NC STATE UNIVERSITY
College of Education
Belk Center for Community College
Leadership and Research

Adult Learner

GUIDEBOOK

SECOND EDITION

A GUIDE TO RECRUIT & RETAIN ADULT LEARNERS
AT NORTH CAROLINA COMMUNITY COLLEGES

ABOUT THE BELK CENTER

CREATING TOOLS, CONVENING LEADERS, AND CATALYZING CHANGE:

The Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research works with educators, researchers, and policymakers to further more equitable community college outcomes in North Carolina and across the nation.

We equip community college leaders with actionable insights and create opportunities for collaboration as we tackle the most pressing issues facing students and campuses to build stronger, more resilient communities. The Belk Center is housed in the College of Education at North Carolina State University, a land-grant university that shares our commitment to community colleges and the critical role these institutions play in creating and expanding opportunities for all North Carolinians.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABOUT THE BELK CENTER 1

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 2

TABLE OF CONTENTS 3

INTRODUCTION 4

ADULT LEARNER OVERVIEW & STORIES 7

KEY LEARNINGS & OPPORTUNITIES 10

LESSONS FROM LEADERSHIP 20

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES 26

FACULTY INSIGHTS 32

QUANTITATIVE DATA HIGHLIGHTS 35

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING FOR FACULTY & STAFF 40

ADVICE FROM NC RECONNECT COLLEGES 42

THE FIVE P ADULT LEARNER FRAMEWORK 47

A CALL TO ACTION 49

SINCE 2021, NORTH CAROLINA HAS MADE EXTRAORDINARY PROGRESS TO CLOSE GAPS IN EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT.

A focus on supporting the adult learner population has gained considerable attention and support from leaders in education, policy, community, and research. The need for collaborative efforts among these stakeholders continues to be essential as North Carolina's workforce becomes more dynamic and the economy grows.

As colleges across the state reimagine the experiences of adult learners on their campuses, several strategies and promising practices focused on North Carolina's community colleges have emerged and are shared here, in the second edition of the adult learner guidebook. What has remained constant since our first guidebook is that by 2030, North Carolina must ensure that two million 25-44 year olds are equipped with the skills necessary for the jobs of today and tomorrow, which increasingly require some form of postsecondary education. To date, 1.56 million North Carolinians ages 25-44 have a high-quality degree or credential (See Graphic 1), and the state will need to make rapid progress in order to achieve its goal (MyFutureNC, 2021). Adult learners are critically important to the success of North Carolina's statewide attainment efforts and have a vital role to play in the strength of our workforce and economy.

The goal to ensure North Carolinians are ready for the workforce remains in reach. Since the John M. Belk Endowment (JMBE) launched the North Carolina Reconnect Program (NC Reconnect) in 2021 with five inaugural cohort one colleges, 10 additional North Carolina community colleges have joined the work to make up cohorts two and three (See Graphic 2).

COHORTS

ONE

- Blue Ridge Community College
- Durham Technical Community College
- Fayetteville Technical Community College
- Pitt Community College
- Vance-Granville Community College

TWO

- Wilkes Community College
- Caldwell Community College and Technical Institute
- Forsyth Technical Community College
- Central Carolina Community College
- Lenoir Community College

THREE

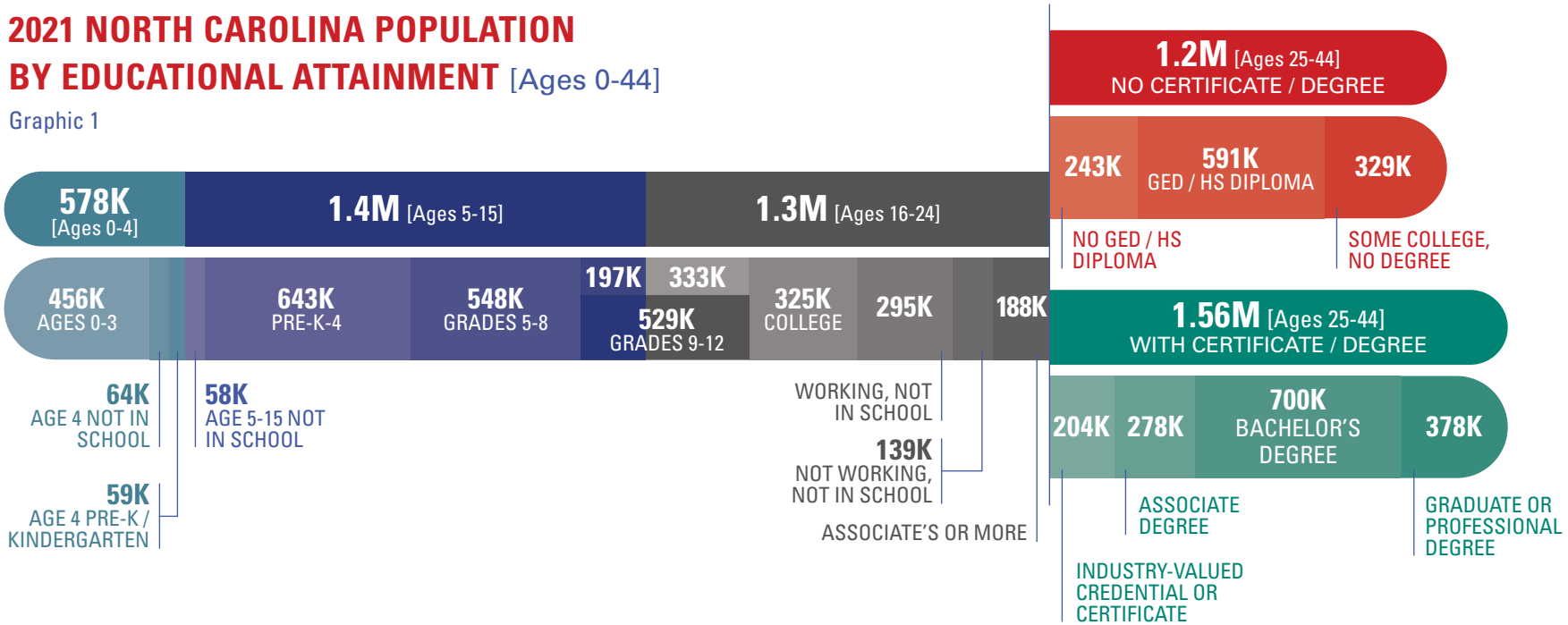
- Catawba Valley Community College
- Davidson-Davie Community College
- Brunswick Community College
- Edgecombe Community College
- College of the Albemarle

Similar to cohort one, colleges in cohorts two and three benefit from the support of JMBE, InsideTrack, VisionPoint Marketing, CRISP Communications and the Belk Center, as they implement targeted marketing and recruitment campaigns for adult learners.

In this second edition of the adult learner guidebook, you will have the opportunity to learn about the experiences of campuses across North Carolina – in regions both urban and rural – and their work to ensure the success of adult learners in their communities. We hope your campus will use this guidebook as a resource for strategies and insight to support adult learners as they return to your institution.

2021 NORTH CAROLINA POPULATION BY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT [Ages 0-44]

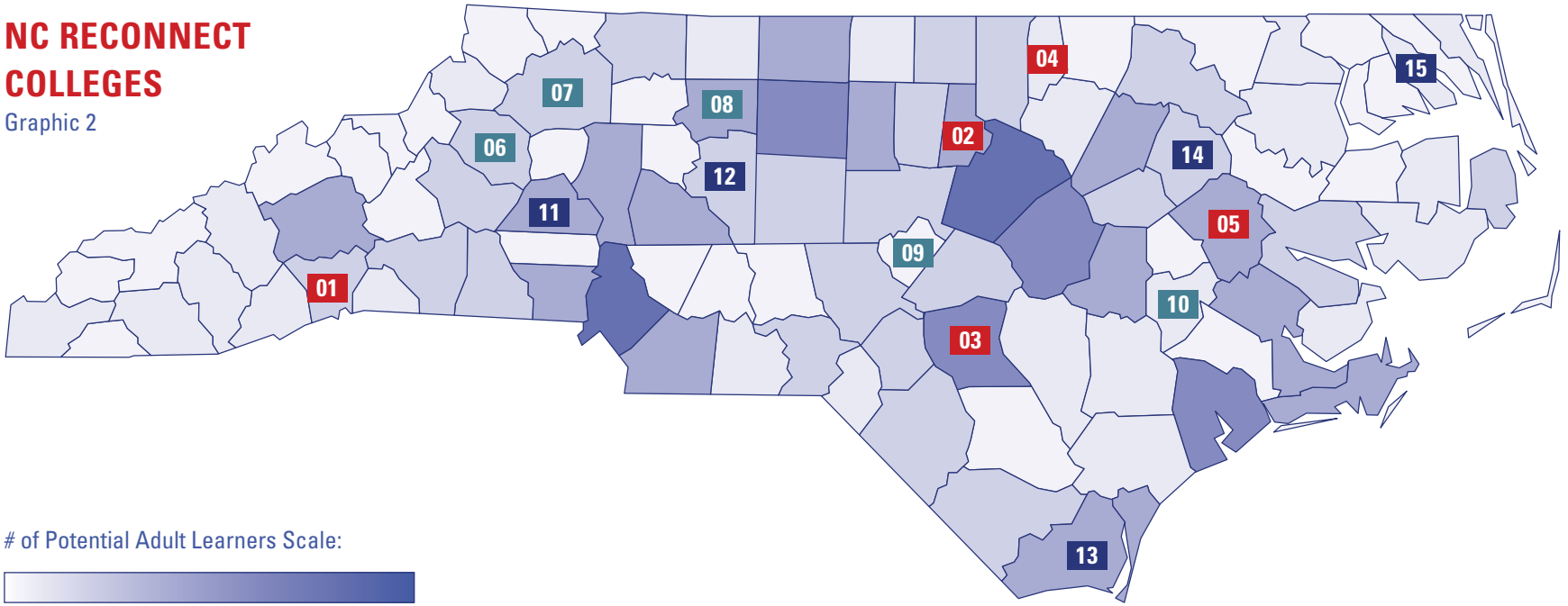
Graphic 1



WHERE WE ARE

NC RECONNECT COLLEGES

Graphic 2



COHORT ONE

- 01 BlueRidge Community College
- 02 Durham Tech
- 03 FTCC
- 04 Vance-Granville Community College
- 05 PITT Community College

COHORT TWO

- 06 CCC&TI Caldwell Community College & Technical Institute
- 07 Wilkes Community College — Wilkes • Ashe • Alleghany
- 08 Forsyth Tech Community College
- 09 Central Carolina Community College
- 10 Lenoir Community College

COHORT THREE

- 11 Catawba Valley Community College
- 12 Davidson-Davie Community College
- 13 Brunswick Community College
- 14 Edgecombe Community College
- 15 College of the Albemarle

AGE IS JUST ONE CHARACTERISTIC THAT DESCRIBES ADULT LEARNERS.

From the beginning of NC Reconnect, adult learners have been and remain described by age and a diverse set of characteristics and circumstances. Adult learners are students entering or returning to higher education after the age of 24.

Characteristics such as demographics, life experiences, and acquired skills are also discussed in conversations around identifying adult learners. Additionally, adult learners may carry responsibilities of parenting and working full- and/or part-time, both of which must be considered in the decision to return to college.

Some adult learners have become displaced from their jobs and are seeking opportunities to retool their skills and gain access to new career paths. Veterans transitioning to civilian life and the workforce are also well-represented in our state's population of adult learners. Life's challenges may have caused some individuals to stop out of high school or college, and they are looking to take the next step toward earning a diploma, degree, or credential. Lifelong learners may be deciding to return to college to learn a new skill or pursue a personal interest. No two adult learners are the same. North Carolina's community colleges recognize this and are committed to championing the success of all adults as they continue their education.

As in cohort one, colleges in cohorts two and three support adult learners experiencing similar challenges when it comes to returning to college.

ADULT LEARNERS MAY:

- Delay enrollment in postsecondary education by a year or more after high school...
- ...have dependents other than a spouse...
- ...attend college part-time...
- ...be single parents...
- ...work full-time while enrolled...
- ...be financially independent from parents...
- ...not receive a standard high school diploma.

REAL LIVES. REAL STORIES: MEET THREE ADULT LEARNERS

Re-engaging adult learners requires a holistic approach. This means providing support for academic and non-academic needs, such as childcare and financial support, and engaging in partnerships with community stakeholders who can help provide support.

Adult learners bring value and a plethora of experiences to the classroom. Additionally, adult learners provide opportunities for colleges to assess and make continuous enhancements to their mission as it relates to teaching, learning, workforce development, and community engagement.

In this second edition of the guidebook, we will introduce you to three new adult learners and their experiences. While their names have been changed to protect their identities, their stories are real.

Many adult learners work part- or full-time while taking classes. The students highlighted in this edition of the guidebook juggle several responsibilities, including managing work, family, and finances. Consistent with students from the first edition, those featured here are doing their best to manage life and college success. Despite the challenges they have faced along their educational journeys, all remain determined to complete a degree or credential aligned with their career goals. Their stories shed light on the important role that collaborative efforts like NC Reconnect are playing in supporting community colleges and changing the narrative about adult learners and the role they play in the state's workforce.

MEET JACK

01

Returning to School

Jack has attempted to return to college at least three times. Between working full-time and saving money, it continues to take him longer than expected to complete his credential.

Jack is determined to make his way to the finish line. He sees a college education as a way to "more economic security" and an escape from "living paycheck to paycheck."

Career Goals

Jack has worked in the logistics industry his entire career in different roles, such as commercial truck driver, forklift operator, and receiving clerk. Though he enjoys the industry, his ultimate goal is to advance and earn more pay.

Challenges

Working long hours in his current job has made Jack's decision to return to school a difficult one. The thought of working 40 hours a week while maintaining a full-time credit hour load is taxing.

Additionally, Jack recognizes that he needs extra support in math, and past visits to the tutoring center were sometimes unhelpful for him.

Jack describes how he must maintain a focus on "adult responsibilities" like paying bills and finding work-life balance. Though finances contributed to his initial stopping out, future career advancement and a better life for his family keep him focused on the goal of completion.

REAL LIVES. REAL STORIES.

MEET TERRI

02

Returning to School

Terri shared that she had "a lot of things going on" during her first year as a student.

The message she received about "free tuition" helped her decide it was time to give college another try. The salary she was making at her full-time job was just enough for her family, however, she needed additional financial support to complete her goal of obtaining a college credential.

Community advertisements at places such as Goodwill and Walmart – and even on a billboard – helped Terri confirm that resources were available and the time was now.

Career Goals

Terri's desire is to gain skills in advertising and graphic design.

Challenges

Terri takes classes part-time while also working three jobs. Her job in the hospitality industry is very demanding and stressful, so she is grateful to have access to online classes and a flexible class schedule.

There are some concerns about having to make adjustments to her work schedule, as she is unable to take all of her courses online.

Terri also recognizes that taking classes part-time plays a role in her time to completion. Plus, she feels that two classes are all she is able to handle with the demands of work.

MEET GRETA

03

Returning to School

Greta is a 34-year-old single parent who views returning to college as a way to "move on with life and actually do something instead of becoming stagnant."

The colorful and inviting mailer she received from the local community college moved her to inquire about opportunities to return to school.

Once she learned about the availability of financial support, she was ready to move forward and return.

Career Goals

Greta is ready for a career change. After 18 years in the call center industry, she is pursuing training for a career in information technology/ network management.

Challenges

Personal tragedy came to Greta's life after the death of a close friend. This loss contributed to Greta's stopping out of college, and she is working hard to get back on track as she returns.

Greta identified career development support and mentoring as things that may be helpful for her to focus and stay on track.

Also, with the burden of finances being an issue, it is essential for Greta to receive as much support by way of funding as possible.

KEY LEARNINGS & OPPORTUNITIES

ACROSS THE NC RECONNECT PROGRAM, WE GLEANED SEVERAL TAKEAWAYS FROM THE FIRST AND SECOND COHORTS.

To frame the conversation, we use the analogy of on-ramps and off-ramps to help visualize the journey of adult learners. We also incorporate the "Five P Framework" (see page 48) into each point of the adult learner journey.

Using these approaches, we also highlight some of the roadblocks that may try to derail the success of adult students.

WHEN DECIDING TO ATTEND OR RETURN TO COLLEGE, ADULT LEARNERS NEED EASILY ACCESSIBLE ON-RAMPS TO GET STARTED.

Customized marketing and outreach events targeted to adults can support their enrollment in school. Due to fear and uncertainty around returning to college, adult learners need to feel as if the decision to enroll makes sense. Developing intentional public messaging and communication strategies to recruit adult learners is essential to accomplishing this goal.

PITT COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Institutions like Pitt Community College created a job fair on campus to recruit adult learners. As students visited the campus to seek out better jobs, staff were available to answer questions about credentials and degree requirements.

> *"We partnered with our local economic development agencies, major employers, as well as the university to host a 'Better Skills, Better Jobs' job fair. We had over 600 individuals attend, focusing mainly on adult learners. The key behind this effort is not only to say that there are jobs available out here, but that we also have the resources to help you get those jobs."*

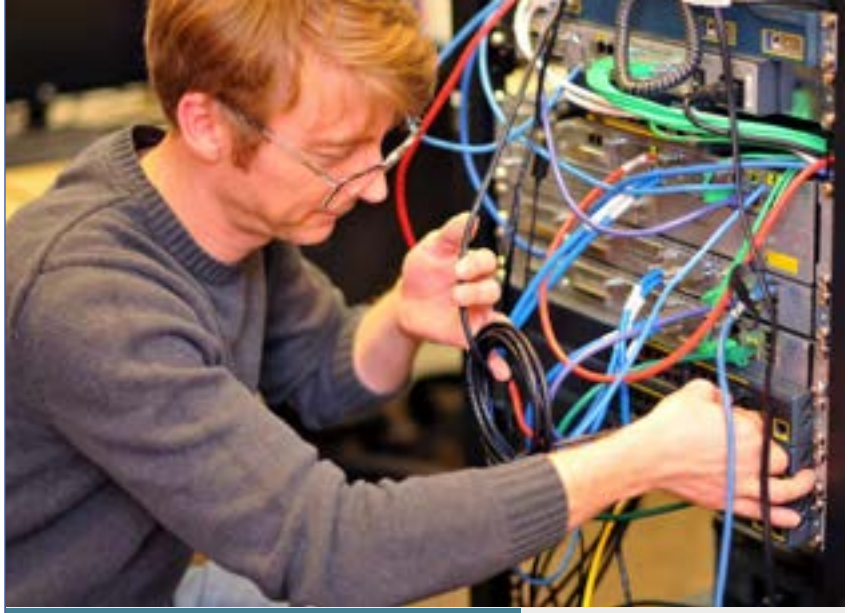
DR. LAWRENCE ROUSE
Pitt Community College President (COHORT ONE)

BLUE RIDGE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Institutions like Blue Ridge Community College (Blue Ridge) advertised free college in their marketing.

> *"Adults considering higher education always ask two questions: 'How long is it going to take?' and 'How much will it cost?' To truly meet their needs, we must be ready to present a financial package while answering these questions. In considering a path toward free college for all students, I met with our CFO and ran a projection. We combined 14 sources of funding and assumed a 10% increase in enrollment. We were thrilled when the numbers added up, proving it was possible. We then prepared our messaging with the marketing team and shared the good news with the community. It worked. Our spring early indicators showed that we were up 13% in enrollment with 70% of them full-time equivalent students. We're confident that this success was the result of combining our messages for free college and adult engagement."*

DR. LAURA LEATHERWOOD
Blue Ridge Community College President (COHORT ONE)



CENTRAL CAROLINA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Colleges are getting creative with their marketing and are utilizing partnerships to recruit adult learners. Central Carolina Community College (Central Carolina) fostered community partnerships to recruit adult learners and help with transportation needs.

> *"There was a back-to-school bash in our community before school started. What made it different was the group of community stakeholders that worked together, including churches, the sheriff's department, and a couple of other agencies. We provided backpacks for students, and we also had tons of other resources available for adults."*

DR. LISA CHAPMAN
Central Carolina Community College President
(COHORT TWO)

ROADBLOCKS

When deciding to return, adult learners may face many emotions, including:

01 Fear of failure

02 Apprehension around returning to a new campus environment

03 Nervousness about time away from work

04 Feelings of selfishness for focusing on themselves in addition to their families

05 Doubt about the necessity of a degree or credential since they may already be working full-time

Institutions should be proactive in addressing these roadblocks via marketing materials, emails, and conversations before learners arrive, so adults know that these concerns are a normal part of the return process.

ONCE ADULTS DECIDE TO ENROLL, THERE ARE MANY FACTORS (E.G., APPREHENSION AND UNCERTAINTY) THAT CAN DERAIL THEM FROM THE VERY BEGINNING.

Working collaboratively across the institutions – and with community partners and families – campuses must eliminate unnecessary roadblocks that may prevent adult students from successfully onboarding to college. Updating institutional processes and determining adult learner pathways upfront can help alleviate barriers that can be detrimental to student success.

LENOIR COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Institutions like Lenoir Community College and Pitt Community College created forms and surveys for adult learners to complete prior to enrollment that collect information about their lives outside of the classroom. College student support staff review these surveys and connect adult learners with resources that might be helpful as they navigate the college.

> *We are doing an onboarding survey for students that asks about what's happening in their lives. How many kids do they have? Are they working full- or part-time? Are there any challenges they might have? Do they need accessibility services? We collect that up front in a short survey and can get some impactful information about how we can help those students moving forward."*

DR. RUSTY HUNT
Lenoir Community College President (COHORT TWO)

DURHAM TECHNICAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Some campuses made financial decisions to have enrollment specialists working over winter break. This creativity helped put adult learners at ease before returning to campus in the spring.

> *We realized that by closing December 22nd and reopening on January 2nd, our enrollment specialists and support members in admissions, records, and registration were missing the opportunity to engage many potential students – especially from the adult learner population. So we pulled funding together, creating the opportunity for our team members who wanted to work and earn additional income while serving prospective students during a critical time. We changed our message to say we are here and waiting to talk to you. Because of this effort, we had about 175 students enroll during that period. It was a small expense for a big return that also created a culture shift for what's important to us."*

J.B. BUXTON
Durham Technical Community College President (COHORT ONE)

CALDWELL COMMUNITY COLLEGE AND TECHNICAL INSTITUTE

Caldwell Community College and Technical Institute launched a first four-weeks campaign that allowed students to connect to faculty and staff in creative ways during the critical first four weeks of the semester when adult learners are most likely to stop out.

> *We had faculty and staff sign up for a speed dating-like event. They would sign up for time blocks and had a list of questions designed to help students engage with faculty and staff on campus. They were general kinds of questions like: 'What kind of music do you like?' and 'Are you a morning or a night person?' When the bell rang, students moved on to the next employee. At the end, they got their card stamped and were entered for prizes like gift certificates to the food trucks or other things on campus. It was an intentional exercise early in the semester because we know those first four weeks are critical to engage students and help them meet and develop relationships with our faculty and staff."*

DR. MARK POARCH
Caldwell Community College and Technical Institute President
(COHORT TWO)

ROADBLOCKS

When moving into college, adult learners may face many emotions, including:

01 Anxiety around choosing the wrong career pathway

02 Fear of not receiving a return on their investment

03 Nervousness about completing documentation like the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)

04 Frustration about the number of staff with whom they must connect to complete the enrollment process

Institutions in cohort one attended to these roadblocks by putting key players (e.g., success coaches) and resources (adult learner centers) in place to provide step-by-step support, with the understanding that adult learners need a person or an office to walk with them through this process.

ADULT LEARNERS NEED FLEXIBILITY TO MAKE PROGRESS TOWARDS THEIR GOALS.

To help students find their rhythm and make progress on the road to success, adult learners need flexible classes including in-person, hybrid, and fully online class options. Having flexible options helps adults to juggle their busy schedules while moving forward in their studies. Additionally, adult learners need faculty who understand their experiences and need for flexible deadlines and increased support. Further, institutions should try to support adult learners or work collaboratively with community partners to provide childcare, transportation, and stable broadband internet.

WILKES COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Wilkes Community College revised their advising model so that the instructor who taught the mandatory college transition course was also the student's academic advisor. Additionally, they hired a success coach specifically for adult learners.

> *"We redesigned our advising program and offer even more intentional coaching and advising for adult learners. When they take our ACA college success course, that instructor becomes their advisor and stays with them throughout their journey here at the college. They have that person in their corner as long as they're here as a student. Plus, they have their adult learner success coach."*

DR. JEFF COX
Wilkes Community College Former President (COHORT TWO)

VANCE-GRANVILLE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Vance-Granville Community College provided shorter semester classes so that students could finish a program more quickly and have more financial aid eligibility.

> *"We're transitioning to a predominantly eight-week term. We all know that adult learners, they want to get in and they want to get out. We believe this change will accelerate short-term opportunities and better serve the adult learner population."*

DR. RACHEL DESMARAIS
Vance-Granville Community College President (COHORT ONE)

FAYETTEVILLE TECHNICAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Fayetteville Technical Community College (Fayetteville Tech) collaborated with community partners to help fix a transportation issue.

> *"In partnership with the city of Fayetteville, we were able to arrange bus tokens for our students who did not have transportation to campus. We had the good fortune of working with community partners to remove different barriers for our students."*

DR. LARRY KEEN
Fayetteville Technical Community College President Emeritus (COHORT ONE)

ROADBLOCKS

In moving through college, students face many roadblocks, including:

01 Unreliable internet access

02 Difficulty navigating online courses

03 Life emergencies *(e.g., transportation, childcare, homelessness, housing insecurity, unemployment, etc.)*

All of these roadblocks can get adult learners off track.

ADULT LEARNERS NEED CAREER COUNSELING, WORK-BASED LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES, AND AMPLE SUPPORT THROUGHOUT THEIR JOURNEYS TO MOVE INTO HIGH-QUALITY CAREER OPPORTUNITIES.

While these resources should be available during the entire student journey, adults need support from on-campus and community partners to successfully matriculate into the workforce. Improving proximity toward completion is essential to help adult learners reach their degree or credential.

FORSYTH TECHNICAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Forsyth Technical Community College (Forsyth Tech) is partnering with industry leaders who employ Forsyth Tech students to improve the proximity to their degree.

> *One of our vice presidents is working with industry partners that employ a high number of our adult learners. She is trying to help with their scheduling and/or identify ways that we can help them support the adult learners that are working with them."*

DR. JANET SPRIGGS
Forsyth Technical Community College President (COHORT TWO)

FAYETTEVILLE TECHNICAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Fayetteville Tech met with external partners and employers.

> *We created an advisory committee of local employers to understand their needs and how we can better support and prepare students for future careers. We also went to connectors in the community. For example, we are working with the local Housing Authority to train residents in property maintenance, so that the Housing Authority can employ their residents to help repair and maintain those properties. And those individuals are learning workforce skills while becoming a leader in their community and earning an income."*

DR. MARK SORRELLS
Fayetteville Technical Community College President (COHORT ONE)

ROADBLOCKS

When moving out of their institutions, adult learners may:

01 Not have access to work-based learning opportunities or internships due to busy schedules and, therefore, not get connected to employers to showcase their skills and secure a meaningful job

02 Feel like their geographic location is a hindrance to landing their dream job

03 Be unaware of all the available resources on campus to help them find work

EXIT

With all these roadblocks in mind, institutions should find ways to overcome these barriers.

THE JOURNEY BACK TO COLLEGE AS AN ADULT

01

DECIDING TO RETURN

Might get off track due to fear, uncertainty, or simply being overwhelmed

02

MOVING IN

Might get off track due to enrollment challenges, including RDS, financial aid, & uncertainty about who to contact

03

MOVING THROUGH

Might get off track due to conflicts with work, childcare, finances, and transportation or their sense of belonging

EXIT

MOVING OUT

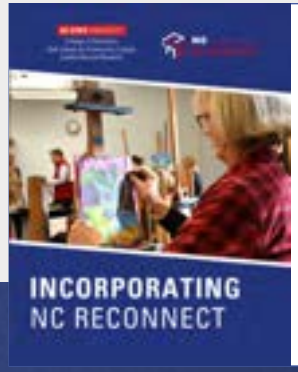
Might get off track due to lack of career counseling and support

RESEARCH + PRACTICE

From these key learnings and opportunities, the Belk Center has published a series of research and practice briefs for community college presidents, faculty, and staff about best practices for supporting adult learners.

Getting Strategic About Investing: *How NC Reconnect Colleges Used Funding to Maximize Re-Engagement Efforts*

Launching NC Reconnect: *Five Key Leadership Decisions to Consider*



Incorporating NC Reconnect Across Campuses & Communities

Recruiting Adult Learners Through NC Reconnect

INTENTIONAL STRATEGIES FROM CAMPUS PRESIDENTS

Community college leaders designated to lead adult learner efforts have an immense responsibility and potential to change the trajectories of individuals and communities.

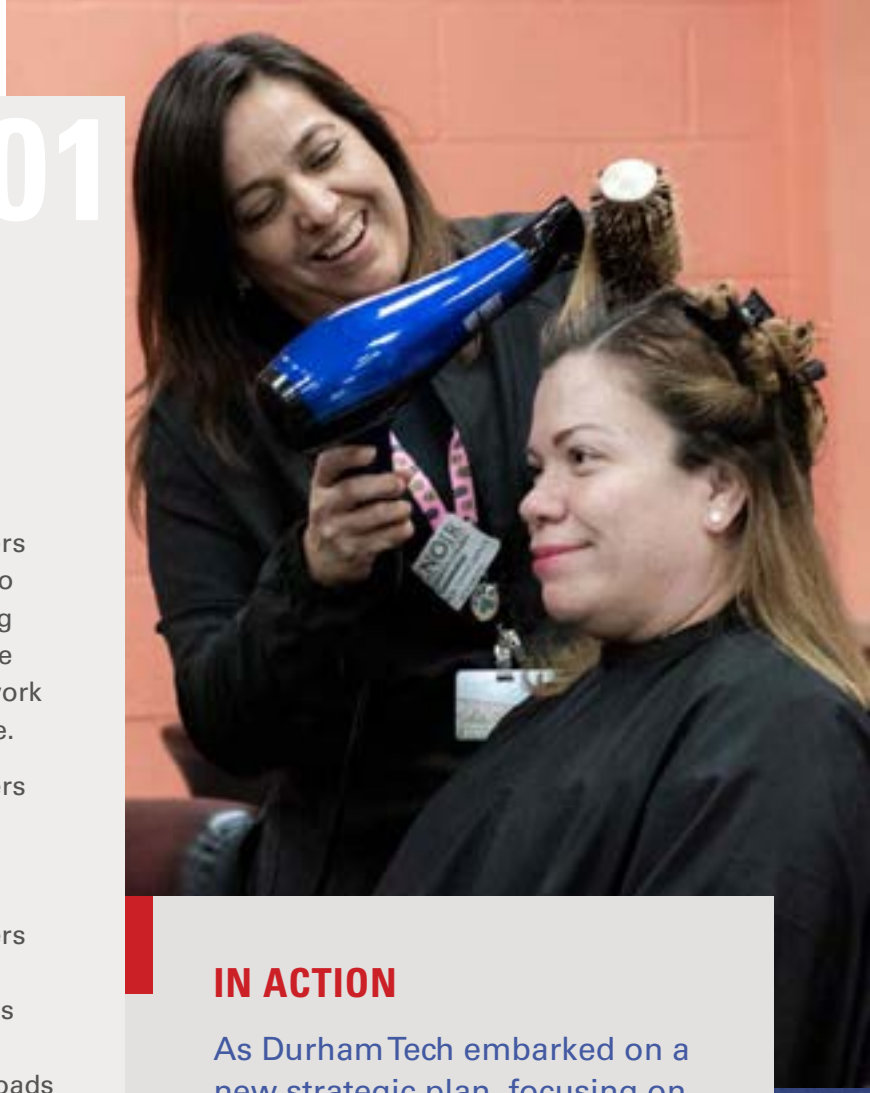
Though this work will not be accomplished by any single individual, the following intentional decisions were made by presidents and college leaders to support adult learner work on their campuses.

01

SET THE TONE ACROSS CAMPUS & THROUGHOUT THE COMMUNITY

Colleges are initiative rich, and for the adult learner work to gain momentum and sustain engagement, presidents were intentional about the way NC Reconnect was communicated to the college and local communities. Leaders altered the way they spoke about NC Reconnect internally. They stopped calling it an initiative and instead shared that this work was part of what they were already doing. Although community colleges have supported adult learners for decades, NC Reconnect provided an opportunity for colleges to refocus attention on this population. This work has been a building block for creating a college operating model that meets the unique needs of each and every student. Several colleges included this work in their strategic plan, while others used it as a catalyst for change.

Re-engaging adults who stopped out means identifying the barriers that caused them to pause their education in the first place, and then mitigating those barriers through efforts across campus – from creating spaces in buildings specifically for adult learners to revamping course schedules and extending campus hours. Leaders used their participation in NC Reconnect to embark on institution-wide evaluation of processes and systems. Setting the tone means investing in this work and the people who do the work. That investment could look like hiring additional staff or shifting workloads for those leading NC Reconnect efforts. Either way, presidents made strategic staffing decisions in order to elevate the work. College leaders were keenly aware that the work to re-engage adults does not happen without the support of the community and industry partners, which led them to invite the partners to join them in supporting all aspects of the adult learner journey. Ultimately, setting the tone across the institution and through the community required strategic messaging about NC Reconnect – first from the president and later through communications across campus.



IN ACTION

As Durham Tech embarked on a new strategic plan, focusing on adult learners was essential.

Durham Tech began a culture shift by revisiting its mission to ensure equity and inclusion. At the same time, Forsyth Tech tied NC Reconnect to their Vision 2025 plan and lifted up the adult learner work they were already doing.

02

IDENTIFY A PROJECT MANAGER/ADULT LEARNER CHAMPION

Presidents need a point person to lead these efforts and troubleshoot concerns when they arise. The point person must have skills to engage with internal and external stakeholders and must be deeply committed to the success of adult learners. Some colleges divided the work and named two co-leads, one lead from executive leadership and another lead who was part of the on-the-ground work. A point person is someone with both influence and the ability to bring ideas to the executive leadership team. Leads should be able to engage with internal and external stakeholders. Having adult learner champions who can empathize with the returning student and provide resources to aid in their journey is important.

While each college organizes their NC Reconnect teams differently, leaders pointed out that regular meetings were critical to making sure every member of the team was part of the progress. One stated, *"If we want students to think differently, we (as a team) have to do the same thing in order to implement some of these changes."* Presidents also scheduled regular check-ins with their college's NC Reconnect point persons.

IN ACTION

Pitt Community College was the first to identify a point person.

Identifying one point person can help institutions keep tabs on data updates, student experiences, and any leaks in the adult learner pipeline. This decision proved to be so valuable that engaging in NC Reconnect now requires the identification of a lead team member.

03

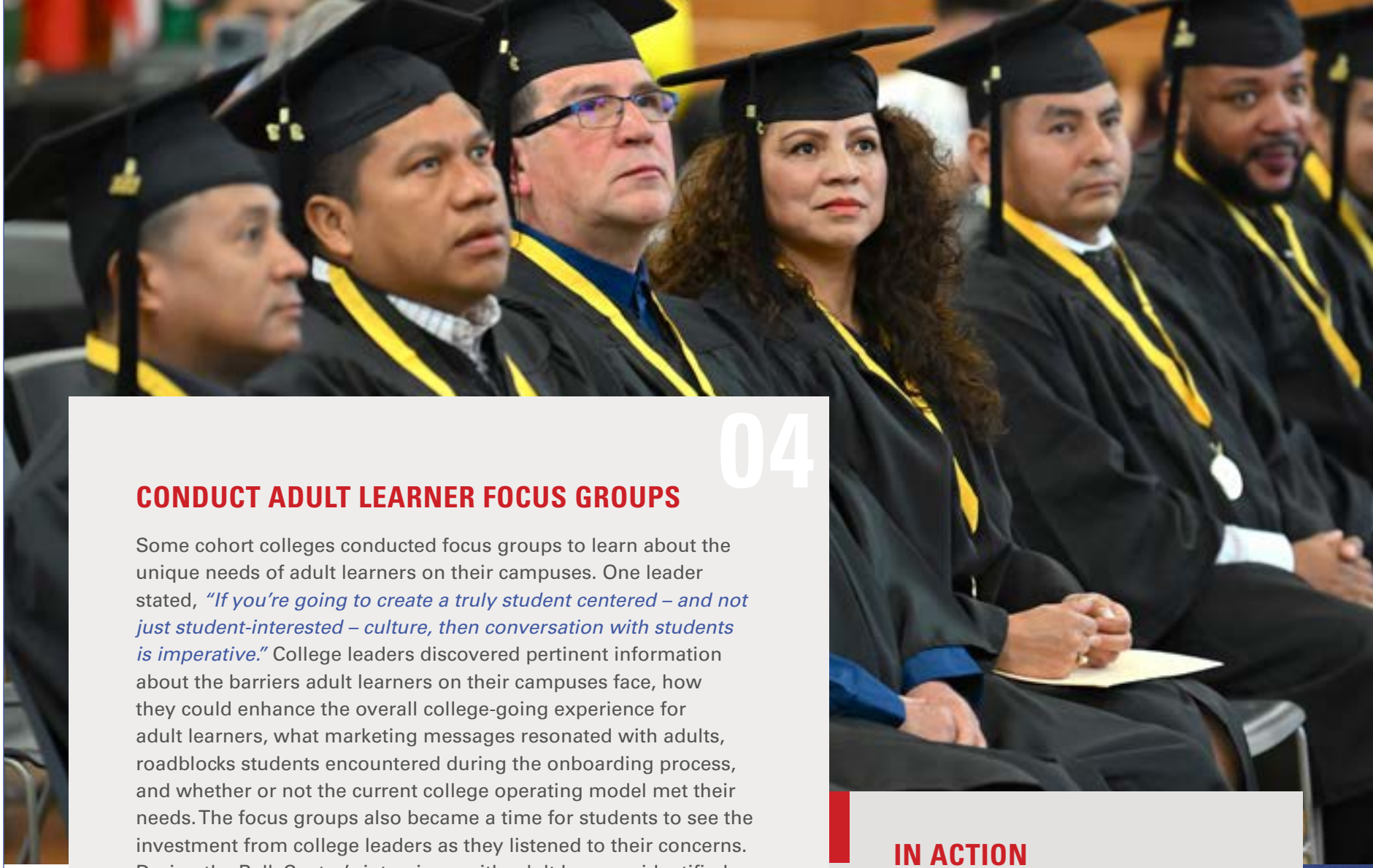
EVALUATE THE STUDENT ONBOARDING PROCESS

NC Reconnect provided opportunities for colleges to evaluate their processes for students, specifically their onboarding process. Presidents shared that evaluating how their processes were experienced by students allowed them to "sharpen their focus" and better understand how they could improve. While adult learner focus groups revealed challenges with onboarding processes, the evaluation of these processes identified the specific areas that created unintentional barriers for students applying and reapplying. One NC Reconnect college hired outside consultants to assess how students move through the enrollment pipeline.

Some NC Reconnect colleges discovered the application process for those re-enrolling was both cumbersome and unnecessary. To remedy this problem, one college streamlined the process for returning students, creating a short, five-question application. Other colleges learned they were asking students to complete steps in the enrollment process that could easily be finalized by the college. One college president shared that the outside consultant helped them remove the fear of process evaluation, thus allowing for changes to be implemented quickly. For changes that could not be made immediately, NC Reconnect teams began triaging the most urgent issues and creating timelines for implementation.

IN ACTION

Lenoir Community College evaluated and revised their onboarding process by creating a survey for adult learners to express their academic and personal needs and life circumstances outside of taking classes at the college. That way, the college could connect adult learners with resources to help them be successful before they start taking classes.



04

CONDUCT ADULT LEARNER FOCUS GROUPS

Some cohort colleges conducted focus groups to learn about the unique needs of adult learners on their campuses. One leader stated, *"If you're going to create a truly student centered – and not just student-interested – culture, then conversation with students is imperative."* College leaders discovered pertinent information about the barriers adult learners on their campuses face, how they could enhance the overall college-going experience for adult learners, what marketing messages resonated with adults, roadblocks students encountered during the onboarding process, and whether or not the current college operating model met their needs. The focus groups also became a time for students to see the investment from college leaders as they listened to their concerns. During the Belk Center's interviews with adult learners identified through NC Reconnect, students mentioned how meaningful it was to see the president of the college taking notes as students discussed their experiences at the institution. Continuously reviewing data about adult learners of NC Reconnect students helped presidents create momentum and maintain that energy around the work.

IN ACTION

Forsyth Tech engaged in adult learner focus groups well before making changes to better learn the life characteristics of adults that could impact their learning.

05

LEVERAGE ADDITIONAL FUNDS

Colleges were strategic about securing funds to enhance the work of NC Reconnect, and to do so, leaders communicated the importance of re-engaging adult learners to those who could offer financial support. Messages to foundation boards, community members, and industry partners explained the function of NC Reconnect; highlighted the benefits of investing in adult learners for the college, community, and state; and identified practical ways in which additional funding could be used. Institutions used these additional resources, as well as the investment from the John M. Belk Endowment, in a variety of ways, including clearing past balances of students; hiring additional staff to support Reconnect efforts; purchasing software and other tools to support outreach and engagement with adult learners; providing professional development; and enhancing communication with partners.

IN ACTION

Central Carolina, Blue Ridge, Durham Tech, Vance-Granville, and Lenoir put funding toward hiring new positions, including evening and weekend advisors focused on nontraditional students, enrollment specialists, and success coaches. Vance-Granville created a new Outreach and Student Support Coach position to implement NC Reconnect marketing and engagement efforts. Central Carolina used a portion of this funding to support the salary of an Adult Learner Education Navigator who works directly with students prior to enrollment and beyond.

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

The participating community colleges in the first three cohorts of the NC Reconnect program had access to the support of CRISP Communications, InsideTrack and VisionPoint Marketing to maximize their communication and marketing campaigns and help them attract and enroll more adult learners.

We recognize not all institutions have the resources to hire a dedicated marketing firm, so based on the experiences of the first 15 participating community colleges and the many lessons learned, we believe there are at least 12 promising practices you can use to plan and build a successful marketing campaign to attract more adult learners to your campus.

12 PROMISING PRACTICES

01 Zero in on the specific targets your institution is seeking to reach (stop-outs vs. short-term career credentials vs. others).

02 Launch your campaign early to allow maximum time in the market before your desired enrollment deadlines.

03 Use targeted digital advertising (especially Google search and display, along with Facebook and Instagram) to drive clear and consistent career-focused programs and messages to reach your targets.

04 Create a customized landing page for your college specifically geared to adult learners and include an easy way for students to sign up to gain additional information and learn more about next steps toward enrollment.

05 Ensure immediate follow-up with all interested prospects. Use SMS text messaging, as well as email and phone to quickly connect back. Respond in a timely manner when a student expresses interest (within 24-hours) and keep the correspondence brief, using accessible language. (See pages 29-31 for examples).

06 Develop an ongoing series of personalized and cultivating touches with adult learners who express interest in coming back to school. Add personal touches to your texts and emails, like a personal note from someone in admissions or enrollment services.

12 PROMISING PRACTICES

07 Create customized campaign graphics with brand colors and messaging specifically for your institution and programs (e.g., short-term programs work best for attracting adults).

08 Consistently share "free" social and earned media content around your campaign launch and special events that support the campaign, in addition to any paid advertising.

09 Whenever possible, embrace a "free college" message, especially for adult learners who are already Pell-eligible.

10 Embrace the uniqueness of your college, referencing and using photos of real students, job placement success stories, and high-demand pathways and programs.

11 Set up a communications and cultivation process that seeks to build long-lasting, meaningful relationships with prospective adult students.

12 Set specific contact and enrollment goals and track your progress against these goals throughout your campaign.

DIGITAL MEDIA STRATEGY

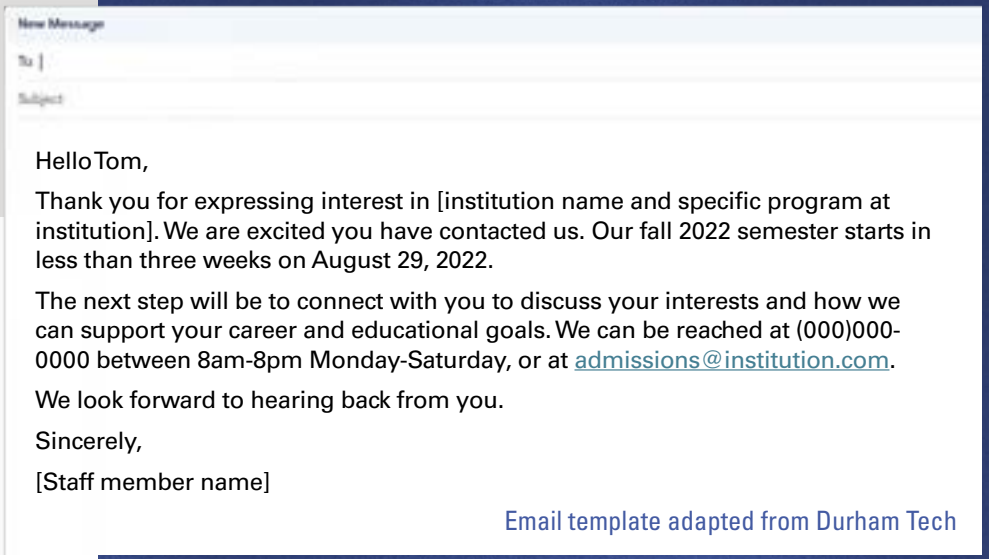
To provide further context, the following section offers more details about email and digital advertising strategies that have worked well in the first three cohorts of NC Reconnect.

USING TEXTS AND EMAIL INTENTIONALLY

Admissions and enrollment teams are becoming more agile and strategic than ever before to attract and enroll adult students.

It is important to utilize a variety of communication strategies when marketing to adult learners, including text messages and emails, which are affordable outreach methods to help the college quickly connect with prospective students in a personalized way.

Using "secret shopper" techniques, VisionPoint Marketing collected data on existing email and response communications for many of the initial NC Reconnect colleges. Below are sample email templates loosely adapted from Durham Tech and Pitt Community College that demonstrate promising practices when using email to reach back to adult prospects.



New Message

To |

Subject

Hello Tom,

Thank you for expressing interest in [institution name and specific program at institution]. We are excited you have contacted us. Our fall 2022 semester starts in less than three weeks on August 29, 2022.

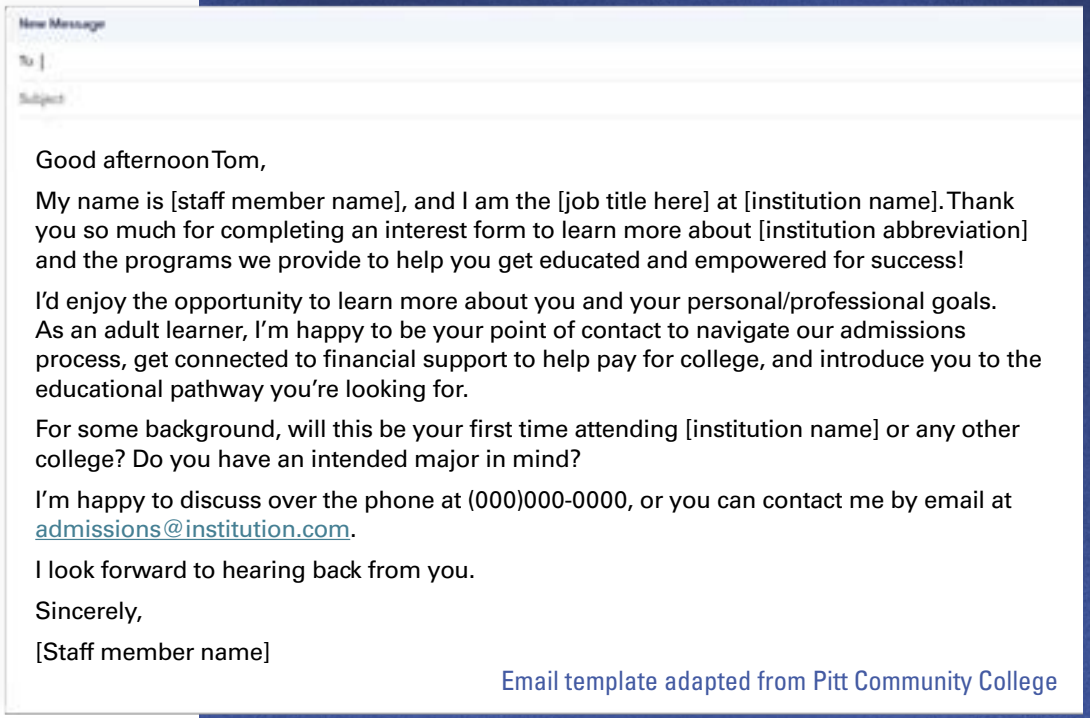
The next step will be to connect with you to discuss your interests and how we can support your career and educational goals. We can be reached at (000)000-0000 between 8am-8pm Monday-Saturday, or at admissions@institution.com.

We look forward to hearing back from you.

Sincerely,

[Staff member name]

Email template adapted from Durham Tech



New Message

To |

Subject

Good afternoon Tom,

My name is [staff member name], and I am the [job title here] at [institution name]. Thank you so much for completing an interest form to learn more about [institution abbreviation] and the programs we provide to help you get educated and empowered for success!

I'd enjoy the opportunity to learn more about you and your personal/professional goals. As an adult learner, I'm happy to be your point of contact to navigate our admissions process, get connected to financial support to help pay for college, and introduce you to the educational pathway you're looking for.

For some background, will this be your first time attending [institution name] or any other college? Do you have an intended major in mind?

I'm happy to discuss over the phone at (000)000-0000, or you can contact me by email at admissions@institution.com.

I look forward to hearing back from you.

Sincerely,

[Staff member name]

Email template adapted from Pitt Community College

EMAIL & TEXT CAMPAIGN
FORSYTH TECHNICAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE

New Message

To |

Subject

Hi, David (Future Trailblazer)!

I am so happy that you are considering Forsyth Tech for your learning journey.

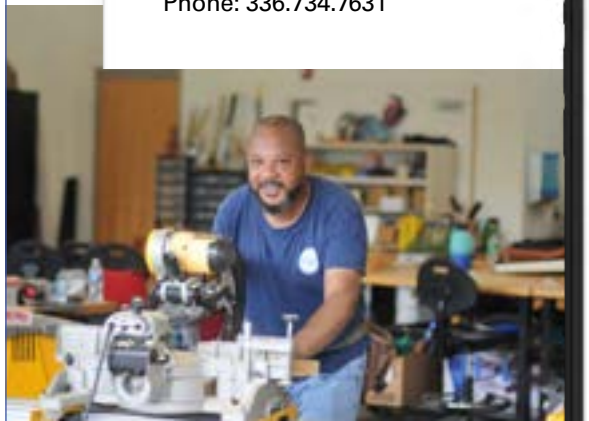
My name is Candace, and I am the Adult Re-Engagement Coordinator. Here's a link with some additional information about the IT Network Management Program that you are interested in IT - Network Management - Forsyth Tech.

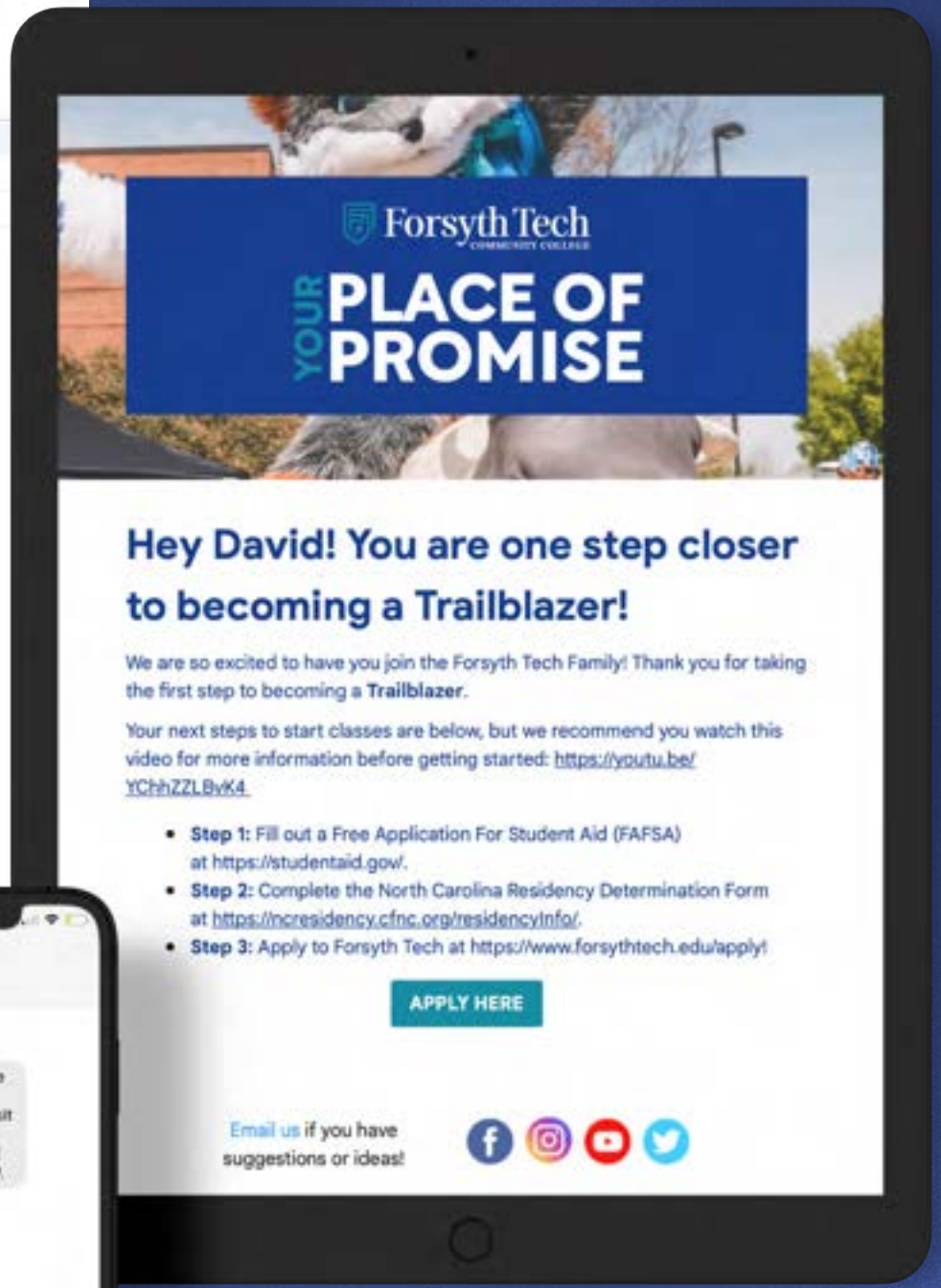
When you're ready to apply, you can visit www.forsythtech.edu/apply to complete the application process. You will find additional details that serve as a roadmap to help you get started on the right path to success, as well as provide important information you will need to plan and prepare for your greatest investment: YOU!!

If you need help, I'm here, too. Please enter your contact preference here and I can lend a hand and/or connect you with additional resources at Forsyth Tech.

We are looking forward to working with you and celebrating your academic accomplishments!

Candace Y. Roberts
Adult Reengagement Coordinator
croberts@forsythtech.edu
Phone: 336.734.7631





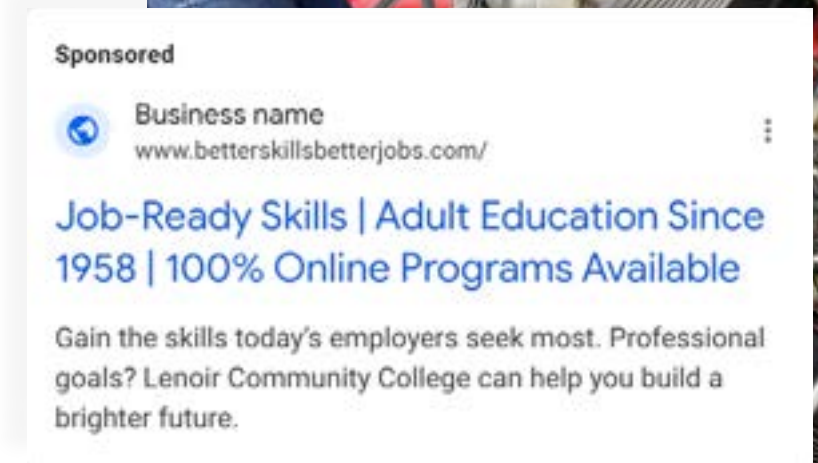
(VisionPoint Marketing, 2023)

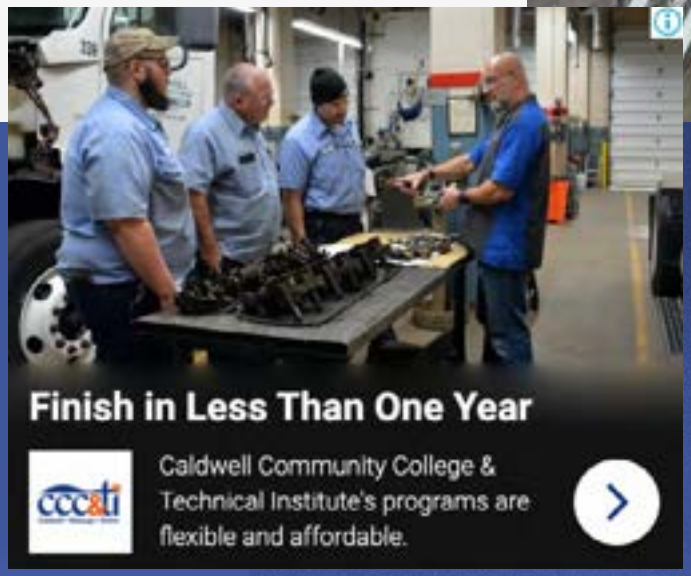
DIGITAL MARKETING AND SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGIES

When used effectively, digital advertising and organic social media posts can be a valuable marketing tool in reaching prospective adult learners.

Using a diverse mix of career-focused photos and messages featuring real people doing real things connected to high-demand pathways (rather than institutional or generic photos and messaging) works best. Successful NC Reconnect campaigns highlighted specific programs and credentials that prepare students to enter a job in the area with a family-sustaining living wage. Colleges that used tangible offers with short phrases that grabbed the attention of adult learners had more success, including "free college" or "earn a degree in six months."

Here are several examples of some of the highest-performing social ads from the adult learner campaign.





(VisionPoint Marketing, 2022)

FACULTY INSIGHTS

OUR GREATEST INSIGHTS

01 ALLOW ADULT LEARNERS TO WORK AHEAD

02 OVER-COMMUNICATE

03 BE AWARE OF RESOURCES

04 KEEP CARE AT THE CENTER

Classroom spaces should be inclusive of all students, particularly adult learners.

Faculty members at an institution from the first cohort shared insights on practical strategies for working with adult learners in virtual and in-person classes. While working with adults is not a new idea for the college, intentional messaging from the campus president, department heads, and colleagues helped faculty be strategic about policies and practices that might hinder student success.

INSIGHT 1

ALLOW ADULT LEARNERS OPPORTUNITIES TO WORK AHEAD.

Students who identify as adult learners need ample time to access Learning Management Systems (e.g., Moodle, Blackboard, Canvas) and opportunities to work ahead on course assignments.

FOR EXAMPLE:
Faculty should make courses, assignments, and tests available as early as possible for those who want to move strategically through course materials.

INSIGHT 2

OVER-COMMUNICATE WITH ADULT LEARNERS ABOUT ASSIGNMENT DUE DATES AND CLASS EXPECTATIONS.

For adult learners, the identity of a student is not always salient, particularly if other identities take priority (e.g., parent, employee, caregiver). Knowing that adult learners are juggling responsibilities at work and home, faculty should over-communicate with adults and provide learners with ample time and space to ask questions and receive support.

FOR EXAMPLE:
Faculty members shared that they offered virtual office hours for students each week to answer immediate and urgent questions. These intentional office hours cut down on excessive emails and helped faculty build rapport with students. Faculty also created a shared space in Moodle or Blackboard for the class to answer one another's questions. Instructors shared that learners appreciate having a virtual community to support them through assignments instead of traversing through their courses alone.

INSIGHT 3

BE AWARE OF RESOURCES BOTH ON- AND OFF-CAMPUS.

Faculty shared the importance of working collaboratively with student support staff and their local communities to help adult learners experiencing a personal crisis (e.g., mental health concerns, homelessness, illness, job loss). As first responders to student emergencies, faculty should know how to communicate with student support staff.

FOR EXAMPLE:
At one of the cohort one institutions, faculty were knowledgeable about communicating student concerns via the AVISO Retention software platform. Adding student notes in AVISO allowed several faculty members to quickly speak across the institution to success coaches, academic advisors, and student support staff members, creating a safety net to prevent adult learners from falling through the cracks.

INSIGHT 4

KEEP CARE AS THE "CENTER OF THE WORK."

For many faculty, the COVID-19 pandemic brought opportunities to shift classroom curricula and virtual opportunities for all, particularly adult learners. Creating flexible course and assignment options during COVID-19 allowed faculty the opportunity to explore new ways to care for students.

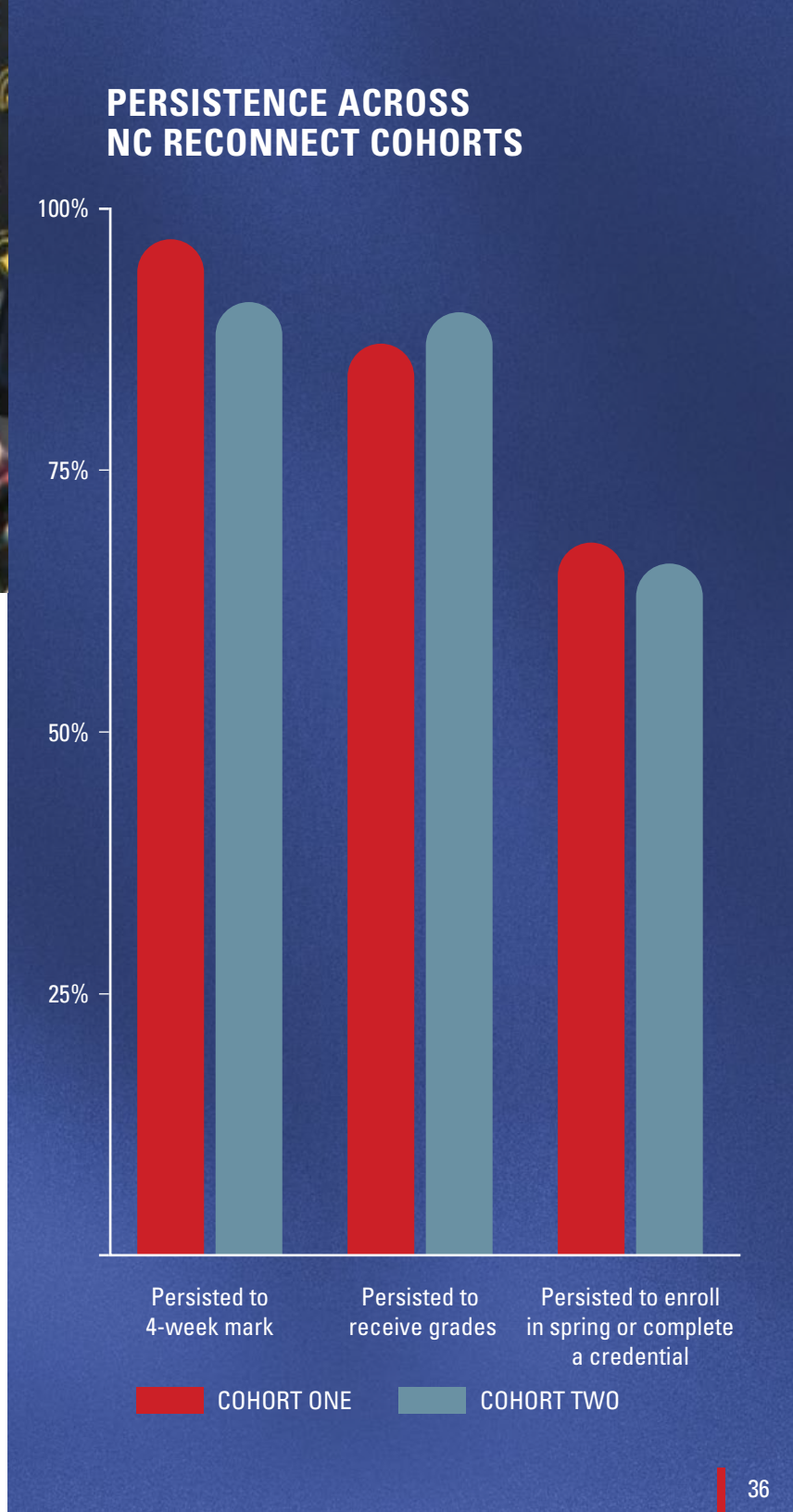
FOR EXAMPLE:
Faculty mentioned giving grace to adult learners. Grace for adult learners looked like providing flexibility on assignment deadlines, inviting students to work collaboratively on assignments, creating hybrid courses for students to work online and in-person, and allowing paper submissions on coursework if students do not have access to the internet.

QUANTITATIVE DATA HIGHLIGHTS

OVERALL TAKEAWAYS

BOTH COHORTS HAVE A HIGH RETENTION RATE FOR ADULT LEARNERS PERSISTING THROUGH THE FOUR-WEEK MARK/CENSUS DATE

- Cohort one - 97% remained enrolled after census date.
- Cohort two - 91% remained enrolled after four weeks.
- If adult learners can pass the four-week mark, they are more likely to stay to the end of the semester.
- The vast majority of adult learners who initially re-enrolled in cohorts one (87%) and two (90%) finished the term and received grades.
- However, there is still a gap between persistence to receive grades and persistence to re-enroll in the spring semesters (cohort one - 68%; cohort two - 66%).



OVERALL TAKEAWAYS BY VARIOUS DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS

- While Black and Hispanic adult learners are statistically less likely than their white counterparts to persist after a month into the semester, those students who carry on past the four-week point are more likely to persist into the next semester in comparison to their white peers (cohort one - 73%; cohort two - 70%).
- Male students ages 37-50 experience higher persistence rates (100%) in comparison to their female counterparts ages 37-50 (78%).
- Students ages 18-24 are persisting at higher rates than adult learners (ages 25+).
- Full-time students had a higher persistence rate to the end of the fall 2022 semester (99%) compared to part-time students (90%).
- Students receiving a federal Pell Grant award had a higher persistence rate (95%) compared to students who did not receive a Pell Grant (88%).

PERSISTENCE AT CENSUS, END OF FALL 2021 TERM, AND THROUGH SPRING 2022

TOTAL:

753
UNIQUE STUDENTS

100%

68% EITHER COMPLETED THEIR CREDENTIAL IN THE FALL OR CONTINUED ENROLLMENT INTO SPRING 2022

87% PERSISTED TO RECEIVE GRADES IN FALL 2021 COURSES

97% PERSISTED THROUGH FALL 2021 CENSUS

PERSISTENCE & COMPLETION

- Black and Hispanic adult learners remain enrolled through the first semester at rates higher than their white peers (73% and 70%, respectively).
- Taken in context with the student-level data, this suggests that while Black, Hispanic, and American Indian students are statistically less likely than their white counterparts to persist past the four-week mark in the semester, those who carry on past that point are more likely to enroll in the spring in comparison to white students.
- Students that enrolled full-time were 44% more likely to still be enrolled by the four-week/census mark.
- There were no statistical differences by gender or among students who were Pell-eligible.

COHORT TWO TAKEAWAYS

PERSISTENCE AT FOUR-WEEK MARK, FALL 2022

TOTAL:

436
UNIQUE STUDENTS WHO INITIALLY RE-ENROLLED IN FALL 2022

PERSISTENCE & COMPLETION

- Hispanic students are about 9 percentage points less likely to persist to the end of the semester than their Black and White peers.
- Male students ages 37-50 are persisting at higher rates (100%) to the end of the semester compared to their female counterparts ages 37-50 (78%).
- Younger students (ages 18-24) are persisting at higher rates than older students (ages 25+).
- As seen in cohort one data, full-time students had a higher persistence rate (99%) in comparison to their part-time counterparts (90%).
- Similar to the findings with cohort one, students receiving a federal Pell Grant award had a higher persistence rate (95%) compared to students who did not receive a Pell Grant (88%).
- Overall, about 75% of students over the age of 25 who were enrolled in fall 2022 and received grades that semester either completed a credential after fall 2022 or re-enrolled in spring 2023 (n= 287).
- 37 adults who previously chose not to complete their degree re-enrolled in fall 2022 and finished their degree by the end of the semester.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING FOR FACULTY & STAFF

Adult learners are a unique population that require individualized support and attention.

They often work full-time or part-time, are parents or caregivers, and carry responsibilities that students directly out of high school may not have. Many staff, faculty, and administrators choose to participate in professional learning opportunities to learn how to support and accommodate adult learners. Additionally, staff who work in marketing and communications may seek professional development to learn how to best conduct outreach to adult learners. Working with a professional marketing firm (e.g., VisionPoint Marketing, CRISP Communications) could prove beneficial in recruiting adult learners to your college.

Below are a number of resources to equip community college faculty and staff to best provide this support.

RESOURCES FOR SUPPORT

RESOURCE 1

THE BELK CENTER FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGE LEADERSHIP & RESEARCH

The Belk Center is committed to supporting colleges in their quest to learn about their adult students.

The Belk Center and EducationNC continue to support efforts to learn about the challenges and opportunities facing adult learners. The Belk Center, along with the North Carolina Student Success Center (NC SSC) and Achieving the Dream, are building Teaching and Learning Hubs across the state. These Hubs can provide vital support to faculty and staff educators working with adult learners.

RESOURCE 2

INSIDETRACK

InsideTrack provides adaptive, project-based training and development services to support institutions in measurably improving student success.

They include assessments, training, strategic planning, secret shopping and more. Programs can build on each other and are focused on actionable insights and lasting change. InsideTrack provides staff training, staff certification, coaching quality development, professional development, train-the-trainer, staff recruiting, diagnostics, and competitive analysis.

RESOURCE 3

NORTH CAROLINA COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM

The North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) offers the REACH Collaborative, which focuses on transforming credential pathways to associate degrees at community colleges to improve credential attainment and economic mobility for adult learners of color. Twenty-four colleges are participating in the project. In addition, the NC SSC offers a variety of workshops that are relevant for faculty and staff who wish to better support adult learners. Professional learning opportunities offered by NCCCS can be found here.

RESOURCE 4

THE COUNCIL FOR ADULT AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING (CAEL)

To promote professional development opportunities for our stakeholders, CAEL offers a variety of self-paced and live, online learning experiences through webinars, micro-courses, instructor-led trainings, and conferences.

ADVICE FROM NC RECONNECT COLLEGES

THINK ABOUT YOUR INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

Each institution is different. Whatever you come up with, you want to modify it to fit your institution as well as the demographics that you serve. And I think that's the way that you'll be more successful. Allow input from your faculty and staff, but let's not get stuck in, 'This is the way we've always done it.' Let's say, 'How can we make this happen? How can we be successful with it?' and move forward from there.

Durham Technical Community College

BE INTENTIONAL AND STRATEGIC

If you decide to take this on, make it a priority, and let it come from the president that this is important – not just because the president says so, but because this is a population that we serve, and we want to make sure that we engage them. Your leadership team must drill down on this as an important priority for your institution.

Pitt Community College

USE DATA AND COMMUNICATE

Don't be afraid to roll up your sleeves and dive into the data. Every Monday morning, I now look at the numbers. I look at our key performance indicators, like the number of applications and FAFSA forms we're receiving. This helps me see the results of our work and any concerns on the horizon. It also allows us to make 'real time' adjustments in our work.

Blue Ridge Community College

MAKE SURE YOUR TEAMS ARE CROSS-TRAINED

If you have a single individual that holds all the knowledge and skills to perform a certain function, you are setting the stage for the work of the college to stall. Given the fact we just emerged from a pandemic, redundancy in our work and having everyone cross-trained became more important than ever. This is important no matter the size of the college.

Blue Ridge Community College

ALIGN WORK WITH YOUR STRATEGIC PLAN

It's important to connect this into your mission and strategic focus, otherwise you run the risk that others will see this as a kind of new initiative or beta test that's going to start and end, or grant money is going to run out and you don't do it anymore. I think that's really important from the outset.

Durham Technical Community College

QUESTION EVERYTHING

Question everything and listen to who's not coming. Ask 'why do we do what we do?' Not just because it's always been done at our individual college, but I would say, question everything to the point of the way education works. 'Why are we doing this?' Because a lot of us don't realize we're following a four-year college model that, in many cases, doesn't make sense for us, particularly for the adult learner.

Vance-Granville Community College

Don't get so aligned with old systems that you fail to see what is possible in the future. All of us operate in cultures, and those cultures, if you're not careful, can come to the point where they make you unable to move forward and do things that are creative and innovative.

Fayetteville Technical Community College

We're using the current circumstances as an opportunity to transform what we do every day, right now, and right here in the present.

Blue Ridge Community College

COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR FACULTY AND STAFF

We're making sure that everyone understands what we're doing and how it's going – including how many students we've re-engaged – at all levels throughout the organization. We're communicating what's happening and also giving them an opportunity to tell us what they're seeing, wherever they are within the institution, and give us ideas about how we could do things better.

Forsyth Technical Community College

Engaging faculty early on, in particular with focus groups, helps establish buy-in. We're listening to their concerns, if they have concerns, and listening to their suggestions about how we can better serve adult learners.

Caldwell Community College and Technical Institute

You're not asking them to sign on to another initiative, you're saying, 'This is really integral work that's connected to what we're already working on. We're going to support these learners' specific needs and remove their specific barriers in new and different ways.' It's all tied to our why and our larger purpose.

Forsyth Technical Community College

PRIORITIZE RECRUITMENT AND OUTREACH

Find a group of students who are willing to do the work to get the skills they need to meet workforce demands, and then let the college be the bridge between the two. If you can put that together, you're changing economic mobility in the community.

Wilkes Community College

We're doing outreach to the community. We try to make sure that each student feels comfortable in knowing that our college has their back.

Lenoir Community College

ESTABLISH THE CULTURE

It's a very purpose-driven culture. We know who we are, we know why we're here. We've built a roadmap that we think is going to help us get to where we want to be to realize our vision. We've been keeping NC Reconnect front and center in all the work we're doing towards our Vision 2025 strategic plan, because it's an integral part of that. We want to focus on completion, and we want more students to get through the process, so we need to start with students who've already been here and get them back. It's that tie-in and buy-in.

Forsyth Technical Community College

We were going to tackle our adult learner program from every angle of the college. It took everybody working together to make sure that we were structuring things to better serve our adult learner population.

Caldwell Community College and Technical Institute

DESIGNATE AN ADULT LEARNER CHAMPION/POINT PERSON

Identify a point person that understands all the pieces and how they impact each other – and who is passionate about the value of this opportunity. It must be the right person.

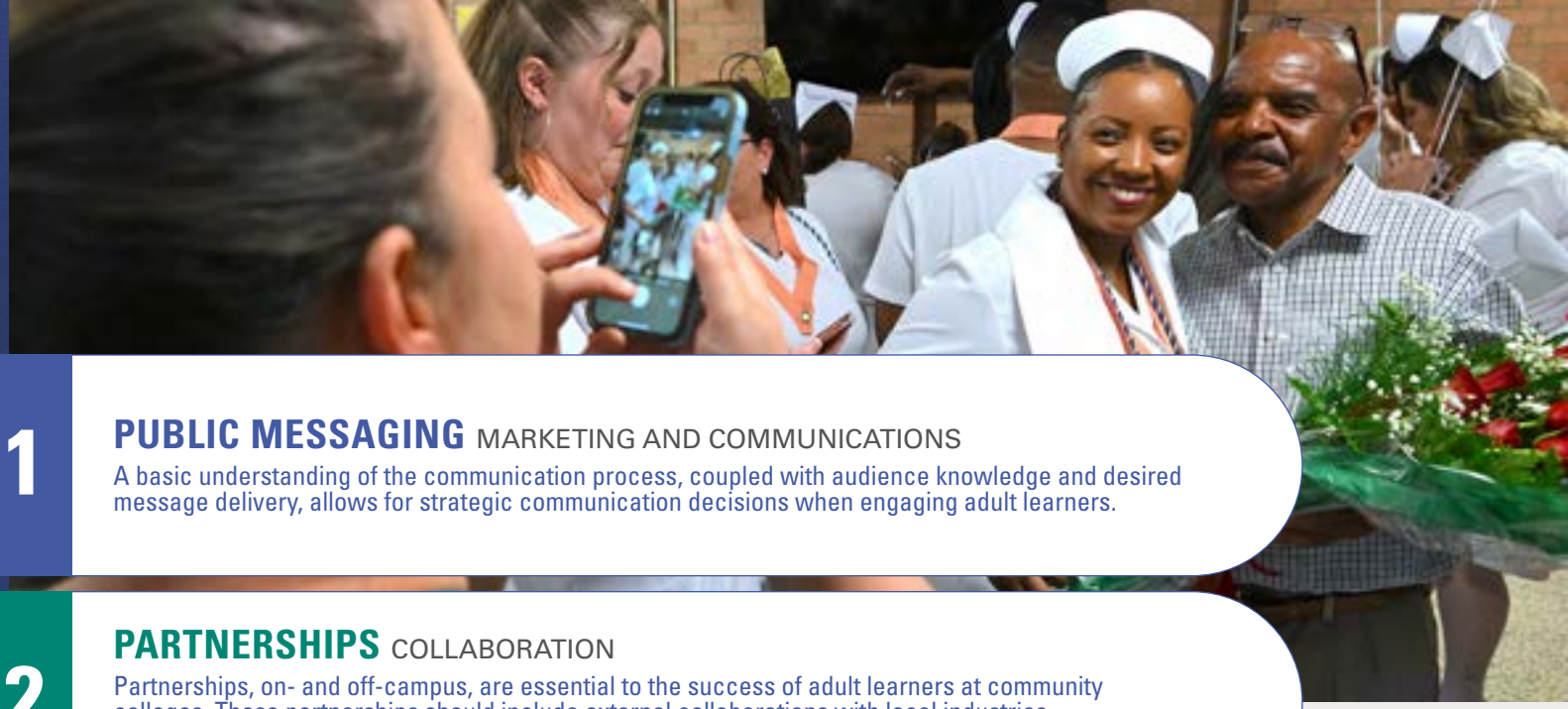
Central Carolina Community College

THE FIVE P ADULT LEARNER FRAMEWORK

The adult learner journey includes the decision to return, followed by moving in, moving through, and moving on to the next stage of their lives (Breeden et al., 2021).

As a result of this journey mapping, our research team identified five critical stages – the "Five P" framework – to recruit, retain, and support adult learners. This framework supports the community college by identifying critical touchpoints that map to adult learners, which include public messaging, partnerships, processes, pathways, and proximity. Short overviews of each "P" are outlined in Graphic 3.

THE FIVE P'S



01 **PUBLIC MESSAGING** MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS

A basic understanding of the communication process, coupled with audience knowledge and desired message delivery, allows for strategic communication decisions when engaging adult learners.

02 **PARTNERSHIPS** COLLABORATION

Partnerships, on- and off-campus, are essential to the success of adult learners at community colleges. These partnerships should include external collaborations with local industries and community agencies, in addition to collective buy-in from campus faculty and staff and collaboration across offices and departments.

03 **PROCESSES** SHIFTING THE APPROACH

Taking a "one-size-fits-all" approach to supporting adult learners could present challenges and barriers to those who may already experience existing hurdles. An in-depth examination and adaptation of existing processes and practices (e.g., communication strategies, financial aid award processes, admissions requirements, course scheduling) is integral to the success of adult learners.

04 **PATHWAYS** ACADEMIC AND CAREER ADVISING

On- and off-ramps to supporting adult learners' academic and career pathways (beyond guided pathways) are crucial to their student experience. Advisors helping students map their learning to end goals early in their academic journeys and introducing students to work-based learning are two of many opportunities to effectively support adult learners along the pathways and meet their career needs.

05 **PROXIMITY** TO ACCESS & COMPLETION

As colleges become more aware of the barriers impacting adult learners, it is imperative that they think strategically about the barriers to access and completion, and ways to overcome them. Proximity to time, distance or physical spaces, and relationships or people, help relieve barriers for adult learners.

Graphic 3

A CALL TO ACTION

To begin thinking about how to move forward with supporting adult learners at your college, we encourage you to answer critical questions associated with each of the P's in the Five P Framework.

How each institution approaches these questions will depend on institutional context.

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

01 PUBLIC MESSAGING MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS

- What does the college's current communication process look like when marketing to adult learners? How can this process be improved?
- What types of public messaging currently exist at the college that are catered toward recruiting adult learners (e.g., social media, text messages, mailers, etc.)?
- Where is public messaging currently viewed/heard to reach adult learners? Where should it be viewed/heard?

02 PARTNERSHIPS COLLABORATION

- What external partnerships exist that support adult learner success at the college? What external partnerships do you hope to build in the future?
- How will your team foster internal teamwork and buy-in from faculty and staff at the college to support adult learners?

03 PROCESSES SHIFTING THE APPROACH

- What shifts in processes and practices are necessary to re-engage adult learners?
- What opportunities are there to engage adult learners early/pre-enrollment?

04 PATHWAYS ACADEMIC AND CAREER ADVISING

- What does academic advising look like at the college for adult learners? How is this similar or different compared to students right out of high school?
- What does career advising look like at the college for adult learners? How is this similar or different compared to students right out of high school?
- How does the college connect continuing education/workforce development and curricular pathways?

05 PROXIMITY TO ACCESS & COMPLETION

- How can the college address issues around access for adult learners?
- How can the college remove barriers to recruit and re-engage adult learners?
- What innovative steps can the college take to reduce time-to-degree for adult learners?

Graphic 4

NC STATE UNIVERSITY

College of Education
Belk Center for Community College
Leadership and Research

BELK-CENTER.CED.NCSU.EDU