

Russ Deaton

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Personal Story

Russ Deaton, Executive Vice Chancellor for Policy and Strategy of the Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR), was initially intrigued by the intersection of economics, psychology, philosophy, sociology, and government, and found his way to higher education public policy through the encouragement of a professor. Before joining TBR in 2017, Deaton served in a dual role as Deputy Executive Director and Associate Executive Director for policy, planning, and research at the Tennessee Higher Education Commission (THEC). Through his work at THEC and now at TBR, Deaton is motivated by the opportunity to reform longstanding practices that have failed to serve the interests of the people. Raised in Tennessee, and committing his professional life to improving

educational outcomes in his home state, Deaton is passionate about the work of rethinking and remaking policies and practices to work better for students. "A quote I always include in my own syllabus is from Thomas Paine – 'A long habit of not thinking a thing wrong, gives it a superficial appearance of being right.'" This philosophy combined with his research background is what helps Deaton oversee the policy and strategy unit at TBR, which encompasses academic affairs, student success, and organizational effectiveness. Under his leadership, the policy and strategy unit deliberately aims to weave these departments together to approach higher education improvement efforts through robust cross-silo collaboration. Oriented by what he refers to as TBR's "deliberately designed and avowedly open access mission," Deaton is deeply mindful of the importance of ensuring the insights of frontline faculty and staff inform and infuse TBR efforts. This helps TBR more effectively wield its power to support institutions in the hard work of developmental education redesign at scale.

Policy-Related Overview

Reform work in Tennessee has evolved in the last 20 years. In 2014-15, TBR employed a pilot for the corequisite model and saw successful implementation. The model was expanded systemwide over the following two years and results showed increases in student performance in paired gateway math courses. Students who were retained with good progress increased from 15% in 2012-13 to 22% in 2017-18. The heavy lift of moving an entire system to a uniform, corequisite approach was supported by TBR's culture of data-driven decision making which encouraged institutions to further break data down by subpopulations of race, gender, and socioeconomic status.

"We don't shy away from talking about where we think it has gone well and where gaps remain. Presidents know exactly how they're doing and how they compare to other schools. It is a culture that has been built by leaders over the years that we are benefitting from and trying to continue."

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When asked to reflect on some lessons learned about operating as a system and driving the work forward, Deaton focused on data, collaboration, and the importance of leveraging pilots to build a broad sense of ownership for complex, context-specific work. First, Deaton talked about the importance of being honest with data and research in order to confront the realities of student outcomes disaggregated by socioeconomic status, gender, and race. Creating the conditions for institutions to be clear-eyed in their understanding and use of data is a cornerstone of Deaton's leadership at TBR. In addition to unwavering attention to evidence and data, Deaton also stressed in our conversation the critical importance of creating space for institutional practitioners to inform policies and drive practice improvements. Through strategic use of pilots and effectiveness assessment, the state of Tennessee has made significant progress on scaling high-quality corequisite models in math and English.

Through open dialogue with institutional practitioners across Tennessee, Deaton's team has built and refined its ongoing policy work as a collaborative journey. By creating dynamic interaction between TBR and institutions that were early adopters of piloted corequisite models, Tennessee has been able to advance a common model of corequisite remediation that works well across institutional types.

Using these as a foundation to carry the system through the COVID-19 pandemic, Deaton reflected on the opportunity to try new things and take advantage of the "low status quo bias" driven by the pandemic. With a proclivity among faculty and staff to try new things, there has been a window of opportunity to experiment with a multiple-measures approach to developmental education in the fall that was brought to the forefront by the lack of ACT and ACCUPLACER tests. Research shows that students who are assessed using multiple measures are more likely to be assigned to college-level courses and pass than the students who are assessed through standardized tests alone.

With the foundation of ongoing reform work in the state of Tennessee and the momentum created by the COVID-19 pandemic, Deaton remains focused on how the government can get itself on the right posture to serve students. By deliberately weaving his policy and strategy unit with the academic affairs perspective, Deaton fosters a culture of cross-silo collaboration and data-driven decision making.

Citation:

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