

BLACK STUDENT PERSISTENCE: EMPHASIS ON NORTH CAROLINA

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Brief Description

The purpose of this brief is to highlight the programs, policies, and procedures that promote persistence and post-secondary success for Black students attending community colleges, with a focus on the state of North Carolina. It is important to acknowledge the diversity that exists within the term Black students in terms of background, access, income levels, and family education history; this term in itself isn't a monolith. As a term, Black students will be used in this brief to recognize students within a shared racial group, with the understanding that there are nuances within this community of students that may or may not impact the issues of persistence and attainment. According to myFutureNC, [persistence](#) is the "percent of first-year students beginning post-secondary education at a North Carolina institution who are still enrolled in any post-secondary program one year later." This definition does not require continued enrollment at the same institution, but accounts for continued enrollment from semester to semester at any institution. In a [2021 report](#), across all four-year and two-year post-secondary institutions, Black students were found to have the lowest persistence rates among racial groups at 64.9% as compared to their white (79.3%) and Latin* (68.6%) peers. Nationally, community colleges have also seen recent decreases in both their persistence and retention rates for Black students.

Introduction

According to the [Community College Research Center](#), 44% of all Black undergraduates were enrolled in community college during the 2018 academic year. With open-door admissions policies, including dual enrollment and transfer opportunities, Black student enrollment at community colleges has increased since 1980, when Black students only made up 10.6%. Nationally, Black student persistence at community colleges continues to gain traction in practice and policy, with recent emphasis on the recruitment and retention of Black males, transfer outreach to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), and the impact of mentoring programs on student success, retention, and completion. Community colleges must continue to support the community of Black students, being responsive to the experiences of some Black students amidst the evolution of COVID-19, with particular attention on enrollment.

From Fall 2018 to Summer 2020, Black student community college enrollment in North Carolina [declined](#) 21%, exceeding the [11%](#) decline in enrollment across all institutions in the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS). In the 2019-2020 school year, [Black students represented 22% of enrolled North Carolina community college students](#). As institutional priorities during COVID-19 are identified and refined, efforts must be made to enroll and retain Black North Carolinians.

In North Carolina, [42% of students](#) who begin their post-secondary education in 2014 at a community college complete their degree or credential within six years. According to the [NC Community Colleges' College Transfer Performance - Institutional Outcomes](#) report in 2019, 87.8% of North Carolina's community college students who earned an associate degree or at least 30 transfer credits transferred to a 4-year institution. [Within this group, Black students transferred at 85%, with withdrawal for this same population of students being 15% for the 2019-2020 academic year.](#) The impact of campus resources – including academic support, advising, and mentoring – are critical to all, especially Black students, as shared during the [EdNC Rise UP panel](#) last year.

During this forum, recent community college graduates recommended that institutions engage in early outreach in both K-12 schools and community spaces to support Black students' persistence. Racial disparities across post-secondary schools are not unique, pointing to the need for systems to bolster support for Black student success. Systemic barriers can impede historically marginalized populations – especially Black, Latin*, and American Indian students – from achieving academic, economic, and social success at community colleges. Following [Salinas](#), we use Latin* to refer to individuals who may have been classified as Latinx, Latino, Latina, Latine, or Hispanic using other classification structures and data sources. The term Latin* is respectful of the various linguistic groups that comprise this racial/ethnic identification and is sensitive to a variety of gender identities. To frame this issue of persistence and retention, this brief will use the Loss/Momentum Framework introduced by [Completion by Design](#) that focuses on the student's journey from enrollment interest to credential completion. This [framework](#) breaks the journey down into four phases:

- Connection - "encourage new students to apply in a timely manner, secure the necessary financial aid, begin to develop a plan for college and careers, and enroll in initial coursework appropriate to their level of readiness and goals"
- Entry - "help students choose and enter a program of study as quickly as possible"
- Progress - "help students get to the point where the end is in sight"
- Completion - "complete program of study to credential with labor market value"

The Framework

The Completion by Design framework presents a structured plan to support the design of strategies that supports students' pathways and leads to momentum to their next step. Using this framework, we focus on understanding educational attainment for Black students by highlighting specific initiatives in North Carolina that generate completion momentum. The Loss/Momentum Framework can be used as an alternative to the four pillars of the [Guided Pathways framework](#) for student success which are "clarify the path," "get on the path," "stay on the path," and "ensure learning." The Loss/Momentum Framework can be used with the Guided Pathways approach, as it focuses on student progression throughout their academic career and areas where students are likely to drop off.

Connection

Connections to Attainment:

- [Cooperative Innovative High Schools](#) are existing strategies that promote student success outcomes by providing students with early access to institutions of higher education, with 117 currently partnered with North Carolina community colleges. These programs allow high school students who would benefit from accelerated learning, are at risk for dropping out, or are first-generation college students, to attain post-secondary credentials prior to their high school graduation, offering early exposure to higher education opportunities. Students who participate in early college or dual-enrollment programs, like [Career and College Promise](#), are more likely to enroll into post-secondary institutions post-graduation. The Career & College Promise program encourages post-secondary education success by offering three student pathways: college transfer, career and technical education, and cooperative innovative high schools. Engaging Black and historically marginalized students is one goal for Career and College Promise programs, yet, in the [2019-2020 school year](#), only 20% of Black graduates were participating in one dual-enrolled course compared to 38% of their white peers. This was a decline from the [2018-2019 school year](#) where 23.13% of Black graduates were enrolled in at least one dual-enrollment course compared to 33.18% of the white peers. Dual

enrollment is not universally defined and may have different eligibility requirements. As such, dual-enrolled students can pay for their courses directly or have tuition costs be subsidized by collaboration between their school district and local college. It is important to note that the numbers of dual-enrolled students do not account for race, income levels, and Pell Grant eligibility – a trial for a select number of colleges through the current financial aid year. Historically marginalized groups have not been represented proportionally in dual enrollment, nor have access to rigorous coursework. In 2015, 9% of Black students nationwide participated in dual enrollment. Considering students enrolled in college courses in high school are more likely to enroll in higher education and are more likely than their peers to complete their degree, the downward trends need exploration. Furthermore, [Deal's research](#) found that participation in programs like Career and College Promise and the College Transfer Pathway increases persistence and community college completion for Black students and those that receive free and reduced lunch. Dual-enrollment opportunities and programs like Career and College Promise provide the opportunity to socialize students to community college enrollment, leveraging interest and investment in post-secondary education.

Relevance to North Carolina:

- North Carolina has recognized that there is a lack of exposure to post-secondary education for students who are from low-income backgrounds, as seen through its participation in [GEAR UP](#), which targets schools with at least 50% of its students enrolled in free and reduced price lunch. Since 2019, the University of North Carolina System has been using its GEAR UP grant to increase access and readiness services by providing advising, college tours, and professional development, and works with students from middle school to their first year of post-secondary education. [Seniors who participated in the program and graduated in 2018](#) had a 82% persistence rate to their second year at a community college. Yet, out of 115 public school districts, GEAR UP NC only engages 16 school districts. High school engagement for Black students is crucial in North Carolina, as the average on-time post-secondary enrollment for Black students is [51% compared to white and Asian students who had a 63% and 67%](#), respectively, on-time enrollment rate. [Community college enrollment](#) for high school graduates who delay enrollment is also [more likely](#) in North Carolina. Inconsistent enrollment in early college and dual-enrollment programs, complemented by the low number of high schools participating in GEAR UP, reflect a disconnect between access to and engagement with K-12-based, post-secondary initiatives for North Carolina's Black students. These trends show the need to utilize additional pathways that are affordable for low-income Black students.

In addition to the ways Black students can be engaged at the post-secondary education level, community college partnerships with four-year institutions present active pathways for Black students to complete bachelor's degrees at a lower cost from early on in a student's post-secondary journey. [Dr. Sandy Shugart's 2019 Dallas Herring Lecture](#) focused on the need to redesign the transfer of academic credit from community colleges to four-year universities to support students who have chosen an affordable pathway and support social mobility for the most vulnerable students. NC State offers the [Community College Collaboration \(C3\)](#), which provides dual-admissions with 13 community college partners and offers an opportunity for students who are low-to-moderate income and/or first-generation students the opportunity to matriculate to a four-year university after completing their associates degree. Additionally, there is access to an academic advisor, online planning tools, and networking programs while enrolled either right after high school or after completing less than 30 credit hours. The University of North Carolina Greensboro uses a similar approach to supporting transfer students through their Transfer Information Program (TIP), which provides an application fee waiver for transfer and adult students. UNC Greensboro also has co-admission programs with eight community colleges in the North Carolina Community College System, in addition to [2Plus majors](#) that align specific AAS and university degrees.

Recommendations:

- Establishing strong connections to local community colleges can greatly influence Black student enrollment and persistence. Students' post-secondary school decisions are partially determined by an established knowledge of and connection with surrounding educational institutions. Students should be connected to programs like [Your Hire Education](#), which allows students to explore the diverse programming offered across North Carolina's community colleges. Pre-college advising program development specifically created to support Black students would be beneficial in establishing and maintaining Black student connections to post-secondary institutions. Pre-college advisors are

separate from a student's academic advisor or guidance counselor. [A Vanderbilt University study](#) found that pre-college advising during high school increased community college enrollment for Hispanic students. Identifying important community spaces, like faith-based institutions, may help community colleges identify more opportunities for connection. For Black students who have been historically excluded from institutions of higher education, retention begins during a student's first engagement and relationship building with faculty and staff. Community colleges should emphasize the value of frontline staff in retention processes in their attempts to help students succeed.

Entry

Connections to Attainment:

- Enrollment and completion of a student's first community college course requires adequate academic preparation as a prerequisite to persistence. Historically, community college students [enroll in developmental coursework](#), which they often fail to complete. North Carolina is no exception. Within the NCCCS, less than 30% of the 58 community colleges report developmental curriculum course success rates of [70% or greater](#) during the 2019-2020 academic year.

Relevance to North Carolina:

- The primary avenue for entry for future community college students in North Carolina is early college enrollment. Within this program model, there are three early college enrollment methods students can participate in: dual enrollment (simultaneously taking high school and community college courses), summer bridge, and early class registration. These programs primarily target high school students but fail to target and enroll Black students at rates comparable to their counterparts. Between 2009-2016, the statewide immediate [post-high school enrollment rate](#) for white students (63 percent) was

12 percentage points higher than the statewide immediate enrollment rate for Black students (51 percent). This enrollment gap varied across prosperity zones, ranging from seven percentage points in the Northwest region to 18 percentage points in North Central. Entry points for Black students should be of increasing concern to NC community colleges as [enrollment declines](#) have been observed due to COVID-19, with Black students having the highest enrollment decline. North Carolina has been recently [selected by the Lumina Foundation](#) to participate in the [Racial Equity for Adult Credentials in Higher Education \(REACH\) Collaborative](#), which will provide a pathway for adults to receive high-quality, non-degree credentials through associate degree programs. Community colleges offer a pipeline for Black adult learners to return to higher education and earn credentials as the COVID-19 pandemic has caused job losses.

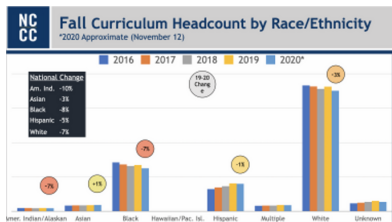


Image taken from NCCCS

Recommendations:

- Efficient entry into community college and the desired program of study also promotes student success and increases credential completion. Community colleges seek to successfully matriculate students from initial enrollment to persistence. The completion of English and math courses is often a prominent metric used to benchmark successful student support efforts. Guided Career Pathways are another example of a successful student support framework, as it encourages student career trajectory in tandem with their coursework. Nationally, Jobs for the Future (JFF) leads this work through three core elements for pathways: labor-market-informed design, expanded outreach and support strategies with emphasis on equitable outcomes across student demographics, and integrated work and experiential learning throughout a student's post-secondary career. At Durham Technical Community College, seven Guided Career Pathways provide students with a map from start to finish through career exploration and built-in student support services. Durham Tech's Equity Action Plan is also reflected in the work of Guided Career Pathways through strategic support of the college's student communities of color. Guided Career Pathways also provides an opportunity to explore career options without accumulating extra credits and costs associated with college enrollment. Online orientation has shown to help with student entry. It adds flexible, but permanent, access to the information necessary for a successful transition. Finally, mandatory academic

coaching has been shown to facilitate Black student success. Requiring [academic coaches](#) to implement a student intake survey that enhances placement and connects students with services before classes start is another recommended practice. The Community College Research Center (CCRC) [profiled multiple colleges that participated in the guided pathways approach](#) to onboarding students to provide guidance on redesign. Expansion of the promise programs at community colleges can be used to [“increase access and affordability of post-secondary education through place-based scholarships.”](#) The CRCC recommends a [four- to five-year timeline for planning and implementing a guided pathways model](#), which in the long term provides more structure to college students – allowing them timely graduation.

Progress

Connections to Attainment:

- Completion rates are a key factor in education attainment. Yet, nationally among their peers, Black community college students have the lowest rates of completion [with more than half of students dropping out](#). Faculty-student engagement is a strong determinant of Black student success. Black students who see instructors with shared identities are likely to succeed in their studies. In North Carolina, faculty and staff are not demonstrative of the student population. While colleges employ a diverse workforce, the racial stratification is clear and not unlike many other states. In North Carolina, 22% of community college students identify as Black, similar to the early 2020 [census data](#), which indicates that 20% of North Carolinians also identify as Black. However, only 17% of all NCCCS employees and only 11% of Senior Administrators are Black. While some Black employees build relationships with Black students contributing to their collegiate success, a lack of Black senior leaders creates a void of voices and experiences absent from decision-making processes. Though increasing the number of Black employees in community college leadership roles continues to be a useful tool, this alone will not increase Black student success. Instead, institutions must establish spaces and practices that nourish and encourage the Black faculty presence on their campuses. Research finds that [students in community colleges](#) note that those in faculty and administrative roles often serve as role models and sources of advice.

Relevance to North Carolina:

- Currently in North Carolina, data on Black student persistence focuses on Black males, as well as other minority male students. The primary program that is working to address the needs of Black males is the [Minority Male Success Initiative \(MMSI\)](#). The purpose of MMSI is to address and increase the progression and completion rates of minority male students. This includes students who identify as Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, Asian American or Pacific Islander, or American Indian or Alaska Native. This program was designed to strengthen minority male student outcomes in course completion, persistence, graduation rates, and transfers to four-year institutions. These outcomes are achieved by encouraging participation and collaboration among student participants and institutional departments. To help realize the stated goal, MMSI seeks community colleges willing to make a three-year commitment that assesses and enhances the student success outcomes of minority male students. During the 2016-2019 grant cycle, institutions were able to reduce the gap between minority male students and their white counterparts from 11% to 8%; however, the high variance across colleges made it difficult to determine which program incorporated good systematic practices versus programs that worked locally and uniquely for specific schools. In 2019, the NCCCS office narrowed down the options for schools receiving funding for MMSI projects to create standardization that helps identify the best practices fit for replication across the system. The system’s three-year grant funding, beginning in 2019, offered three options for application: programmatic design, embedded success coaches, and the use of early alerts.

Through these changes, in 2020, the persistence rates during 2016-2019 school years for minority male students at the eleven MMSI schools persisted at a rate 3.3% lower than white male students. Moreover, during the 2016-2019 school years, these same institutions found that minority male students completed courses at a rate 8.2% lower than white male students. This data demonstrates the need for ongoing efforts to support Black male students. A similar program at Durham Tech, [Men of Color Scholars Institute](#), provides mentorship and scholarly activities to students to provide increased opportunities of resource exposure. Additionally, the lack of specific programming targeting Black female students presents an opportunity for future program ideas and changes.

Recommendations:

- All Black students need a welcoming environment that supports them holistically and equitably. Such support requires innovative changes from an advising perspective. Equity-focused professional development training aims to increase awareness of equity issues, explore the effects of equity issues on the Black student experience, and provide strategies to address them. This professional development for all faculty is essential, as [research](#) has found that the attitudes and behaviors of faculty impact the success of Black male community college students. Mentoring programs also allow volunteer mentors to frequently communicate with mentees, send motivational messages, and provide supplemental academic support crucial to student credential completion. Portland Community College's Multicultural Center offers the [Men of Color Leadership Program](#) to provide male students with opportunities to acquire transferable credits tuition-free and explore topics related to success and wellness.

Additional [studies](#) by The Brookings Institute found that long-term community college programs that offer students advising, mentorship, or case management increased persistence and completion for students. Investments must be made into developing well-designed programs that increase attainment levels for Black community college students. Furthermore, these programs must create community-building opportunities for students with shared backgrounds. In California, the [Umoja Community](#) of the California Community College system encourages community college persistence and retention with a “culturally responsive curriculum and practice,” supported by local community college leadership. Adopting programmatic models from national peers offers the North Carolina Community College System opportunities that could support and bolster the progress towards completion for their Black students.

Completion

Connections to Attainment:

- Strengthening the transfer pipeline is a key strategy to increase post-secondary credential attainment that leads to labor market outcomes aligned with living-wages. In 2019, Dr. Sandy Shugart delivered the annual Dallas Herring Lecture on the “[Future of Transfer](#).” In his address, he noted that equity is imperative to creating pathways from community college degrees and credentials to four-year degrees. Rather than depending on students to navigate complex systems, research suggests that clear pathways create a seamless pipeline for all students, especially Black students. Aspen's [Transfer Playbook](#) outlines specific strategies that promote transfer student success, specifically the importance of creating clear programmatic pathways with aligned high-quality instruction.

In North Carolina, almost half of Black students transfer from a NC community college transfer to a minority-serving institution, including one of the state's five public HBCUs. Colclough shares that the relationship between public HBCUs and community colleges needs “[communication, advising, and financial aid planning](#)” to provide the best support, matriculation, and graduation for transfer students. For those who work directly in Student Services at community colleges, specific training and development can be offered to create student-ready colleges that offer culturally relevant support for Black students as they attempt to transfer and successfully earn their four-year degree.

Relevance to North Carolina:

- North Carolina has put forth a call-to-action that by 2030, “[Two million 23- to 44-year-olds will have a high-quality post-secondary credential or degree](#)” through the [My Future NC Commission](#). An investment in community colleges is critical to fulfilling this goal. The Completion By Design phase is most crucial to the commission because it positions community college to university transfer students as essential through the [Comprehensive Articulation Agreements](#) between NC community colleges and NC public universities.

Recommendations:

- Completion and transfer partnerships with local HBCUs can also support the degree completion of Black students. Like Comprehensive Articulation Agreements, some partnerships present associate degree holders with opportunities to complete a bachelor's degree efficiently online. Such a partnership exists between Piedmont Community College (PCC) in Roxboro, N.C. and Fayetteville

State University (FSU). Black students make up 27 percent of the student body at Piedmont Community College. The [\\$10k Pathway Plan](#) offers PCC students the opportunity to complete a bachelor's degree at FSU in 10 online programs. Many PCC students are first-generation or those interested in watching their educational costs. Connecting community colleges with four-year institutions encourages graduates to continue their journey while saving money, likely increasing their chances at degree completion. Further investments can be made to ensure completion pathways for Black students with opportunities for reverse transfer credits for students who transfer to a community college from a four-year institution with the hopes of gaining an associate's degree.

In 2019, Winston-Salem State University and Forsyth Technical Community College entered into a [2+2 partnership program focused on biotechnology](#) that allows students to transfer with a junior status. This program [can be entered at multiple points](#) along one's educational journey. Additionally, investing in [work-based learning](#) (WBL) programs can provide additional support for students in their preparation for academic and career alignment. [Dr. Lewis-Sessom has completed previous work](#) on this idea of developing students skills at the community college level through the use of career and technical education (CTE) programs. She reports that students found that WBL experiential learning courses allowed students to put soft skills into practice and prioritize them. This preparation for career development is a [direct benefit to employers](#) seeking talent pipelines that have technical competencies, and reflect diversity of thought and clientele.

Conclusion

Highlighting the practices that can be implemented by community college leaders and stakeholders to promote the persistence and post-secondary support for Black students attending North Carolina community colleges is crucial to the economic success of both citizens and state.

Persistence has been a noted problem for Black students in North Carolina where [retention rates have fallen between 2007 to 2016](#). In the face of COVID-19, persistence has become an area of greater concern as [equity gaps have widened](#) and Black students who attend community college are [more likely to face financial hardship](#). Community colleges in North Carolina should continue to invest in programming and initiatives at all stages of Black students' academic journey that begins prior to even stepping on campus to foster an environment that encourages persistence.

By using the Loss/Momentum Framework created by Completion by Design, context has been given for how each part of the student's journey contributes to attainment and persistence.

Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge the following colleagues for their contributions on previous drafts: Julia Whitfield and Dr. Jemilia Davis. Dr. Roshanda Breeden, Dr. Audrey Jaeger, Dr. Brett Ranon Nachman, and Dre' Sha Singleton provided feedback to this brief and its content. Erin O'Quinn provided the graphic design for this brief.

Suggested Citation

Leggard, T., Bryant, V. & Colclough, M. (2022) Black Student Persistence: Emphasis on North Carolina. Raleigh, NC: Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research.

FURTHER READING

Access & Enrollment

[Expectations meet Reality: The Underprepared Student and Community Colleges](#)

[Improving community college completion rates by addressing structural and motivational barriers](#)

[The Dual Enrollment Playbook: A Guide to Equitable Acceleration for Students](#)

Equity Centered

[How Community Colleges Can Bring Black, Hispanic, and Native American Adults Back to Campus and Help Them Earn Valuable Credentials](#)

[Strategies for Improving Postsecondary Credential Attainment Among Black, Hispanic, and Native American Adults](#)

[Aspirations to Achievements: Men of Color and Community Colleges](#)

[Community Colleges, for-profit and rural institutions, black undergraduates, and male undergraduates suffered most from online-only 2020 summer sessions, according to latest enrollment data](#)

Student Experience & Frameworks

[What We Know About Guided Pathways](#)

[Building Momentum: Using Guided Pathways to Redesign the Student Experience](#)

[Understanding the Student Experience Through the Loss/Momentum Framework: Clearing the Path to Completion](#)

Transfer Related

[Effective Community College and Public University Transfer Partnerships in North Carolina](#)

[Transfer Seeking Behaviors of North Carolina Community College Students](#)

[Community College-HBCU Transfer Students: Promising Practices for Student Success](#)