

**NC STATE UNIVERSITY**

College of Education  
Belk Center for Community College  
Leadership and Research



# LAUNCHING NC RECONNECT: FIVE KEY LEADERSHIP DECISIONS TO CONSIDER

# Launching NC Reconnect:

## Five key leadership decisions to consider

### INTRODUCTION

Launching a college-wide endeavor is no small feat. The work is intensive, requiring collaboration among a variety of departments across campus and involving the coordination of various strategic partnerships.

As a partner of NC Reconnect, the [Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research](#) engages with presidents, staff, faculty and adult learners to gain insights and produce resources to aid stakeholders as they make critical decisions regarding [NC Reconnect](#).

**The [Adult Learner Guidebook](#) is one resource available to those seeking additional information about the key learnings and promising practices from the first five NC Reconnect colleges.**

In addition to the guidebook, the Belk Center is curating relevant and timely content to help NC Reconnect colleges navigate the various components of the adult learner initiative.

Drawing from the guidebook and interviews with cohort two leaders and students, the following contains key decisions made by presidents and college leaders regarding the implementation of NC Reconnect on their campuses.

### NC RECONNECT COLLEGE PARTNERS



## NC RECONNECT OVERVIEW

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

The goal was simple – ensure adult learners across North Carolina have maximum opportunity to pursue training at one of the state’s 58 community colleges. Starting with five community colleges of various sizes and geographic locations, NC Reconnect soon grew to ten colleges. By November 2022, five additional colleges were added, making it the initiative’s third cohort.

NC Reconnect consists of two major outreach 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.

The majority of higher-wage jobs require more than a high school diploma, yet less than half of North Carolinians between the ages of 25-44 have earned the credentials needed to access those jobs. To easily highlight upskilling opportunities and a student’s return on investment, **Better Skills. Better Jobs.** became the official outreach campaign message of NC Reconnect.

As the initiative grows, so do the insights and learnings.

**Below are five key decisions made by presidents and college leaders in cohorts one and two before and during the implementation of NC Reconnect.**





# FIVE KEY DECISIONS

## MADE BY COLLEGE LEADERS OF NC RECONNECT

### 1 Set the tone across campus and throughout the community

Presidents agree, colleges are initiative-rich and have been for years. In order for the adult learner work to gain momentum and sustain engagement, leaders were intentional about the way NC Reconnect was communicated both on and off campus.

Several colleges folded the work into their institution's overall strategic plan – setting the tone and sending the message that NC Reconnect is a college-wide endeavor.

Others have altered the way they speak about NC Reconnect internally.

“Since launching, we stopped calling it an initiative.”

Whether it's changing vocabulary, including the work in the college's overall vision, or reframing NC Reconnect as an avenue to accomplish goals already agreed upon, colleges are using ideas learned through this work as a catalyst for change on their campuses.

NC Reconnect has been a building block for creating a college operating model that meets the unique needs of each and every student.

That is, in part, due to the nature of this work.

Re-engaging adults who stopped out means identifying the barriers that caused them to push pause on their education in the first place. And then, it's implementing ways to mitigate those barriers.

From creating spaces in buildings specifically for adult learners to revamping course schedules that align with working adults to extending campus hours, colleges have used their NC Reconnect participation to embark on an institution-wide evaluation process.

The result has been campus-wide shifts and a deeper understanding about the elements and work behind NC Reconnect and how it supports the success of all students.







Colleges also recognized the need to create an orientation or event specifically for their adult learner population. The events were a time of gathering, and in some cases, created a shared sense of belonging among students who were returning as well as with faculty and staff at the college.

**“The coolest thing for adult learners was to get in a room with other adult learners and say, ‘Oh, there’s more of us here.’”**

Most adult learner events were family friendly or provided childcare, and all events included food for those participating – a gesture that was frequently cited by adult learners as helpful for their engagement.

Setting the tone means investing in work and the people who do the work. That investment could look like hiring additional staff or shifting workloads for those spearheading NC Reconnect. Either way, presidents must make strategic staffing decisions in order to elevate the work.

Equally important is professional development for faculty and staff so they gain relevant knowledge and skills to enhance the work with adult learners. Some cohort colleges used college-wide professional development days to inform the campus about NC Reconnect, building excitement and buzz about the adult learner work. One college led individuals uniquely involved with NC Reconnect through a study using Carol Dweck’s book “Mindset” to build a framework for re-engaging adult learners. Sharing a common college professional learning experience was a strategic choice by several presidents.

College leaders are keenly aware the work to re-engage adults does not happen without the support of the community and industry partners. Colleges invited local businesses to campus during the first four weeks of class to encourage and engage with students as they walked through campus. Other colleges held special events/meetings that gathered local government officials, community stakeholders and industry partners in one room to share about NC Reconnect and generate support from key leaders. One college hosted a back-to-school event that brought together community members, faith leaders and the college.

Ultimately, setting the tone across the institution and throughout the community requires strategic messaging about NC Reconnect from the president first, followed by those spearheading the initiative. The NC Reconnect team should become the loudest cheerleaders on campus and continue the excitement to re-engage, re-enroll and retain adult learners.

## 2 Identify a point person and other champions for the adult learner work and organize a team dedicated to the initiative

All cohort colleges identified at least one point person to lead the efforts of NC Reconnect. Some colleges opted to divide the work and named two co-leads, one lead from executive leadership and another lead who was part of the boots-on-the-ground work.

A point person is someone on campus with both influence and the ability to bring ideas to the executive leadership team. Additionally, leads should be able to engage with internal and external stakeholders, be committed to the success of adult learners, and have a working knowledge about the multiple areas within the college that will be impacted by NC Reconnect.

“Having a point person that understood all those pieces and how they could impact each other – and who was passionate about the value of this opportunity...who you have having you engage, must be the right person.”

“What you need is someone who has the passion, sees the opportunity and then takes it and helps that vision grow beyond the vision.”

Leads should also inspire others at the college who are engaged with the planning and implementation of NC Reconnect. Their enthusiasm for the work trickles down to those working directly with adult learners.



While the college needs a dedicated person championing the internal work of NC Reconnect, returning adult learners also need individuals cheering them toward completion.

When adult students re-enroll, regardless of the reasons for pausing their education, they often return with unique fears. Much of that is an internalized fear of failure, as described by adult learners in cohorts one and two. But it can also be fear surrounding the ways in which education has evolved since they were last enrolled. Education delivery has changed and many returning adult learners are unfamiliar with new technology and online learning.

Having adult learner champions who can empathize with the returning student and provide resources to aid in their renewed journey is a must.

**“It’s important that adult learners hear you smiling and hear that you’re their rah-rah cheerleader.”**

Additionally, the college should organize a team of individuals who can evaluate and grow the efforts of NC Reconnect.

That team is often comprised of individuals from various areas across campus who have a vested interest in the adult learner work. Examples of areas represented among NC Reconnect teams:

Marketing, Student Services, Admissions, Academic Advising, Financial Aid, Faculty, Data, Executive Leadership, Strategic Initiatives, Educational Partnerships, Workforce Development, Success Coach Representatives and more.

While each cohort college organizes their NC Reconnect team differently, leaders pointed out that regular meetings are vital. Most teams gather once a week to discuss initiative progress across their various areas and make recommendations.

Presidents also scheduled regular check-ins with the college’s NC Reconnect point person or persons.

**“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.”**

In addition, developing a college timeline for NC Reconnect work was suggested by campus leaders (see example from Wilkes Community College). The team should include a diverse group with enough influence to move ideas to action.



Courtesy of Jody Call, Wilkes Community College



### 3 Leverage additional funds

Colleges were strategic about securing additional funds to enhance the work of NC Reconnect. 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 both the institution and community, and identified practical ways in which additional funding could be used.

As a result, several colleges received funds from local industry partners and foundations – some of which matched the initial investment made by JMBE.

Institutions used those funds, as well as the investment of JMBE, in a variety of ways, including clearing past balances of students the college sought to re-engage, purchasing swag for adult learners once they re-enrolled, offering gift cards to students who participated in focus groups, hosting adult learner events, and in some cases, offering students the opportunity to return without incurring expenses.

### 4 Conduct adult learner focus groups

**“If you’re going to create a truly student-centered, not just student-interested, culture, then conversation with students is imperative.”**

Some cohort colleges conducted focus groups to learn about the unique needs of adult learners on their campuses.

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.

One NC Reconnect president highlighted that students on their campus who stopped out mostly did so due to “life happens” events. But when the barrier went away, the students didn’t return. Students cited lack of encouragement and support from family and friends. Importantly, students who re-enrolled were grateful for the opportunity to return.

**“It’s almost like they were out there waiting for someone to reach out.”**

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.

**“I appreciated that they were taking the time, and they understand that it’s a lot more difficult for us (adult learners).”**

**“I appreciate they took the time out of their schedule to ask us.”**



## 5 Evaluate the student onboarding process

NC Reconnect provided opportunities for colleges to evaluate their student onboarding process. Student focus groups revealed problems with the onboarding process that had been overlooked.

**“The staff wanted to do the admissions process well, but no students had ever told them they didn’t (do well) because we never asked.”**

In addition to student focus groups, secret shopping was offered to all cohort colleges to better understand what students’ experience as they engage with the college. One NC Reconnect college hired outside consultants to assess how students move through the enrollment pipeline.

The assessments uncovered that some of the processes and policies in place created unintentional barriers for students applying or reapplying. 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.

As one college leader shared, the outside consultant helped 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 and creating timelines for implementation.



## CONCLUSION

At the heart of NC Reconnect are the 380,000 North Carolinians ages 25-44 who have some college but no degree. Re-engaging those individuals is about more than boosting enrollment – it’s about providing skills and training that lead to better jobs. And at the end of the day, it’s celebrating the power of education to transform lives and communities.

MC Belk Pilon, JMBE’s president and board chair echoed those sentiments.

**“We think we can help them get across the finish line and increase their economic mobility. Closing the attainment gap inherently helps us close the equity gap.”**