NAVIGATE RECONNECT

2024 Annual Report

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Executive Summary

Navigate Reconnect is Tennessee's primary model of college coaching and advising for independent and over-25 students in Tennessee. Between 2019 and 2021, Navigators helped nearly 11,000 Tennesseans explore and fulfill their hopes to enroll in or return to college. This report is the first in a series documenting college and workforce outcomes for prospective students who have worked with a Navigator through the Navigate Reconnect program ("Reconnectors") in Tennessee.

Highlighted findings for 2019 – 2021 Reconnectors include the following:

- About 2/3 of Reconnectors were female, and they were 33 years old on average, with a lower household income than the state average. Reconnectors were more likely to be Non-White than the state population. About 1 in 7 previously received Unemployment benefits. A majority would have been the first in their family to attend college.
- Between 33% and 43% of Reconnectors enrolled in college within 1 year of first speaking with a Navigator. The volume of new Reconnectors peaked in Spring/Summer 2020, and this cohort was more likely than others to enroll in college.
- Among Reconnectors who enrolled in Tennessee institutions, 6% enrolled in a TCAT, 7% enrolled in a 4-year college or university, and 87% enrolled in one of the state's community colleges.
- Reconnectors were more likely to persist in college and complete college credentials than other nontraditional students. For example, 55% of Reconnectors who enrolled in community colleges were still enrolled two years later or had attained a college credential in that time. The corresponding figure for other nontraditional students was just 44%.
- We see greater persistence rates among Reconnectors across 2-year and 4-year college sectors, regardless of gender, race/ethnicity, prior enrollment history, prior unemployment, first-generation status, and work intensity while enrolled.
- Reconnectors were 78% likely to be working when they enrolled, 13 percentage points more than other nontraditional students. Employment gaps between Reconnectors and non-Reconnectors were wider for males than females, for students without a prior history of enrollment, and for lower-income students.
- Two years after enrolling, Reconnectors earned an annualized income of $42,200, on average, somewhat less than the average $47,600 of other nontraditional students.

Section 1: Background

The Navigate Reconnect model can be traced back to Graduate Memphis, a nonprofit effort focused on postsecondary advising for individuals aged 25 and up who wanted to enroll in or return to college. The Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) identified Graduate Memphis as a scalable model that could contribute to the state's "Drive to 55" effort to increase the rate of Tennessee's working-age population with a postsecondary credential. Starting in 2016, THEC coordinated a competitive grant process to establish "Tennessee Reconnect Communities" (TRCs) that each replicated the core advising tenets of Graduate Memphis, but with a broader base of prospective students that included age 25+ Tennesseans as well as financially independent individuals under age 25. In 2019, THEC centralized TRC day-to-day operations and expanded coverage statewide.

Navigate Reconnect differs from most postsecondary advising programs by focusing on prospective students who are not yet enrolled in college. The program is marketed through traditional and digital media, colleges, and other state programs. Interested individuals encounter a simple pitch:[1]

You've made the decision to go to college. Now what? Talk to someone who can help you navigate the application and enrollment process.

From there, a Reconnector fills out a short interest form online, which initiates what the program records as their *Inquiry* phase. Reconnectors are then prompted to schedule an interest interview with a Navigator, also called a "goal call." Statewide, 12 Navigators serve four regions, grouped by community college service area. The inquiry phase is meant to move a Reconnector from initial interest in college to a commitment to enroll, or at least a better understanding of whether college is suitable for their circumstances and goals.

The inquiry phase concludes after the interest interview, at which point a Reconnector who is committed to enrolling in college moves into the *Pre-enrolled* phase. Navigators assist with institution and program selection during this phase, as well as enrollment and financial aid applications. Navigate Reconnect is institution-neutral, meaning that advisors do not prioritize certain institutions or sectors. Instead, they seek to help Reconnectors identify the best fit among available options. Recognizing that the path from inquiry to college is not always complete or linear, the program also recognizes *Inactive* phases, or as necessary, refers Reconnectors to steps that need to be taken before further planning for college (reconciling old student loans, getting a high school equivalency credential, or gaining English language fluency).

Later phases for college-bound Reconnectors are *Enrolled* and *Alumni*. Navigators play a smaller role in advising once a Reconnector enrolls in college, when degree checklists and institutional requirements are more in the purview of academic advisers.

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[1] https://tnreconnect.gov/talk-to-a-navigator

Section 2: Data

We rely on data from two sources: Navigate Reconnect program records and state administrative data. Program records are collected and maintained through customer relationship management software (CRM), which staff at Tennessee's state administrative data system ("TN DATA") matched with records from THEC as well as the Tennessee Independent Colleges and Universities Association (TICUA) and Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development (TDLWD).[2]

Linked CRM/TN DATA data are limited in three respects. First, CRM data cover Reconnectors who completed an intake interview. We do not observe data on individuals who contacted the program but did not schedule or complete an intake interview. Second, linked TN DATA data are limited to Reconnectors who enrolled in Tennessee public higher education, enrolled in one of the private TICUA institutions that share student data with THEC, and/or had a history of earnings covered by Tennessee Unemployment Insurance (UI). This omits enrollment records for out-of-state or non-TICUA private institutions, and earnings from out-of-state work or employers not covered by UI. Nonetheless, we are able to identify postsecondary or workforce outcomes for the majority of program participants.[3]

A third limitation of the CRM/TN DATA data, not unique to this setting, is that we do not observe Reconnectors' goals for degrees, credentials, or programs, or their plans for part-time versus full-time enrollment. We also do not see how their goals change as the realities of a nontraditional postsecondary education unfold, and we do not know if a Reconnector's pathway involves intermediate milestones such as stackable credentials or transfer. Results to follow report on Reconnectors' persistence through multiple terms of college and their receipt of postsecondary credentials. In addition, we track trends in an either/or combination of credential receipt and persistence with or without a credential, which comprehensively covers diverse Reconnector pathways.

CRM data are more comprehensive and more consistent for Reconnectors who first engaged with the program after the TRCs were centralized into the statewide framework in late summer 2019. Results to follow focus on Reconnectors who first contacted the program during or after summer 2019. We group each Reconnector with a **contact cohort** according to the point in time when they completed their intake interview. The Fall 2019 contact cohort, for example, includes all Reconnectors who had an intake interview (and therefore completed at least the inquiry phase) between August and December 2019, while the Spring 2020 contact cohort includes all Reconnectors who interviewed between January and July 2020.[4] For Reconnectors who later enrolled in college, we also group them into an **enrollment cohort**

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[2] The de-identified administrative data was provided by the Tennessee Departments of Education and Labor and Workforce Development, Tennessee Higher Education Commission, and Tennessee Independent Colleges and Universities and compiled by TN DATA, Tennessee Data Analytics for Transparency and Accountability, Tennessee's longitudinal integrated data system.

[3] Most individuals in Navigate Reconnect CRM records were matched to individuals in TN DATA higher education or workforce records (69%). There are a few reasons why a Reconnector might not match to TN DATA records. First, the primary individual identifier in the CRM is not used in the TN DATA, so TN DATA staff matched on available crosswalks and other fields. In addition, some individuals who engaged with the program did not enroll in a public higher education institution or TICUA institution and did not have an in-state, UI-covered employment history. Others had incomplete intake form data or otherwise did not have enough identifying information in program records.

[4] A small number of students were interviewed in July 2019, after centralization; We group these students with the Fall 2019 contact cohort.

according to their first term during or after their contact cohort year.[5] As with contact cohorts, enrollment cohorts align with Spring/Summer and Fall terms. TN DATA data include college and workforce outcomes through mid-2023, covering at least two complete academic years for Reconnectors who enrolled by Fall 2021.[6]

Section 3: Reconnector Profile

During intake interviews, Navigators record some of the reasons that Reconnectors want to enroll in college and why they are having trouble (or expect to have trouble) doing so. These fields are not comprehensively populated, but they give us a sense of some of the most common challenges that nontraditional students face or perceive when they are thinking about enrolling in college.

Of the two-fifths of students who described their top reason for returning to school, 43 percent said they would do so for personal satisfaction or to achieve a personal goal. The next most common response was increased earning potential (20 percent), followed by hope for a career change (19 percent), a better job (14 percent), or a promotion (4 percent). Roughly the same number of Reconnectors described their anticipated challenges. Students listed on average 3 different potential challenges, and most frequently cited financial worries (86 percent) followed by work demands (41 percent), time management concerns (33 percent), and family and childcare responsibilities (23 percent).

Table 1 describes some of the characteristics of Reconnectors who met with a Navigator in academic years 2019/20 and 2020/2021. Column 1 provides a demographic, socioeconomic, and academic profile for all Reconnectors who met with a Navigator.[7] Column 2 narrows the sample to those who were matched to TN DATA records and who additionally filed a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) in 2019 or later. Filing a FAFSA is an important step toward college enrollment for financially constrained students, since it is required for federal Pell Grant aid, federal student loans, and state grant aid including the Tennessee Reconnect Grant. In addition, the FAFSA includes information on adjusted gross income and parental education,[8] the latter of which we use to identify Reconnectors who would be the first in their families to go to college. Table 1 column 3 focuses on FAFSA-filing Reconnectors who enrolled in college between Fall 2019 and Spring 2023. Column 4 provides details on an analogous set of non-Reconnect students aged 25 and older.

Reconnectors' demographic profile was similar regardless of whether they filed a FAFSA or eventually enrolled in higher education. Just over two-thirds of Reconnectors were female; around 27% were Black or Hispanic, 58 – 59% percent were first-generation college students, and the average age at intake was 33. The three groups of Reconnectors described by Table 1 columns 1 – 3 differed somewhat in their

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[5] About 1 in 4 Reconnectors enrolled at some point prior to contacting a Navigator. For these individuals, we focus on their post-program enrollment and define their enrollment cohort to be the first term during or after their contact term.

[6] Because Reconnect is aimed at the nontraditional age student population, we exclude those who began their enrollment spell in graduate-level education. A very small number of Reconnectors enrolled in graduate programs. Results comparing Reconnectors to other 25+ non-Reconnectors likewise exclude graduate students from the non-Reconnector comparison group.

[7] Students in Table 1 column 1 include those without matching TN DATA higher education and/or employment records, but they are necessarily excluded from summary statistics derived from TN DATA records.

[8] Cohorts who enrolled in 2024 and later will not have adjusted gross income or parental education included in FAFSA records.

prior enrollment behavior. Of the Reconnectors who enrolled at some point after entering the program, 59% had already received some higher education as compared with 47 - 53% percent of all Reconnectors. Compared with other nontraditional students (column 4), Reconnectors were very similar in terms of demographics and household income, but much more likely to have applied for the Tennessee Reconnect Grant (90% versus 46% of non-Reconnectors). Reconnectors had $51,410 in adjusted gross income, on average, somewhat less than the state average ($65,837 in 2021).[9]

Section 4: College Enrollment and Completion

Table 2 lists the cumulative percent of Reconnectors in six different contact cohorts (Fall 2019 – Spring/Summer 2022) who enrolled in a Tennessee public or TICUA institution in the months and years after their intake interview, or who attained a college credential in that window. As noted above, this combined enrollment and/or credential measure is designed to track postsecondary progress in light of a short window of available data and varied student goals for college. Note also that we combine Spring and Summer terms, to smooth out some of the seasonality of year-round enrollment and to align with labor market outcomes in later results.

Between 13 and 20 percent of Reconnectors enrolled or received a college credential during the same 6-month period that they spoke with a Navigator. This pattern was more common among the first three cohorts. It is possible that there was unmet demand for a program like Navigate Reconnect, and that take-up in these initial cohorts was driven by enthusiasm for new Reconnect benefits, or that some of the early-adopting Reconnectors were seeking guidance around their in-progress postsecondary pathways.

The volume of new Reconnectors peaked at 2,793 during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, Spring/Summer 2020, before falling below pre-COVID levels in Fall 2020 and later terms. The post-COVID fall in prospective students is consistent with lower college enrollment more generally, both in Tennessee and throughout the U.S.

We can observe at least three years of postsecondary outcomes for Reconnectors who contacted the program between Fall 2019 and Fall 2020. Among those contact cohorts, we find that 44 – 52% either enrolled or completed a credential by the 5th term after intake (end of the 3rd year). Initial enrollment tended to peak 1-2 terms after intake, or within 18 months. For Reconnectors in 2021 and 2022 contact cohorts, 36 – 42% enrolled in that timeframe.

Now focusing on Reconnectors who enrolled in college between Fall 2019 and Fall 2021, we shift from contact cohorts to enrollment cohorts and examine college persistence over the first two academic years after starting or restarting college. Table 3 lists the percent of Reconnectors who persisted into a second, third, and fourth term, by the sector where they first enrolled after intake.[10] As before, we combine Spring and Summer terms into one half-year term, so that two terms represent one academic year. And for comparison, Table 3 also reports persistence for students aged 25 and older who were not Navigate

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[9] State adjustment gross income averages are found here: https://trac.syr.edu/tracirs/.

[10] Table 3 is organized by the sector where students begin college after speaking with a Navigator (or after a spell of at least one year out of school, for non-Reconnectors). Enrollment shares include students who transferred to other sectors, or who attended schools in different sectors. In results not shown, we examine transfer patterns for Reconnectors as compared with other nontraditional students. We find that Reconnectors are not substantially more likely than non-Reconnectors to transfer to a 4-year institution by the end of the two-year window.

Reconnect participants but who started college, or who re-enrolled at least one year after stopping out, as members of the same enrollment cohorts.

One observation from Table 3 is that Reconnectors who enrolled in college were much more likely to start in a Tennessee community college (87%) than in a 4-year college (7%) or in a TCAT (6%). Another dominant theme from Table 3 is that Reconnectors were more likely to stay enrolled in higher education over their first two years than other nontraditional students. About 2 out of every 3 TCAT Reconnectors persisted into at least a second term, as well as nearly 3 in 4 community college and university Reconnectors. Corresponding figures for non-Reconnectors are lower in all three sectors. At the end of their second year in college, 46% of community college Reconnectors and 48% of university Reconnectors were still enrolled, versus 35% of non-Reconnectors in community colleges and 39% of non-Reconnectors in universities. TCAT Reconnectors were 18% likely to be enrolled in the 4th six-month period after starting college, versus 16% of their non-Reconnector counterparts.

Table 3 persistence rates exclude students who earned a credential within two years and left college. In Table 4, we focus on the same population of Fall 2019 – Fall 2021 enrollees and report cumulative rates of certificate, diploma, or degree attainment by sector and time since initial enrollment for Reconnectors as well as age 25+ non-Reconnectors. Reconnectors were consistently more likely to earn college credentials in a given term than other nontraditional students. Among community college enrollees, 21% of Reconnectors completed a college credential within two years, versus 18% of non-Reconnectors. Reconnectors in 4-year schools were also more likely to attain a degree within two years than other nontraditional students (28 versus 24%). In TCATs, 67% of Reconnectors completed certificate or diploma programs by the end of two academic years, versus 54% of other nontraditional students.

Table 5 lists combined college persistence and/or credential receipt for Reconnectors in Fall 2019 – Fall 2021 enrollment cohorts, as well as age 25+ non-Reconnectors who entered college at the same time. Similar to Table 2 tabulation by contact cohort, Table 5 describes the cumulative share of enrollment cohorts who completed college credentials within a certain time since enrolling, or who remained enrolled at that time.

The combined enrollment or credential outcome in Table 5 starts at 100% in the enrollment term and declines with each later term as students stop out of college without a credential. Two years after enrollment, 55% of community college Reconnectors either had a postsecondary credential or remained enrolled. This compares favorably with 44% of non-Reconnectors. We know from Table 3 and Table 4 that 46% of community college Reconnectors were still enrolled after two years, and 21% had attained a credential. These separate enrollment and completion shares add up to more than the combined 55% figure from Table 5, meaning that a fair number of community college Reconnectors remained in college after attaining at least one credential.

Appendix Tables A1 – A6 describe Reconnector enrollment and completion by student gender (A1), race/ethnicity (A2), pre-contact enrollment history (A3, limited to Reconnectors), UI benefit history (A4), first-generation status (A5), and work intensity at the time of contact (A6). Here, we highlight a few patterns from these breakouts.

Both male and female Reconnectors were more likely than non-Reconnectors of the same gender to persist to a 4th term in college or earn a credential in that time. The gap was somewhat wider for females in TCATs and community colleges, and somewhat wider for males in 4-year schools. Within the

Reconnector population, those who enrolled in college at some point before or during their contact period had about the same persistence/completion as first-time students in 2-year schools, and 2% greater persistence/completion in 4-year schools. Regardless of race/ethnicity, work intensity at enrollment, or first-generation status, TCAT and community college Reconnectors were more likely than non-Reconnectors to persist through two years of college or earn a credential in that time.

We see more differences in postsecondary progress by Navigate Reconnect participation and first-generation status, race and ethnicity, or prior UI receipt in the 4-year sector. In 4-year schools, Reconnectors who were not the first in their families to attend college, or who had previously received UI benefits were less likely than their non-Reconnector counterparts to be enrolled after two years or in possession of a college credential by that time. By contrast, Reconnectors who were first-generation college students or who had not previously received UI benefits achieved higher persistence/completion rates than non-Reconnectors. A small number of Reconnectors enrolled in 4-year schools, however, so it is uncertain if these patterns will hold over time as more cohorts enter the program.

Collectively, Tables A1 – A6 suggest that Reconnector success in college was not driven by one group of students of a certain gender or race/ethnicity, or with a particular socioeconomic background. There may be exceptions for the small number of Reconnectors who enroll in 4-year schools, where first-generation Reconnectors outperformed first-generation non-Reconnectors, as well as other Reconnectors.

Next, we describe enrolled Reconnectors' progress and success in college, specifically their average GPA[11] (Table 6, limited to community college and 4-year Reconnectors) and cumulative credits or contact hours (Table 7), by sector and time since initial enrollment. As before, these tables include comparable statistics for age 25+ students who did not participate in Navigate Reconnect.

Reconnect and non-Reconnect students in community colleges maintained very similar GPAs by term. By the end of two academic years, Reconnectors and non-Reconnectors in community colleges had 3.15 GPAs, on average. Reconnectors enrolled in 4-year institutions attained higher GPAs than non-Reconnectors, with gaps of about one-third of a point. This is particularly impressive considering Reconnectors also tended to take on a larger number of credit hours each term regardless of institution type (Table 7). Another striking takeaway from Table 7 is that both Reconnectors and non-Reconnectors in community colleges and 4-year schools enrolled for a small number of credits per term, on average, or about 2 – 3 courses per term.[12] Part-time enrollment is generally more common among older, nontraditional students, and as discussed below, a majority of Reconnectors and non-Reconnectors work while enrolled.

TCAT Reconnectors completed 279 – 340 clock hours per 6-month period, slightly more than other nontraditional TCAT students. This level of engagement would put TCAT Reconnector on track to complete a certificate program in 2 – 3 terms (within 1.5 academic years), or a diploma program in 4-5 terms (2 – 2.5 academic years).

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[11] Note that GPA is not available for TCAT students. Unlike Tables 3 – 4, statistics for GPA, credits, and contact hours are computed by students' sector of enrollment in the indicated term, rather than by their initial sector.
[12] Credit hour averages include student records with zero completed credits in a term, which accounts for fewer than 10% of student-term observations. Zero-credit enrollment terms may be from students who did not complete any of their attempted credits, as well as from students who enrolled in only non-credit remedial courses.

Section 5: Employment and Earnings

Not enough time has passed to determine if Navigate Reconnect has had a sustained effect on participants' employment or earnings, but we can use the matched TN DATA/CRM data to begin to understand patterns in workforce outcomes before and shortly after Reconnectors engaged with the program.

Figure 1 Panel A plots the percent of Reconnectors in the 2019 and 2020[13] contact cohorts who were employed in Tennessee UI-covered jobs in the five-year period prior to their intake interview, through two years after their intake interview.[14] Figure 1 Panel B plots average six-month earnings in UI-covered jobs over the same time period (in inflation-adjusted 2024 dollars), omitting students with no observed employment/earnings. Both figures examine Reconnector employment outcomes separately for Reconnectors who enroll after intake, and Reconnectors who do not enroll.

First, looking at the overall employment rate of these two groups relative to their intake interview (prior to period 0) we observe similar 60 – 70% employment rates three to five years before contacting Navigate Reconnect (periods -10 through -6). Two years prior to intake, however, Reconnectors who ultimately enrolled in college were increasingly more likely to be employed, up to 80% by the time they spoke with a Navigator. Pre-program employment remained at 70% for Reconnectors who did not later enroll. Moreover, average 6-month earnings for future enrollees were persistently higher than for never-enrollees. This suggests that never-enrolling Reconnectors may have had characteristics or life circumstances that hindered both their ability to maintain employment and to enroll in college, despite signaling interest.

Job loss often triggers an individual's interest in enrolling in college or job training, which would manifest as a decline in employment and earnings just prior to enrolling. This pattern, along with the tendency for earnings to rise afterward, is known as an "Ashenfelter's dip." [15] Figure 1 Panel A shows a modest drop in the employment rate of Reconnectors who enrolled, from 80% at the time of their intake interview to 77% over the two years following contact. Reconnector earnings also fell for both groups in the contact period, by about $700 for Reconnectors who enrolled in that period or later, and $400 for Reconnectors who did not enroll. This is consistent with a mild degree of involuntary unemployment among Reconnectors that triggered their engagement with the program, but also voluntary unemployment or underemployment to accommodate time for school.[16]

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[13] These two cohorts are the only ones for which two full years of wage and employment data are available after their intake interview.

[14] UI data are organized into quarters. We align the first and second quarters of each year with the Spring/Summer contact cohorts, and the third and fourth quarters of each year with the Fall contact cohorts.

[15] Ashenfelter, O. (1978). Estimating the effect of training programs on earnings. *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, 47-57.

[16] In results not shown, we disaggregate Figure 1 results for ever-enrolled Reconnectors based on the number of terms between contact and enrollment. The broad post-contact patterns we see in Figure 1 are similar for Reconnectors who enroll during their contact term as well as those who enroll later. All intake cohorts experience a decline in employment between their contact and enrollment periods. Among employed Reconnectors, average half-year earnings decline in their contact period and rise post-contact, regardless of how much time elapses between contact and enrollment.

Next, Figure 2 focuses on Reconnectors who enrolled between Fall 2019 and Spring/Summer 2020. Panel A plots their employment rates over the five years before and two years after enrollment, and Panel B plots average earnings in each six-month period over the same time period. Since Reconnectors tended to enroll within 12 months of contact, their employment and earnings patterns were similar when the 0-period is the time of enrollment, as in Figure 2, or when the 0-period is the time of contact, as in Figure 1. We see a modest, 2% decline in employment for Reconnectors over the two years post-enrollment (Panel A), along with a $800 decline in earnings in the enrollment period (Panel B). After enrollment, average Reconnector earnings steadily increased each period. Two years after enrollment, Reconnectors were earning about $21,100 each six-month period (or $42,200 annually), which was $3,200 more than what they were earning when they enrolled ($6,400 more, annualized).

For comparison, we plot the same patterns for other nontraditional students, that is, non-Reconnectors aged 25 and up. We observe a large difference in the employment rate between Reconnectors and other nontraditional students. Reconnectors were more likely to be employed in all observed periods, by 7 – 14 percentage points. This could be in part because Reconnectors were less likely to be enrolled in four-year institutions than comparison students, making them more available for employment across the observation period as they pursued shorter degree programs.

Despite differences in the employment rate favoring Reconnectors, working Reconnectors tended to earn less than non-Reconnectors before, during, and after enrollment. Two years after starting or restarting college, non-Reconnectors earned $23,800 per six-month period, or $47,600 annualized.

In the Appendix, additional figures plot employment and earnings by gender (Figure A1), race/ethnicity (A2), previous enrollment (A3), previous UI receipt (A4), first-generation status (A5), and work intensity at initial enrollment (A6). Here, we review select findings from these breakouts.

The employment gap favoring Reconnectors that we see in Figure 2 was wider for males than for females (Figure A1), for students without a prior history of enrollment (A3), and for lower-income students (A6). Figure A3 also shows that Reconnectors with a history of pre-program enrollment tended to have higher rates of baseline employment and that their employment rates sustained at around 80% after re-starting college. This might be in part due to age—that is, older Reconnectors would be more likely to have had prior enrollment and would also be further into their prime working years. Another pattern that we can potentially attribute to age is found in Figure A4, where we show that Reconnectors and non-Reconnectors who had previously received UI benefits tended to have higher rates of employment and earnings before, during, and after enrollment.

Employment rates around enrollment were very similar for first-generation and other students, although non-first-generation Reconnectors had lower earnings than first-generation Reconnectors and other nontraditional students (Figure A5).

Finally, we find a more prominent pre-enrollment dip in earnings among students who were working when enrolled, but earning less than the half-time, minimum wage level (Figure A6). Both Reconnectors and non-Reconnectors in this group had declining income and rates of employment up to one year prior to enrolling. Employment and earnings rebounded to pre-enrollment levels over the next two years.

Conclusion

Reconnectors face a number of challenges as they embark on a process to enroll in or return to college. Most would be the first in their families to complete college, and most are working when they first speak with a Navigator. About 1 in 7 have previously received Unemployment Insurance benefits. In their own words, Reconnectors cite financial, work, and family responsibilities that they expect to hinder their success getting to and through college. Nonetheless, up to 47% of people who contacted Navigate Reconnect were enrolled within 18 months, and up to 53% enrolled within 3 years. Enrolled Reconnectors persist and complete college at greater rates than other nontraditional students and attain a similar level of earnings two years after enrollment.

These findings are limited in a couple of respects, in addition to CRM/TN DATA data omissions discussed in Section III. Foremost, comparisons between Reconnectors and other nontraditional students are descriptive and should not be interpreted as the causal effect of the program on postsecondary or workforce outcomes. These descriptive patterns highlight a number of differences between Reconnectors and other students that should be accounted for in a more causal analysis, such as different baseline levels of employment and earnings, and a stronger tendency among Reconnectors to enroll in community colleges. Second, post-enrollment results are limited to a short period of time: Just two academic years, which we can observe for Reconnectors who enrolled as late as Fall 2021. Later versions of this report will extend that timeline, which will allow us to study college completion outcomes over a longer period of time as well as workforce outcomes after college.

Tables and Figures

Table 1. Summary Statistics, 2019-20 and 2020-21 Reconnectors

	(1) All Reconnectors	(2) Reconnectors with FAFSA	(3) Reconnectors with FAFSA who enrolled	(4) Age 25+ Non- Reconnectors who Filed FAFSA and Enrolled F19 or later
Female (%)	67.4	69.2	69.8	65.6
Black (%)	22.7	24.0	24.4	26.3
Hispanic (%)	4.6	4.7	5.1	3.5
White, non-Hispanic (%)	63.0	62.4	62.2	63.0
Other non-Hispanic race/ethnicity (%)	9.7	9.0	8.3	7.2
Age	32.5	32.8	32.8	34.0
First-generation college student (%)	58.8	58.8	58.2	57.4
Enrolled in college before contact (CRM records) (%)	46.5	53.4	59.4	N/A
Received UI benefits before contact (TN DATA records) (%)	14.1	16.9	18.9	N/A
Working at least half-time in contact term (%)	55.6	56.7	58.8	N/A
Filed FAFSA, 2019 or later (%)	72.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Filed for Tennessee Reconnect Grant, 2019 or later (%)	52.0	68.3	90.1	46.1
Adjusted gross income (2024$)	51,410	51,410	53,365	49,570
Number of individuals	8,377	6,033	3,726	35,041

The table lists summary statistics for all individuals in matched TN DATA/Navigate Reconnect records who worked with a Navigator in academic year 2019-20 or 2020-21 (column 1), the subset of those individuals who also filed a FAFSA (column 2), and the subset with FAFSA records who enrolled in a public or TICUA college or university between Fall 2019 and Spring 2023 (column 3). Column 4 reports comparable summary statistics for age 25+ non-Reconnectors who filed a FAFSA and enrolled in college during the same time period.

Table 2: Reconnectors Ever Enrolled or Receiving an Award, by Contact Cohort and Time Since Intake

Contact Cohort	Fall 2019	Spring / Summer 2020	Fall 2020	Spring / Summer 2021	Fall 2021	Spring / Summer 2022
	Enrolled or Award (%)	Enrolled or Award (%)	Enrolled or Award (%)	Enrolled or Award (%)	Enrolled or Award (%)	Enrolled or Award (%)
Time Since Intake						
Intake Term	18.1	20.4	18.8	13.7	15.4	13.3
1 term after intake	35.0	43.3	38.9	32.5	36.1	38.4
2 terms after intake	39.3	47.0	44.2	35.5	41.0	42.2
3 terms after intake	41.2	49.7	46.5	38.4	42.9	
4 terms after intake	43.0	50.8	47.6	39.9		
5 terms after intake	43.8	51.9	49.0			
6 terms after intake	44.3	52.7				
7 terms after intake	45.1					
Number of Reconnectors	2,123	2,793	1,593	1,868	977	1,361
Number of Reconnectors who enrolled by spring 2023	958	1473	780	745	419	574
Number of Reconnectors who earned credentials by spring 2023	342	552	245	187	64	70

The table reports the percent of Reconnectors who enrolled in Tennessee public or TICUA higher education, or who had attained a college credential, by contact cohort and time since intake into Navigate Reconnect. We group spring and summer terms together so that two terms represent one academic year. Enrollment and credential attainment rates exclude any college credentials earned prior to intake.

Table 3: Nontraditional Student Persistence in College, by Sector, Reconnector Status, and Time Since Enrollment

Sector	Community Colleges		4-year Colleges and Universities		TCATs	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
		Age 25+ Non-		Age 25+ Non-		Age 25+ Non-
	Reconnectors	Reconnectors	Reconnectors	Reconnectors	Reconnectors	Reconnectors
Initial term	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
2nd term	72.9	61.1	73.9	65.5	67.7	56.7
3rd term	56.2	42.9	63.0	50.8	39.8	33.9
4th term	45.6	34.7	47.9	39.0	18.1	16.3
# students	3,277	30,521	257	24,726	226	10,272

The table reports the percent of students who remain in college by sector, Reconnector status, and time since initial enrollment. We group spring and summer terms together so that two terms represent one academic year. The sample is limited to students who initially enrolled in Fall 2019 - Fall 2021. Sector is based on the first observed institution of enrollment.

Table 4: Nontraditional Student Credential Receipt, by Initial Sector, Reconnector Status, and Time Since Enrollment

Sector	Community Colleges		4-year Colleges and Universities		TCATs	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
		Age 25+ Non-		Age 25+ Non-		Age 25+ Non-
	Reconnectors	Reconnectors	Reconnectors	Reconnectors	Reconnectors	Reconnectors
Initial term	3.5	3.9	5.1	3.4	16.8	14.5
2nd term	7.8	8.1	10.9	8.5	40.3	32.7
3rd term	13.9	11.9	20.6	15.8	61.9	47.6
4th term	21.2	17.8	28.4	23.7	66.8	53.5
# students	3,277	30,521	257	24,726	226	10,272

The table reports the cumulative percent of students who have earned college credentials by sector, Reconnector status, and time since initial enrollment. We group spring and summer terms together so that two terms represent one academic year. The sample is limited to students who initially enrolled in Fall 2019 - Fall 2021

Table 5: Nontraditional Student Persistence and Credential Receipt, by Sector, Reconnector Status, and Time Since Enrollment

Sector	Community Colleges		4-year Colleges and Universities		TCATs	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Reconnectors	Age 25+ Non-Reconnectors	Reconnectors	Age 25+ Non-Reconnectors	Reconnectors	Age 25+ Non-Reconnectors
Initial term	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
2nd term	75.2	64.3	76.3	68.9	79.2	67.8
3rd term	61.5	49.5	68.9	58.3	74.8	62.5
4th term	55.0	44.0	61.5	53.0	73.5	59.9
# students	3,277	30,521	257	24,726	226	10,272

The table reports the percent of students who are enrolled in college or have attained a certificate or degree by sector, Reconnector status, and time since initial enrollment. We group spring and summer terms together so that two terms represent one academic year. The sample is limited to students who initially enrolled in Fall 2019 - Fall 2021.

Table 6: Nontraditional Student Cumulative GPA, by Sector, Reconnector Status, and Time Since Enrollment

| Sector	Community Colleges		4-year Colleges and Universities	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Reconnectors	Age 25+ Non-Reconnectors	Reconnectors	Age 25+ Non-Reconnectors
Initial term	2.68	2.59	2.51	2.36
2nd term	2.97	2.93	2.76	2.61
3rd term	3.13	3.06	2.95	2.67
4th term	3.15	3.08	2.96	2.68
# students	3,320	31,028	469	26225

The table reports the average cumulative GPA by term, sector of current enrollment, Reconnector status, and time since initial enrollment. We group spring and summer terms together so that two terms represent one academic year. The sample is limited to students who initially enrolled in Fall 2019 - Fall 2021.

Table 7: Nontraditional Student Term Credits, by Sector, Reconnector Status, and Time Since Enrollment

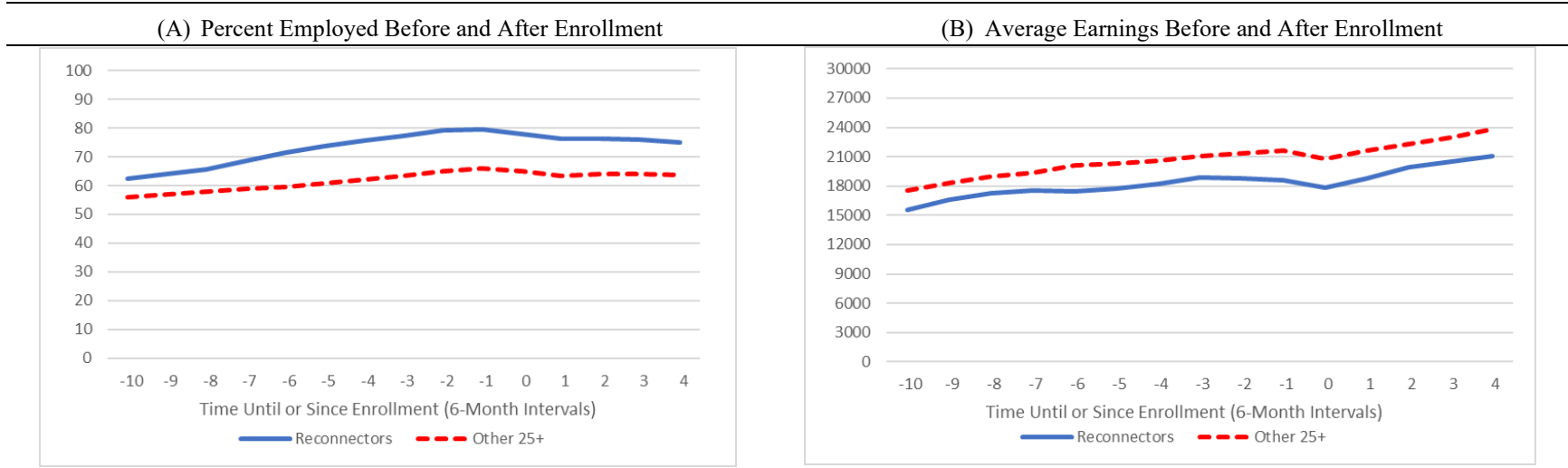|	Community Colleges		4-year Colleges and Universities		TCATs	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Reconnectors	Age 25+ Non-Reconnectors	Reconnectors	Age 25+ Non-Reconnectors	Reconnectors	Age 25+ Non-Reconnectors
Initial term	7.1	6.4	7.7	6.5	296.4	238.6
2nd term	7.2	6.9	10.0	7.5	339.5	323.6
3rd term	7.6	7.3	9.2	8.1	322.0	296.7
4th term	7.4	7.2	10.8	8.3	279.0	257.8
# students	3,320	31,028	469	26,225	259	10,580

The table reports the average credits or contact hours by current sector of enrollment, Reconnector status, and time since initial enrollment. We group spring and summer terms together so that two terms represent one academic year. The sample is limited to students who initially enrolled in Fall 2019 - Fall 2021.

Figure 1. Reconnector Employment and Earnings Five Years Before and Two Years After Contact

(A) Percent Employed Before and After Contact	(B) Average Earnings Before and After Contact
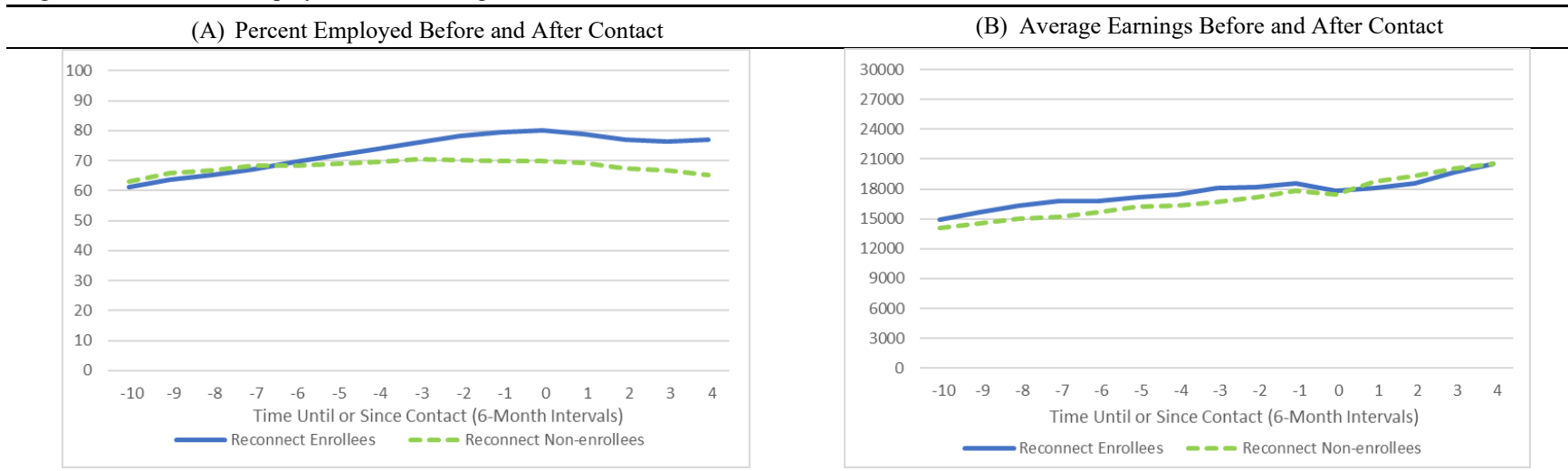
Panel A plots the percent of Reconnectors with in-state, UI-covered employment in the 2019 - 2021 contact cohorts during the five years prior to their Navigate Reconnect intake interview (periods -10 through -1), during the six-month period when they completed their intake interview (period 0), and during the two years after contacting Navigate Reconnect (periods 1 - 4). Panel B plots average UI-covered earnings (conditional on having any UI-covered from Tennessee employers) in each six-month period over the same time frame.

Figure 2. Nontraditional Student Employment and Earnings Five Years Before and Two Years After Enrollment, by Reconnect status

(A) Percent Employed Before and After Enrollment	(B) Average Earnings Before and After Enrollment

Panel A plots the percent of Reconnectors versus other nontraditional students with in-state, UI-covered employment in the 2019 – 2021 enrollment cohorts during the five years prior to enrollment (periods -10 through -1), during the six-month period when they enrolled (period 0), and during the two years after enrollment (periods 1 - 4). Panel B plots average UI-covered earnings in each six-month period over the same time frame (conditional on having any UI-covered from Tennessee employers). Earnings are inflation-adjusted to 2024 dollars.

Appendix: Additional Tables and Figures

Table A1: Nontraditional Student Persistence and Credential Receipt, by Sector, Reconnector Status, Time Since Enrollment, and Gender

	Male				Female			
Sector	TCATs and Community Colleges		4-year Colleges and Universities		TCATs and Community Colleges		4-year Colleges and Universities	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	Reconnectors	Age 25+ Non-Reconnectors	Reconnectors	Age 25+ Non-Reconnectors	Reconnectors	Age 25+ Non-Reconnectors	Reconnectors	Age 25+ Non-Reconnectors
Initial term	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
2nd term	73.6	67.2	77.2	68.0	76.3	66.0	75.8	69.8
3rd term	59.8	55.9	69.6	56.9	63.4	52.5	68.5	59.5
4th term	54.1	51.4	62.0	51.7	57.0	47.5	61.2	54.1
# students	1,068	14,895	79	9.840	2,435	24,918	178	14,80423,067

The table reports the percent of students who are enrolled in college or have attained a certificate or degree by sector, Reconnector status, and time since initial enrollment. Enrollment/completion rates are listed separately for males (columns 1-4) and females (columns 5-8). We group spring and summer terms together so that two terms represent one academic year. The sample is limited to students who initially enrolled in Fall 2019 - Spring 2021.

Table A2: Nontraditional Student Persistence and Credential Receipt, by Sector, Reconnector Status, Time Since Enrollment, and Race/Ethnicity

	Non-White or Hispanic/Latino				White, not Hispanic/Latino			
Sector	TCATs and Community Colleges		4-year Colleges and Universities		TCATs and Community Colleges		4-year Colleges and Universities	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	Reconnectors	Age 25+ Non-Reconnectors	Reconnectors	Age 25+ Non-Reconnectors	Reconnectors	Age 25+ Non-Reconnectors	Reconnectors	Age 25+ Non-Reconnectors
Initial term	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
2nd term	70.3	60.5	71.2	64.3	78.4	67.6	81.6	72.4
3rd term	55.0	47.8	63.6	53.5	66.6	55.3	74.4	61.9
4th term	49.8	43.9	55.3	48.5	59.9	50.2	68.0	56.4
# students	1.288	13,985	132	10,545	2,215	26,808	125	14,181

The table reports the percent of students who are enrolled in college or have attained a certificate or degree by sector, Reconnector status, and time since initial enrollment. Enrollment/completion rates are listed separately for Non-White or Hispanic/Latino students (columns 1-4) and students who are White Non-Hispanic (columns 5-8). We group spring and summer terms together so that two terms represent one academic year. The sample is limited to students who initially enrolled in Fall 2019 - Spring 2021.

Table A3: Reconnect Student Persistence and Credential Receipt, by Sector, Time Since Enrollment, and Prior Enrollment History

Sector	Not enrolled in or before contact		Enrolled in or before contact	
	(1) TCATs and Community Colleges	(2) 4-year Colleges and Universities	(3) TCATs and Community Colleges	(4) 4-year Colleges and Universities
Initial term	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
2nd term	77.1	72.9	74.3	77.9
3rd term	63.1	63.5	61.8	71.5
4th term	56.7	60.0	56.5	62.2
# students	1,419	85	2,084	172

The table reports the percent of students who are enrolled in college or have attained a certificate or degree by sector and time since initial enrollment. Enrollment/completion rates are listed separately for Reconnectors with prior enrollment (columns 1-2) and without prior enrollment (columns 3-4). We group spring and summer terms together so that two terms represent one academic year. The sample is limited to students who initially enrolled in Fall 2019 - Spring 2021.

Table A4: Nontraditional Student Persistence and Credential Receipt, by Sector, Reconnector Status, Time Since Enrollment, and UI Benefit History

Sector	No Prior UI Benefits				Prior UI Benefits			
	TCATs and Community Colleges		4-year Colleges and Universities		TCATs and Community Colleges		4-year Colleges and Universities	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	Reconnectors	Age 25+ Non-Reconnectors	Reconnectors	Age 25+ Non-Reconnectors	Reconnectors	Age 25+ Non-Reconnectors	Reconnectors	Age 25+ Non-Reconnectors
Initial term	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
2nd term	75.1	65.1	78.0	69.0	77.1	65.6	67.4	68.4
3rd term	62.2	52.8	69.2	58.5	62.8	52.8	67.4	57.3
4th term	56.2	48.1	64.5	53.3	55.9	47.8	46.5	51.4
# students	2,847	31,368	214	21,476	656	9,425	43	3,250

The table reports the percent of students who are enrolled in college or have attained a certificate or degree by sector, Reconnector status, and time since initial enrollment. Enrollment/completion rates are listed separately for students with no prior record of UI benefit receipt (columns 1-4) and those who had previously received UI benefits (columns 5-8). We group spring and summer terms together so that two terms represent one academic year. The sample is limited to students who initially enrolled in Fall 2019 - Spring 2021.

Table A5: Nontraditional Student Persistence and Credential Receipt, by Sector, Reconnector Status, Time Since Enrollment, and First Generation Status

Sector	Non First-Generation				First Generation			
	TCATs and Community Colleges		4-year Colleges and Universities		TCATs and Community Colleges		4-year Colleges and Universities	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	Reconnectors	Age 25+ Non-Reconnectors	Reconnectors	Age 25+ Non-Reconnectors	Reconnectors	Age 25+ Non-Reconnectors	Reconnectors	Age 25+ Non-Reconnectors
Initial term	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
2nd term	75.2	70.0	76.6	75.8	76.3	69.0	78.3	75.0
3rd term	61.7	57.0	68.1	66.4	63.0	56.1	70.4	64.0
4th term	56.0	52.0	57.4	61.3	57.3	51.2	64.3	58.3
#students	1,296	11,368	94	5393	1.846	17,135	115	5,429

The table reports the percent of students who are enrolled in college or have attained a certificate or degree by sector, Reconnector status, and time since initial enrollment. Enrollment/completion rates are listed separately for students whose parents had a college education (columns 1-4) and those who would be the first in their families to complete college (columns 5-8). We group spring and summer terms together so that two terms represent one academic year. The sample is limited to students who initially enrolled in Fall 2019 - Spring 2021.
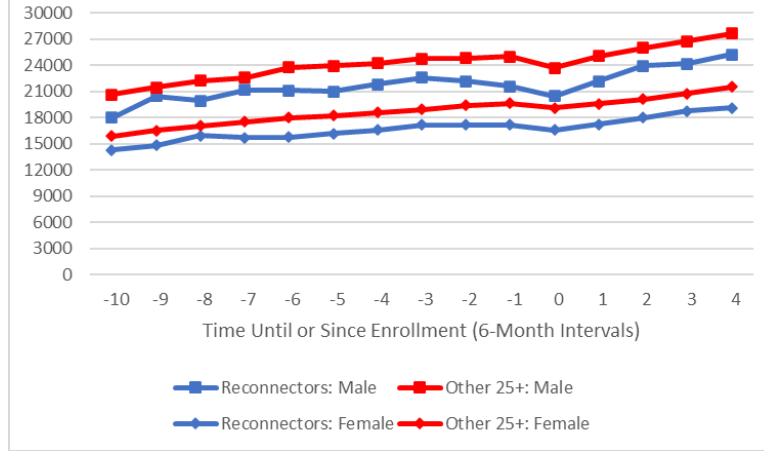
Table A6: Nontraditional Student Persistence and Credential Receipt, by Sector, Reconnector Status, Time Since Enrollment, and Work Intensity While Enrolled

Sector	Earning less than HT Wage				Earning HT Wage or More			
	TCATs and Community Colleges		4-year Colleges and Universities		TCATs and Community Colleges		4-year Colleges and Universities	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	Reconnectors	Age 25+ Non-Reconnectors	Reconnectors	Age 25+ Non-Reconnectors	Reconnectors	Age 25+ Non-Reconnectors	Reconnectors	Age 25+ Non-Reconnectors
Initial term	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
2nd term	75.2	63.7	74.8	67.2	75.7	66.5	77.4	71.3
3rd term	61.9	52.0	67.6	56.0	62.6	53.5	69.9	61.5
4th term	55.3	47.5	62.1	50.8	56.8	48.5	61.0	56.0
# students	1,523	19,810	111	14,149	1,980	20,983	146	10,577

The table reports the percent of students who are enrolled in college or have attained a certificate or degree by sector, Reconnector status, and time since initial enrollment. Enrollment/completion rates are listed separately for students who were not working or who were earning less than a halftime level of earnings at the time of their initial enrollment (columns 1-4) and students who were earning at least a halftime level of earning when they enrolled (columns 5-8). We group spring and summer terms together so that two terms represent one academic year. The sample is limited to students who initially enrolled in Fall 2019 - Spring 2021.

Figure A1. Nontraditional Student Employment and Earnings Five Years Before and Two Years After Enrollment, by Reconnect Status and Gender

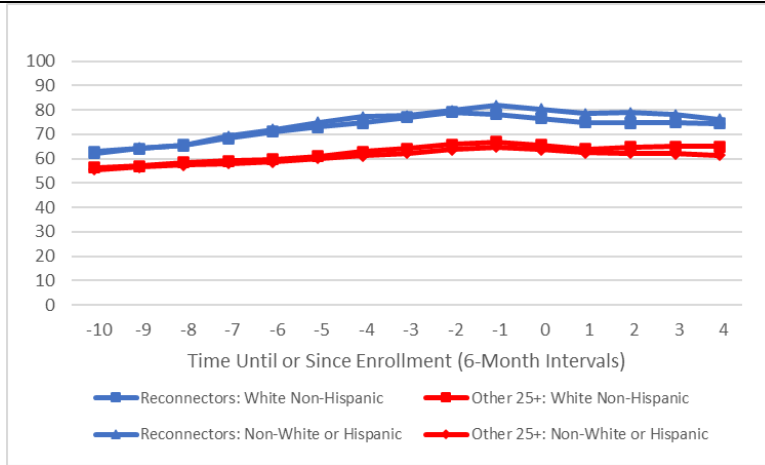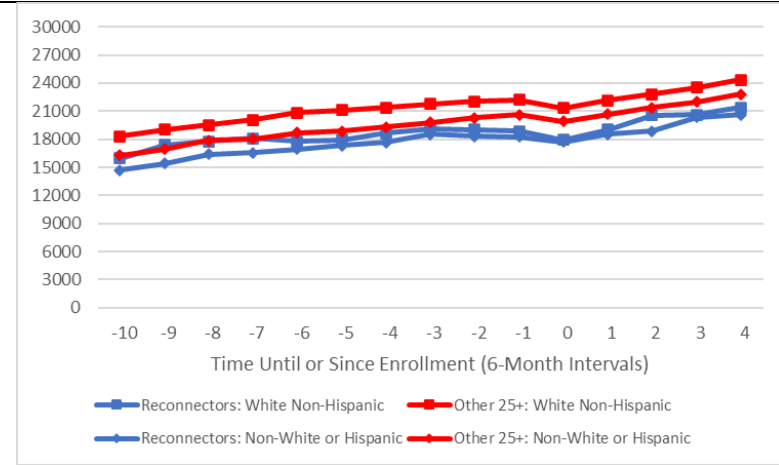| (A) Percent Employed Before and After Enrollment	(B) Average Earnings Before and After Enrollment
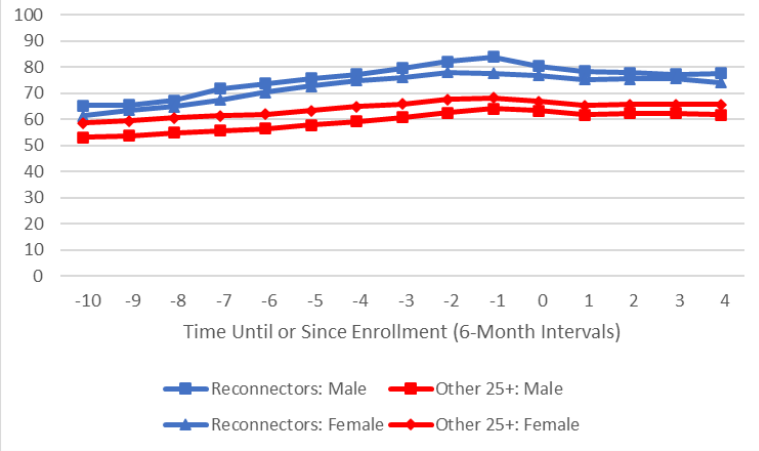
Panel A plots the percent of Reconnectors versus other nontraditional students with in-state, UI-covered employment in the 2019 – 2021 enrollment cohorts during the five years prior to enrollment (periods -10 through -1), during the six-month period when they enrolled (period 0), and during the two years after enrollment (periods 1 - 4). Panel B plots average UI-covered earnings in each six-month period over the same time frame (conditional on having any UI-covered from Tennessee employers). Earnings are inflation-adjusted to 2024 dollars. Each figure presents trends separately for males and females.

Figure A2. Nontraditional Student Employment and Earnings Five Years Before and Two Years After Enrollment, by Reconnect Status and Race/Ethnicity
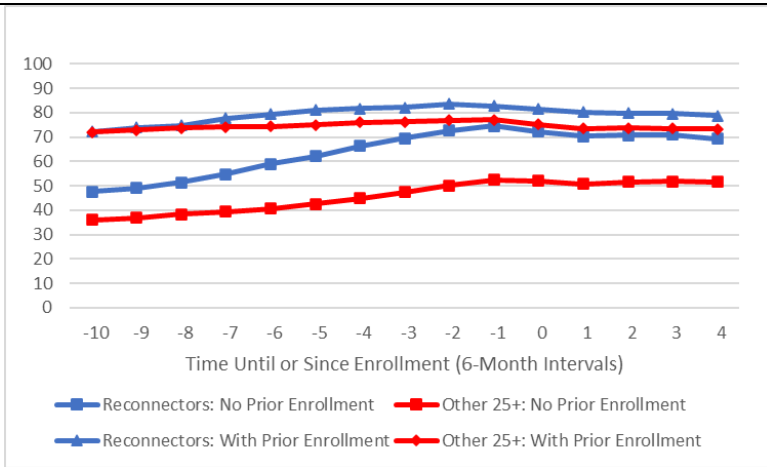
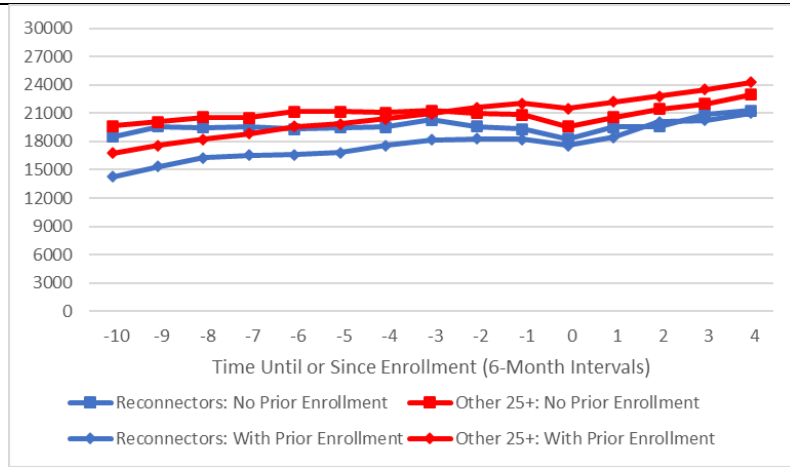| (A) Percent Employed Before and After Enrollment	(B) Average Earnings Before and After Enrollment

Panel A plots the percent of Reconnectors versus other nontraditional students with in-state, UI-covered employment in the 2019 - 2021 enrollment cohorts during the five years prior to enrollment (periods -10 through -1), during the six-month period when they enrolled (period 0), and during the two years after enrollment (periods 1 - 4). Panel B plots average UI-covered earnings in each six-month period over the same time frame (conditional on having any UI-covered from Tennessee employers). Each figure presents trends separately for White Non-Hispanic students, and Non-White or Hispanic students.

Figure A3. Reconnector Employment and Earnings Five Years Before and Two Years After Enrollment, by Prior Enrollment History

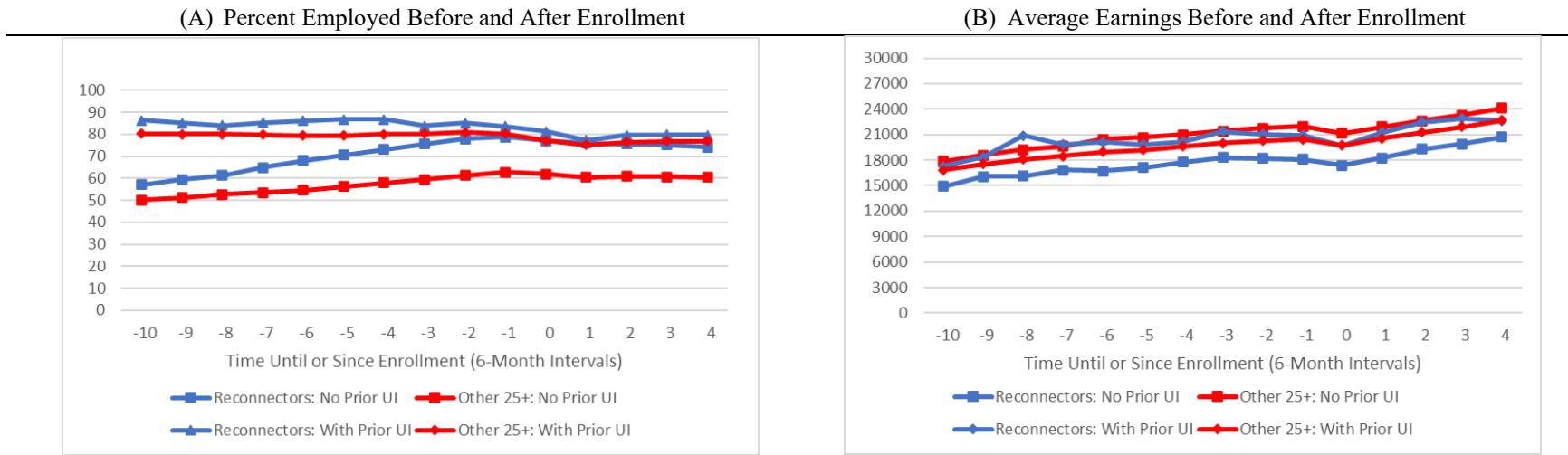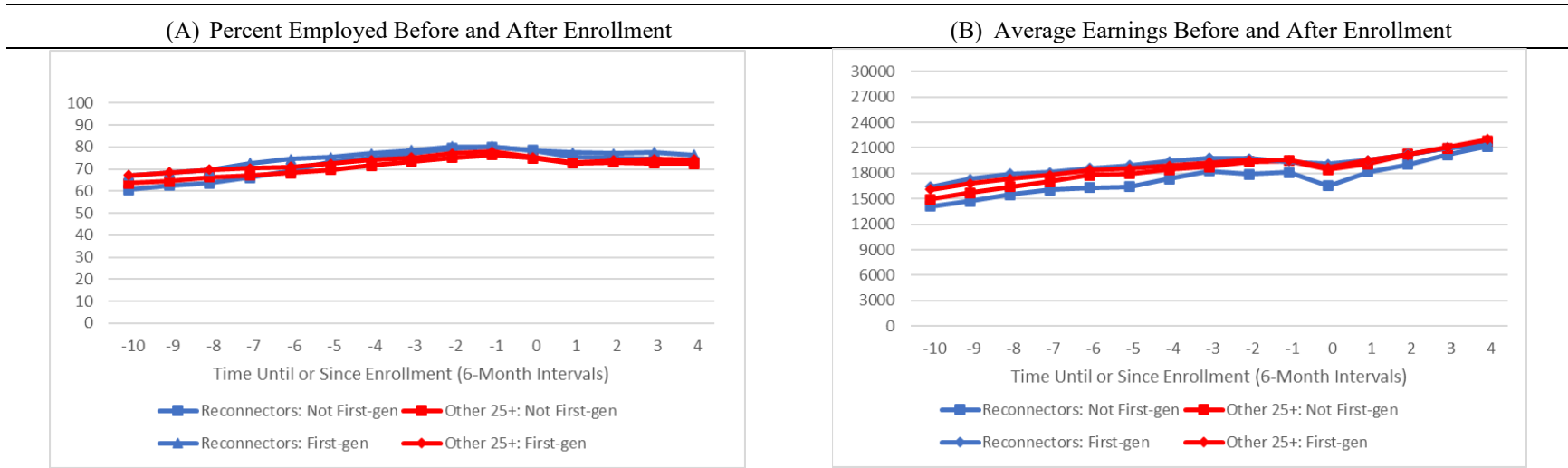| (A) Percent Employed Before and After Enrollment	(B) Average Earnings Before and After Enrollment

Panel A plots the percent of Reconnectors versus other nontraditional students with in-state, UI-covered employment in the 2019 - 2021 enrollment cohorts during the five years prior to enrollment (periods -10 through -1), during the six-month period when they enrolled (period 0), and during the two years after enrollment (periods 1 - 4). Panel B plots average UI-covered earnings in each six-month period over the same time frame (conditional on having any UI-covered from Tennessee employers). Earnings are inflation-adjusted to 2024 dollars. Each figure presents trends separately for students with and without observed college enrollment prior to period 0.

Figure A4. Nontraditional Student Employment and Earnings Five Years Before and Two Years After Enrollment, by Reconnect Status and Prior UI Receipt

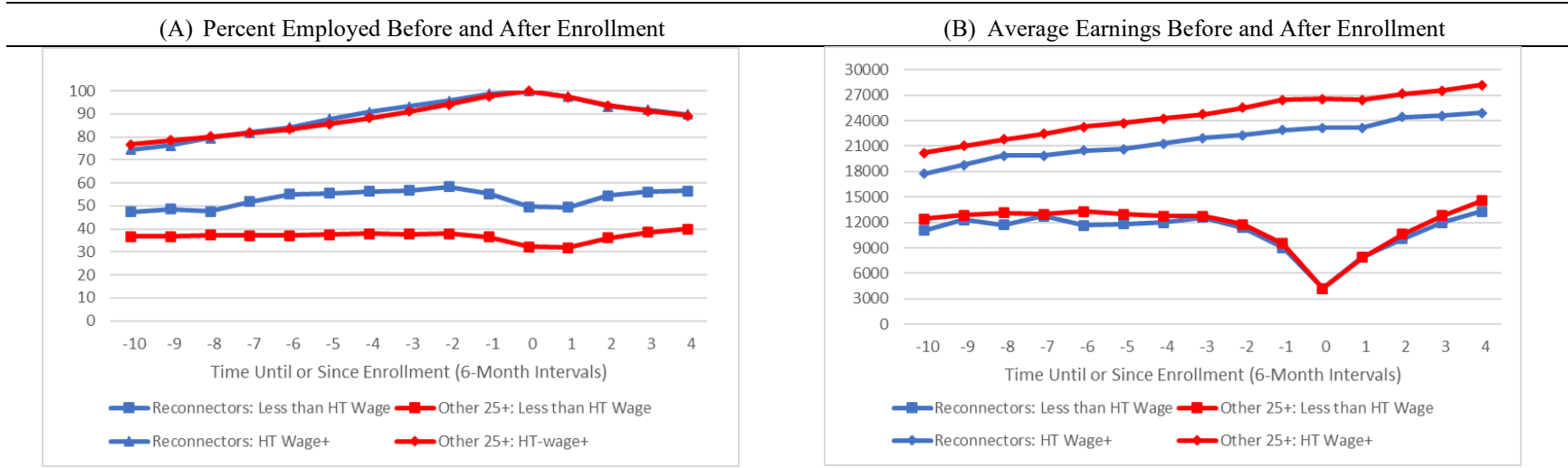| (A) Percent Employed Before and After Enrollment	(B) Average Earnings Before and After Enrollment

Panel A plots the percent of Reconnectors versus other nontraditional students with in-state, UI-covered employment in the 2019 - 2021 enrollment cohorts during the five years prior to enrollment (periods -10 through -1), during the six-month period when they enrolled (period 0), and during the two years after enrollment (periods 1 - 4). Panel B plots average UI-covered earnings in each six-month period over the same time frame (conditional on having any UI-covered from Tennessee employers). Earnings are inflation-adjusted to 2024 dollars. Each figure presents trends separately for students with and without a history of unemployment benefit receipt prior to period 0.

Figure A5. Nontraditional Student Employment and Earnings Five Years Before and Two Years After Enrollment, by Reconnect Status and First Generation Status

(A) Percent Employed Before and After Enrollment	(B) Average Earnings Before and After Enrollment

Panel A plots the percent of Reconnectors versus other nontraditional students with in-state, UI-covered employment in the 2019 - 2021 enrollment cohorts during the five years prior to enrollment (periods -10 through -1), during the six-month period when they enrolled (period 0), and during the two years after enrollment (periods 1 - 4). Panel B plots average UI-covered earnings in each six-month period over the same time frame (conditional on having any UI-covered from Tennessee employers). Each figure presents trends separately for students who were the first in their family to attend college and those who had at least one parent with a college education.

Figure A6. Nontraditional Student Employment and Earnings Five Years Before and Two Years After Enrollment, by Reconnect Status and Work Intensity When Enrolled

(A) Percent Employed Before and After Enrollment	(B) Average Earnings Before and After Enrollment

Panel A plots the percent of Reconnectors versus other nontraditional students with in-state, UI-covered employment in the 2019 - 2021 enrollment cohorts during the five years prior to enrollment (periods -10 through -1), during the six-month period when they enrolled (period 0), and during the two years after enrollment (periods 1 - 4). Panel B plots average UI-covered earnings in each 6-month period over the same time frame (conditional on having any UI-covered from Tennessee employers). Each figure presents trends separately for students who were earning at least half-time pay during the six-month period 0 when they enrolled, and students who were not working or earning less than the half-time threshold.