*my*FUTURE**NC**

LISTENING TOUR

A Statewide Perspective on Education, Attainment & Opportunity

STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES & BARRIERS TO STUDENT ATTAINMENT & RELATED RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

In the fall of 2017, the President of the University of North Carolina System, the Acting President of the North Carolina Community College System, and the North Carolina State Superintendent of Public Instruction partnered with representatives from the education, business, policy, philanthropy, faith-based, and nonprofit communities to establish myFutureNC, a statewide commission focused on educational attainment. For over a year, the Commission worked on developing a comprehensive Call to Action that included an attainment goal for the state, benchmarks to measure progress toward that goal, and Focus Areas and Priorities to guide the state's work as it continues to reach for the goal.

During the spring of 2018, the Friday Institute for Educational Innovation at North Carolina State University organized a Listening Tour to gather feedback from stakeholders across the state about the Commission's emerging Call to Action and its components. In each of the state's eight prosperity zones, Tour staff convened stakeholders at a central location and conducted focus groups and panels all related to the theme of attainment. At many of the stops, staff also led focus groups at local schools or colleges, as well as at local businesses, in order to collect information from teachers, students, employees, and others who otherwise would not have been able to participate in the events. Over the course of the tour, nearly 400 event participants and over 170 on-site student, teacher, and employee participants provided input in the following locations: **Asheboro**, **Cherokee**, **Elizabeth City**, **Greensboro**, **Jacksonville**, **Kannapolis**, **Lenoir**, **Pinehurst**, and **eastern Wake County**. In addition to the daytime events, EducationNC hosted evening gatherings in surrounding communities, allowing for even greater participation from community members who were unable to attend the daytime meetings. Concurrent with the Listening Tour and evening gatherings, EducationNC and Gallup administered two surveys to different constituencies. To include the voices of more North Carolinians and those who were not able to participate in face-to-face convenings, this report includes responses to relevant corresponding survey items.

Data collected on the myFutureNC Listening Tour and from other myFutureNC-related meetings (including Commission meetings) coalesced into two broad categories of findings—Challenges and Barriers to meeting personal and statewide attainment targets, and Recommendations for moving forward. We have grouped the challenges and barriers into six thematic areas: *Foundational, Structural, Social, Place-Based,* and *Fiscal Challenges and Barriers, along with Challenges and Barriers to Engaging Students and Families.*

Organization of the Briefs

Six documents summarize the Challenges and Barriers identified during the Listening Tour (one for each of the different themes), as well as the related Recommendations provided by Listening Tour participants. Where appropriate, we have supplemented participant comments with relevant data from the statewide EducationNC and Gallup surveys.

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? Challenges and barriers can be either *within- and cross-sector or out-of-sector.* "Sector" refers to the major education provision levels (pre-Kindergarten, K-12, community colleges, and four-year colleges and graduate schools); "out-of-sector" refers to other variables outside of formal schooling that influence attainment.* This brief details challenges and barriers that we have categorized as Structural Challenges and Barriers. **Structural Challenges and Barriers** are those related to the *rules and policies* that govern each sector's operation, as well as those related to *coordination* across sectors and between education sectors and the employment sector.

Recommendations

For many focus group participants, recommendations are based on existing or past local-level actions or programs. In some cases, recommendations are speculative and are not grounded in current projects or initiatives. Recommendations for addressing identified challenges and barriers are included at the end of each section.

Source Codes

At the end of each section, abbreviations indicate the Listening Tour sessions during which the topic of that section was discussed.

Disclaimer

The themes shared in these six summary documents are not presented here as statements of fact or as indications of the Commission's preferred recommendations. The information is simply a reflection of the conversations held across the state—a record of how North Carolinians who participated in the Listening Tour sessions think about the issue of attainment and of the work necessary to improve attainment outcomes for people in their communities.

* This brief also refers to the "continuum," which is used to describe education sectors from P-12 to postsecondary in addition to the business and industry sector that follows.

Structural Challenges & Barriers to Student Attainment & Related Recommendations

Insufficient Educator Preparation and Development

The teaching profession suffers from difficulties in recruitment and retention.

Listening Tour participants included a large contingent of educators from K-12 and higher education who detailed challenges along the path to becoming a teacher, as well as difficulties in developing skills once in the profession. Stakeholders highlighted teacher recruitment as a major issue, saying that many shy away from the field because of the high expectations and low pay. Even those with credentials from outside of the state found it challenging to obtain licensure in North Carolina, citing time and associated expenses as barriers to entry.

Once teachers are in the classroom, retention is a challenge. Many teachers expressed lack of support from peers and administrators as the cause of frustration and high turnover, especially among beginning teachers. At times, policies designed to reward top performers, like differentiated teacher pay, may undermine the teacher collaboration critical to fostering growth in educator capacity within schools. Another issue related to teacher retention is under-staffing: with fewer specialized staff in schools, the teachers remaining are required to take on more responsibilities and address the needs of students in areas outside of their expertise.

Relevant Survey Findings

- Gallup survey respondents rated the teacher quality as the second biggest challenge facing K-12 schools in their community behind lack of funding. Respondents rated teacher turnover as the third biggest challenge.

Recommendations from Participants

- Prioritize providing a high-quality teacher in every classroom, and continue to incentivize teachers to take on roles that are difficult to staff

- Train teachers to collaborate more and to focus on teaching the whole student

- Design a mentoring system for teachers, pairing veterans with new teachers so new teachers can draw on the experience of the veterans[1]

(A, EC, G, P, TAC)

Insufficient Job Forecasting

Schools find it difficult to respond quickly to the ever-evolving job market.

Both representatives from higher education and employers expressed concern that postsecondary structures are not equipped to match pace with rapidly changing economic projections. It is difficult for schools to respond to emerging markets in a timely manner because to do so they often have to create new courses, programs, and training opportunities. As such, it is important for students to learn transferrable skills that prepare them for employment in dynamic markets.

Relevant Survey Findings

- About a third (32%) of Gallup survey respondents cited the inability of two-year colleges to meet the needs of today's students as a major reason why students do not complete two-year degrees. In response to a similar question, 39% of respondents said four-year colleges need to change to better meet the needs of today's students.

1. Editor's note: Most school districts provide mentor teacher programs, and the state has supported beginning teachers in dozens of districts via the New Teacher Support Program since 2011.

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- A majority (71%) of EducationNC survey respondents from across the continuum said that educational opportunities were "very useful" or "somewhat useful" in providing people with the skills they need for jobs in their community.

Recommendations from Participants

- Increase state resources for job forecasting efforts to support better projection of workforce needs, and better publicize information available currently. Improve regional and local job forecasting.

- Shift focus to teaching students transferrable skills that prepare them for employment in dynamic markets instead of attempting to develop new courses and programs quickly in response to constantly-shifting market needs

- Formalize and expand connections between educators and employers so that schools can tailor more programs and courses to employer needs.

(A, C, K, P, W)

Unclear Admissions Requirements and Inconsistent Credit Transfer Guidelines

A lack of universal rules for advanced course credit acceptance can add an element of uncertainty to students' higher education decisions.

Feedback pertaining to admissions and credit transfer came from stakeholders at every stop along the Listening Tour, from students to parents to administrators in higher education. Students and parents felt that admissions requirements lacked clarity and that credit transfer to postsecondary institutions lacked consistency. In a number of cases, students and parents expected credits to transfer from high school to a postsecondary institution or between institutions only to discover after enrollment that credits would not transfer. One of the contributing factors identified by participants is that credit transfer is not standardized across institutions, sometimes resulting in unexpected course repetition, with students losing time and money in the process.

Relevant Survey Findings

- A little more than a third (38%) of Gallup survey respondents cited college credits not transferring from one school to another as a major reason why students do not complete two-year degrees. In response to the same question, 31% of survey respondents said that this was a major reason for non-completion at four-year institutions.

- The majority (86%) of Gallup survey respondents felt that it was "very important" or "important" that students have the ability to transfer community college course credits to four-year institutions, and 83% said the same of students' ability to transfer credits they have earned elsewhere to four-year institutions.

Recommendations from Participants

- Align course offerings between high schools and institutes of higher education to reduce unnecessary course repetition

- Create pathways based on co-admissions guidelines to ease transfer from community colleges to four-year colleges and universities

- Create system-wide articulation agreements for credit transfer

  - Revise and standardize credit determination

  - Elevate decisions about course credit above the faculty level

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- Provide a uniform approach to giving credit for military experience and training
- Provide credit for courses based on student-demonstrated mastery

(EC, J, K, L, LM, P, W)

Redundant and Narrow Program Offerings

Improved coordination across postsecondary institutions could help reduce redundant programming, and improved coordination between the postsecondary and business and industry sectors could expand program offerings that help produce more well-rounded job candidates.

Listening Tour participants identified two challenges directly related to program offerings in two-year and four-year colleges:

1. Lack of coordination between community colleges and four-year institutions sometimes results in redundant offerings – Many participants noted that it is not cost-effective for nearby four-year and community colleges to offer the same programs.

2. Program offerings at some colleges are too narrow in scope to ensure long-term student success – Employers said that narrowly focused programs do not produce versatile job candidates.

Recommendations from Participants

- Consider regionalization of community college programs and/or overlapping service areas for community colleges
- Allow local organizations to create for-credit experiential learning opportunities connected directly to workforce needs
- Develop more degree programs that connect to available jobs

(C, EC, L, W)

Bureaucracy and Lack of Local Flexibility

At every Listening Tour stop, educators stressed the importance of local flexibility and autonomy.

Generally, schools are required to follow state-approved frameworks and mandated implementation processes. School administrators and teachers expressed the need for autonomy in order to better address special/local cases. Educators highlighted several examples to illustrate the need for local discretion:

1. Teachers specifically expressed the need for more autonomy in what they teach in the classroom; they feel that the curriculum requirements and emphasis on test preparation do not allow for deviation to explore students' related interests.

2. Many stakeholders agreed that students need scheduling flexibility during school hours to take advantage of courses at other schools and/or work-based learning opportunities.

3. Representatives from institutes of higher education felt that the current governing body process can hinder their ability to respond to changing workforce needs, as the process for new program approval sometimes can take six to 18 months.

Recommendations from Participants

- Allow localities to develop plans to address state-level goals, instead of mandating statewide rules and implementation guidelines

- Grant educators at all levels more autonomy
- Grant education institutions at all levels more flexibility with respect to use of funds, programs offered, and curriculum
- Expand the ability of institutes of higher education to offer certificates and non-degree credentials to students in response to workforce needs

(A, C, EC, G, J, K, L, P, W)

Within- and Cross-Sector Communications Barriers

Insufficient communication within and across sectors results in missed educational opportunities.

Listening Tour participants felt strongly that communication barriers along the continuum resulted in missed opportunities. For instance, participants highlighted a curriculum disconnect between high school and postsecondary, noting that secondary schools do not always know enough about what is required in postsecondary to prepare students adequately. As highlighted above, in higher education, community colleges in adjacent service areas may duplicate efforts, and transfer pathways from community college to university are not always well-defined. Participants also identified work-based learning opportunities that lead to careers as another opportunity for better communication and collaboration.

Outside of the business and industry sector, communication barriers make it difficult for parents and students to get access to needed information about education options, especially at junctures when students reach major transition points (elementary to middle, middle to high, or high school to postsecondary). District-to-district inconsistencies in local data systems often place the onus on parents and students to ensure that all of their information travels with them during transitions.

Relevant Survey Findings

- Half of Gallup survey respondents felt that high school students were prepared to be successful in community colleges, while only 39% felt that high school students were prepared to be successful within four-year institutions.

Recommendations from Participants

- Continue to strengthen high school to community college connections through dual enrollment programs
- Encourage communities, schools, colleges, and businesses to establish more pathways for students that connect schooling and the workforce; create more structures that support ongoing, fluid, and dynamic interactions between education and the business and industry sector
  - For example, develop more partnerships to connect students to job and training opportunities and to better calibrate course/program offerings with industry needs
- Invite career development professionals to schools to interface with parents, teachers, business leaders, and other external partners
- Think of and engage the business and industry sector as another education sector
- Create central hubs to share education information within and across sectors

(A, C, EC, G, J, K, L, P)

Fragmented and Uncoordinated Cross-Sector Organizations

Too often, education and business groups form committees to solve mutual problems, but end up duplicating efforts, resulting in too many fragmented groups working on the same issues.

Focus groups highlighted local-level cross-sector organizations (Workforce Development Boards, Chambers of Commerce, Economic Development Boards, etc.) all over the state that provide needed resources and services but do not coordinate at the community and regional levels. These organizations lack clear lines of communication and ways to share best practices and reduce redundancies, and they are unable to take advantage of economies of scale. Site visits in some regions revealed the beginnings of cross-organization coordination, but convening entities struggled to account for all of the work and measure the quality of efforts and progress towards common goals. Inadequate time to convene and the absence of central organizing structures further compound the difficulties of aligning efforts.

Recommendations from Participants

- Construct a dynamic asset map of organizations working on attainment statewide

    - Construct a rubric for measuring the quality of and progress made in each effort

- Consider coordination at the regional level rather than at the county or community level

- Encourage collaboration between elected officials from different levels

(G, J, K, L, P, W)

Unprepared Students

Gaps in preparation and lack of support personnel make transitions difficult for students.

Listening Tour participants detailed challenges in student preparation at several specific points along the continuum, starting in pre-Kindergarten. The consensus among focus group attendees was that achievement gaps form between students who attend and do not attend preschool, and that these achievement gaps are difficult to overcome as students progress. At the other end of the continuum, many stakeholders—including students and employers—felt that their high school experiences did not properly prepare them for college, and that their college experiences did not prepare them for the workforce.

Stakeholders also highlighted two structural challenges to student preparation:

1. Lack of support personnel in schools – each sector has challenges matching teachers to student instructional needs. Many schools do not have the funds to hire support staff to help students prepare for transitions and make connections outside of the classroom, and even when they have the budget, they may not have a strong applicant pool from which to draw.

2. Emphasis on promotion at all costs – Stakeholders expressed concerns about the incentives to promote students before they are ready for transitions academically and/or emotionally. Specifically, student lack of soft skills was a big concern for teachers and employers. Often, if a student is able to pass a test, she or he is eligible for promotion, but many felt that test scores reveal only one aspect of student preparedness.

Relevant Survey Findings

- Half of Gallup survey respondents were of the opinion that attending preschool has a major impact on the long-term success of students in school and life.

- Repeated from the Within- and Cross-Sector Communications Barriers section: Half of Gallup survey respondents felt that high school students were prepared to be successful

in community colleges, while only 39% felt that high school students were prepared to be successful within four-year institutions.

Recommendations from Participants

- Provide universal access to pre-Kindergarten

- Advocate for smaller class sizes in early grades

- Map career pathways, illustrating supports at each transition point

- Expand apprenticeship and internship opportunities

- Expose students to meaningful postsecondary opportunities early and often

- Provide pathways for high school students to earn employment-ready certifications

- Hire more non-instructional support staff at each level of schooling

- Update curriculum to more holistically assess student progress towards benchmarks in learning (for example, employ formative assessments and project-based learning)

(A, C, EC, G, J, K, L, P, W)

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