

NC STATE UNIVERSITY

College of Education
Belk Center for Community College
Leadership and Research



INCORPORATING NC RECONNECT

Incorporating NC Reconnect

HOW COLLEGES ARE INCORPORATING NC RECONNECT ACROSS THEIR CAMPUSES AND IN THEIR COMMUNITIES

What started as a pilot initiative with five North Carolina community colleges to reach adult learners has led to what leaders are calling a chance to “sharpen our focus” and “incorporate the work into what colleges were already doing to serve students.”

In 2021, the John M. Belk Endowment (JMBE) launched NC Reconnect – an initiative aimed at re-engaging adult learners in North Carolina. In addition to JMBE, various partners collaborate to elevate the efforts of NC Reconnect including the Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research, myFutureNC, the North Carolina Community College System, Crisp Communications, InsideTrack and VisionPoint.

The goal of the program is to ensure adult learners across North Carolina have maximum opportunity to pursue a degree or credential at one of the state’s 58 community colleges. Starting with five community colleges of various sizes and geographic locations within the state, NC Reconnect soon grew to include 15 colleges.

NC RECONNECT COLLEGE PARTNERS



NC Reconnect consists of two major components: re-engage adult students who previously earned some college credit but left without a credential, and deliver targeted communication to prospective adult students within the colleges' service areas.

Leaders from the second cohort describe how their institutions are integrating the strategies, promising practices and lessons learned from NC Reconnect across their campuses.

Presidents expressed how colleges are often initiative-fatigued but knew they wanted the work of NC Reconnect to take root and spread – creating a culture shift across their campuses. To begin, presidents did not refer to NC Reconnect as an initiative and some began to incorporate the work into their institution's overall strategic plan.

NC Reconnect quickly became an avenue that allows colleges to assess everything from student onboarding to advising to course delivery to external partnerships. Through assessment, colleges have begun to prioritize areas across their campuses that need to be improved or overhauled.

“We're not creating another initiative...we're just adding in this reengagement work to the work that's already being done.”

INCORPORATING NC RECONNECT ACROSS THE INSTITUTION

In fall 2022, the North Carolina Community College System enrolled 377,462 students. Of those, 33% were adult learners between the ages of 25 and 44. Community colleges have always served adult learners. In fact, they enroll some of the most diverse student populations who are often historically underrepresented and underserved.

When NC Reconnect first launched, college leaders commented that their institutions often approached meeting the needs of their students through a lens that most aligned with the experiences of a traditional-aged college student right out of high school. With resources provided through NC Reconnect, colleges doubled-down on their efforts to meet students where they are and implement the work across the entire institution.

“NC Reconnect is helping us have a laser-like focus on the specific needs of our adult learners versus our whole student population.”



How do colleges integrate the adult learner work across all areas? Presidents say it starts with leadership.

"That came from me trying to set the tone that this was a priority, first and foremost. This wasn't one area of the college that was taking this on...it was college-wide. All hands on deck."

"The president needs to be a champion, but we need to add someone who can really mind the store."

While presidents were the initial champions for the work, establishing a dedicated team was imperative. Colleges in cohort two first chose a point person and then assembled a team that could carry out the initial phases of NC Reconnect. For one college, that team has already iterated. Coordinating the right team meant some initial members rolled off and new representatives from the college joined.

"We want it (the team) to have the right people at the right table to be able to immediately respond to some of the barriers that our students were telling us they had."

Presidents said employee buy-in needed to happen across the entire institution, and that regular, campus-wide communication about the work and the results was necessary. Communication can be in the form of emails, reports or opportunities for faculty and staff to check in on a monthly basis to hear about the college's efforts to serve adult learners.

College leaders are also being intentional and listening to faculty and staff about their concerns and ideas to better engage adult learners.

"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 suggestions on how we better serve adult learners."

In addition to the Belk Center's interviews with adult learners, several colleges are coordinating their own focus groups to understand student needs and how the college can better address those needs. These focus groups have helped leaders assess their onboarding processes and know which types of communication are most relevant for students. Presidents acknowledged that improving processes, procedures, and policies for adult learners leads to better experiences for all students.

"We have got to be relational and not transactional, because transactional will not solve the problem."

Championing the work, organizing a team and regular campus-wide communication have started to break down silos and strengthen collaboration across campus.

INCORPORATING NC RECONNECT INTO THE COMMUNITY

Leaders said as vital as it was to create buy-in on their campuses, they also needed to create awareness and enthusiasm in the communities they serve. Several leaders involved their college foundation boards, which has led to additional funding to support adult learners on these campuses. Colleges have also held events and invited county commissioners and chamber members to learn more about the goal of NC Reconnect. Those initial meetings sparked ideas and, for one college, it meant a partnership where local businesses came to campus during the first four weeks of the semester to greet students – offering swag, food and notes of encouragement. Many NC Reconnect colleges are hosting entertainment events for the community that are family-friendly and have a component to engage prospective students.

Creating buy-in doesn't fall solely on the president. For some colleges, they recognized the need for community champions – individuals who are trusted and can serve as a bridge between the college and the community. For one college, that meant involving leaders in the faith community and for another, it meant hiring a person who is trusted in the Latinx community to recruit and translate college materials for Spanish-speaking families.

“We have been talking for four years about community champions and figuring out how to develop a partnership in a way that community champions have the tools and the resources to be able to champion us within communities that we're not.”

HOW NC RECONNECT IS SHAPING THE WORK OF COLLEGES

North Carolina community colleges are many things to many people. They serve diverse populations with unique needs and offer a variety of educational opportunities, and they've done so for more than 60 years. Community colleges are also adapting to meet the needs of those they enroll, whether they are part of an initiative or not.

According to NC Reconnect college leaders, some of the work surrounding adult learners was already happening on their campuses. However, the initiative allowed them to assess and enhance their efforts. It has also helped them leverage strategies so the work is embedded college-wide.

“(NC Reconnect) has turned into something not just for adult learners, it's turned into a student initiative...All of our students face similar challenges, not just our adults. I think it's really had a positive impact on how we serve students across the board. We serve a wide variety of demographics. And again, I think it's taught us how to be more effective in how we teach and how we serve those students.”

“NC Reconnect has been transformational for the state. I think the impact goes way beyond...the broader conversation around adult learners that frankly, we probably should have been having in a more robust way.”

The Belk Center will continue with NC Reconnect evaluation efforts by collecting data that assesses how NC Reconnect impacts recruiting, retaining and ensuring the success of adult learners throughout North Carolina. We will continue interviewing presidents, staff, faculty and students to identify opportunities and promising practices as colleges incorporate NC Reconnect across all areas of their institutions.