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# Cross-Campus Report on Student Recruitment, Retention and Outreach in NC Community Colleges

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# Executive Summary

This cross-campus study synthesizes insights from interviews with leaders at 15 North Carolina community colleges and five statewide postsecondary stakeholders. Together, they provide a multilevel view of recruitment, retention and outreach strategies in a rapidly shifting higher education landscape.

**Adult learners** are driving much of the state's recent enrollment growth, spurred by career changes, statewide reengagement initiatives and demand for short-term workforce credentials. Colleges are redesigning programs with flexible scheduling, accelerated terms and targeted outreach to "stop-outs."

**Dual enrollment** has expanded dramatically, strengthening early college access but creating yield challenges as many students with substantial credit bypass community colleges for four-year transfer. Efforts to retain them include scholarships, stackable pathways and early advising.

**Employer partnerships** are central across all college types, shaping programs through co-developed curricula, apprenticeships and industry-sponsored facilities. State initiatives such as NC Community Colleges Boost and the proposed Propel NC funding model promise to deepen this alignment, though leaders caution that rural equity must be safeguarded.

Colleges are also expanding **wraparound supports**, such as childcare, transportation aid, food security and success coaching to address nonacademic barriers, while **proactive outreach** and refreshed marketing aim to reframe community college as a first-choice pathway.

**Guided pathways** and intrusive advising are helping students navigate complex offerings and stay on track.

We segmented findings by college type, identifying distinct patterns among rural low-resource, resource-rich rural, urban/suburban, industry-driven, and minority-serving/adult-focused institutions, each leveraging different strategies and facing unique challenges shaped by their resources, populations and regional contexts.

**Notable innovations** range from multichannel digital campaigns and on-site high school onboarding to employer-backed academies, accelerated credentials and one-stop student success hubs.

**Persistent structural challenges** include fragmented program messaging, one-size-fits-all policies misaligned with nontraditional learners, funding formulas that put part-time students and rural service areas at a disadvantage, limited advising capacity, and the difficulty of sustaining grant-funded programs.

**External stakeholders** reinforced these findings, highlighting the need for ecosystem coordination, better data on adult learner needs, more navigable pathways and investment in equity-focused infrastructure.

The findings underscore a dual imperative: scale the innovations that are working while addressing systemic policy and funding barriers. Doing so will position North Carolina's community colleges to fully meet their mission as accessible, responsive engines of workforce and social mobility.

The leaders who responded are identified in general terms rather than by name to allow them to speak more freely about trends and strategies in higher education.



# Cross-Campus Key Themes

While each community college operates in a unique geographic, demographic and resource context, the 15 colleges in this study share some common priorities in how they attract, enroll and retain students. These themes reflect both the shifting realities of higher education in North Carolina and the creative strategies colleges are using to meet students where they are academically, professionally and personally.

Key themes include:

- **Adult learners are on the rise**, necessitating flexible scheduling, targeted outreach and accommodating program formats to engage working adults and “stop-outs,” those who withdraw temporarily from college.
- **Dual enrollment has a double-edged impact**, boosting early college access while creating postgraduation yield challenges as many students bypass community college for four-year transfers.
- **Employer partnerships serve as growth engines**, aligning programs with regional workforce needs through deep industry collaboration and direct hiring pipelines.
- **Holistic support for retention** means expanding wraparound services, from transportation and childcare to advising and emergency aid, to address nonacademic barriers.
- **Outreach and perception change** require a creative community presence and refreshed marketing to reposition community college as a first-choice option.
- **Guided pathways and advising** simplify navigation and strengthen proactive advising to keep students on track toward completion.

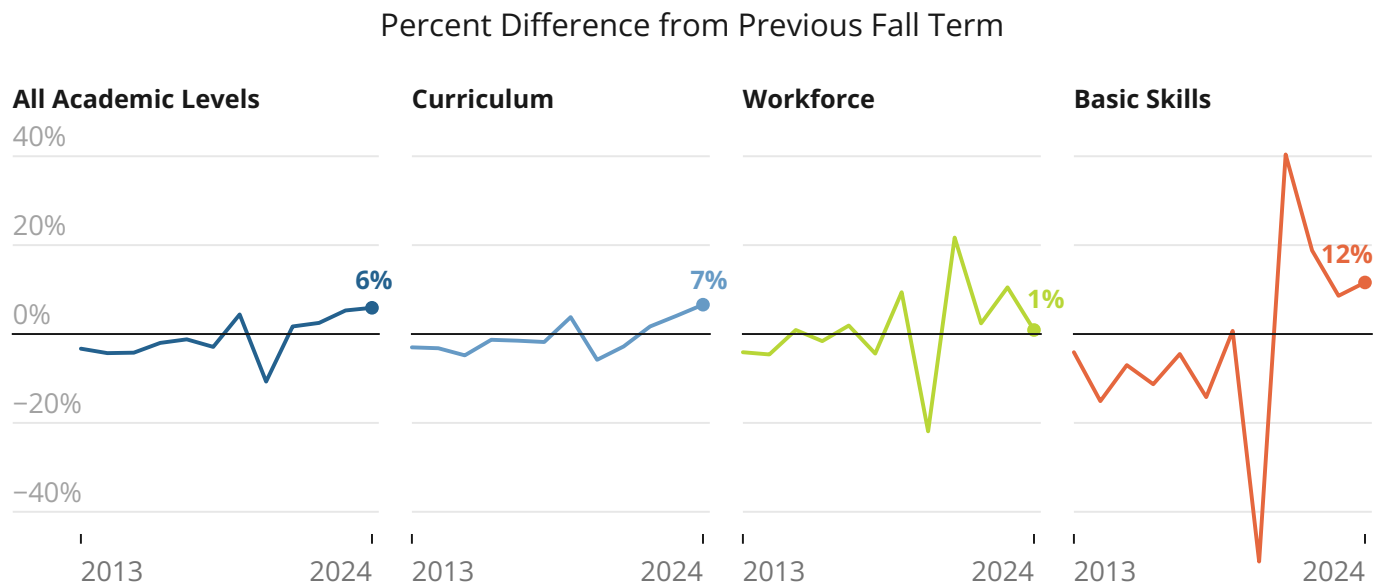
## Adult Learners on the Rise: Flexibility Is Key

Across North Carolina’s community colleges, adult and nontraditional learners now account for a growing share of enrollment, outpacing recent high school graduates in some regions. Statewide, community colleges saw the highest enrollment jump in 15 years in Fall 2024, with full-time equivalent (FTE) enrollment up 6% overall, including a 7% increase in curriculum, 12% in basic skills and 1% in workforce programs (North Carolina Community College System, 2024), reflecting the same shift echoed across institutional interviews.

Colleges attribute the shift to pandemic-related job changes, the statewide NC Reconnect initiative and career reevaluations among working adults. One suburban college hit an 11-year enrollment high largely by engaging adults ages 25+, while another reported “close to 35% growth in underrepresented student enrollment aged 25+ in the last three years.”

In response, colleges are redesigning offerings with working adults in mind: expanding evening, weekend and hybrid courses; adopting accelerated eight-week terms; and embedding support services like childcare and transportation assistance.

**Figure 1. Percent Change in Instructional FTE by Academic Level, 2024 (vs. Prior Year)**



Reporting Year = Fall

Source: NC Community Colleges

**“We’ve seen growth among working mothers. ... The challenge is offering the flexibility and support they need.” – Dean of Enrollment, Rural Community College**

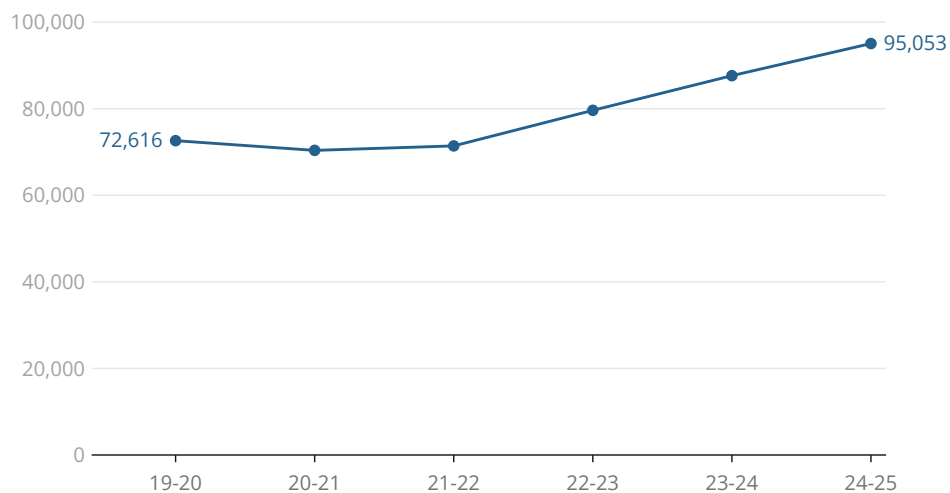
Targeted outreach to “stop-outs” is common: Staff call former students, visit workplaces and partner with employers to reach those who left without a credential. National research also shows adult learners are more likely to respond to flexible program formats and accelerated course models than to traditional recruitment tactics (American Council on Education, 2021). This shift often blurs recruitment and retention, with colleges treating every reengaged adult as both a new and returning student.

## Dual Enrollment Pipeline: Early College Access and the Flip Side

Dual enrollment through the Career & College Promise program and early college high schools has become a central recruitment tool. In some colleges, program students make up nearly half the student body. Families save thousands in tuition, and high schoolers can graduate with certificates or even associate degrees.

**“These kids are graduating high school with a jump-start on a credential. ... That’s a win for everyone.” – Administrator, Rural Community College**

**Figure 2. Total Number of Career & College Promise Students Enrolled in North Carolina Community Colleges (2019–25)**



Reporting Year = Summer, Fall, Spring

Source: NC Community Colleges

Participation in the program has grown steadily over the past several years, underscoring its increasing importance as an entry point into higher education.

Dual enrollment through Career & College Promise has increased significantly, reaching over 95,000 students in 2024–25. However, many of these students transfer directly to four-year universities, bypassing the community college as first-time, postsecondary enrollees. Leaders call this the flip side of the pipeline, with one leader succinctly describing the program’s dual impact: *“They often leave us for a four-year school at 18 with lots of credits, so we have to get creative to keep them coming back.”* This challenge mirrors national data showing program participation has risen sharply, but postgraduation yield to community college remains low without intentional conversion strategies (Community College Research Center, 2024). Strategies to capture yield include stackable credential pathways, which allow students to earn multiple credentials; tuition scholarships for program graduates; and early advising to demonstrate the value of completing a community college degree before transfer. While the short-term enrollment boost is undeniable, most leaders frame the program as a long-term community investment in college-going culture and workforce readiness.

## Employer Partnerships and Industry Alignment

Colleges consistently described close collaboration with regional employers as essential to both recruitment and program design. Advisory boards of hospital directors, manufacturers and energy companies help shape curricula to match current job requirements.

Apprenticeships, “earn-and-learn” programs and industry-sponsored labs make training relevant and immediately marketable.

Examples range from a heavy equipment operator academy launched with county government to fill local construction jobs, to a CNC machining lab co-developed with a global aerospace company.

**“When you make sure your programs align with skills the employers need, the students win, the employer wins and the community wins.” – Workforce Dean, Community College**

Employer ties also extend to marketing, from co-branded recruitment events to allowing on-the-clock training for incumbent workers. Partnerships with K-12 career and technical education programs feed high school students into industry-aligned community college pathways, reinforcing the “community as campus” ethos.

New policy initiatives like the **NC Community Colleges Boost** program are pushing even more direct alignment between high-demand industries and college programming, backed by nearly \$100 million in proposed funding (NCCCS, 2025). Across the board, leaders expressed strong enthusiasm for the proposed workforce-aligned funding model **Propel NC**, which would shift state allocations toward high-demand career sectors and better account for part-time enrollment (EdNC, 2025). A statewide researcher noted that all 58 community college presidents signed letters of support for the plan, underscoring its broad appeal as



a tool to modernize funding and align programs with labor market needs. At the same time, rural leaders cautioned that without adjustments for population density and higher per-student service costs, the model could unintentionally penalize small, geographically dispersed colleges even when they meet performance expectations.

## Holistic Student Support and Retention

Many colleges credit retention strategies, rather than new recruitment, for recent enrollment gains. Wrap-

around supports like food pantries, emergency grants, transportation stipends and embedded success coaches address nonacademic barriers.

“We try to anticipate their needs with wraparound services from Day 1, so no one walks alone on their education journey.” – Student Services Director, Rural College

Flexibility is built into scheduling and policy, from allowing term breaks to offering late-night tutoring. Early alert systems flag attendance drops or grade issues, triggering outreach from advisers or counselors. One rural leader summed it up: “Flexibility is integral,

from night classes, online options, childcare support, we're trying to eliminate the 'life happens' excuses that keep folks from finishing." By meeting basic needs and adapting to life circumstances, colleges keep more students enrolled, and those satisfied students become advocates in the community.

## Outreach, Marketing and Changing Perceptions

"Meet them where they are" is more than a slogan: Colleges are taking recruitment to county fairs, church events, grocery store parking lots, even door-to-door in rural neighborhoods.

**"We can't sit back and wait. ... We're out in the community showing folks that college is for them." – Outreach Coordinator, Rural Community College**

This local presence is paired with refreshed marketing to counter the "last resort" stigma. Persistent perception gaps exist, with many still viewing community colleges as a fallback option despite the fact that 39% of all US undergraduates attended a community college in Fall 2023 (American Association of Community Colleges, 2025). Colleges showcase alumni success, share workforce ROI data and invest in digital platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and text campaigns. CRM systems enable personalized follow-up with prospective students. One admissions officer commented, "*We tried everything – TikTok, open houses, blueberry festivals.*" Storytelling and trust-building, especially with parents and families, are central. Bilingual workshops, family nights and inviting campuses help shift perceptions, making community college a first choice for education and training.

## Navigating Complexity: Guided Pathways and Advising

With multiple enrollment streams, program types and transfer routes, community colleges can feel like a maze. Leaders recognize the need to simplify navigation through guided pathways, a model for helping students choose and complete their path toward a certificate or degree, and proactive advising.

**"It's overwhelming for students to try to figure out which pathway to take." – Adviser, Large Community College**

Many colleges now provide semester-by-semester program maps, mandatory advising at key milestones and cross-training so staff can guide students across credit and noncredit options. Some have shifted from faculty advising to professional advising centers, giving each student a consistent point of contact from entry to completion.

**Early interventions** are critical, especially for financial aid recipients who risk losing eligibility if they take the wrong courses. Data tools like CRM alerts and degree audits help advisers act before a student goes off track. The goal: a **navigable institution** where students see a clear, supported route from interest to credential.



# Segmented Analysis by College Type

While the above themes apply across all institutions interviewed, strategies and challenges **vary by type**. North Carolina’s community colleges range from small rural campuses serving a few hundred students to large urban hubs with tens of thousands, as well as specialized or minority-serving institutions.

## Rural Low-Resource

These small, often economically distressed campuses depend on deep community trust and personal outreach to recruit. Faculty, staff and even presidents serve as front-line recruiters. Partnerships fill service gaps in innovative ways, from shuttle services to shared apprenticeship programs. Technology investments are modest, but connection is personal and persistent.

| COLLEGE TYPE                     | DISTINCT STRATEGIES  | COMMON THEMES  | CHALLENGES / TENSIONS   |
|----------------------------------|--|--|---|
| Rural Low-Resource               | Hyperlocal, face-to-face outreach (fairs, door-to-door, churches); faculty and leadership as recruiters; consortia to share costly programs.             | Adult learner focus; dual enrollment; intrusive advising; barrier removal (childcare, transport).          | Limited tech/marketing budgets; narrow program menu; dependence on grants.  |
| Rural Re-source-Rich             | State-of-the-art facilities and programs; flagship offerings to draw beyond local area; specialized staff for adult/high school outreach.                | Dual enrollment and community engagement; wraparound supports; “grow your own” workforce mission.          | Sustaining grant-funded programs; recruiting enough students to fill capacity; hiring specialized faculty.                          |
| Urban/Suburban                   | Large-scale CRM/data-driven marketing; segmented recruiters; on-campus events; strong brand identity.  | Dual enrollment with multiple districts; adult learner growth; diversity and equity initiatives.           | High competition for students; maintaining personal touch at scale; policy misalignment for part-time learners                      |
| Industry-Driven                  | Flagship training centers (e.g., public safety, aerospace, trucking); tightly aligned curricula with employer input; industry co-marketing.              | Employer partnerships at the deepest level; career pathway dual enrollment; “learn-and-earn” models.       | Narrow program mix, which can limit undecided students; rapid industry shifts, requiring agile pivots.                              |
| Minority-Serving / Adult-Focused | Relationship-based recruitment; cultural partnerships (tribal councils, churches, Spanish-language events); flexible formats; credit for prior learning. | Retention via mentoring, cohorts, intrusive advising; extended service hours; equity-centered programming. | High student need for remediation/support; limited resources for intensive services; overcoming mistrust or “too late” perceptions. |

## Rural Resource-Rich

With grant funding or legislative support, these colleges leverage modern facilities and flagship programs to attract students from beyond their county. They still face rural recruitment constraints but can afford specialized staff and innovative delivery models. Sustainability of programs after grant periods is a constant concern.

## Urban/Suburban

Large student populations allow for sophisticated marketing and segmentation but also require scaled systems to maintain engagement. These colleges navigate competition from multiple higher ed providers while leaning on their diversity, robust student life and program breadth to stand out.

## Industry-Driven

These institutions orient programming and recruitment around dominant local industries, producing highly targeted pipelines. While this secures employer buy-in and job outcomes, it can make diversification difficult if industry demand shifts. Agility in curriculum and marketing is essential.

## Minority-Serving/Adult-Focused

Colleges serving large proportions of underrepresented or adult learners operate on a foundation of trust, representation and tailored support. Outreach is relational and culturally responsive; retention hinges on removing structural barriers. They face intense resource demands but succeed when embedded in the fabric of their communities.



# Notable Innovations

Across campuses, innovations are emerging in six key areas: recruitment and outreach, onboarding, program design, student support, financial incentives and collaborative models. These efforts blend technology, high-touch engagement and partnerships to meet shifting enrollment patterns and workforce needs.



| KEY AREA                        | INNOVATION EXAMPLES > IMPACT   |  |
|---------------------------------|--|--|
| Recruitment and Outreach        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multichannel digital campaigns (TikTok, texting, social media).</li> <li>• On-site high school enrollment events.</li> <li>• Enhanced branding and weekly media stories.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Reach students on familiar platforms, improve Gen Z response rates.</li> <li>› Secure early commitments, demystify enrollment process.</li> <li>› Strengthen perception of community college as a first-choice option.</li> </ul> |
| Onboarding and Early Engagement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tailored “Welcome” days by audience (traditional vs. adult learners).</li> <li>• Family inclusion initiatives (childcare at events, bilingual parent nights).</li> </ul>            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Address distinct questions and build early connection.</li> <li>› Encourage family support and normalizes college-going culture.</li> </ul>   |
| Program Design and Delivery     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employer co-designed apprenticeships/ programs.</li> <li>• Accelerated eight-week terms (“Be Great in 8”).</li> <li>• Flexible evening/weekend/hybrid programs.</li> </ul>          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Align training with job demand, often include paid training and job guarantees.</li> <li>› Allow focus on fewer courses, increase flexibility and completion rates.</li> <li>› Expand access for working adults.</li> </ul>       |
| Student Support and Retention   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One-stop student success hubs.</li> <li>• Embedded success coaches in programs.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Centralize advising, tutoring and financial aid, reducing barriers.</li> <li>› Provide proactive mentoring from entry to graduation.</li> </ul>   |
| Financial Incentives            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategic “last-dollar” scholarships and local promise programs.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Remove tuition barriers, boost local graduate enrollment.</li> </ul>  |
| Collaborative Models            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regional CDL academy partnerships.</li> <li>• Joint apprenticeship programs with employers and other colleges.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Expand training capacity, address regional workforce shortages.</li> <li>› Broaden reach, attract funding and scale impact.</li> </ul>  |

# Structural Challenges

Despite widespread innovation, community colleges face structural barriers that undercut recruitment and student success. These challenges span policy, funding, staffing and system design, often limiting the ability to scale what works or fully serve diverse learners.



| CRITICAL BARRIER                            | CHALLENGES > IMPACT   |  |
|---|---|--|
| Fragmented Program Branding and Terminology | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confusing distinction between curriculum, continuing ed and workforce training.</li> <li>• Inconsistency of acronyms across colleges and high schools.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Students/parents misunderstand options and credentials.</li> <li>› Dilutes marketing and awareness; hampers recruitment.</li> </ul>   |
| One-Size-Fits-All Policies                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Orientation/advising models built for recent high school grads.</li> <li>• Rigid placement, course formats and academic calendars.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Misses needs of adults, military, caregivers.</li> <li>› Limits access and success for nontraditional learners.</li> </ul>  |
| Financial Aid and Funding Misalignment      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Full-time funding model penalizes part-time students.</li> <li>• SAP rules disqualify students after withdrawals or major changes.</li> <li>• Funding formulas ignore positive workforce exits.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Disincentivizes working students who can't attend full-time.</li> <li>› Reduces reentry and exploration.</li> <li>› Good job offers can hurt completion metrics.</li> </ul> |
| Completion Metrics vs. Workforce Outcomes   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students hired before finishing credentials.</li> <li>• Performance funding prioritizes completion over employment.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Improves individual economic outcomes but lowers institutional "success" rates.</li> <li>› Provide proactive mentoring from entry to graduation.</li> </ul>                 |
| Insufficient Advising Capacity              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Caseloads of 300–500 students per adviser.</li> <li>• Evening/online students receive less advising.</li> <li>• Restrictions on high school career coaches recruiting for community colleges.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Limits proactive guidance.</li> <li>› Poor course selection, delayed completion.</li> <li>› Missed opportunity to direct students into aligned pathways.</li> </ul>         |
| Resource Constraints and Sustainability     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One staff member juggling multiple critical roles.</li> <li>• Overreliance on short-term grants.</li> <li>• Faculty shortages in high-demand fields.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>› Burnout, reduced outreach.</li> <li>› Successful pilots struggle to scale.</li> <li>› Delays in expanding programs despite interest.</li> </ul>                             |

# Insights from Ecosystem Partners

This section synthesizes key themes and practitioner insights from five external, non-community college organizations within the educational ecosystem that also work to advance community college recruitment, advising and workforce readiness across North Carolina.

## Top Themes from Ecosystem Stakeholders

### 1. System fragmentation undermines student navigation

- Stakeholders repeatedly highlighted the fractured nature of advising, credentialing and communication systems between high schools, colleges and employers. Even well-intentioned initiatives risk duplication or confusion.

**“We hear from students all the time: They’re not confused by the options, they’re confused by who’s in charge of helping them move forward.” – Policy Strategist, Statewide Postsecondary Network**

### 2. Need for data-driven outreach and pathway mapping

- Leaders underscored the importance of smarter data usage to better understand prospective student populations, especially disconnected youth and adults, and tailor pathways accordingly.

**“We’re flying blind on what adults actually want from community colleges unless someone’s mapping that in a real, granular way.” – Statewide Community College Policy Leader**

### 3. Missed opportunities in ecosystem coordination

- Several interviewees noted that colleges too often approach recruitment and workforce alignment independently, rather than through convened ecosystems involving employers, chambers and public agencies.

**“It’s not just about filling the pipeline. It’s about aligning which pipelines actually go anywhere in your region.” – Regional Impact Lead, Postsecondary Readiness Nonprofit**

### 4. Equity requires infrastructure, not just intent

- Equity-focused outreach to marginalized populations (especially adult learners, multilingual families and rural students) must be operationalized through funding, staffing and metrics rather than just stated goals.

**“We’ve seen a lot of talk about equity, but not enough redesign of how advising actually works on the ground.” – State Director, Postsecondary Equity Initiative**

## Notable Ex-Community College Stakeholder Strategic Recommendations

From these leaders, several cross-cutting strategic needs emerged:

- **Formalize regional convenings** between community colleges, employers, high schools and community-based organizations.
- **Invest in adult learner mapping** to understand barriers and messaging gaps.
- **Fund regional advising infrastructure** with shared training and language.

- **Integrate workforce projections** more tightly into college recruitment strategy.
- **Build a unified credential navigator** for stackable pathways across institutions.

Taken together, campus and stakeholder perspectives paint a picture of a system that is both resourceful and constrained: Colleges are innovating within their walls, while external partners see opportunities to streamline the broader ecosystem, deepen data use and operationalize equity. Both agree that stronger regional coordination, targeted adult learner strategies and flexible policy frameworks are essential to meeting North Carolina's workforce and education goals.



# Conclusion and Recommendations

This cross-campus study reveals a North Carolina community college system that is both deeply adaptive and constrained by structural limits. Across all institution types, leaders are innovating through employer-aligned programs, targeted adult learner outreach, wraparound supports and proactive advising, while also contending with funding misalignment, policy rigidity and uneven resource capacity.

Study synthesis points to five core imperatives for action:

## 1. Double down on adult learner engagement.

Build on momentum from NC Reconnect and post-pandemic reentry trends by scaling flexible formats (eight-week terms, evening/weekend/hybrid delivery) and direct outreach to “stop-outs.” Invest in granular adult learner data to target programming, marketing and support services.

## 2. Convert the dual enrollment pipeline.

Treat high school dual-enrollment participants not only as short-term headcount gains but as long-term recruits. Expand scholarships, stackable pathways and advising interventions that incentivize completion of a community college credential before transfer.

## 3. Operationalize workforce alignment.

Use state initiatives like NC Community Colleges Boost and the proposed Propel NC funding model to more tightly link programs to regional labor market

needs. Safeguard rural equity in funding formulas and maintain agility to pivot as industry demands evolve.

## 4. Institutionalize wraparound supports.

Transition successful grant-funded services, such as childcare, transportation stipends and embedded success coaches, into core operations to ensure continuity. Evidence from both campuses and literature confirms that these supports improve persistence for first-generation, working-- and adult students.

## 5. Strengthen the ecosystem infrastructure.

Formalize regional convenings between colleges, employers, K-12 and workforce boards to reduce duplication and align pathways. Create shared advising language, a unified credential navigator and joint marketing assets to simplify the student experience.

North Carolina’s community colleges have demonstrated that recruitment and retention challenges can be met with creativity, partnership and responsiveness. The next step is to secure structural supports including policy flexibility, sustainable funding and coordinated infrastructure that allow these innovations to scale equitably across the state. By pairing local ingenuity with systemic investment, the state can position its community colleges as enduring engines of workforce development, economic mobility and educational access.



# Interviews

Interviews with 15 North Carolina community college administrators and faculty. (March–July 2025)

Interviews with five external stakeholders in the North Carolina postsecondary and workforce ecosystem. (March–July 2025)

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