



Reconnecting with Success

How Tennessee Community Colleges are
Supporting Returning Adults

November 2021

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How Tennessee Community Colleges are Supporting Returning Adult Students

TBR-The College System of Tennessee is the state's largest public higher education system. TBR serves as the governing board for the state's 13 community colleges and 27 colleges of applied technology.

TBR and community colleges have partnered with behavioral science experts at the Nudge4 Solutions Lab and ideas42 to develop and test interventions that promote adult student success.

1

The Impact of **Tennessee Reconnect** at Community Colleges

2

The Persistence Challenge

3

A Nudge to Reconnect

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Tailored Support Strategies for Returning Adults with Some College but No Degree



The Impact of Tennessee Reconnect

At Community Colleges

What is Tennessee Reconnect?

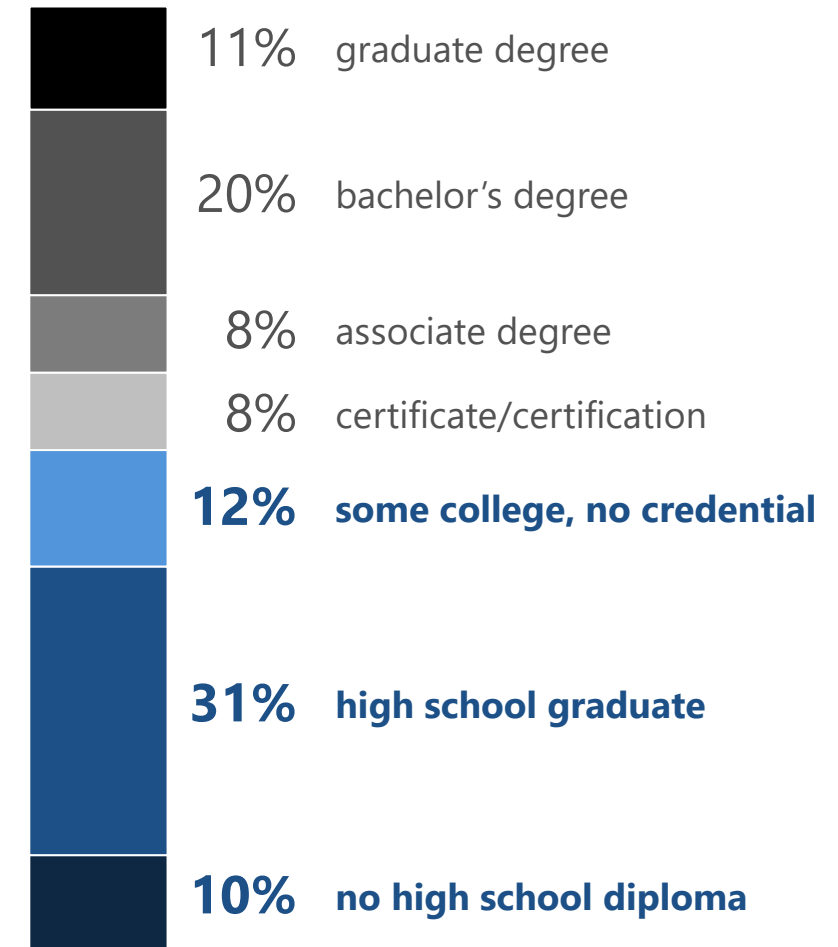


More than 2 million working-age adults in Tennessee lack a postsecondary credential.

In 2018, **Tennessee Reconnect** launched at community colleges statewide.

- Last dollar scholarship that allows eligible adults (typically those over age 24 with no prior college degree) to enroll **free of tuition and mandatory fees.**
- Requires students to enroll in at least six semester hours, continuously enroll, and reapply annually by submitting a success plan.

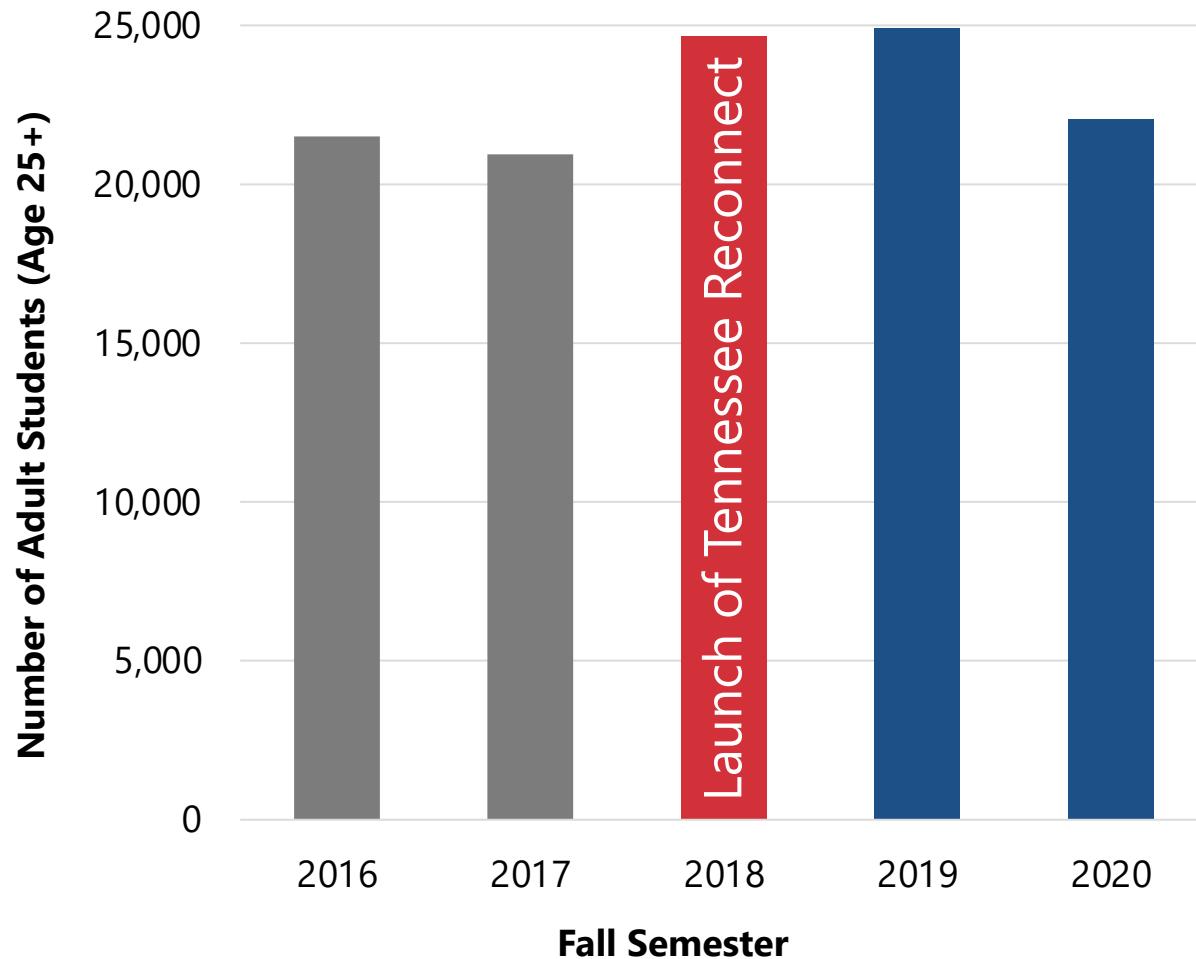
Educational Attainment: Tennesseans Ages 25-64



In 2018, adult enrollment grew 18%.



Adult Enrollment at Community Colleges



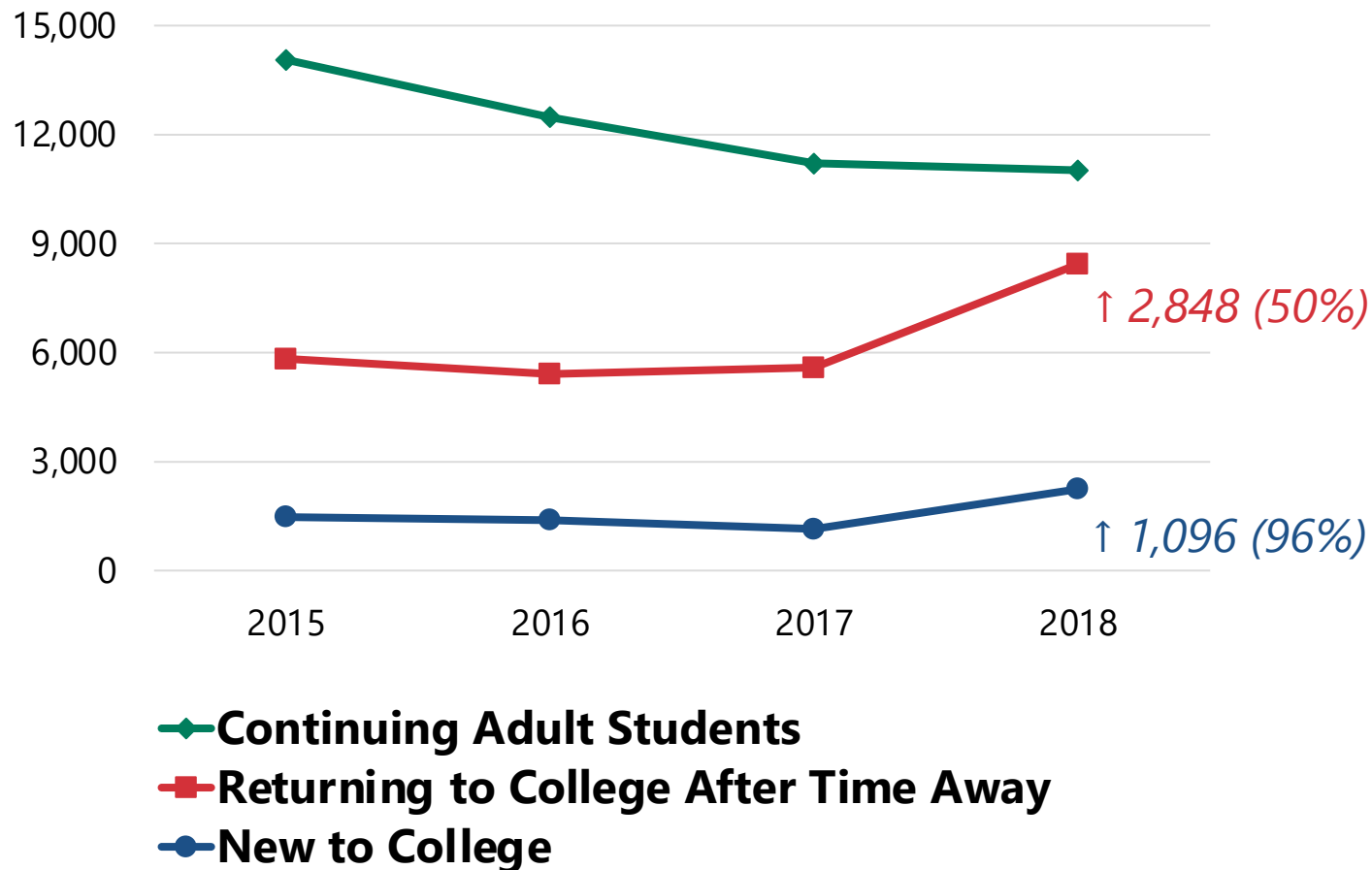
In fall 2018, the first semester of Tennessee Reconnect, **adult enrollment at community colleges grew 18% over the prior year.**

This growth represented nearly 4,000 *additional* adult students at Tennessee community colleges.

Most Reconnectors had prior college experience.



Adult Enrollment at TN Community Colleges In the Fall Term



After the launch of Reconnect, **first-time adult enrollees** at community colleges nearly doubled.

Adults who had prior college experience and were **returning after time away** rose 50%, an increase of nearly 3,000 students.

About Reconnect Students

- Nearly 75% of participants were white and 70% were female
- Nearly half received Pell Grants
- 62% were under age 35 and 43% were under age 30

Based on 2019-2020 Reconnect Participants



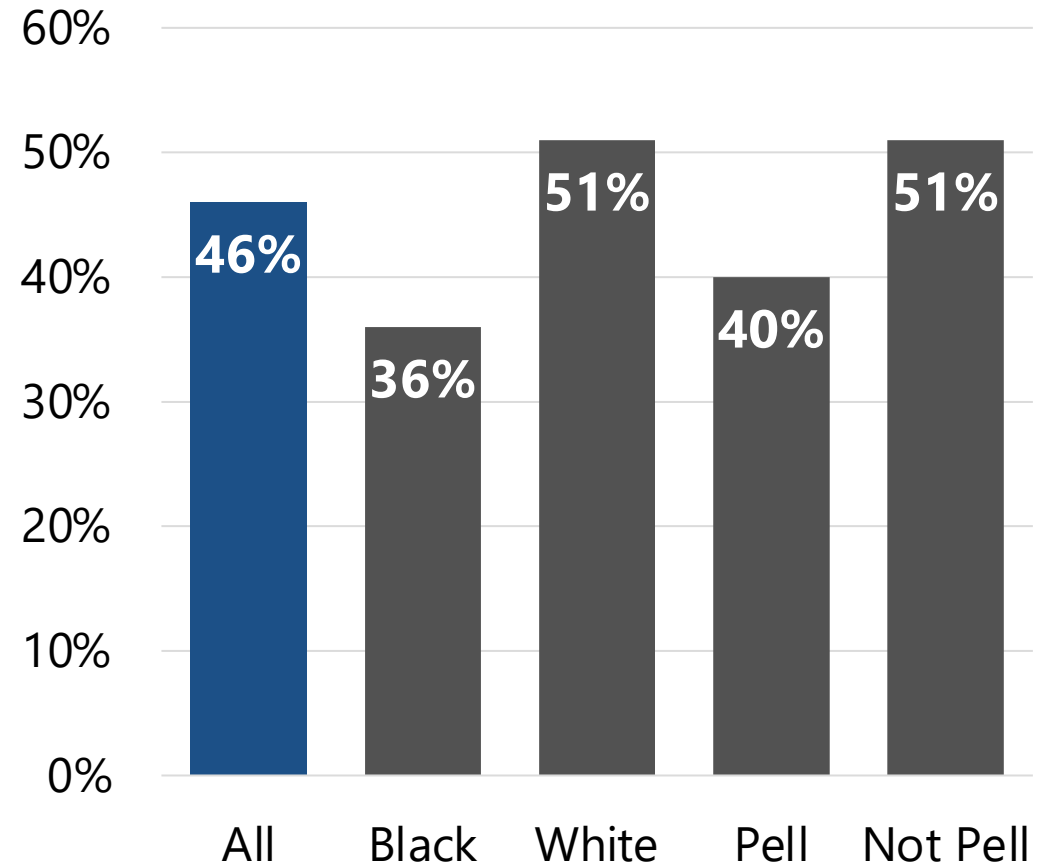
The Persistence Challenge

Fewer than half of Reconnectors persisted.




Among the 17,000 community college students who participated in Reconnect in the program's first year, **only 46% persisted** at community colleges and *as Reconnect students* the next year.

Reconnect Persistence Rates after Year 1



*TNR persistence rates reflect the proportion of TNR students from an academic year who return as community college students and TNR participants in the following fall semester, excluding graduates. The first TNR cohort includes TNR participants during the 2018-19 academic year.

A photograph of a young woman with blonde hair, wearing a black graduation cap and gown. She is smiling broadly and waving her right hand. She is holding a rolled-up diploma in her left hand. The background is slightly blurred, showing other graduates.

**Why do some
Reconnect students
struggle to persist?
We asked them.**

During in-depth interviews in 2020, current and former Reconnect students shared their perspectives on the barriers to persistence:

- Many adults balance school with work and childcare.
- Adult students sometimes don't feel a sense of belonging on campus or struggle to adapt to college.
- **Information from colleges was sometimes unclear or inconsistent about the steps to remain *Reconnect eligible*, like the requirement to reapply for Reconnect each year.**

Students shared potential barriers to reapplication.



Lack of Awareness

Students often didn't know that they needed to reapply for Reconnect each year.

- One Reconnect student said, "I was talking to someone I worked with that had reapplied and they told me to be sure to reapply, or I wouldn't have known."



Limited Reminders

Many students either didn't receive a reminder to reapply or didn't receive a reminder that effectively captured their attention and prompted them to act.

- One Reconnect student said, "There were emails from the school on a fairly regular basis about the semester coming up and reminders for all different types of things. I don't recall any for Reconnect."



Unclear Information

Students didn't know who to go to with questions, and they may have received inconsistent information depending on who they asked.

- One Reconnect student said, "I went into financial aid and said, hey I would like to take advantage of this, what do you all know about it?...And there was no one in the office who could really go over it with me. So, I came back the next day, and there was a lady who could explain it a little bit...There are just a lot of breaks in communication. Having experts would be wonderful."



A Nudge to Reconnect

Tennessee community colleges have **piloted three projects** to boost Reconnect persistence.

Colleges conducted targeted outreach to **remind** Reconnect students about requirements, **prompt** students to reapply and re-enroll, and **connect** students to key campus resources.

- Each pilot carefully considered the content, timing, and messenger of the reminder.
- Pilots were designed with help from our partners at the *Nudge4 Solutions Lab* and *ideas42*.
- Three urban community colleges tested these pilots: Nashville State, Pellissippi State (in Knoxville), and Southwest Tennessee (in Memphis).

Reconnect Persistence Pilots

1

Delivered Targeted Nudges

2

Recruited Faculty to Help

3

Drew on the Influence of Peers

Persistence rates rose significantly at pilot colleges.



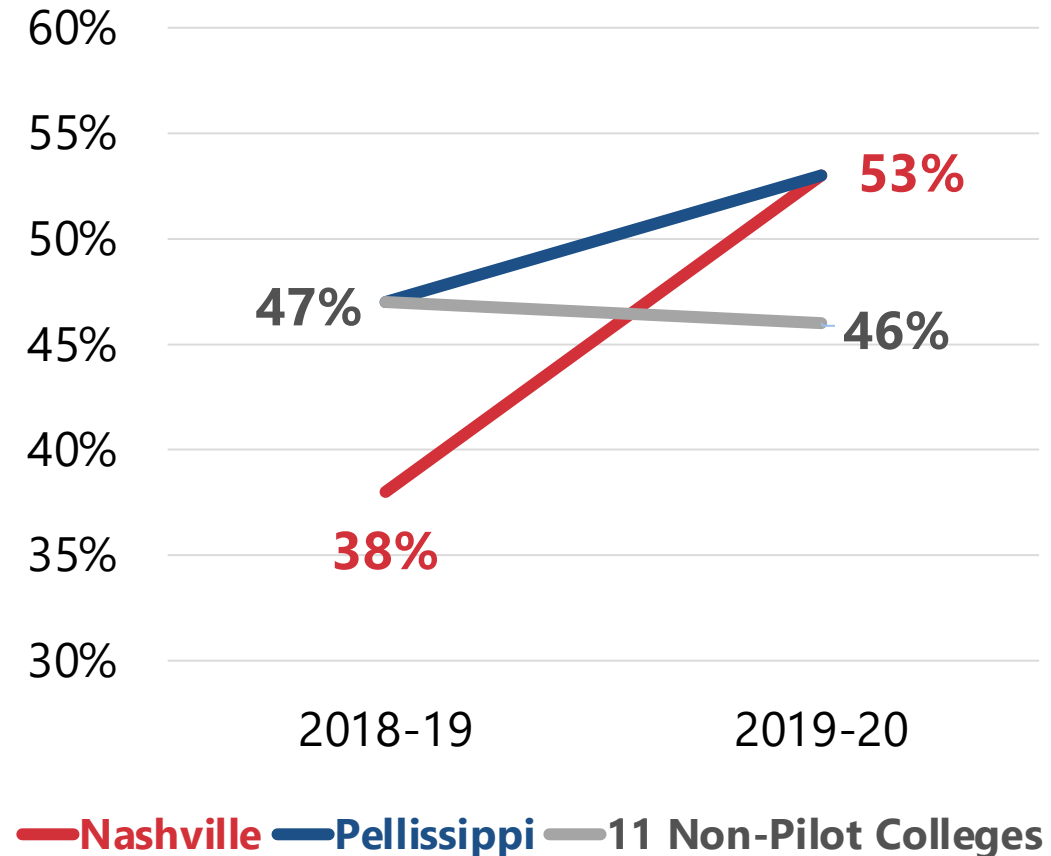
After implementing the first pilot, the Reconnect persistence rate:

- **rose 15 percentage points at Nashville,** and
- **rose 6 percentage points at Pellissippi,**
- even as Reconnect persistence fell at other colleges.

Additional Pilot Outcomes

- Persistence rate increases were statistically significant even after accounting for student characteristics.
- For **Black Reconnect students** at Nashville, persistence rates rose from 28% to 43%, a 15-point increase.
- For **low-income Reconnect students** at Nashville, persistence rates rose from 30% to 51%, a 21-point increase.

Reconnect Persistence Rates after First Pilot



*TNR persistence rates reflect the proportion of TNR students from an academic year who return as community college students and TNR participants in the following fall semester, excluding graduates. The first TNR cohort includes TNR participants during the 2018-19 academic year.

In Pilot 1, colleges sent targeted nudges.



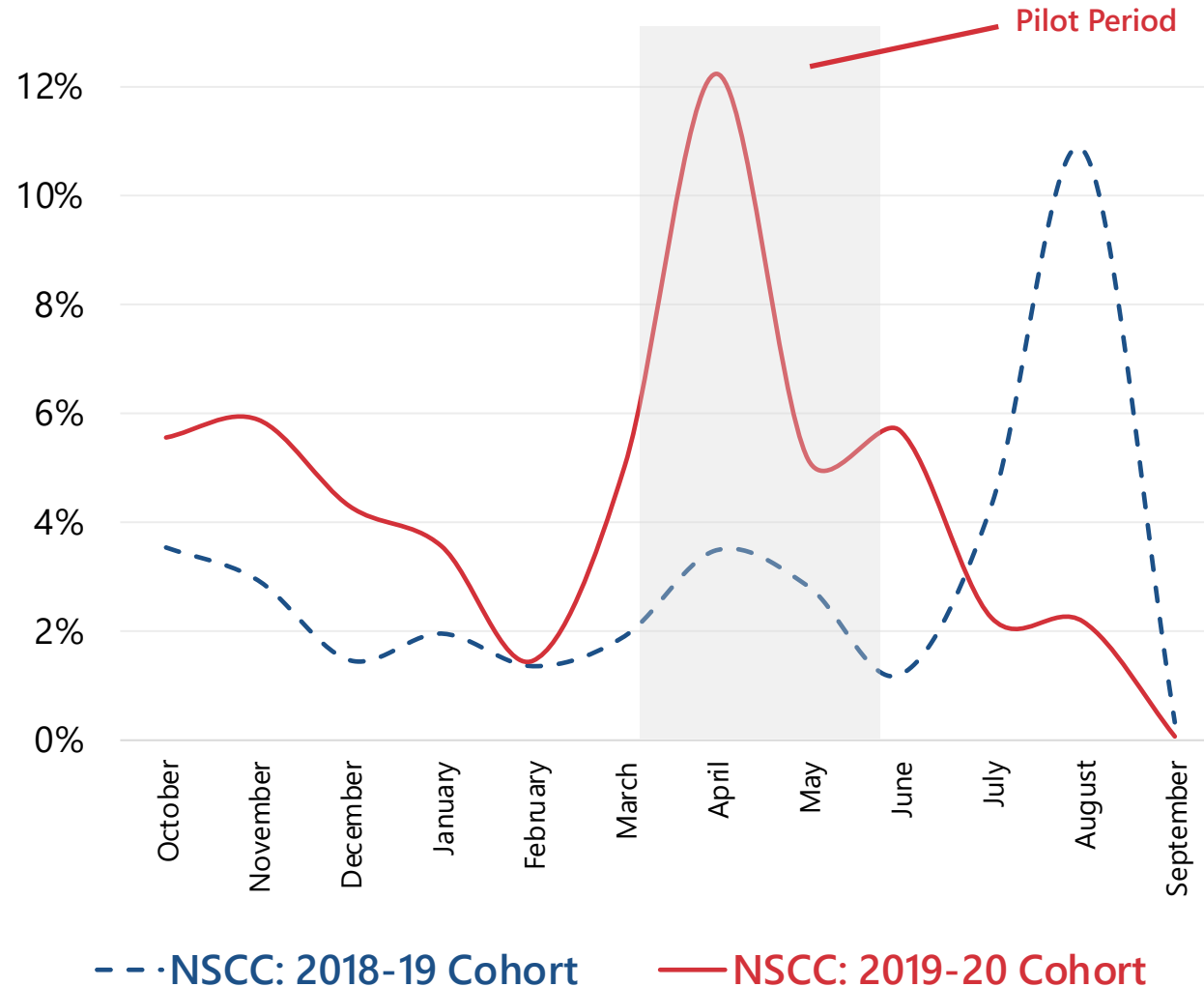
Who: In spring 2020, financial aid staff at two colleges sent targeted nudges to Reconnect students across multiple platforms (through text messages, campus portals, and postal mail).

How: Messages were designed to prompt students to reapply for Reconnect and register for fall classes, or to contact someone at the college who can help.

Key Takeaway: During the pilot period, Reconnect reapplications rose significantly.

The only costs to the college were postage, texting fees, and staff time to create and send messages.

Nashville Reconnect Reapplications by Month, 2019-20



In Pilot 2, colleges recruited faculty to help.



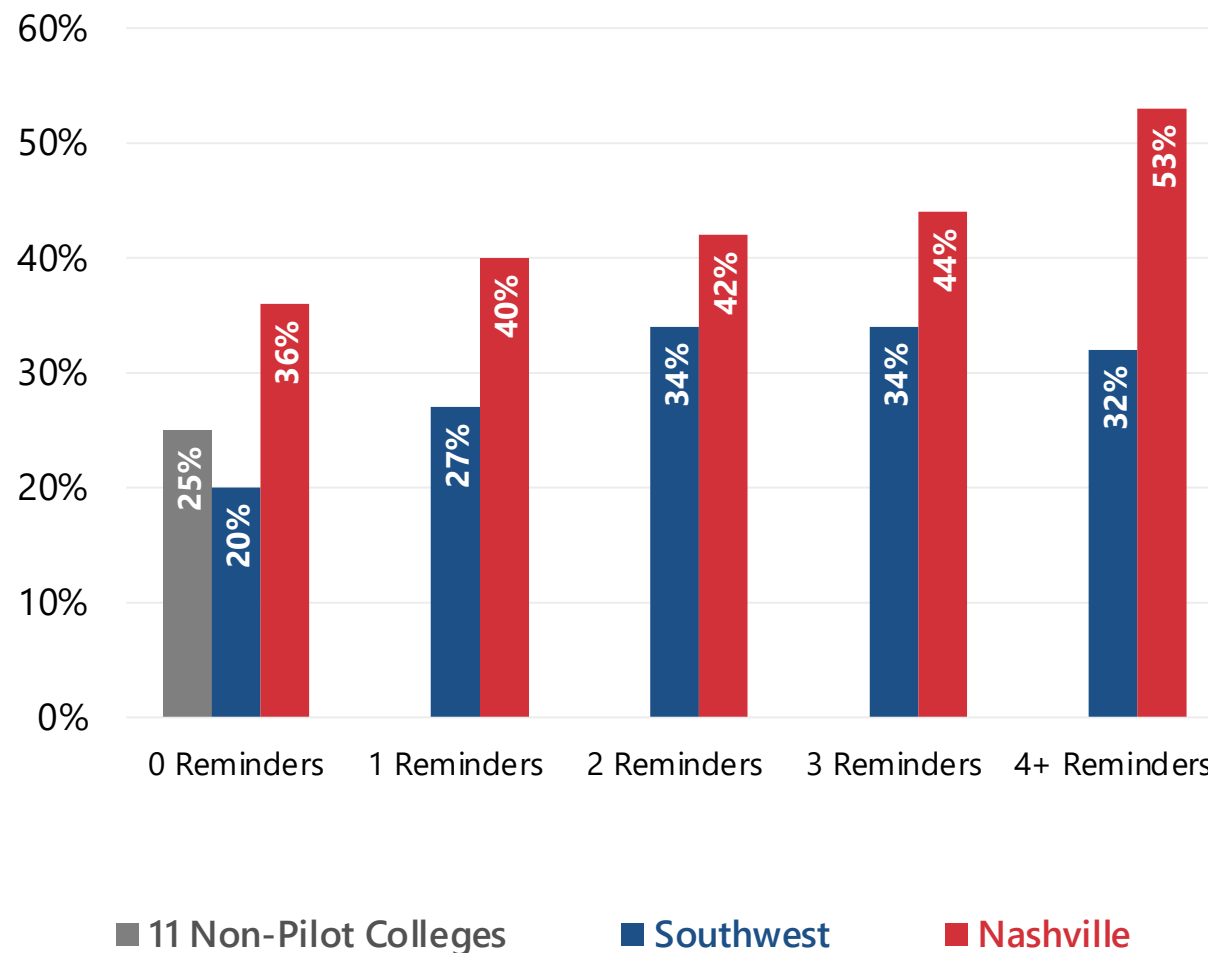
Who: In fall 2020, 350 faculty at two colleges volunteered to remind students to reapply for Reconnect. This exceeded expectations for faculty participation.

How: Faculty participants reminded students about the reapplication and provided time during class to complete the application.

Key Takeaway: Students who received a reminder reapplied for Reconnect at high rates. Students who received multiple reminders reapplied at even higher rates.

The only costs to the college were faculty time to deliver the reminders.

Reconnect Reapplications by Month During the Pilot Period, October-December 2020



*Based on preliminary data; final data will be available in fall 2021.

Pilot 3 draws upon on the influence of peers.

Who: In spring 2021, Nashville and Southwest hired experienced Reconnect students to serve as peer mentors to new students.

How: 850 first-year Reconnect students were *randomly selected* to receive a peer mentor.

The peer mentors work with new Reconnect students to build a sense of belonging, connect students to campus resources, and provide reminders about Reconnect requirements.

Students receive *pre-written nudges* throughout the semester through the Signal Vine platform.

Key Takeaway: Mentors reach out and meet with mentees to share resources and build connections.

Reconnect peer mentoring has continued through fall 2021.

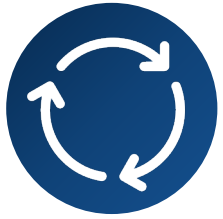




Returning Adults with Some College but No Degree

New Research on SCND Adults who Re-Enroll

We're learning more about SCND adults who return.



Persistence rates were lowest for adults who had some college but no degree.

Among returning SCND adult students at Tennessee community colleges since 2010, only **58% persisted** to the next semester, and only **26% graduated** within six years of returning to college.



Outcomes differed based on returning adults' prior experience with college.

Success rates were lower for returning adults who had **previously earned very few credits** before stopping out and students who were **returning to new colleges** than where they previously attended.



Many adults rarely visited college advisors.

According to survey data, **40% of adult students met with an advisor never at all or only once per year**. Only one out of three adult students said someone at the college talked with them about how to balance academic responsibilities with work and family.



These students will need new types of support to ensure their success.

Tennessee community colleges are working to design tailored support strategies for adults who return to college, and new pilots are planned for 2022-23.

Key Takeaways



Tennessee Reconnect helps to support adult students' **access** to college. Now, colleges are working to support Reconnect students' **persistence** and **success**.

1

After enrolling through Tennessee Reconnect, adult students needed additional **information** and **resources** to support their reapplication and persistence.

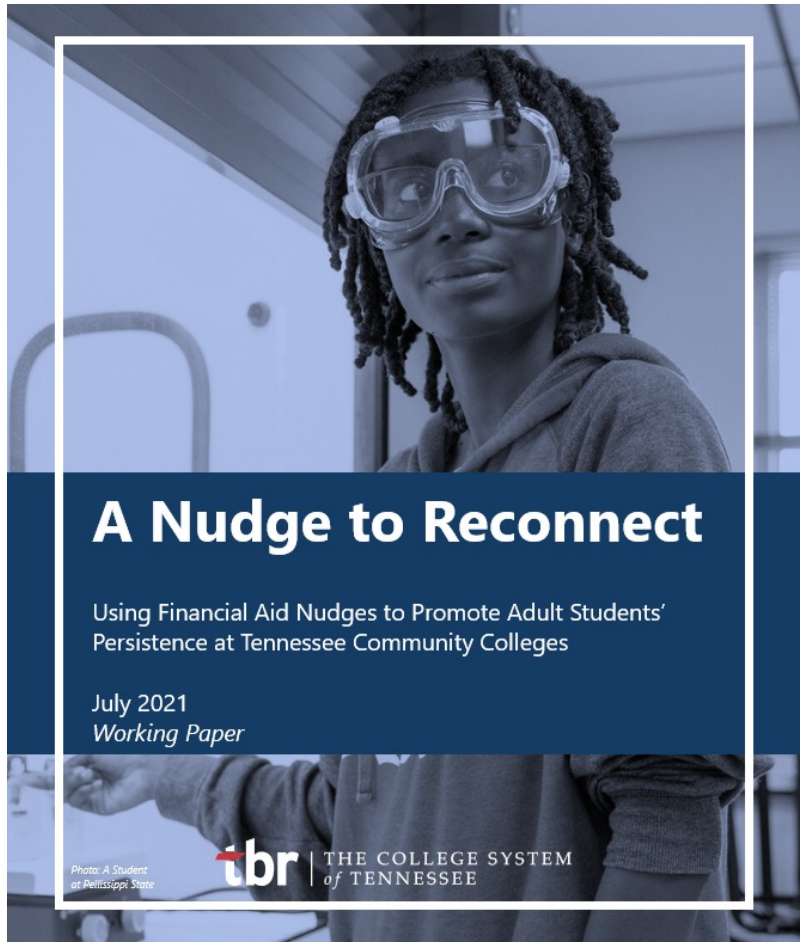
2

Clear, targeted messages (delivered by multiple messengers) helped get information to students that **prompted action**.

3

Faculty and **peers** can play a key role in supporting adult students' persistence.

More Information



More information about Tennessee Reconnect is available at [**tnreconnect.gov**](https://tnreconnect.gov)



More information about this project is available at [**tbr.edu/data**](https://tbr.edu/data)



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