RURAL COLLEGE LEADERS PROGRAM:

Supporting Rural Student Success Through Cohort-Based Leadership Development

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SUPPORTING RURAL STUDENT SUCCESS THROUGH COHORT-BASED LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Rural-serving community colleges are fixtures within their communities and represent "anchor institutions" that provide tremendous resources to students and non-students alike (Mcclure et al., 2021). The values and contributions of rural community colleges are clear and abundant— yet they coexist with challenges distinct to their geographic contexts. Within North Carolina, these challenges, and the fact that over 40 of the state's 58 public community colleges serve rural communities (Koricich, et al., 2022), presented a pressing need for focused leadership development aimed at rural community colleges.

Designed to address these needs, the Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research developed the three-year, cohort-based Rural College Leaders Program (RCLP).

This capacity-building program leans on a team-based leadership model (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993) to equip college presidents and senior leadership teams at ten rural North Carolina community colleges with the tools necessary to support their efforts in improving student outcomes at their institutions. Specifically, RCLP engages institutional leaders in multiple facets of strategic support, including:

COHORT-MODEL WORKING GROUPS TO COLLABORATIVELY DEVELOP RURAL-FOCUSED SOLUTIONS TO IMPROVE STUDENT LEARNING RESULTS

EXECUTIVE DATA COACHING THAT DRIVES CHANGE

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW OF EXISTING POLICIES

ADMINISTRATION OF AN INSTITUTIONAL EMPLOYEE CLIMATE SURVEY

The purpose of this brief is to provide practitioners, policymakers, and researchers interested in rural postsecondary education with an overview of RCLP. We highlight key elements about participating colleges and their service areas, the makeup of each colleges' RCLP team, and an overview of their action planning, the initial process colleges engaged in to determine and map out their respective strategies. In subsequent briefs, we will share insights gathered from presidents and administrators leading the RCLP efforts at their college.

EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACH

Rural colleges influence students and communities by providing access to higher education and expanded workforce opportunities (Miller & Tuttle, 2007). The colleges serve a role in anchoring communities through labor, educational programs, and providing access to activities such as sports and recreation (Miller & Deggs, 2012). These anchor institutions have a long tradition of local workforce development (D'Amico et al., 2019), which is a particular strength for rural-serving colleges because many were established to address shortages in critical occupational fields such as education, nursing, and business (McClure et al., 2021).

Rural community colleges experience unique challenges, including limited broadband access, increased student food insecurity, limited access to funding (Rush-Marlowe, 2021), and slow-moving local economies (Eddy & Murray, 2007). The colleges typically have smaller course and program offerings than their urban counterparts (Hardy & Katsinas, 2007). The lasting impacts of COVID-19 also exacerbate rural colleges' challenges (D'Amico et al., 2022), requiring them to adapt to technological advances (e.g., providing devices, internet access, and mobile-friendly courses) that best support students (Ratledge et al., 2020). Cohort-based approaches to studying rural colleges have existed for some time (Kennamer & Katsinas, 2011). Focusing efforts on a smaller cohort of colleges with similar needs provides an opportunity to develop trusting relationships in order to define, coach, and track change over time (Burmicky et al., 2023). Because these colleges provide access to higher education to underserved communities, research on rural colleges has primarily focused on student experiences with retention and persistence. For example,

rural students' perceptions of transfer are influenced by personal challenges, issues with self-confidence, and difficulties navigating learning management systems (Coke et al., 2023). Retention and persistence are influenced by a lack of involvement with the campus, specifically for students enrolled in career and technical education programs, students with longer commutes, and students who were primarily entirely online (Bowler & Cutler White, 2023). RCLP is structured to support colleges as they support students to overcome barriers and challenges.

WHO IS INVOLVED IN RCLP?

Rural colleges applied to be part of the program, and ten colleges were selected, representing a range of institutional characteristics such as size and student demographics (Figure 1). Enrollment size of participating colleges ranged from about 2,300 total enrollment to nearly 13,000 annually (Figure 1). Reflecting the general demographics of their service areas, most RCLP colleges predominantly serve white students, while two of the colleges - Roanoke-Chowan and Vance-Granville - serve a higher proportion of Black, Hispanic, and students of two or more races.

All of the colleges in RCLP engage adult learners at their institutions, with at least a fifth of their student body comprised of students over the age of 24. Using US Census data compiled by the Rural Serving Institutions Index, an estimate of geographic rurality, shows that RCLP colleges serve geographic locales that are at least 45% rural and up to 88% rural.

RCLP INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

CARTERET COMMUNITY COLLEGE

5,636 STUDENTS

BLACK	7%
HISPANIC	6%
WHITE	80%
OTHER	7%
AGE 24 +	41%
RURAL SERVICE AREA	64%

COLLEGE OF THE ALBEMARLE

7,699 STUDENTS

BLACK	12%
HISPANIC	4%
WHITE	64%
OTHER	18%
AGE 24 +	20%
RURAL SERVICE AREA	88%

CATAWBA VALLEY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

12,702 STUDENTS

BLACK	6%
HISPANIC	14%
WHITE	67%
OTHER	21%
AGE 24 +	19%
RURAL SERVICE AREA	45%

DAVIDSON COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

11,659 STUDENTS

BLACK	12%
HISPANIC	8%
WHITE	70%
OTHER	11%
AGE 24 +	28%
RURAL SERVICE AREA	47%

ROANOKE-CHOWAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

2,361 STUDENTS

BLACK	58%
HISPANIC	2%
WHITE	33%
OTHER	9%
AGE 24 +	23%
RURAL SERVICE AREA	84%

ISOTHERMAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE

5,410 STUDENTS

BLACK	9%
HISPANIC	8%
WHITE	74%
OTHER	10%
AGE 24 +	23%
RURAL SERVICE AREA	52%

MCDOWELL TECHNICAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE

5,283 STUDENTS

BLACK	2%
HISPANIC	10%
WHITE	83%
OTHER	4%
AGE 24 +	23%
RURAL SERVICE AREA	67%

VANCE-GRANVILLE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

8,352 STUDENTS

BLACK	31%
HISPANIC	8%
WHITE	46%
OTHER	14%
AGE 24 +	28%
RURAL SERVICE AREA	74%

STANLY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

8,734 STUDENTS

BLACK	16%
HISPANIC	4%
WHITE	65%
OTHER	17%
AGE 24 +	40%
RURAL SERVICE AREA	50%

WESTERN PIEDMONT COMMUNITY COLLEGE

5,677 STUDENTS

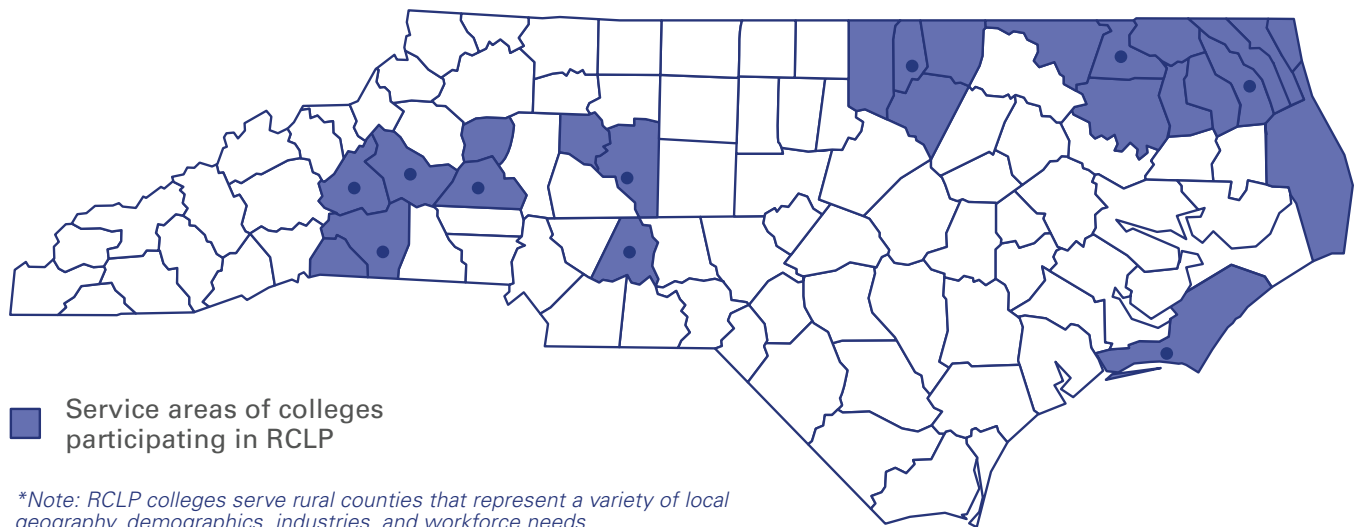|	
BLACK	5%
HISPANIC	9%
WHITE	78%
OTHER	14%
AGE 24 +	21%
RURAL SERVICE AREA	55%

Note: Other indicates race unknown, two or more races, Native/American Indian, Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders, and Asian.

Figure 2
RCLP INSTITUTIONAL LOCATIONS AND SERVICE AREAS

■ Service areas of colleges
participating in RCLP

**Note: RCLP colleges serve rural counties that represent a variety of local
geography, demographics, industries, and workforce needs.*

RCLP participants are comprised of five to nine administrators from each of the ten colleges in the cohort. Each working group required the college president's engagement along with a team of senior-level staff to participate in the three-year program. RCLP colleges were asked to select representatives in leadership roles best positioned to enact change on their campus. While some of the participants have served as faculty members or as an instructor for certain classes, RCLP participants were comprised of mostly administrative leaders rather than faculty. Among all RCLP participants (n=69), most held positions at their college as vice presidents, deans, and directors.

RCLP participants represented a variety of college function areas poised to effectively address issues impacting rural learners (Figure 4). The vast majority of RCLP participants led units in academic and student affairs, and all cohort college presidents are engaged in the program. Student success or enrollment management as well as institutional research, planning, and effectiveness, were also common functional areas that colleges prioritized in compiling their RCLP working groups.

Figure 3

RCLP PARTICIPANT COMPOSITION BY ROLE AND FUNCTION AREA
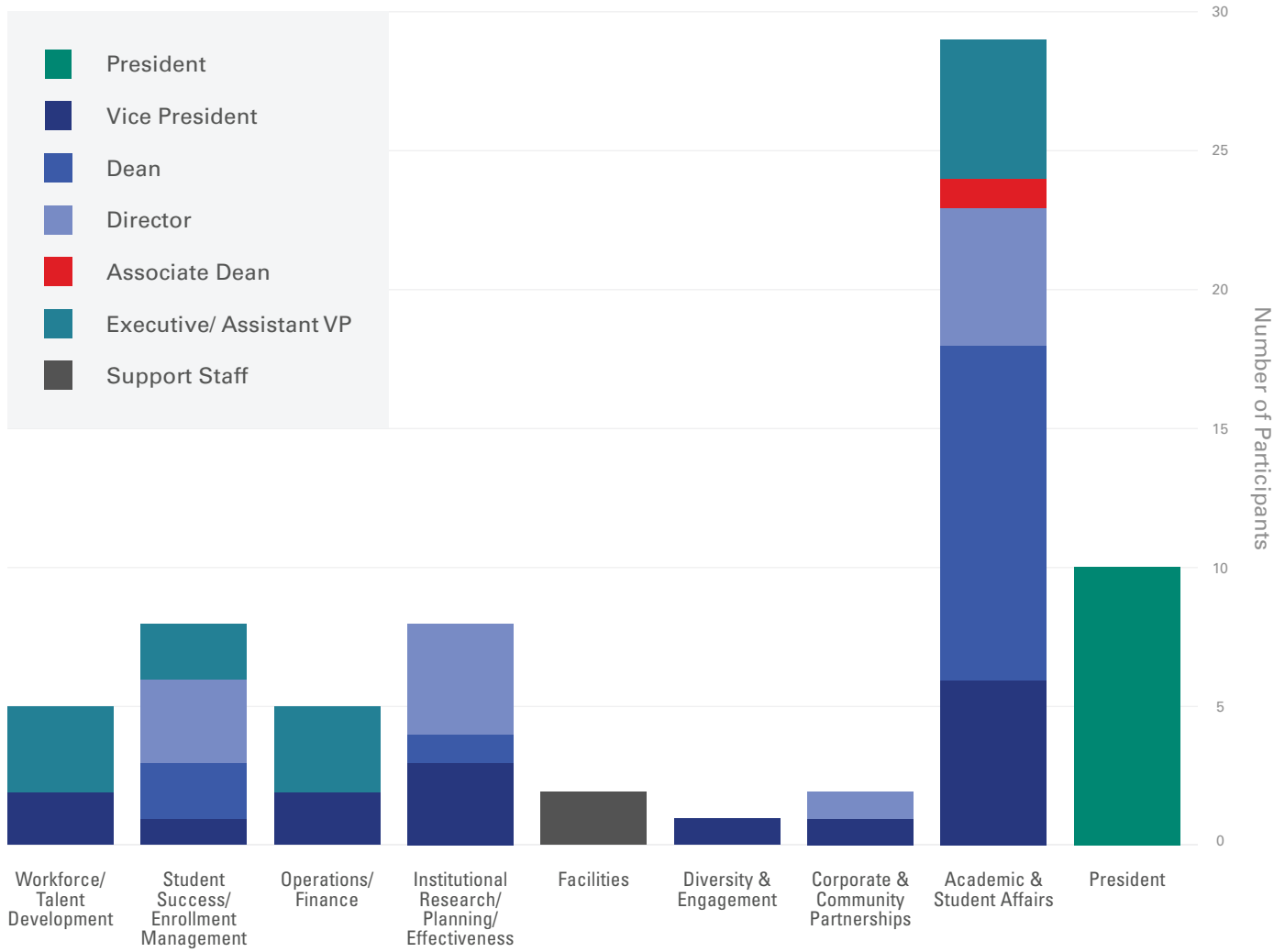
ACTION PLANNING AS A CORE COMPONENT OF RCLP

Colleges developed institutional action plans that served as a means of defining priorities and a foundation for strategies they planned to implement to achieve their specific goals. These action plans targeted the recruitment, retention, and completion phases of the student experience. Some examples of identified strategies include developing recruitment and communication plans targeted to prospective students in the community, implementing specialized student support services to improve retention, and improving program pathways to ensure more students complete their degree or credentialing programs. In addition, some colleges' action plans target their local communities in their efforts (e.g., ensuring local/regional employers endorsed credentials and increasing the number of industry partners engaged in formal work-based learning opportunities). Altogether, there's a variety of efforts being made across the ten institutions to effectively support low-income, adult, and racially minoritized students. In particular, action steps or strategies fell within five overarching categories:

FIVE CATEGORIES TO SUPPORT LOW-INCOME, ADULT, & RACIALLY MINORITIZED STUDENTS

Assessment, Data, and Evaluation - Leaders recognized the need for efficient data strategies to quickly assess their institutions (e.g., processes, existing program areas) to identify barriers and opportunities for improvement.

Improving or Implementing New Coursework and Curriculum Pathways - Several RCLP colleges identified the development of new programs that respond to local workforce needs, revising existing guided curriculum pathways and maps with part-time and adult students in mind, and improving gateway math and English courses and completion rates.

Implementing Advising Programs and/or Initiatives - In addition to curricular pathways, colleges articulated plans to develop advising and coaching models for designated student populations, open house and new student orientation events, and new mentoring and tutoring offerings.

Communication and Recruitment - Institutions developed plans for specific communication strategies to recruit prospective or former students (e.g., social media, letters, emails) and utilize call centers and customer relationship management tools (CRMs) to support current students.

Training and Professional Learning Opportunities for Employees - To address high rates of turnover among college staff, colleges developed action plans for employees to learn about new programs, supporting adult learners, and student persistence data.

MOVING FORWARD WITH SUPPORT FOR RCLP

Closing opportunity gaps and supporting economic mobility in rural communities takes a multifaceted approach. The Rural College Leaders Program places emphasis on key aspects of cohort–based professional learning for college leadership, providing college-specific data coaching, policy review and enhancement, analysis of rurality and economic needs, and leveraging college-wide and community partnerships. Looking ahead, the Belk Center is eager to continue sharing knowledge about RCLP as we continue to explore aspects of the program found most beneficial to its participants.

As the program continues into its next phase, we plan to collect longitudinal data that tracks the efforts colleges make to address their action plans. Upcoming convenings will allow the colleges to share best practices, strategies, and challenges with one another. During these convenings, researchers will conduct focus groups to gather perspectives and progress of their action plans. Researchers will also conduct site visits to engage campus communities about the action plans. The forthcoming series of briefs about the RCLP program will highlight key time points for the program, showcase specific colleges, and lift up promising efforts that may be replicated in other rural institutions.
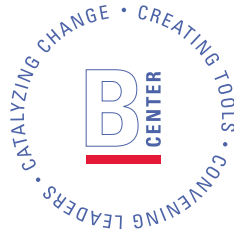
ABOUT THE BELK CENTER

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.

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