



JAMES KING

Title	Vice chancellor
Organization	Tennessee Technology Centers
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Other	King has been vice chancellor of the Tennessee Technology Centers since August 1999. He is a former commissioner of the Council on Occupational Education. He currently serves on the board of directors as president of the American Technical Education Association and serves on the Board of Trustees for the National Vocational Technical Honor Society. He is a graduate of the University of Tennessee at Martin and has a master's degree from the University of Memphis.

“There’s Light at the End of the Tunnel”

An Interview with James King of the Tennessee Technology Centers

Harvard University’s graduate school of education published an article titled “Pathways to Prosperity: Meeting the Challenges of Preparing Young Americans for the 21st century.” The article cites the Tennessee Technology Centers for its 75 percent graduation completion rate, a rate most two-year institutions don’t meet. During the economic downturn, the Tennessee Technology Centers (TTC) placed 83 percent of their graduates in jobs. James King, vice chancellor of the 27-school system, spoke with *EconSouth* about the evolution of higher education, tuition inflation, and the future of distance learning.

EconSouth: *The Tennessee Technology Centers have combined remedial education with college-level development. What are the benefits and results of this sort of hybrid?*

James King: The research shows that many students starting their college career are not ready for college-level work. Our system integrates the remedial and development work within the program area. For instance, if we—Tennessee Technology Centers—have a student who wants to be an automotive technician, machinist, or computer operator, part of his or her day is spent in remedial and developmental [R&D] while still attending his or her program. This approach allows the students to understand why math and other basics

are so important. Those students find out in the first few weeks that a machinist does need to know math, algebra, and geometry. You’ve got to improve your reading skills to succeed in that field. The student sees the importance of the basic skills to the career choice.

I’ve got friends with children in college, and the parents boast and say, “My child is going to college,” but they haven’t completed a class that counted for credit in [most of] their first year. They’re in remedial and developmental programs. This is happening at colleges and universities across the country. Students get frustrated with the process and do not see the importance of R&D and leave with little or [no] real achievements toward a career. If the TTC system operated in that manner and placed an automotive student in remedial and developmental for the first six months, that student would be gone after about three days.

ES: *What is the reason behind the intensiveness of the schedule?*

King: I am a firm believer that the longer it takes you to go to school, the more likely you’ll drop out. Life gets in the way. We’re graduating students within the [traditional] time frame because our program structure is designed to get you in and get you out with a marketable skill. We integrate the remedial. We provide a strong student-service component. The program structure design is more like the



The curriculum at the Tennessee Technology Centers integrates remedial work with work within a student's program area, resulting in a placement rate of 83 percent of the system's graduates.

workplace. It's a model that has proven to work and [that] we have continued to perfect over the last 40-plus years. After a review of the IPEDS [Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System] data, I was amazed to find out of the 1,145 two-year public postsecondary institutions in the United States, only 105 can report that, for the last five years, more than 50 percent of their students graduated within an average of 150 percent of the normal time. One-fourth of the 105 are Tennessee Technology Centers, and our completion rates are 70 percent or more. There is no other state postsecondary system that comes anywhere close to achieving these outcomes. We're proud of that fact.

ES: *How has inflation in the cost of postsecondary education affected institutions of higher learning?*

King: When I look at our [tuition] inflation over the past 10 years, we have, like most institutions of higher education, nearly doubled our tuition. We are now faced with a troubling situation. We have a weak

economy and a decrease in state appropriations, and I cannot continue to see the tuition rate increasing and continue placing the burden on the backs of the students. Fortunately, in Tennessee we have two lottery scholarship programs providing help to students. One is the HOPE scholarship for the universities and community colleges, which is tied to ACT scores and high school graduation. We also have the grant [that serves our schools]; the Wilder-Naifeh Technical Skills Grant is available to all Tennessee residents, no matter the age. It presently covers about 70 percent of the tuition for our students. By removing some of the financial aid burden, we help increase our completion rates at the technology centers. However, our system is still looking at the possibility of double-digit tuition increases. At one point, this lottery scholarship covered 92 percent of tuition. As a result of tuition increases, the percentage of the costs covered by the Wilder-Naifeh Technical Skills Grant continues to go down, placing more burden on the student.

ES: *Is tuition inflation in the Southeast similar to what other regions are experiencing?*

King: When you look at the Southeast, I think tuition rates have traditionally been lower. For years, we were a low-tuition region. But I think at the same time, our tuition rates have nearly doubled or more than doubled over the past 10 years, as has been the case everywhere else in the country. We're raising tuition at the same rate as most of the nation, but the South probably had a lower tuition base to begin with. I think if you look in the New England area, the cost of education is probably higher, but we have probably raised tuition as much as anyone over the past several years. We have had to do so to keep the doors open and the lights on.

ES: *How will rising tuition affect the average family?*

King: There is going to be a point where the costs are going to get out of reach for a significant portion of our population. I really believe that. Especially at the university level, it's going to be back [to where] it probably was years ago, in the 1960s, when only [the upper class] could afford to go. However, I think you will see that students are more cost-conscious and are not going to come out of institutions anymore with \$100,000 to \$150,000 in student loans for a \$30,000 or \$40,000 job in a career that does not have the return on their investment. I think you'll see more of a shift to state institutions over the private schools if that continues to happen. Those \$30,000 and \$40,000 jobs are even getting more competitive to get. I think one shift you could see are state institutions being the lower-cost [option] for some of the students who can no longer afford to go to higher-cost private schools.

ES: *Will the Internet make distance learning more viable for more people?*

King: Yes, we have seen a huge surge in distance education and online education

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here in Tennessee. With the economic downturn, we are seeing a 40 percent increase in our students wanting online education. And some of it is two-fold. Students save time and money by enrolling online. The cost of fuel and everything tied to [transportation] makes online education less costly than getting up and going to school every day. We have had programs that have long waiting lists because, with the downturn in the economy, our enrollment has increased so much and class sizes have filled. You have students that end up on waiting lists. Students then rely on the distance education courses until they can get in an on-ground program. Online education also provides the opportunity for the individual who holds a job and cannot attend the traditionally offered classes. These students can take classes from the comfort of their homes at a time that fits their work schedule. I think the [increase in distance learning] will continue as people get more comfortable with online education, as the credibility of online education continues to improve, and online education is accepted in the world of academia and the workplace. Today, you are looking at a generation of students who are comfortable in the technology environment and taking classes online. Those of us who did not grow up in the computer age are still not quite as comfortable. I am still more comfortable in a classroom setting, but for those students who are tech savvy, distance education is a truly viable option.

ES: *Are students today resigned to graduating with large debts?*

King: Our students do not graduate with training-related debt. Out of the 27 technology centers in the state of Tennessee, we have eliminated the loan program in all but one. I made a commitment 12 years ago to eliminate the loan program primarily to protect the students from themselves. We tried to put together a financial aid package that would work, including the technical skills grant scholarship, federal financial aid, etc. I didn't want to hear

a commercial running where one of our students was saying, "I am still paying for that slice of pizza I ate in 1986." We have a technical skills grant that serves the purpose of the loan, and we're completing 75 percent of our students without the students going in debt.

With that said, I do feel like there's more emphasis placed on student debt now in the higher education settings than there was 10–20 years ago. I think students are being a little more conscious [about debt]; they're trying to keep from taking out as many loans. Unfortunately, many traditional college students still rely on loans to go to school with tuition continuing to increase. They have no choice at this point but to [borrow] if they're going to go to school.

ES: *What industries have the greatest employment opportunities?*

King: In Tennessee, we are seeing graduates with marketable skills and industry credentials finding employment opportunities. Specifically, graduates within the health care arena are currently being placed. Practical nurses, surgical techs, health information technologists, and other allied health professionals are getting jobs even with the economic downturn. We're seeing a high placement rate in the area of machinists, automotive technicians, and skilled trade areas. Our students are getting jobs due to their specific skill sets.

What has changed slightly is that for years we viewed the only road to success as a four-year degree. Employers are now placing more emphasis on the employee's skill and/or industry credentials instead of the once-coveted general four-year degree. People with generalist degrees are having trouble finding employment and will continue to have problems because the workplace is changing.

There are fabulous opportunities available for skilled technicians coming from community colleges and technical colleges. These graduates, our graduates, are well trained for the marketplace

and have a high level of expertise and knowledge specific to an industry. The 1950 mindset that we put Johnny in an automotive program because he is not capable to do anything else has changed for the better. Right now, it takes some of the best and brightest students to actually succeed in automotive programs, electronics programs, or any other technical field. Students who succeed and will have the greatest employment opportunities are the students with high academic and technical skills to succeed in current technical education.

ES: *Do you see Tennessee's approach influencing other states?*

King: The last year has been exciting for Tennessee Technology Centers. We have been asked to share our successes regionally and nationally. We do have some elements other systems can learn from and adapt to see similar completion results. The four key areas that distinguish our success are program structure, high-quality education in demand fields, strong student services, and integrated remedial and developmental programs. But we should not overlook a simple but very central lesson: providing high-quality education and organizing educational delivery and program structure to support student completion and success in the labor market can lead to high outcomes. We achieve these outcomes with a population of students who are very often very low-income and who have not fared well in other educational settings. We need to provide students with the ability to see there is light at the end of the tunnel. ■

This interview was conducted by Ed English, a staff writer for EconSouth.