

NC STATE UNIVERSITY

College of Education
Belk Center for Community College
Leadership and Research

ACADEMIC MOMENTUM IS BUILT – NOT ACCIDENTAL:

**Findings and Recommendations from Year One of the NC
Community Colleges Boost Implementation Study**



DECEMBER 2025



ABOUT THE BELK CENTER

As a trusted resource for North Carolina’s community college leaders, the Belk Center delivers actionable research and tailored leadership programming to advance college and student success. We support leaders at every stage of their careers, equipping them with timely insights and practical tools focused on improving the experiences and outcomes of their students. Our work is both nationally informed and deeply focused on North Carolina’s unique community college landscape. Drawing on this expertise and our strong relationships across the state, the Belk Center was selected as the research and evaluation partner for NC Community Colleges Boost.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT	4
METHODOLOGY AND SCOPE	5
KEY FINDINGS ACROSS SITES	6
RECOMMENDATIONS	12
CONCLUSION	14

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

In an effort to address North Carolina’s critical workforce needs, the North Carolina Community College System Office (System Office), in partnership with the City University of New York (CUNY) Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) Replication team and local college partners, developed the NC Community Colleges Boost Program. The Boost Program, generously funded by Arnold Ventures, is North Carolina’s statewide replication of the CUNY ASAP program, a nationally recognized and rigorously evaluated student support program. The program, launching at 15 colleges between 2025 and 2026, provides supportive and individualized advising, financial support for textbooks and supplies, career development programming and community building initiatives. Each college is responsible for recruiting up to 150 students pursuing eligible programs per year. In the fall of 2025, eight colleges—including two working together in a consortium—rolled out their respective Boost Programs.

The Boost team at the System Office has taken the lead as the state-level organizer, policy developer and administrator for the program across all participating colleges. In this role, they have adapted the CUNY ASAP model into specific policies and provided policy guidance to all colleges. They have also delivered initial and ongoing training and technical assistance, facilitated communication and support among Boost colleges as well as between the colleges and the System Office, and managed the grant funding in partnership with the North Carolina Community Colleges Foundation. Additionally, they have created processes and platforms to oversee tracking and reporting of student and program performance.



COHORT ONE - NC Community College Boost Institutions

Alamance Community College

Caldwell Community College and Technical Institute

Cape Fear Community College

Central Piedmont Community College

Cleveland Community College

Forsyth Technical Community College

Johnston Community College

Wake Technical Community College

METHODOLOGY AND SCOPE

The Belk Center was selected as the research and evaluation partner for Boost, and is conducting three complementary studies to understand the program’s creation and impacts, starting with an implementation study, followed by an educational impact study, and an economic costs and impact study. The following brief represents findings from the first stage of the implementation study¹, which is designed to gain an understanding of how the Boost Program is being implemented in North Carolina community colleges. While the Belk Center is studying the full lifespan of the program, this initial report examines how Boost was launched during the earliest months of program implementation.

The research team conducted site visits at eight community colleges in cohort one of the Boost Program. These hybrid site visits included at least three research team members from the Belk Center, as well as colleagues from EducationNC (EdNC) and the System Office; some visits also included a videographer collecting video footage of Boost students and staff. Visits consisted of a tour of various student services available on each campus for all visitors led by college administrators, after which the research team began their interviews with the Boost Program director and academic advisor, and a focus group with students participating in the program. Concurrently, representatives from EdNC commenced their media engagement with college leadership and System Office colleagues met with Boost staff.

The interviews collected for the evaluation were audio recorded and transcribed using Scribie. Some interviews were also video recorded in order to facilitate a mixed-media evaluation that captures participants’ voices, as well as their expressions, body language and appearance. After the interview data was transcribed, Belk Center researchers conducted a priori and inductive coding to analyze the data. The research team met regularly to talk about themes that were emerging during analysis. Additionally, our team designed this study to include a rapid feedback cycle, in which data would be efficiently collected and analyzed, and findings would be shared with the colleges and System Office in a timely fashion. As such, findings from each site visit were synthesized and reported in college-specific briefs that were provided to the colleges 10-13 weeks after their initial visit.

This brief contains key findings gleaned from all eight college sites, as well as recommendations focused on policy or procedures that are most relevant to the System Office.

KEY FINDINGS ACROSS SITES

Staffing

The staffing model for the Boost Program is characterized by dedicated, full-time personnel who manage the program and provide intensive support to students. In most cases, each participating community college employs a Boost director who is responsible for the overall implementation, operational management, budget oversight and compliance with the Boost model. The program also requires hiring dedicated academic advisors who are assigned a smaller caseload of 150 Boost students. This low ratio of students to advisor enables the advisors to meet with students frequently and address academic and personal barriers, ensuring students are meeting all of their requirements and staying on the path to graduation. As previously noted, two colleges are implementing the Boost Program together, as a consortium. Accordingly, these colleges share one Boost director, who oversees the program at both colleges but have their own academic advisors and a lower enrollment target of 190 students total, between the two colleges.

Notably, this model represents a shift in advising structures at many participating colleges, where faculty are tasked with academic advising responsibilities. Additionally, two colleges have adapted Boost to existing advising models and procedures. At these institutions, students have access to the Boost director, the Boost advisor/success coach², and additional advising and coaching staff.

Many Boost campuses felt behind on student recruitment due to late hiring timelines, with the best-positioned programs being those that filled Boost roles by selecting internal staff. At the time of our visits, all advisors and directors were in place, though some were only in their roles for a matter of days or weeks. Institutions attributed these delays in hiring to logistical challenges they encountered in getting the Boost funding, which led to delays in posting the positions. As such, about half of the advisors we spoke with were hired after the July 2025 Boost training put on by the North Carolina Community College System. Notably, those who attended the training indicated that they found it highly valuable, while those who did not, indicated a steep learning curve as they attempted to learn both new institutions and Boost program expectations. To be sure, the institutions that were most successful in establishing their programs and in early recruitment were those who made internal hires. Moving existing college staff into Boost roles ensured the advisor and director roles were filled quickly and that staff could hit the ground running, equipped with institutional knowledge.

Boost staff are doing incredible work across college units to facilitate recruitment and roll out.

Throughout our interviews, it was clear that for the program to successfully recruit students, provide them academic and career supports, and deliver their financial incentives as promised, Boost staff had to build relationships with a wide array of college units. Boost Directors and advisors worked closely and quickly to build relationships with colleagues across campus; most often mentioned were forging connections in the business office, bookstore, financial aid, TRIO and career services. While staff noted developing these relationships was time-intensive, they also indicated that doing so was important, as other units were often key to the success of various aspects of Boost—including

ensuring the textbook stipend could be used, getting support grants to students, and relying on other colleagues' expertise to deliver career development programming. Notably, only some campuses had made headway in building relationships with faculty across campus. Among those who did, faculty became a key source of referrals to the program, which helped meet recruitment targets. As such, we noted the importance of engaging faculty in intentional ways in our reports to individual colleges where appropriate.

Student Eligibility and Recruitment

The Boost staff within the System Office worked closely with the CUNY ASAP replication team to develop eligibility criteria for students to participate in Boost. These criteria were shared with college Boost staff members via training and in the policy guidebook. At the program's inception, students were eligible to participate in the program if:

- A. They were a North Carolina resident eligible for in-state tuition, per the NC Residency Determination Service
- B. They had a high school diploma or equivalency at the time of program entry
- C. They were eligible for the [Next NC Scholarship](#), a statewide financial aid program that combines federal Pell grants with state-funded financial aid to ensure that students from families earning less than \$80,000 a year have their tuition and fees completely covered.
- D. They were able to complete gateway math and English course requirements within their first year
- E. They had earned no more than 24 program-eligible credits upon acceptance to the program
- F. They were enrolled in a high demand, high wage degree program per the North Carolina Community College system's proposed funding model, Propel NC
- G. They maintain full-time momentum in enrollment (i.e., attempted at least 24 credits per year)

Modifying the financial eligibility criteria may require navigating practical and policy implications.

Initially, colleges were directed to only admit students to Boost who were Next NC Scholarship eligible and in specific degree programs aligned with Propel NC, the state's proposed funding model aimed at supporting high-demand, high-wage careers. However, these criteria proved to be too limiting and made recruitment difficult. Further, some college staff were finding students were Next NC eligible based on family income but were currently only receiving Pell grants. As such, with support from the System Office, all colleges pivoted to accepting students into Boost who received one or more of the following types of financial aid: the Next NC Scholarship, Pell grants, and/or veterans' benefits. This change allowed the program to be more accessible to more students who demonstrate financial need. However, at the program's inception, the Next NC Scholarship was selected as the key criterion for participation in Boost because its last-dollar design ensures that all tuition and fees are covered, effectively providing free college to eligible students. This free college model was thought, at the program's proposal, to both facilitate student recruitment and retention in the program and help make the case for long-term sustainability since all student tuition costs were

already being covered by the General Assembly through Next NC and Pell grants. By expanding eligibility for Boost to students who are Pell eligible but not Next NC eligible, some participating students may be responsible for covering some portion of their own tuition and fees, which may pose a barrier to continued enrollment and participation. Further, this shift toward broader eligibility may necessitate a larger recurring budget request to the General Assembly in future cycles to subsidize student tuition costs. As a first step, System Office staff may consider creating training or communication materials for Boost staff and financial aid staff at each college emphasizing the importance of getting eligible students enrolled in the Next NC Scholarship program.

Boost is unique in its intention to support North Carolina's workforce pipeline and current and future policy decisions should support this goal. The Boost program's proposed eligibility criteria also hinged on students being enrolled in a program linked to high-demand, high-wage careers aligned with North Carolina's proposed funding model, Propel NC. In addition, aspiring transfer students could participate in Boost if they were enrolled in an Associate in Arts, Associate in Science, or Associate in Engineering degree program aligned to higher-wage careers in the region. All colleges adhered to this program criteria, though one participating college chose to accept only STEM transfer students to their Boost program. While the System Office staff based their decisions for eligible transfer programs on North Carolina's workforce needs, it is worth noting that the inclusion of the Associate in Arts transfer degree may be less directly connected to high-demand, high-wage jobs in the state. In addition, allowing students to pursue degrees or short-term credentials beyond those in demonstrated high-demand, high-wage fields (i.e., Health Care, Engineering and Advanced Manufacturing, Trades and Transportation, Information Technology, and Public Safety and First Responders) may reduce Boost's direct connection to and impact on addressing pressing workforce needs.

Staff are leveraging data and technology tools for program recruitment but strategies with a personal touch have been most effective for enrolling students in the Boost Program. In order to streamline recruitment efforts, colleges were creatively leveraging data and reports run by their institutional effectiveness teams as well as using customer relationship management (CRM) platforms to narrow down eligible students and contact them. In particular, Element451, a CRM platform designed for higher education institutions, allowed the recruitment of students to be automated using labels based on eligibility. In the software, students who meet eligibility requirements for the Boost Program are labeled, which triggers an email to the student with a link to the Boost application. If the student completes the application, Boost staff are notified and follow up. However, the effectiveness of recruitment seemed to hinge on moving eligible students from passive interest to actual enrollment. While technology tools provide broad reach (e.g., mass emails, filtering), relying too heavily on automated contact may not capture the interest or attention of all eligible students. As we learned from our interviews, a strong personal connection is essential to build trust, dispel misinformation and motivate students to commit to a demanding program like Boost.

Colleges that were most successful with recruitment found that it was their in-person presence at registration days, campus events and in classrooms that yielded the most new applications. Specifically, this strategy of face-to-face recruitment helped dispel doubt surrounding the program's legitimacy, as some students believed Boost was "too good to be true" when they first heard about it.

Using the term "accelerated" when promoting the Boost Program can cause confusion. Students from several campuses mentioned that they were interested in the program because it was advertised as an "accelerated" program. As such, students believed that the Boost Program would allow them to finish their credentials early (i.e., within 12 to 18 months), rather than earlier relative to students who are not enrolled in Boost, as the advertising intended to convey. This misconception around the terminology was disappointing to students, and future implementation efforts may benefit from being more specific about the benefits to students.

Program Benefits

The Boost Program offers participating students a comprehensive package of financial, academic and personal support designed to facilitate their efficient degree completion and entry into the workforce. Financially, students benefit from having tuition and fees covered (primarily through the Next NC Scholarship), a stipend for textbooks (up to \$600 per year) and a \$100 monthly incentive for meeting program requirements. Academically, the core benefit is the dedicated academic advisor whose caseload does not exceed 150 students and provides intensive, one-on-one advising, ensuring students register for the right courses, get the tutoring and support services they need to maintain the required full-time course load, and have a clear plan to graduation and/or transfer. The Boost program also has a community-building component whereby Boost staff coordinate social events, block scheduling and other opportunities for students in the program to build a strong peer support network.

Close and caring relationships with the Boost advisor and director are some of the biggest draws for students. Nearly every student we spoke with highlighted the personal connection they had already built with their advisor, despite the fact that our visits occurred in the first few weeks of the term. For first-time students, many of whom were navigating an unfamiliar college environment and were anxious about finding trustworthy guidance, the advisor became an anchor: someone who checked in regularly, offered encouragement and helped them chart a clear path to completion. The Boost advisor also served as a beneficial new resource for returning students, who often described having previously met with overworked advisors who had limited time and rarely got to know them as individuals. For them, Boost's model of proactive, relationship-centered advising felt like a level of attention and genuine care they had not previously experienced. Across both groups, students emphasized that this sense of being known and supported was a defining feature of Boost and a key reason they applied and enrolled in the program, even above the financial benefits.

Access to student data poses challenges. Given Boost's specific eligibility criteria and the important role of the advisor in keeping students on track, access to student data and the systems to track

student success are essential. At a number of the campuses we visited, many Boost staff were working to clarify logistical challenges to access student data within their local student information systems and in ServiceNow, the platform managed by the System Office. At some colleges, due to existing campus policies, academic advisors do not have access to student grades and instead must rely on the students themselves to be forthcoming about grades or challenges in order to address any concerns about academic performance. While some advisors were confident in their ability to overcome this obstacle because of close relationships with their students, it should be noted that a lack of access to timely student grades will make it more difficult for advisors and students to be proactive in their approach to students' struggles before they become more difficult or impossible to address. In regard to ServiceNow, Boost staff reported navigating data access challenges when directors could both input and access student data, but advisors could only input data and did not have permissions to access or see the data in the platform.

Data access challenges were especially difficult at consortium colleges, where the Boost director may have access to the student data on the campus where they are stationed but not to the data on other colleges in the consortium, despite overseeing the Boost Program there.

Students are grateful for the financial supports offered through the Boost Program, and they benefitted most from honest, simple discussions of the financial benefits. Many students in our focus groups emphasized being grateful to be participating in a student support program that paid them for their engagement; however, others had less clarity or understanding of the financial benefits. For instance, one college advertised the funding on posters and signage as “bi-monthly,” which led some students to believe they would be paid an incentive twice a month. During our focus group other students explained that that meant every other month, but the procedure had changed and it was a monthly payment now; the signage advertising “bi-monthly” stipends was still in the student center at the time of our visit.

To be sure, we visited most colleges before the first student support grant was administered, but it was notable that at institutions where students had less awareness about the financial benefits, the Boost staff seemed to be unclear about the financial incentives as well. Specifically, there was a lack of clarity among Boost staff from most institutions surrounding when and how the money for textbooks and student stipends would be distributed, and from which source (i.e., Next NC, Boost, Pell) the funds would come. Several Boost staff felt they were unprepared to address students' questions about the financial incentives, and both directors and advisors indicated they had received conflicting information from their institutions' leadership, the System Office, or Boost staff members from other colleges about how the textbook support should be applied or the process to distribute stipends to students. More than one Boost staff member mentioned that at the time of our visit they just were not talking to students or advertising the financial benefits of the program because there was so much uncertainty around the specifics of how the funds would be distributed and what they could cover.

Conversely, some students also felt the advertising around the financial incentives was overstated. For example, several students expressed dismay about the Next NC Scholarship. Many misunderstood that the scholarship would cover their tuition separate and apart from their Pell grants or other funding. Others were directed to the Next NC calculator as part of the Boost recruitment process and the calculator indicated they would receive much more than the amount for which they were actually eligible. Despite being quoted three to five thousand dollars in funding, students said their actual Next NC Scholarship awards ranged from \$50 to a few hundred dollars. Another campus created signage that told students Boost stipends could cover childcare costs, resulting in an influx of students who expressed interest in free daycare. In reality, childcare is an expense students could choose to cover with their monthly Boost stipend.

Textbook support and monthly stipend not going as far due to logistical challenges of disbursement. Many Boost staff described the complexities in actually distributing the textbook supports and monthly stipends. While a few students we spoke with mentioned successfully using the textbook supports to buy lab kits or automotive shirts, in general, the textbook support was especially difficult for staff to effectively distribute and students to spend—due in part to the fact that many North Carolina community colleges have recently shifted to open educational resource (OER) platforms that provide most or all students at the college with free e-book versions of their textbooks. Some Boost students we spoke with indicated that they would prefer a hard copy of their textbook, but they were unable to use their Boost textbook assistance to purchase a physical textbook; due to their college’s implementation of OERs, their bookstores no longer stocked books. Further, because the funds were processed from the business office to the bookstore, they were unable to use the textbook support money for books from Amazon or other retailers. Other Boost staff and students indicated that since textbooks were covered, they wished the funds could be applied to computers, hotspots or other technology resources available in the bookstore that would help students be successful.

Distributing the monthly stipends was also logistically difficult, and these challenges affected the impact of the stipends. Many colleges were advised and encouraged to distribute their stipends through their institutional business office, which would cut students a paper check for pick up. This process was sometimes arduous for Boost and business office staff to establish, resulting in delays in payment to students. Beyond this, the paper checks presented difficulties as many students do not live near campus and may need transportation (that they sometimes must pay for) to get to campus to receive their check. Further, students without bank accounts had nowhere to deposit the check and were thus required to pay to get their check cashed. These additional hurdles reduced the overall impact the financial supports were able to provide, and in some cases proved entirely too much; many Boost staff reported having to destroy checks that students did not pick up or receive per their campus policies and procedures around unclaimed checks.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Find ways to communicate the full and accurate financial aid picture to students. The confusion among students regarding how their tuition would be paid, the monthly stipend, the textbook stipend, and whether Boost covered the costs of childcare added extra time and frustration to recruitment efforts. To clarify these aspects of the program for students and staff, consider creating a clear, student-friendly document that indicates: Next NC eligibility and how it is calculated and applied, what the Boost textbook and supplies stipends can be used for (including concrete examples), and the process by which monthly stipends are disbursed and when students can expect to receive them. As policies and procedures for the Boost program financial incentives evolve, documents should be designed and advertised as “living documents,” that will be regularly updated.

Create and/or inform protocols and strategies to ensure the right people have access to advising technology and data. Boost staff across campuses had varying levels of access to student data via both internal platforms and ServiceNow. System Office staff may be able to help Boost colleges think through and create strategies that focus on data utility and system integration to empower advisors. Specifically at colleges where advisors do not have access to student grades, the System Office should work with those advisors and directors to think creatively about how Boost staff can be proactive in identifying and mitigating student academic struggle. Perhaps developing a standard script that all Boost advisors can use, or a current grade pulse survey students could complete at a semi-regular cadence. To be sure, both ideas still rely on student reports, but they are aimed at creating frequent informal check-ins to build trust and help advisors get some access.

Further, student data sharing is an especially important consideration for future consortia in cohort two, as consortium colleges in cohort one faced unique challenges with inter-campus data access. While Boost staff and college leaders in the consortium were working to establish a data sharing memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the campuses at the time of our visit, the lack of access and the process to get it was frustrating for all involved. The System Office may be able to initiate conversations around data access and sharing earlier and encourage the development of an MOU.

Expand textbook supports to be more accessible. The textbook support aspect of the Boost Program is an incredible resource, but current policies and other programs are minimizing the effect the textbook support can have. Working with the funders to widen the scope of eligible items students are allowed to spend the textbook support funds on would be beneficial. Specifically, including computers, hotspots and other technology would more effectively support students whose textbooks are already covered by other existing open educational resource (OER) programs, but who still demonstrate financial need for other resources. While it may be more administratively complex, setting aside textbook funds that students can use to purchase physical books from other retailers—especially when campus bookstores no longer stock them—may better support students’ academic

success. Further, since a large number of colleges have built in OERs to provide students with textbooks, the System Office might consider a policy change that reduces the textbook support funding and expands the student support grant funding.

Facilitate continuous training and development opportunities for advisors and directors to both learn and build community. Boost staff would likely benefit from continuous professional development for both advisors and directors, perhaps through a Professional Learning Community (PLC). This effort would not only support the development of Boost program staff in their skills and competencies but would also build and strengthen community across staff from the participating colleges. Boost staff come from a wide variety of backgrounds and levels of experience, and much of their expertise could be leveraged to support their peers at other colleges. For instance, Boost staff we met with had already created strong templates and handbooks that other cohort one—and later, especially cohort two colleges—could benefit from. Additionally, program-to-program recommendations about successful recruitment strategies including messaging and engaging with key partners on campus like faculty and admissions staff may facilitate program rollout and help troubleshoot recruitment challenges. A PLC could also provide support for the creation of a digital resource hub, formalize peer-to-peer mentoring programs that pair experienced staff with new hires and host regular inter-college convenings.

Clarify program marketing and reduce use of “accelerated” descriptor. Consider updating standardized marketing protocols and materials for the Boost Program to ensure consistency across all sites. Specifically, materials must clearly and honestly delineate the details around financial incentives, separating federal financial aid from other direct aid. Doing so will support staff members’ understanding and ensure they are equipped to explain the program’s financial benefits to students, including what the benefits are, how to access them and what they will cover—setting realistic student expectations and preventing overstatement or understatement of the financial benefits of the program. Furthermore, the unintentionally misleading descriptor “accelerated” should be minimized and could be replaced with clearer language, such as “A clear roadmap to graduation” or “A degree in four semesters” that more accurately reflects the program’s benefits or timeline to reduce student confusion.

CONCLUSION

In sum, the insights gathered across the eight Boost community college site visits during the first fall of implementation underscore both the remarkable progress unfolding on campuses, as well as some challenges that limit students' ability to fully access and benefit from available supports. While it was clear that each Boost college operates within its own local context, across the board, we saw a shared commitment to improving student success, a growing capacity for cross-departmental collaboration, and a clear need for stronger infrastructure to sustain and scale effective practices. Taken together, these findings point toward strategic opportunities for the NC Community College System Office to strengthen guidance, streamline processes, enhance data use and promote more consistent implementation across institutions. By advancing these recommendations, the System Office can help ensure that colleges are better equipped to meet students' academic, financial and social-emotional needs, and that the promising innovations seen across the Boost sites translate into positive, long-term student outcomes statewide. Furthermore, the evidence collected on successful practices and implementation hurdles will be critical in developing a playbook for future CUNY ASAP replication efforts. These findings are essential to support Boost's expansion across the state with cohort two colleges rolling out their programs in 2026, but also for informing other community college systems or states that seek to replicate this high-touch success model.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The implementation study received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from NC State University (protocol number 28194).
- ² At one college, the Boost staffer in this role is explicitly a "success coach" and not an advisor based on the college's existing advising model and division of responsibilities.