



# INNOVATIVE ADVISING

TECHNIQUES

HOW NC RECONNECT COLLEGES MEET THE  
ADVISING NEEDS OF ADULT LEARNERS

**NC STATE UNIVERSITY**

College of Education  
Belk Center for Community College  
Leadership and Research



## NC RECONNECT OVERVIEW

In February 2019, [myFutureNC](#) unveiled an ambitious goal of ensuring that two million North Carolinians between the ages of 25 and 44 have a high-quality postsecondary degree or credential of value by 2030. The [John M. Belk Endowment \(JMBE\)](#) launched [NC Reconnect](#) in 2021 to help reach this statewide goal and meet North Carolina’s future workforce needs. The aim of NC Reconnect is to engage or re-engage adult learners in the North Carolina Community College System’s (NCCCS) “Great 58” community colleges. Starting with five colleges of various sizes and geographic locations, NC Reconnect has now grown to 20 colleges across four cohorts.

JMBE has fostered a number of collaborative partnerships—including one with the [Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research](#) (the Belk Center)—to successfully facilitate this work alongside the 20 NC Reconnect colleges. Research associates at the Belk Center interviewed presidents, student support staff, and faculty about their experiences launching this work and how they recruit, retain, and support adult learners in their journeys through community college. The Belk Center also interviewed adult learners to gain insight into their experiences at community colleges, thus far. NC Reconnect engages with [InsideTrack](#), [Crisp Communications](#), and [VisionPoint Marketing](#) who provide a variety of supports to NC Reconnect colleges, including qualitative and quantitative research, marketing, and direct student outreach. JMBE provides mini-grant funding that can be used in various ways including recruitment and outreach.

## INTRODUCTION

Effective academic advising is the cornerstone of community college student success. Whether helping select courses, referring to different campus resources, or serving as a sounding board, academic advisors play an essential role in aiding adult learners in and through the community college. NC Reconnect colleges use a variety of advising models to support their students, but many are revamping their advising systems and structures to meet the needs of their adult learners. The advising techniques described below come from NC Reconnect Cohort 3 colleges: College of The Albemarle, Brunswick Community College, Catawba Valley Community College, Davidson-Davie Community College, and Edgecombe Community College.



## PROACTIVE ADVISING MODELS

Proactive advising for adult learners in community colleges is a strategic approach aimed at fostering academic success and holistic development by engaging students early and consistently throughout their educational journeys. Unlike transactional advising, proactive advising involves advisors taking the initiative to anticipate and address potential challenges before they escalate, promoting a collaborative and personalized relationship with adult learners.

**Brunswick Community College's** proactive advising is evident through a faculty member's initiative to include a personal crisis statement on syllabi, encouraging students to communicate challenges that could jeopardize their college enrollment.

**Catawba Valley Community College** focuses attention on career advising for adult learners. The career advising team engages in conversations with students to understand their individual circumstances, including factors like full-time employment for adult learners. These discussions involve considerations of the students' responsibilities, allowing for tailored advice on program specifics, financial aid, and academic planning.

**College of The Albemarle** proactively assigns all students an advisor as the main point of contact upon student acceptance. Advisors are required to contact new students within three days of the students being added to the advisor's caseload. However, specific to adult learners, the college has transitioned from a transactional advising model to a more holistic approach, implementing a differentiated advising model through its Quality Enhancement Plan which focuses on adult learners who are Pell Grant recipients. The differentiated advising model was designed to ensure new students who are applying for financial aid receive comprehensive support in an effort to address identified equity gaps in performance measures for Pell Grant recipients versus non-recipients. This model focuses on building meaningful relationships between advisors and students. Working with their advisor, adult learners are able to identify potential barriers whether academic, financial, or personal during their initial advising appointments,



allowing for early referrals to appropriate wraparound services. In addition, the differentiated advising model promotes early enrollment in gateway courses in English and math. Advisors strongly encourage adult learners receiving the differentiated advising approach to enroll in these courses within their first year, in hopes of gaining early momentum and increasing their chances of academic success.

**Davidson-Davie Community College's** director of reconnect and success serves as the direct point of contact for all NC Reconnect students. The director takes on the role of advisor and coach, working in collaboration with various committees (i.e., Pathways and Scheduling Committee, Reconnecting Adult Learners Committee, Success Coaching Committee, Teaching and Learning Committee) to streamline pathways for adult learners. An onboarding navigator also plays a crucial role in identifying Reconnect students and facilitating their integration into the system. The director manages the advising for all Reconnect students and collaborates with other advisors based on specific program criteria.

## WRAPAROUND SERVICES

Wraparound services for adult learners encompass a comprehensive and integrated support network designed to address the various challenges faced by adult learners pursuing higher education. These services may include flexible scheduling options, career guidance, financial aid assistance, childcare and family support, and collaborations with community organizations.

**Brunswick Community College** has implemented the NCCCS's online referral resource, [findhelp](#), that allows for students to search for free or reduced-cost services like medical care, food, job training, and more.

**Catawba Valley Community College** incorporates wraparound support services through the Student Opportunities and Academic Resources (SOAR) program. SOAR includes various services such as library assistance, academic student success classes, the Tutoring Center, and accommodations.

**College of The Albemarle** created a Student Support Services booklet that contains a list of wraparound services that is available to adult learners electronically and as a hard copy. Advisors are trained to ask questions during advising sessions to help adult students identify potential barriers to success, allowing for immediate referrals to support services. Questions asked are specific to the most common challenges experienced by adult learners and include areas such as child care assistance, financial concerns, food and housing insecurity, mental health concerns, technology deficits, and transportation. Advisors are intentional about closing the loop and providing follow-up emails linking adult students to resources discussed during differentiated advising appointments, as well as including an electronic copy of the Student Support Services booklet for immediate and future access.

**Edgecombe Community College** strategically hires individuals with diverse backgrounds to enrich the support services available to students. The college offers a variety of initiatives and programs, including the BUTTERFLIE (Building Unity through Teamwork, Empowerment, Respect, Friendship, and Leadership to Inspire Excellence) women's group designed to mentor historically minoritized women

students and provide additional support and resources. External partners, such as Edgecombe Works!, local credit unions, and the health department, also contribute to the wraparound services offered to students.

## EARLY ALERTS

Early alerts serve as a proactive intervention strategy designed to enhance student success, retention, and overall well-being. By promptly identifying and addressing potential academic or personal challenges that adult students face in the initial stages of their educational journey, early alerts enable educators and support staff to intervene in a timely manner.

**College of The Albemarle** has streamlined its early alert procedure, encouraging faculty to contact students before submitting alerts via [Watermark](#), and providing follow-up once alerts are received. The institution has incorporated progress reports in gateway English and math classes for identified adult learners, covering aspects beyond grades, such as attendance. Additionally, the college communicates with students weekly, offering tutoring services and additional support to address identified barriers and ensure a smoother academic experience.

**Davidson-Davie Community College** and **Edgecombe Community College** use [Starfish](#) in their early alert process. The colleges emphasize the importance of communication and collaboration among various teams to ensure students receive the support they need. Starfish allows faculty and staff to identify and address student concerns promptly. Davidson-Davie connected their director of reconnect and success to each adult learner in Starfish so that they are privy to student alerts and interventions.

## PROXIMITY TO ADVISORS: BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

**The Five P Framework** of the adult learner journey through the community college includes the concept of “proximity.” When thinking about proximity to the community college space, distance, time, and relationships to others can expand or close an adult learner’s proximity to their degree. Being in close proximity to advisors can help reduce barriers for adult learners. Students are at the center of these conversations, and relationships are critically important to their success.

**College of The Albemarle:** one adult learner described their advisor as helpful and wonderful, always offering assistance and guidance even assisting the student with scheduling a test while the student was in Tennessee. The student credited the advisor for contributing to their success. Another adult learner described one advisor as being consistently available and never making the student feel inadequate for asking questions.

**Davidson-Davie Community College:** adult students shared positive experiences working with their advisors, highlighting the significant impact these relationships have on their academic journeys. An advisor, referred to as an “auntie” by one student, stands out for demonstrating unwavering support since the student’s first year. The student recognizes the invaluable guidance provided by the advisor and acknowledges them as a mentor.

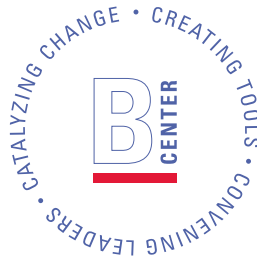
**Edgecombe Community College:** adult students express gratitude for the support and assistance provided by the advising staff. Students highlighted the advisors’ dedication in consistently responding to calls, texts, and emails, ultimately resolving many issues. One adult learner noted that advisors provide a clear outline of tasks to be completed before registering for classes, making the process smooth and efficient.

Overall, these adult learner experiences underscore the vital role advisors have in facilitating a smooth transition for adult students, offering guidance on academic requirements, and establishing meaningful connections that go beyond the traditional advisor-student relationship. The advisors’ commitment to their students’ success is evident in the personalized support and assistance provided, creating a positive and empowering academic experience for adult learners.

## CONCLUSION

Adult learners have specific needs and challenges when pursuing their education. Building a relationship with an advisor can help meet these needs and alleviate barriers for adult learners. All NC Reconnect Cohort 3 colleges have assessed ways their advising models can be more supportive of adult learners on their campuses. Through proactive advising models, wraparound services, and early alerts, NC Reconnect colleges are supporting their students in and through their degrees.

You can learn more about innovative advising techniques from NC Reconnect Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 colleges in the [Adult Learner Guidebook](#).



## 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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