

# A MATTER OF DEGREES

**The Complete College Tennessee Act articulates a plan to address the need for better-educated Tennesseans as the state recovers from the recession.**

**by Richard Rhoda**

**T**he Tennessee General Assembly met in extraordinary session this January to address reform of the state's public higher education system. The enacted legislation represents the culmination of months of deliberation by Governor Phil Bredesen and legislative leadership. It embodies responsible action. It sets a clear direction to address the need for many more Tennesseans to be better educated at a time when the state's fiscal capacity to support higher education has diminished drastically.

In the way of background, state operating appropriations for higher education have been in a reduction mode for a number of years. With the prospect of a 6% reduction in 2010-11, the three-year combined decline in support will total some \$280 million, a decrease of 21%. This effectively cancels a decade of gradual growth in the state's funding of higher education. Fortunately, federal stimulus funds were made available to soften the blow of the sharp drop-off of state support; however, this one-time funding expires at the end of the next fiscal year. And, despite the reductions in state appropriations, higher education leaders deliberately have not sought to recoup the lost revenue through student tuition, increasing in-state tuition only 5% per year.

Regardless of this fiscal environment, Tennessee's nine public universities and 13 community colleges, as a group, do not graduate enough students. While enrollments continue to grow (250,000 students in fall 2009), the number of Tennesseans successfully completing a college education is not adequate to meet the economic and social needs of the state in the near and long term. Currently, only 29.9% of Tennessee's adults aged 25-64 hold an associate's degree or higher, compared to the national



average of 37.2%. Annually, Tennessee produces approximately 35,000 associate and bachelor's degrees per year. In order to reach the national average of degree attainment by 2025, Tennessee would need to almost double its annual production of associate and bachelor's degrees to 59,000 per year.

## Complete College Tennessee Act of 2010

Against that backdrop, the Complete College Tennessee Act of 2010 is a significant public policy statement that establishes expectations for the state's system of higher education. It speaks directly to the needs of the state for greater educational attainment of its people and

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the responsibility of its institutions of higher education to accomplish that objective.

The act contains provisions that mandate change in state-level and institutional policies: academic, fiscal, and administrative. The Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC), University of Tennessee (UT) Board of Trustees, and Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) are charged with specific responsibilities for implementing the legislation. Most provisions include implementation dates over the next two years.

Discussion of implementing the act began upon its passage in January. Beginning in March, a set of working committees, including representatives of UT, TBR, THEC, and other pertinent entities, were appointed, and they have commenced their assigned tasks, consistent with provisions of the legislation. Faculty and campus staff participation on the committees is emphasized. The committees' work will be integrated and well communicated.

In broad terms, implementation will involve:

- Revision of the state's master plan for higher education. Specifically, the plan is to focus on "(a) addressing the state's economic development, workforce development, and research needs; (b) ensuring increased degree production within the state's capacity to support higher education; and (c) using institutional mission differentiation to realize statewide efficiencies through institutional collaboration and minimized redundancy in degree offerings, instructional locations, and competitive research."
- Revision of the formula by which the request for state operating support is determined for all public colleges and universities. The existing funding formula, which has served the state well over the years, is largely enrollment-driven. The new formula is to be

an outcome-based model. It "shall emphasize outcomes across a range of variables that shall be weighted to reinforce each institution's mission and provide incentives for productivity improvements consistent with the state's higher education master plan." Outcomes cited in the statute include student retention, degree production, student transfer activity, research, and student success.

- Development and revision of policies for the purpose of increasing student success and degree completion. This will be principally through improved transfer and articulation arrangements, a dual admission policy, refocusing remedial and developmental studies, and greater emphasis on a unified community college system.
- Elevation of the work and status of UT Knoxville, as a top-tier national research institution, through expanded collaboration with the Oak Ridge National Laboratory. Also, elevation of the University of Memphis, as a leading collaborator in the Memphis Research Consortium.

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Convergence of changing state economic development needs and the renewed public policy interest in higher education as a path to tomorrow's employment opportunities has been clearly articulated in the challenges issued by the Complete College Tennessee Act of 2010. As a result, higher education, government, and the business community have an unusually direct, and welcome, mandate for collaboration in increasing the number of Tennesseans that successfully complete a college education.

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