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REDESIGNING THE NEW STUDENT ONBOARDING EXPERIENCE

INTRODUCTION

Effective student onboarding is a cornerstone of success in postsecondary education. Research shows that students who participate in well-designed onboarding programs, including orientation and first-year success courses, are more likely to persist, engage meaningfully with their institution and ultimately achieve their academic goals.¹ Institutional leaders have significant agency in shaping how these programs are planned and delivered. Decisions such as when onboarding is offered, its content, how to communicate it to students, and whether attendance is mandatory can influence their effectiveness. Thoughtful design and intentional delivery can transform onboarding into a powerful tool for fostering student success, particularly for the diverse community college student population, including adult learners, full-time workers and dually-enrolled students.

This brief explores how [Catawba Valley Community College \(Catawba Valley\)](#) redesigned its onboarding process by expanding new student orientation with follow-up support, via student success courses, to address the diverse needs of its student population. Through innovative approaches – such as automatic enrollment in orientation to encourage participation, hybrid student success courses frontloaded into the first four weeks of the semester, and embedded opportunities for feedback and continuous improvement – Catawba Valley created a more inclusive and effective onboarding experience. Additionally, the college’s focus on cultivating a strong sense of community underscores the importance of supporting students both academically and personally.²

The following sections examine how onboarding can extend institutional strategic priorities, the importance of engaging campus stakeholders and the specific strategies used in Catawba Valley’s redesign. Together, these elements offer a replicable framework for college leaders seeking to enhance their onboarding practices and improve student outcomes.

KEY POINTS

- Design onboarding programs that are unavoidable for students via automatic enrollment with an opt-out option, while prioritizing relationship-building with faculty, staff, and peers.
- Ensure programs are relevant and timely by frontloading and reinforcing key information aligned with each student's program of study – assuring each student moves forward into their semester with either a clear transfer plan or a work-based experience opportunity.
- Align onboarding efforts with institutional priorities and other strategic priorities and existing initiatives to create more holistic processes.

DATA SOURCES

Catawba Valley Community College (Catawba Valley) participated in the Belk Center's [Rural College Leaders Program \(RCLP\)](#), a three-year, cohort-based program that provides college presidents and executive leaders with tools to support their efforts to improve student outcomes at their institutions. This included individualized data coaching and collaborative development of rural-focused solutions for improved student outcomes. [The Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research \(Belk Center\)](#) visited Catawba Valley in 2024. This brief is part of a series highlighting innovative practices at rural institutions across the state, based on insights from these site visits. Two other research briefs, [“Responding to Rural Community College Student Needs through ‘Be Great in 8”](#) and [“Building Momentum Toward Degree Attainment through Contextualized English Courses”](#) feature Isothermal Community College and Stanly Community College, respectively. This series is supported by [Ascendium Education](#) and is designed to show the results of community college leaders providing space for faculty and staff to present innovative ideas. The Belk Center conducted four focus groups over the course of a day, which included administrators, faculty and staff to gather data on the onboarding model that includes new student orientation and student success classes at Catawba Valley.



DECISION TO CHANGE THE ONBOARDING PROCESS

Catawba Valley had a new student orientation that worked well for athletes because students were welcomed, introduced to resources, and connected with faculty, staff and peers. To ensure all students received this experience, the college expanded orientation to make it “inevitable” for all students. While pre-semester orientation sessions were effective in building relationships and fostering a sense of community, they were not sufficient on their own. Other onboarding elements, such as the ACA 122 transfer student success course and WBL 110 work-based learning course, covered the necessary information, but pacing of the semester-long course meant that some critical materials were introduced too late in the term for students to use. To address this, Catawba Valley decided to compress the courses into the first four weeks to front-load key information so that students could access and utilize it when they needed it most.

Catawba Valley undertook a comprehensive redesign of its student onboarding process to better support incoming students and foster their long-term success. By addressing common barriers, leveraging innovative course delivery formats and prioritizing student feedback, the college created a model that engages students from their first interactions. Below are the key components of Catawba Valley’s redesign to make the onboarding process relevant and timely, offering insights and strategies that other leaders can adapt to enhance their own onboarding processes.

ESTABLISHING CLEAR EXPECTATIONS FOR STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Catawba Valley expanded their pre-semester new student orientation sessions to include more interactive and engaging activities, aimed at building a stronger sense of community and connection among new students. By engaging new students from the outset, the college ensured that both content and delivery methods were purposeful. A central element of this approach was the mandatory new student orientation, which was integrated into the advising process. Students were informed about the orientation’s importance through email and advising staff, and were encouraged to register during their advising sessions. This strategy proved successful, as the first session saw more than 470 students attend, surpassing the initial target of 400. For students unable to attend, advisors worked with them individually to explore alternative options, reinforcing the long-term benefits of a strong academic foundation.

To increase engagement and reduce attrition, Catawba Valley embedded orientation into the enrollment process. This integration successfully boosted participation rates, and efforts to enhance them further are ongoing. Similarly, students are automatically enrolled in the appropriate four-week student success course, which is held on Fridays, as one in-person session and three virtual sessions. This seamless integration into the enrollment process makes it easier for students to participate while also ensuring they receive the necessary support from the outset.

DELIVERING STUDENT SUCCESS COURSES IN A HYBRID FORMAT

In addition to new student orientation, Catawba Valley's redesign included two key student success courses: [WBL 110 Work-Based Learning](#) and [ACA 122 College Transfer Success](#). These one-credit, two-contact hour courses are designed to enhance student success beyond the classroom. WBL 110 prepares students for the workforce, covering job searching, workplace ethics, safety and human relations. The capstone of the WBL course applied their knowledge to their career goals by requiring a job interview with a local employer. This gives students a chance to grow their network and even resulted in several students getting hired. ACA 122 supports students planning to transfer to a four-year institution by focusing on career exploration, choosing a major and effective academic preparation. The capstone assignment for ACA 122 similarly helped students apply their knowledge to their goals by requiring them to complete a term-by-term course plan for completing their baccalaureate degree.

The courses were compressed into four-weeks, frontloaded in the semester and offered in a hybrid format, meaning ACA 122 began with an in-person session focused on relationship building and transfer-specific information. During the remaining three weeks, students completed course work online asynchronously. For WBL 110, students began with online asynchronous work focused on workforce skills such as resume building, followed by a capstone in the fourth week where students participated in a mock job interview with a local employer. This structure allowed students to access critical resources and support early on, enhancing their ability to succeed.

FOSTERING A SENSE OF COMMUNITY

Catawba Valley's orientation program was designed to foster a strong sense of belonging by connecting students with peers, faculty and staff. Students were grouped by their area of study, enabling them to form connections with others who shared similar academic and career interests. This peer connection – combined with opportunities to meet faculty and staff before classes began – helped students feel more comfortable navigating the transition to college. Early relationships with faculty and staff are essential not only for enhancing students' educational experiences but also for building professional networks within their chosen fields.⁴

The student success courses furthered this sense of community by grouping students based on their educational goals – either workforce entry (WBL 110) or transfer to a four-year institution (ACA 122). These courses allowed students to connect with others pursuing similar paths, reinforcing their connection to the college and shared purpose. Additionally, opportunities for apprenticeships or work-based learning in WBL 110 or major selection in ACA 122 helped students gain confidence and momentum in their academic and career journeys.

By equipping students with both personal and professional connections from the start Catawba Valley ensures a smoother transition into and through college. These efforts empower students to navigate their new chapter with confidence, laying the groundwork for academic and career success.

CULTIVATING AND ACTING ON ITERATIVE FEEDBACK

A cornerstone of Catawba Valley's onboarding redesign was the intentional cultivation of regular feedback from both students and staff, with a focus on continuous improvement. The college created multiple avenues for students to share their feedback, including in-person immediate feedback during new student orientation and through standard course evaluations at the end of the semester in ACA and WBL. This dual approach allowed leaders to capture both immediate and reflective feedback on the onboarding experience.

By acting quickly on feedback, Catawba Valley was able to make meaningful improvements. For example, after the first round of orientation, students indicated they would be more likely to attend if refreshments were available. In response, the college added snacks and beverages to subsequent sessions, resulting in increased attendance and engagement. This responsiveness reinforced the message that student input drives program improvement.

Catawba Valley also actively sought feedback from faculty and staff throughout the redesign process. This collaborative approach ensured that the perspectives of all stakeholders were incorporated into the development of new student success courses and orientation, fostering a sense of ownership and involvement across the college.

QUESTIONS FOR LEADERS ON STUDENT ONBOARDING DESIGN AND DELIVERY

- How can you make important student supports unavoidable without adding barriers for students? How might this benefit your incoming class? What are possible challenges to applying this on your campus?
- How can you address onboarding structures and processes – like Catawba Valley's hybrid model – to provide timely connection, information and resources to students when they need it?
- How do you incorporate an engaging delivery of the onboarding programming? In what ways are you personalizing student onboarding to be relevant to the changing student populations and helping them meet their academic and career goals?
- Consider the pathway that a new student takes when first engaging with your institution. How many opportunities are there for meaningful engagement with faculty, staff and other students? Is the institution providing ways for them to find connections with those working for the college?
- When embarking on the redesign of a program or the creation of a new one, how are you gathering insights from stakeholders? How are you closing the loop after feedback is collected to ensure they are affirmed?

ONBOARDING AS AN EXTENSION OF STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

Catawba Valley's comprehensive onboarding redesign is deeply rooted in its 2022-2027 strategic plan, which prioritizes student success through effective support services and data-driven decision-making. A central theme of the strategic plan is a commitment to excellence and delivering world-class service to students. This commitment directly informed the decision to focus on onboarding as a key component of the college's Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), a part of the college's reaccreditation, which was intentionally developed in parallel with college leaders' participation in the RCLP.

During a RCLP convening, leaders from several rural-serving institutions collaborated to develop actionable plans that would advance their institutions' strategic goals. At the same time, Catawba Valley's leadership was gaining valuable insights through their implementation of guided pathways.³ This confluence of strategic planning, a QEP focused specifically on student onboarding, and professional support through RCLP created a unique alignment that positioned Catawba Valley to overhaul its onboarding process. The college's new approach incorporated elements such as new student orientation, the development of guided pathways, and student success courses designed for both transfer students and those pursuing work-based learning opportunities.

By leveraging this momentum, Catawba Valley was able to operationalize its vision for a more effective and holistic onboarding process – one that aligns with both the institution's strategic priorities and the diverse needs of its student population. This strategic alignment not only ensured the success of the onboarding redesign but also set the stage for long-term improvements in student engagement, retention and success.

QUESTIONS FOR LEADERS ON ALIGNING STRATEGIC INITIATIVES:

- How can you critically evaluate your initiatives (i.e, strategic plan, QEP, grant-funded initiatives) to identify areas of alignment and opportunities to reimagine the student experience? How can these insights inform your institution's future strategic planning process to drive meaningful change?
- How can you align these initiatives with the strategic plan to faculty and staff so that changes are seen as part of the larger vision instead of discrete projects that may lead to initiative fatigue?
- How are you using data and goal setting to keep the plan moving forward?
- What opportunities currently exist for you and other executive leaders to share and adapt approaches, metrics or strategies with peer institutions?

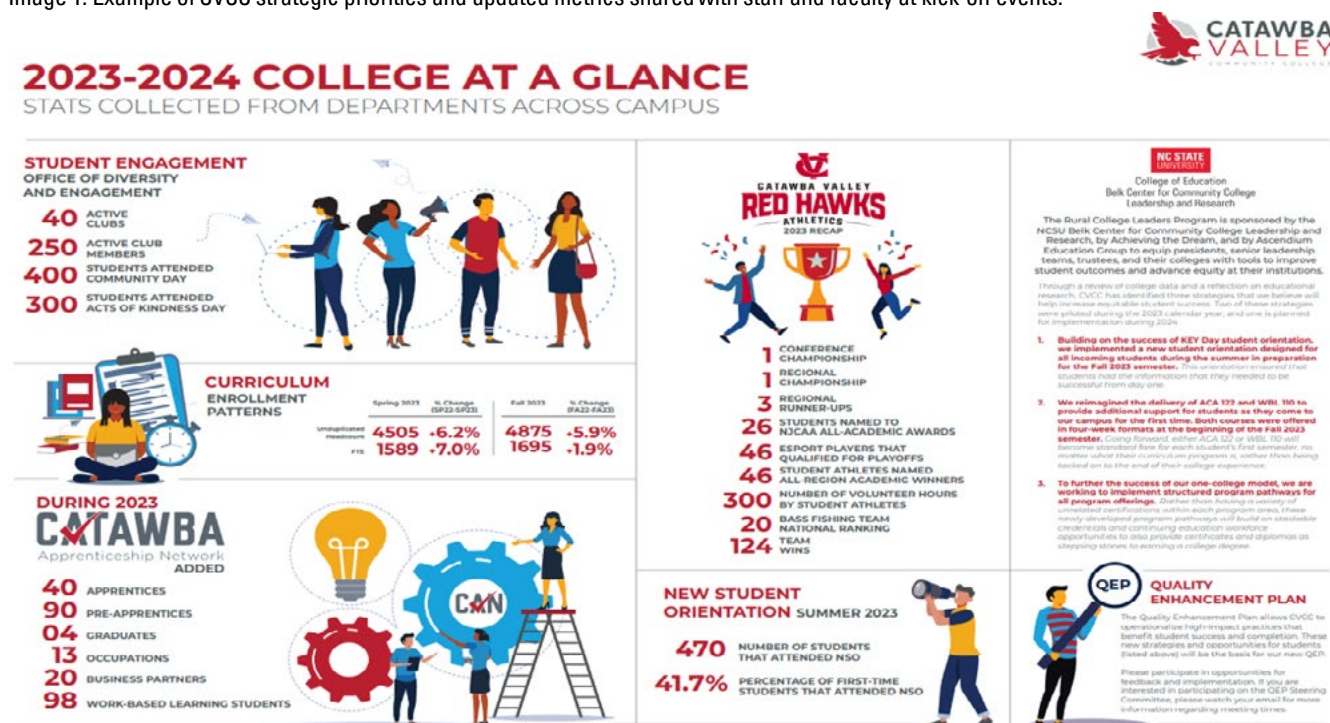


COMMUNICATING TO CAMPUS STAKEHOLDERS

Catawba Valley leaders prioritized clear and inclusive communication to ensure that everyone on campus – from leadership to students – was well-informed about the progress of their onboarding initiatives. Transparent communication throughout the redesign process was essential for engaging faculty and staff at all levels, emphasizing the need for collaboration across departments. This included the formation of cross-functional committees responsible for building the student success courses and orientation. By ensuring that faculty and staff expertise was included, Catawba Valley created an onboarding program that not only served students but also met the needs of the entire campus community.

Effective communication strategies also helped align staff with the college's strategic goals, keeping them informed about key objectives and progress. One of the most innovative approaches was the use of customized placemats that graphically represented the college's strategic goals and metrics. These visual tools, utilized at all-staff meetings and academic year kick-off retreats, highlighted the broader impact of student success across multiple areas, from academic achievements to student engagement in campus activities. The placemats not only clarified the strategic vision but also underscored the vital role that staff play in executing institutional change, fostering a culture of collaboration and buy-in across campus.

Image 1: Example of CVCC strategic priorities and updated metrics shared with staff and faculty at kick-off events.



QUESTIONS FOR LEADERS ON COMMUNICATING WITH STAKEHOLDERS:

- Catawba Valley created an innovative way to communicate their strategic goals and accomplishments – reminding stakeholders about the impact of their work and creating buy-in. How can you find ways to remind your campus of their goals and celebrate their progress? Thinking beyond social media and email, how can you quickly communicate in engaging ways?
- The college's communication strategy demonstrates their commitment to student success and staff engagement with the strategic plan. How has your institution created engagement with big goals through intentional communication?

CONCLUSION

College leaders find creative ways to address the specific challenges of their rural communities, leveraging structured support such as data coaching and executive team planning offered through the Rural College Leaders Program. This brief is part of a series that highlights strategic approaches – including [contextualizing core English classes](#) and [adjusting the length of course terms](#) – to improve student outcomes. Catawba Valley effectively employed innovative strategies and intentional decision-making to ensure that the onboarding process for new students fostered momentum toward degree attainment. By aligning onboarding changes with existing strategic initiatives, leaders promoted cohesion among staff and faculty, streamlined the process to make it more engaging for students, and communicated the importance of these efforts and their progress to both staff and students.

The college's strategic plan and QEP underscore their commitment to student success and spurred this redesign of new student onboarding. The engaging design was evident in the thoughtful planning of hybrid formats and seamless integration of orientation and student success courses. Their communication strategy was equally innovative, keeping stakeholders informed and engaged both during the transition and after the launch. As a result, student enrollment in curriculum programs has increased each academic year since Catawba Valley changed its student onboarding. Another metric Catawba Valley leaders have noticed is that student requests for on-site tech support have declined by 20% since the onboarding launch. Difficulty logging into learning platforms can be a frustrating barrier during the critical first few sessions of class, and are typically the main request received, and are often avoidable if information is effectively communicated before the semester begins. College leaders attribute this improvement to the significant focus on electronic student platforms (e.g., Outlook email, Blackboard LMS, Self-Service, etc.) and log-in procedures during New Student Orientation.

Altogether, Catawba Valley Community College demonstrates how a thoughtful redesign of onboarding – driven by institutional data, clear communication and responsiveness to student needs – can effectively improve student success.



Photo provide by EdNC.

ABOUT THE BELK CENTER

The Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research serves North Carolina's community colleges by convening leaders, creating tools and catalyzing social and economic mobility for learners. 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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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Colin W. Jones, Research Associate, Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research

Holley Nichols, Ph.D., Associate Director of Research and Evaluation, Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research

Sarah Deal, Ph.D., Director of Research, Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research

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ENDNOTES

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