

# THRIVING



A Youth Participatory Action Research Project by  
The Education Trust in Tennessee's Thrive Fellows  
on College Access and Success in Tennessee

# THRIVE

An initiative of The Education Trust in Tennessee



The Education Trust  
IN TENNESSEE



# INTRODUCTION & MISSION STATEMENT

We are Thrive Fellows, nine students attending different universities and colleges across the great state of Tennessee. The Thrive Fellowship is part of the Thrive Network, an Education Trust in Tennessee initiative that aims to equip Black, Latino and students from other historically minoritized and marginalized communities, and community organizations serving these students, with strategies to increase the number of students progressing to postsecondary education.

The Thrive Fellowship is a year-long project to investigate college access barriers for Black, Latino, and other minorities by collecting data from youth, practitioners, and organizations. Through the Fellowship we connected our personal experiences to data, policies, and practices related to our journey from high school to college completion. We built a community across the state, deepened our understanding of education systems and pathways to postsecondary success, and developed research and writing skills along the way.

Part of the Thrive Fellowship entailed us to conduct and share our findings through a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) project. Through our research we wanted to analyze and report on barriers that exist for Black, Latino, and other minoritized communities in accessing higher education pathways and to provide actionable recommendations to shift the culture around expanding access to post-secondary education.

In this report *Thriving and Creating a Better Future: A Case to Shift the Culture Around College Access and Success*, we hope the data and stories collected spark conversations that lead to change and equity.

## KEY TERMS

**Minoritized:** We use the word minoritized instead of minority because it more accurately conveys the power relations and processes by which certain groups are socially, economically, and politically marginalized within the larger society. (McCarty, 2005)

**Practitioner:** For this report, we define a practitioner as an adult who works in college access and success and who is invested in all students accessing higher education.

**Youth:** We define an individual between ages 14-24 as youth.

**Youth Participatory Action Research:** YPAR is an innovative approach to positive youth and community development in which young people are trained to conduct systematic research to improve their lives, their communities, and the institutions intended to serve them. Research is conducted over a period of time in partnership and allyship with adults.

## So, why college access?

Black, Latino, and students from minoritized backgrounds face immense barriers in accessing higher education in the United States. This issue is even more prevalent in the state of Tennessee where we saw a recent decline of 11.4% for Black students and 11.1% for Latino students in college attendance according to THEC's latest report.

We approached this topic by bringing diverse backgrounds, voices, and institutions to the table. The nine Thrive Fellows who engaged in this year-long process have the same goal of finding a way to increase college access for our communities. We all believe that higher education is needed to provide individuals, especially students of color, more career and life opportunities. It has been shown through numerous research and data analysis how post-second-

ary education after high school leads to more opportunities in occupations, including engineering, business, education, communications, and many other fields that we are studying right now in our respective majors.

The Thrive Fellows chose this research topic because we are Tennessee youth and care about the success of Black, Latino, and other historically minoritized students. By graduating from Tennessee high schools, we had a unique experience that showcased the need for support from our public schools. As college students, we now aim to advocate and elevate the resources and supports needed for future generations to access, succeed, and thrive in post-secondary education and beyond.

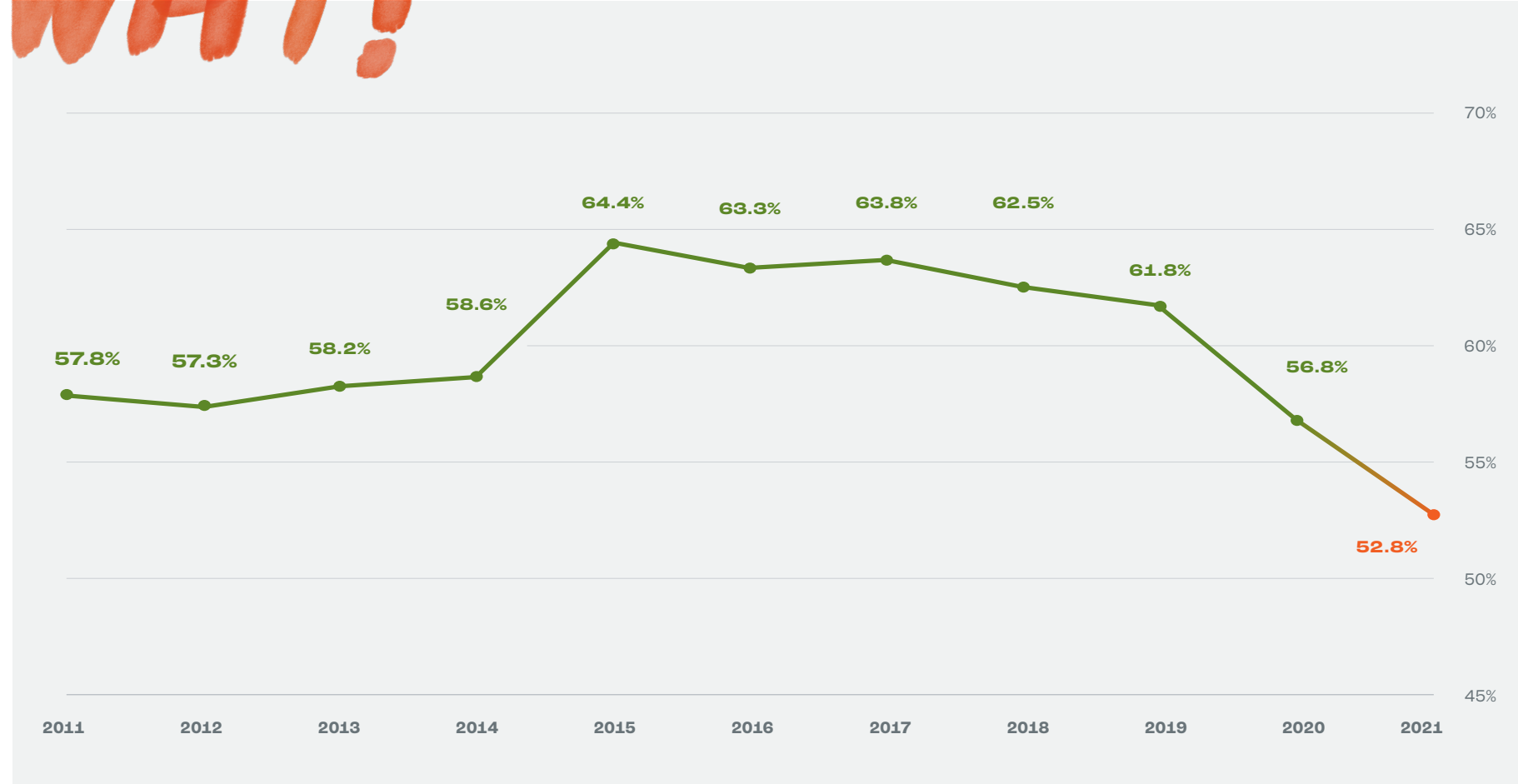
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# WHY?

Source: THEC, 2022

## Statewide College-Going Rate



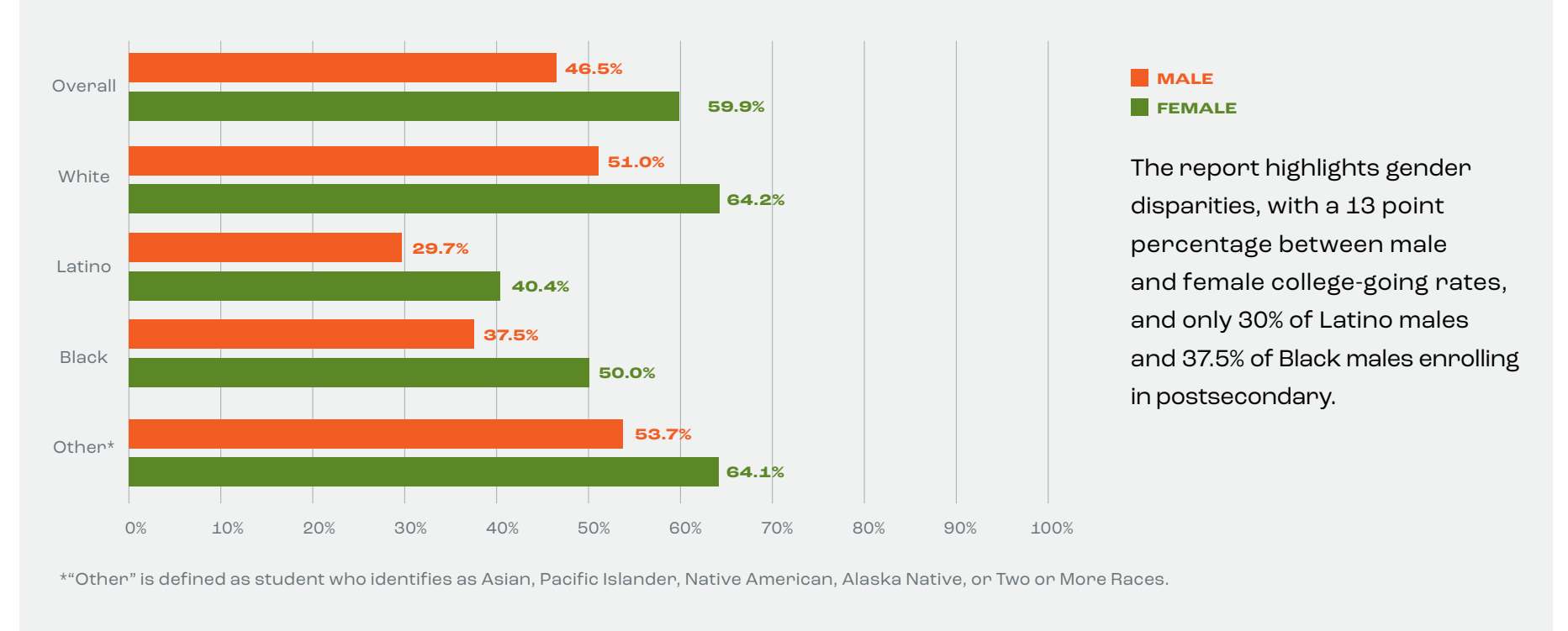
Since 2017, there has been a steep decline in college going rates, with a 9% percentage drop overall, and an alarming drop of 15% for Black students and 13% drop for Latino students, according to the Tennessee Higher Education Commission's latest report.

### College-Going Rates

College-going rates are the portion of public high school graduates who seamlessly enroll (i.e., immediately after high school) in postsecondary education.

Source: THEC, 2022

## Class of 2021 Male vs. Female College-Going Rate by Race



The report highlights gender disparities, with a 13 point percentage between male and female college-going rates, and only 30% of Latino males and 37.5% of Black males enrolling in postsecondary.

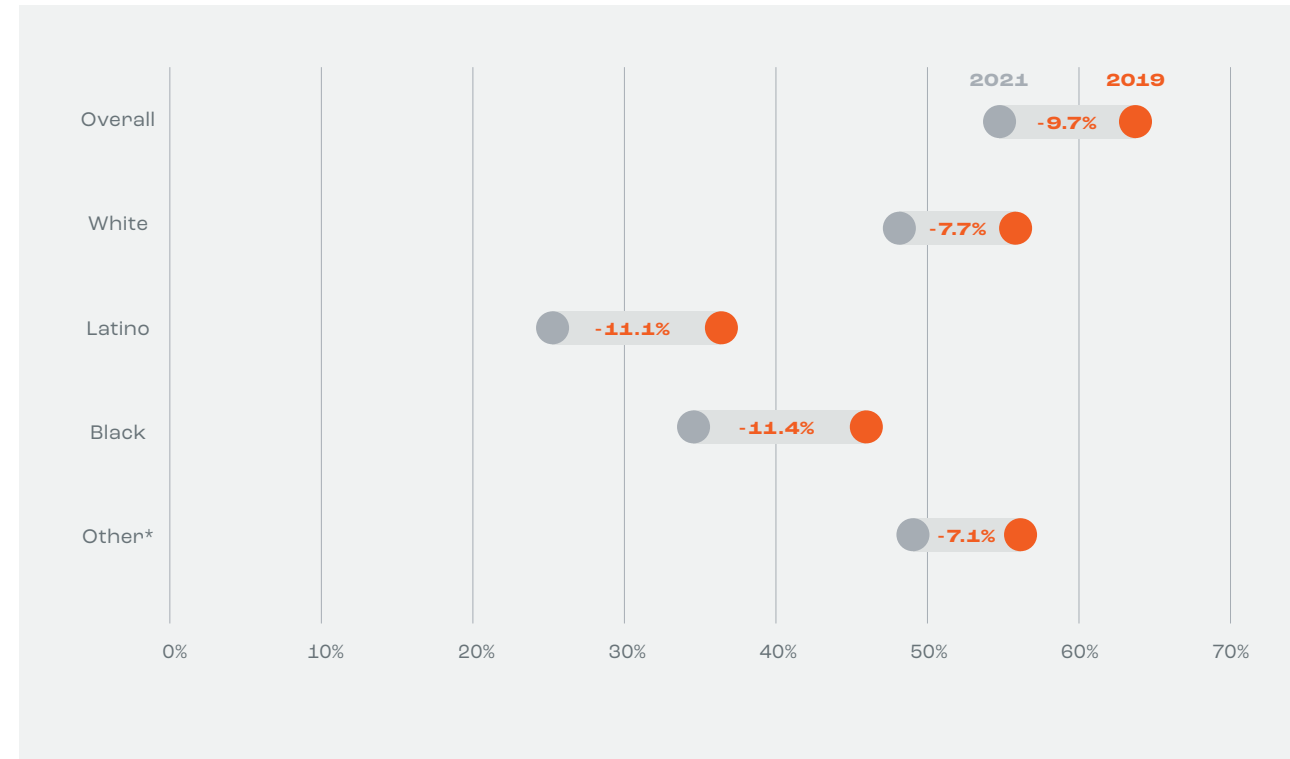
*"In our culture, if you are the oldest in the family, most of the time, you just have to take care of your siblings. So, that might lead to the first person in the family, the oldest person, to not go to college. We have this thing called*

*machismo ingrained in us. The male has to take responsibility for everybody in the house. A lot of times the male person is the oldest person, which feels like he has to take care of the family and earn money for the family."*

— Diana Medina, Middle Tennessee State University, Thrive Fellow, THEC Report

Source: THEC, 2022

## College-Going Rates Since the Onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic



The Covid-19 pandemic is an additional layer to the issue at hand. The pandemic further exacerbated and highlighted the disparities in college going rates.

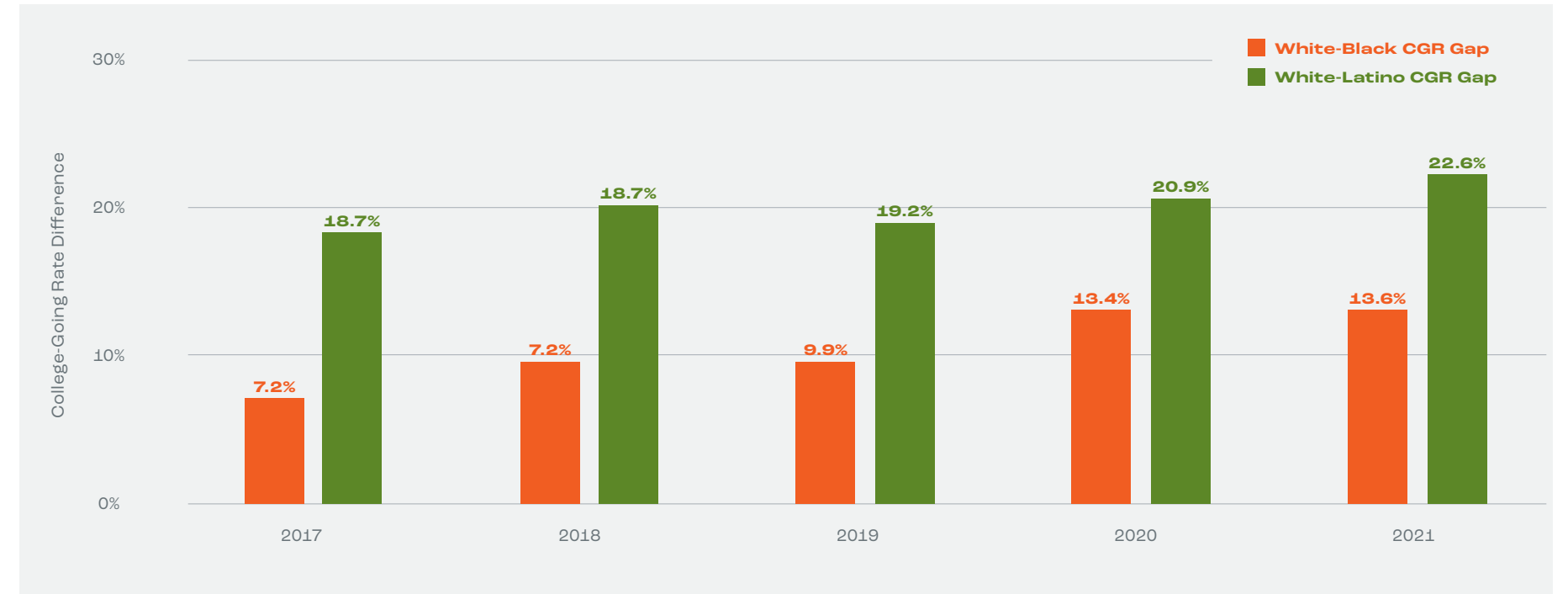
“Technology plays a huge part in college access. The pandemic has really highlighted this with the access to laptops and computers. Some households had multiple students trying to access the internet with low-speed wifi. Or students had to travel to public spaces to use the

— Keith Hembree, Recruitment and Retention Coordinator at University of Memphis

internet, which may interfere with deadlines. Some older parents and guardians may not understand the internet or using computers. Also in rural Tennessee, students may not have even been able to access wifi as frequently as other metro areas.”

Source: THEC, 2022

## College-Going Rate Gaps by Race



“High schools can be the only place students of color have time and access to resources to prepare for college, and there are two ways to ensure more students make it. First, inform students of the process before their senior year. Second, high schools can prioritize helping students create a transition plan to college. Many students of color still do not have family to help them navigate the

— Brea Hinds, University of Memphis, Thrive Fellow, THEC Report

college process, so their high schools need to be that support system. Many students do not find out about resources until it is too late, and they are not met with open arms at colleges and universities. The drops in college enrollment for students of color speak to how little proactive support and the unwelcoming environment these institutions are providing to their students of color.”

## Methodology and Research

During our year-long Fellowship with the Thrive Network, we decided to use three different methods to obtain qualitative data from youth and practitioners around our research question.

### RESEARCH QUESTION

What are the barriers to accessing higher education for Black, Latino, and students from historically excluded and currently marginalized communities in Tennessee?

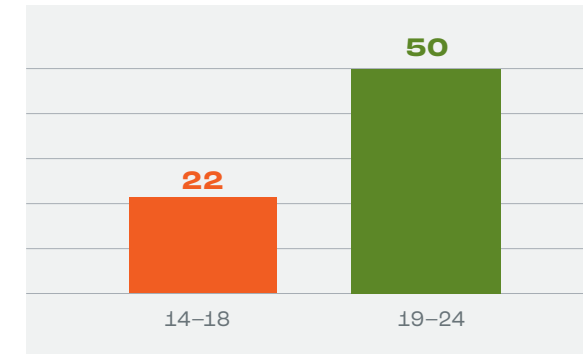
We used focus groups, one on one interviews, and a survey for youth that was conducted from the end of July to early September, 2022. The focus groups and one on one interviews encouraged a conversational atmosphere to welcome all opinions and insights from youth and practitioners.

Focus groups were moderated and led by two Fellows at a time, and there were separate groups for youth and practitioners. Each Fellow shared the sign-up information within our different communities to get participants. There were five youth focus groups and

four practitioner focus groups. Each focus group session lasted 1 hour and the Fellows asked fourteen questions., with one Fellow moderating and the other dictating the discussion. As we captured responses we would code the responses into categories that would help inform our research question.

We designed and launched a survey on September 5, 2022, for youth to provide feedback on their college-going experience. The survey questions were drafted in small group breakout rooms where each Fellow was able to offer suggestions for the questions based on the section of the survey they were assigned. During rotations, each small group of Fellows edited and added feedback to different sections of the survey and it was a collaborative effort. The survey questions were concise and reflected the goal of the

Age groups of youths surveyed



overall YPAR research question. To reach our goal of 50 responses, we took a more intentional approach to receive responses. Utilizing a spreadsheet to track outreach, each Fellow was required to contact 10 different people or organizations in their community. A digital and physical flier with a QR code was shared online and around the Fellows' campuses and communities. At the end of the survey, we met the goal of 50 unique responses, exceeding it with a total of 72 of responses representing 11 counties in Tennessee.

In addition to focus groups, each Fellow was required to conduct a minimum of two interviews – one with youth, and one with a practitioner. The one-to-one interviews allowed each participant to give their authentic views on barriers and access rates for Black, Latino, and other minoritized students. Each Fellow was able to have conversation-style interviews with people in their commu-

nity, which led to insightful responses for our research. This research method was a great way to gain more peer insight because it was more challenging to connect with high school students. There are a total of 22 youth and practitioner interviews. After each interview, the Fellows coded the information to align with the goal of the YPAR research question.

At the end of all three outreach protocols, the Fellows met to create a Master Code document, pulling our separate codes together to find similarities in the data that we collected over the three months. The Master Code document guided our final months and allowed us to synthesize our findings for our research and final report.



## RESEARCH & FINDINGS

Elevating resources and supports to help students thrive in their transition to higher education is at the heart of the Thrive Fellowship and Network. The stark decline in college-going rates for Black, Latino, and other minoritized students is alarming, and the purpose of the Thrive YPAR project is to illuminate the experiences of youth and share actionable recommendations.

More than 80% of students surveyed feel as though their identity impacts the way they view college. Of the 72 students that participated in the survey, 46% of them are first generation college students.

### Finding 1: Guidance and Advising:

Our research revealed that comprehensive and targeted guidance is the primary barrier keeping Black, Latino, and students from historically excluded and currently marginalized communities in Tennessee from enrolling in postsecondary institutions. It was a common theme in our surveys, focus groups, and interviews. 80% of student survey participants note that identity plays a big part in their view of college, and 46% identify as first-generation college students. Black, Latino, and first generation students expressed that guidance falls short when it is layered with racial bias from counselors, there is a lack of counselors who represent shared identities and experiences of students themselves, and when there is a lack of knowledge from counselors on how to support students with specific barriers related to not having citizenship status, mixed family status, transitional housing, and complicated family and financial dynamics. Youth shared some of the most helpful guidance support included access to essential college preparation resources, such as advanced classes and programs that promote college access and persistence for these groups.

### Finding 2: The Digital Divide and Digital Literacy

Another key takeaway from our research was the need to assist students in overcoming the technological divide. Many of our students in our interviews expressed hardships because they lacked the necessary quality digital literacy that would help them keep up with the expectations of digital learning in post-secondary education. A few key examples include having a computer to complete coursework and apply to opportunities upon graduation, and ingesting media misrepresenting the importance or value of college experience or not mentioning college at all.

All of our youth participants are members of Generation Z (those born between 1997 and 2012). These students are becoming the face of the workforce and positive participants in society. With the significant increase in technology and digital media in education settings and informing social choices, it is vital that students from historically excluded and currently marginalized communities not get left behind. Another area worth exploring is what social media looks like for the average prospective college student. One of our practitioners suggested social media influencers should be part of the face of college for the new generation. It would be interesting to get

a picture of what our students are consuming and how many of them have completed college or considered it.

“As a first-gen student my parents were learning the college application process with me. Technology was a barrier because my parents did not have email accounts needed for the FAFSA application and my parents not being able to stay up to date with application process because of technology barriers”

— Samuel Perez, Middle Tennessee State University Student

“I grew up with the regression technology era so I have expectations from other students that may not be realistic not knowing they might not have grown up using technology. We need to adjust unrealistic expectations when it comes to technology and technology at home” — Danielle Rochelle, IDA Director at Middle Tennessee State University

### Finding 3: Familial and Community Connections and Influence to Pathways

In communities of color, the decision to attend college is often made by an entire family, with parents and siblings making financial sacrifices that can impact all members of the house-

*“My sister helped me the most because she went to college before me and gave me advice when I needed it.”*

Student from Memphis

*“My family pushes me to be the best version of me and that has always included higher education. Without their encouragement, I wouldn’t have done it.”*

Student from Memphis

hold. These decisions can be made in a vacuum, with unreliable sources of information, and unrealistic notions of costs to attend and the responsibilities for the college student. For Black and Latino students, their families are a main factor in their decision to pursue higher education. There are many examples from our research suggesting that students are expected to attend college, and they’re reasoning relies on their family’s support. Despite the lack of knowledge surrounding the pre- and post-college application process, older generations expect students to attend college.

We found in our research that there was a consistent theme about the lack of partnership between communities and institutions that were in conflict with the high expectations and assumptions from families for their students to attend college. Families, high schools, and post-secondary institutions seem to be isolated when discussing pathways for success for students pursuing post-secondary education, which can cause confusion and interfere with students’ college going rates. There are innovative initiatives from high schools and univer-

sities to educate students and their families, however they are not aligned and do not support every student. Some high schools in Tennessee are cited to have college preparatory initiatives, and that may be the only support and resource for students. Oftentimes, post-secondary institutions are also not connecting with high schools or their students in order to build successful pathways into their institutions, which creates a barrier for students when trying to access information on specific resources.

*“My main support system for navigating the college process was my parents, although they didn’t know much of it, they were there every step of the way.”*

Student from Nashville

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Youth

1. Check all communications from counselors/resources/colleges » **check your email!**
  - How can I do that?
    - i. Set a daily reminder on your cellphone or calendar!
    - ii. Make a habit of checking your email.
2. Advocate for your own education and take initiative with your college-going journey » do not sit-and-get and allow information to be given to you passively
  - What can I do?
    - i. Set up a time as early as freshman year with your assigned counselor. Lay out your post-high school goals and create a plan!
3. Prioritize college-going tasks and deadlines. Reach out for assistance to meet goals and deadlines despite outside obligations (jobs/family-related responsibilities)
  - How can I prioritize these tasks?
    - i. Technology is your friend! Set reminders, appointments, and deadlines on your calendar, email, and cell phone.
    - ii. Read about FAFSA, the importance, eligibility, and FAFSA deadline.
    - iii. Set up advising and career planning sessions with your counselors.
    - iv. Utilize collegefortn.org for additional information to best prepare for postsecondary education!

4. Take advantage of public spaces like libraries and utilize their resources
  - What do libraries have to offer?
    - i. Access to computers and/or internet
    - ii. Printing services for school work and/or important documents
    - iii. Study and work spaces for tutoring or preparation for college entrance exams

### Practitioners

1. Provide advocacy strategies for students and parents/guardians to use during their college-going process
  - How can I provide these strategies?
    - i. Build partnerships and rapport with other community based organizations, local schools, universities/colleges, and create opportunities for youth and community members to engage!
2. Collect resources for different students and parents/guardians that will benefit their situations
  - What do you mean?
    - i. Inclusivity is key! It’s imperative that you think of varying college-going scenarios. There is no one-size-fits-all approach or need. Communicate options outside of traditional 4 year universities, include Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology, and community colleges, and pathways for undocumented students to obtain post-secondary education.
3. Be welcoming and open-minded to encourage community with students and parents/guardians.
  - How can I do this?
    - i. Create spaces, initiatives, and programs to build intentional community amongst the different stakeholders to advance awareness and access for post-secondary education.
    - ii. Being culturally responsive is imperative when creating these spaces. Translate materials where possible and necessary.
    - iii. Tap current or former college students from your alumni and ask them to help design or inform programming

### Policymakers

1. Ensure that all high school students are aware of the full costs and financial aid options available associated with obtaining a postsecondary education.
  - How can we do that?

- i. States should request education agencies to collaborate, develop and disseminate financial aid and college-preparation resources for students, parents, and districts.
  - ii. States should require LEA's to implement a course that includes information on the FAFSA, financial aid milestones, and college and career planning. For Tennessee, ensure that the currently required financial literacy course includes the above material.
2. Implement an inclusive, state-wide database for college-going resources to ensure that all students and families understand their postsecondary options.
- How can we do this?
    - i. States should ensure that current college-going resources follow plain language guidelines. Consult students and families from all backgrounds to ensure that resources are accessible for all.
    - ii. States should translate college-going resources in the top three most commonly spoken languages other than English.
3. Improve access to college and career advisors that assist students and families with the college-going process.
- How can we do this?
  - States should conduct a study to better understand the counselor role at the local level. This study should include an analysis on adequate staffing levels, as well as a time-use study to better understand the role of counselors on the college-going process.
    - i. States should ensure districts fund college counselors at each high school, and incentivize partnerships with community organizations that support college-going.
4. Strengthen financial aid systems to improve access to Higher Education, particularly for students from low-income backgrounds.
- How can we do this?
    - i. Congress should double the federal Pell Grant to keep up with the increases in the costs of postsecondary education.
    - ii. States should tackle barriers to students receiving state financial aid. In Tennessee, policymakers should address barriers to uptaking valuable scholarships like Tennessee Promise to ensure all students who are eligible can receive financial aid.
    - iii. States should strengthen need-based financial aid systems to help students pay for both tuition and non-tuition costs of a postsecondary education. In Tennessee, increase state appropriations to the Tennessee Student Assistance Award to allow more students access to need-based funding.

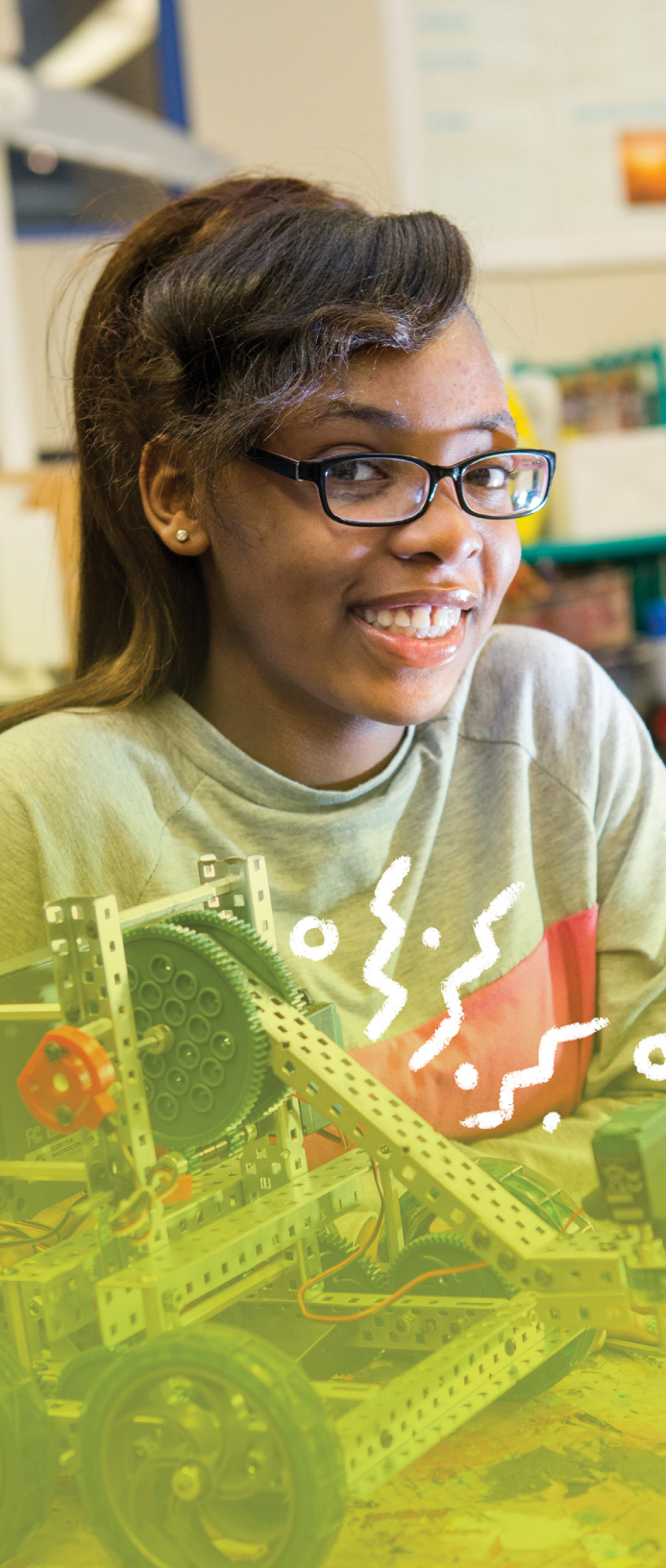
## Parents/guardians

1. Prioritize financial aid literacy
  - How can I/we do this?
    - i. Get informed. Have an understanding of your students' post-high school goals and collect resources online and within the school and community to get informed. Make a financial plan to save and pay for college, and start early. Sit down with your student and their counselor and get informed together!
2. Encourage your student to pursue post-secondary education.
  - Why is this important?
    - i. On average, Tennessee college graduates earn about 1.5 times more than high school graduates 3 years after completing a degree.
    - ii. Completing a postsecondary education allows students the flexibility to pursue a career that they find meaning in.
3. Advocate (and teach advocacy skills to your student) for your student.
  - Why should I/we do this?
    - i. It's important for youth to feel empowered to advocate for their needs and the future they wish to create!
    - ii. Set goals together, starting in the 9th grade. Explore careers, help your child understand their interests and talents, and find the path to maximize those.

## High schools

1. Prioritize college-readiness starting freshman year.
  - How can we do this?
    - i. Administer career aptitude testing, PSAT/SAT/ACT, and other college-based assessments to guide students.
    - ii. Support students in interpreting the results from these assessments to best plan for their future.
2. Prioritize expanding access to early postsecondary opportunities to help students prepare for college, and to curb financial debt before entering college.
  - How can we do this?
    - i. Elevate the importance of dual enrollment and host informational sessions. Dual enrollment encourages students to continue college going as they earn college credits in high school. This can alleviate future financial stress.
    - ii. Brainstorm and institute mechanisms that remove or alleviate the financial burden of Advanced Placement exams.
3. Create inclusive systems and tools to explain the importance of college-going tasks such as applications, deadlines, financial aid applications, college essays and the Common App.





- How can we do this?
  - i. Create a culture around post-secondary goals. Make important due dates markers of celebration in your school. Host college tours, recruiters from diverse colleges onto campus, college essay writing workshops or office hours during lunch.

### Universities/Colleges

1. Make stronger connections with local high schools.
  - How can we do this?
    - i. Host college fairs, information days, and host high school events on campus
    - ii. Create near-peer mentorship programs, and partnerships between high school guidance counselors and university/college counselors for professions that the school population is interested in.
2. Have an opt-in/out policy to include parents/guardians in the financial aid journey for students to build strong financial literacy for college.
  - Why is this important?
    - i. Each students' home and familial life is different. Creating an opt-in/opt-out policy for families/parents/guardians to be financially involved can remove barriers to access financial aid.
3. Shift the culture from "Don't ask, Don't tell" within financial aid offices.
  - How can we do this?
    - i. Offer more access to financial aid literacy and resources.
    - ii. Conduct targeted outreach to BIPOC and first-generation college students.
    - iii. Offer more access to financial aid to students (do away with the 'don't ask, don't tell' culture with financial aid)



## REFLECTIONS ON YPAR PROCESS

"As a Tennessee native and high school graduate, it was especially rewarding to learn more about Tennessee's school system and develop ways for students of marginalized groups to access college. Over the YPAR project, we moderated focus groups, 1:1 interview, and conducted research. By working with various groups of people across Tennessee, we were able to broaden our knowledge of the issues within our system and address it as a group. Following the YPAR project, I hope to see an increase in the college-going rates for Black and Latino students of Tennessee. I was fortunate to learn so much from our YPAR project and plan to continue to be proactive for educational equity in Tennessee schools."

—Soziema Ella Dauda, Belmont University, Thrive Fellow



This year-long process was definitely a meaningful experience. For one it made me reevaluate my opinions on the school systems in Tennessee as well as my own journey from high school to college. Working alongside people from different backgrounds and colleges absolutely improved my cultural awareness and teamwork skills. The 1:1 interviews near the end of the project made me realize that there are many things that we can do as a society to better prepare the next generation for college. It also gave me more answers on why people decide not to attend college or seek higher education besides money. After working on this project with the other Fellows, I am already striving to make an impact on my campus to make sure black students succeed academically and give more support to high schools in my area.

—Elijah Watley, The University of Tennessee, Thrive Fellow



I feel that we did a thorough job in collecting data because we went straight to the source: youth and practitioners. In my opinion, the focus groups held the most valuable information because it gave youth and practitioners a safe space to voice their opinions. I learned so much from every person we interviewed and discovered different places that our education system is lacking. The survey was an interesting and new experience for me, and I was fearful that we would not get good results from it because there is no face to face interaction with people. However, I was surprised to find that a lot of people care enough about education to voice their opinion on such an important topic.

—Autumn Grimsley, Belmont University, Thrive Fellow



Education has always been valuable in my household as a first-gen college student and first-gen American. Furthering my education has always been part of my parents' American dream so that I can be economically stable in the future. Working as a Fellow for the Thrive initiative and the Youth Participatory Action Research project has motivated me to become an active advocate for equity in education to ensure that students from minoritized communities are given the resources they deserve to make their future brighter. I learned and grew so much with my Fellows about all the external factors that affect college-going rates and finding actionable solutions to implement throughout the state of Tennessee.

—Diana Medina, Middle Tennessee State University, Thrive Fellow

## REFLECTIONS FROM YPAR LEADS:

### Kayla Romero Morais, Chief Growth Officer, Our Turn

It was an incredible experience to partner with Ed Trust Tennessee to support the training of Fellows and the development of this report. The YPAR framework is similar to a community organizing model, which is what we use with youth in Our Turn to make change and build power in local communities, so it was powerful to see another model be effective in achieving the same goals. Throughout the year-long project we had the opportunity to learn from Thrive Fellows, observed their growth as advocates and leaders, and together cultivated space that fostered belonging and purpose.

### Vilmaris González, Senior Manager of Engagement, The Education Trust in Tennessee

Leading and guiding Thrive Fellows through the Youth Participatory Action Research methodology has been an honor. To every youth engaged in this project and the Fellows, I thank you for your heart, honesty, and time. I have researched and studied YPAR, Participatory Action Research (PAR), and sociopolitical consciousness and development, and putting the tools and knowledge into practice has been a gift. The Thrive Fellowship has been a vehicle for youth to examine and deepen their understanding of education systems and structures that have and continue to impact them today. YPAR is a liberatory methodology that positions youth at the center as experts and allows them to use their radical imagination to transform the world around them. The process of YPAR is as valuable as the findings and recommendations our Fellows have elevated through this process. My call to action to practitioners and adults reading the report: Center your students. Position them as the experts. Empower them to use their voice to advocate for the change they want to create in their communities.

## CONCLUSION

Today's reality of education is becoming dimmer as the days pass. **Read** this report and **share** it with others in your community to spread awareness of how to enhance pathways to higher education for Black, Latino, and other minoritized groups. **Discover** ways for different groups to take action against the rising barriers against Black and Latino students in Tennessee. Our recommendations are calls to action for every stakeholder because each of them can impact this issue.



## OPPORTUNITIES TO ENGAGE FURTHER

Let us know what resonated! What do you have questions about? How will you use the report?

Contact Vilmaris González at [vgonzalez@edtrust.org](mailto:vgonzalez@edtrust.org).

Reflection prompts to facilitate discussion with your team, youth, network, organization, and institutions.

How has the report helped guide you in reflecting on your experiences in higher education, and has it encouraged you to do better work?

Where can you support youth, parents, or institutions in the college going process?

### Follow us on social media

@EdTrustTN  
@OurTurnNatl



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**The Education Trust in Tennessee**

**Our Turn**

**Tennessee Higher Education Commission**

**Samantha Gutter** for spending time with us and helping us understand THEC's report.

**Tennessee College Access and Success Network**

**Bob Obrotha and Wendy Blackmore**, thank you for breaking down the data in the early stages of this process.

**Dr. Alexza Barajas Clark** for empowering us to use our voice and tell our stories.

**Jamie Clinton** for stepping in and supporting the Fellowship in multiple ways. We love and appreciate you, Jamie!

**Fariha Hossain** for helping tell the story and historical data of education in Tennessee.

And last but not least, we want to thank all **the youth and practitioners** for attending focus groups, engaging in interviews, completing the survey, and spreading the word. This report would not be possible without your insight and voice.