

NC STATE UNIVERSITY

College of Education
Belk Center for Community College
Leadership and Research



THE POWER OF PARTNERSHIPS

IN NC RECONNECT COLLEGES





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 evidence-based 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. Since 2021, the Belk Center has served as the official research partner of NC Reconnect, a state-wide effort created and led by the John M. Belk Endowment (JMBE) designed to recruit and support adult learners in North Carolina’s community colleges.

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INTRODUCTION

Community colleges leverage partnerships to create academic and workforce opportunities for students. Whether those partnerships are with local community agencies or exist between colleges, they alleviate barriers to academic success and prepare students for the next steps of their academic or professional journeys. For NC Reconnect colleges, partnerships are vital to re-engaging and retaining adult learners and preparing them for high-quality work opportunities.

NC RECONNECT OVERVIEW

In 2021, the John M. Belk Endowment (JMBE) launched NC Reconnect to re-engage and re-enroll adult learners across the state. In addition to JMBE and the Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research (Belk Center), various North Carolina partners, including the North Carolina Community College System and myFutureNC, collaborate to elevate the efforts of NC Reconnect.

NC Reconnect ensures adult learners across North Carolina have maximum opportunity to pursue education at one of the state's 58 community colleges. Starting with an initial cohort of five community colleges of various sizes across the state, NC Reconnect has added three cohorts in three years, growing to 20 colleges. NC Reconnect consists of two major outreach components:

re-engaging adult students who previously earned some college credit but left without a credential and delivering targeted communication to prospective adult students within the colleges' service areas. The majority of high-wage jobs in North Carolina 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.¹ To highlight upskilling opportunities and a student's return on investment in education and training, NC Reconnect adopted the outreach campaign message, "Better Skills. Better Jobs."

As the Belk Center's pivotal work with NC Reconnect grows, so do the insights and learnings. **In this report, we emphasize a component of NC Reconnect essential to recruiting and retaining adult learners – the power of partnerships.**

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https://www.myfuturenc.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/JLEOC2022_EducationalAttainmentReport_Upd122022.pdf

OVERVIEW OF PARTNERSHIPS

A common theme across the first three cohorts of NC Reconnect colleges was the importance of establishing partnerships to prioritize the success of adult learners. Three types of partnerships emerged in our conversations with institutional leaders at NC Reconnect colleges.

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Partnerships with external organizations and agencies that support colleges in their efforts to support students. These ventures could include collaborations with local industries to create work-based learning opportunities for students or alliances between colleges and local agencies (e.g., child care services, transportation services, or housing) to help minimize barriers that may adversely affect adult learners' academic trajectories.

INTRA-INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

Collaborations between departments and offices within the college to support adult learners on their academic and professional journeys. Examples of these types of partnerships include collaborations between enrollment management and advising or collaborations between student support services and college faculty.

INTER-INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

Collaborations that happen across colleges to support the common goal of recruiting and retaining adult learners. Examples of these partnerships include sharing knowledge, data, insights, lessons learned, and promising practices between colleges across and within NC Reconnect cohorts.

In the sections that follow, we delve further into each of these partnership types, providing examples and quotes highlighting the collaborations NC Reconnect colleges have leveraged to support their efforts to recruit and retain adult learners.

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

“Supporting NC Reconnect is a community effort, not just an effort of the college.” - Blue Ridge Community College Staff Member (Cohort 1)

Collaborations with local community agencies support students holistically and alleviate potential barriers that could present major challenges as students pursue their academic and professional goals. Wilkes Community College’s NC Reconnect lead emphasizes the importance of partnerships by stating, “Just as our outreach efforts to re-engage adult learners require multiple touchpoints, our work with the community should be approached no differently.”

Central Carolina Community College quickly connected with faith-based leaders as partners to engage adult learners in the community. Together, these groups co-host community events and work to engage adult learners through student testimonies shared via banner-ups, bulletin inserts, and video clips. The engagement with the faith-based community is sustained through annual events, regular planning meetings, and a shared project plan/outcomes.

Brunswick Community College utilized NC Reconnect to bolster awareness and support within the substance use and recovery community. The college partners with Coastal Horizons, a nonprofit service delivery corporation that provides outpatient counseling, to serve adult learners in Brunswick County who lack health insurance.

Davidson-Davie Community College incorporated a Single Stop telehealth service for medical and counseling support services available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The college has seen adult learners utilize the service for both counseling and medical appointments, which has helped keep students enrolled.



INTRA-INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

“An important consideration regarding buy-in is understanding skepticism among faculty and staff, and acknowledging previous similar initiatives or approaches may have yielded meager results.” - Dr. Jeff Cox, Former President, Wilkes Community College; President, North Carolina Community College System

Just as local community collaborations are important to the success of adult learners, collaborations within the college are essential. As college leaders reflected on the ways their campus engaged in NC Reconnect, a common thread emerged – the need to have collective commitment across campus to effectively do the work.

Free tuition and fees was a high priority during initial planning discussions with Wilkes Community College’s NC Reconnect leadership team. This team collaborated across the institution by bringing together representatives from financial aid, student services, instruction, and strategic planning. As a result, Wilkes replicated its Education Promise scholarship program for recent high school graduates by offering free tuition and fees to returning adult learners. The decision paid dividends as Wilkes saw more than 200 adult learners re-enroll between fall 2022 and spring 2024. The scholarship effort has generated well in excess of \$1,000,000 in full-time equivalent enrollment (FTE) and resulted in 53 students receiving 91 credentials to date.

Davidson-Davie Community College established the NC Reconnect Care Team and an NC Reconnect committee, including members of the college’s senior leadership council. The college created a dedicated position, the Director of Reconnect Success, to focus on adult learners. This unique role exemplifies how intentional and effective collaboration occurs across multiple units within the community college. Although the Care

Team was composed of members from different divisions, a shared vision of cooperation in working toward the goal of adult learner support removed potential barriers to efficiency and success. Davidson-Davie also added an onboard navigator, an adult learner success coach, and a college admission specialist who would be primarily responsible for supporting adult learners. Furthermore, to promote empathy and relatability, Davidson-Davie assigned two former adult learners to these roles.

Data plays an important part in internal collaboration, and faculty and staff should be encouraged to contextualize that data in a way that makes sense of their experience. Strengthening relationships with institutional research staff and colleagues who provide data facilitates the work. NC Reconnect colleges refer to a cadence of reliable and relevant data to examine their individual progress and the results of their collective efforts.



Intra-institutional teams work together by utilizing software that provides early alerts, student progress updates, and insights into unique challenges and needs. These case management tools mitigate stop-outs when students experience non-academic barriers or struggle to demonstrate their learning. Using a customer relationship management software, for example, to collect and track student data helps colleges understand their students and develop ways to engage and support them, which in turn results in greater retention and completion.

Another feature of this type of software is the ability of employees to make notes on students' profiles. When this feature is used effectively, faculty and staff support adult learners by keeping college stakeholders informed of students' progress and potential needs. Davidson-Davie went a step further and introduced a referral button so any faculty or staff member could send an adult learner referral to the NC Reconnect Care Team. Following the button's implementation, anyone can refer an adult learner who meets the criteria for NC Reconnect to specialized support services.

INTER-INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

Collaboration within and between NC Reconnect cohorts through kick-off meetings, convenings, mentor partnering, and ad-hoc conversations builds momentum and strengthens the unified approach. Colleges borrow ideas, refine processes, and develop emerging solutions through cross-college partnerships. Forgiving student debt, temporarily easing financial aid satisfactory academic progress rules, hiring adult learner advocates, and providing a space tailored toward adult learners are just a few examples of the ideas shared across colleges.

The peer relationships forged among cohort colleges amplify their energy, excitement, and passion. Just as adult learners see potential success in themselves by observing fellow adult learners, community colleges witness the progress and victories of peer institutions, and can see themselves doing the same.

Following the cohort model, there is value in colleges going through the onboarding process for NC Reconnect together. Lived experiences facilitated through convenings, presentations, and individual conversations provide valuable insight and guidance, especially around data

reporting, data analysis, and project milestones. Cohort programs have been shown to facilitate relationships that encourage learning and provide a supportive group for individuals,² and the NC Reconnect cohort approach is no exception.

A core and unique component of the NC Reconnect work is the investment of the John M. Belk Endowment (JMBE). JMBE is a philanthropic organization that focuses on transforming postsecondary education in North Carolina and removing barriers that impede on their abilities to gain education. JMBE serves as the lead and primary funder of NC Reconnect, as well as an integral partner in moving the work forward. College Reconnect leads, presidents, and others involved in the initiative have noted the value that JMBE brings to the table by convening the college personnel involved on a regular basis, hosting statewide adult learner gatherings, and approaching each component of NC Reconnect with a "do no harm" philosophy. JMBE's approach to holistically support Reconnect efforts while also leading the work makes them a truly unique partner and champion of adult learners in North Carolina.

2 Brooks, Paula A. (1998). "Cohort Communities in Higher Education: The Best Example of Adult Education," Adult Education Research Conference. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/1998/papers/12>

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