

ALIGNING ACADEMIC PROGRAM APPROVAL WITH STATE WORKFORCE NEEDS:  
A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY ON SYSTEM POLICY CHANGE

by

David Henry Tanner

(Under the Direction of Erik C. Ness)

ABSTRACT

Workforce development is one of the top issues for state higher education executives today. Employers are actively looking for ways to address skill gaps and labor shortages in their companies. To address these talent gaps, states are aligning their academic program approval process with state workforce needs. Minimal research has explored the regulatory and policy role of states in approving academic degree programs or the role governing boards and coordinating boards have over academic programs at public institutions.

This comparative case study of policy changes in Georgia and Tennessee provides insights into how higher education systems have used their academic program approval authority to respond to employer calls to improve academic program alignment and address the lack of skills employers see in graduates. Findings from this dissertation indicate that states are using new program approval to advance their economic goals and governance structure impacts the tactics states can use to align programs to the talent needs of a whole industry or an employer's specific need. Policy change frameworks such as the multiple streams framework and the ecology of higher education policy change are helpful in understanding the factors influencing policy changes made in Georgia and Tennessee. State-level requirements for new program

proposals have remained fairly consistent for decades; however, changes made in the two states in this case study indicate an increase need for data-informed justification of program demand and employer support and engagement. Developing programs quickly to meet market demand for talent is putting political and economic pressure on state systems to revisit their new academic program requirements and processes while balancing the responsibility states have to maintain quality programs that are financially viable. This study affirms the central role of faculty in the development of new programs. The study outlines five ways state systems can support employers and faculty in the development of new programs. This dissertation adds context to why governance matters in a state's ability to address workforce needs and how academic program approval is an effective tool for states in aligning programs with state economic needs.

**INDEX WORDS:** State Authorization; Academic Program Approval; Workforce Development; Higher Education Governance

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DAVID HENRY TANNER

B.A., Brigham Young University, 1995

M.P.A, Brigham Young University, 1999

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2024

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by

DAVID HENRY TANNER

Major Professor: Erik C. Ness

Committee: James C. Hearn  
Elizabeth DeBray

Electronic Version Approved:

Ron Walcott  
Vice Provost for Graduate Education and Dean of the Graduate School  
The University of Georgia  
May 2024

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this PhD to my mother Donna Wittwer Tanner and my wife Vonae. Mom, you instilled in me the confidence to take on challenges and the drive to see them through to completion. Vonae, we came but for friendship and took away love. I could not have accomplished this goal without you. Your love and support made this possible.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

“The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step” (Lao Tzu).

Completing my doctorate degree has been my personal goal for a very long time. I first stepped into Meigs Hall on the campus of the University of Georgia to learn about the doctoral program in Higher Education in 2004. At the time, I was working as a budget analyst at the Governor’s Office of Planning and Budget with responsibility for the budget of the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia. I visited Meigs Hall to learn what it would take for me to work toward my goal of earning a PhD. Pursuing a PhD was a major part of my decision to move to Georgia in 1999 and to go to work at the University of Georgia in 2012. In the fall of 2014, I took my first class on my journey to earn my PhD. It is now 2024, and the journey of a thousand miles is at the finish line.

The journey would not have happened without the love and support of my wife Vonae. Her support and sacrifices have been significant in me getting to this point. I also want to thank the University System of Georgia for their generous tuition assistance program, which enabled me to be part of the Institute of Higher Education doctoral program. The faculty and staff at the Louise McBee Institute of Higher Education have been so supportive and helped me grow in so many ways. I deeply appreciate the counsel and support of my committee, Dr. Erik Ness, Dr. James Hearn, and Dr. Elizabeth DeBray.

As a father of three boys who is working full-time and enrolled as a part-time student, this journey has not be easy. Thank you, Sam, Nick, and Zack for your patience and support. I want to thank Laura Meadows and Rob Gordon, my directors, and all my colleagues at the

University of Georgia Carl Vinson Institute of Government for their support and encouragement.

I also want to thank the many people in Tennessee and Georgia who willingly shared their experiences and insights, which are the basis for the research shared in this dissertation.

Higher education is an important part of my life. I am linked to many of my ancestors, some of who were privileged enough to have a higher education and others who sacrificed their education goals to pursue higher goals to care for their family and lay a foundation for their children's success. The glory of God is intelligence. I look forward to using my new knowledge and experiences to continue to contribute to helping others in their education journey and improving education access, student learning, and outcomes in Georgia and across the county.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### Context

Employers today are increasingly challenged to find the talent they need to fill available jobs (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022a). The demand for labor has exceeded supply since the end of the Great Recession. At that time, according to a report by the McKinsey Global Institute (2012), “Many [jobs are] going unfilled for long periods of time because approximately half of employers now claim they cannot find employees with the competencies, skills, and degrees they need” (p. 3). Headlines from other surveys since 2012 have continued along the same theme: “[S]tudents thought they were far better equipped for jobs than employers did” (Hart Research Associates, 2015); “College students may believe they’re ready for a job, but employers think otherwise” (National Association of Colleges and Employers [NACE] Staff, 2017); “Fewer than half of college students are ready for the workforce” (McGraw-Hill Education, 2018); “Why aren't graduates ready for work? They're the least working generation in U.S. history” (Busteed, 2019); “Employers say college grads lack hard skills, too” (Wilkie, 2019). While employers are reporting that college graduates are not ready for work, the need for a college-educated workforce has simultaneously never been greater.

This study will provide insights into how higher education systems have used their academic program approval authority to respond to employer calls to improve academic program alignment and address the lack of skills employers see in graduates. This comparative case study

of policy changes in Georgia and Tennessee analyzes how two state systems are working to align new academic programs with state talent needs.

### Employer Needs and State Responses

A ready and available labor pool is critical to a state's economic development efforts. In an annual survey of economic development professionals by *Area Development Magazine*, available talent has been one of the top three criteria over the past five years for businesses when looking for a location to expand or relocate a business (Gambale, 2020, 2023). Human capital is a driving force in economic growth. The competencies and knowledge gained through a college degree are increasingly critical (Carnevale et al., 2020). Stakeholders, including legislators, higher education administrators, economic developers, governors, and policy analysts, to name a few, have been asking: What is the best way to close the gap between what employers need and what colleges are producing?

Since the recent turn of the century, two major shifts have occurred related to workforce development. First, colleges and universities are increasingly seen as integral to the workforce system. Second, demographic shifts have created an environment where labor demand exceeds supply.

In public education, workforce development has long been associated with vocational schools or technical colleges and federal workforce programs through the Perkins Act and the Workforce Education and Innovation Act. Now, all colleges and universities are seen as part of the workforce development infrastructure. Employers increasingly view colleges and universities that offer bachelor's and master's degrees as equal players in the workforce development system that, as members of that system, are not doing their part in preparing

students with the skills they need to enter the workforce after graduation (Mann & Dawkins, 2014).

The second shift in workforce development relates to demographic changes. In the 20th century, the U.S. generally had a good supply of high school and college graduates. Baby boomers, followed by their children, provided a steady flow of labor. States focused their economic and workforce development efforts on creating jobs for the available labor supply. What has changed in the new century is that states are increasingly focused on developing the labor supply for all the available jobs (Fenlon & Fitzgerald, 2021; U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 2021). According to projections produced by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, the number of high school graduates nationally is expected to peak around 2025 and then decline for at least the next 10 years. This drop-off is due to a lower number of births starting in 2007 (Bransberger et al., 2020). The limited labor supply the United States is experiencing today will likely continue absent policy changes regarding immigration or efforts to increase both the number of high school graduates and the college completion rate (Grawe, 2018, 2021). One way to attract more students to higher education is to make the programs more relevant to what students see demand for in the labor market.

To address the pressure from employers and to entice more students to enroll in relevant programs, states are working to improve the alignment of their academic degrees with the in-demand jobs and skills needed by employers. A scan of the National Conference of State Legislatures (2023) summary of state legislation related to workforce development shows that for almost 10 years legislatures have enacted changes to improve the alignment of education and workforce systems. Since 2018, states' higher education governing and coordinating boards have been enacting policy changes to put more emphasis on workforce development (Venters,

2021). In two consecutive annual reports by the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO), a survey of higher education executives indicated that economic and workforce development was a top policy priority (Harnisch & Laderman, 2023; Harnisch et al., 2024). My research goal is to better understand the forces and factors that informed and influenced state higher education agencies and their governing boards to enact policy changes related to workforce development.

The focus of higher education has both expanded and become more specialized over the past 300 years, and so too has its engagement with business and industry. Today, business and industry leaders recognize that they must be more involved in the development of talent, not just their historical focus on commercialization. Today, businesses engage with the educational enterprise typically for four main reasons: for brand recognition, to “do good” and be part of the local community, for research and development purposes, and to be more purposeful in developing talent for their industry or company (Hogarth et al., 2007; McCarthy et al., 2010; Spaulding & Martin-Caughey, 2015; Whalen et al., 2003).

Integral to the evolving focus of higher education institutions is the role of the faculty. Faculty roles changed as institutions and departments became more segmented, specialized, and professional. These shifts gave rise to more administrators and professional managers. Four historical trends related to the faculty role and its impact on the curriculum and approved academic programs are noteworthy. The first shift in faculty role was from instruction to research, resulting in faculty spending less time on teaching, administrative activities, service, and governance. Newfield (2003) notes that by the early 1900s, the focus of faculty was being pulled toward research and away from governance. The second shift was from faculty running all aspects of the academy and institution to the growing importance of administrators and

professional staff (Frye & Fulton, 2020; Geiger, 2006; Lucas, 1994; Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006). The third shift was the rise of more formalized governance structures and coordinating boards at the state level (Barak, 2007; Lingenfelter, 2018). Finally, the fourth shift was state governing boards and coordinating boards more actively asserting their authority in approving academic programs (Barak, 2007; Venters, 2021).

Over the last two decades, state boards have become more active in reviewing new programs and making sure programs align to state workforce needs (Barak, 2007; Lingenfelter, 2018; Venters, 2021). In the private sector, education entrepreneurs are developing new ways to attract students and package and teach the specific competencies employers are looking for. These new approaches include boot camps, on-demand learning, badges, and micro credentials (General Assembly, 2022; Gish-Lieberman et al., 2021; Russo, 2020; Semuels, 2020). At the system level, states are creating new programs to meet employer needs. For example, the Georgia Film Academy and the Georgia FinTech Academy are two programs created by the state's higher education system office to meet state economic development goals and employer workforce needs (Smithgall, 2016; Wallace, 2018).

### Regulatory Triangle and State Authorization

To understand how systems like the University System of Georgia and other state higher education boards implement new academic programs and oversee education in their respective states, it is important to first understand the regulatory framework established by the writers of the U.S. Constitution. The U.S. Constitution lays out a federalist framework for the governance of education (U.S. Const. amend. X). The 10th Amendment, also known as the “reserve clause,” delegates powers not specifically reserved by the federal government to the states. The authority over education, including higher education, is one such power that falls to the states.

Furthermore, the Higher Education Act of 1965 established the “regulatory triad,” a shared framework of governance between the states, the higher education sector (third-party accreditors), and the federal government (Kelchen, 2018). Within the triad, states are responsible for authorizing both institutions and academic degree programs. Educational quality is assured by regional and national accreditation agencies. The federal government uses the allocation of federal funds disbursed by the U.S. Department of Education and other federal agencies as leverage so states will comply with federal requirements by only granting funds to authorized and accredited institutions.

State governments are the ultimate arbiters of educational decision making at all levels (primary, secondary, and postsecondary) within their respective borders, yet how individual states govern and exercise their powers of regulation and oversight differs greatly (Harnisch et al., 2016; Kinser et al., 2017; Onwuameze, 2017; Ozdemir & McDaniel, 2013; Tandberg et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2016). State authority over higher education including the creation and closing of institutions and programs, along with an increasingly important role in protecting consumers, is referred to generally as “state authorization” (Tandberg et al., 2019). State legislatures delegate the authority to authorize institutions of higher education and oversee higher education to one or more state agencies (Ness, Baser, et al, 2021).

State governance of public higher education is constructed differently in each state, but three types of governance are typical: consolidated governing boards, coordinating boards, and administrative services agencies (Fulton, 2019; McGuinness, 2013, 2016). Governing boards typically approve new academic programs, set faculty and personnel policies, hire presidents, monitor and evaluate institutional effectiveness, and set budgets for institutions. Coordinating boards typically coordinate higher education policy among one or many institutions or systems

of higher education in the state, collect and report higher education data for the state, and approve or license institutions. Many coordinating boards also administer financial aid programs. Some coordinating boards like THEC in Tennessee approve new academic programs. Administrative services agencies typically conduct research and analysis, oversee interstate compacts, license non-public postsecondary institutions, and provide data and information services. In some states, these agencies also manage financial aid programs (Fulton, 2019).

Oversight of degree programs and the approval or elimination of academic degree programs at institutions are also powers delegated by legislatures to higher education agencies (Barak, 2007; Venters, 2021). Venters (2021) cites a 2019 SHEEO survey of higher education boards that found that “many governing boards are involved in academic planning (20 of 29, 69%), program review (24, 83%), and program approval (21, 74%)” (p. 7). The same survey revealed that slightly fewer coordinating boards were involved in academic planning, program review, and program approval compared to governing boards. Administrative service agencies do not have any authority to approve academic programs at public higher education institutions. In states with an administrative service agency structure, the individual institutions or the board of an institutional system approves new programs (Fulton, 2019).

This dissertation focuses on the power of higher education agencies to approve new academic degree programs and how that power has been used by governing and coordinating boards to operationalize state workforce priorities.

## **Problem**

As noted in the opening section, surveys of employers indicate that educational programs need to do better at teaching students the skills employers need. There is also a significant gap between the supply of labor and the demand for labor across the economy. For states, the

challenge is both economic and political. For students, the problem is both practical and economic. First, some programs offered may not be responsive to employer needs for skills and competencies, leaving the student unprepared to enter the workforce. Second, the cost of a degree is climbing, so the payback period, or time it takes for salary earnings to pay for the cost of college, is getting longer.

The economic challenge for states, as noted earlier, is that employers that want to maintain or grow their businesses need a steady supply of labor that is prepared to work. A state's ability to develop and maintain a strong labor pool is critical to recruiting and retaining employers. A weak or even stagnant economy is a political liability. For governors and policy makers, a growing economy and positive business outlook fuels their political capital. A diverse and growing economy also provides the tax base needed to maintain government services. For students who need to raise their earning potential, a credential that is relevant and efficient in its instruction contributes to their economic mobility (Carnevale, et al., 2011; Ma et al., 2016). Toutkoushian and Paulsen (2016) find that the returns from obtaining a bachelor's degree over a person's lifetime increases their average expected income by 84%. Students with a large amount of debt from obtaining a degree based on a curriculum devoid of relevant skills and competencies needed for future career success raises concerns about the quality of education and could also be seen as violation of consumer protections (Tandberg et al., 2019). Students with lots of student loan debt and limited skills upon graduation face significant headwinds in improving their economic mobility, especially in the short term. Students are finding it increasingly more difficult to pay off their loans with an undergraduate degree, a situation exacerbated for students who drop out of school without obtaining a degree (McCann & Laitinen, 2019). While recent efforts to implement policies like test-optional admissions may

increase student access to postsecondary education (Bennett, 2022; Breen, 2022), the corresponding spike in cost and perceived drop-off in relevance of the degree limits a student's earning potential upon graduation. This issue of relevancy and alignment to market needs is of increasing importance to policy makers and intermediary organizations, such as foundations, institutes, and think tanks that focus on higher education policy (Humphreys & Taylor, 2020; Kelly, 2019; Merisotis, 2015; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2023). State authorization, including the approval of new degree programs at public colleges and universities, is a policy tool states can use to improve quality assurance and protect student interests (Tandberg et al., 2019).

According to Tandberg et al. (2019), minimal attention has been paid to the regulatory role of states in approving academic degree programs. The authors add that a number of studies have examined the authorization and oversight of programs offered by proprietary schools, distance education providers, and for-profit institutions. Tandberg et al. focus on the consumer protection role of state authorization, especially related to for-profit and proprietary institutions. However, there is a lack of research regarding the role governing boards and coordinating boards have over academic programs at public institutions.

The literature on academic degree approval also lacks depth on how intermediaries act as policy entrepreneurs and influence governing boards, elected officials, and their staff. Since 2019, research related to state authorization has increased. The State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO, 2021), with support from Arnold Ventures, funded six research teams to investigate different aspects of state authorization with the immediate goal to provide states with evidence-based recommendations to improve state authorization.”<sup>1</sup> A

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://sheeo.org/state-authorization-research-projects/>

component of state authorization is the approval of academic programs. Minimal research has examined how state higher education governing and coordinating boards use their academic program approval authority.

### Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of how state higher education agencies use their power of academic program approval to enact policy changes related to state workforce development priorities. I used three criteria to select the cases for this study. I wanted to look at states in close proximity, states with growing economies and massive economic development projects, and states with different higher education governance structures. See Chapter 3 for more information on case selection. For this comparative case study, I analyzed academic program approval policy changes in Georgia and Tennessee. My research provides a deeper understanding of how state-level higher education policy changes related to economic development are operationalized through new academic program approval. Two primary research questions guided this study:

1. What were the forces and factors that led higher education agencies in Georgia and Tennessee to change their new degree program approval process and criteria?
2. How and to what extent was degree program approval utilized to advance state priorities, such as workforce development?

The approach of this study is to use two frameworks or conceptual models for policy change to understand state system policy changes related to new program approval. The first, the ecology of state higher education policy (Hearn et al., 2017; Hearn & Ness, 2019), emphasizes the importance of understanding the context in which state policy is developed. Under this framework, the analyst takes into account the state's demographic, economic,

organizational, and political contexts as well as any outside influences. The second model I use to analyze the policy changes is the multiple streams framework (Jones et al., 2016; Kingdon & Stano, 1984; Knaggård, 2015). This framework provides a structured way of understanding three main “streams” in which policy originates. It also captures the role of policy entrepreneurs and the importance of windows of opportunity in the policy development process.

### Significance Of The Study

This study makes several contributions to the body of knowledge. First, I provide new insights into how higher education leaders perceive the lack of alignment between academic programs and state workforce needs. Second, this study contributes to literature on state system new program approval, an under-researched area of policy analysis (Barak, 1982, 2007; Lee & Bowen, 1971; Lee & Gilmour, 1977; Venters, 2021). While a recent and growing stream of research has focused on non-public institutions and their programs, less is known about the oversight and approval of new academic programs by state systems. Studies sponsored by SHEEO and its donors have highlighted the importance of state powers to regulate and oversee higher education in their states (Dell, n.d.; Ness, Baser, et al., 2021; Tandberg et al., 2019). Much of the state authorization literature focuses on for-profit institution oversight, reciprocity, consumer protection, the quality of private actors, and overall governance (Harnisch et al., 2016; Kelchen, 2020; Natow et al., 2021; Onwuameze, 2017; Ozdemir & McDaniel, 2013; Tandberg & Martin, 2019). Far fewer studies have looked at program approval powers afforded boards and commissions of state higher education systems. Third, this study highlights the shifting focus of intermediaries, employers, and policy actors from vocational programs and workforce alignment to bachelor’s- and master’s-degree-granting public institutions and their alignment with state workforce needs. Historically, research and legislative focus related to program

approval and workforce development focused solely on vocational and two-year colleges (O'Banion, 2019). Over the past decade, more pressure has been on higher education institutions offering bachelor's and master's degrees and their state oversight boards to make sure new programs align with workforce needs.

Public higher education systems are the dominant players in the bachelor's and master's degree education market. To meet the demand for workers prepared with the skills employers need, employers recognize that universities, not just vocational or technical colleges, need to be responsive to their needs. To illustrate this point, Table 1 shows data from the National Center for Education Statistics's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) on higher education degrees awarded during the 2021–2022 academic year. The table shows the distribution of bachelor's degree awards across public institutions and all institution types (public, private, and for-profit) in the United States, the state of Georgia, and the state of Tennessee. During the 2021–2022 academic year, 43,755 bachelor's degrees were awarded by the Georgia public institutions that are part of the University System of Georgia (USG), accounting for 76 percent of all bachelor's degrees awarded in the state that academic year. Thus, the USG is the dominant player for bachelor's degrees in the higher education market in the state (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021–2022). The share of bachelor's degrees in Tennessee granted by public institutions (22,677) compared to all types of institutions in the state was 62 percent, 3 percent below the national rate of 65 percent. Private institutions in Tennessee awarded 12,917 degrees, accounting for approximately 36 percent of all bachelor's degrees, compared to private institutions in Georgia that awarded 12,157 bachelor's degrees or 21 percent of all bachelor's degrees.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For-profit institutions accounted for 3.3% of bachelor degrees in Georgia and 2.0% in Tennessee for the same year.

Table 1: Bachelor’s Degree Production in 2021–2022 in the United States, Georgia, and Tennessee

Entity	Public Institutions	Total	Percent of Degrees
United States	1,399,435	2,138,492	65%
Georgia	43,755	57,806	76%
Tennessee	22,677	36,325	62%
Source: IPEDS			

Because of the large market share of public institutions governed by state higher education agencies, policy related to academic degrees has significant implications. In Georgia and Tennessee, a change in degree program approval policy or practice by the Board of Regents of the USG or the commissioners of the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) can have a seismic ripple effect on administrators, faculty, staff, students, and their respective states at large.

This research provides an example of how the interests of employers, state policy makers, higher education leaders, and intermediaries converged to effect change related to workforce development priorities by amplifying the power state higher education agencies had to approve new academic programs. I use a comparative case study approach to trace the development of the USG’s and THEC’s new academic program approval policy and processes. This study analyzes how two states—one with a centralized governing board and the other with a coordinating board—used their program approval powers to make significant changes to the requirements their institutions must follow to request a new academic degree program. Each state has also worked to make its processes as efficient as possible to meet employers’ needs. This comparative case study on new academic program approval approaches policy change from the perspective of two theoretical frameworks: the ecology of higher education policy change and the multiple streams framework. Policy changes to new program approval implemented

since 2021 by the USG place more emphasis on employability and aligning degrees with occupational skills needed by graduates. Policy changes at THEC place more emphasis on employer support and giving institutions more flexibility in the process. This comparative case study looks at the intent of the policy change and examines its origins, design, and development. This study also adds to the body of literature related to the role of employers, governors, legislators, and intermediaries in the development of policy windows and the use of research, knowledge brokering, policy learning, and funding to inform and influence policy makers and enact policy changes.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

To contextualize this study, this chapter provides an overview of the relevant literature in four sections, followed by a discussion of two policy change theoretical frameworks. In the first section of the literature review, I discuss work related to higher education governance and the state's role in overseeing higher education through state authorization and academic program approval. As part of this analysis, I also review the historical role of faculty in developing new program proposals and how this role has evolved. Second, I discuss the role intermediaries, such as thinktanks and foundations, play as policy entrepreneurs in higher education and how their attention on workforce development is influencing higher education policy change. Third, I review the literature on business and industry engagement in higher education and how employers and market forces are influencing academic program policy. Fourth, I examine recent state policy responses to economic development pressures and employer talent needs. Following the four literature review sections, I summarize two theoretical frameworks that guide this study, explaining how each provides a distinct perspective for better understanding the policy-making process.

I begin by defining some key terms. First, the term “state authorization” pertains to a state's powers to oversee and regulate education within its borders (Horn & Tandberg, 2018). State governments are the ultimate arbiter of educational decision making at all levels (primary, secondary, and postsecondary) within their respective borders, yet how individual states govern and exercise their powers of regulation and oversight differs greatly (Dell et al., 2021; Harnisch

et al., 2016; Kinser et al., 2017; Natow et al., 2021; Ness, Baser, et al., 2021; Tandberg et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2016). Second, the term “program approval” refers to the power a state governing body has to review and approve new academic programs at a specific institution in the state. A recent influx of research (Dell, n.d.) has focused on state authority to oversee higher education institutions, with significant emphasis on for-profit and proprietary institutions. Far less attention has been devoted to the public state higher education governing board’s authority over academic programs or to the connection program approval has to student success after graduation (Boatman & Borowiec, 2021; Dell, n.d.; Ward et al., 2021).

### **Higher Education Governance and Academic Program Oversight**

This section summarizes the relevant literature related to higher education governance and the state’s role in overseeing higher education through its authorization and program approval powers. I first discuss the regulatory triangle of oversight of education in the United States. Second, I review state powers and responsibilities related to program cost, quality, and access. Third, I discuss how higher education governing and coordinating boards have used their delegated powers to oversee academic programs. Fourth, I review studies about the role of faculty in program development and discuss some of the gaps in the literature related to program approval and the use of state program approval authority.

#### The Federal Government’s Role and the Accreditor’s Role

The U.S. Constitution lays out a federalist framework for governance, whereby the 10th Amendment, also known as the “reserve clause,” delegates powers not specifically reserved by the federal government to the states. The authority over education, including higher education, is one such power that falls to the states. The federal Higher Education Act of 1965 further clarified the states’ role and established the “regulatory triad,” consisting of a shared framework

of governance between the states, the higher education sector (third-party accreditors), and the federal government (Kelchen, 2018). Within the triad, the responsibility for the authorization of both institutions and academic degree programs is handled by the states; educational quality is assured by regional and national accreditation agencies; and allocated federal funds are disbursed by the U.S. Department of Education to authorized and accredited institutions (Hegji, 2020). The federal government provides funding to institutions but requires the states to authorize the institution to grant a degree and for accreditors to provide evidence of quality. For a higher education institution to be eligible for Title IV funds from the federal government, the U.S. Department of Education must deem it to be compliant with Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965. Specifically, Title IV relates to financial aid. For students to be eligible to receive federal financial aid funding like Pell Grants, the school they are attending must be accredited. The states have the constitutional responsibility to authorize postsecondary education entities and accreditors who are responsible for educational quality (State Authorization, 2023). Assessing and measuring education quality and outcomes has been elusive. Some researchers have proposed that the federal government could use data and scorecards in addition to funding as part of its role in the regulatory triad. The data in scorecards could also be a quality check on the accreditors (McCann & Laitinen, 2019; Tandberg et al., 2019). The federal government already tabulates risk scores for all colleges that participate in the federal financial aid system; McCann and Laitinen (2019) suggest that risk data could be used to tighten oversight and inform sanctions (see pp. 32–33).

Accreditors are the second side of the regulatory triad. Federal reports indicate a perception that the accreditation process needs reforming. A report by the Commission on the Future of Higher Education (2006) called the accreditation process broken. Accreditors were

criticized in the report for focusing on inputs, such as the quality of the students at admission and the credentials of the faculty, more than outcomes like employment after graduation or passing licensure exams. Accreditors can be subject to regulatory capture because faculty and administrators are often tapped to be reviewers as part of an accreditation team, knowing there is a chance that their own institution will be reviewed by a similar group of peers in the future. Accreditors are also funded by the very schools they oversee and are built on peer review (Hegji, 2020).

According to a 2014 report from the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), accreditors are not fulfilling their role in validating institutional quality:

[A]cademic quality is a key accreditor responsibility under the Higher Education Act, and student aid funds may be at risk when schools that do not provide a quality education have access to these funds . . . GAO’s analysis raises questions about whether the standards accreditors use ensure that schools provide a quality education, and whether [the Department of] Education is effectively determining if these standards ensure educational quality. (Government Accountability Office, 2014)

### The State Government’s Role

State governments are the third part of the regulatory triad. Though accreditors are responsible for ensuring quality, more pressure has been put on states recently to use their state authorization powers to enforce or ensure quality:

Federal actors and accrediting agencies alike depend on the performance of state roles to enable them to carry out their own responsibilities, most notably states’ authorization of public and private institutions to operate and an expectation of corresponding consumer protection. (Taylor et al., 2016, p. 8)

In 2010, federal regulations were updated to clarify “state authorization.” States must authorize an institution through state law or constitution, or it may be authorized through meeting state requirements. States must also have a “process to review and appropriately act on complaints

concerning the institution” (State Authorization, 2023). States have significant powers they can wield in the areas of quality assurance and consumer protection. One form of consumer protection is to make sure the degree students earn is of a rigor and quality that ensures the student has employable skills. For this reason, the state’s role in reviewing and approving academic programs is of particular interest to intermediaries and others focused on workforce development (Merisotis, 2015). Quality is just one of the three points used to understand higher education. At the heart of aligning academic programs with workforce needs is the discussion of quality, access, and cost.

### Iron Triangle

Access, cost, and quality are often referred to as the “iron triangle” in higher education (Immerwahr et al., 2008). Many people associate increased exclusivity (i.e., prestige) with higher costs and, therefore, assume that the institution that costs more is of higher quality (Daniel et al., 2009). However, quality in higher education can be defined in many ways. Lagrosen et al. (2004) identify five ways to define quality. First, quality is a term of art and has a transcendent characteristic. Second, it can be defined as a product having great use or utility. Third, quality can be determined by customer satisfaction. Fourth, it can be defined as a product meeting specifications, without defects, or in compliance. Fifth, quality can be defined as a product having a good value for the price. Quality academic programs can therefore be defined five different ways: (1) Academic programs can be transformational and have a transcendent effect; (2) academic programs can have utility by providing the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed for a job; (3) academic programs can exhibit quality simply because they are enjoyed; (4) quality academic programs can be judged based on specifications like learning outcomes; and (5) academic programs can be deemed “quality” because they are seen as a good product for the

price. Employers and policy makers define the quality of an academic program using the second definition, that of utility: whether students are prepared for a job (Carnevale et al., 2020; Carnevale & Smith, 2013).

In multiple surveys, employers have indicated that educational programs need to do better at teaching students the soft and hard skills they will need in the workforce (Busteed, 2019; Hart Research Associates, 2015; McGraw-Hill Education, 2018; NACE Staff, 2017; Wilkie, 2019). In response, researchers are identifying the skills and competencies needed to address the skill gaps employers are talking about. Anthony Carnevale and colleagues have been researching the skills employers want since 1988 (see, for example, Carnevale et al., 1988; Carnevale, 1990; Carnevale et al., 2010; Carnevale et al., 2011; Carnevale & Smith, 2013; Carnevale et al., 2020). His team at the Center on Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University has conducted research that resonates with policy makers and intermediaries pushing for increases in college participation rates and changes to the skills taught to make sure students have the competencies employers want. For example, statistics from the Carnevale et al. 2010 report *Help Wanted: Projections of Jobs and Education Requirements through 2018* were mentioned by President Obama when talking about growing the workforce of the future during the 2011 State of the Union address (Obama, 2011), and the paper was cited in the Complete College Georgia plan (University System of Georgia, 2012).

Developing ways to embed the needed skills and competencies in the curriculum is a function of program development and review. Matthew Hora (Hora, 2019; Hora et al., 2018) has published a number of articles and written a book about closing the gap between a college curriculum and the skills employers are seeking in graduates. His research highlights the

importance of embedding the learning of core employability skills into the fabric of what is being taught.

Think tanks and policy organizations concerned with the future of work recognize the need for changes in academic programs and the way new programs are formed. Policy makers are increasingly aware that these reforms can only be operationalized through academic program review. For example, a July 2020 National Governors Association report titled *Reimagining Workforce Policy in the Age of Disruption* recommends the following actions that directly relate to changes to the curricula and programs over which states have oversight:

Build a bridge between education and industry by investing in a transparent, portable, and stackable credential infrastructure .... Innovate teaching and learning models to close the technological and digital literacy gap and develop uniquely human skill sets; and engage employers in the development of demand-driven training programs and integrated learning pathways for workers of all ages. (Ash & Rahn, 2020, p. 9)

Think tanks are also calling for innovation that impacts program approval. For example, the Aspen Institute's Future of Work Initiative calls for "expanding access to high quality training" and for states to provide "high-quality, in-demand skills training" (Aspen Institute, 2019, p. 8). In the higher education space, the demand for different training means college and university faculty usually need to develop new programs, which will then go to state boards for approval.

Access is a second component of the iron triangle. Access includes both the ability to enter a program and the resources needed to complete it. Recently, intermediaries have been pushing higher education institutions to use equity, access, and graduation outcomes as measures of quality (Humphreys & Gaston, 2019; National Association of System Heads, 2020; Tandberg & Martin, 2019).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, enrollment has been trending downward.

The overall college enrollment rate for 18- to 24-year-olds decreased from 41 percent in 2010 to 38 percent in 2021. The college enrollment rate in 2021 was higher for 18- to 24-year-olds who were Asian (60 percent) than for those who were White (38 percent), Black (37 percent), of two or more races (35 percent), Hispanic (33 percent), and American Indian/Alaska Native (28 percent). (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023, p. 1)

Completion rates vary by race. Nationally, only about 42 percent of students complete a four-year degree in four years—with rates that are much lower for Black (22 percent) and Hispanic (33 percent) students—and fewer than one in three complete a certificate or associate degree within one-and-a-half times the length of time it should take them. (McCann & Laitinen, 2019, p. 5)

Disparities in access and completion among students from low-income backgrounds and students of color underscore the importance of additional supports and the need for more focus on how programs are designed. A key recommendation in a 2019 Lumina report titled *A Model to Advance Quality and Equity in Education Beyond High School* is “intentional program design: quality credentials require intentional design leading to demonstrated competencies” (Humphreys & Gaston, 2019, p. 12). The authors acknowledge that individuals are earning quality credentials; however, “inequities persist in access to and success across academic programs” (p. 1). Humphreys and Gaston (2019) add, “We hope these ideas will help expand access to credentials of value in today’s world—that is, credentials that open doors to economic opportunity, social mobility, and full civic participation (p. 1). State system approval of programs that promote alignment with economic opportunity and social mobility is an area of emphasis for the Lumina Foundation.

Cost is another side of the iron triangle. State budgets are pressured by increasing costs of healthcare and other competing priorities. Parents are concerned about the rising cost of college, and student debt has increased. Universities and colleges are facing economic and

political pressure to graduate students more quickly and at the lowest possible cost. Because of the economic benefits of higher education, many students are willing to go into debt to get an education (Ma & Pender, 2021; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). Over the past two decades, the cost of attendance has increased as state legislatures have reduced appropriations to universities, which in turn have raised tuition to compensate (Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016). Consequently, the average debt load for graduates has risen. In addition, many students who do not finish their program of study are finding it even harder to pay off their loans without a degree (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2020).

### Program Approval Powers

Minimal research has examined the role and powers of state systems in approving and reviewing programs. Most state higher education governing and coordinating boards have three main responsibilities: (1) budget and financial policy, (2) program approval and review, and (3) academic planning (McGuinness, 2016). Barak and Breier (1990) note that program review is one of the only opportunities members of the public have, through their representatives on the board or commission, to have input into the programs, services, and curricula at colleges and universities. The level of involvement depends on the type of governing board in the state. In 1978, only three states noted that workforce development was a reason for doing a new program review. By 2006, on a similar SHEEO survey, more than 66 percent of higher education executives indicated that local workforce or employer needs were highly relevant in program approval and review decisions (Barak, 2007, p. 10). By 2022, the importance of meeting workforce needs had increased even more. Most state higher education governance organizations in the Southeast have changed their program authorization policies and practices in

the last three to four years (Venters, 2021; author's research notes<sup>3</sup>). In two recent annual SHEEO surveys of higher education system leaders, economic and workforce development was ranked as the top policy priority for higher education (Harnisch et al., 2024; Harnisch & Laderman, 2023).

According to McGuinness (2016), “states have traditionally accorded both public and private institutions a significant degree of autonomy on substantive decisions on whom they admit, what should be taught, and who should teach” (p. 5). This autonomy is noted in Barak’s 1982 report titled *Program Review in Higher Education* in which he tells of a professor in the 1940s who stood up a new horticulture program by developing the curriculum and then worked with the registrar’s office to formalize the degree for enrollment purposes. By the early 1970s, states had implemented processes to make sure individual programs were at least reviewed by the state governing board to keep a check on the expansion and duplication of programs, and to monitor financial concerns (Lee & Bowen, 1971). Lee and Gilmour (1977) proposed an eight-step procedure for developing new programs. One of the steps was to estimate program demand including input from well-informed community leaders, market research, and piloting courses. At the time, data were hard to come by and expensive to collect. Barak and Berdahl (1978) analyzed how state systems review programs in all 50 states. They found that needs analysis was a consistent element of program review that included justification for the program based on data like “the student demand for the program; the projected enrollment; the relationship to manpower needs; the opportunities for employment; the likelihood of unnecessary program duplication within the state and attempts to establish cooperative arrangements with other institutions” (p. 33). However, Barak and Berdahl noted that while data in the needs analysis

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<sup>3</sup> Author reviewed higher education board websites in September 2022 to determine whether each state in the Southeast had updated its policy on new academic program approval.

section were important, there was “some agreement that many factors are just based on ‘guesstimates.’ For example, manpower projections are notoriously unreliable” (p. 33). Labor demand data today are much more accessible and reliable compared to 1978.

Barak (1982) highlights how little the overall process has changed since the 1970s (see Barak, 1982, figure 1, p. 10): Programs are developed and proposed by departmental faculty, then reviewed by a college committee and then a university committee. Next, the academic affairs vice president or provost reviews the proposal; then it goes to an institution’s board (if it has one), then to the system office for staff review or an interinstitutional board review, and then ultimately to the state higher education board for review. In 1978, Barak and Berdahl (1978) found that 21 states reviewed new proposals. By 1981, 47 states were reviewing new programs. Conrad and Wilson (1985) note that the “heightened interest in program review can be traced to a widespread interest in improving program quality and the need to respond creatively to severe financial constraints and external constituencies’ expectations for accountability” (p. 5). McGuinness (2016) observes that the period of the 1980s to the mid-2000s was marked by greater accountability and experiments in outcome-based funding models. The most recent period, from 2008 to present, is described by McGuinness as a time when states have taken more control of higher education policy goals. The chief example is the adoption of the Complete College framework by most states and the efforts by governors and state boards to implement policy changes to increase the number of students completing a credential. In the late 2000s, the focus was on quantity. As recovery after the Great Recession started, the need for workers was never greater, but state leaders were also feeling pressure to make sure graduates were prepared with the skills employers needed. With the focus on quantity and employer demands for graduates with relevant skills, the ground was laid for more state-level focus on program quality

and student preparation for the workforce. This pressure pushed state higher education systems to focus on the process and content of program approval and program reviews.

In regard to the iron triangle of cost, access, and quality, state authorization policy focuses mainly on the quality and finances of the institution and consumer protection of students. The literature on state authorization notes that the idea of quality also needs to also take into consideration student consumer protection, which encompasses the price of the content or instruction as well as the utility of the degree in preparing the student for success after school (Tandberg, et al., 2019). More research is needed on how approval of academic degrees accounts for cost, access, and quality.

Much of the literature on state authorization focuses on regulating institutions. More research is needed on the states' powers through higher education governing and coordinating boards to approve or eliminate academic programs. Ensuring students are offered quality programs that prepare them for a job or career path after graduation has been emphasized more by intermediaries like Lumina, politicians, parents, and employers in the last decade (Carnevale et al., 2020; Merisotis, 2015). Preparation for the workforce is increasingly seen by boards as an important definition of program and institutional quality and one that state administrators feel more compelled to oversee (Harnish & Laderman, 2023).

### Role of the Faculty

New academic programs historically originated from the faculty (Barak, 1982). Faculty governance over the institution and the curricula have been a key tenet of the university for hundreds of years (Thelin, 2011). The professionalization and specialization of the academy over the centuries has changed the focus of the faculty, especially at the largest research

institutions. Four historical shifts related to the faculty role and its impact on curricula and approved academic programs are noteworthy.

First, the shift in focus from instruction to research that began in the late 1800s meant faculty spent less time on teaching, administrative activities, service, and governance. Newfield (2003) notes that by the early 1900s, faculty were being pulled toward research and away from governance. With the Industrial Revolution, the role of the faculty at the emerging research universities evolved from a focus on teaching and governance, to research and entrepreneurship. Newfield (2003) observes that “by 1910, utility and research [had] uneasily joined together” (p. 42).

The second shift was from faculty running all aspects of the academy and institution to the rise of administrators and professional staff in the mid-20th century (Frye & Fulton, 2020; Geiger, 2016; Lucas, 1994; Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006). Barrow (1990) argues that the role of faculty changed as more industrialists became part of university governance and industry research funding increased. This industrial involvement meant the faculty essentially became the proletariat. Faculty were seen as labor and lost their original role in governance of the university. Curricula became more standardized and were managed by the administrators (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) argue that the rise of the managerial class at universities to supervise all the commercial endeavors resulted in fewer resources for faculty: “Institutional expenditures for administration go up, while expenditures for instruction go down” (p. 332). As more faculty, especially faculty at research universities, focus on research productivity and their own needs, the quality of instruction may suffer.

The third shift was the rise of more formalized governance structures and coordinating boards at the state level (Barak, 2007; Lingenfelter, 2018). Sinclair (1923) reports that in the

1920s “only fourteen of 649 college boards of trustees include a college professor and six of them are Harvard professors” (p. 28). By the early 1940s, more states had enacted governing boards (McGuinness, 2016). Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) explore the control of corporate interests in university governance in the late 20th century. They find that 100 trustees of the top 10 private research universities also served on the boards of the “top thirty capitalized corporations in the United States or on the boards of the NSF’s [National Science Foundation] top 500 research performing corporations, representing a total of sixty-one firms” (p. 236). Corporate involvement on higher education boards is evidence of the interlocking networks of commercial and academic interests. Ultimately, Slaughter and Rhoades’s work asks questions of the integration between academia and industry through the new economy and how this relates to the purpose of higher education.

Finally, the fourth shift, which has occurred in recent decades, is the growing tendency among state governing boards and coordinating boards to assert their authority in approving academic programs (Barak, 2007; Venters, 2021). The focus on research and its economic benefits for companies, government, and society over the past century provided significant incentives for administrators and faculty to put their brightest minds in the lab rather than the classroom. With the institutional economic incentives so great on the research side of the equation, governing boards and coordinating boards provide an important counterweight in making sure institutions also stay focused on the teaching and learning role of institutions. Bok (2009) warns, “Unfortunately, the structure of governance in most universities is not up to the challenge of resisting the excesses of commercialization” (p. 185), but it is up to presidents and deans to uphold the academic values of the institution. Similarly, faculty often act as a check on

employers, ensuring that the learning objectives meet both the immediate learning objectives and teach students to be lifelong learners.

Faculty are the engine of innovation and inquiry in the lab and in the classroom. However, as faculty have become more specialized, there has been a rise in administrative and governance roles influencing and overseeing curricula and new academic programs.

### State Higher Education Governance

University governance has evolved over the past 200 years as the demands on the academy changed from civic-mindedness in the early history of America, to practicality in the antebellum period, to commercialization in the industrial age, to affluence in the post-World War era (Dorn, 2017; Geiger, 2016; McGuinness, 1997; Thelin, 2011). The definition of “public good” has evolved with the changing ethos of the time. Dorn (2017) notes, “During each of these periods, changes to the nation’s prevailing social ethos led Americans to establish new kinds of higher-education institutions that reflected the priorities of their day” (p. 234).

As a result of this evolving ethos, each state takes a slightly different approach to governance of public higher education (Fulton, 2019; McLendon, 2003). States can establish a governance framework within the state constitution or through state statute. Three types of governance are typical: consolidated governing boards, coordinating boards, and administrative services agencies (Fulton, 2019; McGuinness, 1997, 2013, 2016). Under a governing board, the power to allocate funds, enact policies, and hire presidents of universities, among others, is centralized under one board over all institutions within a system. A coordinating board generally has powers to do statewide planning, approve institution missions, and coordinate data collection and statewide reporting, but allocation of funds to institutions is usually done by the state legislature. Administrative service agencies typically conduct research and analysis, oversee

interstate compacts, license non-public postsecondary institutions, and provide data and information services. In some states, these agencies manage financial aid programs. According to an inventory done by Mary Fulton (2019) for the Education Commission of the States, “a primary goal—and often a challenge—for state policymakers is to ensure that postsecondary institutions serve the public interest while providing colleges and universities with sufficient autonomy to control their internal decisions and operations” (p. 5). Fulton notes that boards established in a state constitution have more independence from legislative control, whereas those established by statute are more susceptible to legislative mandates and influence. In Fulton’s review of 60 coordinating and governing boards across the 50 states, she found that most are created by statute (Fulton, 2019). “For example, a state legislature may require a system governing board with statutory authority to implement a particular student success program and only *request* a governing board with constitutional authority to do so” (Fulton, 2019, p. 5, italics added for emphasis).

McGuinness, in a publication from the Education Commission of the States in 2016, gives a historical overview of state higher education governance. Six general functions fall under the auspices of the state higher education agency:

1. State-level planning.
2. State finance policy: budgeting, appropriations and resource allocation.
3. Maintenance of databases and conversion of data into information that guides policymaking.
4. Regulation of higher education institutions or academic programs.
5. Administration of state-level services (for example, administration of student financial aid programs).
6. Governance of higher education systems and institutions. (McGuinness, 2016, p. 4)

In some states, all of these powers may be vested in one agency, but in most they are divided up between two or more agencies (Ness, Baser, et al., 2021). States have generally given

institutions some level of autonomy over activities like admissions, faculty hires, academic programs, and allocation of funds (McGuinness, 2016). The governance structure can also influence the nature and intensity of oversight or the autonomy institutions have over their own academic programs or university activities.

### Georgia and Tennessee Higher Education Governance

As this study focuses on academic program approval in two states, this section summarizes the governance frameworks in Georgia and Tennessee. As noted above, the power to establish colleges and universities may be referenced in the state constitution but is spelled out more specifically in state statute (Fulton, 2019; McLendon, 2003). For example, the Georgia Constitution states, “The government, control, and management of the University System of Georgia and all of the institutions in said system shall be vested in the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia” (Ga. Const. art. VIII § IV.I.b). Georgia state statute then explicitly states, “The Board of Regents is authorized to consolidate, suspend, or discontinue institutions; merge departments; inaugurate or discontinue courses; and abolish or add degrees” (Official Code of Georgia Annotated § 20-3-32 (a)).

The Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia (USG) is a 19-member governing board established in 1931 with responsibility for the 26 public colleges and universities in the state. Its members represent the 14 congressional districts of the state, and five additional members are appointed from the state at large. All regents serve a seven-year term, and all are appointed by the governor and then confirmed by the state senate. A separate state board oversees the two-year technical colleges. A third board, the Non-Public Post-Secondary Education Agency, oversees the for-profit and private institutions in Georgia.

Policymaking context is different in each state. In Georgia, the governor appoints the regents, sets the revenue estimate, and has significant budget control powers. The Board of Regents of the USG gets a lump-sum appropriation from the legislature. The board, not the legislature, has the decision power to allocate funds to institutions (Lauth, 2021).

Compared to Georgia, state higher education governance in Tennessee is more decentralized. The Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) was formed in 1967 and then restructured in 2016. THEC is a statewide coordinating board that governs higher education in the state. THEC's responsibilities include approving all new degree programs, producing the state master plan for higher education, administering the funding formula, collecting and analyzing postsecondary data, authorizing and overseeing proprietary institutions, and approving veteran education benefits (Ten. Stat. § 49). Tennessee law specifically empowers THEC to "review and approve or disapprove all proposals for new degrees or degree programs or for the establishment of new academic departments or divisions within the various institutions of higher learning" (Ten. Stat. § 49-7-202, para. 6). THEC is under a sunset law, which means the Tennessee Legislature reviews THEC's powers and role every four years as part of the reauthorization process. THEC was extended to June 30, 2026, during the 2022 legislative session.<sup>4</sup>

Tennessee law code section 49-7-204 outlines how the commission is organized. It has 10 voting members appointed by the governor. Two students serve on the commission: one is a voting member, and one is ex officio. The comptroller of the treasury, the secretary of state, and the state treasurer, who are all elected by the Tennessee Legislature, serve as ex officio voting

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<sup>4</sup> See Tennessee Senate Bill 1734 2022 Legislative Session; <https://wapp.capitol.tn.gov/apps/BillInfo/Default.aspx?BillNumber=SB1734&GA=112>)

members of the commission. The executive director of the State Board of Education is a nonvoting *ex officio* member of the commission.

Institutions under two other higher education boards—the Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) and the University of Tennessee System—must comply with THEC policies and directives in two specific areas: approval of new degree programs and reporting data for statewide reports. TBR<sup>5</sup> oversees the 13 public community colleges in the state, which offer two-year degrees, and the Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology. The University of Tennessee Board of Trustees<sup>6</sup> oversees the University of Tennessee System. Locally governed state universities are also under THEC’s purview (Hunt Institute, 2019). Similar to Georgia, the governor sets the revenue estimate for the budget. However, the funding mechanism for higher education follows an outcomes-based funding formula that relies on a number of performance factors. THEC compiles the data and runs the performance-based funding formula, which then informs the appropriation of funds for the public colleges and universities in Tennessee.

This background information about the Georgia and Tennessee higher education boards provides important context for this study.

### **Role of Intermediaries**

Elected officials, governing and coordinating board members, and higher education administrators all play important roles in developing public policy and setting agendas for higher education. However, many others are also active in the higher education policy ecosystem. An increasingly influential participant in higher education policy development is intermediaries.

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<sup>5</sup> See [www.tbr.org](http://www.tbr.org)

<sup>6</sup> See <https://trustees.tennessee.edu/>

Intermediaries are organizations that operate outside the structure of state or federal government and are usually independent of university governance. They are often affiliated with foundations, institutes, interest groups, public policy organizations, member associations, or think tanks. Intermediaries fund research projects and pilot or demonstration projects, provide grants, or conduct research of their own on policy issues to advance their ideology or agenda. Higher education intermediaries are usually viewed as trustworthy because of their strong research and data-informed positions and their familiarity with state policy contexts (Ness, 2010). Intermediaries are becoming increasingly active in informing state-level policies (Honig, 2004; Ness et al., 2018; Ness & Gándara, 2014; Orphan et al., 2018; Reckhow et al., 2017; Rich, 2004; Scott et al., 2014).

As Gándara et al. (2017) observe, “Intermediaries are boundary-spanning groups that provide a translating function between principals with different values and perspectives” (p. 702). Intermediaries diffuse policy ideas through policy learning and coercion (Shipan & Volden, 2008). Policy advocacy takes several forms. Intermediaries fund knowledge-brokering activities like conferences, convenings, or, in the case of the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO, 2021), “communities of practice.” Intermediaries also “package and disseminate data” (Scott & Jabbar, 2014, p. 241). In an analysis of state-level ideological think tanks, Ness and Gándara (2014) find that think tanks “are providing information on the most pressing policy issues and, in nearly all cases, are doing so with an ideologically driven perspective” (p. 273). The policy ideology is promoted through tactics such as research funding or normative pressures through shaming (Gándara et al., 2017). Coercion often takes the form of incentives like funding research or influencing public policy leaders through associations such as

the National Governors Association, National Conference of State Legislators, Education Commission of the States, and Council of State Governments.

How intermediaries operate is a fertile area for research. As Scott and Jabbar (2014) observe, “There is, as yet, less scholarship about the mechanisms by which foundations help to produce and broker research between foundations and the development of think tanks and independent research institutes” (p. 235).

Foundations and intermediaries use a variety of tactics to influence policy changes or create awareness of problems that need to be addressed by policy makers. In 2004, the MacArthur Foundation issued *Foundations and Public Policy*, which outlined a strategy or playbook for how foundations can create awareness and make deep change.

There are many ways to encourage change, including strategies that shape market forces as well as those that strengthen the non-profit sector. But one of the most effective is to influence government policy. Through its grantmaking, the Foundation can help to change policies or regulations, or to influence the direction of government funding at local, state, national and international levels. (Benedict, 2004)

Intermediaries like the Lumina Foundation and its CEO Jamie Merisotis use an activist approach. Merisotis was part of a growing chorus of advocates encouraging a rethinking of American higher education, pushing for higher education institutions to more purposefully meet the talent needs of employers. In his book *America Needs Talent: Attracting, Educating, and Deploying the 21st Century Workforce*, Merisotis (2015) challenged higher education to be more innovative and focus on its role in preparing students with the skills and competencies needed in the workforce. As political forces were aligning around the growing talent gaps and employer needs, parents and politicians were asking whether the cost of college was worth it. Merisotis, sensing these political pressures governors would need to address, suggested that they stay focused on student success. At a National Governors Association meeting, he advised,

Focus your efforts on benefiting students, not institutions. Your policy initiatives, your budget priorities, your funding decisions ... all of these should aim to increase opportunity and improve outcomes for students.... Serving students well is the best way to serve your state. (Merisotis, 2011, para. 10)

Intermediaries operate in a variety of ways: Some are passive, while others are more activist. As the quote above from the MacArthur Foundation highlights, the modern foundation playbook suggests a more activist approach. The secondary education literature on intermediaries has coined the term “venture philanthropist” to describe an intermediary that aggressively attempts to influence policy change. A venture philanthropist, as defined by Janelle Scott (2009), is a foundation that expects aggressive returns on its investments: “They measure such returns not necessarily by profit generated but by growth in student achievement, expansion of particular educational sectors ... and the growth of constituencies who will place political support on public officials to support particular educational reforms” (p. 116).

The Lumina Foundation is an example of an engaged and well-financed intermediary focused on developing strategies to incentivize states to take action. The Lumina Foundation is considered a policy entrepreneur. Kingdon (2003) identifies a policy entrepreneur as “advocates who are willing to invest their resources—time, energy, reputation, money—to promote a position in return for anticipated future gain in the form of material, purposive, or solidary benefits” (p. 179). For example, one way the Lumina Foundation influences policy is through competitive grants to national higher education associations, state higher education systems research teams, and universities. State systems and universities have used grant funds provided by Lumina to advance special projects that they would otherwise not have been able to finance. Using funding from Lumina and other foundations, SHEEO has launched two projects meant to help states improve their authorization process. The first, funded by Lumina Foundation, is the State Authorization Learning Community Project, which is designed to help nine state teams

evaluate and strengthen their authorization processes to better protect students and improve quality in higher education. The second, the State Authorization Research Projects, was funded by Arnold Ventures. This competitive grant resulted in six funded projects meant to provide states with evidence-based recommendations to improve state authorization. Intermediary funding is often noted in the acknowledgements in research produced by national organizations, such as the Education Commission of the States and SHEEO (SHEEO, n.d.)

As part of this study, I examine how intermediaries have targeted the program approval process as a way to improve student success. I consider how intermediaries like the Lumina Foundation have been key actors in motivating states to align their degree programs to workforce development objectives by focusing on the quality aspect of the iron triangle.

### **Business and Industry Engagement in Higher Education**

State higher education governing boards, intermediaries, and businesses all play a role in higher education policy and practice. The literature on business and industry engagement in higher education provides helpful context for understanding the recent growth in industry involvement in talent development and the pressure being put on higher education agencies and state leaders. Historically, industry was most interested in capitalizing on the research and innovation generated by universities. As noted in Chapter One, a significant demographic shift is impacting state workforce policy. For most of the nation's history, the U.S. has had more labor available than jobs. Today, we are facing a new dynamic as we have more jobs than laborers. Since the Great Recession of 2008, employers have become increasingly interested in higher education's role in workforce development and how they can better shape and tap the talent coming out of universities.

The United States has a long history of strong relationships between higher education and industry. The role of the university has evolved over the centuries (Axtell, 2016; Geiger, 2006; Thelin, 2011). Since the early beginnings of higher education in the United States, there has been a tension between universities and their market-based beneficiaries. Axtell (2016), in his book *Wisdom's Workshop: The Rise of the Modern University*, states that in earlier times, “the universities’ primary goal, the reason for their creation, was not to produce edified Christians or zealous clergyman, but to prepare professionals to maintain and lead the established social order, secular as well as religious” (p. 18). However, nearly two-thirds of Harvard graduates in the 17th century entered the ministry (see Axtell, 2016, p. 136, footnote 75). Other early colonial universities sought to prepare men for employment in the church or civil state and be men of letters and manners (Geiger, 2016).

In 1862, the Morrill Land Grant Act established the land grant college system. This act expanded the mission and number of universities across the United States. The Morrill Act emphasized that universities needed to be connected to communities and industry and address the needs of people outside the academy (Chan, 2016). Expansion of the curricula and outreach related to agriculture, mechanization, and engineering as well as public service and extension of the university to address local needs was part of the land grant university creed. Industry engagement with universities grew during the 1900s to meet defense and national security goals (Bok, 2009). Industry and government funding of university research and development expanded during World War I and World War II, leading to the creation of the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health (Thelin, 2011).

The Space Race and Cold War era accelerated cooperative research activities between universities, national laboratories, and federal agencies. As symbiotic relationships between

industry and universities grew, there was mutual interest in the commercialization of university research. The Bayh-Dole Act of 1980 enabled the expansion of commercialization and allowed universities and researchers to profit from intellectual property. Products developed on an American university campus and the researchers involved were able to take a stronger financial position related to spinning off an invention to create a company. When manufacturing jobs were increasingly going overseas in the 1980s, the federal government created the Manufacturing Extension Partnership (MEP) program to help small and medium-sized businesses with manufacturing technical assistance from research universities (Cranmer, 2018). Today, businesses and industrial organizations are not only interested in university-based research and how to commercialize new technologies, but increasingly they also want a strong talent pipeline for their company or industry that can fill jobs in the future (Hasselmo & McKinnell, 2003; Mann & Dawkins, 2014).

Most of the literature on business engagement in higher education and workforce development is related to STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) education and vocational programs, from secondary schools to research universities (Carraway et al., 2012; Watters & Diezmann, 2013). Research has found that business and education collaboration is particularly important for technology-related degrees (Stroud & Hopkins, 2016). Janicki and Cummings (2016) highlight that associations and accreditors are including a requirement that certain programs involve more business input in the curriculum: “Both AACSB (2015) [Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business] and ABET (2013) report guidelines for academicians to involve more corporate and real world experiences into the learning environments” (p. 1). More research is needed on the relationship between business engagement and arts and humanities programs.

Today, businesses tend to engage with the educational enterprise for four main reasons: for brand recognition, to “do good” and be part of the local community, for research and development purposes, and to be more purposeful in developing talent for their industry or company (Hogarth et al., 2007; McCarthy et al., 2010; Spaulding & Martin-Caughley, 2015; Whalen et al., 2003).

Across the literature on business engagement in higher education, very little research has explored how industry involvement impacts teaching and curricula. Since World War II, many of the university–industry interactions have focused on research and innovation, with industry taking a hands-off approach to curricula. Measuring the quality of student learning continues to be elusive (Columbus, 2016). As Bok pointed out in his 2009 book *Universities in the Marketplace*, there is no good way for students to know “which college or professional schools would teach them the most” (p. 160). Bok argues that if there were a reliable way to measure learning, then market forces would predict that students would “gravitate to the most effective schools” (p. 161). Since that publication, higher education has seen more disruption as young people have new ways to access learning and have a lower opinion of the value of higher education (Belkin, 2023).

Industrial philanthropy and funding at the turn of the 20th century transformed universities to be more business minded, with more and more faculty research being sponsored to advance industrial priorities. In the post-World War II era, faculty were primarily publishing their research to add to the body of knowledge. However, the passage of the Bayh-Dole Act of 1980 marked a shift to faculty creating knowledge and innovation for the advancement of the research scientist and university commercialization efforts. For example, “from 1983 to 2003

the number of patents issued directly to American Universities grew from 434 to 3,259” (American Association of University Professors, 2014, p. 61).

Charles Vest, the former president of MIT and an engineer by training, is a proponent of the benefits of industry partnerships on campus. Vest (2007) has argued that both faculty and students benefit from the applied focus industry involvement brings: “My own view is that [industry partnerships] expand the intellectual opportunity space in which some faculty and students engage in a very positive way” (p. 46). Others would argue that with faculty so focused on their research, students are left to be instructed by adjunct or part-time faculty or graduate students. The focus on workforce development and career preparation is drawing new attention to student success as employers are not only interested in research and development but also talent development, and they are emphasizing the quality of the curriculum in preparing future employees.

The literature related to universities and workforce development tends to focus on vocational programs and STEM education. The literature emphasizes that attracting, retaining, and graduating more students with STEM-related majors requires a systematic and integrated learning approach (Business–Higher Education Forum [BHEF], 2010, 2011b; 2013a; Hoachlander & Yanofsky, 2011). Aligning K-12 education, postsecondary institutions, and workforce development is critical to ensure students graduate from high school prepared for college and/or a career. Historically, the workforce pipeline has had some “leaks,” including inadequate college preparation, lack of development of high-demand skills in undergraduate education, and poor connections between what employers need and graduate training (BHEF, 2001). Companies are looking at ways to align K-12 investments with college investments to maximize impact (McCarthy et al., 2010). Erisman and Looney (2008) observed,

Many business leaders have sharpened their interest in the education and training of the future workforce, recognizing the growing need for individuals with college degrees. With the combination of the business community's financial resources and business leaders' public prominence, strategically targeted philanthropy initiatives have a chance to make an important impact on educational practice and outcomes. (p. 4)

The Business–Higher Education Forum (BHEF), a consortium of corporate and university leaders focused on developing a highly skilled workforce, noted in a 2013 report, that students and their employers are better off when students can gain workplace competencies in the early grades by “placing greater emphasis on developing those workplace competencies at the K-16 levels will realize considerable cost savings and, concomitantly, strengthen students’ competitiveness in the job market” (2013b, p. 3). The report continued, “Developing the necessary 21st century workforce competencies in graduates will require closer collaboration between the corporations recruiting employees and the institutions educating them.” (BHEF, 2013b, p. 3). Similar calls for alignment and coordination to develop smooth pathways for students is coming from other intermediaries (America First Policy Institute, 2021). An emphasis on competencies, both career and occupation competencies, is more recent (Carnevale & Smith, 2013; Hora, 2019; Hora et al., 2018). The National Association of Colleges and Employers (2021), the professional association for university career center directors, has promoted its career-readiness competencies among its members.

One developing priority for business and industry is addressing their diversity, inclusion, and equity goals. Further evidence of the priority corporations in America are placing on improving the racial diversity of their workforce is where they are choosing to open new offices. For example, Atlanta, Georgia, has been in the headlines as a place of choice for employers because of its diversity (Airbnb, 2022; Holland & Freda, 2022; Musulin, 2021). Employers

seeking to diversify their workforce are looking to higher education and the demographics of where they locate offices to help them accomplish these goals.

### **Public Attitudes and Disruptions Impacting Responses**

Attitudes about the purposes of higher education differ among faculty, government leaders, employers, and students. Many faculty see the purpose of higher education in more idealist terms, including making changes to society or helping students think differently about the world and societal benefits (Chan, 2016; Pasquerella, 2019). Government leaders and employers want higher education institutions to prepare students for a career (Chan, 2016). However, young adults today perceive a college degree to be less important compared to 10 years ago. Data from a 2019 Gallup poll suggest that a college degree is less critical than it was in the past (Marken, 2019). The positive perception of a college education is down most among young adults ages 18 to 29. The view of young adults reflected in the Gallup poll is that skills lead to employability and that a college degree is not necessary. This attitude is disrupting the traditional higher education market. A 2023 poll found a similar decline in the value people place on a college education, with 53 percent of Americans indicating that the cost of college was worth it in 2013 compared to 42% in 2023 (Belkin, 2023). In the same poll, just over 60% of people ages 18 to 34 years said a four-year college education was not worth the cost.

The changing attitudes about traditional college may help explain the increase in new market-driven models of acquiring learning. These new models may not be enrolling the large number of students found in traditional colleges and universities, but they are a disruption to the higher education market. These disrupters include micro credentials, badges, and more on-demand learning platforms like LinkedIn Learning and Udemy.

## Badges and Micro credentials

Symbols, insignia, badges, and recognitions have been used to distinguish people since ancient times and have long been used to recognize soldiers in the military (Ellis et al., 2016). A badge is a symbol that one has accomplished certain tasks or demonstrated mastery of new skills or gaining new knowledge. A “badge” or micro credential breaks down what a student has to learn into a set of discrete and concrete skills or capabilities. Micro credentials “offer an alternative to traditional credentialing like certificates, diplomas, and grades by recognizing discrete skill development via digital icons called badges, which are embedded with metadata such as criteria for and evidence of achievement” (Gish-Lieberman et al., 2021).

Micro credentials are focused on learning a specific skill and can be stacked or grouped into a certificate. A set of certificates could then be bundled to meet requirements for an associate degree. Students who do not have a lot of time or money see micro credentials as a path to gaining marketable skills, with the badge providing proof of their new competency (Digital Promise, n.d.; Do et al., 2022). Martin and Davies (2022), in a mixed-methods study, find that certificate-first programs, a form of micro credentials, had a positive effect on student matriculation rates compared to traditional-pathway students. The authors note the importance of a supportive network and that earning a certificate increased student confidence and motivation to stay in school.

## Boot Camps and On-demand Learning

Boot camps and on-demand learning are close cousins to micro credentials and badges, providing innovative ways for students to get the marketable skills they need without going to college. General Assembly is one example of a boot camp program that trains people in IT and computer skills, focusing primarily on low-income and non-white persons. Since its founding in

2011, the training firm has helped more than 100,000 workers launch tech careers (General Assembly, 2022).

LinkedIn learning, Udemy, Udacity, Coursera, and even YouTube are on-demand learning platforms. Designed for working adults, these platforms enable upskilling in one to two courses or two to three months in specific skill areas. For example, Coursera advertises, “Those wishing to expand their skills in product development and data and artificial intelligence could do so in two to three months” (Russo, 2020). The demand for this kind of online learning is increasing (Russo, 2020). As reported in Time.com, the cost of on-demand learning is considerably cheaper than a traditional college education. These new skills-learning options have led to another shift in the labor market: Some employees are getting a job first and then earning credentials and skills while working (Semuels, 2020). In 2015, Starbucks was one of the first companies to include college tuition as an employee benefit. The company’s website states, “Every eligible U.S. partner working part- or full-time receives 100% tuition coverage for a first-time bachelor’s degree through Arizona State University’s online program” (Starbucks, n.d.). By 2018, other companies like McDonalds and Chick-Fil-A were also were offering employees postsecondary education benefits as a way to recruit and retain employees (Powell, 2018). Some students looking to gain new skills quickly so they can enter the workforce and begin earning money find boot camps, on-demand learning platforms, micro credentials, and badges a better option than a traditional college pathway.

### Automation and Artificial Intelligence

Another disruption to the traditional higher education market is the rise in automation and the use of artificial intelligence (AI). Increasingly, companies are automating work functions and using AI to improve worker productivity (Bughin et al., 2018). A 2017 McKinsey report

projected that not only will jobs with predictable tasks in manufacturing, hospitality, food service, and retail be impacted by automation, but middle-skill and high-paying, high-skill occupations, too, have a degree of automation potential (Manyika et al., 2017). This move toward automation and the use of AI only accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Global Business Policy Council, 2020; Sedik & Yoo, 2021). Data from the World Economic Forum’s *The Future of Jobs Report 2020* indicate that 80 percent of businesses are accelerating the digitalization of their work processes and expanding their use of remote work, and 50 percent of employers are expecting to accelerate the automation of jobs in their companies (World Economic Forum, 2020). These data are based on a representative survey of companies in countries that comprise 80% of the world GDP. The survey was fielded in the middle of 2020 with a sample comprised of 15 industry clusters across 26 countries.<sup>7</sup> The increased pace of automation and expanding use of AI will eliminate some jobs and create others.

### **State Responses to Market Forces and Employer Talent Needs**

A web of forces is influencing and informing the alignment of academic programs and state workforce development needs. This section summarizes some ways states are responding to these pressures and influences. I begin by summarizing some of the key forces covered earlier in this literature review. Under the 10th amendment of the U.S. Constitution, states have the responsibility for overseeing education, authorizing institutions, and approving academic programs for public, private, and for-profit institutions. How each state organizes itself to accomplish these duties differs (Ness, Baser, et al., 2021). Program review is one of the powers state higher education boards have to ensure quality and oversee the cost of instruction. How

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<sup>7</sup> “65% of the final sample is composed of multinational companies, while 35% is from larger local companies, significant in terms of revenue or size. The final sample includes responses from chief executive officers (12%), top executives (59%), middle-level executives (25%), and, in exceptional cases, other respondents such as consultants (3%)” (World Economic Forum, 2020).

programs are developed and reviewed is up to each state, but a general trend across the country has been the evolving role of faculty in program development, from being primary authors of new programs to one of shared governance to more recent efforts to develop new programs at the system level. Intermediaries have a unique role in both informing and incentivizing public policy change in higher education. Business and industry have also historically been engaged in the work of higher education, with more emphasis over the last decade on the need for college graduates better prepared to enter the job market.

In response to demands for action to address labor market shortages, a perceived lack of preparation of college graduates, and siloed bureaucratic programs, states have taken a number of actions. The initiatives outlined in the sections below were highlighted in a review of state legislation related to workforce development that passed between 2019 and 2021 compiled by the National Conference of State Legislators (Hentze, 2020; Hentze et al., 2021). Because my study is based on states in the southeastern United States, my review focuses on legislative policy changes that happened primarily in the Southeast.

### Governance and Alignment

One of the themes apparent in the state legislation passed since 2019 is a desire to better align the programs and governance of education and workforce development systems. In 2014, the U.S. Congress reauthorized the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and in 2018 it reauthorized the Perkins Act (Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act, 2018). A priority in the reauthorization effort was to improve the alignment of these two federal/state workforce development programs to employer needs and to improve program coordination and alignment among federal agencies and within states (Advance CTE, 2022; Jacobs, 2013; Perkins Collaborative Resource Network, 2022; WIOA, 2014). The push

for alignment of workforce programs, policy, and funding continues. Employers also recognize that aligning P-12, postsecondary, and workforce is critical to ensure students graduate from high school ready for college and/or a career (BHEF, 2001, 2010, 2011a, 2011b; Hoachlander & Yanofsky, 2011; McCarthy et al., 2010).

Legislation passed in Alabama in 2019 and Virginia and Mississippi in 2020 highlights this trend. For example, Virginia's Workforce Development Board was aligned to comply with federal law related to WIOA, and financing was expanded to the board so it was no longer solely supported by WIOA administrative funds. Research by the Education Commission of the States (ECS) has highlighted the effort to improve alignment across education agencies in many states. A September 2021 inventory completed by ECS showed that whereas originally boards that governed WIOA funds were narrowly defined, states have expanded their boards to include members with a broader set of experience. Of the 50 states, 22 now include higher education leaders (state higher education executives or equivalent) on their workforce boards (Erwin et al., 2021).

#### Georgia and Tennessee Higher Education Strategic Plans

In both Georgia and Tennessee, the state higher education boards have made efforts recently to better align the higher education strategic direction with the economic and workforce needs of the state. Efforts in Georgia to close the gap between employer talent needs and student preparation was raised in the USG 2025 Report (Wrigley, 2018), and accentuated by the approval of the *USG 2024 Strategic Plan* by the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia (USG) on November 19, 2019 (USG, 2019). The plan was the culmination of an eight-month effort to re-envision a path forward for higher education in the state of Georgia given the

gap between graduate skills and workforce needs. A key policy shift in the plan placed an increased emphasis on aligning degree programs to industry and community workforce needs:

Public higher education fosters economic competitiveness through development of a highly skilled and knowledgeable workforce and through research and innovation. To achieve this goal, we **need to improve the alignment of our degree programs with industry demands and focus on our communities' need for talent.** (USG, 2019, p. 19, bold added for emphasis)

Leaders in Tennessee are also focused on aligning education programs to employer needs. In 2019, Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) convened a Future of Work Task Force to look at the alignment of high-demand jobs and postsecondary credentials. The overall objectives of the task force were “(1) to align industry and higher education, (2) to prepare for the state’s workforce needs of 2030 and beyond, (3) to ensure that skilled, credentialed Tennesseans are available to employers, and (4) to increase the speed and agility of workforce development” (THEC, 2022b, p. 34).

The executive director’s cover letter to the THEC 2020 update to the THEC 2015–2020 Master Plan notes the connection between higher education and economic and societal outcomes:

If we make progress in each of these areas, higher education will have been the catalyst for meaningful change, but will not be the most important beneficiary. The by-products of improved college affordability, gains in student success, and awarding high-need degrees will, as the title of this report indicates, develop a competitive edge in recruiting high quality jobs to our state. Closely allied to the economic impacts of a better-educated Tennessee are the societal effects: reductions in crime and recidivism, improvements to public health, and improved civic engagement. (THEC, 2022b, p. 3)

### Complete College Plans

As the economy improved and labor markets tightened after the Great Recession, demand for labor was outpacing supply. Political and economic pressures on higher education increased to address the supply side. In 2010, the Center on Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University released a report titled *Help Wanted: Projections of Jobs and Education*

*Requirements Through 2018* (Carnevale et al., 2010). This report documented the increasing gap between the number of jobs that would require some college education and the lack of qualified workers. The report authors prognosticated that, “by 2018, the postsecondary system will have produced 3 million fewer college graduates than demanded by the labor market” (p. 16). This report became a rallying point for advocates of workforce development and was used to propel the agenda of a new organization called Complete College America in 2009. Complete College America and its sponsors pushed governors, through the National Governors Association, to develop and adopt state Complete College plans (Ness, Rubin, et al., 2021). In 2009 and 2010, foundations, state governors, and the White House were all talking about the same goal: increasing the percentage of the population with a college education (Hall & Thomas, 2012; McPhail, 2011; Obama, 2011; Sandeen, 2012). This push for postsecondary education is still a driving force, with all but eight states having developed a Complete College plan (Complete College America, n.d.a).

Both Georgia and Tennessee adopted Complete College plans (Complete College America, n.d.b). In Tennessee, the focus has been on the attainment goal titled “Drive to 55”: having 55 percent of the working-age population (18 to 55) hold a postsecondary credential by the year 2025. Georgia joined the Complete College America network in 2011. One of the focus areas for Georgia has been developing more seamless articulation with the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG). Today, 27 courses in the core curriculum will transfer between the USG and the TCSG. Other strategies include increasing dual enrollment programs and ensuring the guaranteed transfer of core curriculum course credits among USG institutions.

### Career Grants or Scholarships for Specific Academic Programs or In-Demand Occupations

One strategy states have employed to increase college completion rates and meet employer demands for labor is funding scholarships and grant programs for specific academic programs that are related to high-demand jobs. These special grants or scholarships are designed to incentivize students to enroll in programs that lead to in-demand occupations. Many states have had service cancelable loan programs for years related to in-demand jobs like nursing (Thaker et al., 2008). These programs pay the cost of tuition, and the recipient of the loan agrees to work in a certain part of the state for the number of years needed to pay off the loan (Georgia Board of Health Care Workforce, 2022; Thaker et al., 2008). For example, Georgia increased its investment in and diversified the list of service cancelable loan programs in 2022. Funding for such loans in the fiscal year (FY) 2023 Georgia state budget was \$13,445,000, including \$10 million for behavioral health professionals, \$1.44 million for law enforcement, and \$360,000 for medical examiners (FY 2023 Appropriations Act).

More recently, states have implemented grants to pay for vocational-type training that essentially makes college free for students in these high-demand career training programs. For example, in the wake of the 2014 High Demand Career Initiative, Georgia funded the HOPE Career Grants, which pay for tuition and fees for 14 specific programs ranging from automotive repair to truck driving to welding (HOPE Career Grant, 2022; HOPE Career Grant – Athens Tech, 2022).

In Tennessee, Governor Bill Lee has implemented the Tennessee Promise program and the GIVE Initiative (Mastered in Tennessee, n.d.). The GIVE Initiative is an incentive program that funds regional partnerships between high schools, industry, and a Tennessee College of Applied Technology to develop work-based learning and apprentice programs and to expand

industry-informed career and technical education offerings. The Tennessee Promise program, which was launched in fall 2015, provides free tuition to graduating high school seniors who attend community or technical college. Other examples of state incentive programs include the FastForward program in Virginia and an industry credential grant in Mississippi. In 2015, the Virginia General Assembly put language in the budget to direct the Virginia Community College system to “to develop a plan to address a gap in middle-skills work — jobs that require some postsecondary education, but not necessarily a degree” (Robertson, 2022). The Virginia FastForward program is a short-term program that helps “Virginians earn industry credentials and certifications for the most in-demand jobs across the Commonwealth” (FastForward, n.d.). In 2019 the Mississippi legislature passed Senate Bill 2447, which provides a \$600 per student grant to pay for “qualifying industry certification examination fees, professional development for teachers in career and technical education programs . . . student instructional support for programs that lead to qualifying industry certifications, or to increase access to qualifying industry certifications” (SB 2447, 2019).

In 2020, the South Carolina legislature passed, as part of its appropriations bill, new funding for “critical workforce program areas.” Critical Workforce Development Initiative funds must be “allocated to colleges, especially technical colleges, that prioritize workforce development needs. Finally, the bill appropriates funds for workforce development scholarships and allows workforce development initiatives to be used in substance abuse disorder services” (Hentze, 2020).

An innovative new policy, piloted at Georgia State University, was funded for statewide implementation in the Georgia FY 2023 budget. The state of Georgia provided \$10 million for a new gap funding scholarship called the College Completion Grant. These grants are modeled

after the successful micro-grants (Panther Grants) Georgia State University implemented to help students who were close to completing their degree but needed a small amount of funding to get through their last semester (Georgia College Completion Grant, 2022; Kurzweil & Wu, 2015).

### Career Academies

Career academies are another strategy states have used to prepare students to fill high-demand jobs. Career academies have been around for more than 40 years and are typically part of high school programs but provide a bridge to postsecondary programs and certifications (Brand et al., 2009). According to Kemple (2004), career academies are typically small learning communities where academic and technical hands-on learning occurs. Such programs usually partner with local employers for work-based learning opportunities. Kemple found that career academies have positive and sustained impacts on labor outcomes for young men especially. In his study based on survey data collected from more than 1,400 young people involved in a randomized controlled trial, Kemple found that young men increased their earnings “by an average of \$212 per month over 48 months” (p. ES-3). Kemple also found that participating in a career academy is especially helpful to high school students who are at risk of dropping out.

In the last decade, more states have embraced the career academy model as a way to create more opportunities for students to accelerate their applied learning in a specific vocational pathway. These programs allow students to gain both high school and college credit and, when available, also earn an industry-recognized certification or credential before they graduate from high school (Stern et al., 2010). Georgia’s career academy model requires a K-12 school system to take the lead and partner with a technical college (Technical College System of Georgia, 2022). Other states like Texas and New York have found the P-TECH model effective. The P-TECH model is a college and career academy designed to assist historically underserved students

who are economically disadvantaged or at-risk. P-TECHs enter into specific partnership agreements (Pathways in Technology Early College High School, n.d.; Texas Education Agency, n.d.).

### Align Curriculum with Workforce Needs

As noted earlier, states are using their program approval powers to better align college programs with state workforce needs (Venters, 2021). Curriculum alignment is not only happening with higher education programs but also in grades K-12. For example, in 2020, the Mississippi state legislature passed SB 2563, which created a Mississippi Workforce Development Study Committee to review the curriculum in K-12 schools to make sure it meets the workforce development needs of the state (Hentze, 2020).

### Industry-Specific Initiatives

States are politically and economically motivated to meet the workforce needs of employers, especially those building new operations or expanding operations in the state. States have a long history of providing tax breaks and workforce training incentives to companies looking to bring hundreds to thousands of jobs to the state. An interesting trend in the automobile manufacturing industry has been to open more operations in the southeastern U.S. Southern states like South Carolina, Alabama, Georgia, and Tennessee have seen a significant increase in jobs related to auto manufacturing, with companies like Hyundai and Mercedes Benz in Alabama, Kia and new Hyundai and Riven electric vehicle plants in Georgia, Volkswagen and Ford's new Blue Oval electric vehicle plant in Tennessee, and BMW in South Carolina. With each of these announcements, state-funded training programs specific to industry needs have been included in the state's incentive package.

Georgia was one of the first states to launch a program specifically designed to train the employees of companies establishing a large manufacturing operation within its borders. Georgia's QuickStart program is part of the state's economic development incentive package (QuickStart, n.d.). The state commits to provide skills training for new employees at little to no cost to the company. A recent example is Georgia's commitment to Hyundai, which will be building a large electric vehicle plant outside of Savannah. The new 3,000-acre plant will create an estimated 8,100 jobs with a payroll that will reach "\$4.7 billion over 10 years" (Kaneli et al., 2022). The state appropriated funds to construct a \$62.5 million worker training center for its QuickStart program that will help prepare Hyundai workers. The state will also fund the \$5 million annual operating cost for five years (Kaneli et al., 2022). The state of Georgia provided a similar benefit to Kia Motors when it located a large manufacturing plant near LeGrange.

Tennessee is providing similar incentives to Ford Motor Company. To help attract Ford's new Blue Oval plant, Tennessee offered the company a \$410 million economic incentive package that included "\$250 million in forgivable loans and \$36 million of skills training investment" (Grzelewski & Beggin, 2021). Historically, most workforce-related incentives have involved partnerships with a state's two-year or vocation colleges. The expansion into electric vehicles has been accompanied by a push into research and development and training engineers to work in advanced manufacturing, including battery chemistry and development. The electric vehicle industry is just one example of how the advanced skills needed by employers are expanding workforce development pressure to bachelor's- and master's-degree-granting institutions.

States are working to address employer demand for trained labor. Academic program approval is central to many of these strategies. Curricula must be created that teach students the

competencies needed to meet employer requirements. New models of learning and credentialing in the private sector are impacting public higher education's approach to program design and delivery. Microcredentials and pathway programs through dual enrollment and college and career academies are some of the ways higher education agencies are responding.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

Theoretical frameworks for policy change are helpful in understanding how policy changes regarding program approval and review occur. In Chapter 4, I use two conceptual frameworks—state policy-making ecology and the multiple streams framework—to analyze how workforce development demands have become an integral part of new academic program approval in Georgia and Tennessee. In this section, I first explain the core constructs of the conceptual frameworks. I then discuss and critique the tradeoffs of each of the conceptual frameworks related to the topic of policy change through new academic program approval.

#### State Policy Making Ecology

Many forces and factors influence higher education policy. The ecology of state higher education policy making framework developed by James Hearn and Erik Ness (2019) and Hearn et al. (2017) helps explain the context and state landscape in which policy changes are made. The ecology of state policy change and innovation comprises four distinct sets of forces or contexts, each with a number of subtopics: socio-economic context, organizational and policy context, politico-institutional context, and interstate policy diffusion context. The premise for the framework is that state context matters when analyzing and comparing state policy decisions. As Hearn and Ness (2019) explain, the framework is “for considering how conditions within individual states and at the intersections among states may shape policymaking in those settings”

(p. 24). Each of the factors within the framework can both overtly and latently influence the decisions state actors make.

### Socioeconomic Context

The socioeconomic context includes the demographic attributes of the state, the educational attainment of the citizenry, and the state's economy. The age and racial makeup of the population, migration trends, and whether the state is growing in population or in decline all impact policy decisions and budgets. In addition, the level of educational attainment, including how many people are graduating from high school, attending college, and graduating from college, is also a crucial factor in state-level decision making. Hearn and Ness (2019) note that "states with a highly educated citizenry benefit from improved economic competitiveness" (p. 26). Finally, economic characteristics that impact policy making include gross state product, per capita income, and the unemployment rate. Hearn and Ness (2019) point out that "solid economic health may expand state expenditures on education and other outcomes and, conversely, economic privation can stimulate policy change" (p. 26).

### Organizational and Policy Context

The second context in the ecology framework is the organizational and policy context. "Each state has a distinctive organization ecology. Most visibly, states differ in their number and kinds of institutions" (Hearn & Ness, 2019, p. 27). Each state and region differs in its mix and number of private and public institutions and types of institutions. Legislatures in states that have a large number of private universities compared to public universities, for example, will likely look at higher education policy changes differently because they have less influence than states with more public institutions. Hearn and Ness (2019) also include agency analytical capabilities and sophistication in the organizational context. Some states have professional staff

supporting the legislature, for example, whereas others have very limited research staff support. Also included in this context is the general policy posture of the state, which refers to the general ethos or policy attitudes about funding higher education and the societal value of higher education.

### Political-Institutional Context

The third context in the framework is the political-institutional context, which Hearn and Ness (2019) divide into eight subtopics: governance arrangements, appointment characteristics for state agency heads, political ideology, gubernatorial characteristics, legislative characteristics, partisanship, interest-group climate, and in-state intermediary organizations (p. 29). When analyzing policy change in higher education, it is essential to understand the higher education governance structure of the state, which can range from a governing board to a coordinating board, to an administrative agency (Fulton, 2019). The governance structure informs the level of government (e.g., legislature, state system, or institution) at which policy and funding decisions are made in the state. The historical political climate in the state informs policy and values. The mix of legislative and gubernatorial powers also matters and differs from state to state. For example, in states like Texas and Florida, the legislature sets the revenue estimate, and appropriations to universities are line items in the budget (National Association of State Budget Officers, 2021). Policy making is quite different in a state like Georgia, where the governor appoints the regents, sets the revenue estimate, and has significant budget control powers. In Georgia, the Board of Regents of the USG gets a lump-sum appropriation from the legislature. The board, not the legislature, has the decision power to allocate funds to institutions (Lauth, 2021). In Tennessee, the performance-based funding formula enacted in 2010 as part of the Complete College Tennessee Act codified a new way for the public colleges and universities

to be funded. Funding is based the student data related to progression, completion, and the number of degrees awarded (Testa & Swim, 2017).

### External Context

The final context in the ecology framework is the interstate policy diffusion context or the external context, which includes policy/practice emulation and avoidance, state competitors, state networking, federal influences, and national intermediary organizations (Hearn & Ness, 2019, p. 34). Research on policy innovation and diffusion, like the foundational work of Jack Walker (1969), particularly informs this context area. States are competitors, and they look to each other for innovative ideas they can adapt to their own use. For example, in economic development, “one state’s decision to adopt a research-centered economic-development policy may prompt neighboring states to adopt similar policies to remain economically competitive within a region” (Hearn & Ness, 2019, p. 35). In addition, federal policies and programs like the Pell Grant Program or student loan policy impact state behavior.

External intermediary groups like the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Lumina Foundation exercise significant influence on states in the area of higher education policy. Foundations can be effective catalysts for action, especially when they use the possibility of funding as an incentive to bring key actors together. Foundations are less encumbered by state funding cycles than state actors, and large foundations can typically better weather economic downturns (Hall & Thomas, 2012).

The ecology framework provides an analytical lens for understanding the policy changes made by the USG and THEC to improve the alignment of academic programs with workforce needs. The framework’s contextual categories offer a way to deeply analyze the economic, organizational, political, and policy diffusion dynamics. For example, Georgia and Tennessee

compete every day with each other and their neighbors for jobs and new prospects. Georgia is ranked as the number one place to do business by *Area Development Magazine*, and the governor works to maintain that ranking. Making sure the education systems of the state are highly effective and student-focused helps create a strong business climate. The executive powers of the governor in both Georgia and Tennessee are strong. Because governors appoint the Board of Regents at the USG and most of the board members at THEC, they have considerable leverage over higher education policy. This type of contextual information sheds light on how policy changes in the USG and THEC are influenced by economic, organizational, political, and diffusion factors.

### Multiple Streams Framework

The multiple streams framework (MSF) was first developed by political scientist John Kingdon in 1984 (Kingdon & Stano, 1984). MSF is helpful in understanding policy change at the system level (Jones et al., 2016). MSF also explains how an idea can move from the conceptual phase to being implemented as a new policy and the key roles involved in that process. The framework identifies three streams from which policy change can originate: the problem stream, the political stream, and the policy stream.

The problem stream looks at how a problem gets attention. In the problem stream, the relevance of the issue is more important than the actual severity. Many severe problems do not gain attention because they fail to be perceived as a problem by the public.

The policy stream focuses on organizational and public values, the technical feasibility of the policy, and consideration of budget and resources. In this market of ideas, the focus of this stream is on refinement of the issue through criteria for policy survival, including technical feasibility, financial feasibility, public acceptance, and value acceptability. Kingdon (2003)

describe the policy stream as the “primeval soup” where ideas simmer looking for traction: “While many ideas float around in the policy primeval soup, the ones that last, as in a natural selection system, meet some criteria. Some ideas survive and prosper” (p. 117). The policy stream is inspired by Cohen et al.’s (1972) garbage can model of organization decision making when there is a lot of discussion about what could be done to address a problem (Herweg & Zahariadis, 2018).

The third stream is politics. This stream focuses on the actions and motivations of the policy makers themselves, influenced by political party ideology, national mood, and the interests of stakeholders and advocates. If politicians perceive support from the public to address the issue, then they are more inclined to move forward. The national mood, interest groups, government officials, and regents who are appointed by politicians can fuel an issue to make it a priority for action.

MSF has three additional components: coupling forces, policy entrepreneurs, and policy windows. Coupling forces include events, data, or even celebrities that garner public or policy maker attention. Examples of coupling forces are focusing events like a disaster or an election, or indicators or data that get people’s attention. In addition, the feedback policy leaders receive from their constituents can be a coupling force.

Several coupling forces or focusing events have occurred in Tennessee and Georgia that brought attention to the alignment of higher education and workforce needs. Focusing events included multiple surveys of both employers and students showing a gap in student preparation. In Georgia in 2014, Governor Nathan Deal launched the High Demand Career Initiative, which involved listening sessions with employers and industry representatives held around the state. Employer after employer highlighted the skills they could not find. In Tennessee, a similar 2019

focusing event occurred with the Future of Work Task Force, which looked at the alignment of high-demand jobs and postsecondary credentials. A third coupling force was data and research from the Georgetown Center for Workforce and Education underscoring that the jobs of the future would require more postsecondary education. Finally, the Lumina Foundation is raising the attention of higher education policy makers through research it funds at SHEEO and other trusted associations that ultimately brings new data to the conversation.<sup>8</sup>

Another component of the multiple streams framework is policy entrepreneurs, which are persons or organizations that advance an idea that comes from one of the three streams. Policy entrepreneurs can be internal to an organization or external. In some cases, intermediaries act as policy entrepreneurs as they advance ideas through research and advocacy. Policy entrepreneurs can be active in each of the three streams and may create or influence triggering or coupling forces. Kingdon (2003) identifies policy entrepreneurs as “advocates who are willing to invest their resources—time, energy, reputation, money—to promote a position in return for anticipated future gain in the form of material, purposive, or solidary benefits” (p. 179). Jones et al. (2016) clarify that policy entrepreneurs “couple the streams and shape outputs” (p. 16). Jones et al. identify three critical success factors for entrepreneurial success: “resources (e.g., time and money), access to critical decision makers, and the strategies they employ. Strategies include efforts to manipulate and couple the streams ranging from bargaining to communication framing” (p. 16). As such, policy entrepreneurs can be think tanks, foundations, or a person inside the organization who can harness resources, has access to leadership, and can mold the policy, problem, and political streams to bring attention to an issue (Mintrom, 1997; Ness & Mistretta, 2009).

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<sup>8</sup> See a list of grants issued by the Lumina Foundation at <https://www.luminafoundation.org/resources/grants/grant-database/>

The policy window, a third component of MSF, is when the timing or “climate” is right and an idea generated in one or more of the three streams advances into the public square for debate, funding, and ultimately a decision to move forward or not. Policy entrepreneurs can act as brokers in moving an idea to action by identifying or creating a policy window in which the idea can advance to a formal decision process and ultimately implementation.

The role of the Lumina Foundation as a policy entrepreneur in higher education is noteworthy. The foundation is a well-resourced and strategic policy entrepreneur. Using the language of MSF, Lumina creates “policy windows” through competitive grants to higher education associations (like SHEEO) and universities. Herweg & Zahariadis (2018) define policy windows as an “opportunity for advocates of proposals to push their pet solutions, or to push attention to their special problems” (p. 26). Often, state systems and universities use grant opportunities to advance special projects forward that would otherwise not be funded.

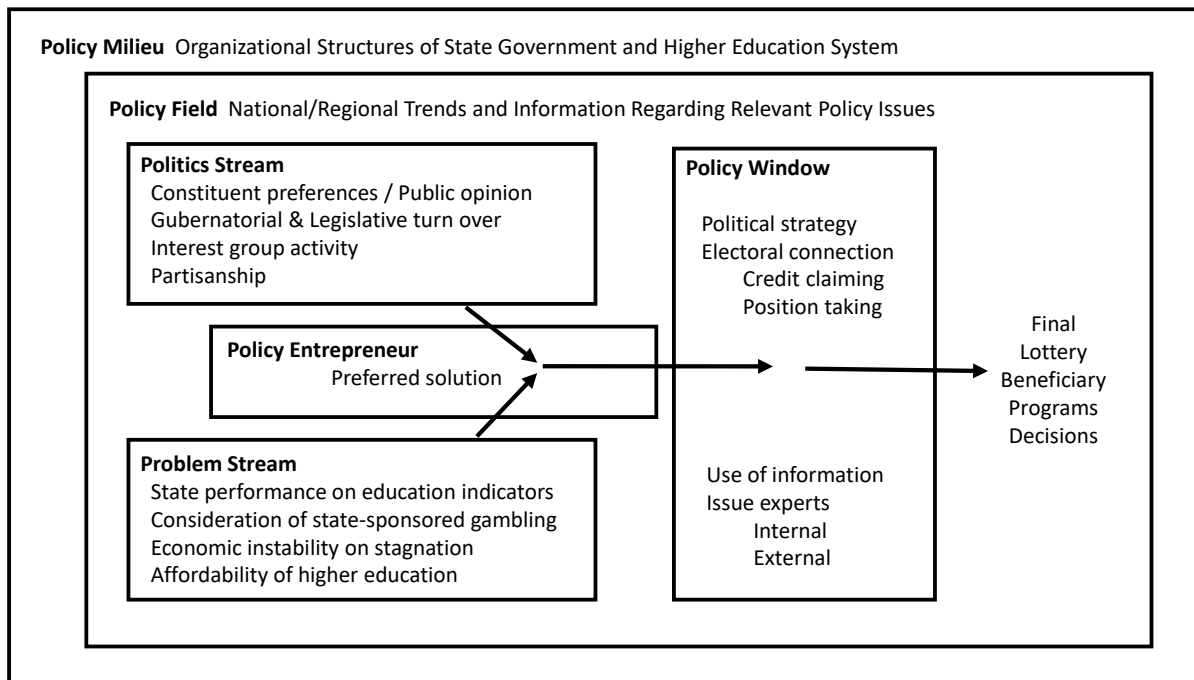


Figure 1: Revised multiple streams modeling of lottery decisions, taken from Ness and Mistretta (2009), figure 3

Variations on the multiple streams framework have evolved. Figure 1 from Ness and Mistretta (2009) illustrates how MSF can be applied to lottery beneficiary decisions, particularly in regard to higher education. Instead of the policy stream being a distinct stream like the politics and problem streams, Ness and Mistretta argue that it is a contextual foundation. The authors show the policy stream as both the policy milieu and the policy field. In their context, the policy milieu is the overall governance of the state and higher education system. The policy field includes regional and national normative and isomorphic forces that can influence policy in a given state. In my analysis of Georgia and Tennessee policy changes, I follow the Ness and Mistretta revised framework because the construct of the policy milieu has merit, as context really matters to this case.

At the same time that changes are being discussed in the policy and political streams, intermediaries are also busy developing strategies to move states to action.

### Combining the Two Frameworks

Together the MSF and policy making ecology make for a useful framework for analyzing policy changes related to new academic program approval. The state policy making ecology helps the analyst consider the unique environment, values, forces, and factors that exist in each state. Policy is not made in a vacuum, and, as the common saying goes, all politics are local. Location matters, and the ecology framework helps the analyst consider “where” when analyzing and comparing a similar policy change in different states. One of the limitations of the ecology framework is that it does not explain why a policy came about or who was involved.

MSF is a helpful framework in understanding the sources of a policy idea, who the players are in moving a policy from idea to implementation, how the policy evolved and matured, and the role of policy entrepreneurs. MSF helps one analyze questions about who,

how, and when related to a policy change. However, MSF lacks clarity about how the policy gets implemented. It also is limited in context. Ness may have recognized this same gap in context with MSF. Later papers by Ness (2010) and Ness and Mistretta (2009) both contain a figure of a revised multiple streams model (see figure 1 of Ness & Mistretta, 2009). This updated model was used to analyze lottery beneficiary decisions. In the revised model, the policy stream is changed to a policy field. The problem and politics stream are nested in the policy field. The policy field and all the other components of MSF are then layered on top of the “policy milieu,” which consists of the organizational structures of the state government and higher education systems (Ness, 2010; Ness & Mistretta, 2009). This revised version of MSF makes it clear that more context is needed to fully analyze a policy change. Combining frameworks improves the analytical power because the state’s context is considered as the researcher investigates the roles the different streams and their players had in a policy change as well as the policy entrepreneurs.

The state policy making ecology framework provides helpful prompts in looking at the context and forces and factors that contribute to the development of a policy. The MSF helps unwrap how the USG and THEC policy changes related to new degree programs emerged from the policy, political, and problem streams and how policy entrepreneurs,, both internal and external to THEC and the USG, fueled the momentum to move the idea from concept in the primeval soup to action through a policy window to ultimately a policy outcome.

## **CONCLUSION**

States are responsible for managing and overseeing academic programs and higher education institutions within their borders. State legislatures determine whether oversight will be done through a governing board, coordinating boards, or some other construct. These boards can

be created by state constitution or by state statutes authorizing them to be the police, referees, or firefighters in monitoring academic program quality. Many different organizations, people, and stakeholders inform and influence public policy related to higher education. Elected officials, board members, and state and university leaders all have a role. Increasingly, intermediaries (acting as policy entrepreneurs) and the business community are active in pushing reforms and innovative policies from the bottom up and top down through grant making, research, and advocacy.

Employers and industry groups are also active in higher education and have been for centuries. The role of the American university has evolved from colonial college established to educate the clergy and gentlemen for civic duty to multi-universities that are economic engines first and centers of learning second. Employer and industry groups have long relied on universities to prepare their workforce. In more recent years, employers have expressed concern that students are not gaining the competencies they need to be successful in the workplace after they graduate. Employers are engaging more with the higher education community to influence the development of their own talent pipelines. Recent disruptions in the higher education realm like short certificate programs, badges, and boot camps indicate a changing market for higher learning.

Intermediaries like the Lumina Foundation are aligned with employer interests and calling for state systems and boards over colleges and universities to use the process of academic program approval to more directly impact program quality and equity and access (Humphreys & Taylor, 2020). States have been active in addressing the pressure to strengthen their workforce pipelines. Actions include aligning governance boards so their purview is over both education and workforce development programs; creating targeted grants, scholarships, and service

cancelable loans for high-demand career areas; developing new education models; and providing training resources for growing industries.

The case study that follows will illustrate the convergence of intermediaries' funding and goals, employer needs, and entrepreneurial policy leaders to enact policy changes that address a perceived gap between the relevant curricula at public universities and colleges and the talent needs of business and industry. The case study will also demonstrate how state authorization powers, specifically new program approval, can be used as a policy implementation tool.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH DESIGN

The purpose of this comparative case study is to understand how states use new academic program approval as a lever for changing policy and better aligning higher education with state workforce and economic development goals. This study is bounded by the policy changes to academic program review and approval that were enacted between 2019 and 2023 by the University System of Georgia (USG) and the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC). This comparative case study analyzes the context, actions, and policy actors in Georgia and Tennessee and how new program approval is used to achieve broader state goals. This chapter provides an overview of the methodology used to conduct this study. I explain the case selection criteria, data collection methods, analysis techniques, and the validity and reliability checks that I employ. This study stands to offer a deeper understanding of how state-level higher education policy changes related to economic development are operationalized through new academic program approval.

Two primary research questions guide this study:

1. What were the forces and factors that led higher education agencies in Georgia and Tennessee to change their new academic program approval process and criteria?
2. How and to what extent was academic program approval utilized to advance state priorities, such as workforce development?

I also explore a follow-up question to the first research question: How do state workforce and economic development pressures impact state degree program approval discussion and decisions at the board or commission level?

The approach of this study is to use two frameworks or conceptual models of policy change: the ecology of state higher education policy (Hearn et al., 2017; Hearn & Ness, 2019) and the multiple streams framework (Jones et al., 2016; Kingdon & Stano, 1984; Knaggård, 2015). The ecology framework emphasizes the importance of understanding the context in which state policy is developed, taking into account the state's demographics, economy, and organizational and political contexts as well as any outside influences. The second framework provides a structured way of understanding three main "streams" in which policy originates, the role of policy entrepreneurs, and the importance of windows of opportunity in the policy development process.

### **Explanation of the study design and methods**

The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of how state-level higher education policy changes came about. This study uses a qualitative approach that is based on a comparative case study. Qualitative methodologists (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Grenier, 2019; Simons, 2009; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014) point out that a case study design helps explain a phenomenon in a "bounded system." Case study research also allows one to test theories of policy change. A comparative or multiple case study involves researching the same phenomenon or topic in two or more locations or research subjects. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) state, "The inclusion of multiple cases is, in fact, a common strategy for enhancing the external validity or generalizability of your findings" (p. 40). Yin (2014) argues that a multiple case study is similar to doing a controlled experiment multiple times and seeing if the results are

similar. Therefore, binding the case study to a single topic or phenomenon is important so that the multiple case studies are essentially replications of the same study or experiment. Another strength of comparative studies is the ability to triangulate data. With a single case study, one is triangulating data within the case using interviews, documents, and observation. A multicase study adds the ability to triangulate themes across cases, which makes the findings more applicable to other contexts.

### Case selection

Case selection is a core component of a qualitative research design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2014). Purposeful sampling begins with selection criteria. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) note that “in criterion-based selection you first decide what attributes of your sample are crucial to your study” (p. 97). I selected cases based on a set of criteria that would allow for a comparative analysis of two states that are similar with one key difference. First, I wanted to compare two states that had similar levels of economic activity and workforce development demands. Second, I wanted to compare states that are in close proximity and in the same geographic region that compete for new jobs. Third, the key difference important for this study is that the states needed to have different higher education governance models. Based on these criteria, I selected Georgia and Tennessee for this dissertation.

According to *Area Development Magazine*, an economic development trade publication, in 2022, of the top 10 states in which to do business, eight were in the southeastern United States. Georgia and Tennessee were ranked first and second, respectively (Kaelble, 2022). Political power is held by the Republican Party in both states. The governors in both Georgia and Tennessee are Republicans, and the Republicans hold a majority in the house and senate in both states (MyTimeToVote.com, 2023).

To evaluate the economic conditions within the two states, I used an index of state economic momentum and compared unemployment and labor participation rates. Federal Funds Information for States, a subscription service created by and affiliated with the National Conference of State Legislatures and the National Governors Association, produces an annual index of economic momentum in each of the 50 states based on three indicators of economic vitality: personal income growth, population growth, and employment growth. The December 2022 report (the latest available report when this study started) showed that of the top 10 states in the index, six were in Southeast and three were in the Intermountain West, with Maine as the lone outlier from the Northeast. Georgia and Tennessee both ranked in the top 10 (Federal Funds Information for States, 2022).

Next, I took a deeper look at two labor market indicators for Georgia and Tennessee. The unemployment rate and the labor force participation rate are two common indicators used to understand supply and demand in a state's labor market. Unemployment is a measure of how tight the labor market is. Generally, when unemployment is below 5%, economists consider the market to be out of equilibrium, with labor demand exceeding supply (Investopedia Team, 2023). As of December 2023, the U.S. unemployment rate was 3.7%, Georgia's was 3.4%, and Tennessee's was 3.5% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.b.). These figures indicate an overall tight labor market and that Georgia has a tighter labor market than the U.S. and Tennessee. The labor force participation rate captures the share of working-age adults in the workforce. In 2023, Georgia's labor force participation rate was 61.6% and Tennessee's was 59.4%, both below the national rate of 62.5% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.a). Thus, a higher percentage of working-age adults are not participating in the labor force in Georgia and Tennessee compared to the U.S. overall.

One indicator of how Georgia and Tennessee compete for jobs is site selection announcements. Since 2021, Georgia and Tennessee have both been selected by automobile manufacturers as sites for new electric vehicle plants. In Georgia, both Rivian (2021) and Hyundai (2022) announced plans to build new plants. In Tennessee, Ford announced plans to build a new plant in a town the company is calling Blue Oval City in Stanton. These projects are putting pressure on existing workforce systems and increasing the need to attract more people to work in the states as well as prepare residents to work in a variety of industries related to electric vehicles. Table 2 highlights some of the similarities and the differences in the two states selected.

Table 2: Comparison of Selected States for the Study

<b>Attribute</b>	<b>Georgia</b>	<b>Tennessee</b>
Population (2020 Census)	10,711,908	6,346,105
Educational Attainment: Percent of population over age 25 with a bachelor's degree or higher	34.63% 2,505,076	30.48% 1,467,481
Higher Education Agency	Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia (USG)	Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC)
Governance Model	Governing Board	Coordinating Board
Number of Public Institutions	26 <sup>9</sup>	51 <sup>10</sup>
Unemployment (Dec 2023) (US Rate was 3.7%) <sup>11</sup>	3.4%	3.5%
Labor Force Participation Rate (Dec 2023) <sup>12</sup> US Rate was 62.5%	61.6%	59.4%

<sup>9</sup> In Georgia, the 22 technical colleges are under a different governing board.

<sup>10</sup> 9 public universities; 2 special-purpose institutes, 13 community colleges, and 27 colleges of applied technology; THEC has authority over 6 locally governed institutions and all others that are governed by UT or TBR.

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Unemployment Rate (n.d.b)

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Labor Force Participation Rate (n.d.a): A state's labor force participation rate is the percentage of the civilian noninstitutional population 16 years and older that is working or actively looking for work. It is calculated by taking the number of all employed and unemployed workers divided by the state's civilian population.

<b>Attribute</b>	<b>Georgia</b>	<b>Tennessee</b>
State Ranking: Top States to Do Business <sup>13</sup>	1	2
Major New Economic Development project	Rivian and Hyundai electric vehicle plants	Ford Blue Oval electric vehicle plant
Governor	Republican	Republican
Legislature (2023 session) House Senate	Rep 106 / Dem 74 Rep 35/ Dem 21	Rep 73/ Dem 26 Rep 28 / Dem 5

Boundaries of the Case

This case study is what Stake (1995) calls as an instrumental case study, meaning it helps us better understand something else. In this case, I strive to gain a deeper understanding of how higher education policy change is enacted, with the specific application being the use of new degree program approval to meet state economic and workforce development objectives. This comparative case study is focused on the actions of the USG and THEC, which enacted policy and process changes to improve the approval of new academic programs to align with state workforce development goals. Bounding this case is important. I limit my study to Georgia and Tennessee and focus on the period of 2019 to 2023, when these two states implemented their policy changes. As Simons (2009) points out, this approach enables “policies to be studied in depth and interpreted in the precise socio-political contexts in which programs and policies are enacted” (p. 23). It also enables one to “document multiple perspectives, ... demonstrate the influence of key actors and interactions between them” (p. 23). Through the case study approach, researchers can explore and understand the “process and dynamics of change” (Simons, 2009, p. 23).

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<sup>13</sup> *Area Development Magazine* (Kaelble, 2022)

## **Data Collection**

This comparative case study is informed by documents, interviews, publicly available recorded meetings, and observations of USG Board of Regents and THEC meetings. Using a variety of methods and sources enabled me to triangulate the data and ensure a fuller and deeper understanding of how the policy change came about (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Stake, 1995). As a comparative case study, this research is similar to doing a controlled experiment multiple times and seeing if the results are similar (Yin, 2014). For example, both Georgia and Tennessee enacted similar policy changes related to new program approval. However, the governance frameworks differ, which allows a deeper analysis of the policy-making process in a state like Georgia with a strong governing board versus a state like Tennessee that has a coordinating board (Fulton, 2019). I am thus able to explore how the processes and politics of enacting new academic programs differ in a state with a governing board versus a coordinating board. Some additional areas of inquiry I explore include a comparison of the role of SHEEO and the board members, and the influence and authority of the governor and state legislators. Because Georgia and Tennessee are neighboring states, I can also explore the role of policy diffusion and any isomorphic or normative pressures to enact policies that are similar to those of a neighboring state.

### Documents

To understand the origins of the policy change and the wide spectrum of policy entrepreneurs, as well as perspectives from the political stream, policy stream, and other influences, I analyzed relevant documents and forms related to the policy change. Simons (2009) notes that “document analysis is often a helpful precursor to observing and interviewing” (p. 64). I reviewed more than 20 different documents including academic policy, check lists,

new program request instructions, master plans, and commission meeting minutes and recordings produced by THEC, TBR, and Tennessee departments and the legislature. Similarly, I reviewed more than 15 different documents produced by the University System of Georgia including new program application forms, check lists, training, policies, strategic plans, and board meeting minutes. I also reviewed enabling legislation and proposed and passed legislation in Tennessee related to THEC and academic program approval and termination. I also reviewed documents from intermediaries like the Lumina Foundation, Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) and education thinktanks and associations, such as the Education Commission of the States and the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO).

### Interviews

To gather data relevant to my research questions and gain firsthand accounts of the policy process from a variety of perspectives, I interviewed state board members and their staff, agency leadership, economic development officials, and intermediaries. Stake (1995) notes that “two principal uses of case study are to obtain the descriptions and interpretations of others” (p. 64). Obtaining multiple perspectives and points of view is critical to case studies, and interviews are one of the primary means of doing so (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). Table 3 summarizes the people interviewed by role in each state. In addition, THEC archives recordings of its quarterly meetings. Commissioner comments in these public meetings were also used in the study.

Table 3: Distribution of State Interview Participants

	Georgia	Tennessee
New Academic Program Development and Review Staff (includes staff from USG, THEC, TBR, and UT System)	3	7
Regents of the University System of Georgia and THEC Commissioners	3	0 <sup>14</sup>
Other State Agency Staff	2	6
Former Agency Leadership	3	3
Economic Development Official	1	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>17</b>

As Table 3 shows, I interviewed a total of 29 state officials for this study, including 12 from Georgia and 17 from Tennessee. I also transcribed the August 2023 THEC meeting and utilized commission member testimony given at public THEC meetings that were recorded and available through the THEC website. The number of people interviewed in Tennessee is higher for two reasons. First, in two instances, three people were present in two different interviews with THEC staff. One group interview was with the THEC program review staff. I also interviewed (listed under other staff) a group of THEC workforce development staff. Second, given the coordinating board governance model in Tennessee, I also interviewed staff who work for TBR and the UT system who assist with new academic program development. Interviews with other agency staff included staff that work with data collection and reporting, strategic planning, and workforce development as well as one of the staff to a THEC commissioner. In addition to the people in Georgia and Tennessee outlined in the table, I also interviewed a representative of a national intermediary that works in the high education arena. All officials interviewed for this study were currently employed or had recently changed jobs or retired and had firsthand knowledge of policy changes to academic program approval and background knowledge that informed these policy changes.

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<sup>14</sup> THEC commissioners' quotations were pulled from recordings of THEC public meetings from 2023.

I used my contacts from past research activities as well as contacts of my major professor to initiate connect with interviewees. All interview participants agreed to be recorded, with an understanding that direct quotes would be anonymous or that I would request specific permission to attribute a quote to a specific person.

Interviews were semi-structured to allow for exploration of topics and themes raised by the interviewees. A sample interview guide is included in Appendix A. The interview guide consists of open-ended questions to allow the participants to share freely and to avoid interviewer bias in questioning (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Simons, 2009). The interview guide was reviewed by my major professor to check for any bias and to improve objectivity. Two interviews were held in person, one by phone, and all others were conducted using Zoom video conference technology. The length of the interviews ranged from 30 minutes to one hour and 15 minutes. All interviews were conducted between August 2023 and October 2023. I recorded all interviews using Zoom and took notes during the discussions. Recordings were transcribed in real time using the Zoom transcription tool. The phone interview and in-person interviews were also recorded using Zoom audio. I then reviewed and cleaned up the transcripts before coding them. I wrote field notes to capture my reflections immediately following the interviews. In my field notes and reflections, I recorded my observations, any notable body language, key points, and themes (Simons, 2009). I used the field notes to inform adjustments to the interview protocol for future interviews of people in similar positions.

To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, this research was done under the approval of the University of Georgia Institutional Review Board (IRB), and the names of those interviewed were coded and not used in reports or notes (Simons, 2009) unless specifically authorized.

## Observations

Observational data provide context that cannot be gained other ways (Simons, 2009; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). As this case study explores the policy changes at the USG and THEC between 2019 and 2023, past meetings cannot be observed. However, current board and commission meeting observations can inform and provide context to the review of meeting minutes and other documents. Georgia currently webcasts USG meetings but does not provide recordings (USG Board of Regents, 2022). THEC meets quarterly and currently posts recordings of its meetings (THEC, 2022a). To gain situational understanding, I attended one board meeting in person in each state: the August 17, 2023, THEC meeting and the September 8, 2023, meeting of the USG Board of Regents. Being there in person allowed me to observe the interactions of board members and staff and also gain insight into board member preferences and personality traits (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Issues raised at the August 17, 2023, THEC meeting directly impacted the scope of this study. During the meeting, commission members and presenters made direct comments about the need for THEC to change its policy and practices related to new academic program approval.

## Data Analysis

I coded data from the document review and interviews using a three-cycle coding process. As noted by Merriam and Tisdell (2016, quoting Saldana, 2013, p. 3), “A code is a word, or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (p. 199). I coded the interviews transcripts, field notes, policy documents, and program applications forms by theme. For other documents used as background information, I wrote case memos if they contained

information relevant to the primary research questions. I used the qualitative analysis software MAXQDA to catalog the codes, run frequency tables, and create themes.

Prior to the first cycle of coding, I created a provisional or *a priori* list of codes that correspond to the two conceptual frameworks and topics arising from the relevant literature. I then used this list to conduct a first cycle of coding. The second cycle was to identify other themes that emerged from the data. Field notes and memos informed the second cycle of coding. A third round of coding was to group the initial codes into categories to summarize the data. This third cycle was also an opportunity to connect concepts and form relationships between ideas, timelines, and actors in the policy change (Miles et al., 2018). From this final cycle of coding emerged descriptive themes for each state's process and three major themes relevant to both states.

I analyzed the data collected based on the constructs of two theoretical frameworks. For the ecology of higher education framework outlined by Hearn and Ness (2019), the *a priori* or deductive codes included the four contexts: the demographic characteristics and economic characteristics of Georgia and Tennessee; the states' organizational and policy contexts, including the differences in governance; the political context in each state; and the external context, including the interstate policy diffusion context. Within the political context, the impact of appointment powers and approval authority were most critical. The role of intermediaries and regional policy diffusion were also of particular interest in the analysis of the external context.

The *a priori* or deductive codes for the multiple streams framework included data that relates to the problem stream, policy stream, and politics stream as well as information on actions by policy entrepreneurs and the presence of policy windows or windows of opportunity for policy change. My coding took into account the potential overlap in codes related to the

policy and political streams in the multiple streams framework compared to the policy and political contexts in the ecological framework.

### **Validity and Reliability**

Comparing two cases enhanced the validity and reliability of the study (Yin, 2014). I was able to compare data between states as well as triangulate data gathered from the interviews and documents. Data saturation and data triangulation are critical in qualitative research. Stake (2006) emphasizes that “triangulation for a multicast study serves the same purpose as in a single case study: to assure that we have the picture as clear and suitably meaningful as we can get it, relatively free of our own bias” (p. 77). Analyzing data from multiple sources enabled me to cross-check themes, contextualize assertions, and test the theories underpinning this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I conducted multiple interviews to ensure broad perspectives and saturation of the data collected.

The external validity of this study is enhanced as Tennessee and Georgia are growing southern states with expanding and diversifying economies. The study places higher education policy changes within the context of this rapidly changing economic environment. The two states in the study are seen as both competitors and innovators in higher education and public policy. The research is generalizable as many states are working to address workforce shortages and better align their education and workforce systems (Ash & Rahn, 2020).

### **Researcher Bias and Subjectivity**

Researchers bring their distinct worldview, values, upbringing, and knowledge to their work. As such, a researcher is honor bound to conduct ethical and data-guided research. However, each researcher also has biases both seen and unseen that they bring to their work. Ratner (2002) argues,

Subjectivity guides everything from the choice of topic that one studies, to formulating hypotheses, to selecting methodologies, and interpreting data. In qualitative methodology, the researcher is encouraged to reflect on the values and objectives he brings to his research and how these affect the research project. (p. 1)

Stake (2006) notes that “qualitative understanding of cases requires experiencing the activity of the case as it occurs in its contexts and in its particular situation” (p. 2). When I embarked on this case study, I already had a deep understanding of higher education administration, policy, and budget. I had 12 years of budget and policy analysis experience at the Georgia Governor’s Office of Planning and Budget (OPB). During four of my years at OPB, I was the budget analyst responsible for the University System of Georgia. Currently, I am a full-time employee of the University of Georgia’s (UGA) Carl Vinson Institute of Government and in that role was hired by the USG to work on the implementation of the USG new program application. UGA is one of the 26 institutions under the Board of Regents of the USG. Because of my work, I have firsthand knowledge of how the policies and process were implemented. However, I was not involved in conversations or work activities that led to the development of the board’s 2024 or 2029 strategic plans. I was not part of the decisions to change the USG program review process. The case study research is enhanced by my knowledge and situational understanding of the implementation of the new program application. The objectivity and validity of the research is enhanced by being a comparative study. My objectivity is also enhanced because I was not involved in the origination of the policy change, the development of the board’s strategic plan, or the creation of any system-level academic programs. Nevertheless, as a USG consultant, I have insight into how policies were implemented in Georgia at the USG and assisted in developing technical tools and training on labor market data to aid campuses in compiling information for new program requests.

Proximity makes this case study stronger because of my deep contextual understanding of the University System of Georgia, its budget, its institutions, and the governance framework in which it resides. By contrast, I have no connections to any work done in Tennessee. However, my familiarity with higher education governance and operations in Georgia has helped me better understand and put in context how other states operate and makes my analysis much more insightful. My experience aides me as a researcher. As I came to better understand another state's (Tennessee's) approach to new program approval, it broadened my understanding of Georgia's approach and how the research can be applicable to many other state systems studying the same topic.

## CHAPTER 4

### TWO STATE CASE STUDY

#### **Introduction**

This chapter discusses the current program approval processes and policies of the USG Board of Regents in Georgia and THEC in Tennessee and how and why these processes have changed over the last four years. This chapter has three main sections. The first section provides an overview of Georgia and its higher education governance structure, followed by a review of the USG new program application and process, and then information on how and why the USG approval process changed between 2019 and 2021. The second section outlines the Tennessee and THEC case. The section begins with an overview of Tennessee and its higher education governance structure, followed by a detailed description of the THEC new program approval form and process. I then discuss how and why the THEC process and forms changed between July 2022 and January 2024. In the third section of this chapter, I discuss the major themes that emerged from the documents analyzed and interviews conducted with higher education and economic development officials in Georgia and Tennessee.

#### **Section 1: Georgia Case**

##### Socio-Economic Context

Georgia is the eighth-largest U.S. state, with an estimated population of just over 11 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). The state population is projected to grow to more than 13 million by 2040. Since the 1980s, a large share of the state's growth has occurred in the metro

Atlanta area and around regional hub cities. According to the 2020 U.S. Census, Georgia's growth rate exceeds the national rate. From 2010 to 2020, Georgia grew 10.6% compared to the U.S. growth rate of 7.4%. Georgia is geographically the largest state east of the Mississippi and has 159 counties (Carl Vinson Institute of Government, 2023).

Georgia is a racially diverse state. Census 2020 data indicate that Georgia's population is 50 percent white, 31 percent African American/Black, 10 percent Hispanic, and 9 percent other and mixed races. The state is projected to become even more racially diverse in the coming decades. Like almost all states in the country, Georgia's birth rate has been declining since 2007, which is projected to result in smaller high school graduating classes in the coming years. The population is also aging as the baby boomer generation begins to retire (Carl Vinson Institute of Government, 2023).

Educational attainment in the state has been improving. The percentage of the population with a bachelor's degree or higher increased from 28 percent in 2015 to 34.7 percent in 2023. In-migration of knowledge workers contributes to some of the gains, but another upstream factor is an increase in the percentage of high school students graduating, which climbed to 84.1 percent in 2022, up from 78.8 percent in 2015 (Carl Vinson Institute of Government, 2023). Per capita income in Georgia in 2022 is estimated to be \$56,589 (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, n.d.a).

A point of pride for the state is its billing as the number one state in which to do business for 10 years in a row according to *Area Development Magazine* (Kaeble, 2023; Office of the Governor, 2023a). Georgia has a wide variety of business and industry that keeps the economy strong. From a new and growing film industry to businesses like floor coverings and carpet to agricultural products like poultry, sweet onions, and blueberries, Georgia continues to have a

growing and diverse economy. The decision by Hyundai to build its newest electric vehicle manufacturing plant near Savannah, Georgia, is one of many announcements highlighting the continued job growth coming to the state. A growing and diverse economy means there is significant pressure for talent to fill the jobs of existing and new employers.

### Organizational and Policy Context

Georgia has a wide variety of public, private, and for-profit higher educational institutions. The state has two public postsecondary education systems. The Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) has 22 colleges offering associate degrees, certificates, and diplomas. In 2022, more than 37,000 students graduated from TCSG schools. The Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia (USG) is a governing board established in 1931 with responsibility for the 26 public colleges and universities in the state. The USG categorizes the 26 institutions into four sectors: research universities (4), comprehensive universities (4), state universities (9), and state colleges (9). The board has 19 members, 14 of whom represent the state's congressional districts and five of whom are appointed from the state at large. All regents serve a seven-year term, and are all appointed by the governor and then confirmed by the state senate. Figure 2 is a visualization of the USG governing structure. A third board, the Non-Public Post-Secondary Education Agency, oversees the for-profit and private institutions in Georgia. Georgia Military College is considered a public authority. It receives state funding and is therefore categorized as a public higher education institution, but it is not governed by the Board of Regents.

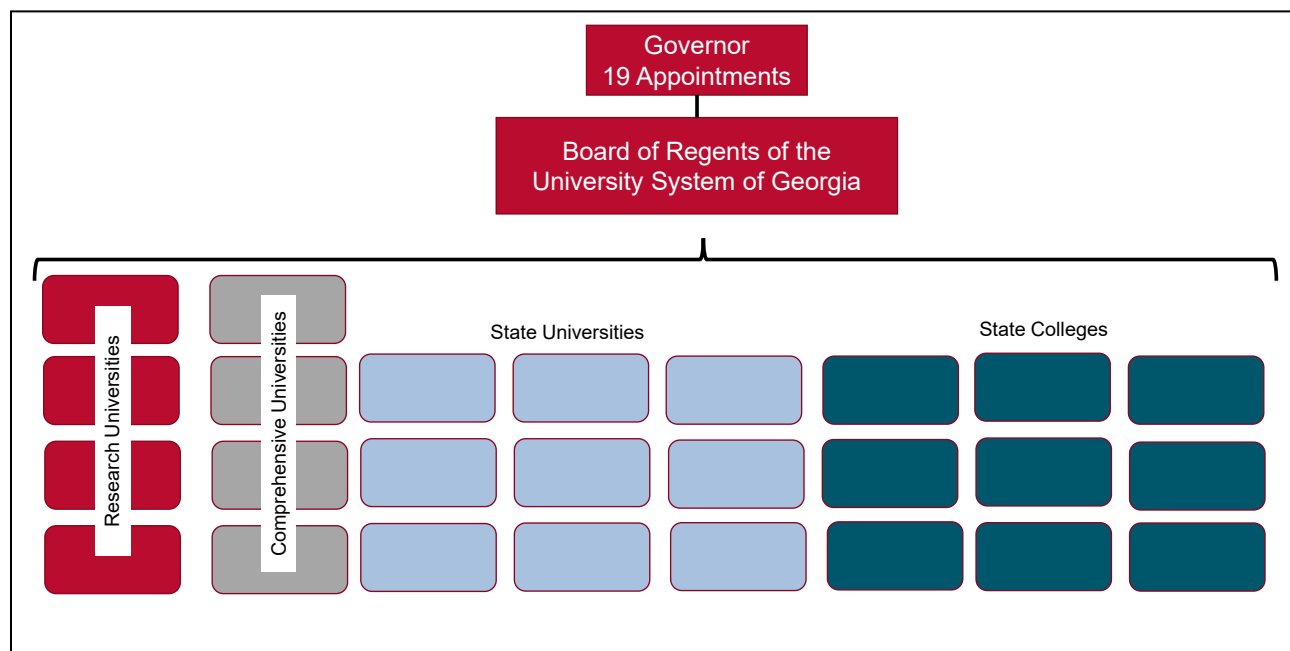


Figure 2: University System of Georgia Governance

Table 4 outlines the number of higher education institutions and bachelor’s degrees awarded in Georgia during the 2021–2022 academic year. Of the bachelor’s-degree-granting institutions in the state, 27 are public (including Georgia Military College), 30 are private, and seven are for-profit. Though the number of public and private institutions is close in number, the public institutions accounted for 75.7% of all bachelor’s degrees awarded in the academic year ending in 2022.

Table 4: Georgia Bachelor’s-Degree-Granting Institutions by Type and Degrees Awarded during the 2021–2022 Academic Year

Type of Institution	Number and Percent of Institutions			Number and Percent of Bachelor’s Degrees Awarded (2021–2022)	
For-profit	7	10.9%	For-profit	1,894	3.3%
Private	30	46.9%	Private	12,157	21.0%
Public	27	42.2%	Public	43,755	75.7%
Grand Total	64	100%	Total	57,806	100%

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, 2023

## Politico-Institutional Context

Politically, Georgia is a Republican state, with all of the statewide elected offices of state positions being held by Republicans. Based on the outcome of the most recent presidential election, some consider Georgia to be moving into the “purple” state category as the majority of votes in the 2020 election went to Joe Biden, the Democratic Party candidate, and the current sitting U.S. senators are both Democrats.

The Georgia General Assembly has Republican majorities in both the House and Senate. All members of the state House and Senate are elected for a two-year term. The General Assembly has a 40-legislative-day session that starts the second Monday in January. Both the House and Senate have Higher Education Committees where legislation is debated and discussed. Separate budget subcommittees deliberate on the budget for the higher education agencies (State of Georgia, 2024).

The Georgia General Assembly has the power to appropriate funds to the University System of Georgia. However, the state constitution stipulates that the USG is appropriated funds in a lump sum, which means the Board of Regents has the power to decide how to allocate the appropriated funds down to the institutions. To facilitate the appropriations process, the state established a funding formula in 1982 that is based on prior-year enrollment and a few other factors. The formula is used to determine the amount the university system can request from the governor and legislature to fund the institutions (USG, 2011).

## University System of Georgia Program Approval Authority

The Georgia Constitution grants the Board of Regents of the USG “the government, control, and management of the University System of Georgia and all of the institutions in said system” (Ga. Const. art. VIII § IV 1(b)). State statute gives the regents power over the

governance of universities, departments, courses, and degree programs: “The Board of Regents is authorized to consolidate, suspend, or discontinue institutions; merge departments; inaugurate or discontinue courses; and abolish or add degrees” (Official Code of Georgia Annotated § 20-3-32).

The strong governance powers vested in the Board of Regents allows it to develop and enact centralized policies and approaches to new academic programs. The vision statement in the USG 2029 Strategic Plan states that the USG “advances the prosperity of individuals, the state of Georgia, and the nation” (USG, 2023). Such language about the USG’s role in developing the prosperity of individuals and the state is found throughout the 2029 plan. Three of the four goal areas mention student success initiatives related to career preparation and the development of programs that align with industry needs. The Economic Competitiveness goal states, “The University System of Georgia will play a critical role in developing the talent and knowledge for current and future industry needs in the state of Georgia and beyond” (USG, 2023).

Formal state coordination of economic development activities with education programs has been more episodic. Governor Nathan Deal convened employers to understand their needs in 2013 and 2014 as part of the Governor’s High Demand Career Initiative. More recently, the Georgia Department of Economic Development has convened education and community development partners in the state to discuss how the education partners might best meet the increased demand for talent as the state has seen record growth in job announcements. Regular and informal coordination typically occurs by project or as needs arise.

## USG New Program Approval Process

The following information is based on the forms and information provided on the USG Academic Affairs website as of October 2023 and explanations from interviews with current and former USG staff.

In December 2020, the USG system office rolled out the new USG academic program proposal form and process through a series of training webinars (Academic Affairs Division, n.d.c). The first set of program proposals using the new forms and process was discussed and voted on as part of the Board of Regents meeting in April 2021 (Board of Regents, 2021b). In this process, the USG did not enact any changes to Board of Regents policy 3.6.1 that governs the creation of new academic programs as it simply states that new programs must be approved by the Board of Regents (USG, n.d.). Instead, all changes were done by adjusting the forms and instructions provided to institutions.

The process at the USG for proposing new academic programs starts months in advance of the proposal being submitted to the USG for review and Board of Regents approval. Under the new USG guidelines for new academic programs, USG institutions are asked to first list programs they want send forward for approval on an Academic Program Forecast and Program Status Report (Academic Affairs Division, n.d.a). The Academic Forecast is a simple form on which institutions list the programs they are planning to submit to USG for approval in the next 12 months. The process allows the USG staff to provide early feedback to the institutions and also begin to gauge whether there are potentially any competing or duplicative programs. Prior to 2021, the Academic Program Forecast was due in September. To align the academic planning meetings with the budget planning meetings, the USG moved the due date of the Academic Program Forecast to coincide with budget planning meetings the USG chancellor and

senior USG staff have with the institution presidents, typically in January and February. If a program proposed is not listed on the Academic Program Forecast form, it may still be able to move forward, but such instances are rare and often related to gubernatorial or legislative priorities or related to demand caused by a new economic development project. The Academic Program Forecast requires institutions to share information about low-performing programs<sup>15</sup> at the same time they are indicating what new programs they plan to propose. This requirement puts pressure on presidents and provosts to look at their whole academic portfolio and discuss their strategy with the system office staff.

Most new program proposals originate from one of the 26 institutions that are part of the USG. New program proposals can also originate from the USG office itself but usually in collaboration with one or more institutions. Examples of USG-originated or -facilitated collaborative proposals include the creation of programs as part of the Georgia Film Academy, the FinTech Academy, and cybersecurity programs.

New academic program proposals are developed by academic departments and institutions. The USG new academic program application requires basic information about the program being requested, and how the proposed program aligns with the USG strategic plan and the institution's mission, function, and strategic plan. Section C of the form requires institutions to provide a justification and data based on workforce strategies and talent demand. Proposals must provide information on institutions with similar programs and their degree production, as well as labor market projection data for careers aligned with the program and degree being proposed. Section C also requires applicants to list some of the knowledge, skills, and abilities

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<sup>15</sup> Low-performing programs are defined by degree level in the USG Academic Program Forecast Form. The following are thresholds based on a three-year average for enrollment and graduation by degree type: Bachelor's = less than 10 degrees or enrollments, Master's = less than 5 degrees or enrollments, Ed.S. = 3 degrees or enrollments, and Doctorate = less than 3 degrees or enrollments

required by occupations that align with the academic program. Institutions can pull data from free resources like O\*Net<sup>16</sup> and other state and federal reports and websites. USG staff can also run labor market data reports from JobsEQ, Lightcast, or similar proprietary labor market data systems.

Section D of the USG form asks questions about the curriculum. Applicants report the number of credit hours required for graduation, the delivery mode, what high-impact practices will be embedded in the program, and whether the program is part of any USG initiatives like the FinTech Academy, eCampus, or the Georgia Film Academy. The form requires a list of learning outcomes, and applicants are asked to attach the curriculum map for the upper division or major curriculum. Regardless of degree type, the form asks applicants to indicate how career-ready competencies, as defined by the National Association of Colleges and Employers,<sup>17</sup> are linked to the learning outcomes. The final set of questions in this section asks for information on how graduate outcomes will be assessed and a list of the entire course of study, including all courses and programs of study, as an attachment.

Section E of the form is focused on the implementation of the program. Applicants provide an enrollment projection and an explanation of any contingencies if enrollment is not realized. Applicants are asked to describe the program and how they will market it and recruit students. If the program requested is a doctoral program, then information on external reviewers is included. External reviewers are only required for doctoral programs. Three external reviewers are provided by the institution, and one peer reviewer comes from within the USG.

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<sup>16</sup> See <https://www.onetonline.org/>

<sup>17</sup> See <https://www.naceweb.org/career-readiness/competencies/career-readiness-defined> for more information on career-ready competencies.

Section F is the finance and resources section of the application. In this section, institutions are asked to provide details on any tuition differentials, fees, redirection of existing resources, and other program costs for students. A faculty staffing plan is also required. Applicants provide information on the use of current faculty and staff and the plan for any new faculty or staff. Information on facility and space needs and major equipment or technology is also required.

The final section of the application asks applicants to assess the risks to program development and success and any assumptions being made by faculty or the institution as part of the proposal.

Institutions are provided a template in Word to gather all the information required. A signature page is also a mandatory part of the submission, with seven signatures required: the president, vice president for business and finance, vice president for facilities, vice president for enrollment management, economic development officer, career services, and the contact for accreditation. Prior to the changes in January 2021, far fewer signatures were required. The longer list of signatures was a way for the USG to ensure that key offices on the campus were aware of a new program being proposed. New program applications are uploaded to a SharePoint site, and some information from the application is cut and pasted into an online form in SharePoint and submitted to the USG.

#### USG Integrated Review

Once a program is submitted to the USG, it goes to a team of system office staff called the “Integrated Review Team,” which meets once a month (on a Friday) to review proposals. The Integrated Review Team includes USG staff from the Academic Affairs, Fiscal Affairs, and Facilities divisions,. USG staff members are generally seasoned higher education administrators,

with many having served as provosts, vice presidents, or department heads. Participants interviewed as part of this study described the Integrated Review Team stage as a collaborative review or multi-disciplinary review.

The USG staff sees the integrated review process as iterative and collaborative. The goal is to help the institution propose a program that will get the approval of the board. Often, the USG Academic Affairs staff will provide coaching or advice to institutions before they officially submit a proposal to ensure it is as complete as possible and the justification is as strong as possible.

#### Board of Regents Approval

After the Integrated Review Team has reviewed the proposed program and the USG Academic Affairs staff has received clarifications and updates, the executive vice chancellor for academic affairs takes the proposal to the chancellor and his cabinet, which is made up of the executive vice chancellors, for review. Once the proposal is vetted at this level, it is then placed on the agenda for the Academic Affairs Committee of the Board of Regents. Proposal packets are prepared by the USG Academic Affairs staff and then sent to the committee members and included in the board packet. USG staff also brief the committee chair before the meeting on the agenda items.

Usually, the executive vice chancellor or vice chancellor for academic affairs will present the proposals to the BOR Academic Affairs Committee. The committee discusses and then votes on the program proposed. If the vote is affirmative, then it is taken to the full board for approval. Typically, committee approval and board approval happen in back-to-back meetings or on the same day. The committee may meet on day one of a two-day meeting or in the morning of a

one-day meeting. The full board would then vote on day two of the two-day meeting or in the afternoon of a one-day meeting.

According to USG staff that reviews programs, once the USG receives a proposal, the fastest they have seen a full program move forward for approval is three weeks. The Integrated Review Team meets on the first Friday of each month, and the USG BOR meets the second Tuesday of the month. However, items for the board must be submitted two weeks in advance. Therefore, if a program is submitted and reviewed by the Integrated Review Team on the first Friday of month one, the soonest it would be on the BOR agenda would be week two of the second month. The typical timeframe for approval once the application comes to the USG is six weeks to three months. Overall, of the programs listed on the Program Forecast in January, the USG will likely receive and review about 70 percent of them within a 12-month period.

#### USG Changes to New Program Approval

The process and forms described above were announced at the November 11, 2020, board meeting and implemented in April 2021. In this section, I provide some context on the forces and factors that informed the policy changes and how they came about. The information presented in this section is based on interviews with current and former USG officials and on USG documents.

A number of events laid the groundwork for the process and form changes implemented in April 2021. Governor Nathan Deal took office in 2011 (2011–2019), and one of his priorities for higher education was for the state to participate in the Complete College America initiative. At the urging of Governor Deal, the USG helped develop the Complete College Georgia plan, which was officially approved on November 9, 2011. According to leaders at the USG, the focus on completion led to an analysis of academic programs with very low enrollment and also

caused them to think more about the relationship between academic programs and the talent needs in the economy. As one former USG official stated,

...you got all these degree programs around the system. They got very limited enrollment. You got a handful of students in [them]. They probably are getting degrees they're not finding jobs in. So, we began to enforce the low-producing programs part of the board policy and I think over time wound up doing away with ... at least 400 and something [degree programs] . . . and that really then led to a conversation. Why are these degrees out there? Why is there no demand for them? I mean, you could kind of look at them and go, well, I see why there's no demand for X. So that sort of led into this broader conversation over time about having a greater linkage between degree programs and the need in the economy.

As USG leaders began discussing completion and program alignment with the labor needs in the Georgia economy, they started talking more about developing curricula at the system office.

One of the USG leaders at the time noted,

We were heading in that direction, openly talk[ing] about it was we're going to have to probably develop curriculum at the system office. . . . Traditionally in higher ed its [new program proposals] got to bubble up, literally almost, from a department. A faculty member thinks, I need to offer this. The driver there was the need to deal with the dramatically growing film industry, which led to the creation of the [Georgia] Film Academy, which was a system-level effort. We had a lot of campuses doing a lot of good work in the film arena, but it wasn't sort of pulled together.... We hired this great guy, Jeff Stepacoff, and had the involvement of the industry in designing the curriculum and what they needed. That really became a model for our thinking in some respects at the system level. Where there are these dramatically growing industries and where they have needs, we need to be talking to them and we're going to drive curriculum development and program development at the system office. Which then led to the last one we were working on when I left was a FinTech Academy. I remember meeting with quite a few people from the FinTech industry. They were very much involved in the design of that, what they needed in the courses.

The USG system office developing academic programs that meet industry needs and leveraging existing courses and expertise across multiple campuses was a significant shift in how programs were proposed and developed in Georgia. In 2015, a collaborative effort between the USG and TCSG launched the Georgia Film Academy (Georgia Film Academy, 2024; Roberts, 2015). The next top-down program the USG system developed was the FinTech Academy,

which was approved on September 11, 2018, and launched in 2019 (Georgia Fintech Academy, 2022; Wallace, 2018). As part of the development process at the USG, staff work with faculty at one or more institutions to develop “playbooks” that summarize the competencies employers need for a given industry or career area. A playbook for an industry like FinTech or career area like data science documents the projected demand for workers in the industry over the next five to 10 years. The document highlights the current types of jobs in demand and the skills needed in each job. To understand the competencies needed for each job, the researchers talk with industry experts and practitioners, discuss strategy with employer leadership, and hold conversations with “hiring managers, supervisors, team leads, and practitioners—those who are in closest proximity to the use of knowledge to create products and services and solve problems for the company or its customers” (Recesso et al., n.d., p. 38).

The outcome of the analysis for demand, industry trends, and subject matter expert research is documentation of the knowledge domains, competencies, and capabilities needed by employers. In many ways the “play book” is a job analysis that communicates the knowledge, skills, and abilities a faculty member would need to develop learning objectives. The play book also includes research on existing knowledge development frameworks from consultants, government agencies, educational organizations, and companies. From there, faculty can consider what competencies are already being taught in existing courses and what new courses might be needed to teach the remaining competencies. Faculty can also research existing curricula to so they do not have to start from scratch.

The system-level development of new programs aligned to growing and important industries in Georgia set the stage for a deeper review of how new academic programs

originating from institutions align with state economic needs. A USG academic affairs leader noted,

[Our] efforts around low-producing programs sort of evolved over time into a conversation around, our degree programs need to be more in tune with what the economic needs are. Leading, as I said, to the Film Academy, FinTech, and ultimately changes in board policy around if you're going to propose a new degree program of any kind, you've got to provide these justifications and enrollment projections.

The USG also created a new type of degree called the “nexus” degree. In a press release, the USG explained that “industry officials have told University System leaders they want to hire people who have experience in specialized fields and who can apply their knowledge and skills quickly. The nexus degree aims to fill that need by giving students a specialization in priority career fields and emphasizing experiential learning” (Sutlive, 2018).

Nexus degrees are developed in close partnership with industry and employers and target high-demand career sectors in Georgia, including aerospace, blockchain, cybersecurity, film production, financial technology (FinTech), health informatics, information technology, logistics or supply chain management (e.g., special focus on enterprise-level systems and applications), and mechatronics (Academic Affairs Division, n.d.c).

The nexus degree has 50 credit hours of course work, including a “substantive experiential learning component” and “at least six credit hours in an apprenticeship or clinical model such as those used for preparation in the healthcare professions” (Academic Affairs Division, n.d.b). The nexus degree was an effort by the USG to have more applied degrees that align with industry demand and require fewer credits than a full bachelor’s degree. The USG webpage on nexus degrees emphasizes that “employers are critical partners in the design and delivery of the nexus degree” (Academic Affairs Division, n.d.b).

The USG's shift in new academic program proposal policy and practice enacted in 2021 was informed by the top-down development of programs at the system level starting in 2015. In addition, a convergence of factors in late 2019 and early 2020 added fuel to the USG efforts to change its program approval practices. USG Academic Affairs staff and regents also wanted to make some changes. In January of 2020, Governor Brian Kemp appointed some new regents who were joining other regents in asking to improve how new programs are reviewed and justified. The BOR wanted to see better data on labor market supply and demand, potential salaries, and how programs align with state economic development efforts. The Board of Regents 2019 Strategic Plan also emphasized alignment of programs to industry and community needs (USG, 2019). In addition, in fall of 2019, the Lumina Foundation released a request for proposals for state systems to receive grants to address program quality. This convergence of new regents, a new strategic plan, potential grant funding, and constant demand from employers to develop talent all converged and contributed to USG changing its academic program approval requirements.

One USG staff member described this time of transition. Before the change in forms and process, the USG review was seen as more perfunctory, with the institutions' expectation that whatever they put forward would be approved. As a new academic affairs vice chancellor was hired and new members joined the BOR, interest in changing the process grew. A USG academic affairs staff member explained,

Early on in my tenure there, we were approving a lot of degree programs. There could be up to 12 degree programs on [the board agenda]. The review process was internal. We looked at whether it was needed in Georgia, but really there wasn't a whole lot we could do. . . . We would get these degree [proposals] very much written like a literature review. Some on need, but the expectation from campuses was generally if they put something forward, it was going to get approved, and that's how we operate it. There were times that the board would raise questions about the number of degrees we were approving and also the fact that they didn't see very many degrees being terminated. . . We had a

change in leadership. Dr. Tristan Denley came in and, we [took] it the same way. Pretty much, same format. Then the board started to change. With the board changing, we were getting much more pointed questions from the regents about the approval process.

Dr. Tristan Denley was recruited from Tennessee to Georgia to be the chief academic officer and executive vice chancellor for academic affairs. Denley was brought to Georgia to work on student success initiatives, as he had done in Tennessee. Early in his time in Georgia, he worked on the momentum year,<sup>18</sup> which was part of USG efforts to meet its Complete College goals. In an interview conducted for this study, Denley recalled that his work initially focused on graduation rates but that soon the goal changed.

It [momentum year work] was specifically designed to move the needle on graduation rates and completion rates. So, it was really about trying to help many more people complete and earn credentials of value from college. That was what it was all about. Over those five years (2016–2021), the goalpost moved. It gradually became more and more about, well yes, we want more people to graduate, but we want people to graduate and go on. So, I began saying freely it's about shaking your president's hand at graduation, but it's also about shaking your employer's hand. It began with this kind of career focus, basically education-to-employment pipeline. (Denley, 2023)

Denley also noted, that when he started at USG, if you said “workforce development” in Georgia, everyone would think of technical colleges. The Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) is a separate system that provides certificates and diplomas in technical areas and some associate degrees. The TCSG also runs an economic development program called QuickStart and provides non-credit training that is specific to a new company or growing industry in Georgia. Though the TCSG was best known for workforce development, the USG was graduating two to three times as many people who were entering the workforce. Denley realized this perception needed to change.

What is the workforce engine of Georgia? Everybody would have said, well, it's the technical and community college system, right? It's TCSG. TCSG is the workforce engine, right? Nobody would even construct a sentence that said that USG had any

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<sup>18</sup> Momentum Year is a suite of strategies designed to help USG students in their crucial first year of college. See [https://www.usg.edu/academic\\_affairs\\_and\\_policy/complete\\_college\\_georgia/momentum\\_year](https://www.usg.edu/academic_affairs_and_policy/complete_college_georgia/momentum_year)

connection with workforce at all. And from my perspective, that was just ridiculous, right? I mean, the number of graduates that were coming out of USG was two to three times greater than TCSG (Denley, 2023).

In 2019, the higher education landscape was changing rapidly, and USG staff recognized that the new measure of success was not just graduation but also talent development related to jobs after graduation. In fall 2019, the Lumina Foundation issued the new Lumina State Quality Assurance Grant to State Systems. The purpose of the grant related to program quality. In a February 20, 2020, press release, Georgia and the USG was announced as one of nine states that received funding. Lumina noted that all grantees are

[s]eeking to design or implement new systems that will use better data to approve new college programs and review the quality of existing programs... Four [states] seek to expand transparency and accountability within their states or systems for quality post-high school programs and providers. These efforts include enhanced state data dashboards that unite education, workforce, and earnings data, disaggregated by race/ethnicity, to paint a more complete picture of student and graduate outcomes. (Humphreys & Taylor, 2020)

A Lumina official interviewed for this project recalled that a handful of states applied for the grant to address the challenges of proprietary or for-profit schools closing. However, most states that applied for funding, including Georgia, were focused on program approval and review. A Lumina official familiar with the RFP recalled,

Most [states] responded to the section of the RFP [request for proposals] that [focused on] how to improve or reform how you do program approval and review. Particularly with quality in mind, by which we meant alignment with employment [or] alignment with what students need and what the economy needs.

The USG received the Lumina grant in early 2020 just as the global COVID-19 pandemic was taking hold. Denley, senior vice chancellor for academic affairs at the USG, noted that the funding from Lumina enabled the USG to accelerate the work it was already doing with more resources. Another USG official said the funding from Lumina allowed the system to move quickly to review its process and implement changes.

We use the grant funding, the majority of the grant funding, for this complete redesign of the program [review process] that also ended up with dashboards that the campuses will have access to. Not only was the board interested in the new programs, they wanted to know how the programs that they had approved four years ago were doing—what those enrollment trends were doing.

USG staff was motivated to align academic program approval with workforce needs and improve campus access to data. The Lumina grant provided resources to develop new forms, tools, and procedures for a new program application process.

A third factor that cemented the USG effort to change its academic program approval process was pressure from the Board of Regents, especially its newest members. In January 2020, Harold Reynolds was one of five new regents appointed by Governor Brian Kemp. Regent Reynolds had served on the TCSG board for years. A year into his tenure at the USG, some new academic programs came to the whole board from the Academic Affairs Committee for a final vote of approval. Regent Reynolds alerted Denley and the chancellor that he might not approve the new academic programs at the January 2021 board meeting. One staff member recalled,

Prior to the meeting, he called Dr. Denley and I think he also probably called the chancellor and said, “I’m going to veto these degrees. I’m not going to approve it.” And we were stunned. “You said there are no outcomes data that you’re going to be looking at. You don’t have any alignment to what the state of Georgia needs. Your assessment plans are boilerplate.... I want to get your attention basically, and I’m going to vote no.” He actually didn’t sit on the Committee for Academic Affairs, but it got the attention of everybody.

Regent Reynolds, recalled saying at the January 2021 meeting,

I’ve actually read the book and did my homework. I finally just said, look, this whole thing’s driving me crazy. I said nothing in here explains why we’re doing the program. It says the criteria to evaluate will be determined later. About what? The criteria for what? I mean. What is it? Is it number of students? Is it getting a job?... I’m not going to vote against it this time. But next time, either you’re going to have to break them up into individual motions, or I’m just telling you I’m a going to vote no. I realize it is going to pass anyway, but I just can’t vote for it. That was my statement. I had a couple

of board members call me up immediately after the meeting... they said, “Thank you for saying that. You know, this has been a topic for some time.” (Reynolds, 2023)

A USG academic affairs staff member noted the effect Regent Reynold’s statement had. “We knew going forward, everything had to change. ... we put a moratorium or a hold, a temporary hold on new programs; they were not reviewed from January [to April].” USG staff and institution leadership clearly understood that no new programs would be approved until the information and justification improved.

Having the overt support of the regents was invaluable to USG leadership. Having the regents charge, gave USG staff the clearance needed to move forward with implementing new academic program procedures systemwide. With the line in the sand drawn, no new programs were approved until the new process was in place.

Another regent later reflected that prior to the policy change, the board was making decisions about new academic programs based on very little information. “It’s hard to imagine we ever approved [programs] without that information. I mean it just really [feels] like, as you look back on that, we approved [programs] blindly.”

Minutes of the Committee on Academic Affairs from the February 9, 2021, BOR meeting highlight the fact that a moratorium was in place on program approval.

Dr. Venn shared the status of the new academic proposal processes and forms and that all programs will be required to use the new processes and forms. Hence, no degrees were presented to the committee. (Board of Regents, 2021a)

Additionally, minutes of the Executive and Compensation Committee meeting on February 9, 2021, also note the intent of the board to require more information related to proposed new academic programs.

e. Academic Program Review. Several Regents expressed a desire for more information related to new academic programs. Required information related to new academic programs has been expanded to include data and metrics related to employability of

graduates from these programs as part of a revised Academic Program Authorization proposal protocol that was enacted on January 4, 2021. This change will be fully implemented for all future new degrees presented for approval. Changes to the review process to provide analogous information for existing programs are being developed and will be implemented over the coming months. (Board of Regents, 2021a)

Denley and his team had worked behind the scenes on the changes to the academic program approval process for most of 2020 to develop a new procedures, forms, and supporting tools and training. This process change did not require any board action, but rather was done within existing policy by changing procedures and forms.

USG staff involved in designing the new forms and procedures noted that the process was highly collaborative, with lots of focus groups and regular discussions with an advisory committee. A USG staff member explained,

We changed everything. We built a new form with input from every sector of our campuses. But it was really economic-focused. We wanted degrees in Georgia where students will graduate and readily be able to go into a good-paying income stream. And so that caused a ripple for campuses. Because it was very different, generally the approach on campuses is a dean tells the provost, I want to write this degree, they write it. ... We flipped it. And the deans and chairs had to do a lot more work on getting the analytics or getting the data for the economic outcome from the degrees that they proposed. This resulted automatically in our [proposed] degrees falling significantly, maybe four to five at the most. So [it] went from 12 to four degrees we would have on an agenda. And we put in a much more rigorous review on our side of the office.

Reflecting on how the institutions may have perceived the change from the old to the new approval process, one USG official quipped, “I think it’s fair to say we went from a flu shot to a colonoscopy.”

As part of the change in the program approval process, the USG eliminated the comment period. Instead, the system office now looks at redundancy and supply-and-demand data as part of the integrated review process. A former USG staff member observed,

The other piece that I think is important to note is, historically, an institution could propose a new degree program and it was kind of put out to all the other institutions for comment. And another institution had the ability to basically shut down a new academic

program proposal because they may say, no, we already do that and we're in the same [area]. We're within an hour, hour-and-a-half of that institution and so they shouldn't get that degree program. . . . For that reason, I think we were starting to get a lot of complaints like, well, I can't get a new degree program here to save my life because the institution down the road keeps saying no. So, what am I supposed to do?

The focus switched to offering degree programs that meet demand and less emphasis on competition if the labor demand existed. The same former staff member noted,

We could focus our work around how our academic programs support economic development and workforce development in our state as a public entity, that really was part of our primary mission. It gave us some common language to talk about priorities and using data that existed to be able to really articulate our case for a new degree program in ways that we had not been able to or had not been asked to in the past. . . . And so, this was really a structure that was put in place in my view to add focus, priority, and strategy at the system level that then filtered down to the campus level.

USG officials interviewed did not sense much resistance from campuses about the changes, stating that they “did not hear much.” Two interviewees said that the word “workforce” was too tied to vocational programs and that the preference on campuses was to use words like “talent development.” Participants also expressed general concern about the process being too focused on programs that tie directly to an occupation and discounting the role of liberal arts programs in talent development.

## Section 1: Georgia Conclusion

In January 2021, the USG implemented a new set of forms and procedures for new academic program approval, and the first set of programs approved using the new forms came before the board in April 2021. The USG staff implemented these changes without formally changing USG policy or statutes but acted within the existing USG policy by changing forms

and guidelines. In the years leading up to this policy change, the USG, as a centralized governing board, used its power to create and implement curricula and program changes from the top down. The Georgia Film Academy and FinTech Academy are two top-down programs developed centrally by the USG in collaboration with its institutions. As public and policy maker expectations of higher education shifted through the 2010s, the USG's focus also shifted from Complete College goals to graduate outcome goals and career success. A convergence of factors in 2019 and 2020 accelerated the USG shift in practice. Pressure from new members of the Board of Regent manifested in a new strategic plan and specifically in ultimatums that new programs would not be approved until better justifications, including alignment to state workforce needs, were provided.

The new USG academic program application implemented in January 2021 resulted in a new form that includes a robust needs assessment that requires labor market data and research on similar programs. A new budget process and signature form was added to make sure there was a full awareness across a campus of a new program being proposed. A new format was used as well for presenting the proposed program to the board. The new process and forms resulted in a more collaborative dialog with provost offices and fewer questions from the regents when new programs are brought forward for approval.

## **Section 2: Tennessee Case**

The second part of this chapter presents information on Tennessee and the work of the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC) in approving new academic programs. The first subsection provides a short profile of Tennessee, including the demographic and economic context, the political context, and the organization background of the state government and THEC. The second subsection outlines the forms and processes THEC had in place in October

2023 for new academic program approval. The third subsection provides additional information on changes THEC made to its program approval process in July 2022 and then again in January 2024 as well as a discussion of the forces and factors that are influencing THEC program approval policy and practice. The information about the Tennessee program approval process and changes to this process is based on publicly available documents, recordings of THEC meetings, and interviews with higher education officials working in Tennessee.

### Socio-Economic Context

Tennessee is the 15th largest U.S. state, with an estimated population of just over 7.1 million. The state population is projected to grow to more than 7.8 million by 2040 (Tennessee State Data Center, 2024). In the 2020 U.S. Census, Tennessee's growth rate slightly exceeded the national rate. From 2010 to 2020, Tennessee grew 8.9% compared to the U.S. growth rate of 7.4% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). Tennessee is often described in terms of its three grand divisions. Its 95 counties are divided geographically into West, Middle, and East Tennessee. The three divisions are defined in the state constitution and are represented by the three stars in the middle of the Tennessee state flag. Tennessee straddles two time zones. Eastern Tennessee is in the eastern time zone, and Middle and West Tennessee are in the central time zone (Tennessee Historical Society, 2024).

A larger proportion of the Tennessee population is non-Hispanic white compared to Georgia, accounting for 70.9% of the population, followed by Black or African American at 15.7%, and Hispanic or Latino at 6.9%. Those reporting as two or more races, Asian, or other groups account for the balance of the population (Tennessee State Data Center, 2021).

Like Georgia and almost all states in the country, Tennessee's birth rate has been falling since 2007, with some variation in the last couple years. Similar to Georgia, the population is also aging as the baby boomer generation enters their retirement years.

Educational attainment has been improving in Tennessee. The percentage of the population with a bachelor's degree or higher has increased from 25.7% in 2015 to 31.1% in 2023. The high school graduation rate has held steady in recent years, with 89.1% graduating in 2018 compared to 88.7% in 2021 (Tennessee Department of Education, 2024). Per capita income in 2022 Tennessee is estimated to be \$61,246 (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, n.d.b).

Tennessee has a diverse economy with a wide variety of industries that keeps the economy strong. Healthcare, banking and finance, advanced manufacturing, and the music industry are all strong and growing areas of the Tennessee economy. The announcement by Ford that it will build its newest electric vehicle manufacturing plant in West Tennessee joins Nissan and Volkswagen as major car manufacturers in Tennessee. Similar to Georgia, Tennessee is a growing state with strong job growth. Higher education leaders face economic and political pressure to develop the talent to fill current and future in-demand job needs (Tennessee Higher Education Commission, 2023f).

### Organizational and Policy Context

Tennessee has a wide variety of public, private, and for-profit higher education institutions. Table 5 shows the number of institutions by type and bachelor's degrees awarded in Tennessee during the 2021–2022 academic year. Of the bachelor's-degree-granting entities in the state, 10 are public, 34 are private, and seven are for-profit institutions. Though the number of private institutions is triple that of public institutions, the public institutions accounted for

62.4% of all bachelor’s degrees granted in the academic year ending in 2022 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023).

Table 5: Tennessee Bachelor’s-Degree-Granting Institutions, by Type of Institutions and Number of Degrees Awarded in Academic Year 2021–2021

<b>Institution Type</b>	<b>Number of Institutions</b>	<b>Share of Institution Types</b>	<b>Number of Bachelor’s Degrees Awarded</b>	<b>Share of Bachelor’s Degrees Awarded</b>
For Profit	7	13.7%	731	2.0%
Private	34	66.7%	12,917	35.6%
Public	10	19.6%	22,677	62.4%
Grand Total	51	100.0%	36,325	100.0%

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, 2023

Public postsecondary education is coordinated by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC), which is a coordinating board that has both governor and legislative oversight. Six members plus a student representative are appointed by the governor. The General Assembly appoints three members. In addition, three voting ex officio statewide officials who are elected by the General Assembly are also on THEC: the comptroller of the treasury, the secretary of state, and the state treasurer. The powers and duties of THEC are outlined in state law and formally reviewed every four years as part of its renewal. THEC is under a sunset law provision and was extended to June 30, 2026, during the 2022 legislative session.<sup>19</sup>

THEC is empowered to review and approve or disapprove proposals for new academic programs at all public higher education institutions, as set forth in state law.<sup>20</sup> The content of courses and the specific courses offered is a function of the governing boards of the various

<sup>19</sup> See SB 1734, 2022 legislative session: <https://wapp.capitol.tn.gov/apps/BillInfo/Default.aspx?BillNumber=SB1734&GA=112>

<sup>20</sup> See Tenn. Stat. § 49-7-202 (q)(2)(A)-(B).

institutions. The enabling legislation for THEC also requires the commission to prepare a strategic plan called the “Master Plan,”<sup>21</sup> which provides a set of goals for a five-year period. The most recent plan, published in 2020, sets goals for higher education through 2025. Tennessee law related to the Master Plan also directs THEC to make sure new programs are aligned with economic development and workforce needs and to minimize redundancy in degree offerings (Ten. Stat. § 49-7-202).

Higher education governance in Tennessee is multi-layered. THEC is the coordinating board that approves new academic programs, tracks and reports data on higher education activities, implements the performance-based funding formula, and makes recommendations for capital expenditures (facilities and infrastructure). The Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) and the University of Tennessee System must comply with THEC policies and directives in two specific areas: approval of new degree programs and reporting data for statewide reports. TBR oversees the 13 public community colleges in the state, which offer two-year degrees, and the Tennessee Colleges of Applied Technology (TCAT). TBR is responsible for final review and approval of TCAT programs. New two-year programs offered by the community colleges that are governed by TBR must be approved by THEC. The University of Tennessee Board of Trustees oversees the University of Tennessee System or UT system, which comprises the four UT universities (Knoxville, Martin, Pulaski, Chattanooga), the Health Science Center in Memphis, and the statewide Institute of Agriculture and Institute for Public Service. All new

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<sup>21</sup> Tenn. Stat. § 49-7-202 (d) (4) states, “This Master Plan shall be reviewed and revised as deemed appropriate by the commission, and shall include, but not be limited to, consideration of the following provisions: (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; (C) Using institutional mission differentiation to minimize redundancy in degree offerings, instructional locations, and competitive research, and to realize statewide efficiencies through institutional collaboration.”

academic programs at UT system institutions must be approved by THEC. The Focus Act of 2016 reorganized higher education governance in Tennessee and switched six locally governed state universities from being part of TBR to being independent, though they remain under THEC’s purview. Each locally governed institution (LGI) has a board, and new programs proposed at LGIs must be approved by THEC. The LGI boards each have 10 members, eight of whom are appointed by the governor. Of the other two members of the board, one is a faculty member appointed by the board, and one is a student who is a nonvoting member (Focus Act of 2016).

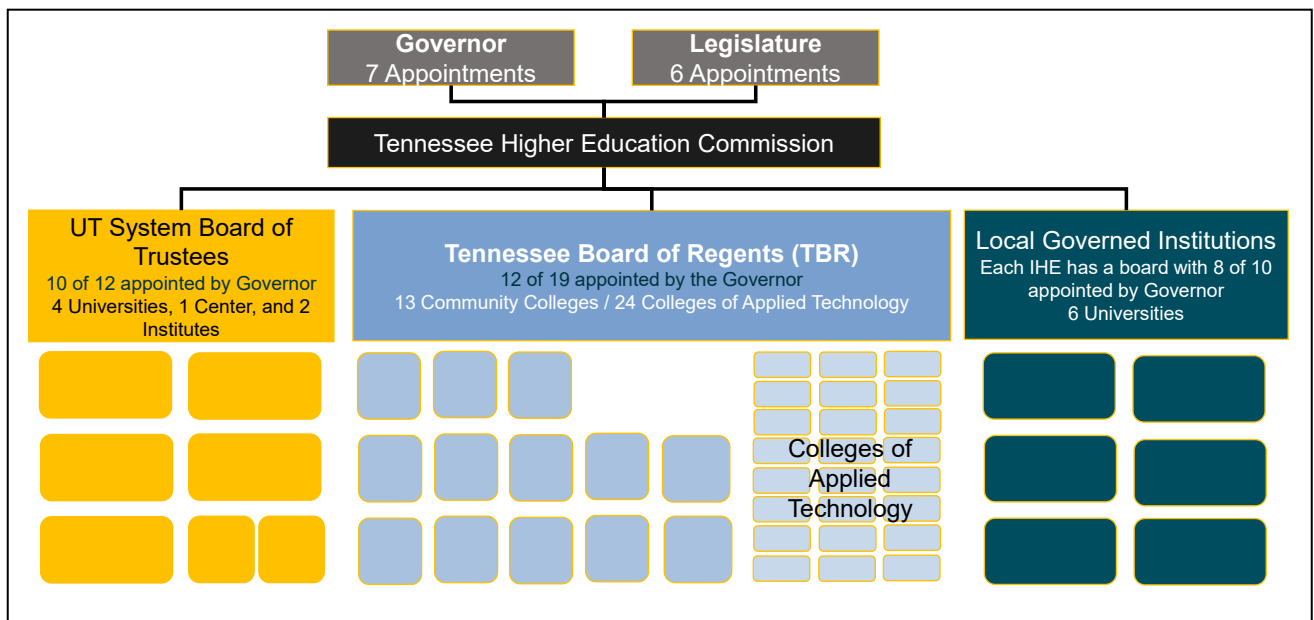


Figure 3: Tennessee Higher Education Governance Structure

Politico-Institutional Context

Tennessee is a Republican state. Of the nine U.S. House members representing Tennessee, two are Democrats and seven are Republicans. Both U.S. Senators are Republican. The Tennessee House and Senate are also majority Republican, and all elected executive branch offices are held by Republicans. State Senators are elected for four-year terms, and state

Representatives are elected to two-year terms. The General Assembly meets for 90 legislative days over a two-year period. The session starts on the second Tuesday in January. Higher education–related legislation in the Tennessee House is usually assigned to the House Higher Education Subcommittee then to the House Education Administration Committee. If the bill has a significant financial impact, it is then assigned to the Finance Committee. The flow of legislation is the same in the State Senate.

The Tennessee General Assembly appropriates funds to Tennessee’s public colleges and universities using an outcomes-based funding formula that was enacted as part of the Complete College Tennessee Act of 2010 and implemented during the 2011–2012 academic year (Testa & Swim, 2017). The funding formula uses measures like graduation rates, degrees awarded, and credit hour accumulation as funding determinants for each institution. Prior to 2011, funding in higher education was based on credit hour earnings, similar to the current USG formula.

As noted in the 2020 update to the Master Plan, the THEC convened “its first ever” Future of Work Task Force in 2019 (p. 34). The task force included leaders from industry and state economic development, workforce, and education agencies to plan for the 2030 talent needs of the state. Other forms of state coordination have also happened. Recently, a “table top” exercise was convened by the Tennessee Department of Community and Economic Development as a time for state leaders from economic development, labor, tourism, the Tennessee Board of Regents and THEC, and the Board of Education to coordinate economic develop and talent development efforts. Through the table top exercise, all parties become more aware of the industries and companies being recruited to Tennessee and how shifts in the Tennessee economy are impacting jobs across the state. As part of these exercises, the parties

work to develop plans to address changing needs. Staff at THEC interviewed mentioned these table top exercises are held infrequently.

### THEC Program Approval Process

This section outlines the THEC program approval process based on the policy in place in fall 2023. THEC policy A1.0 governs new academic program approval. It outlines THEC's five-step process for establishing new programs: "(1) letter of notification, (2) new academic program proposal (NAPP), (3) external review, (4) institutional governing board approval, (5) commission action" (THEC, 2023c). Every public university in Tennessee must follow the THEC process in order to add an academic program at its institution.

Informing program proposals are occupation forecasts that highlight the in-demand careers in Tennessee over the next 10 years (Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development, n.d.). The THEC Supply and Demand Report lists forecasted in-demand jobs and is jointly prepared by THEC, the Tennessee Department of Labor, and the Department of Community and Economic Development. The report provides a unified basis for labor demand to inform program proposals. If an occupation is on the in-demand list, then it can qualify for an expedited review at THEC. Programs under expedited review do not have to provide as much justification of the workforce need because the associated occupations have been prequalified by nature of being on the in-demand list.

The first step in the approval process, the origination of the idea for a new program, usually comes from an academic department or faculty member. The institution requesting a new program must complete a letter for notification (LON) and send it to THEC for review. The LON checklist outlines the elements that must be included in this letter (THEC, 2023b). The LON requires an overview of the program proposed, including the Classification of Instructional

Program number or CIP code, contact, and proposed implementation date. Section II of the checklist outlines elements related to the background of the program, including a description of and information on what “sparked” the initiation of the proposal. Applicants are also required to explain specifically how the proposed program aligns with the THEC Master Plan, discuss the institution’s capacity to deliver the program, research which other institutions in Tennessee offer a similar program, provide information on accreditation requirements and timeline, and include an organizational chart and explanation of where the program is situated in the institution.

Unnecessary duplication of programs is noted in the law as a key purpose of THEC’s review of programs. Benchmarking data in the LON helps the reviewers determine whether there is any duplication in programs and whether jobs are available for graduates. (For programs to be considered viable, THEC has established a benchmark of a three year average of 10 graduates per year for undergraduate programs.) If the program will work with partners like colleges or another institution, they also need to provide a letter of support that explains the partnership.

Section III of the LON covers program feasibility. In this section, institutions provide data and information on student interest, local and regional demand, employer demand (with specific direction to use data from the THEC Supply and Demand Report), and community and industry partnerships, confirmed by letters from regional, community, and workforce partners indicating how they will support the proposed program. Institutions use a variety of data sources to demonstrate workforce demand, including O\*Net (<https://www.onetonline.org/>) and labor market data from aggregators like Lightcast.

Section IV of the LON requires five-year enrollment and graduation projections and any expected attrition. Doctoral programs require a seven-year projection. In Section V, applicants provide information related to the costs of the programs using the THEC Financial Projections

Form. The form requires cost data for faculty and instructional staff, non-instructional staff, graduate assistance, accreditation, consultants, equipment, technology, library resources, marketing, facilities, travel, and any other resources. Section VI is where institutions report projected revenues, including expected tuition, grants, and other funding sources.

A completed LON is about 20–30 pages. The provost’s office from the LGIs or TBR or UT system office submits the LON to THEC electronically through a web-based portal. Once received, the LON is posted on the THEC website for public comment for 15 days. THEC policy A.1.0 states that THEC staff can extend the comment period to a maximum of 30 days and that LONs submitted but not approved are valid for two years. THEC, by statute, is tasked with looking out for any program duplication. The public comment period is one way to have peers express any concerns related to duplication or express concerns or support regarding a program proposal. The proposing institution is required to address any public comments submitted. THEC staff noted that most comments are productive and that other institutions sometimes indicate an interest in collaborating.

THEC policy A.1.6 allows for an expedited approval process. To qualify for expedited review, the program must be deemed a “high demand” program by nature of being on the STEM CIP code list, linked to the high-demand list of programs per the THEC Academic Supply and Occupation Demand Report, or created to respond to “demonstrated workforce needs.” An expedited review requires a letter from the president/chancellor or system office prior to submission of the LON, and the public notification process is shortened to 10 days and not to exceed 20 days, at the discretion of THEC staff. Upon approval, an expedited NAPP is required as well as an external review.

THEC staff members who review new program applications tend to have taught at a college or university in the past or to have doctoral degrees. The THEC team is housed in the Academic Affairs Division of THEC and is led by the chief academic officer, who is a senior administrator with institutional executive-level experience. Overall, THEC staff have an average of eight years of campus experience (THEC, 2023e).

THEC review of the LON has one of two outcomes. It can pass with no revisions and go on to the next stage (preparation of the full request), or the LON may be returned with questions and a request for more information. If sent back, typically THEC staff request more information on the feasibility of the program or more data from students to gauge interest or demand. Institutions rework the LON and resubmit it to THEC for staff approval. Incomplete information is a common reason for a LON to be sent back. THEC will not approve the LON if the workforce needs section is not complete.

Once THEC staff have approved the LON, the institution can then move on to the next step, the development of the new academic program proposal or NAPP. If the LON is like the prospectus of a dissertation, the NAPP is the full dissertation. Sections I to VI from the LON comprise the first part of the NAPP. Section VII requires an implementation timeline. In this section, institutions outline the timeframe for accreditation (if applicable), dates for the external review, and the timeline for reviewing and responding to the external review comments and proposed date for the THEC meeting at which the full request will be presented.

In Section VIII of the NAPP, applicants provide information about the curriculum, program goals and objectives, student learning outcomes, academic program requirements, and existing and new courses. Syllabi for each course must be attached in an appendix. Section VIII also asks for a program of study for full-time students and how the program will be assessed and

evaluated. Information on articulation and transfer pathways is also required. For proposed bachelor's programs, applicants must list all Tennessee Transfer Pathways that provide acceptable entry to the program. Applicants also note any specific community college or technical college programs that may be articulated for transfer.

Section IX is titled "Students" and requires information about the academic standards for admission, retention, and graduation; how the program will be marketed; and how a diverse population of students, including underserved and historically underrepresented students, will be recruited. Applicants are also required to provide an overview of the student support services that will be available.

Section X asks for information about instructional and administrative resources, including a list of faculty and how they will help meet standards of high quality for the program. Faculty CVs must be attached in an appendix. A list of any new faculty or instructional faculty and non-instructional staff and how they will support the new program is also required. In Section XI, applicants provide information about infrastructure supporting the program, including equipment, facilities, information technology, library resources, and any other items needed for the program.

A typical completed NAPP or "Full Proposal" is about 100 to 200 pages. At any one time, institutions could have a couple of program proposals in the development pipeline. During interviews, THEC and local board staff emphasized the importance of starting early because the process takes so long.

### Site Visit

An external reviewer site visit has been a component of the THEC new program review process for decades. THEC considers the site visit to be a critical and core part of the process.

The institution submits a list of five potential external reviewers. The nature of the site review depends on the level of the program (undergraduate versus PhD) and the modality of the program (online versus an in-person course of study). PhD programs have two external reviewers, and master's and bachelor's degree programs have one. Reviewers are known experts in the discipline. They are typically faculty members or program directors at peer or aspirational institutions. From the list of reviewers provided to THEC, the commission will select a primary and an alternate reviewer. The external reviewers are compensated by the campuses with typical pay being between \$1,000 and \$2,000. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, all site visits were done in person. Today, some site visits are conducted virtually.

A typical site visit is a full day from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. During the visit, the external reviewers typically attend eight different meetings and activities outlined in THEC site visit guidelines (THEC, 2020, 2021, 2023d). The first meeting is with the campus leadership and centers on how the program proposed aligns with the institution's vision and mission. The second meeting is with the college- or department-level leadership, and the third is with the program faculty. A facilities tour is suggested and varies based on the type of program proposed. Other meetings include discussions with students and community partners. If the program is a hybrid or online program, the reviewer will also meet with the Office of Technology and online student support leaders. If the program has a study abroad component, then international program staff will also be involved in meetings.

Any stakeholder involved in the development or delivery of the program is part of the site visit. The logistics of coordinating all the people that need to attend an in-person site visit are significant and can take some time to schedule. When site visits moved online, scheduling became much easier. At the conclusion of the site visit, the reviewer writes a report that answers

15 key questions about the program (THEC, 2020). Questions are open-ended, allowing the reviewer to provide feedback.

The site visit report includes commentary on the expertise and preparation of the faculty, the level of resources committed to the program, the level of community and employer support, and available jobs in the discipline. Specifically, Questions 9 and 10 center on program alignment to workforce demand:

9) Based on the supporting documentation provided and your knowledge of the field, is the level of national demand for graduates of such programs sufficient to ensure employment?

10) Based on your review, does the curriculum provide sufficient opportunity for graduates to demonstrate both knowledge and skills needed for successful employment? (THEC, 2020)

The reviewer assesses the quality of the program, the preparation of the faculty and institution, and the resource plan. Reviewers have up to 30 days to prepare and submit their report to the institution. Interviewees for this study indicated that getting local board and THEC approval can be delayed if the external reviewer takes the full 30 days or longer to prepare their report. Program faculty then have an opportunity to respond to the reviewer's assessment, either agreeing or respectfully disagreeing. For faculty, this is much like responding to peer feedback on an academic journal submission. The site report and responses are sent with the NAPP to THEC for review. Sometimes THEC staff have follow-up questions.

#### Timing the Local Board and THEC Approval

Once the external review process is complete, the proposal (NAPP) must have the approval from the local board before it goes to THEC for approval. THEC does not dictate when local board approval takes place. The process I have outlined does not include review and approval steps that may be in place at the institution like a faculty senate or university committees that also review new program proposals. The institutional steps in the process and

local board approval have to be accounted for in the overall timeline to get a program before THEC for approval. In the UT system, the board meets three times a year. In a presentation on a new program proposal to a board, the following questions are typically covered: What is the program? Why is it being offered? Who is the target audience? How is it going to benefit the university? How is it going to benefit students? How much does it cost? When a program gets to this point in the process, it is rarely not approved.

THEC typically meets four times a year. Called meetings can also occur as needed. Timing presentations and votes by the local board (e.g., TBR, UT Board of Trustees, LGI boards) in order to have the program on the THEC agenda is critical for institutions to move proposals forward with minimal delay. For example, imagine a program proposal going through the UT system. The UT Board of Trustees meets three times a year, usually in February, June, and October. Programs are not approved outside that schedule. THEC meets four times a year, usually in January, May, July, and November. A program approved by the UT system board in June can usually get on the THEC agenda for July. However, a program approved at the UT system February meeting will usually be put on the May agenda. Another constraint is the lead time needed to get included on board and commission agendas. For the UT system, agenda items need to be ready about five weeks before the board meeting. At the latest, if the new program proposal packet is not ready three weeks before the board meeting, it will be pushed to the next meeting. If a proposal misses the UT Board June meeting agenda deadline, it would be on hold for four months and then placed on the October agenda. If it were then approved in October, the goal would be to get the program on the THEC November agenda. THEC staff work closely with the staff at TBR and the UT system board and the locally governed institutions (LGIs) to make sure everyone is aware of the timelines. Often, the THEC staff will include an

item that has everything but the certificate of approval from the local board and then drop it from the agenda if that document is not received by the time THEC meets.

THEC staff are involved in the review process and prepare a recommendation for THEC prior to their meeting. Because altogether, the NAPP materials can number 100 to 200 pages, the THEC staff prepare a short briefing document (usually about four pages) for the briefing book for the commission meeting. THEC staff then brief commissioners in advance of their meeting. In Tennessee, a representative from the institution presents the proposed program to the full THEC for approval. A typical presentation includes an overview of the program, the labor market demands, projected enrollment and revenue based on enrollment, and the types of jobs available for graduates. Following the presentation, THEC commissioners ask the presenter questions, and then the THEC chair calls for a roll call vote, which can take about 15–20 minutes per program. In November 2023, THEC implemented a subcommittee system. Going forward, new programs will be presented in subcommittee, then brought to the full commission for a vote.

#### THEC Changes to New Program Approval

This section discusses the changes THEC has made to its program approval processes and forms since July 2022. At the THEC July 28, 2022 meeting, changes to THEC new academic program policy A 1.0 included removing some of the specific requirements for the LON and NAPP from THEC policy to the checklist that is managed by THEC staff. This provided THEC staff more flexibility to address the needs of institutions. The July 2022 policy change also strengthened the language in the policy regarding the THEC staff criteria for review, including alignment with the Master Plan, “documentation of student interest, local and regional demand, industry support and workforce need.” (THEC, 2022a, 1.0.3A1). Other formal policy

changes to THEC policy A1.0. are noted as happening on January 27, 2023, and January 25, 2024. The January 27, 2023 change clarified the timing of when institutional boards approve new programs and specified that it must happen before consideration of the commission (THEC, 2023a). Changes to THEC policy A 1.0 in January 2024 were made to provide more flexibility as to when the external review happens and to align external reviewer selection criteria with the accrediting body the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) (THEC, 2024).

The July 2022 updates to the new program approval policy included revised THEC forms and checklists to improve the data being submitted by institutions to explain the workforce development connections and employer support in their proposals. These changes included new numbered sections and more explicit instructions to include information on “existing and anticipated community and industry partnerships and how they will support the program” (THEC, 2022a). Institutions are directed to “provide letters of support from regional, community, and/or workforce partners in the LON Appendix A. Letters should be dated and appear on letterhead and address how the partner will support the proposed program (job placements, internships, advisory board, etc.)” (THEC, 2022a). The enrollment section changed from a paragraph of instructions to a table that now must be filled out, and the cost components were all grouped into section V with more direct instructions. The feasibility instructions changed to be more explicit about what information was expected from employers and other partners because THEC staff were seeing a lot of form letters and not the level of commitment or partnership they expected.

One of the goals of the July 2022 changes was to speed up the approval process. THEC staff felt that a clearer and more concise checklist would result in less passing of proposal

documents back and forth between the institution and THEC staff to get all necessary information. The update to the checklist was an administrative change, so THEC staff had flexibility to adjust the specific language as needed.

At the July 2022 THEC meeting, THEC also clarified its statutory responsibilities for review of ALL new academic programs. This declaration meant that going forward, TBR would no longer be authorized to approve new two-year associate degree programs. This clarification item was a significant shift in practice and, as I will explain later, fueled the debate around where authority for program approval should ultimately reside.

The policy clarification related to THEC's role in approving ALL new academic programs was instigated by an internal review by THEC legal counsel and the office of the state attorney general of state statute and the practice that had been in place for more than 16 years of TBR approving new academic programs for the institutions for which it had responsibility. In 1967, THEC was created with responsibility for approval of new academic programs and review of existing programs. The FOCUS Act, passed in 2016, reconfigured the higher education governance responsibilities of THEC related to TBR, the University of Tennessee System (UT System), and locally governed institutions. From 2016 to July 2022, TBR continued to review and approve all new academic programs for its institutions. A compromise reached between TBR and THEC in July 2022 in interpreting the statute resulted in the clarification that if a program already exists at a TBR institution and a second institution wants to offer that same program, then it is not a new program. In this situation, TBR can authorize that the academic program be offered at another TBR institution. If the program is completely new, however, then it requires THEC approval.

The clarification of THEC authority and TBR's lack of authority to approve new academic programs caused some institution leaders about the time it would take to get new programs approved. Adding to the debate about THEC's role was a question about program termination. Senate Bill 1040 was introduced during the 2023 legislative session and proposed a change in statute granting THEC authority to terminate academic programs. In Tennessee, degree termination has been a power reserved for TBR, the UT System Board of Trustees, and LGI boards. These two actions—the clarification of TBR authorization powers and the idea that program termination could be taken from the local boards and given to THEC—expanded into a broader discussion of the role of THEC in program approval. The debate about THEC's powers was publicly on display at the THEC meeting in August 2023. A THEC commissioner—the comptroller, who is elected by the Tennessee Legislature to a two-year term—sent a letter to the THEC board proposing that powers for approval of new academic programs be removed from THEC and placed with the boards at TBR, the UT system, and LGIs (Mumpower, 2023). The effects of these events and the debate on who should have the power to approve new academic programs and the responsibilities of THEC has continued into the 2024 legislative session. House Bill 2676 was introduced on January 31, 2024. If passed, the bill would change the makeup of THEC and shift authority for new program approval to the institutional boards as well as authority over capital outlays.

THEC staff convened academic program staff and provosts in fall 2023 to gain insights into how the commission could improve its processes, the first meeting of this type that had been held for many years. During the November 2023 THEC meeting, the THEC chair noted that the feedback was positive and institution representatives indicated that they appreciated the opportunity to be heard (THEC, 2023e). In considering how to speed up the THEC process, the

external review (site visit) was seen as a core component of the approval process. In the January 2024 THEC meeting, the site visit policy was changed to give institutions more flexibility on the timing of the site visit. The level of detail in the LON and NAPP was also discussed. THEC is looking to pilot a more simplified version of the LON and reducing the information required in the NAPP in the spring of 2024.

## Section 2: Tennessee Conclusion

This section discusses how the THEC new program requirements and process has changed since July 2022. Although the new program approval process had been adjusted on the margins over the past several decades, recent policy clarifications and emphasis on workforce alignment has placed a stronger focus on the overall process and the time it takes for a program to be reviewed and approved. In July 2022, THEC policy related to TBR programs was clarified, ending the 16-year practice of TBR approving new academic programs for TBR schools (not TCATs). Additionally, in July 2022, THEC updated its checklists and clarified its requirements to emphasize the importance of proposed programs aligning with Tennessee workforce needs. At the August 2023 THEC meeting, college presidents, UT and TBR system officials, and some THEC commissioners expressed concerns with long time it takes to approve new programs. The UT System and TBR representatives voiced support for program approval being shifted from THEC to their local boards. In the coming academic year (2024–2025), THEC will be piloting some additional changes related to the level of detail required in the LON and NAPP to increase flexibility and shorten the approval time.

Table 6: Two State Comparison of Academic Program Review Activities

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Georgia / USG</b>	<b>Tennessee / THEC</b>
Program Approval	Institution/ BOR	Institution/ Board/ THEC
Site Visit	PhD Only	Associate, Bachelor's, Master's, PhD
Post for Public Comment	No	Yes – 10 to 15 days minimum
Who Presents Program for Approval at USG or THEC Meeting?	USG Staff	Institution Requesting Program
Submission	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Annual Forecast and Program Status Report</li> <li>2. New Program Application and attachments</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Letter of Notification</li> <li>2. New Academic Program Proposal and appendices</li> <li>3. Site Visit Report</li> </ol>
Program Application Number of Pages	20–40 pages plus attachments	100–200 pages
Internal State System Review and Approval	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. USG Integrated Review Team</li> <li>2. Chancellor's Cabinet</li> <li>3. BOR Academic Affairs Committee</li> <li>4. BOR</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. LON – THEC staff</li> <li>2. Public Notice</li> <li>3. NAPP – THEC staff</li> <li>4. Site Visit Report – THEC Staff</li> <li>5. THEC Committee</li> <li>6. THEC</li> </ol>
State System Meeting Calendar	9–10 times a year	4 times a year plus called meetings
Terminate Academic Programs	Yes	No
State System Board Appointment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Governor, one per congressional district (14) plus 5 appointed from the state at-large</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Governor – 7 (includes one student)</li> <li>• Legislature – 3</li> <li>• Constitutional Officers – 3 (elected by legislature and serve as ex-officio voting members)</li> <li>• Executive director of the State Board of Education serves as an ex-officio non-voting member</li> </ul>
Number of Board or Commission Members	19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 10 appointments</li> <li>• 3 ex-officio voting</li> <li>• 1 non-voting ex-officio</li> </ul>
USG Regent or THEC Commissioner Term Length	7 years	6 years
Authorizing Legislation	Ga. Stat. § 20-3-20 (2022)	Tenn. Stat. § 49-7-201

### **Section 3: Major Themes**

In this section, I discuss common themes from the interviews and compare and contrast the case of Georgia and the University System of Georgia with Tennessee and the Tennessee Higher Education Commission. Three major themes emerged from the interviews with Georgia and Tennessee officials. The first theme is the speed to market. Both states recognize the need to respond quickly to the talent needs of industries and employers. The second theme centers on the importance of governance, which impacts how states develop and approve new programs. The third theme relates to the drivers of innovation of academic programs in higher education. Employers, industry, governors and legislators, faculty, and higher education leaders are all innovators and influence the development of new academic programs.

#### **Theme 1: Speed to Market**

There is pressure from industry and policy makers to quickly develop and approve new programs that meet the needs of growing or new industries in the state. For decades, vocational or technical colleges have been able to respond quickly to meet the needs of industry by establishing certificate programs or other short-turnaround programs both for credit and non-credit. Georgia's QuickStart program was one of the first in the nation to use onsite state-funded custom training as an incentive when recruiting new businesses to the state (QuickStart, n.d.). This kind of quick and custom response to training worked well in meeting the needs of manufacturing. However, officials interviewed for this study indicated that the demand for more knowledge workers with bachelor's or master's degrees has put new pressure on colleges and universities to be more responsive to the needs of employers.

In Georgia, one of the ways the USG has responded to the need for programs aligned with industry demand is to develop programs at the system level. For example, the USG

implemented the Georgia Film Academy, FinTech Academy, and Cybersecurity Program. It also created the nexus degree to encourage institutions to develop academic programs in partnership with employers. USG staff developed “playbooks” to document the need for particular competencies in industry and then compiled information from employers that would help institutions develop academic programs to meet that need.

The USG office staff sees the top-down development of programs as a collaborative effort between the system office and the institutions. This centralized research and coordination enabled the rapid development of academic program proposals from institutions. To expedite program development, USG staff worked with institutions to bundle existing courses with a few new courses to create new programs more in line with industry needs. As one USG academic affairs staff member explained,

The first degree we created for FinTech was created and approved in three months. That’s amazing. It’s unheard of. And we just did it again with data science. An institution had the idea approved by the president and provost in two days and five courses approved by the faculty curriculum review process in two weeks.

Not including the time it takes the institution to develop the proposal, USG staff indicated that the fastest they have seen a program go through the internal review and approval process is about three to six weeks. This is much faster than under the old set of forms and processes. Processing time to approve a new program is at the heart of the current debate in Tennessee about what board or commission should have final approval authority. This debate has been fueled by the perception that the THEC process takes too long. The underlying concern is that for 16 years TBR was able to approve new associate degree programs quickly. The change in policy related to TBR approval triggered a wave of anxiety about how long the THEC approval process takes. Interview participants talked about informing their schools about the need for extra lead time. The THEC program approval process does have a couple more approval steps

compared to that of the USG. The logistics of setting up a site visit and orchestrating the timing of the local board approval and THEC approval adds complexity to the THEC process. As one TBR system staffer noted, with the change in policy related to TBR versus THEC approval of new programs, TBR institutions need to plan ahead.

They [TBR colleges] were used to coming up with a program and then getting it approved on a 30-day notice to the board. Now it has a whole new timeline. So now if you got a new program [proposal], it still has to go through your college curriculum, get approved by [TBR system office], but now it also needs a site visit. Imagine getting five busy executives together on one calendar. So that could go several weeks out. I now also have to take new programs to the [TBR] committee chairs meeting. That's where it is just the regents who lead a committee, not the full board, so that they can feel like it is ready for the board meeting. So now that's a new point in the timeline. Then I take it to the board, then I take it to THEC. So now as a policy, you've got to back it up like six months before you think you even want it approved by THEC, because now there are all of these other nuances that changed it.<sup>22</sup> So, it just means colleges need to be forward-thinking and planning way ahead when they want something to happen.

With the on-ramp being so long to get a program launched, institutions and system offices will have multiple applications in the pipeline at the same time. One system staff member noted,

We have a lot of these [proposals] in the pipeline right now. Lots of them. And they're all in different stages because sometimes they take so long. To finish, I think the record speed at which one has ever been conducted was seven months, but that's pretty much unheard of. Usually they take about a year-and-a-half to two years to get them approved.

One former Tennessee higher education leader described the program approval process as “slow as molasses.” The THEC commissioners agree that the process takes too long. In the August 2023 THEC meeting, one commissioner stated, “I agree that it shouldn't take two years to approve a new program.” A former THEC staff member who now works at an institution shared that schools want to respond quickly, but the process takes a long time.

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<sup>22</sup> THEC staff noted that THEC approval would most likely add one or two months to the approval process based on timing of board and commission meeting dates. Typically the additional two to three months needed would not affect the implementation date.

So, a lot of people are calling saying, hey, you did that for [company name], could you do that for us? And we would like to be able to respond with speed. But for some of the phone calls that we get I just have to say, “Look, we’d like to do that. But because of the confines that are placed on us by the state, I’m probably not going to be able to do anything for 18 to 24 months.”

A higher education policy staff member shared, “There is a sense that the workforce changes more rapidly than the governing structures that make decisions about academic programming change. So perhaps the labor market is outpacing government operations.”

As a coordinating board, THEC is not empowered to create new programs top-down like a strong governing board such as the USG. THEC and its partners do inform program development by identifying the fast-growing and in-demand jobs in the Tennessee economy. Institutions proposing programs designed to meet the need for an in-demand job receive an expedited review at THEC. In such situations, the justification section of the proposal can be very brief and the comment period is five days shorter.

In Tennessee, each institution is working to meet the needs of employers. The UT System president emphasized at the August 2023 THEC meeting that the schools are very connected to employers and know what they need: “We are close to the market. We know our customer. We know what the marketplace needs” (THEC, 2023f). However, when the need is statewide in Tennessee, there seem to be challenges in how to best meet that need. One economic developer shared that working with individual institutions can be burdensome: “For the most part, it’s a really challenging process,” and then they added that “neither them nor us nor the TBR systems are talking to each other during this process. . . . The fact that we’re not working together in some capacity. . . . I think that’s a weakness in the state system.”

The frustration builds when the need is statewide and expanding the program from one institution to others takes so much time. The question from the economic developer perspective

is that if the program exists at one university why can they not just share it with other universities. One economic development professional observed,

So they work together and they push through this curriculum and it's gone incredibly quickly, but no one has shared that information. So one of the values of those state systems like in Georgia is that the curriculum can [be] shared between the schools.

Staff who work with industry partners shared their frustration about how much time it takes to launch a new program. However, they also acknowledged that developing a curriculum, getting approval, hiring faculty, and accrediting a new program takes time.

I know business industry, after working with them for so long, they come in with this, they've researched an area of need. . . And then they expect the colleges turn around and instantly start new programs for [it]. We have to explain to them that, no, there are processes we have to follow to ensure quality, to ensure programmatic accreditation is met.

Another interview participant added, "There is a widespread frustration that we can't be as responsive and nimble when it comes to industry and workforce needs as we would like to be."

A system staff member added,

Sometimes a company will move in and they want a program ready in two months. They don't have time to wait on SACCO [the accrediting body, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on College] and this bureaucratic process. They need it to happen. Well, the process is not set up that way.... So part of the angst lately has been how do we move quickly and not get bogged down in what looks to outsiders to be unimportant bureaucratic just mumbo jumbo, and how do we get to the essence of what we're trying to do.

Employers' need for trained talent is acute in some industries. Time is money, so the faster colleges can help stand up a training programs or new career pathways, the better. The fear is that other colleges may be able to respond more quickly. A current college president shared,

For 18 months, our industry partner [company name] is clamoring for these students. [They are] sitting there wondering what in the world is taking you so long and do we need to give up and go build a partnership with an out-of-state institution that can meet our needs immediately rather than waiting on you in the state.

THEC staff recognize that the process can get bogged down when expectations are not clear. They know the process can be improved. For this reason, THEC staff organized meetings with institutions in fall 2023 to get their input on how to improve the process. THEC staff has also worked to make expectations clear. One THEC staff member noted,

We have heard from administration and commission and leadership [that] programs can't take forever. Most of the time when they're delayed, it's not usually us. It's usually a delay on campus. But we do have some responsibility in it and were kicking things back and forth too much. We're trying really, really hard to not do that because it slows everything down. We don't want to read these things 10 times, honestly. We would rather have them submit something quality the first time. And to do that, they need to know our expectations very clearly. And I think that we realize we could move the needle by trying to be clear on what we're telling campuses we want.

## **Theme 2: Governance Matters – Impact on Program Creation and Approval**

Each state determines how it wants to govern and approve new academic programs. The processes in Georgia and Tennessee have similar elements, including justification based on economic need and funding, but the way the work is done, how programs are ultimately funded, the role of the staff, and the role of USG regents versus THEC commissioners all differ greatly. The BOR in Georgia is appointed by the governor, and 14 of the 19 regents represent each of the Georgia congressional districts. Using academic program approval as a case study to look at the role of governance is revealing of the ways states manage their affairs. In Georgia, the state takes a very top-down approach. The BOR is established in the state constitution and gets its funding as a lump sum from the General Assembly. The BOR controls what programs get approved and how schools are ultimately funded. When the BOR issues policies, all 26 institutions must follow. The BOR has established new programs from the top down, by both being directive and by facilitating institution participation. The BOR has also encouraged its institutions to look at low-performing programs and eliminate them.

The new USG program approval process was designed with a lot of BOR input. As one interview participant from Georgia noted,

This new program proposal was designed with a lot of regent input. We had some key regents that were talking about wanting to see more of this. . . and more of that, and we would include the regents in any change that we may make to the form to make sure that it's still conveying to them what it is they want to see.

THEC is a coordinating board. Its voting members are appointed by both the governor and the legislature. Six members plus a student representative are appointed by the governor. The legislature appoints three members, plus three voting ex officio statewide officials elected by the General Assembly are also on THEC: the comptroller of the treasury, the secretary of state, and the state treasurer. The dynamics of a board that is accountable to both the governor and the leadership of the State House and Senate makes THEC governance very different from USG, whose members are accountable only to the governor.

One Tennessee higher education official explained the broker role played by THEC in managing higher education policy in the state:

My favorite way of describing THEC and any coordinating board is, it represents the interests of government to higher education and the interests of higher education to government. That's a tricky place to be, but governing boards don't have that responsibility, only THEC does. And I think it's always in the best interest of government to maintain a strong and influential THEC to help adjudicate policy issues. And THEC's responsibility is to, again, balance those viewpoints. It's got to represent and find a way to thread those needles sometimes.

Often, THEC must act as a referee (See chair's comments during the November 2023 meeting).

As the Tennessee state treasurer and THEC commissioner noted, THEC is often in a position where the decisions the commission makes upset one side or the other.

We have been taken to the woodshed by any number of governors. Any number of committee chairs both in the House and Senate with questions and concerns identical to those that you raise here. My close and personal observation will be this, that I think if we do our job properly, we will not necessarily always gain the favor or that affection of the legislative body or quite frankly at the executive branch level. (THEC, 2023f)

Shared governance impacts how THEC staff do their work and how power is distributed to TBR, the UT System, and the LGIs. Because of the distributed power structure in Tennessee, some businesses find it frustrating not to have a more centralized authority to direct the creation of new programs. In most cases, schools are working with companies in their region or area of expertise to meet a specific need. The THEC board chair described the role of THEC as air traffic control when it comes to reviewing and approving new programs.

[If] you think about air traffic controllers. ... we really act as a bit of a centralized coordinator—an air traffic controller for what’s best for the state, looking at the future of workforce across all the entire state. I’m thinking about where the taxpayer dollars go, the total cost, etc. .... If you have the Dreamliner versus the propeller planes versus the 747s, who gets to land on the airstrip first? Because the Dreamliner is the largest. Propeller planes are the smallest. And there’s differences in all of them and how they’re all kept up. And I can equate that to being very similar to the colleges and universities. (THEC, 2023f)

THEC staff recognize that, as employees of a coordinating board with shared governance, their ability to be directive is very limited. One THEC staff member observed, “We can’t say, hey UT Knoxville, hey, Tennessee Tech, you have to do these things. We just don’t have that authority”

As a coordinating board, THEC does not have the authority to create new programs centrally. However, THEC staff do help institutions develop labor market projections in collaboration with the Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development and the Tennessee Department of Labor. The projections inform institutions as to the in-demand programs needed in the state. Having one set of in-demand jobs gives Tennessee agencies and education institutions focus. The projections become a kind of endorsement of what occupations Tennessee institutions need to develop programs for. Tying the expedited review process to the in-demand occupations further incentivizes institutions to work to address the areas with increased demand in the economy.

TBR staff have recently introduced a new way to glean employer needs and coordinate the development of curricula to meet those needs. As part of the IDEAL (Industry Driven Education Alignment and Learning) model, TBR staff facilitate a monthly meeting of presidents and chief academic officers and directors for workforce development during which employers are invited to share their training needs. Business leaders can present their needs, followed by time for questions. College presidents are then asked to let TBR know if their institution is interested in working on a program. From there, the TBR team works to identify the best way to meet the needs of the employer, working in partnership with the representatives of the interested institutions. This might be through a “traditional academic program, short-term workforce training, registered apprenticeship, dual enrollment opportunity, competency-based education, or as a multimodal approach that incorporates two or more of these strategies” (Tennessee Board of Regents, n.d., p. 1).

Any TBR school can decide if it can and wants to propose programs to help meet the company’s need. In this way, the company only has to make one presentation, and TBR staff then work with interested TBR schools to address the need. In some cases, a program may already be approved and is being offered at one institution but might be needed in a different region of the state. Sometimes the needs might be met through a non-credit workforce program, diploma, certificate, or apprenticeship. In cases where a new program is needed, the interested institutions work with TBR to develop the proposal.

A TBR staff member is assigned to the project, and interested schools meet every-other week to work on curriculum planning as a system and determine how best to meet the employer or industry need. A TBR staff member explained,

We may have 27 colleges and four different models that various colleges will agree to. I'll take it through the approval process at the same time. That way I can track as a state how many [program name] programs are we now going to bring online. And what are the timelines of implementation, because that may vary a bit by the college so I can keep the employer or the partner informed. And then we are working with those faculty who are going to get that work done and implemented. We bring them back together periodically to see what's working well or what needs to be changed. So that is the way that we have really brought a lot of major workforce programs to scale through TBR.

The TBR IDEAL model (see figure 4) is one example of how systems of higher education can act as a coordinating point or hub for employers. Regardless of whether the state has a governing board or a coordinating board, having a centralized point of contact for employers is critical. As the TBR IDEAL model demonstrates, this kind centralized coordination is possible in a coordinating board state. According to TBR staff, employers appreciate having one system-level contact that will help them translate industry need to

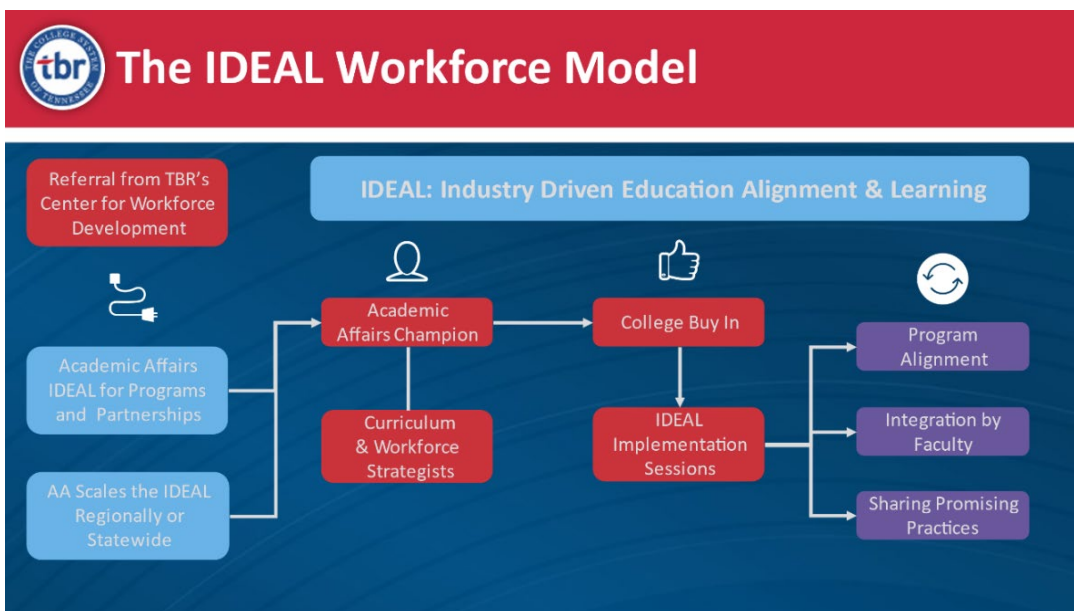


FIGURE 4: TBR Ideal Workforce Model (Source TBR Staff)

academic programs and curricula. As a TBR staff member confirms, “The employers love it because they’re getting everybody in the state all at once.”

The interviews of Tennessee higher education officials and an economic developer in Tennessee suggested that more coordination and sharing of program curricula occurs within the TBR schools than in the other systems or LGIs. In regard to bachelor’s- and master’s-degree-granting institutions, industry works with an individual school. If a program exists at one institution, then the same program would need to be developed and proposed from scratch at a second institution. Employers find this process frustrating. An economic development professional in Tennessee shared that one school quickly developed an engineering management program to meet the needs of an electric vehicle manufacturer. However, “no one has shared that information. So, the value of those state systems like in Georgia is that the curriculum can be shared between the schools for the betterment of all. Well, none of that’s getting shared [here in Tennessee].”

The governance structure underlies the ability of states like Georgia to develop top-down programs for approval. The BOR governance structure is helpful in enacting changes. One former USG staff member observed,

It was very helpful that the structure of the University System of Georgia is what it is. It is a very strong management board system structure. Campuses knew the only way they can get programs approved is by it coming through us [USG staff].

The USG’s centralized powers enable leadership to ask hard questions of institution leaders related to less-productive programs. The USG academic program proposal process includes an annual report on low-enrollment programs as part of the academic forecast and program status report submitted in concert with the USG annual budget and planning process. USG leaders

discussed the value of tying the planning for new programs with the budget conversation and including an accounting of programs not enrolling or graduating a high number of people. This process change and alignment of decision making was a deliberate strategy so that both USG and institution leaders can understand the institution's request for a new program within the context of their whole academic portfolio.

The same governance powers that the USG used to encourage institution academic portfolio management it is also used to consider the academic portfolio at the state level. In assessing the state talent gaps, the USG responded by developing top-down collaborative programs and the nexus degree.

The Georgia Film Academy and FinTech Academy are two examples of industry-informed programs that were created by the USG staff in collaboration with institutions. Additionally, the BOR created a "nexus degree" that is a hybrid of an associate degree that enables institutions to offer a new kind of academic program closely tied to an industry need. Though I use the term "top down," the programs are only successful because of the collaboration with institutions that actually do the implementation work of finalizing the curriculum, hiring faculty, and enrolling students. One USG official noted, "We had built trust and relationships with the institutions to such a point that the first degree we created for FinTech was created and approved in three months"

Because of the research done upfront on the demand for talent in key industries and then organized in playbooks, USG staff are able to inform program development from the perspective of a system and statewide need. Playbooks have proved a critical step in developing system-initiated programs, particularly as it can be challenging to pull the details needed to develop a curriculum out of the minds of employers. A USG academic affairs staff member who works

with employers observed, “The employer [mindset] has shifted, and they’re having a hard time explaining to us. And you have to run a process to basically pull it out of their brains, capture, translate it, and then bring it to the institutions.” In developing the cybersecurity program, USG staff learned that multiple degrees are required to fill the talent needs among employers. When Augusta University proposed a new degree in cybersecurity, the USG office staff informed Augusta leaders that they actually needed multiple degree programs.

We talked to the academic folks in Augusta when they came and said we want to start a degree in cybersecurity, and I said, “No you don’t, and here’s why.” And they like, oh, we could have more than one degree? Yeah, you should. So, they strategized out. I mean there’s a family about half a dozen [programs] because that’s what you need. And we only saw that because of that playbook.

As another example, the strong centralized governance at the USG allowed staff to review programs related to film and require institutions to modify their proposals to align them with USG programs and maximize existing resources. A USG academic affairs staff member recalled,

The individuals with the Georgia Film Academy designed the curriculum. So, it’s designed by the practitioners. Totally different. Not the campuses. ...Campuses would start to put forward film degrees. We basically said no. If you want a film degree or any kind of a portion of a film degree, you had to work with the Georgia Film Academy first. That was the one place where we had kind of the authority because the Film Academy was part of USG. ... any degree that came to us that revolved around film, Georgia Film Academy also reviewed it. And whatever they gave, we sent directly back to the campuses. We had one campus that took almost two years to get the message that they were going to have to play with the Georgia Film Academy. ...They didn’t have to drop everything, but at least some of the courses, because it was a huge resource that the state had already put a lot of money into it.

The ability of the USG to see a statewide need and then go to the institutions and explain how they can use their institutional energy to build capacity in new strategic areas is enabled by the USG’s centralized governance authority. This type of program development is also very different from the traditional model of programs bubbling up from the faculty at a given

institution. The top-down development of programs is now a pattern in Georgia that is strongly supported in the USG 2029 Strategic Plan.

Centralized development of programs enables the state to save money through shared assets. Many of the high-demand programs are resource-intensive. For example, when developing the Film Academy, having a core set of assets like a sound stage, cameras, lighting, and sound and editing equipment in one place made a huge difference. One USG staff member observed,

You need lighting, rigging, all this equipment and you need studios. [We have] world-class industry expected facilities, industry-driven curriculum, industry subject matter experts teaching the classes... We have 29 institutions sharing that curriculum and those faculty. I think this is the beauty of the Georgia model. It is the willingness to invest in centralized assets that increase capacity, increase access, and decrease costs. I don't know where else you would do this. What's the magic of making that? What's the underlying mechanics that makes that happen? It's the governor's office, legislature. It's the boards. It's like ingrained in the thinking here.

According to one USG official, developing programs top down is about being efficient in growing capacity:

We need additional capacity in cyber. We need additional capacity in FinTech. We need a digital capacity in film. Much larger than the capacity of any one institution. So now how as a state do we go about trying to create that capacity? Where it's not tied to one or another institutions and as much as possible, it's not tied to one part of the state or another. That was the idea of the about a Film [Academy], FinTech [Academy], and Cyber [Academy] was to try to build that capacity by creating this collaborative academic arrangement idea which is new [with our accreditors] SACSCOC [Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges].

Having a single point of contact to translate industry need into academic planning is critical. USG staff are now called by major employers when they have a need. They have a track record of success collaborating closely with industry, developing playbooks, and then working with institutions to create new programs. A Tennessee higher education official characterized the difference between Georgia and Tennessee in developing new statewide

programs as follows: “Georgia, because it is a governing board, has more of an ability to direct and mandate action across the campuses, whereas the higher education commission in Tennessee is more of an inducement or an effort to kind of cajole.”

### Governance Matters: Funding

Governance also impacts how programs are funded. In both Tennessee and Georgia, the budget and forecasted revenue and enrollment are required elements of new program applications and part of the packet presented to THEC and the BOR, respectively. Georgia and Tennessee have different models for funding higher education. For decades, Georgia’s funding formula for calculating the amount of funds for appropriation has been based on credit hour earnings. In Tennessee, an outcomes and performance funding formula is used to appropriate funds to institutions.

In Georgia, the proportion of appropriated state funds—to-tuition has shifted over time, with the portion of state funds covering a much lower share of operating costs revenue today compared to 15 years ago.<sup>23</sup> For USG institutions, the funding formula incentivizes institutions to generate enrollment and course credit. Funding is on a lag, so credit hours earned in fall 2023 (earned during state fiscal year 2024) are part of the calculation for FY 2026 appropriations (USG, 1997). In Georgia, the new program application includes a budget template that requires institutions to document and forecast how much revenue they have and expect to receive from tuition and future credit hour formula earnings. Much of the funding focus in Georgia is on whether new faculty, facilities, or tuition differentials are being requested. The institution will

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<sup>23</sup> According to Southern Regional Education Board Appropriation and Tuition reports, in Georgia in 2008, state funds covered 72.4% of costs, and tuition and fees covered 27.6%. By 2022, those percentages had changed substantially: State funds covered just 51.2%, and tuition and fees covered 48.8%. In Tennessee in 2008, state funds covered 63.6%, and tuition and fees covered 36.4%. In 2022, the state funds share covered 50.5%, and tuition and fees covered 49.5%. See table 79 for 2008 and table 115 for 2022. Access annual appropriation and tuition tables at <https://www.sreb.org/general-information/appropriations-and-tuition79>.

not see state formula earnings from credit hour generation for the first two years of the program because of the lag in the formula timeline. Therefore, the institution must provide a financial plan for startup costs.

In Tennessee, higher education leaders interviewed for this dissertation observed that the current THEC process to approve new programs is rooted in the mindset of the old funding model that put the state at risk if the program failed. Because so much of the institution's budget was covered by state funds, due diligence was needed to ensure THEC did not approve a program that would not be viable financially, thereby protecting the financial interests of the state. As one Tennessee official noted,

The authority to approve academic programs was related to the financing obligations of the state and THEC. In other words, they were funding higher education in an enrollment-based funding formula model. Before the state was going to invest in having students in a program, they wanted someone that was not the governing board to make a dispassionate third-party objective, as much as possible, determination about whether, indeed, that program was worthwhile and was worth investing in. So, it was a sort of a concomitant authority with the budgetary authority the THEC had.

The official argued that the THEC program approval processes need to change to reflect the changes in how institutions are funded. In Tennessee, formula funds are based on a three-year average of key indicators. Consequently, full funding for a new program may not be received until year four of a new program. Another Tennessee official added,

The state provides no startup funds for new programs. We have to hire the faculty. We have to outfit the research labs. We have to outfit the clinical space. We have to outfit the instructional space. We are not going to bring a program to market that isn't net revenue positive. We're not going to. You wouldn't start a program that's a loss leader. Now engineering is a loss leader for the first couple of years, so you can build up the enrollment base. But when you're in an institution in which 70 percent of all the revenue is generated from tuition fees or auxiliary sources, and 70 percent of all your expenses are on the people you're going to have to hire to run the programs, in many respects, you're like a private institution. You're starting things that are going to be revenue-positive. Forty years ago, those ratios were different. It was 70 percent from the state, 30 percent from the student. So, there was a state interest not to be duplicative because that was a net sum cost for the taxpayers of the state. That's no longer the case.

The fact that each state's funding mechanism includes a lag between when the program starts and when state funding begins to flow is an important consideration when assessing the risk of program failure. It is also a case of expectations management. System offices want to approve programs that are needed in the market and are financially viable. One of the key tenets of state authorization is consumer protection. Students enroll in a program and expect it to be viable and teach them the skills and competencies needed to be successful in life or career. Overall, the risk involved in creating a new program is borne by a variety of actors. The state, as the holder of state authorization power, must look out for the student's best interest and be a check on program quality. The USG and THEC, by virtue of the authority granted them by the state legislature, are also accountable to make sure the programs being approved are viable. The school carries a significant amount of risk in creating new programs because it has to use reserves or redirect funds to pay for the startup costs. Institutions are also accountable to accreditors whose role is to assure the program being developed meets their expectations on quality.

#### Governance Matters: Staff Role

Governance also impacts the background and role of staff at the USG versus THEC. Several people interviewed noted the difference in the level of university executive experience of those hired at the USG versus THEC and how that difference impacts new program review. The USG system office tends to hire seasoned administrators like former USG institution provosts or vice presidents of academic affairs. The perception is that this level of staff can critique program applications and have more peer-to-peer conversations with institutions as they provide feedback to both the institution and USG leadership and the BOR. Coaching and guiding institutional staff in developing programs is a common activity of both USG and THEC academic affairs leaders. One USG academic affairs official noted,

I do a lot of pre-work and say, “Before you fill out the form, let’s have a conversation, let’s talk.” Usually that helps us when it does come to the committee, the academic review team committee. Yeah, it helps expedite that process if we can have some free conversation. I try to be very approachable. I try to be very open to people who want to ask questions because being in the system office, I may have some knowledge that isn’t on the campus and I can kind of steer them in a better direction ...or keep them from wasting time.

THEC staff that review programs tend to have doctoral degrees and may have taught at a college or university or been an administrator at a university. The THEC chair responded to criticism that THEC staff do not have campus experience in the November 2023 THEC meeting. She noted that THEC staff have an average of eight years of campus experience. However, the level of leadership experience may differ among THEC staff versus USG staff. One Tennessee higher education official familiar with Georgia noted,

Part of the challenge here, no disrespect to THEC, is that the one or two people who have worked at a campus were at a middle-management level. And no one has any campus experience. . . It’s like you’re dealing with a bureaucratic entity, not dealing with a colleague.... And I think that’s another critical difference in Georgia. ... The folks on that staff are all viewed as colleagues. They came from the campuses. They have campus experience. When Tristan Denley was [at USG], he had been a chief academic officer in Tennessee. ... The commission, from my perspective in Tennessee, no longer views itself as an extension of higher education; it’s an extension of state government.

Staff at the USG and THEC are active in reviewing new academic program proposals.

Staff play an important role in briefing leadership and making recommendations on which programs to move forward for approval. The lack of a committee process at THEC to talk through the proposals was a concern for a State Treasurer David Lillard, who has been a commissioner on THEC since 2009. At the August 2023 THEC meeting, he vocalized his concerns that THEC commissioners need time to deliberate and decide if a program should be approved:

We have to get to the point where every commissioner believes that the judgment of the commission represents that commissioner's judgment. And not necessarily solely just the recommendation of the staff. And that's where we are now. (THEC, 2023f)

THEC implemented a committee process in November 2023 to allow commissioners more time to review and discuss program proposals and other policy changes. In observing both the November 2023 and January 2024 THEC meetings and talking with THEC staff, it is clear that THEC commissioners and staff now have more time to discuss issues and any tradeoffs.

One other distinction between the USG and THEC is that USG staff are the ones who present proposals to the Board of Regents Academic Affairs Committee. In Tennessee, a representative of the institution requesting the program presents the request to THEC. In Georgia, the USG academic affairs executive vice chancellor or vice chancellor presents the proposals to the Board of Regents subcommittee.

In Georgia, the system office staff carry significant authority in working with institutions.

As one USG staff member observed,

In Georgia, the system office staff have significant input on academic programs. The ability to implement changes to programs or create programs centrally is a key feature of USG's strong governance structure. A related example of staff influence over academic programs is the recent policy change at USG that will require the update of all syllabi for general education courses to include information about how the course helps students develop career-related skills and competencies. The new program rolled out in October 2023 by USG is called "core impacts U."

The USG staff member indicated that they not only developed the new requirements to identify the career-related skills of the general education core courses, but also were aware that how they explained this change to leadership and employers matters. Speaking of the "core impacts U" initiative name or brand, the staff noted, "It's [the brand] something that's good and easy to roll

out to our regents and employers. And then it's never had career-ready competencies attached to the core and that is a game changer in my mind"

As the USG "core impacts U" example illustrates, in a centralized governance state like Georgia, USG staff are delegated the authority to direct institutions. In a state like Tennessee with a coordinating board, staff play more of a consulting or regulatory role.

### Governance Matters: Conclusion

Higher education governance matters. This case study adds to the body of research on the implications and tradeoffs of different forms of higher education governance structures. How programs are created and funded, the type of staff hired, and the staff's role in analyzing new academic programs are all impacted by the form of governance. Georgia's centralized governance model enables the development of top-down programs to meet the talent needs of a given industry. In a coordinating board state, THEC is often in the role of air-traffic control, working to keep Tennessee higher education systems and institutions from duplicating programs and working together to ensure students have clear pathways to success as they move from vocational programs, to two-year programs, to bachelor's degree programs.

The two states in this study fund higher education differently. Georgia has an enrollment-based funding formula, whereas Tennessee has a performance-based funding formula. A couple of officials in Tennessee observed that under the performance-based funding formula, institutions face more financial risk for programs than the state does. Based on this analysis, some officials in Tennessee argue that the complexity of the THEC process is not needed. Institutions have a stronger incentive to ensure a program is successful than even the state does.

Governance also informs the roles staff are expected to play and impacts the type of personnel hired to review academic program proposals. Staff play an important role at both THEC and the USG in reviewing program proposals, coaching institutions through the process, and facilitating a process that helps the state maximize its resources.

### **Theme 3: Drivers Of Innovation**

A common theme in the extant research is the variety of players who influence and drive the development of new academic programs and innovation in higher education. The interviews for this dissertation revealed that key drivers of innovation in the development of higher education academic programs are industry, the governor, the legislature, faculty, and university leaders. (Note that I only interviewed system-level people for this dissertation, which likely influenced my results.)

#### Industry

Industry-informed and industry-led initiatives were mentioned in both states. At the system level, the USG has developed top-down programs for key industries or occupation areas, including film, fintech, cybersecurity, and data science. The playbook process in the USG is a focused effort to glean from employers the skills and competencies they are seeking in employees. This information is then used to develop new programs and curricula tailored to employers' needs. In Tennessee, individual institutions are active in meeting the needs of state and local industries. Examples abound from the interviews. Efforts related to the new Ford plant, Blue Oval; Volkswagen; Blue Cross–Blue Shield; Eastman Chemical; and many other partnerships were mentioned in interviews. TBR has initiated a new centralized process through which their institutions can learn about employers' talent and skills needs and then coordinate the development of programs at one or many TBR institutions to meet those needs.

Expanding the use of advisory councils was mentioned by officials in both states as opportunities for more employer engagement. Advisory councils are common in programs directly related to a particular occupation (e.g., nursing, accounting, engineering). Expanding advisory councils to programs that lead to many different occupations is a future area for development at most universities. Undergraduate programs with a one-to-many relationship between programs and occupations include biology, English, and sociology.

One USG official noted the importance of regular engagement with industry. She was discussing the FinTech and Georgia Film Academy programs, but the point is similar for most programs: “There’s a constant iteration of that curricula as well because things in both of those industries change pretty quickly. Technology is driving a lot of what they’re doing. And so having that constant engagement with industry allows for us to keep our curricula up to date.”

Governor

Governors are key drivers of innovation in both states. Interviewees mentioned a long history of governor-led efforts in both states. From participation in Complete College America to championing efforts to meet state workforce demand, governors support legislation and funding, and they appoint higher education board members and commissioners. One USG regent noted,

I personally believe that it is impossible to do any meaningful education reform without a governor that’s willing to be involved and lead the charge, or it is just very bad. There are too many entrenched interests to make any meaningful change without the support of the governor.

When Georgia Governor Nathan Deal came into office in 2012, one of his first priorities was a competitiveness initiative. He focused on addressing the challenges businesses faced, with a goal of making Georgia the number one place to do business. From that initiative, employers were unified in calling for more focus on workforce development. In 2013, Governor Deal

initiated a listening session and report called the High Demand Career Initiative (HDCI). As part of the HDCI project, higher education leaders met with employers from around the state representing a variety of industries to learn about the skill and talent gaps businesses were experiencing (Carl Vinson Institute of Government, 2014). Outcomes of the HDCI included the formation of a FinTech workforce group, which led to the creation of the FinTech Academy within the USG. HDCI also led to the creation of the HOPE Career Grant, which provides free tuition for technical training certificates and associate degrees in high-demand career areas. The USG focus on completion and, in turn, looking at degree programs with low enrollment arose from Governor Deal's directive for the USG to be part of Complete College America. A USG leader recalled,

If the system itself isn't innovating and energized and reaching out and figuring out what it ought to be doing, then a nudge has to come from somewhere and a time or two it has come from the governor's office. [When he came into office], Governor Deal made it plainly apparent we were going to be a part of this Complete College America effort, and the system had been resisting that.

In Tennessee, Governor Phil Bredesen (2003–2011) advocated for the state to join the Complete College program. He also pushed for Tennessee to change its funding model from being enrollment based to performance based. Following Governor Bredesen was Governor Bill Haslam (2011–2018). He, too, put his stamp on Tennessee higher education with his work on Drive to 55 and Tennessee Promise. Tennessee Promise is a scholarship that provides last-dollar funding for tuition, enabling students to attend a community college or technical college tuition-free. Governor Haslam framed higher education in terms of economic development. Governors in both states see higher education as integral to economic development in their state. For example, a former Tennessee official observed,

Bill Haslam is elected governor in Tennessee. From Bill Haslam's perspective, I think it's fair to say higher education is a public good. He's a businessman. And Tennessee

cannot afford for you not to go to college because from an economic perspective, Tennessee needs to have more people who are educated in the fields that will move the economy of Tennessee forward. So, yes, it may well be a private good, but it is a public good in the sense that we need to be able to attract the educated workforce that Tennessee needs. That, in the end, creates the Tennessee Promise in Tennessee. I think it's not unreasonable to imagine that if you were looking at this from the outside, you would imagine it was proposed by Democrats, whereas actually, I mean that's true in most of the states that have free college are blue states not red states. But Tennessee was one of the first states to do it.... Bill Haslam was a strong fiscal conservative, and they had [a] Republican supermajority in [the] House and Senate, but it was passed unanimously in both [the] House and Senate.

Current Tennessee Governor Bill Lee is the former president of his family business, which provides HVAC, plumbing, electrical, and appliance repair and manages large construction projects. He has put renewed focus on vocational education. In the 2023 legislative session, he pushed for a \$975 million capital budget for vocational facilities and equipment (Office of the Governor, 2023b). He is also focused on aligning high school technical programs with technical education and other academic tracks in higher education. The push for technical training is influencing recent changes at TBR to rethink the order in which students earn credentials toward associate degrees. In a pilot project started at six schools in fall 2023, students will first be guided to earn a certificate in a technical track and then complete their other associate degree requirements (see comments at THEC meeting August 17, 2023, presentation by Russ Deaton, TBR). A commission staff member observed,

For a long time, Tennessee has been somewhat fortunate in that our governors on both sides of the aisle have believed in the value of a higher education. The definition of what that value is kind of changes over time. In the past four or five years, workforce development [and] workforce alignment are real, real themes. But I think Tennessee's fortunate to have governors who have put money into programs that get students to school. Like Tennessee Promise is a nearly first-of-its-kind program. Tennessee Reconnect financial aid. Governors have been able to work with THEC staff to have leadership as well as the legislature to get these programs approved. The Haslam administration was Tennessee Promise, and now the Lee administration is making a strong investment and TCAT master planning to the tune of like a billion dollars.

Governors can influence institutions to create programs through their use of the “bully pulpit.” In other words, because the governor is talking about a particular issue or need, it gets a president or provost’s attention. A TBR staff member recalled seeing program proposals that are informed by a governor’s remarks.

There have been a couple of instances that I can think of where like the governor has made statements about the particular workforce initiatives that he’s interested in developing, that then correlate to program proposals that we see. ... [For example,] the governor gives a speech and it’s like six months later, oh, here’s a program related to what he talked about. Most recently, he’s made some comments about Tennessee being a leader in the nuclear industry. And so, we have a couple of proposals for nuclear engineering in development.

A former system administrator shared how governors can be particularly influential in setting policy or moving initiatives forward because they have both the bully pulpit and can direct state resources to support their initiatives.

I don’t think the real innovation comes from a commission. I’ve been in a state where a governor made a call for more nurses. The governor pounds the table, we need more nurses. The governor then sets money on the table to incentivize institutions to create more nurses. The chancellor then pushes on the president, the president pushes on the dean, the dean pushes on the faculty, and it all comes from the bottom up. So, governors can use [the] bully pulpit and financial resources. In governing boards, they can force action more than in coordinating boards, like in our state [Tennessee]. If Governor Lee said tomorrow, I wanted the university to produce more teachers. Unless there’s financial resources that move with it, the innovation has to come from those who control the curriculum. That’s the faculty in the college.

Governors can bring attention to an issue or need and they can allocate resources, but it is still the faculty who make it happen.

In both Georgia and Tennessee, governors appoint members of the higher education boards. However, only seven of the 13 voting commissioners on THEC are gubernatorial appointees. The power dynamics and the influence of the governor and the legislature is shared in Tennessee. In contrast, the governor appoints all the regents in Georgia. The USG is not only a strong board by virtue of being established via the state constitution, but its power and

direction is strongly tied to the governor. Governor Kemp's appointments to the BOR directly impacted USG program review policy and practice. New board appointees in spring 2020 strongly supported revisions to the program review process and called for a more data-informed process.

One of the challenges facing THEC in the fall of 2023 was a perception by a couple of commissioners that the current governor was not as connected to the work of THEC as previous governors had been. This sentiment was also shared at the August 2023 THEC meeting by the comptroller. A good relationship between the governor and the higher education board or commission is critical. Governors in both states have significant influence over higher education because of their ability to direct resources, create policy, appoint board and commission members, and use their position to bring attention to issues.

### Legislature

Interview participants in Tennessee referred more often to the legislature and its influence than did interview participants from Georgia. This difference is not surprising as several THEC members are directly appointed and others are elected by the Tennessee General Assembly and legislation related to THEC and new program approval was actively being debated in Tennessee as the interviews for this dissertation were conducted. Six THEC members are appointed by the legislature. Additionally, the statutes establishing THEC give the legislature more influence over higher education than statutes in Georgia governing the USG.

Having a strong working relationship with legislative leaders is critical in any state. One long-time staffer's comment encapsulates the sentiment many shared about how the governor and legislature in Tennessee have been supportive of higher education:

We are very fortunate to have a legislature and a governor who are extremely supportive of and friendly toward higher education ... Especially in other conservative states by

comparison, the legislature here really, really is supportive of higher education and wanting higher education to be as responsive as possible to industry. So that has definitely been an added benefit I think for all of us in higher education in the state.

A high level of support from the governor and legislature is apparent in both states, with significant funding for higher education programs, especially student-facing programs designed to encourage increased college participation and programs that align with workforce needs.

This study is being written during a time of inflection and reflection in Tennessee. Norms are being revisited, and the roles and responsibilities related to the approval and termination of academic programs is being debated among members of the legislature and THEC. There is great interest in aligning academic programs with workforce development needs. One staffer who works closely with the legislature on education policy observed,

When it comes to legislative interest in workforce development, a ton of Tennessee is rural. You drive 20 minutes out of Nashville, and you're in a completely different place. So most of our representatives in the General Assembly are representing rural communities with high workforce need and low skill... meaning a low level of degree attainment. ... I would venture to say that the legislature is interested in how do we get more workforce-ready Tennesseans to attract more businesses to have more jobs available in the state where we have people that need jobs. But they need the skills first. And so they are very interested in the pace at which they can make that happen.

Based on comments made at the August 2023 THEC meeting, the comptroller shared his perspective that not only was the relationship with the governor not as strong as it needed to be, but also the relationship with legislative leadership needed work. Having a strong working relationship with the legislature is critical. Ultimately, the legislature holds the purse strings. Thus, for programs to be financially viable, support from the legislature is needed. Relationships are key to working with the legislature. In criticizing THEC leadership's current lack of engagement with the legislature, the Tennessee comptroller stated the following at the THEC meeting in August 2023:

THEC is not a strong player in the world of higher education in the halls of the Tennessee legislature. We have not had an executive director that has had a relationship with legislators or legislative leaders that has had a relationship at the governor's office, and we have suffered for that. We are not at the table in the way THEC used to be. And if we're going to continue to exist, which we do such great work in regard to data collection and data analysis and reports and such important and great work in regard to the financial aid component. But we either need to do a great job that is held in high regard for all our functions or we need to jettison some of those functions. (THEC, 2023f)

The comptroller is just one of 13 voting members of THEC. Prior to the August 2023 THEC meeting, the comptroller sent a letter to his fellow commissioners suggesting that powers granted to THEC to approve new programs, set tuition, and approve capital outlay be given to the local boards (Mumpower, 2023). This letter was the cause of animated discussion during the last hour of the August 2023 THEC meeting. However, his letter and comments at that meeting illustrate how influential one commissioner can be in sparking changes in public policy and how crucial it is that higher education leaders maintain strong relationships with the governor and legislature. Comptroller Mumpower challenged his fellow commissioners during the THEC meeting that they needed to take action or the Tennessee legislature may change THEC's authority.

I will say as well something I didn't say before and that is that I think the commission, if we don't look internally and at least examine the concepts of changes that may be needed, we may find next legislative session those changes are made for us. I can tell you that from my personal experience, talking and working with leaders on the Hill. You know, and so I would urge us to be engaged in these decisions, lest we find ourselves having it done for us. (THEC, 2023f)

The comptroller's warning in August 2023 was realized on January 31, 2024, when House Bill 2676 was introduced. The proposed bill restructures THEC responsibilities and commission membership. It also would move responsibility for academic program approval to the local governing boards and change THEC's role related to capital outlay requests.

One of the primary functions of a state legislature is to pass a state budget that appropriates funds to agencies and programs. The higher education leaders I interviewed in Tennessee reiterated that the resources for innovation in higher education come from the legislature through state funds, lottery funds, and capital outlay funds. Ideas for new programs come from various sources, but the legislature is the funder.

Legislators control the purse and can enact policy changes through appropriations and law changes. One way to implement change in higher education is to educate legislators about key issues that they work on in committee or they care about personally. Influencing public policy through research is one of the main ways intermediaries like the Lumina Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gate Foundation work to change systems and state policy.

Intermediaries work closely with higher education associations and state systems to inform and influence change. A representative from Lumina who was interviewed for this study indicated that the foundation's strategy is to do research that would then inform and influence state legislative policy.

We set up efforts to influence both state and federal policy. We do not lobby. So, what we mostly do is, we do a lot of research. We do a lot of funding of people to do the legwork on what would other kinds of systems look like and what kind of impact would they have. We're not out there telling everybody they should vote for this particular person or for this particular piece of legislation. But we can get out there, and we do work with legislators to say, here are three other ways that you could organize how you fund higher education. If you did it this way, this is what would happen. So, we do a lot of development of policy solutions, evaluation of policy solutions, and then education about the first two.

In this case study, there was little or no evidence of intermediary influence in legislative actions in Georgia or Tennessee related to academic program approval.

The legislature has significant influence over higher education policy and funding. In Georgia, legislative influence over academic program approval and board activities is minimal.

In Tennessee, the legislature appoints members to the higher education commission. This appointment power gives the legislature much more influence in the workings of THEC.

### Faculty and University Leaders

Faculty play a critical role in academic program development. As one USG regent noted, “Faculty though are a huge influencer in what happens overall in higher ed” This sentiment was a consistent theme among education leaders interviewed for this study. Higher education leaders recognize the need to align academic programs to workforce needs, but they equally recognize that the work of developing the curriculum and teaching the courses can only be done by the faculty. Traditionally, new programs have always come from the faculty. THEC staff indicated that “most, if not all the ideas [for new programs] begin with faculty, or come at the suggestion of a provost’s office.”

The role of faculty in creating curricula is still a core function in the development of a new program. When the USG created the FinTech curriculum, it relied on faculty at Kennesaw State University to help write the playbook, and faculty and administrators at Georgia State University took the lead in knitting together existing courses and developing new ones. At TBR, when an employer comes in with a need, it is the Academic Affairs staff and program faculty at the interested institutions that develop the academic plan and curriculum.

For a program to be approved, it needs to be rigorous and pass the internal review of faculty committees and university committees and, often, external accreditors. Faculty often provide the creative energy in developing new programs. However, placing the need for the program within the context of the state’s talent and economic needs often requires the help of others who see the statewide picture or political context. For this reason, staff at THEC and the USG provide guidance to institution staff and faculty who are developing programs. As a former

USG official noted, the “creativity comes from faculty and departments, but they don’t always see the big picture. In fact, rarely see the big picture.”

Administrators complete many parts of a new program application, but the curriculum is ultimately the responsibility of the faculty and department that will teach the program. USG and THEC staff, as well as UT System and TBR staff, often help orientate the faculty, department, or institutional representative because creation of a new program by a department is very episodic and infrequent. Coaching new program applicants is a common part of the job for staff at the state level and local board level. An interview participant in Tennessee who works with faculty and departments in developing new program proposals shared her experience:

Typically, what happens is when a faculty member or a department gets an idea about wanting to create a new program, I will always have an initial conversation with them because sometimes they just don’t understand how intense the process can be. It is always much more cumbersome than people like. But we follow the policies and procedures outlined by the Tennessee Higher Education Commission because they are the final approver of any academic program.

Presidents, provosts, or other leaders at the university also drive the development of new programs. The provost office has purview over the whole academic landscape of the university and often sees needs that can best be met through cross-disciplinary programs. As was mentioned earlier, UT System President Randy Boyd remarked in the August 2023 THEC meeting that presidents know what employers need. He explained,

We work day and night working closely with our partners in the workforce [system] ... the collaboration between the universities and the workforce is really close. And that’s how, as you heard from the programs that we recommended today, how we come up with those programs because we’re so close to the market. (THEC, 2023f).

### Drivers of Innovation Conclusion

Drivers of innovation in higher education include industry, governors, the legislature, and faculty and university leaders. Systems of higher education can harness the bully pulpit of

governors to raise awareness of state priorities and critical industries that need talent. Legislators play an important role in appropriating funds to support innovative programs and the infrastructure needed to support academic programs. In Tennessee more than in Georgia, legislative influence extends to THEC because of its responsibility to appoint six of the 13 voting commissioners. Faculty and other institutional leaders at colleges and universities are important innovators. Ultimately, if a new program is going to launch at a college or university, the faculty and their administrators have to create and deliver the learning content.

Table 7: Governance Roles and New Academic Programs

	<b>USG</b>	<b>THEC</b>
System Approach	Directive and engaged	Convene and officiate
In-Demand Jobs	USG targeted playbooks for specific industries  New Program Application Section C – Needs Assessment	THEC Academic Supply and Occupation Demand Report  Letter of Notification Section III: Feasibility Study
Program Creation	Institution proposals and USG creates collaborative programs for specific industries	Institution proposals
Staff Role	Advise institutions; evaluate proposal, brief board, and present to board	Advise institutions and local system staff; evaluate LON, NAPP, site visit report, handle disputes, brief board
Faculty Role	Develop curriculum and teach the content; work with campus leadership to help justify program and gain approval	Develop curriculum and teach the content; work with campus leadership to help justify program and gain approval

### Section 3: Themes Conclusion

In section three of this chapter, I discussed the major themes that emerged from the interviews, recordings of public meetings, and document review done as part of this study. The first theme, speed to market, captures concerns among officials in both states about the time it

takes to approve a new academic program. A driving reason for changes to forms and processes in both states was the desire to accelerate the approval process to address the talent needs of employers and to meet state workforce demands. The second theme, governance matters, highlights the impact governance has in how work is done in each state. Georgia has a strong governing board model. As a result, the USG operates from an executive branch lens and takes a directive approach when executing policies and processes. This governance model enables the USG to create programs at the system level to meet a whole industry's talent needs. In comparison, THEC is a coordinating board that uses a data-driven approach to inform its institutions about the high-demand programs needed to support Tennessee's growing workforce. How programs are created, how they are funded, the kind of staff hired, and their role in analyzing new academic programs are all impacted by the form of governance. As a state coordinating board, THEC takes an "air-traffic control" approach by convening stakeholders and an officiating role by screening programs for quality, advocating for transfer pathways, and ensuring programs are not duplicative.

Drivers of innovative academic programs include industry, governors, the legislature, and faculty and university leaders. Based on the interviews done for this dissertation, the role of intermediaries in developing new academic programs is minimal to none. However, in Georgia, the Lumina Grant did enable the USG to take a more comprehensive approach with revising its policy, forms, and supporting data tools.

Industry benefits from having a single point of contact at a state higher education system who can hear their needs and then convey those needs to academic departments and faculty to develop academic programs. Faculty and departments benefit from system-level support in

documenting the competencies, knowledge, skills, and abilities employers need that can then be incorporated into new and current programs.

Governors in both states have led important initiatives and recommended funding for programs that are transforming higher education in their states. In both Tennessee and Georgia, governors are focused on initiatives and incentives that will grow the workforce needed for today and tomorrow in their state. In Tennessee more than in Georgia, legislative influence extends to THEC as it appoints six of the 13 voting commissioners. Though a handful of programs have originated from the USG system office, the overwhelming majority of new programs originate from the faculty and departments of the colleges and universities in the state. The role of faculty is critical to new program creation. For a new program to move forward and meet the talent needs of employers, faculty must develop the curriculum and assessments, and teach the content. These two cases highlight the fact that systems, institutions, and faculty are all integral to the creation of new programs. Both states changed their academic program approval forms and processes to speed program development and align programs with state workforce needs. In Chapter 5, I will analyze how the policy-making frameworks help explain the policy events and the drivers of policy changes related to new academic programs in Georgia and Tennessee. I will also reflect on the key lessons learned from this comparative case study and what they mean for other state systems looking to reform their academic program approval policy, processes, and forms.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

#### Introduction

The previous chapter outlined the cases of Georgia and Tennessee and the recent changes the states made to their approval process for new academic programs. The approval of new academic programs is one of the most direct ways states or their governing boards can impact knowledge acquisition and help students gain the competencies needed for their next degree or career. The approval of academic programs is also one of the key processes states control to ensure the programs offered are academically rigorous and aligned with talent needs in the economy and community, while also being financially viable. Ultimately, through academic program approval, higher education leaders can influence curricula and how they align with state economic goals.

Both Georgia (USG) and Tennessee (THEC) have changed their policies and practices related to academic program approval since 2019. I conducted this study to better understand the forces and factors that contribute to policy changes related to academic program approval. I started this study with two primary research questions:

1. What were the forces and factors that led higher education agencies in Georgia and Tennessee to change their new degree program approval process and criteria?

2. How and to what extent was degree program approval utilized to advance state priorities, such as workforce development?

This chapter has three main sections. In the first section, I examine the two research questions within the context of the multiple streams and the ecology of policy-making frameworks. In the second section, I discuss the implications of this dissertation research and how it contributes to our understanding of academic program approval and how governance structure, state elected officials, and employers impact academic program approval in state systems. In the third and final section of this chapter, I share recommendations for state systems that may be considering policy changes related to academic program approval.

### **Program Approval Through the Lens of the Policy Change Frameworks**

#### **Research Question 1: Forces and Factors Leading to Policy Change**

The multiple streams framework (Kingdon, 2003; Kingdon & Stano, 1984) and the ecology of policy-making framework (Hearn et al., 2017; Hearn & Ness, 2019) provide helpful lenses for understanding the forces and factors that led to policy and process changes that the USG and THEC enacted for new program approval. In both states, leaders clearly saw problems with their program approval process. Policy documents like the USG strategic plans and the Tennessee master plans reveal shifting attitudes about higher education's role in economic development. In both states, the governor was pivotal in driving change and innovation. In addition, legislative influence in Tennessee is particularly strong because of how commissioners are appointed to THEC. Contextual factors like the economic development efforts of the states and demand spurred by new businesses creating jobs are important forces for change.

## Closing Talent Gaps Quickly

In the multiple streams framework, the problem stream relates to how a problem gets attention. Many severe problems do not gain attention because they fail to be perceived as a problem by the public. In this dissertation, the problem was clear: Employers in both states are experiencing workforce shortages and workers who lack the skills they need. In Tennessee, a second problem was that employers, legislators, and many college administrators all felt the approval process for new programs took too long. During the timeframe of this study, THEC changed its new academic program policy three times (July 2022, January 2023, and January 2024). The underlying purpose of these changes was to add more flexibility and shorten the timeframe for getting a program approved. In Georgia, the main driver of change, from a problem perspective, was that the regents felt the justifications for new programs were neither rigorous nor informative.

One of the four forces underlying the ecology of policy change is the socio-economic context. Low unemployment rates, growing gross state product, and new job announcements (Hearn et al., 2017) in both states provide context to the evolution of language in the USG strategic plans and THEC master plans, which became more specific about meeting the talent needs of industry over time. For example, the language in the USG strategic plans became more specific in how the board planned to support community and economic development through new programs and program alignment with industry needs. Similarly, the language in the Tennessee Master Plan moved from a focus on researching and reporting high-demand jobs to more directive language. For example, the Future of Work Task Force section in the 2020 update to the Master Plan directs institutions to develop programs that align with industry and infuse curricula in new areas, including data science and artificial intelligence.

## Approval Authority Debate in Tennessee

The debate in Tennessee over who will have the authority to approve new programs also has both a policy and political dimension, two streams of the multiple streams framework. Coupling forces or focusing events are events that advance an idea because there is a convergence of two or more streams (Kingdon, 2003). From a policy perspective, THEC clarified its policy at the July 2022 commission meeting and reclaimed its approval authority over TBR associate degree programs. Absent the problem stream and political question of control, THEC's action would not have spurred the debate. However, this policy clarification had a coupling effect by adding fuel to the political stream as the debate became whether TBR or THEC could be most responsive to the needs of employers by approving programs quickly (problem stream).

Another focusing event that contributed to the policy debate was legislation introduced during the spring 2023 Tennessee legislative session. Senate Bill 1040 opened another policy discussion on where authority to terminate programs should reside. A third focusing event fueling the debate was the policy question posed in August 2023 by the Tennessee comptroller. He issued a letter to his fellow THEC members advocating for the commission to change policies and give the local governing boards (TBR, UT System Board, and local governing institutions' boards) the authority to not only approve new programs but also request capital outlay and set tuition rates. The policy debate continued into the 2024 legislative session. House Bill 2676 was introduced on January 31, 2024, in the Tennessee General Assembly to codify some of the suggestions outlined in the comptroller's letter.

## Political Forces

The political-institutional context of the ecology of policy making framework emphasizes an assessment of the political and appointment powers at play in a state. Understanding the governance framework and the appointment powers of the governor and legislators in Tennessee is critical to understanding why the comptroller has such a weighted voice in this debate. As a member of THEC who is elected by the legislature, he is accountable to legislative leadership to make sure their concerns and needs are being addressed. Yet, one could argue that the governor would have even more control over higher education offerings if approval authority shifts from THEC to the local boards. This is because the governor has eight of 10 appointments to each of the local boards compared to seven of 13 for THEC.

From a multiple streams perspective, the political stream is similarly helpful in understanding the debate over program approval authority. The political stream focuses on the actions and motivations of the policy makers themselves, influenced by political party ideology, and the interests of stakeholders and advocates like economic developers and employers. As discussed in Chapter 4, governors are pivotal in framing state priorities in higher education. As the executive leaders of their states, governors play a unique role as policy entrepreneurs. Through their rhetoric and funding proposals, governors in Georgia and Tennessee have a track record of setting the agenda for reform or innovation in higher education in their states.

Who appoints the USG regents or the THEC commissioners impacts the politics of how the organizations approach academic program approval. The governor of Georgia appoints all 19 USG regents. The impact of gubernatorial appointments to the USG Board of Regents and the addition of new members in early 2020 led the board to clearly spell out the evidence of need

it would require to approve any future new programs. The board's actions gave USG staff political cover to implement the changes that were already in development.

With six of the 13 THEC voting members appointed or elected by the legislature, the Tennessee General Assembly is much more engaged in high education policy than its counterpart in Georgia. The political debate over THEC membership and powers is ongoing in Tennessee. During the August 2023 THEC meeting, the comptroller, who is elected by the Tennessee Legislature, did not mince words in stating that THEC needed to make some changes or the legislature would do it for them. Legislative influence over THEC and higher education policy is an important differentiator from the powers of governance in Georgia. During the writing of this dissertation, the THEC members appointed by the legislature were very vocal in calling for reforms. For example, to address a perception that too often commissioners were just doing what THEC staff told them to do, these members advocated for the establishment of committees, which would allow THEC commissioners more time to review and discuss proposals, including new academic programs.

#### Window of Opportunity and Coupling Forces

Timing plays an important a role in the policy-making process. As Kingdon (2003) observed, "The opportunity for action on a given initiative, present themselves and stay open for only short periods of time" (p. 166). For policy changes to move forward, it takes a combination of events and actors coming together all at the same time. In the case of the USG's changes to the academic program approval process, a clear policy window opened up when three forces came together. First, the USG had an internal policy entrepreneur, Tristan Denley, who was advocating for updates to the process. Second, a grant from the Lumina Foundation provided the resources the USG needed to make a comprehensive change with supporting tools. Third,

regents began calling for changes to how new programs are justified and presented to the board, which provided political support for the changes. These forces came together at the same time that the conversation nationally was heating up regarding the role of higher education and its economic return for students.

The convergence of three events is an important factor for policy change in Tennessee. First, in Tennessee, the role of THEC executive director changed hands three times between 2021 and 2023. Dr. Emily House was promoted from interim executive director to executive director in January 2021 before resigning in December 2022. Interim Executive Director Robert (Bob) M. Smith served from December 2022 to August 2023 and was replaced by Steven Gentile, a long time THEC staff member. Dr. Gentile served as interim executive director until his appointment as executive director in November 2023. Second, Tennessee Comptroller of the Treasury Jason E. Mumpower, a THEC commission member, was elected by the Tennessee General Assembly on January 13, 2021. He was reelected in January 2023 to a second term. During his time in office, he witnessed the turnover in the THEC executive director position and feels it has weakened THECs position with the legislature. From his perspective, the lack of consistent leadership impacted THEC's ability to work with the governor's office and legislative leaders on long-term change (THEC, 2023f). Third, the THEC policy change in July 2022 to redefine TBR's delegated authority to approve new associate degrees brought more attention to THEC's overall authority to approve programs and raised anxiety among schools under THEC authority over how long it would take to get a new degree approved. These three factors contributed to a policy window opening in Tennessee. As of the 2024 legislative session,

legislators were taking a fresh look at new program approval and termination authority and whether it should be a THEC responsibility or that of the local governing boards.<sup>24</sup>

### Impact of Complete College Initiative

Another factor that spurred new academic program reform was the adoption of Complete College plans in Tennessee and Georgia. Evidence of policy diffusion, a tenet of the ecology of policy making, is at play here. Governors were feeling pressure from the national network and their intermediaries to push their high education systems to change and focus on increasing the number of people in the state with a postsecondary credential. The Complete College initiative shifted thinking in both states from enrollment to completion or graduation. Kingdon (2003) would consider this initiative a coupling force: a solution linked to other problems, policy issues, or political issues. At the USG, system leaders began asking why certain programs with low enrollment even existed and how programs were relevant to the state's economy. These questions, in turn, led USG leadership to consider how the organization might improve its program approval processes so that new programs would be more closely aligned with workforce needs. At THEC, the Complete College initiative informed the adoption of a new performance-based funding formula that put more attention on completion.

### Economic Development Pressure

Finally, one other contextual factor driving academic innovation is the demand for talent coming from state economic development efforts. The policy making ecology framework calls this the socio-economic context (Hearn & Ness, 2019). In both Georgia and Tennessee, new jobs are being announced regularly. Meeting the talent demands of large mega-site projects like Ford's Blue Oval in Tennessee and a new Hyundai plant in Georgia are at the forefront of many

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<sup>24</sup> See HB 2676, introduced by Representative Ryan Williams on January 31, 2024. This bill would change the makeup of THEC and give power to approve new programs to the local governing boards.

policy makers' minds. The pending demand for trained labor is impacting debates about who should approve new programs and how to better align and share curricula between schools to more efficiently meet employers' needs. In discussing the focus on aligning program approval with economic needs of the state, higher education leaders noted that the phrase "workforce development" was not well received by faculty as associated the term with vocational education and learning a trade. Leaders interviewed suggested a coupling strategy to garner faculty support for program alignment is to use the term "talent development."

In summary, a combination of forces and factors have led the USG and THEC to change their new academic program approval processes and criteria in an effort to increase the number of graduates in areas related to high-demand jobs in the state economy. The need to get programs developed and approved quickly has been a driving force. Policy-related factors prompting changes to new program approval include shifting priorities, as reflected in the agency strategic plans; changes in approval authority at TBR; and the comptroller in Tennessee advocating for significant changes to THEC. Politically, a number of forces and factors are pushing for change. These include gubernatorial appointments in Georgia and legislative appointments impacting THEC. A contextual force motivating change is the demand for talent at large mega-site economic development-related projects.

### **Research Question 2: Use of Program Approval to Advance State Priorities**

This section explores my second research question: How and to what extent was degree program approval utilized to advance state priorities, such as workforce development?

Using the multiple streams framework, the problems the states were working to address included employers' need for skilled talent, a slow speed to market in developing and approving new academic programs, and inadequate justifications and feasibility studies to align new

programs with the economic needs of the state. The overarching policy solution to these problems was reforming new program approval. How these policy changes were implemented was different in Georgia and Tennessee. The coupling events were different and the policy windows and policy entrepreneurs were different, but all the facets of multiple streams are present in this two-state case study.

Both Georgia and Tennessee used new academic program approval as a tool to support the states' economic development agenda and fill high-demand jobs. In answering the second research question, I will highlight four policy solutions, two from each state, that were used to address the perceived problems and focus attention on state workforce priorities. Changes to the forms was one of the most direct means. Other tactics included the USG's development of top-down programs and THEC's expedited review process tied to projections of high-demand careers. In addition to the changes to new academic program approval, the USG used its authority to align general education programs with career competencies and also create the nexus degree.

#### Policy Solution: Forms, Feasibility, and Flexibility

The desire to meet employer talent needs was a problem addressed through both political and policy solutions. The new academic program application process is one of the most direct ways to align what is being taught with the state's economic development priorities. What was changed to new program approval and how it was changed are both noteworthy. The first (what) is informed by the socio-economic context and the second (how) by the political and institutional context from the ecology of policy making framework.

First, in both states, the forms for new program proposals explicitly require a feasibility study or needs assessment. This requirement within the program approval process is not new, as

documented by Barak and Berdahl (1978). However, coming out of the Great Recession, both Tennessee and Georgia saw increased economic development across their states. Most recently spurring the demand for labor were announcements by Ford in Tennessee (September 2021) and Hyundai in Georgia (May 2022) that new electric vehicle plants and associated battery manufacturing and related parts manufacturing would be built in the respective states. The economic context is important to this case. Falling unemployment rates and new job announcements were already putting pressure on Georgia and Tennessee in 2014. By 2022, the demand for skilled labor was even more intense coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic. Though both states in policy and practice already required labor market data and employer support, it was now of even more importance to the USG Board of Regents and THEC commissioners.

The impetus to improve the feasibility section of the application was both political and policy driven. Politically, governors want to make sure employers in the state are happy so they will stay and invest more in the state. From a policy perspective, the states wanted to ensure that new programs are aligned with state economic priorities. Enabling the changes in feasibility studies are new data tools. Accessing relevant data has become very easy with the advent of the internet, availability of federal and state data on labor demand and supply, and most recently, data dashboards that make large data sets useful for less-technical researchers. This study highlights how USG regents in Georgia demanded more rigor in the data provided to justify a new program. In the new program proposal guidelines issued by the USG in January 2021, Section C of the application was very prescriptive as to the evidence needed to justify a program, show demand, and demonstrate alignment with state workforce needs.

Similarly, changes to THEC's new program approval policy in July 2022 were made in part to emphasize the importance of employer engagement and support for a new program. In both states studied for this dissertation, institutions must show demand in the labor market for the proposed program or it will not be approved. This requirement is a strong lever to ensure any new program is tied to state economic and workforce needs.

The political and institutional context is helpful in understanding how the policy changes in Georgia and Tennessee were implemented. The USG is a governing board that tends to keep board policy broad and leave the details related to implementation of policy to guidelines and forms. Such broad board policy enables USG staff to make adjustments quickly and administratively, which keeps the changes out of the political stream. THEC functions in more of a legislative posture, with more actions being specified in THEC policy. The approach each state takes to policy versus administrative forms is illustrated by the number of words in the formal policies currently in place related to academic program approval. Formal USG Board of Regents policy on new academic programs (3.6.1) is 84 words, whereas the THEC policy on new academic programs (A 1.0) is 2,284 words. THEC staff recognized the need to add flexibility to the commission's policy on new program approval. Therefore, the changes to the process instituted in July 2022 moved specific requirements out of the formal policy and onto updated LON and NAPP checklists posted on the THEC website. Additional THEC policy changes over the next two years continued this shift from formal policy to putting the details in checklists and guidelines. This shift in Tennessee was an attempt to streamline the process and speed up approval timelines.

The changes to forms, instruction to improve the needs assessment section, and added flexibility to speed up approval times are changes the states made to advance state workforce

development priorities. Why and how these changes were made are more clearly understood by looking through the lens of the economic context and governance context in each state.

#### Policy Solution: USG Top-Down or Collaborative Programs

A second policy solution to address the problem of the lack of skilled workers to support the state's economy is the USG's efforts to develop top-down or collaborative programs with its institutions. Georgia made a strategic decision in the mid-2000s to provide a generous tax credit to grow the film and media industry in the state. Demand for "behind the camera" workers—from grips, to camera crews, to set designers—grew in the state. As the ecology of policy making framework suggests, this context is helpful in understanding why the USG collaborated with the state's technical college system to establish the Georgia Film Academy in 2015. The successful implementation of that academy was a seminal event that fostered new thinking about the USG's ability to create programs centrally to meet the needs of an entire industry. This entrepreneurial model integrated the efforts of multiple campus programs to meet a whole industry's need for talent. This industry-led process and curriculum was heavily informed by people working in the film industry. The USG staff documented the needs of the employers and created "playbooks." This same playbook approach was subsequently used to document the competencies needed in the FinTech industry, then cybersecurity and then data science. In each case, the state's economic need for talent pushed the USG to develop programs and curricula from the system office in partnership with USG institutions. The documentation of competencies and translation of those competencies into learning objectives and curricula improves the alignment of the academic program to the state's workforce needs and also helps expedite the approval process as the program is co-created by USG staff, employer representatives, and partner institutions.

Ultimately, the Georgia Film Academy met its economic and political priority: to grow the behind-the-camera workforce in Georgia (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022b). More research is needed to understand the role of policy entrepreneurs in this specific case, but the growth in film production in the state put additional pressure on the governor to make sure the industry had the local workers it needed to be sustainable over the long term. This kind of collaborative program development has since been repeated multiple times and is highlighted in the USG's 2029 Strategic Plan as a practice the system will continue to use to meet industry needs.

#### Policy Solution: Expedited Review

A third example of a policy solution implemented to address the speed to market concern is the expedited review process. THEC's expedited review policy incentivizes institutions to make new program requests that align with high-demand jobs. Shortening the time it takes to get a program approved is a major motivator for institutions that want to offer new academic programs. THEC not only wanted to approve programs quickly, but also make sure the new programs are aligned with the state's economic needs.

THEC offers expedited review for proposed programs that align with in-demand jobs listed on the THEC Workforce Supply and Demand Forecast. The expedited review process has a shorter public notice period and requires less justification in the Letter of Notice (LON). Despite this option, interviewees still expressed frustration with their inability to meet employer quick-turnaround expectations for new programs. The fact that some in-demand jobs require skill sets for which curricula may not exist is sometimes lost on employers who were ready to hire talent yesterday. It takes time to develop curricula that adhere to accreditation standards and meet learning objectives. In addition, qualified faculty may not be immediately available to

teach the new courses. This ongoing, uninformed expectation of employers indicates that higher education leaders can do more to educate employers on the academic requirements to develop quality learning opportunities. To truly expedite degrees requires a partnership with employers and a commitment by staff to do the prerequisite work to document and translate the competencies into a format that faculty can then use to create learning objectives and curricula.

#### Policy Solution: Aligning General Education with Workforce Needs

Not only is academic program approval being used to advance state economic priorities like workforce development, the USG is also using its power over the general education program to enforce alignment of the core curriculum with work skills needed by graduates. In October 2023, the USG established new processes and policies to align general education core courses with workforce and talent development objectives. I anticipate that a likely next step in states with higher education governing boards will be to align existing programs with workforce and talent development objectives as part of the ongoing review of current programs. The nexus degree, created by the USG, is an example of a state developing new kinds of credentials that are industry-informed and targeted to meet a specific employer or industry need. Industry and academic leaders also noted the emerging need for a degree that is three years in duration.<sup>25</sup> The USG's creation of a whole new degree type is additional evidence of how the system is using its program approval authority to meet the needs of employers.

Both Tennessee and Georgia have used new academic program approval as a tool to advance the state's priorities for higher education institutions to produce workers for the high-demand occupations in the state economy. Because the tactics differ by state, our understanding is enhanced by looking at the policy and process changes through the lens of the policy making

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<sup>25</sup> Programs mentioned during interviews were primarily related to applied engineering and advanced manufacturing with some management training.

ecology framework and specifically the economic and political and institutional context. As I conclude my analysis of the case, I reflect on what drove the policy change. It is noteworthy that no one person or institution pushed the changes in policy through to implementation by acting alone. Both Dr. Denley and Regent Reynolds were in their own way policy entrepreneurs, but it was the combination of their leadership and support from other USG leaders, other USG regents, and USG staff that resulted in policy changes in Georgia. In Tennessee, the coupling events of policy clarifications, university president and employer demands for a much speedier process, and challenges for more legislative control have pushed THEC and legislative leadership to be where they are in January 2024, debating the future role of THEC in approving programs.

### **Contributions To Program Approval Research**

This comparative case study was designed to analyze new academic program approval through the lens of the multiple streams framework and the ecology of policy making framework. I purposefully selected states with many similarities and one significant difference: the form of higher education governance. This research design yielded important findings that add to the body of knowledge about state-level approval of academic programs and the use of policy-making frameworks to understand higher education policy changes. The research design also allowed me to discern a clear contrast in the tactics available to centralized governing boards versus coordinating boards attempting to align academic programs with state economic development and workforce needs.

The extant literature on state-level program approval is limited (Barak, 1982, 2007; Barak & Berdahl, 1978; Berdahl, 1971; Seymour & Fife 1988; Venters, 2021). Unlike these studies that provide overviews of how state systems are approving academic programs, this case study offers a rich qualitative analysis of how two specific states implemented and changed their

academic program approval process. This study also utilizes two policy change frameworks to understand both the context and the forces and factors that contributed to changes in state-level program approval.

Findings from this dissertation have implications for researchers studying higher education governance as well as state system leaders who are looking to change their academic program approval processes and requirements. First, this study confirms that how a state structures its higher education system and its oversight affects how policies are enacted and how staff operate to get the work done. Second, this study sheds light on employer needs related to academic program development. Third, financing of new academic programs is an area for additional research. Fourth, this study re-enforces the important role of faculty in developing and implementing new programs.

#### Governance Structure Impacts Program Development and Approval

A key finding from this research is that the higher education governance structure of a state matters. It impacts how the state approaches new academic program development and approval. The qualitative findings of this research add to the quantitative work of Knott and Payne (2004), who found that governance structure affects the management and performance of higher education. This dissertation has similar findings in the aggregate to Knott and Payne, who observed that each state has its own nuances, including political culture, economic conditions, level of legislative involvement, and board leadership.

A state's higher education structure impacts its ability to respond to the needs of an entire industry. The USG, with its centralized governance model, has been able to develop programs centrally (or collaboratively) to meet the talent needs of a whole industry. THEC operates more like a legislative body that is less directive but more of a buffer or intermediary. THEC has clear

authority to approve new programs but does not have the authority or infrastructure to direct boards or institutions to create statewide programs. This kind of centralized program development can be undertaken by the UT System or TBR because they are governing boards, but the effect may not be statewide nor industry wide.

The USG top-down or collaborative model has a single point of contact that industry representatives can work with to discuss the competencies needed and the kinds of credentials that make sense given the timeline, complexity, and long-term demand. Georgia's higher education governance structure makes it possible for the USG to address a statewide need or a whole industry's specific need for associate, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral graduates.

Because of the layered governance structure of the Tennessee higher education system, a whole industry with a statewide need may have to talk with the UT System, TBR, and six locally governed institutions to create programs that will meet their needs. THEC can help coordinate conversations among the eight parties, but those interviewed for this study acknowledge that a coordinating board, by the nature of its architecture, is not designed to develop top-down programs. This example clearly shows that governance structure impacts what policies are even possible.

According to the literature (Gándara et al., 2017; Hearn et al., 2017; Lacy & Tandberg, 2014), states often look to one another for innovative ideas. Interviewees in Tennessee did express frustration with the Tennessee governance model compared to Georgia's. They noted that Georgia's ability to respond quickly in a centralized way to meet the needs of an industry is a competitive advantage. Because states compete against each other for jobs, speed to market—in this context, approving academic programs quickly—is part of staying competitive in economic development.

Although THEC, as a coordinating board, is limited in carrying out top-down program development, governing boards like TBR can facilitate statewide program development. The TBR system has stewardship over 13 community colleges and 24 colleges of applied technology (TCATs). TBR's IDEAL model is a good example of how a governing board can organize itself to be the single point of contact for employers. Employers come to one meeting during which all interested schools can hear for themselves what the need is and think about the best way to address the need. The TBR IDEAL model also provides its member institutions support and coordination in translating the employer's needs into the optimal type of program, certificate, or short-term credential to help meet the needs of the employer.

THEC's expedited review process, which rewards institutions requesting programs that are responsive to the THEC Workforce Supply and Demand Forecast, illustrates one way a coordinating board can push institutions to develop in-demand programs. Both Georgia and Tennessee are working to create programs to meet the state's workforce needs, but the tools they can use to meet those needs differ because of how they are governed.

I am reminded of the saying, "If you know one state, you know one state." The point is that how each state conducts its business and organizes its higher education governance and power structure differs. Researchers of state system governance and decision making have found that the policy-making process in each state is distinct based on the area economy, legislative power, governance structure, and other contextual factors (Hearn et al., 2017; McClendon, 2003; Ness, Baser, et al., 2021; Ness & Mistretta, 2009). This study adds to this body of knowledge by providing detailed explanations of how appointment powers of governors and legislators impact the behaviors of regents and commissioners. In this case study, specific members of the USG

Board of Regents and THEC played important roles in pushing for changes to academic program approval processes.

### Employer Engagement in Program Development

Needs assessments and labor demand data are longstanding items that almost all states require in new academic program proposals (Barak, 2007; Barak & Berdahl, 1978; Venters, 2021). This research highlights that the level of rigor of these data was not adequate prior to the policy changes made in Georgia and Tennessee. The USG changes in January 2021 and THEC changes in July 2022 underscore this insufficiency. Both Georgia regents and Tennessee commissioners were clear that the needs assessment must incorporate employer input, including letters of support and explanations of how they will participate in the development of the program. Policy and guidelines were changed to clarify the importance of these data, and training was provided to help institutions better meet system office expectations.

This study confirms that state systems expect institutions to work with employers as they develop new academic program proposals. In a review of prior studies on state-level program approval, Barak (2007) found that not much had changed over the previous 30 years. He concluded that “the general purposes, major criteria and basic process components used today by most boards are essentially the same as those identified in 1978” (p. 14). The author also observed that in the 30 years of policy he reviewed, the top five reasons for change generally related to process improvement and shifts in stewardship for review. Barak noted that six states made improvements in the “relationship of PR (program review) and/or PA (program approval) with workforce or economic development” (p. 15). Venter’s 2021 SHEEO report highlighted six states that had recently updated their state-level academic program approval guidelines and forms to require institutions to address employer needs or demand. This study adds to this prior

literature on state-level program approval research by providing context to how and why states are making policy changes. Engaging employers has long been an important part of programing for workforce development. What other studies lack is clarity on how state systems can best engage employers and industry representatives in the program development and approval process.

### Funding New Academic Programs

How new academic programs are funded is an area for additional research. This study did not allow for a full investigation of how programs are financed or the impact of a state's higher education funding model on new program approval. Georgia's state funding for higher education uses an enrollment-based formula. At THEC, the Complete College initiative informed the adoption of a new performance-based funding formula that put more attention on completion. Some interviewees felt that the shift in funding from enrollment to completion is a reason for giving THEC less control over program approval. They argued that under the new formula, institutions are on the hook financially for new programs for a number of years before formula funding will kick in. While this financial argument is interesting, Georgia has a similar lag in funding as part of the USG formula. With the lag in state funding, schools must be judicious in what programs they propose.

Another important factor related to funding is the nationwide trend of states covering a smaller portion of the operating costs of institutions of higher education than just 10 years ago. Today, tuition contributes a larger share of the cost of providing a college or university education. Therefore, the institution has a vested interest in only proposing programs that meet a clear demand and will be financially viable. However, financial viability is just one purpose of state-level review and approval. The regulatory or system-level approval process is not just

about making sure the program is financially viable but also that it meets the state's standards for quality (Horn & Tandberg, 2018).

### Role of Faculty

Historians of higher education note that the role of faculty changed in the mid-20th century with the rise of administrators and professional staff (Frye & Fulton, 2020; Geiger, 2016; Lucas, 1994; Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006). During this time, curricula became more standardized and was managed by administrators (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). Though the growth of administrator involvement in new program development is evident in this study, an underlying theme from the interviews is the vital role that faculty continue to play in the process.

Faculty are the engine of innovation and inquiry in the lab and in the classroom. However, as faculty have become more specialized, there has been a rise in administrative and governance roles influencing and overseeing the curricula and new academic programs. The number of administrators and staff involved in developing a new program has grown from the 1940s when a faculty member would walk into the registrar's office and add a new course of study to the school catalog (Barak, 1982). Today, seven university administrators must sign off on a proposal for a new program before it is submitted to the USG Board of Regents for approval (Academic Affairs Division, n.d.a). Prior to 2021, only the president and provost signed off on new proposals. This change is an acknowledgment of the size and complexity of universities today. The USG signature form is a way of ensuring that stakeholders in the multiversity (Kerr, 1994) all know about a proposed new program.

The role of the faculty is as vital as ever to the creation and delivery of academic programs. Administrators can help with the research and analysis needed to fill out the forms the USG or THEC require, but it is the faculty that develop the curriculum, teach the courses, and

assess student learning. Ultimately, it is up to the faculty to decide how they will or will not incorporate employer input, engage industry in classroom activities, or partner for experiential learning as part of the academic program. For industry and higher education to work together to improve student learning and experiences, faculty members are the ones who in the end make it happen.

## **Recommendations**

New program approval can be a tool to implement deep change in higher education. It is also one of the only ways board and commission members can become closely involved in the programs of a college or university (Barak & Breier, 1990). Deep change is a system-level change that impacts student learning and opportunities for students to meet their personal and economic goals. For system higher education leaders to achieve the goal of having students graduate with the competencies employers need, academic program approval is a first step. As Dr. Denley, former executive vice chancellor and chief academic officer at the USG, observed, academic program approval goes all the way down into the classroom. Because of the deep ripples that academic program approval has within the higher education system in a state, I offer eight recommendations for state systems working to improve the alignment of academic programs to state workforce needs.

### Provide Employers a Single Point of Contact and a Coordinated Response

This study shows that the power to approve new academic programs is central to the governance powers given to governing boards and higher education coordinating boards. States like Georgia with centralized governing boards are able to create programs centrally or top down. This ability to create programs for a whole industry, including coordinating the curriculum development among various institutions, gives centralized systems like in Georgia a

competitive advantage. In states like Tennessee with coordinating boards, the ability to create degrees to meet a whole industry's need centrally is not part of the coordinating board model. Instead, the coordinating board creates awareness through products like labor market forecasts (e.g., the Supply and Demand Forecast), convenes meetings, and facilitates and encourages individual schools and other systems to meet employers' talent needs. The board must rely on a willing school or coalition to meet those needs. Based on the interviews conducted for this dissertation, recent programs approved in both states, and testimony given at board meetings by presidents, it is clear that institutions are in tune with employer needs in both Georgia and Tennessee. However, meeting the needs of a whole industry through a statewide strategy is more easily achieved through a centralized governing board.

TBR has developed a model for the centralized communication of employer and industry needs. The IDEAL model is an example of how to address two key policy problems I uncover in my research. First, this model positions the system office staff as the point of contact for employers. Second, the IDEAL model includes TBR staff who support a consortium of TBR institutions or a single institution in developing curricula and programs to meet employers' needs. States with coordinating boards can learn from the TBR approach.

Regardless of the approach to new program development, state staff recognize the critical role faculty play in developing the actual content that will be taught and how to best deliver that content. System office staff can act as translators, interpreting what an industry needs and then relaying that information to faculty so they can develop a curriculum that meets accreditation standards and institutional requirements, while incorporating relevant learning objectives. Based on the data gathered for this case study, I suggest five ways state systems can improve academic program development and approval through employer engagement and coordination. Both

governing boards and coordinating boards can take on all five of these suggestions: (1) Develop a central point of contact for employers. Employers and industry leaders want one point of contact who can be their champion inside the higher education system. (2) Designate staff who can help translate the competencies the employer needs into a format that faculty can then use to develop learning competencies and curricula. Employers and educators usually do not speak the same language. Translation and interpretation are needed. This same centralized function can also triage requests and determine the best way to meet the employer's needs, whether it be non-credit or credit micro credentials, technical training, certificates, or a new academic program or suite of programs and degree levels. (3) Share curricula across state institutions. Employers expect public institutions in the same state to share their curricula with other public institutions in the same system. (4) Monitor market demands and forecast the high-demand occupations. (5) Higher education system staff can support faculty in developing programs that have a statewide need and help fill labor gaps.

#### Forecast Talent Demand in Coordination with the State Economic Development Agency

Higher education leaders and academic planners are interested in meeting the future talent needs in the economy. The more planners are aware of future demand and the emerging competencies and skills needed by employers, the better they can meet employer demands. Lead time is needed to develop new programs. It can take a year for a university to develop a new program proposal, and implementing the program can even longer if faculty have to be hired, and then usually one to four years to graduate students in that new program. Talent demand forecasts and interagency planning in concert with the state economic development agency are two ways to get ahead of the demand curve.

System offices can compile data and communicate to faculty the career areas in high demand in the state as well as related competencies desired by area businesses. New program proposals often originate from faculty. However, due to siloing, faculty may not be aware of broader trends in the economy and workforce. For this reason, Georgia takes a system-level approach to identifying programs that are in-demand for a whole industry. In Tennessee, the multi-agency-produced labor demand forecast identifies occupations expected to be in demand over the next 10 years. The Georgia Department of Labor publishes similar forecasts, though they are not produced collaboratively across departments and institutions, as is done in Tennessee. House Bill 982, introduced in Georgia during the 2024 legislative session, attempts to centralize the creation of a high-demand career list under the State Workforce Development Board and publish it annually.

Tennessee's convening of economic development, labor, and education agencies to coordinate economic develop efforts and discuss what education providers must do to meet the talent needs of employers being recruited to the state is a model other states could replicate. The Georgia Department of Economic Development has held similar meetings. The ability for the economic development agency that is recruiting companies and jobs to the state to collaborate with the agencies that assist with educating the labor force is a proactive step in the alignment of programs to state economic priorities. This type of approach helps higher education providers anticipate demand and act in a more coordinated way to address the needs of new industries or large employers entering the state. With this early awareness, new programs can be developed in a timelier manner to better meet demand.

Based on the research from this case study, system offices can fill two important roles to better align higher education with the state's economic development agenda: (1) collaborate to

produce lists of in-demand jobs and (2) facilitate or participate in multi-agency planning with education partners and the state's economic development agency.

#### Use "Talent Development" Language

Multiple respondents interviewed for this project noted that university faculty often perceive the words "workforce development" to be connected to vocational or technical education. Instead, they tend to prefer the term "talent development." Talent can take multiple forms, and it can lead to the next degree, intellectual opportunities, or the development of skills needed for a particular career. To mitigate friction with academic faculty and more broadly discuss the relationship between higher education and the economy, I suggest that higher education leaders use the term "talent development."

#### Task Experienced Staff with New Academic Program Review

In the two states researched for this comparative study, I found differences in the background and level of experience of those who review academic program proposals at the USG versus THEC. THEC utilizes an outside reviewer to gain an objective perspective and subject matter expertise on programs being proposed. A state's governance structure and program proposal process can impact who is hired at the system office to do the analysis. Traditionally, the USG Academic Affairs Office tends to hire former provosts and academic affairs leaders from its 26 institutions to work in the division. These leaders then make up the integrated review team that assesses new program applications. At THEC, staff analysts that review the applications and site visit reports have an average of eight years of higher education campus experience; however, most do not have campus experience at the vice president or provost of academic affairs level.

Staff in both states mentioned the role they play in coaching institutions through the approval process and providing tools and insights. Those who review proposals are closest to the discussions inside their system offices and are often privy to commissioner and board member discussions. System staff are uniquely positioned to provide campus applicants perspective and guidance on the program they are considering proposing and can help campus leaders be more realistic and efficient with their time. I recommend that states consider hiring former administrators with experience working in the provost office or former department chairs to work in system academic affairs offices. My interviews revealed that those with more experience are seen as having more credibility when providing coaching and feedback on proposals.

#### Expand the Use of Advisory Committees to Inform Program Content

One former higher education system leader interviewed for this project noted that many faculty are not talking with employers and may not always be aware of the larger state economic development context or politics. Additionally, a college president acknowledged that faculty in academic programs that have a one-to-one relationship between the degree and an occupation (e.g., nursing, secondary education, accounting, or other technical two-year and four-year programs) generally engage more with employers. Programs with a one-to-many relationship with occupations (e.g., English, sociology, biology)—meaning that graduates with a specific degree work in a variety of occupations and in a variety of industries—do not have as much engagement with employers. Graduate outcome data, like those found in the Post-secondary Employment Outcomes Explorer (PSEO)<sup>26</sup> from the U.S. Census Bureau, provide details on the earnings and industry in which graduates are working in one, five, and 10 years after graduation.

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<sup>26</sup> <https://www.census.gov/data/academy/webinars/2023/pseo-past-present-and-the-future.html>

The industry data in such tools can help program leaders of “one-to-many” programs identify the key industries where graduates are working. This insight can help deans and department chairs identify representatives and alumni who work in those industries to participate in their future advisory committees.

Advisory committees are a staple in high school career and technical education programs. Deans and department chairs who oversee bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral programs of all types can learn from the best practices of existing advisory committee frameworks and develop innovative ways to use graduate outcome data and alumni to ensure programs are being updated to reflect the skills, competencies, and habits needed by future employers. Through such committees, alumni can play a critical role in student talent development.

Based on the learning from this research, regular dialog with employers can help keep a program relevant. State systems can encourage leaders of all academic programs to create program advisory committees comprising a representative sample of alumni and industry representatives. The formation of these advisory committees can be informed by graduate outcomes data that identify the industries in which alumni are working.

### Engage Stakeholders When Changing Processes and Policies

When developing or changing a process or policy, involving those affected or those who will implement the change will increase its chances of success and help gain buy-in from institutional staff (Kotter, 2012). When revising Georgia’s new program approval process and developing support tools and data, the USG involved an advisory committee made up of various stakeholders from across the 26 institutions and also held multiple focus groups across the colleges and universities. The USG staff benefited from the perspectives of campus leaders and provost offices, economic developers, students, alumni, foundation leaders, and career services

directors. Though the USG has the authority to dictate policy to the 26 institutions, garnering their input, buy-in, and support created a positive change environment. One USG leader attributed the lack of pushback from institutions on the new academic program application and process to all the work of the advisory group and interaction with other stakeholders in the process of developing the new requirements and processes.

In Tennessee, between the August 2023 and the November 2023 THEC meetings, the THEC academic affairs leader convened a meeting of the academic affairs leaders from across the systems and institutions that need THEC approval for programs. The THEC chair mentioned in her remarks during the November 2023 THEC meeting that this was the first time all these leaders had been convened in a while to discuss and give input on how the process of academic program approval could be improved (THEC, 2023e).

A tenet of change management (and human-centered design) is to involve those who will be affected by the change in the policy-making process (Kotter, 2012). Intentional engagement with students, employers, and all institutional stakeholders will benefit any system or institution that is revising its academic program approval process. Taking the time to convene stakeholders and include end users in the design of new processes and policies will improve buy-in and implementation of the change.

### Align Faculty Incentives with Experiential Learning and Student Success

Incentives strongly influence what happens in higher education. Faculty incentives can conflict with those of students if certain checks and balances are not put in place. Faculty are promoted based on the development and publication of innovative research, teaching evaluations, and service to the profession. New incentive structures need to be developed to encourage faculty to work with industry to develop experiential learning opportunities and make

sure the curriculum will prepare students for success after graduation. Today, students and industry are the parties most motivated to make sure the content of an academic program is aligned with the competencies demanded by employers. Outside pressure from higher education system leadership, industry, legislators, and accreditors can all influence systemic changes to encourage more faculty–employer engagement. Higher education systems can work to align institution and faculty incentives with student success.

### Positioning Public Higher Education as a Center for Lifelong Learning

For generations, most higher education institutions have focused on students graduating with a two-year or four-year degree. Four-year and six-year graduation rates are common measures of attainment in higher education. In most cases, graduation marks the end of a student’s education relationship. This approach is short-sighted. In contrast, the 2029 USG Strategic Plan states that higher education has a role in lifelong learning. The USG aims to develop continuing and professional education to meet “workforce needs and support new and returning students throughout their careers” (USG, 2023).

Because of a rapidly changing economy and labor market, learning never stops. To stay competitive, graduates must continually build new skills and reinforce others. In fact, learning how to learn and developing creative problem-solving skills are two important benefits of a college general education and specifically a liberal arts education (McCarthy, 2004; Startz, 2023; Weise, et al., 2020). While associate, bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees are all important markers of learning, extending the role of higher education can make it more relevant to the workforce of today and in the future. Institutions of higher education could be positioned as the places people return to throughout their careers for certificates and other credentials critical to their own talent development and to staying competitive in the labor market. A shift to

a model of lifelong learning would encourage institutions to be more attuned to the current talent needs of the labor market and the future education needs of alumni, while also providing another source of revenue at a time of declining enrollments at many colleges and universities. The lifelong learning mindset can also provide a needed feedback loop to refresh curricula at all levels and maintain some alignment with state workforce development efforts.

### **Implications For Future Research**

This study examined academic program approval in two states. Future studies would benefit from looking at the academic approval processes in additional states. In addition, this study focused on the process of approving programs at the state system level. I did not investigate the processes, policies, and practices that occur at individual colleges or universities that go into developing a program for system-level approval. An area for future research is to examine the roles of faculty, department leadership, provost offices, faculty senates, university councils, and the like in conceiving, preparing, approving, and requesting a new program within an institution. The economic developer perspective is also needed to fully understand the intersection of academic program approval and economic priorities of the state. For this study, only one economic development official in each state was interviewed. More research that includes the institution and economic developer perspective would enhance our understanding of program development and approval.

More analysis is needed on the role academic programs play in graduate outcomes. Though two programs in two institutions in different states may have the same CIP code, they will not be the same, as faculty customize the program through how they teach the content. Future research on how programs impact graduate outcomes can explore student preparation, the impact of curriculum design, and how student supports affect graduation outcomes within a

given program. Graduate outcomes data provided by the U.S. Census PSEO and state longitudinal data systems or P-20W data systems<sup>27</sup> offer new ways to analyze programs. For example, graduate outcomes by salary and by industry can be analyzed to better understand the cost of attendance and the relationship between programs of study and employment. These new graduate outcomes data sources offer more opportunities to analyze the interplay of academic programs and their effects on student recruitment, retention, completion, and eventual employment.

## **Conclusion**

This study finds suggestive evidence that states are using new program approval to advance their economic goals. Policy change frameworks such as the multiple streams framework and the ecology of higher education policy change are helpful in understanding the factors influencing policy changes in Georgia and Tennessee related to new program approval. This study highlights the power states have to approve new academic programs and how they can use that power to align academic programs to state economic needs. My findings add to a small but growing body of work on academic program approval as one of the powers that is part of state authorization. This study finds that governance structure plays an important role in a state's ability to meet industry and employer needs. In Georgia, which has a centralized governance structure, the USG has the authority to create academic programs from the top down for a given industry. This power does not preclude individual schools from proposing programs that may meet a regional or single-employer need, but the system office can also encourage institutions to be part of collaborative solutions for whole industries. The ability to work with

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<sup>27</sup> State longitudinal data systems track student activity from kindergarten through college for students in a given state. Many of these systems were first conceived as P-20 systems, meaning preschool to grade 20. More states have added a W at the end of P-20 to signify that their longitudinal data system is tracking activities and outcomes from preschool to the workforce.

member institutions and create new programs for entire industries has been replicated several times now in Georgia.

Tennessee is a coordinating board state. This study highlights the ways coordinating boards can focus attention on high-demand occupations and their related programs, provide reports on how labor force gaps are narrowing or widening, and convene stakeholders to understand needs. By nature of their governance structure, coordinating boards are limited in their ability to create programs centrally. They act more as an air traffic controller and convener. The power to create multi-institutional programs centrally is granted to governing boards like TBR and the UT System. In Tennessee, this means the colleges and universities may need to be even more proactive in developing statewide programs for industry.

Approving programs is an administrative process. The real work is creating the content for a new program and making sure it has a student market and will be financially viable. Both states require applicants for new programs to assess the market and show evidence that the program is needed and that it will not oversaturate the existing education market. They must make a financial case for the program. Because of the lag in state funding formulas, institutions are essentially responsible for the startup costs for new programs in both states. This fact alone incentivizes institutions to not propose programs that will lose money. Accreditors have the responsibility to make sure programs are academically rigorous and that the curriculum will deliver the learning objectives intended.

One way to measure program quality is student preparation for a job. Whether this goal has been met is not definitively known until graduates enter the workforce and can provide feedback on whether they felt prepared. Because of this long feedback loop, system offices can require that alumni and future employers be more involved in developing the curriculum and

encourage ongoing communication with employers and alumni through program advisory councils. Because new academic program approval permeates multiple layers of bureaucracy in higher education, it can be a vehicle for deep change. For this reason, Georgia and Tennessee have been able to use this power to improve the alignment of programs with state economic needs and also address policy goals related to student success.

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## APPENDIX A.

### INTERVIEW GUIDE

USG AND THEC Participants

START TIME : \_\_\_\_\_

Background

1. Tell me about your role as it relates to higher education administration and policy change.
2. Please share with me your thoughts on the role of higher education in economic development in Georgia / Tennessee. (ecology- political)
3. The focus of my research is on the process and context of policy changes related new degree program approvals (Remind participant of the policy change made by USG or THEC).
4. Tell me about the social and economic conditions in (Georgia / Tennessee) at the time these changes in policy were happening? (Ecol-socio-economic context)
  - a. How did attitudes about economic development or workforce development influenced this policy change? (Ecology – policy context)
5. Tell me why you think the board / commission made changes to the policy or process of approving new academic degrees.
  - a. What was the problem or issue the board/ commission was trying to address with the policy change? (MSF-Problem stream)
6. Sometimes certain policy changes are possible when a “window of opportunity” opens up. Was there anything going on at the time this policy was developed and enacted that created that window of opportunity? Or made it so it “all come together.” (MSF-Policy window)
7. Where did the idea to enact these policy changes related to new program approval originate? (MSF-Policy)
  - a. Sometimes changes in leadership, board or commission membership, news reports, or even economic conditions are the impetus for policy changes, can you think of any events or conditions that may have helped spur this policy change? (MSF – Coupling)

- b. What were some of the political pressures or attitudes of leaders that may have motivated making this policy change? (MSF-Politics)
  - c. From your perspective, who informed and influenced the policy changes? (organizational and policy context) (listen for Board / Commission, Governor's office, Legislature, Intermediaries etc.
8. Often in the policy change process you find a champion, advocate or entrepreneur. When you think about policy changes related to new degree program approval, tell me about any policy advocates or entrepreneurs that may have played a role. (MSF-Policy Entrepreneurs)
  9. What barriers or resistance was in play when working on the policy change (e.g. budget constraints, opposition or push back from institutions, etc.) (MSF-Policy)
  10. When working on policy changes, where do you look for ideas? (interstate policy diffusion context)
    - a. Are there other state's you tend to follow to see how they are doing things? If so, who? (interstate policy diffusion context)
    - b. Are there other organizations or people that you look to for information or ideas? (interstate policy diffusion context)
  11. How are policy changes developed and enacted in USG / THEC? (politico-institutional context)
    - a. What is the role of the institutions in the policy development process? How do the institutions under USG / THEC inform policy changes? (politico-institutional context)

Conclusion

12. As we said at the beginning, the purpose of this study is to understand the policy making process related to the review and approval of new degree programs at USG / THEC. Is there anything we left out? Is there anything we didn't talk about that you think we should know?

END RECORDING.

END TIME : \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX B.

### THEC NEW ACADEMIC PROGRAMS APPROVAL PROCESS (POLICY A1.0)

Title: Academic Policies

Policy Title: New Academic Programs: Approval Process

Policy Number: A 1.0

1.0.1 A **Purpose.** Pursuant to Tennessee Code Annotated § 49-7-202(q)(2)(A), the Tennessee Higher Education Commission has the statutory responsibility to review and approve new academic programs for public institutions of higher education in the State of Tennessee. These responsibilities shall be exercised so as to:

- promote academic quality;
- maximize cost effectiveness and efficiency to ensure the benefits to the state outweigh the costs and that existing programs are adequately supported;
- fulfill student demand, employer need, societal, and economic requirements;
- avoid unnecessary duplication and ensure that proposed academic programs cannot be delivered more efficiently through collaboration or alternative arrangements; and
- encourage cooperation among all institutions, both public and private.

These expectations for program quality and viability are underscored by Tennessee Code Annotated § 49-7-202(d)(4)(A)-(C). This statute directs public higher education to:

- address the state's economic development, workforce development and research needs;
- ensure increased degree production within the state's capacity to support higher education; and
- use institutional mission differentiation to realize statewide efficiencies through institutional collaboration and minimized redundancy in degree offerings, instructional locations, and competitive research.

1.0.2 A **New Academic Programs Subject to Approval.** Programs subject to approval, per this policy, are associate degree programs, baccalaureate degree programs, master's degree programs, and doctoral degree programs.

1.0.2 B **Joint Degree Academic Programs.** For purposes of this policy, a joint degree academic program is whereby two (2) or more institutions grant a single academic award for completion of an academic program.

For new joint programs that involve the development of a new academic program, a Memorandum of Understanding that clearly outlines program responsibilities and fiscal

arrangements among participating institutions must be developed and approved concurrently with the program proposal at each institution.

If any partner institution does not currently offer the academic program for the joint degree, the joint degree program must undergo the new academic program approval process as outlined in this policy.

If two (2) or more institutions create a joint degree program with academic programs that have already been approved at each institution, then the new joint degree program does not need to undergo the new academic program process and would be subject to the Academic Policy A 1.1 – Academic Program Modifications.

1.0.3 A1 **Criteria for Review.** THEC staff consider the following criteria in order to maximize state resources in evaluating academic programs:

- Alignment with the state master plan for higher education and institutional mission – An institution must provide evidence that the proposed academic program aligns with the state’s master plan for higher education and institutional mission, with a focus on leveraging differentiation to realize statewide efficiency of degree offerings, instructional locations, and competitive research.
- Feasibility – An institution must provide documentation that demonstrates the need for the new academic program including student interest, local and regional demand, industry support, and workforce need.
- Institutional capacity to deliver the proposed academic program – Supporting documentation must be included that confirms an institution can deliver the proposed program within existing and projected resources.
- Program costs/revenues – An institution must provide documentation of all new anticipated costs and revenues associated with the academic program.

1.0.3 A2 **No Unnecessary Duplication.** The THEC Academic Program Inventory provides the initial indication of apparent duplication or undue proliferation of programs in the state. When other similarly titled existing programs may serve the same potential student population, an institution seeking to develop potentially duplicative programs should consult THEC with evidence to demonstrate that a newly proposed academic program is:

- in accord with the institution’s distinct mission as approved by the Commission;
- sufficiently different from all related existing programs in the geographical region in quality and/or rigor, costs of degree completion, student success and completion rates, etc.; and
- more cost effective or otherwise in the best interests of the State to initiate a new academic program rather than meet the demand through other arrangements (e.g., collaborative means with other institutions, distance education technologies, and consortia).

1.0.4 A **Steps to Establish a New Academic Program.** The process in developing a new academic program is multi-staged and includes the following essential steps:

- Letter of Notification (LON)
- New Academic Program Proposal (NAPP)
- External Review
- Institutional Governing Board Approval
- Commission Action

1.0.5 A **Letter of Notification (LON).** The LON must address the criteria for review as outlined previously in Sections 1.0.3A1 and 1.0.3A2. The LON should provide clear, supporting documentation that the proposed academic program contributes to meeting the priorities and goals of the institution's academic or master plan; why the institution needs the academic program; and why the state needs graduates from that particular academic program. The submission of the LON must also include a letter from the President or Chancellor signifying support for development of the proposed academic program.

1.0.5B Evaluation of Letter of Notification (LON). The LON will be posted on the THEC website for a 15 calendar day period for comment by interested parties. Evaluation of the LON will be conducted by THEC

staff and will include consideration of any public comments. The 15 calendar day public comment period may be extended to a maximum of 30 calendar days at the discretion of THEC staff.

THEC staff have the authority to request additional information for the proposed program including, but not limited to, an external, independent feasibility study.

Based on the assessment of the LON both internally, and in relation to external comments, THEC staff will make one of the following determinations and notify the institution within 30 calendar days after the close of the public comment period:

- to support;
- not to support; or,
- to defer a decision based on revision of the LON.

Furthermore, the THEC Executive Director has the authority to refer action on the LON to the Commission for determination if deemed appropriate and/or at the request of the Chairman of the Commission.

1.0.5 C **Letter of Notification (LON) Expiration.** All approved LONs are valid for two (2) years from the date a determination of support is made. If the Commission has not approved the academic program for implementation within two (2) years from the date a determination of support is made, the LON is no longer valid. An institution can request an extension in writing to the THEC Executive Director if extenuating circumstances have delayed the proposed academic program.

LONs that have been submitted, but not approved, are valid for up to two (2) years based on the original submission date. An institution can request an exception in writing to the THEC Executive Director if extenuating circumstances have delayed the proposed academic program.

**1.0.6 A New Academic Program Proposal (NAPP).** Institutions are responsible for quality academic program development and THEC encourages the use of external consultants in development of new programs. The NAPP is to be submitted in entirety to THEC in accordance with requirements outlined in the NAPP checklist on the THEC website.

**1.0.7 A External Review.** External reviewers will be required to serve as expert evaluators for all proposed new academic programs. For doctoral programs, two (2) external reviewers will be required to evaluate the proposed academic program.

THEC will select reviewers from the proposed institutional external reviewer list. Individuals used in the development stage as external consultants may not serve as external reviewers. External reviewers should be selected in alignment with criteria outlined in the Ethical Obligations of Evaluators policy statement for the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC).

In the event no external reviewers proposed by the institution are available or acceptable, THEC staff reserve the right to approve an exception or propose alternative external reviewers and may opt, when appropriate, to authorize a paper review of the proposed academic program rather than a visit to the campus by the external reviewer.

The institution or system office will be notified of the selected reviewers, the review modality, dates of availability of THEC staff, and provide a list of questions for the external reviewer to address during the course of the review. Institutions may add additional questions to the THEC review questions. The external reviewer must provide a written report in response to the questions concurrently to the institution/system office and THEC staff within 30 calendar days of the conclusion of the site visit.

The institution will be responsible for inviting the external reviewer, all scheduling, expenses and contracting with the external reviewer. THEC will provide a summary of the required agenda sessions for the site visit.

**1.0.7 B Post-External Review.** After receipt of the external reviewer's report, an institution must propose solutions to THEC in keeping with best practices for all issues identified by the reviewer.

**1.0.8 A Institutional Governing Board Approval.** Prior to inclusion on the Commission agenda, an institution must have received institutional governing board approval in alignment with institutional/system policies regarding new program approval. Approval from the institutional governing board can be attained at any time in the development of the proposed program but documentation of approval must be provided prior to Commission consideration.

1.0.9 A **Request for Inclusion on Commission Agenda.** Once all requirements of the multi-stage process have been satisfied, THEC staff will notify the institution/system that they are able to request inclusion on the next Commission agenda.

1.0.10 A **Commission Action.** Proposed academic programs supported by THEC staff and approved by the institutional governing board will be presented to the Commission for action at the earliest possible scheduled meeting.

Commission action on a given academic program may take one (1) of four (4) actions:

- approval
- disapproval
- conditional approval
- deferral

Conditional approval may be granted in special cases. This type of approval is reserved for academic programs for which the need is temporary. Conditional approvals will identify a date that the academic program must be terminated.

1.0.10 B **Advertisement of New Academic Program.** New academic programs may not be advertised by any public institution prior to approval by the Commission unless exceptional circumstances require special consideration. Requests for special consideration shall be submitted in writing after a determination of support has been made following post- external review. Requests for special consideration must be approved by the THEC Executive Director. Students may not apply or be admitted to any program prior to final approval by the Commission.

1.0.10 C **Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) Action.** If a new program requires SACSCOC approval, the institution must notify the THEC Chief Academic Officer in writing within 90 days of receipt of the approval or denial from SACSCOC.

If SACSCOC denies approval for the new academic program, the institution must notify the THEC Chief Academic Officer that it will appeal the SACSCOC decision or withdraw the program within 90 days from SACSCOC's denial.

1.0.11A **Approval of New Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) Community College Programs.** New TBR community college associate degree programs are subject to the criteria for review and accountability set forth in Section 1.0.3A1 of this policy. These guidelines must be the basis for TBR staff review and governing board approval.

After final approval by TBR of a new associate degree program, TBR must submit a written request for the program to be included on the next Commission agenda for approval. The request must include documentation of governing board approval and all new academic program approval materials. Prior to inclusion on the Commission agenda, THEC staff will review new program approval materials to ensure completeness and alignment with Section 1.0.3A1 of this policy. Those new degree programs that are submitted with complete documentation and are

confirmed to be in alignment with Section 1.0.3A1 will be included on the next Commission meeting agenda.

While new certificates and replicated associate degree programs at TBR community colleges are not subject to this policy, they are subject to academic program inventory notification as outlined in Section 1.0.10B and post-approval monitoring requirements as outlined in Section 1.0.11A. Academic program replication is defined as the addition of an associate degree program at a TBR community college that has already been approved and is active at one (1) or more TBR community colleges.

**1.0.11B TBR Academic Program Inventory Notification.** TBR will provide a monthly summary report to THEC of all community college program actions approved by TBR, including those programs not subject to this policy. THEC will list all approved community college and certificate programs and reported changes on the THEC Academic Program Inventory.

**1.0.12A Post-Approval Monitoring.** Post-approval monitoring is an annual process by which academic programs are evaluated and is initiated when a new program receives approval by the Commission or is reported through TBR academic program inventory notification. Performance of academic programs, based on goals established in program approval documentation, will be evaluated by THEC annually. The monitoring period will be three (3) years for pre-baccalaureate programs, five (5) years for baccalaureate and master's programs, and seven (7) years for doctoral programs. While the program is in post-

approval monitoring, any changes that would affect the academic program inventory related to the approved program will need to be submitted in writing to THEC staff for consideration.

THEC staff may choose to extend the monitoring period if additional time is needed for the program to demonstrate success on program benchmarks. Annually, the Commission will review post-approval monitoring reports on academic programs that are currently being monitored, including information on those programs not meeting program benchmarks. Additionally, pursuant to Tennessee Code Annotated § 49-7-202(q)(1)(B), the Commission may recommend to the President/Chancellor that a program be terminated if it is deemed unnecessarily duplicative. Copies of such recommendations will be forwarded to the Education Committees of the General Assembly.

Upon completion of post-approval monitoring, academic programs will be evaluated via Quality Assurance Funding, which is a statewide supplemental funding incentive to encourage continuous improvement of academic programs.

Sources: THEC Meetings: April 22, 1988; January 29, 1997; November 14, 2002; January 27, 2011; July 28, 2011; January 29, 2015; January 26, 2017; January 25, 2019; July 28, 2022; and January 27, 2023; and January 25, 2024.

## APPENDIX C

### USG NEW ACADEMIC DEGREE PROGRAM APPLICATION

[Text version of application is provided below]

Released

Updated Version: Summer 2023

#### USG Routing Only

- Program was part of the Annual Academic Forecast
- This proposal requires USG integrated review

#### USG ACADEMIC PROGRAM APPLICATION

##### A. **OVERVIEW** To be completed as part of SharePoint Submission

1. Request ID: (SharePoint Generated unique ID)
2. Institution Name:
3. USG Sector:
4. School/Division/College:
5. Academic Department:
6. Degree Level:
7. Proposed Program Name:
8. Major:
9. Degree Acronym:
10. CIP Code (8 digit):  
(Please use default (00) for the last 2-digit extension unless using same CIP code for similar institutional program.)
10. Anticipated Implementation Semester and Year^:
11. Was this program listed in the most recent Academic Forecast?

- Yes
- No (If no, explain why below)

12. Program Description (Provide a description of the program to be used in the Board of Regents meeting packet):

13. Accreditation<sup>^</sup>: Describe disciplinary accreditation requirements associated with the program (if applicable, otherwise indicate not applicable).

14. Specify SACSCOC or other accreditation organization requirements<sup>^</sup>. Mark all that apply.

- Substantive change requiring notification only
- Substantive change requiring approval prior to implementation
- Level Change
- None

## **B. STRATEGIC PLAN**

15. How does the program align with the USG System Wide/Strategic Plan Context (within mission fit):

16. How does the program align with your institutional mission and function<sup>^</sup>? If the program does not align, provide a compelling rationale for the institution to offer the program.

17. How does the program align with your institution's strategic plan and academic program portfolio? Identify the number of existing and new courses to be included in the program.

## **C. NEED**

18. To what extent does the program align with local, regional, and/or state talent demand or workforce strategies?

19. Was this proposal and the design of the curriculum informed by talking with alumni, employers, and community representatives or other evidence of demand (e.g. employment sector trends, clearly defined learner demand, complement to an existing program, meeting a persistent, new, or emerging demand for knowledge and innovation).

- No
- Yes (If yes, use the space below to explain how their input informed this proposal)

20. Identify the partners you are working with to create a career pipeline with this program .<sup>^</sup> Mark all that apply

- High School CTAE
- High School STEM

- Career academies
- TCSG programs
- Other USG institutions
- Other universities
- Employers
- Community partnerships
- Professional associations
- Other (specify below)

None

21. Are there any competing or complementary programs at your own institution?
- No
  - Yes (If yes, provide additional information about the competing program(s) below).

22. The program service area is used as the basis for labor market supply and demand analysis. What is the program's service area (local, regional, state, national)? If outside of the institution's traditional service area, provide a compelling rationale for the institution to offer the program. If the program's service area is a region within the state, include a map showing the counties in the defined region.

23. Do any other USG higher education institutions in close proximity or sector service area offer a similar program?
- No
  - Yes (If yes, provide a rationale for the institution to offer the program)

24. Using IPEDS data, list the supply of graduates in the program and related programs in the service area.

Similar or Related Degrees/Programs	CIP Code	Supply <sup>1</sup> (Graduates/Completers)	Competitor Institutions <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Supply = Number of program graduates last year within the study area

<sup>2</sup> Competitors = List other USG institutions that offer this program or a similar program in the area (see [Question 23](#))

25. Based on the program’s study area, what is the employment outlook for occupations related to the program. An Excel version of the CIP to SOC crosswalk is also available from [NCES](#). If data for the study area is not available, then use state- or national-level data. Only list the jobs that are highly aligned and likely to be those for which you are preparing students and not every possibility.

Possible resources:

- Click [here](#) for US and Georgia occupation projections
- Click [here](#) for 2026 Georgia Department of Labor data projections for the State or Georgia Workforce Board Regions in Qlik (link to GDOL Projections); data is also available through the [GDOL Labor Market Explore Website](#)
- For a custom Georgia geography – request a Jobs EQ report from [USG Academic Affairs office](#).
- Using data from *O\*-Net*, identify the average salary for the related occupations identified in question.

**Labor Market/Career Placement Outlook/Salary:**

Occupation	O*Net <sup>1</sup>	Current Employment	% Growth	Average Salary (O-Net data)	Future Earnings Potential (O-Net data)
	(Outlook)				

<sup>1</sup>National Center for O\*NET Development. *O\*NET OnLine*. Retrieved [include date] from <https://www.onetonline.org/>

26. Based on the data provided in questions 24 and 25, discuss how this program will help address a need or gap in the labor market? (Provide letters of support and explain the collaboration and how partners will share or contribute resources. Consider internal pipeline programs – “off-ramp programs,” Nursing to integrated health, or MOUs for pathways with other USG institutions (pipelines – keep them in state for grad school if possible).

27. Using data from O\*-Net, identify the average salary for the related occupations identified in question. Then list at least three technical skills and three Knowledge, Skills and Abilities (KSAs) associated with the related occupations. This information can be found using at [onetonline.org](#).

Occupation	SOC Code	Occupation specific technology skills & KSAs

Provide any additional comments, if needed:

Provide any additional comments, if needed:

28. Based on the data compiled and analyzed for this section (see Section C: Need), what is the job outlook for occupations filled by students with this degree?^

**D. CURRICULUM**

29. Enter the number of credit hours required to graduate and/or complete the program^  
Enter #

30. Are you requesting a credit hour requirement waiver (either below or above traditional credit hour length requirements as prescribed by the University System of Georgia? See section 2.3.5 (Degree Requirements) of the USG Board of Regents Policy Manual here for more information).

- No
- Yes (If yes, explain the rationale for the request in the space below)

31. Delivery Mode: related to SACSCOC accreditation, specify if the program format of the proposed program is a^:

<b>Format (Check 1)</b>	<b>Program Percentage</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> On Campus	<input type="checkbox"/> <50%
<input type="checkbox"/> On Campus AND Online	<input type="checkbox"/> 50-94%
<input type="checkbox"/> Online	<input type="checkbox"/> 95-100%
<input type="checkbox"/> Partially Online	<input type="checkbox"/> Unknown
<input type="checkbox"/> External	
<input type="checkbox"/> Campus/Online/External	
<input type="checkbox"/> On Campus & External	

32. Is the program synchronous or asynchronous? Mark one of the options below.

- Synchronous (The majority of courses are offered at scheduled, pre-determined times with students connecting to a virtual room or location and interacting with faculty and fellow students via web/video conferencing platform.)
- Asynchronous

33. For ALL degree proposals, which High Impact Practices (HIPs) will faculty embed into the program? Mark all that apply.

- Internships
- First-Year Experiences

- Common Intellectual Experiences
- Diversity/Global Learning
- ePortfolios
- Service Learning, Community Based Learning

- Undergraduate Research
- Capstone Courses and Projects
- Learning Communities
- Writing-Intensive Courses
- Collaborative Assignments and Projects

34. For ALL degrees, discuss how HIPs will be embedded into the program? Your discussion should provide specific examples and include whether the HIP is required or an optional component. It should also indicate at what point the experience is offered or required.

(i.e. “Students will be required to participate in an externship during their third year of enrollment, in order to develop skills in... etc.”).

35. Does the program take advantage of any USG initiatives? Mark all that apply, and provide a letter of support from applicable initiatives’ leadership.

- eCampus
- Georgia Film Academy
- FinTECH
- Other: Specify Initiative Here

36. List the learning outcomes for the program?^ Attach the curriculum map for the upper division or major curriculum.

37. For ALL degree proposals, fill in the table below to demonstrate the link between the learning outcomes and NACE career ready competencies. Insert more rows as needed.

Career Ready Competencies (NACE)	Student Learning Outcomes	Direct Measure (s) <sup>1</sup>
Critical Thinking/Problem Solving		
Oral/Written Communications		
Team Work/ Collaboration		
Digital Technology		
Leadership		
Professionalism/ Work Ethic		
Career Management		
Global/Intercultural Fluency		

38. How will outcomes for graduates of the program be assessed? (Outcomes may include employment and placement rates, student or employer surveys, or other assessments of graduate outcomes)

39. List the entire course of study required to complete the academic program.<sup>^</sup>
- Include course: prefixes, numbers, titles, and credit hour requirements
  - Indicate the word “new” beside new courses
  - Include a program of study

**E. IMPLEMENTATION**

40. Provide an enrollment projection for the next four academic years<sup>^</sup>

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
Fiscal Year (Fall to Summer)	202x-xx	202x-xx	202x-xx	202x-xx
Base enrollment <sup>1</sup>				
Lost to Attrition (should be negative)				
New to the institution				
Shifted from Other programs within your institution				
<b>Total Enrollment</b>				
Graduates				
Carry forward base enrollment for next year				

<sup>1</sup>Total enrollment for year 1 becomes the base enrollment for year 2

- a. Discuss the assumptions informing your enrollment estimates (i.e. for example, you may highlight anticipated recruiting targets and markets, if and how program implementation will shift enrollment from other programs at the institution, etc.)
- b. If projections are significantly different from enrollment growth for the institution overall, please explain.
41. If projected program enrollment is not realized in year two, what actions are you prepared to take?
42. Discuss the marketing and recruitment plan for the program. Include how the program will be marketed to adult learners and underrepresented and special populations of students. What resources have been budgeted for marketing the new program?
43. Provide a brief marketing description for the program that can be used on the Georgia OnMyLine website.

44. If this proposal is for a Doctorate program, provide information below for at least three external and one USG reviewer of aspirational or comparative peer programs.

*Note: External reviewers must hold the rank of associate professor or higher in addition to other administrative titles.*

*Note: It is the responsibility of the institution proposing the doctoral degree program to attain external reviews and submit those reviews to their proposal.*

Reviewer 1 Name Reviewer 1 Title Reviewer 1 Institution Reviewer 1 Email Address Reviewer 1 Phone Number	Reviewer 2 Name Reviewer 2 Title Reviewer 2 Institution Reviewer 2 Email Address Reviewer 2 Phone Number	Reviewer 3 Name Reviewer 3 Title Reviewer 3 Institution Reviewer 3 Email Address Reviewer 3 Phone Number
USG Reviewer Name USG Reviewer Title USG Reviewer Institution USG Reviewer Email Address USG Reviewer Phone Number		

**F. RESOURCES**

F1. Finance^: Complete and submit the Excel budget forms and the questions below (Do not cut and paste in the excel budget template into this document, submit the Excel budget templates separately.)

45. Are you requesting a differential tuition rate for this program? (masters, doctoral, and professional programs only)

- No (Move to answer question 48)
- Yes (If yes, answer questions 47a & 47b)

a. What is the differential rate being requested? The rate below should reflect the core tuition plus the differential, i.e. the tuition rate being advertised to the student.

In-State per Semester:       \$Enter Amount  
Out-of-State per Semester:   \$Enter Amount

b. Provide tuition and mandatory fee rates assessed by competitive/peer programs per full-time student per semester. Please complete the table below:

Institution name	Link to institution's tuition & fee website	In-state tuition	Out-of-state tuition	In-state fees	Out-of-state fees

46. If existing funds are being reallocated, describe the impact on existing programs and the plan to mitigate these impacts.

47. If student fees are being charged (excluding mandatory fees), explain the cost and benefit to students, per fee.

48. Are there any additional financial costs that students will have to take on as part of this program, but not assessed directly by the institution? (e.g. software licenses, equipment, travel, etc.) If so, please describe these costs and what strategies you have considered to decrease the student's financial burden?

49. How does the institution plan for and fund increased indirect costs associated with the growth in students anticipated in the proposed program? Consider costs such as student advisement, student support services, tutoring, career services, additional library materials, technology, or other infrastructure.

**F2. Faculty^ – Explain your faculty and staff plan for the program**

50. Discuss how existing courses may be incorporated into this new program:

a. Course Development

# of total courses in the curriculum: Enter #

# of existing courses to be part of the new program Enter #

Net number of new courses to be developed Enter #

b. Comment on the costs and workload related to the new course development.

51. Explain how current faculty and staff will contribute to the program.^

a. How many faculty will be re-directed to this program from existing programs?

Enter #

b. If this program is approved, what will be the new teaching load and distribution of time for the current faculty members? How will existing staff be impacted?

c. List the faculty that will be redirected from their current teaching load assignments to support this new program

d. Explain who will be teaching the existing courses that are being released so faculty can teach a new program course. Additionally, please discuss the fiscal implications associated with course releases and redirections of faculty.

e. What costs are included in your budget for course development? (Consider professional development, course development time buy out, overload pay, and re-training)

f. Attach your SACSCOC roster for the proposed program. Include in parentheses the individual with administrative responsibility for the program and whether listed positions are projected new hires and/or currently vacant.

52. Explain your plan for new faculty and staff for the program:

53. How many new staff will be needed for this program over the next four years?  
Enter #

a. Discuss why new or additional staff resources are needed. Consider staff needs, support services (i.e. advisement, faculty support, etc.)

### **F3. Facilities – complete the questions below**

54. Where will the program be offered?^ Mark all that apply

- Main campus
- Satellite campus: Specify Here
- Other: Specify Here
- 100% Online

If the program is 100% online and will use only existing faculty, remaining facilities questions can be skipped.

55. Complete the table below. Specify if these spaces are existing or new in the table below.^ If new, provide the semester and year of completion.

Space	New Space (ASF)	Use Existing Space (as is) (ASF)	Use Existing Space (Renovated) (ASF)	Semester/ Year of Occupancy
Dry Labs (STEM related)				
Wet Labs (STEM related)				
Dedicated Offices				
Fine Arts Spaces <sup>1</sup>				
Classrooms				
Meeting Rooms				
Student Study Space				
Other (Specify)				

<sup>1</sup>Fine arts spaces can include theatres, recital halls, visual arts studios, performing arts centers, recording studios, design labs, and other performance venues.

56. If the anticipated program includes labs or “other” specialized spaces, please describe specific requirements for these rooms, including equipment.

57. What building(s) will be used to accommodate these programs? Please indicate specific building areas or room numbers where possible. If new construction, leasing, or land acquisition is required, please describe those plans.

58. What is the anticipated cost of facilities investments necessary during the first 4 years of the program? What is the planned funding source for initial facilities needs?

#### F4. Technology

Identify any major equipment or technology integral to program start-up and operations. List any equipment or assets over \$5,000 (cumulative per asset) needed to start-up and run the program (insert rows as needed)

	Technology and Equipment	Start-up Costs	On-going Costs	Est. Start Date of Operations/Use
1				
2				
3				
6				
<b>Total Technology Costs</b>		<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	

**G. RISKS AND ASSUMPTIONS**

60. In the table below, list any risks to the program’s implementation over the next four years. For each risk, identify the severity (low, medium, high), probability of occurrence (low, medium, high), and the institution’s mitigation strategy for each risk. Insert additional rows as needed. (e.g. Are faculty available for the cost and time frame).

Risk	Severity	Probability	Risk Mitigation Strategy

61. List any assumptions being made for this program to launch and be successful (e.g. SACSCOC accreditation request is approved, etc.).

**H. INSTITUTION APPROVAL**

Have you completed and submitted the signature page?

\* \* \*