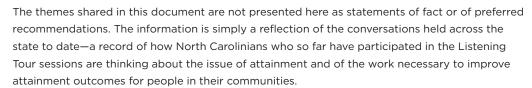# LISTENING TOUR:
MID-POINT SUMMARY REPORT

Overview

Data collected on the first half of the myFutureNC Listening Tour and from other myFutureNC-related meetings (including Commission meetings) are coalescing into two broad categories of findings — **Challenges and Barriers** to meeting personal and statewide attainment targets, and **Recommendations** for moving forward. There are dozens of emerging sub-categories under the Challenges and Barriers heading, and there are four distinct sub-categories under the Recommendations heading — *Recommendations for Addressing Identified Challenges and Barriers, Recommendations for Structuring the Work Going Forward, Recommendations for Laying the Groundwork (Early Actions),* and *Measurement Recommendations*. This document summarizes the top-level themes emerging in each category.

The themes shared in this document are not presented here as statements of fact or of preferred recommendations. The information is simply a reflection of the conversations held across the state to date—a record of how North Carolinians who so far have participated in the Listening Tour sessions are thinking about the issue of attainment and of the work necessary to improve attainment outcomes for people in their communities.

The Listening Tour includes stops in each of the state's eight prosperity zones. For most stops, Tour staff conduct on-site focus groups in a local school or college and a local business, in addition to the focus groups held during the main meeting. To date (June 1, 2018), the Listening Tour has made stops in **Greensboro**, **Lenoir**, **eastern Wake County**, **Elizabeth City**, **Pinehurst**, and **Jacksonville**, with over 200 event participants and an additional 130 on-site student, teacher, and employee participants. Remaining stops will be in **Kannapolis** (6/14), **Cherokee** (7/12), and **Asheboro** (7/18). In addition to the daytime events, the Tour includes less formal evening gatherings in most of the host communities, allowing for even greater participation from community members who are unable to attend the daytime events.

Challenges and Barriers

What are the problems we need to solve in order to improve attainment? What are the structural elements that get in the way? The challenges and barriers identified by Listening Tour participants are divided into two categories — *1) Within- and Cross-Sector Challenges and Barriers,* and *2) Out-of-Sector Challenges and Barriers* — with several sub-categories under each. The term "Sector" refers to the major education provision levels (pre-Kindergarten, K-12, community colleges, and 4-year colleges and graduate schools); "out-of-sector" refers to other variables outside of formal schooling that impact attainment.

Within- and Cross-Sector Challenges and Barriers

Sector challenges include foundational differences in perceived values across sectors, limitations in sector-to-sector communications, barriers to transitions across sectors, and inconsistent sector engagement of students and families.

AUTHOR
Trip Stallings
*Director of
Policy Research*

*(Please direct all
inquiries about
this document to
dtstalli@ncsu.edu)*

AUTHOR
Jeni Corn
*Director of
Evaluation Programs*

AUTHOR
Emily Antoszyk
Research Associate

AUTHOR
Trish Steinbrecher
Research Associate

AUTHOR
Laura Rosof
Research Assistant

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Foundational Challenges and Barriers

These challenges stem from conflicting goals and values within and across sectors, as well as between education sectors and external entities. The conflicts often are between a) the things that the state *measures*; b) the things that the state *values*; and c) the things that each sector believes needs to be the *focus* of its work.

- Sectors are siloed (W)

- Responsibility for student outcomes is not shared equitably across entities (EC, P)

- There are disconnects between schools (at all levels) and the needs of the communities they serve (G, L, EC, P; Comm)

- Some educational pathways and professions have been devalued and de-emphasized (L, EC, J)

"I think the community college system in North Carolina is probably the most under-utilized aspect of our educational system, not only just in North Carolina but [also] across the United States."

"[F]our-year degrees aren't for everyone, every job in this world does not require a four-year degree, but [most jobs] require[] post-secondary education for sure."

Structural Challenges and Barriers

Structural challenges are challenges related to the *rules and policies* that govern each sector's operation, as well as to *coordination* across sectors and between education sectors and the workforce sector.

- Job forecasting is insufficient (W, P; Comm)

- Admissions and credit transfer processes are challenging and inconsistent (L, W, EC, P; Comm)

- Course and program offerings are sometimes narrow and redundant (L, W)

- Progress is hindered by bureaucracy and a lack of local flexibility (L, W, EC, P)

- There are within- and cross-sector communications barriers (L, P)

- Organizations that work across sectors are fragmented and uncoordinated (L, W, P, J)

- Students leave sectors unprepared for the next sector (P, L; Comm)

"If you want . . . smooth transition[s within] K12, then . . . K5 has to know what is needed for 6-8. If you want a smooth transition between 6-8 and 9-12, then 6-8 has got to know what is expected in order for a child to be successful in 9-12. So there has to be communication between the levels. You can't just teach yourself on an island. . . . [Y]ou've got to have knowledge of what is to come, not just knowledge of where you are. There's got to be knowledge of where the child has been and where the child is going."

Challenges and Barriers to Engaging Students and Families

Challenges in this category are related to helping students and their families *progress along the continuum*, as well as barriers that can cause students and families to drop out of the continuum.

- Many students and families (and educators) have little knowledge of career opportunities (L, EC, W, P, J; Comm)

- There is insufficient guidance available for navigating sector admissions and transitions (G, L, W, EC, P, J; Comm)

- There is insufficient information about financial aid (L)

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- Current students and returning students have access to limited guidance for planning for lifelong learning (J; Comm)

- Many families are disaffected with and disconnected from the continuum (W; Comm)

"[T]hinking about what you want to do really starts in middle school because you have to [get ready to] take those classes in high school."

"I think the problems my friends are dealing with now is [that] most of them are in school but they just don't know what they want to do, so they are just taking classes and switching degrees."

Out-of-Sector (External) Challenges and Barriers

There are a host of outside-of-continuum issues—infrastructure, housing, health, fiscal stability, and safety, to name a few—that impact a student's ability to make the most of what the continuum offers and make the challenges of successfully navigating the continuum even harder.

Social and Cultural Challenges and Barriers. These challenges and barriers are the social and cultural pressures outside of the continuum that make attainment more difficult.

- Wraparound services for students are needed but inconsistent (L, W, EC)

- Students' social and emotional needs are not being met (P, J)

- Differences in student/family cultural capital determine success (G, L, W, EC; Comm)

- Many students have limited soft skills development (L, EC)

- Uncertainty about personal safety and security impacts attainment (J)

"You've always got your family support, but as far as anything in the outside world, anything related to this college . . . [t]here's no role model."

"I'm not talking about a child or a group of children who are not intelligent; . . . they're dealing with things at home, they're dealing with issues. The least of their concern is, 'How am I going to become a welder?'"

Place-Based Challenges and Barriers. Geographic or regional obstacles to ongoing engagement and attainment.

- Regional differences mitigate the impact of state-level policies (EC)

- Early childhood opportunities are inequitably available across regions (L, W, EC, P)

- Coordinated public sector infrastructure resources are inconsistent across regions (L, EC, P; Comm)

- There is a persistent urban-rural opportunity divide (L, W, EC)

Fiscal Challenges and Barriers. Instances in which funding and other financial considerations add to the challenges and barriers, both for students and for sector providers.

- Student financial literacy training is insufficient (W, EC)

- Student debt is overwhelming for some (L, W, J; Comm)

- Federal fiscal regulations thwart local-level decision-making (W)

- Funding within and across sectors is inequitable (G, L, EC, P; Comm)

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Recommendations

For many focus group participants, recommendations have been based on existing or past local-level actions or programs. In some cases, however, recommendations are speculative only and are not grounded in any current projects or initiatives.

Recommendations for Addressing Identified Challenges and Barriers

Because recommendations in this category are keyed to specific aspects of the challenges and barriers that were not detailed in previous sections, individual recommendations for this category have not been included in this summary document. They will be included in full in the final report. Listening Tour participants have offered specific suggestions for some but not all of the challenges and barriers they identified.

Recommendations for Structuring the Work Going Forward

These recommendations may help define the structure of the myFutureNC plan-of-action, as well as how the work might be administered.

- Align goals across sectors (Comm)
- Provide statewide structure and support but encourage local customization and experimentation (G; Comm)
- Focus on early childhood (Comm)
- Proceed with caution before making changes to existing structures; be mindful of potential unanticipated negative consequences (L)

Recommendations for Laying the Groundwork (Early Actions)

While technically part of the recommendations in the previous section, these recommendations are specific actions that might need to be taken during the first stage of implementation of the overall plan.

- Identify education and workforce needs at a regional level (L)
- Describe the current state of the education continuum (L; Comm)
- Develop a call-to-action playbook for inspiring stakeholders and for getting the work started (G; Comm)
- Encourage collaboration and information-sharing across stakeholder groups and sectors (G, L; Comm)

Measurement Recommendations

In addition to recommending a statewide attainment goal, the myFutureNC Commission also is considering benchmark sub-goals for key points along the education spectrum. Some Listening Tour participants have provided suggestions for enhancing that work.

- Measure broadly; look for benchmarks outside traditional measures (G; Comm)
- Link data across sectors (W)

Please direct all inquiries about this document to dtstalli@ncsu.edu

Source Key

- **G:** Greensboro
- **L:** Lenoir
- **W:** eastern Wake County
- **EC:** Elizabeth City
- **P:** Pinehurst
- **J:** Jacksonville
- **Comm:** myFutureNC Commission Meeting

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