Policy Briefs

INCREASING EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

A better educated North Carolina is the key to economic prosperity and upward mobility for all citizens.

To close the education attainment gap in North Carolina by 2030, our state must ensure that students have the information, resources, and opportunities they need to prepare for, enroll in, and succeed in college and credentialing opportunities that align with business and industry needs. In 2021, we can begin to close that gap with a dedicated focus on four cross-sector goals:

- Increase commitment to career & college **readiness** programs;
- Increase student awareness of their ability to **access** career & college pathways and federal financial aid;
- Improve need-based supports for students to increase postsecondary **completion**; and
- Expand access to non-degree credentialing programs that improve **alignment** between postsecondary opportunities and workforce needs.

Our progress will be strengthened by additional attention to two key, cross-goal **foundations for success**: broadband access, affordability, and adoption; and analysis of attainment data.

myFutureNC's vision and mission is to create a stronger, economically competitive, and prosperous North Carolina by promoting a statewide education-through-workforce continuum that dramatically increases attainment of valuable credentials and degrees. Our statewide goal is to ensure that by 2030 at least two million North Carolinians between the ages of 25 and 44 hold a valuable, high-quality credential or postsecondary degree.

Postsecondary Readiness

POLICY BRIEF 1

Increase Commitment to Career & College Readiness Programs

Too many North Carolina high school graduates are **underprepared for completing postsecondary programs**,[1] resulting in almost 30% never enrolling, and two-thirds never attaining a postsecondary degree or credential.[2] Those numbers would be even higher without the presence of two key initiatives: Cooperating Innovative High Schools (CIHS) and the Career and College Ready Graduates (CCRG) program.

Recommended Legislative Actions 2021

To secure the ongoing impact of the CIHS initiative and to strengthen support for the state's CCRG partnership between the North Carolina Community College System and the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction[5], during the 2021-22 Session, the North Carolina General Assembly should:

- **Increase Access to Existing Readiness and Remedial Resources for All Qualifying Students**
- **Expand Support for Remedial Instructors**

myFutureNC Commitments for 2021

- Support Cross-Sector Efforts to Increase Remedial Student Success
- Champion Longer-Term Strategies for Eliminating the Need for Remediation

Key Initiatives

Cooperating Innovative High Schools (CIHS)

- Started in 2004, CIHSs give students opportunities to earn college credits and marketable certificates while still in high school.
- By 2020, there were 132 CIHS schools in operation, with more than 4,700 students earning associate degrees or credentials in that year alone.[3]

Career and College Ready Graduates (CCRG) program

- Statewide support for ensuring that all graduating high school students are prepared for postsecondary education.[4]
- Began providing remedial instruction for high school seniors in 2016-17.
- Full roll-out to every NC LEA is taking place this school year.

Postsecondary Readiness

Recommendations

Increase Access to Existing Readiness and Remedial Resources for All Qualifying Students

Action: Continue Support for Cooperative Innovative High Schools.

CIHSs show promising gains not only in high school retention and completion rates, but also in certification and associate degree completion and four-year institution admission. Several CIHSs operate in each of the state's 8 Prosperity Zones, but 8 schools across 4 Zones currently do not receive recurring state support, and several others will see state support drop as a result of changes in county Tier designations.[6]

For 2021: NCDPI is seeking support for these un- or under-funded CIHSs so that they can continue to support postsecondary readiness among high school students in the regions they serve.

Action: Fully Fund Online Remedial Content Subscriptions for all High Schools.

The state provides thousands of high school students each year with access to remedial mathematics, reading, and English content for the CCRG program through a third-party vendor. To date, the state's subscription has been paid for by the Department of Public Instruction out of lapsed salary funds,[7] with initial support from the Community College System for pilot implementation.[8]

For 2021: NCDPI is requesting coverage of subscription costs to ensure continued availability of support for high school students across the state who demonstrate a need for remediation in English or mathematics ahead of postsecondary enrollment.

Expand Support for Remedial Instructors

Action: Provide Funding for a CCRG Effectiveness Coordinator.

CCRG requires coordination of efforts across local school districts, NCDPI, and NCCCS, as well as ongoing training and annual assessment of CCRG's success. Establishing a position dedicated to CCRG cross-Sector implementation and assessment will strengthen the state's ability to provide training and support, track progress, and improve services.

For 2021: NCDPI's request for remedial content subscription coverage for CCRG students (detailed above) includes funding for a coordinator.

myFutureNC's Commitments for 2021

Support Cross-Sector Efforts to Increase Remedial Student Success

myFutureNC will continue to partner with NCDPI and NCCCS to enhance CCRG implementation. As a program with cross-Sector impact, CCRG is strengthened by ongoing collaboration across implementing agencies, as well as by insights gained from both immediate and longer-term[9] outcomes for program completers. myFutureNC will continue to support implementers as they work together to ensure CCRG's success.

Champion Longer-Term Strategies for Eliminating the Need for Remediation

myFutureNC will raise awareness of connections between early childhood and attainment. Reaching our 2M by 2030 goal requires a focus in the short term on high school students and young adults, but 2030 is not a final destination: It is just the first of many benchmarks for statewide postsecondary attainment (the number of adults with high-quality credentials or degrees). To reach even higher levels of attainment in the years beyond 2030, the readiness focus will need to expand beyond remediation alone to include early childhood interventions like universal pre-kindergarten enrollment and Science of Reading-supported[10] early literacy programs.

Looking Ahead: Actions to Consider for 2022-23

The effectiveness of readiness initiatives also will require ongoing training. Going forward, the state should consider additional actions such as:

Providing Support for Statewide Remedial Instruction Training. Teaching effective, college-level remedial courses requires special skills and understandings beyond those acquired during traditional teacher preparation. NCCCS and NCDPI currently partner to provide this training but rely on limited allocations to do so.

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[1] Complete College America estimated (2012) that about 32% of students enrolling in 2-year colleges were placed in remedial courses upon enrollment, with only about one in 10 graduating in three years.

[2] Tippett & Khan (2018a, 2018b)

[3] NCDPI (2021)

[4] After a non-recurring initial appropriation to NCCCS of $355,000 for CCRG implementation in FY 2018-19, the current recurring appropriation is $135,000.

[5] First codified in SL 2015-241; modified in SL 2016-94

[6] A county's economic well-being Tier designation helps determine the amount of state support received by a CIHS.

[7] Lapsed salary funds are funds committed at the beginning of the year for anticipated salary costs that were unused as a result of resignations, retirements, and other job transitions.

[8] The Department of Public Instruction has been solely responsible for providing the subscription since Fall 2020; past funding sources used to fund the subscription were stop-gap only and will not be available going forward.

[9] Understanding the longer-term impact of initiatives like CCRG will benefit greatly from full implementation of the state's planned cross-sector Longitudinal Data System, which is addressed in myFutureNC Brief #5, **Postsecondary Foundations for Success**.

[10] The Hill Learning Center is one of several North Carolina-based groups that can provide additional information about the **Science of Reading**; the Governor's budget recommendations for 2021-23 include an additional $4M (non-recurring) for Science of Reading training (FY 2022-23) to supplement $12M in dedicated federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funds (SL 2021-03), as well as an increase of $30M per year by FY 2022-23 (with $20M of that $30M covered by receipts) in recurring funds that support literacy-focused teacher assistants.

Postsecondary Access

Increase Awareness of and Access to Advising on Career & College Pathways and Federal Financial Aid

Preparation for postsecondary success is only valuable if students **know how to and are able to enroll in postsecondary opportunities**. In North Carolina, only about three out of five high school seniors apply for federal aid[1] and only two-thirds enroll in postsecondary programs within two years of graduation. Those rates are much lower for underrepresented students and students from rural counties.[2]

Recommended Legislative Actions 2021

To improve thoughtful, career-minded postsecondary enrollment, during the 2021-22 Session, the North Carolina General Assembly should:

- **Expand Access to Postsecondary and Career Advising**
- **Re-Envision Access to Postsecondary Financial Aid**

myFutureNC Commitments for 2021

- Continue to Endorse Postsecondary Financial Aid Innovations

Recommended Student to Counselor Ratio:

250:1

North Carolina Student to Counselor Ratio:

350:1

Postsecondary Access

Recommendations

Expand Access to Postsecondary and Career Advising

The nationally recommended student to counselor ratio is 250:1, but in NC that ratio is over 350:1.[3]

Action: Strengthen Early Emphasis on Career Planning.

Student entry into most postsecondary career and college pathways often depends on completion of a series of courses, experiences, and explorations that should begin as early as middle school.[4] However, many younger North Carolina students currently do not have access to high-quality career development advisors[5] who can help them navigate the connections between their current school choices and their future postsecondary and career opportunities.

For 2021: To improve and expand support for middle and high school students as they develop postsecondary pathways connected to their personal career goals, the state should support expansion of the corps of middle- and high school-embedded Career Development Coordinators.

Action: Expand Availability of NC Community College Career Coaches.

Career coaches—community college employees embedded in high schools—help high school students determine career goals and identify community college programs that align with those goals.[6] Current Career Coach cohorts conducted over 24,000 sessions with students in 2019-20 but were able to serve only about half of the counties in the state—and none in the far west and upper northeast.[7]

For 2021: To increase community college enrollment, myFutureNC recommends raising current state support to provide at least one Coach for every community college.

Action: Expand the College Advising Corps (CAC).

The Corps promotes all forms of college enrollment among low-income, first-generation college, and underrepresented high school students by offering guidance on college admission, financial aid/FAFSA, and enrollment.

For 2021: To increase overall postsecondary enrollment, CAC seeks support to grow program capacity in currently-served counties and to provide Corps members for ten additional counties (92 counties total).

Re-Envision Access to Postsecondary Financial Aid

Action: Increase Support for FAFSA[8] Completion.

Completing the FAFSA not only is a requirement for a student to become eligible for federal financial aid but also a requirement in North Carolina for accessing state aid programs. Yet in 2019, only about 64% of NC high school seniors completed a FAFSA form,[9] and rates typically are much lower for lower-income students.[10]

For 2021: To begin boosting FAFSA completion rates and increase postsecondary enrollment among high school graduates, the state should provide support for NCSEAA's proposal for staffing and organizing the agency's FAFSA completion efforts.[11] Optimizing NCSEAA capacity in this area will allow the agency to better offer the guidance many applicants need to hurdle language barriers, navigate the complexity of the form, and overcome other challenges.[12]

Postsecondary Access

myFutureNC's Commitments for 2021

Continue to Endorse Postsecondary Financial Aid Innovations

- **Make First in FAFSA an Annual Event.** myFutureNC is committed to expanding on the success of the 2020 First in FAFSA[13] campaign by making the event annual and exploring options for expanding the campaign with virtual advising and automated completion reminders. myFutureNC's long-range plan includes handing off the campaign to NCSEAA once resources are in place for support.

- **Investigate Options for Providing Targeted FAFSA Completion Data to Schools.** Existing FAFSA Completion Tracking Tools provide counselors with real-time data on FAFSA submissions, completions, and verifications. myFutureNC will work with NCSEAA and NCDPI to complete a scan of approaches other states use to track FAFSA completion to determine whether there are other practices the state should adopt to provide counselors with additional data and support to help them improve completion rates for targeted student populations.

- **Explore Ways to Leverage the State Personal Finance Course.** For example, myFutureNC will work with NCDPI representatives to consider options for including FAFSA completion as a possible course requirement, as well as information about the value and return on investment of education after high school.

- **Identify Options for Providing Last-Dollar Tuition Coverage.** Following the lead of several North Carolina community colleges and a handful of other states[14], myFutureNC will study prospects for expanding last-dollar initiatives—programs that help students pay for tuition costs not covered by state or federal aid—statewide.

Looking Ahead: Actions to Consider for 2022-23

Improving our state's approaches to increasing access to postsecondary opportunities will continue to be an important area of focus for reaching the 2M by 2030 goal. Going forward, the state should consider additional actions such as:

- **Better Coordinating College and Career Advising Efforts.** Each North Carolina college and career advising program already plays a critical role in helping many high school students—especially lower-income and first-generation college-goers—determine career goals and choose postsecondary pathways that support those goals. Identifying ways for these programs to work together more seamlessly could help open pathways for even more students.

- **Supporting Creation of Student Career Development Plans (CDPs).** To encourage more students to translate career goals into postsecondary action plans, middle schools and high schools could help students construct formal CDPs. CDPs help students identify postsecondary credit opportunities they can earn before graduation that align both with their interests and with career pathways in high-growth/high-demand fields. CDPs would pair well with work already under way at NCDPI, which is reviewing ways to elevate competency-based mastery via development of a Graduate Profile (informed by industry input) that will detail traits beyond test scores alone that North Carolina expects to see in all high school graduates.

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[1] National College Attainment Network (**2021**)

[2] Tippett & Khan (**2018**)

[3] NCDPI (**2019**)

[4] Coalition for Career Development (**2019**)

[5] While there are currently about 400 high school-based Career Development Coordinators across the state, there are only about 40 based in middle schools.

[6] In keeping with the importance of aligning postsecondary opportunities with workforce trends, myFutureNC believes the focus of these Coaches should continue to be on increasing enrollment in high-demand, high-growth workforce pathways.

[7] NCCCS (**2020**)

[8] **Free Application for Federal Student Aid**

[9] myFutureNC (**2020**)

[10] USED (**2018**)

[11] NCSEAA's specific plans for enhancing their FAFSA work include increasing outreach to students, families, and schools (including trainings, FAFSA events, and college application weeks), as well as providing communication about federal financial aid changes and the State's financial aid simplifications.

[12] ECS (**2020**); for example, NCSEAA currently only has two Spanish-speaking staff members available to serve the entire state.

[13] **June 2020**

[14] Including **Tennessee**, **Idaho**, and others

Improve Need-Based Supports for Students

North Carolinians with a degree or certificate beyond high school are more likely to be employed than those with only a high school education, and they typically earn two to three times as much annually.[1] Their economic success helps not only their families but also their communities and the state as a whole.

Getting high school students enrolled in programs after high school is no guarantee that they will complete those programs. According to our university and college presidents, many of our most at-risk postsecondary students are "one flat tire away" from dropping out, and fewer than one in five high school freshmen end up completing postsecondary programs or degrees.[3] **Finances and advising should not be among the potholes in their road.** And yet, after significant increases over the first decade of the millennium, need-based student aid has flattened,[4] and the availability of college advisors often falls well short of student demand.[5]

Recommended Legislative Actions 2021

To improve postsecondary completion rates, during the 2021-22 Session, the North Carolina General Assembly should:

- **Reform Public Need-Based Student Aid**
- **Strengthen Postsecondary Student Support**

myFutureNC Commitments for 2021

- Develop Additional Strategies for Improving Postsecondary Completion

Community College Graduates

earn nearly

$8 Billion

more annually than they would have without a degree

and

account for more than

$12 Billion

per year in higher industry profits and additional earnings of other workers.[2]

Postsecondary Completion

Recommendations

Reform Public Need-Based Student Aid

The current complexity of our state's student aid process discourages many would-be postsecondary students from enrolling—particularly first-generation college-going students and students from lower-income families. In addition, more than 1.4 million North Carolinians currently have postsecondary credits but left programs with no degree or credential,[6] and tens of thousands of those left even though they were in good standing with a significant number of credits already earned.[7] Students frequently cite the costs of staying enrolled as a significant barrier to completion.[8]

Action: Consolidate and Simplify Public Need-Based Aid Grants.

The state offers three different need-based aid grants for public college and university students.[9] Because each has its own eligibility criteria and formula for determining need, these programs can be challenging for students and families to navigate. In addition, many students now make enrollment decisions before they know their aid status because notification of grant eligibility typically arrives after a student has been accepted by a public college or university. Finally, yearly changes in the eligibility formula make it difficult for financial aid officers to recruit students.

For 2021: Guided by the North Carolina Scholarship plan that was jointly developed by the UNC System Office and the North Carolina Community College System Office,[10] the state should consolidate the three need-based grant programs that serve students at public colleges and universities[9] into a single, user-friendly program that better supports and encourages postsecondary enrollment, progress, and completion.[11] This consolidation is projected to be budget-neutral.

Action: Update State Grant IT System and Outreach Efforts.

The North Carolina Scholarship plan proposed above will tax NCSEAA's increasingly obsolete grants management system. In addition, NCSEAA will need to conduct a public awareness campaign to educate students, families, and schools about the new plan.

For 2021: The state should provide non-recurring funding to allow NCSEAA to upgrade its systems and outreach in support of the proposed North Carolina Scholarship plan.

Strengthen Postsecondary Student Support

The process for accessing need-based aid is one barrier to completion; equally as important is the amount of aid available—both in terms of general need-based academic aid and aid earmarked for helping secondary students weather challenges like food and housing insecurity[12] or last year's global pandemic.

Action: Expand Student Financial Supports.

Expand targeted financial aid supports across all North Carolina higher education sectors for students who are most at risk of withdrawing from school. Prioritize students in degree or credential programs that align with labor market needs.

For 2021: To begin boosting postsecondary completion rates among the most vulnerable students, prioritize the long-term expansion of available state need-based support, and provide short-term, targeted support specifically for students impacted by COVID.

Postsecondary Completion

POLICY BRIEF 3

myFutureNC's Commitments for 2021

Develop Additional Strategies for Improving Postsecondary Completion

- **Work with NCCCS to Identify Ways to Provide More College Success Advisors.** More college success coaches and advisors means better student-advisor relationship stability and smaller student to advisor ratios. Better-trained coaches and advisors means greater capacity to encourage student retention and on-time graduation—especially for students in traditionally underserved populations. Several community colleges already are starting to see positive results from coaches via the Carolina Works initiative.[13]

- **Convene Sector Partners to Expand Credit-Earning Opportunities.** Current under-used opportunities include granting more credit for prior workplace experience, dual enrollment/co-curricular learning, and military experience, among others.

Looking Ahead: Actions to Consider for 2022-23

For many North Carolinians, cost will continue to be the primary factor in their ability to complete a postsecondary degree or credentialing program, but life stage plays a role as well. Going forward, the state should consider additional actions such as:

- **Continuing to Expand Market-Aligned Need-Based Aid.** Following successful examples from Oklahoma, Tennessee, West Virginia, and elsewhere,[14] as well as examples from our own state's recent use of temporary federal Governor's Emergency Education Relief funds,[15] this expansion could include approaches such as targeting student aid for "some college but no degree" adult students who are eligible for state financial aid programs but who, as non-traditional students, sometimes are not eligible for traditional federal aid via FAFSA.[16]

- **Developing Strategies for Engaging More Adult Learners.** Bringing adults back into the education pipeline is vital to increasing the number of North Carolinians with education and training beyond high school. To support these efforts, state partners can bring together communities and higher education stakeholders to build on our state's current strategies for redesigning the current postsecondary landscape with adult learners in mind through innovations such as: targeted marketing campaigns; single-stop postsecondary navigation tools and other adult learner-focused support services; expansion of experience-based credit (including broader credit for prior learning and military experience, as well as consistent, cross-institution agreement about what will be accepted for credit); flexible degree pathways, accelerated degree programs, cross-institutional programs that build on current transfer agreements between 2-year and 4-year institutions, and expanded online course availability; and better alignment between credential/degree pathways and workforce needs.[17]

[1] myFutureNC (**2020**)

[2] NCCCS (**2015**)

[3] Carolina Demography (**2019**)

[4] 2001-2010: Up from $872 to $ $2,446 per recipient; 2010-2019: Down from $2,446 to $2,417 per recipient.

[5] CCCSE (**2018**)

[6] US Census Bureau, American Community Survey (**2019**)

[7] E.g., Exploratory Analysis of the UNC Partway Home Student Population (**2017**)

[8] E.g., UNC System Office (**2017**)

[9] UNC Need-based Grant; Education Lottery Scholarship; Community College Grant

[10] UNCGA & NCCCS (**2019**);

[11] Additional details are outlined in North Carolina General Assembly **Senate Bill 653**

[12] Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, & Hernandez (**2017**)

[13] **Carolina Works**; Valentine & Price (**2020**) describe early positive impacts of the initiative.

[14] **Project Finish Line** (Oklahoma); **Tennessee Reconnect** (Tennessee); **HEAPS** (West Virginia)

[15] Office of the Governor (**2020**)

[16] **FAFSA eligibility requirements** include enrollment as a regular degree- or certificate-seeking student.

[17] See myFutureNC Policy Brief #5 (Postsecondary and Workforce Alignment) for ways in which myFutureNC and sector partners already are working on this alignment.

Expand Access to Marketable Non-Degree Workforce Credentials

The widest gap between the current number of adults with credentials or degrees and the 2M by 2030 goal is in the number of adults with high-quality, marketable credentials: non-degree-granting programs that provide the skills and tools necessary for such in-demand, living-wage jobs as law enforcement, engineering, and specialized construction. Nationally, only about 5% of working-age adults have earned these credentials.[1] In North Carolina, more than one half of all employers say it is difficult to fill positions—a proportion that has grown steadily for many years—with applicant lack of technical skills and credentials among their top reasons for this difficulty.[2]

Recommended Legislative Actions 2021

A handful of states are leading the way on increasing commitment to high-quality credentialing by providing financial support and training for students and employers alike.[3] Similarly, during the 2021-22 Session, the North Carolina General Assembly should:
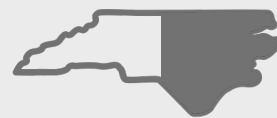
- **Increase Supports for Credentialing Students**

myFutureNC Commitments for 2021

- Formalize a Process for Validating High-Quality Credentials and Projecting Future Credentialing Needs
- Identify Ways to Open More Pathways to High-Value Credentials

More than

one half

of North Carolina Employers say it is difficult to fill positions.

Among top reasons for this difficulty are lack of:

- **Technical Skills**

- **Credentials**

Revised – June 2021

Recommendations

Increase Supports for Credentialing Students

Action: Expand Enrollment and Completion Supports.

Incentivize enrollment and completion of high-value secondary and postsecondary credential programs and pathways by paralleling the supports (financial aid,[4] exam fees,[5] advising) already available to degree-seeking students.

For 2021: The state can begin to address this need by providing support for: a) NC GROW's focus on incentivizing community college students in programs that align with high workforce demand; and b) NCDPI's request to increase coverage for credentialing examination fees that boost the number of students who complete high school with marketable, industry-recognized credentials.

myFutureNC's Commitments for 2021

Much of the foundational work in this Pathway does not yet require legislative action, and myFutureNC will continue to focus a significant proportion of its energy here in 2021.

Formalize a Process for Validating High-Quality Credentials and Projecting Future Credentialing Needs

In 2020, myFutureNC and education and workforce sector partners[6] created the NC Workforce Credentials Initiative, an effort to identify the priority, high-value credentials that will be of greatest value to North Carolinians in the coming years. In 2021, the Initiative began the process of reviewing credentials for seven of the state's 14 industry categories and vetting their results with workforce sector representatives, but much more work remains. myFutureNC will:

- **Encourage Sector Leaders to Formally Establish a North Carolina Workforce Credentials Council.** The Council—comprising representatives from NCDPI, NCCCS, the NC Association of Workforce Development Boards, and Commerce—should carry on the work of the Initiative by establishing a process for periodically reviewing and updating the list of credentials of value.

myFutureNC's Commitments for 2021 (continued)

Identify Ways to Open More Pathways to High-Value Credentials

In 2019, North Carolina employers relied heavily on in-house (97%) and private-sector (42%) training for their employees; much fewer turned to community colleges (17%) and universities (8%)[7]. myFutureNC will:

• **Support Sector Efforts to Develop More High-Demand Training Pathways.** For example, myFutureNC will encourage Sector leaders to consider options for leveraging recently-implemented local needs assessment tools to incentivize development of new courses, update existing courses, support instructors, purchase equipment, and reserve space to address identified gaps between the supply of in-demand, trained workers and labor force demand.[8] The intent of these efforts is not for public-sector providers to compete with private training providers but instead to fill gaps not covered by the private market.

• **Support Sector Efforts to Identify Long-Term Funding for the NCCareers Online Portal.** NCCareers[9] connects users to information about high-quality jobs and careers that match their interests and skills, local employer needs associated with those careers, and relevant education and training opportunities. The portal's fiscal support currently comes from federal grants and Sector contributions.

Looking Ahead: Actions to Consider for 2022-23

The actions above will be a good start, but on their own they are not enough. Going forward, the state should consider additional actions such as:

• **Identifying Barriers to Development of High-Demand Training Programs.** For example, the state could charge the Credentials Council (proposed above) with the task of identifying and proposing revisions to extant statutes and policies that inadvertently hinder the development of these training programs.

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[1] Strada and Lumina (**2019**)

[2] 56% of surveyed employers in 2019, up from 50% in 2017 and 39% in 2015 (NCDOC, **2020**)

[3] E.g., Indiana's **Next Level Jobs** program; Florida's Career and Professional Education Act (for **secondary** and **postsecondary** students); Virginia's **FastForward** program.

[4] E.g., Indiana's **Workforce Ready Grant** and Maine's **Competitive Skills Scholarship Program**.

[5] E.g., in the 2019-20 school year alone, NC public high school students and their districts invested nearly $13.6M in credentialing test fees above the current state allotment ($1.4M)

[6] NC Community College System, NC Department of Commerce, NCWorks Commission, NC Department of Public Instruction, and the Office of the Governor

[7] NCDOC, **2020**

[8] E.g., Florida provides a **weighted allocation** per industry-recognized credential offered in each district.

[9] **NC Careers.org**

| **Postsecondary Foundations** | POLICY BRIEF 5 |

Build Strong Digital and Data-Driven Foundations for Success

Foundation 1: Expand Broadband Access, Affordability, and Adoption across North Carolina

By connecting students and adult learners to the preparation and training they need to participate in North Carolina's rapidly-changing economy, broadband access equalizes opportunities for postsecondary readiness, access, completion, and alignment, regardless of ZIP code. And yet, many communities in North Carolina—most of them rural—have only limited access to broadband[1], and for those that do have access, affordability and adoption rates vary. This gap has become an even greater obstacle to increasing the number of adults with high-quality credentials or degrees as a result of the coronavirus-related school and campus closures that have moved many of our state's learning and training opportunities online.

Foundation 2: Consistently Collect and Analyze Cross-Sector Attainment Data

The North Star for North Carolina's attainment efforts—the initial 2M by 2030 goal for the number of adults with high-quality credentials or degrees—is only as meaningful as the data available to help us track our progress toward reaching that goal. Groups who need access to that data include not only policymakers and Sector leaders but also the thousands of North Carolinians who are working to increase attainment— their own as well as the attainment of others—across our state.

While by many counts our state is a leader in data collection, none of our Sectors' data systems were designed to work together, nor were they tailored to answer questions about attainment progress. For North Carolina to successfully track, analyze, and act on attainment data, the state must invest in the people, data, and systems needed to help guide our way.[11]

Recommended Legislative Actions 2021

- **Expand Broadband Access**
- **Modernize Sector Data Systems**
- **Capture a Broader Array of Attainment-Relevant Data**

myFutureNC Commitments for 2021

- Partner with Stakeholders to Develop Plans for Greater Broadband Affordability and Adoption

- Convene Partners to Establish Cross-Sector Data Standards
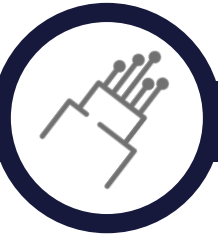
Foundation 1: Expand Broadband Access, Affordability, and Adoption across North Carolina

Recommendations:

To ensure that poor connectivity is not a barrier to postsecondary advancement, during the 2021-22 Session, the North Carolina General Assembly should:

Expand Broadband Access

Action: Accelerate Support for Longer-Term Infrastructure Solutions.

Many of the state's current quick solutions to connectivity (such as mobile hotspots) are only temporary workarounds; the long-term solution is to create a robust, sustainable, statewide broadband infrastructure.

For 2021: The Office of the Governor proposes using federal American Recovery Plan (ARP) Act funding to: modify and expand the Growing Rural Economies with Access to Technology (GREAT) program[2] (which already is transforming access in 26 Tier 1 counties,[3] with expansion to Tier 2 and rural segments of Tier 3 counties in the coming months); support local governments seeking to leverage additional federal funding; and invest in build-outs in areas not prioritized by GREAT.

Action: Continue to Provide Short-Term, Bridging Connectivity Efforts.

The state's move toward a robust, longer-term fixed broadband network will take time to complete. In the meantime, schools and communities un- or under-served by broadband service providers will continue to need short-term solutions that reduce the connectivity gap[4] and provide adequate access to online learning opportunities.

For 2021: The Office of the Governor proposes using federal ARP Act funding to bring temporary coverage to households that are likely to remain underserved for three or more years via small-area WiFi towers, fixed wireless, and other stop-gap solutions, to ensure immediate internet access ahead of wider broadband availability.[5]

Action: Support Efforts to Address Localized Online Learning Needs.

Adequate access to online learning opportunities is a statewide challenge,[6] but solutions often are location-specific. Our community college and university campuses—many of which already are working to meet these challenges—are best-positioned to develop effective, location-sensitive approaches.

For 2021: The Office of the Governor recommends using federal ARP funding to support targeted higher education sector efforts to address site-specific education technology infrastructure needs (e.g., broadband access and service[7], software, technology to support easier access to financial aid information, and other related improvements).[8]

Foundation 1: Expand Broadband Access, Affordability, and Adoption across North Carolina

myFutureNC's Commitments for 2021

Partner with Stakeholders on the Development of Plans for Greater Broadband Affordability and Adoption

Access is only the first part of the challenge; the second part is ensuring that all North Carolinians can take advantage of that access. In about one-third of the state's counties, less than half of all households have a broadband subscription—even in counties with extensive access options.[9] In 2021, myFutureNC will:

- **Work with Sector and Stakeholder Partners to Explore Long-Term Solutions for Improving Service, Affordability, and Adoption for Lower-Income Households.** These solutions may consider options such as providing subsidies for households that otherwise cannot afford service,[10] or offering tax credits or other incentives to providers that actively seek ways to defray costs for those households.

Looking Ahead: Actions to Consider for 2022-23

The actions above will move the state forward rapidly, but on their own they may not be enough. Going forward, the state should consider additional actions such as:

- **Encouraging Public-Private Partnership Solutions.** Clarifying ways in which local governments can support bringing broadband to their unserved and under-served communities, such as by working alongside providers to build out service to these communities, may be an additional important step in the state's efforts to expand broadband access to the last mile.

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[1] According to the North Carolina Department of Information Technology's Broadband Infrastructure Office, fewer than 60% of residents in 11 counties have **access** to baseline high-speed connectivity options, with the lowest availability in Hyde (21%) and Greene (33%).

[2] **NC GREAT Program**; related 2021 legislation: **H947**

[3] A county's Tier designation indicates its economic well-being relative to other counties (Tier 1=most economically distressed; Tier 3=least economically distressed).

[4] As a **recent EdTech report** suggests, technology usage gaps between more- and less-affluent school districts—already wide before coronavirus closures—increased during the switch to online learning in Spring and Fall 2020.

[5] Examples of current work in this area include **NC Student Connect**, which in September 2020 started leveraging about $40M in federal CARES Act funding to distribute wireless high-speed hot spots to students, establish accessible public wireless sites, and remote learning professional development.

[6] As a **recent EdTech report** suggests, technology usage gaps between more- and less-affluent districts—already wide before coronavirus closures—increased during the switch to online learning in Spring and Fall 2020.

[7] This category includes last-mile connectivity for buildings on community college campuses that currently do not have high-speed connections

[8] Per the Governor's proposal, higher education sectors also would be able to use these funds for non-Broadband-related but still attainment-focused activities such as apprenticeship and retraining infrastructure to support preparation for high-demand workforce areas.

[9] North Carolina Department of Information Technology **Broadband Adoption Index**

[10] For immediate, short-term affordability relief, the Office of the Governor has proposed investing federal ARP funds to leverage additional private and federal cost-share funds for lower-income household subscription subsidies for FY22 through FY25.

Foundation 2: Consistently Collect and Analyze Cross-Sector Attainment Data

Recommendations:

To improve the state's ability to determine progress toward the 2M by 2030 goal, during the 2021-22 Session, the North Carolina General Assembly should:

Modernize Sector Data Systems

Each system the Sectors use to collect and store data differs in its capacity, its procedures, and its security, which impacts not only how accurately we can monitor North Carolina's progress toward its attainment goal but also how well we can analyze ways to improve progress.[12]

Action: Support Rapid Upgrades of Public Sector Data Systems.

The state should move quickly to act on Sector recommendations for modernizing their Enterprise Resource Platforms by migrating to more secure systems. Doing so will significantly enhance the state's ability to store, access, and protect the data needed to understand and respond to attainment trends via effective and efficient policy and resource allocation.

For 2021: Both NC Department of Public Instruction and NC Community College System[13] are seeking support for these upgrades.

Capture a Broader Array of Attainment-Relevant Data

Because many Sector data systems were not designed initially with a specific set of cross-sector attainment benchmarks in mind, the attainment-relevant data they do collect are not always complete.

Action: Increase the Availability of Cross-Sector Attainment- Relevant Data.

Unlike data used to measure most within-sector outcomes, some of the cross-sector data our state needs in order to better track and act on attainment progress are not readily available from existing state sources.

For 2021: In FY 2021-22, the State should consider using existing available federal funds to procure cross-sector longitudinal data available from the National Student Clearinghouse.[14] myFutureNC recommends recurring legislative support for data procurement starting in FY 2022. Doing so will enhance the state's longer-term ability to measure key intermediate and longer-term attainment-relevant outcomes.

Foundation 2: Consistently Collect and Analyze Cross-Sector Attainment Data

myFutureNC's Commitments for 2021

Convene Partners to Establish Cross-Sector Data Standards

As an organization explicitly established for the purpose of better aligning attainment-relevant work across sectors, myFutureNC will work with sector partners to:

• Identify the data needed from each sector partner to better monitor North Carolina's attainment progress; and

• Develop procedures for consistently collecting attainment-relevant data across sectors.

Looking Ahead: Actions to Consider for 2022-23

The next critical step for the state will be developing and maintaining the human capacity necessary to capitalize on the improvements to attainment-relevant data collection outlined above. As soon as possible, the state should consider proactive steps to formalize and strengthen cross-sector analyses such as:

• **Supporting State Efforts to Fully Modernize an Interoperable NC Longitudinal Data System (NCLDS).** Just as attainment is not the result of the work of one Sector alone but of all Sectors working in collaboration, analysis of attainment progress also is a cross-Sector endeavor. The state already has agreements in place for maintaining a "system of systems" (the NCLDS) that can connect workforce, higher education, K12, and early childhood outcomes to help strengthen attainment-relevant decision-making. The next step is to turn these agreements into an active entity.[15] The eight key actions for doing so recommended in the NCLDS study commissioned by the Governor's Education Cabinet include: Establishment of formal governance and organizational structures; development of a system architecture to meet NCLDS functional and technical requirements; and development of an external research agenda to prioritize data requests and the formation of research-practice partnerships.[16]

• **Increasing Capacity across Sectors to Collect and Analyze Attainment-Relevant Data.** For example, the state should identify ways to build analytic capacity both at NCLDS and at other partner agencies to support North Carolina's cross-Sector, attainment-related evaluation and research priorities.

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[11] The Education Commission of the States (**2018**) has identified four key targets for this investment: data use, coordination and collaboration, leadership, and outcomes alignment

[12] Data security in particular continues to be a major concern with outdated K12 and postsecondary systems, as demonstrated by recent security breaches in Rockingham County Schools (2018) and Central Piedmont Community College (2021), among others.

[13] Note: NCCCS also is seeking related support for **cybersecurity staffing and services upgrades**.

[14] The **National Student Clearinghouse** provides longitudinal, cross-Sector data on nearly every postsecondary student currently enrolled in a public or private institution.

[15] In the recent past, the North Carolina General Assembly has demonstrated support for the NCLDS; though eventually vetoed, H398 (**2019**) included two years of non-recurring start-up funding ($750K per year).

[16] The Information Decision-Making Collaborative already initiated this process in 2020; Collaborative membership includes representatives from NCDIT (GDAC), the Office of the Governor, the Hunt Institute, NCDHHS, NCDPI, NCSBE, NCCCS, the UNC System Office, NCICU, NCDOC, and myFutureNC.