



BELK CENTER FELLOWS PROGRAM INNOVATIONS CONFERENCE

**THE LEAGUE FOR INNOVATION IN
THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE**

AUGUST 2025

NC STATE UNIVERSITY
College of Education
Belk Center for Community College
Leadership and Research



INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

NC State's Community College Leadership program, housed within the College of Education, provides doctoral students with hands-on learning opportunities to engage with national leaders shaping the future of community colleges through the Belk Center Fellows Program. In its seventh year, the Belk Center Fellows Program recruits and selects doctoral students interested in engaging with renowned organizations focused on community colleges, to attend the League for Innovation in the Community College's annual Innovations Conference.

Since its inception in the 2017-2018 academic year, the Fellows Program has helped empower a new generation of leaders to explore best practices in community college education. Originally launched with a cohort attending Achieving the Dream's DREAM Conference, the program expanded in 2019-2020 to include participation in the League's Innovations Conference – an event that brings together educators, administrators and thought leaders to explore actionable strategies and innovations that improve learning and advance student success.

This year, seven doctoral students were selected to participate as League Fellows: Kerri Donohue, Beth Bockoven, Jennifer Wisely, Jennifer Campbell, Tonya Greene, Elizabeth Ham and Aaron Mabe – all of whom were selected based on their strong academic and professional backgrounds, and their commitment to community college leadership and research. With a wide range of professional experiences, fellows ranged from science and business instructors, to academic advisors, directors and educational non-profit leaders. With a variety of perspectives and backgrounds, the fellows enriched the program and highlighted the importance of all areas of postsecondary education, such as teaching and learning, workforce development and Artificial Intelligence (AI).

Attendees described the 2025 Innovations Conference as stimulating, immersive and progressive. All reflected that the League produced an event that was collaborative among academic experts, thought leaders and practitioners.

Fellows had the opportunity to engage Dr. Rufus Glasper, president and CEO of the League in a conversation to learn more about his role and ask questions relating to community colleges. Four of the Fellows also participated in optional conference tracks, including the Presidents' Track and Vice Presidents' Track – exposing them to key conversations such as board relations and leadership during the AI boom.

The following report includes League Fellows Op-Ed pieces. Designed for fellows to express their viewpoint on specific educational issues that arose during their time at the Innovations Conference, the following are opinion pieces written to challenge perspectives and spark thoughtful reflection.

MEET THE 2025 INNOVATIONS CONFERENCE ATTENDEES



KERRI DONOHUE

Kerri Donohue is a full-time biology instructor at Fayetteville Technical Community College. Prior to this role, she spent nearly a decade teaching science at other higher education institutions and at science museums and aquariums. Passionate about science education and helping individuals reach their goals in the field, her research focuses on teaching and learning in STEM fields, with an emphasis on professional development for STEM educators.



BETH BOCKOVEN

Beth Bockoven is an educator and lifelong learner with expertise in biology, conservation and science education. Since becoming a community college instructor in 2016, she has focused on student success by organizing NCSciFest participation, establishing a Super Science Speaker Series and securing grants for field equipment to enhance biology labs. Her initiatives reflect her passion for experiential science education and inspiring students to explore STEM careers.



JENNIFER WISELY

Jennifer Wisely joined Coastal Carolina Community College in 2017 as an instructor in the business program, where she found her passion for teaching and empowering others. Her dedication earned her recognition as one of the 2024 Educators of the Year and the Edgar J. and Ethel B. Boone Adult and Community College Leadership Award from NC State College of Education. Currently pursuing her doctorate in Community College Leadership, Wisely is passionate about the transformative work of community colleges. Her research and advocacy focuses on the often-overlooked experiences of military spouses.



JENNIFER CAMPBELL

Jennifer Campbell began her career in higher education at Guilford Technical Community College. In 2022, she accepted a position at Davidson Davie Community College where she serves as an academic advisor for transfer students, coordinates study hall and academics for student-athletes and works as a part-time faculty member teaching transfer students. In 2023-2024, Campbell completed the Advising Leadership Academy with the North Carolina Community College System. In 2024, she planned and hosted Davidson Davie's virtual graduation information sessions and graduation fair. Her dissertation research focuses on single-mother community college students and what motivates them to graduate.



TONYA GREENE

Tonya Greene leads the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at Wake Technical Community College. In that role, she directs efforts in evidence-based teaching and learning practices and academic leadership, focusing on enhancing faculty development and student success. Among her key achievements at Wake Tech are the launch of the First Year Academy and the advancement of comprehensive faculty professional learning programs. Her research explores the engagement of Career and Technical Education faculty with professional development programs and their effects on faculty retention and job satisfaction.



ELIZABETH HAM

Elizabeth Ham is an education designer at Education Design Lab. In that role, she works with community colleges nationwide to create micro-pathways that promote learner success and build talent pipelines to meet evolving workforce demands. Her work focuses on designing sustainable educational solutions that connect education with industry using human-centered design principles. Prior to joining the lab, Ham gained experience in data-driven research and hands-on teaching, providing authentic instruction and support to students and colleagues at various levels.



AARON MABE

Aaron Mabe has worked in higher education for more than 10 years, and currently serves as the State Director of Dual Enrollment at the North Carolina Community College System Office, supporting the state's Career and College Promise, Perkins V Career and Technical Education programs. Prior to this role, he worked at various community colleges in eastern North Carolina, most recently serving as the director of student success at Fayetteville Technical Community College.



CONSIDERING THE FUTURE: TEACHING AT THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

KERRI DONOHUE

As a biology faculty member at a community college, I was quite excited for the opportunity to attend the League for Innovation in the Community College's Innovations Conference in San Antonio, Texas. My main goals in attending were to explore trends in science education, and to learn from people as invested in community colleges and their students' success as I am. Throughout the conference, I followed the teaching and learning track to determine what others in the field were doing to improve the learning experience for their students. Fast-paced change was the biggest takeaway for me, as I look to what I may experience in my career just within the next five or ten years.

Today's community colleges look different than they did when I was a community college student back in the early 2000s. I have never heard more about workforce development than I have heard in the past two years. Shorter semesters were previously only for summer with the school year being 16-week semesters. Credentials? What are they? And AI, don't even get me started. It was fascinating – and a bit scary to be honest – to hear about all the changes and new avenues people are focusing on. However, it's also exciting. If the definition and/or pathway of student success is shifting, then we must shift with it. Stepping outside the silo of my own institution left me feeling both inspired and uneasy as I considered the next steps for growth in my own classrooms.. All of this while remembering to look at the big picture of where higher education is heading.

Higher education, and how we view it, is far different now than it was even just pre-pandemic, and now AI has come into the picture to shake it up even more. New apps, gamification, online learning strategies and readings on active learning were all noted during this conference so that I may try to keep reflecting on and revising how I teach. It was great to be part of conversations where fellow educators were speaking about trying out new grouping strategies in their classes or handling terminology that is divisive in

this political climate, but really shouldn't be. Each resource or strategy shared was based on what we all care about, student success. At times I was inspired, challenged and just enjoyed speaking to other educators and getting ideas to bring into my own classroom. I plan to keep trying new methods in my classroom, with intentionality, that work for my students and to not be afraid to change how I view education. It will change anyway.

Beyond trying new methods, I also plan to share this work with my fellow science faculty members. I believe we should be supported when trying out the new pedagogical strategies required to keep up with all these fast-paced changes. Learning new methods takes time, reflection and revision. I also appreciated when educators shared the things they had tried that didn't work in these new innovations. This allowed all of us to learn from one another so that we may keep building and moving forward with these new evidence-based ideas. This is an important reminder of how to handle the revision and reflection practice that is vital to enhancing one's pedagogical skills.

With the rate of change we are seeing in the higher education classroom, it was important to see several sessions focused on strategies for how to build a framework that allows for mistakes, growth and leadership with a core guiding principle. This is what I envision bringing to my department so that we may all work on this challenge together and not only build our own self-efficacy as educators, but bring what students need in this new world to the classroom. With all the business of life and many responsibilities our students have, pulling them into an engaging, relevant classroom will only aid in their learning journey and address the needs of the future. Now is the time to fully step out of our comfort zones and trust that as educators, we can handle this challenge.



INNOVATE WITH BIOPHILIA

BETH BOCKOVEN

As a doctoral student in NC State University's Community College Leadership program, I recently attended the League for Innovations in the Community College conference as a Belk Center Fellow. My research focuses on engaging community college students in STEM and I was eager to hear discussions at the national level. I did not anticipate hearing about the role biophilia plays in STEM engagement. As a STEM practitioner, educator and biophilia believer, I was thrilled.

Biophilia is studied by psychologists, biologists and social ecologists. Through these interdisciplinary scholars, biophilia is understood as a human "love of life," innate connection to nature and state of happiness when connected to nature. Biophilia has implications for the human relationship with our world as well as for human mental health. Biophilia can be part of connections.

The keynote address hit us with biophilia right from the start. Walter Parkes, Dreamscape Learn chairman and co-founder, presented an immersive learning experience where students at Arizona State University use a virtual reality pod to learn biology concepts through an alien zoo. Students not only connected with the impressive technology, but also with the cinematic narrative that led them through animal biology and ecology. A pilot study reported positive impacts on student learning. As innovative and eye-popping as the technology was in conjunction with moving the needle on student success in STEM, it gave me pause.

Within this pause, I wondered about the use of the word "immersive." Has immersive learning been hijacked by technology innovators? Merriam-Webster, that bastion of definitions, defines immersive as 'providing, involving or characterized by deep absorption or immersion in something (such as an activity or a real or artificial environment).' Therefore, students can have an immersive experience without a virtual reality pod. We already have access to immersive experiences for students that do not require expensive technology.

I completely understand some of the advantages of this technology, however, let's not disregard what is around us – our own world.

In contrast to immersion in an artificial environment, STEM educator Bryan Beck shared through roundtable discussion and a presentation, his immersive student learning experience – prairie restoration. Beck is a community college professor teaching environmental science to dual enrolled students, who actively immerses students in environmental science through a prairie restoration project on their high school campus. Students are not only learning environmental science concepts – they're putting them into practice. In addition, they learn about their local community and the role of the prairie in the historical and cultural landscape. Their immersion is interdisciplinary, relevant to lived experiences and deeply connected to place.

It is time to think about our connection to the real natural environment for community college student learning. Dr. Mary Spilde, director at the League for Innovation in the Community College, and the closing speaker for the conference, urged us to be leaders every day – and everywhere – at all levels of the community college ecosystem. Let's get students outside the classroom and connected to nature for STEM engagement within their local communities. I challenge you to think about local, state and national parks, nature centers, zoos, aquariums and science museums near your community college. These entities exist near both urban and rural community colleges.

Immersive experiences with nature – whether indoors at science museums or outdoors at nature centers, zoos and parks – are often urged and implemented in K-12 settings. Yet, this practice is not widely discussed throughout the national community college landscape. There is very little in the research literature regarding community college student learning in nature-based environments and informal science education venues, suggesting significant room for innovation.

Dr. Rufus Glasper, League president and CEO, commented in personal communication when asked about innovations for student engagement in STEM, “I think we need to get out of the classroom.” Now, we can get out of the classroom and into a myriad of diverse work environments, however, I am suggesting the natural environment and places that promote the natural environment, provide a powerful platform for immersive, experiential, hands-on learning that connects community college students to STEM. Our nation’s parks, forests, wildlife refuges, zoos, science museums, nature centers and aquariums are all

potential places of work and potential career pathways for students. Research consistently shows that a sense of belonging fosters student engagement and success. Fostering a student sense of belonging to learning through biophilia, our human connection to life and the world around us, can lead to joy in learning. At the conference, the closing speaker challenged us to write our education story in six words. I wrote “Joy in learning leads to belonging.” If we want to strengthen STEM pathways for community college students, let us embrace biophilia and immerse students in the real world around them.



MICROCREDENTIALS AT COMMUNITY COLLEGES: INNOVATION OR ADDED CONFUSION?

JENNIFER M. WISELY

After attending several sessions on microcredentials during the 2025 Innovations Conference, one nagging question remained: If I, as a community college educator and doctoral student, struggled to grasp the nuances of microcredentials—how they work, how they are awarded and how they are tracked and recognized—then what must our students be feeling? I attended sessions within the Workforce Preparation and Development track because I recognized it as an area where I had the most room to grow. This became especially clear after several sessions focused on a topic entirely new to me: microcredentials. Initially, the idea of offering smaller, stackable learning units that demonstrate specific competencies struck me as a modern, flexible solution to workforce preparation. However, as I attended more sessions in hopes of better understanding them, confusion set in.

Community colleges serve a diverse population, with many adult learners returning to education after being away from the classroom for years. One commonly [cited barrier](#) to enrollment or persistence is confusion about the higher education process. The introduction of microcredentials, while well-intentioned, could add another layer of complexity to an already daunting landscape. In one session, a presenter discussed how microcredentials could be earned independently or

integrated into a course through video-based modules, each tied to a specific skill set, such as collaboration or critical thinking. While the flexibility sounded appealing, I found myself wondering: Who verifies the competency? Is there a capstone or demonstration of skill? And if the credential lives on a digital badge, how do students know where and how to present it to employers or other institutions?

These concerns become even more pronounced when considering transient populations, such as military-connected students and their families; for them, portability is essential. Credit transfer has long been a barrier to success for military-affiliated students, particularly military spouses, who often deal with the frustration of previously earned credits not being accepted at a new institution after a move, resulting in lost time, money and motivation. Introducing microcredentials into this already fragmented system raises additional questions: Will these credentials be recognized across state lines? Will they be accepted by other colleges or employers? During these sessions, I heard few concrete answers about the interstate recognition or transferability of microcredentials. Without consistent standards and communication across institutions and state lines, microcredentials risk becoming institutional novelties—valuable within their issuing college and region but misunderstood or disregarded elsewhere.

From an employer's perspective, the value of a microcredential lies in its clarity and credibility. However, if there is no universal standard or shared understanding of what each badge or credential represents, employers may overlook them altogether, thereby undermining their purpose. Furthermore, one of the most persistent barriers to meaningful employment is the widespread requirement of prior experience. It's a frustrating paradox: individuals need experience to get a job, but they need a job to gain experience. This becomes a significant obstacle for many community college students, particularly adult learners seeking a career change or transitioning service members.

Instead of layering on more video modules, online assessments or digital badges, we could focus on creating more opportunities for students to gain real-world experience. Internships, apprenticeships, job shadowing and cooperative education programs enable students to apply their learning in real-world settings and provide them with the practical experience employers seek. These hands-on experiences make learning tangible, help students build confidence and bridge the gap between education and employment in ways that microcredentials alone cannot.

That said, I believe the concept of microcredentials holds great potential. In theory, they align with the evolving demands of the workforce and can serve as quick pathways to employment. As is often the case

in higher education, the challenge lies not in the idea itself but in the lack of coordination and transparency across systems. We must not forget that students are at the heart of our work. In our effort to innovate, we must avoid unintentionally increasing the cognitive or bureaucratic load on the very people we aim to support.

If community colleges are to move forward with microcredentialing, we must do so deliberately. This means embedding credentialing within guided pathways, aligning them with industry standards, ensuring portability across systems and providing advisors who can help students understand the value of their credentials. We must also listen to our students, surveying them regularly to assess whether these offerings are helping or hindering their progress.

As community colleges continue exploring the role of microcredentials, we must move forward with both empathy and a clear sense of purpose. Microcredentials have real potential, but only if implemented thoughtfully and with students in mind. It will take collaboration among educators, administrators and policymakers to create consistent systems across institutions and states. Our students deserve more than innovation for innovation's sake; they deserve something that genuinely supports their goals. That means providing them with a clear, meaningful path built on transparency, reliability and real opportunities.



IT'S TIME FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGES TO INNOVATE – AND AI CAN HELP

JENNIFER L. CAMPBELL

While waiting for my flight at the airport, I sat down and took out my notebook to jot down some notes. I realized that there were very few clean pages left. I flipped through the pages and saw how the information flooded them. Over the years since working in higher education, I have attended many conferences of all calibers. However, the Innovations Conference offered something that others have not in the past. There's nothing like anticipating attending a conference with

high expectations and inspiration, only to be let down by sessions focusing solely on theory. We can't take theory back to our institutions. We could, but what good would that do? Community colleges need change, not theory. In my mind, the pages and pages of notes from attending this four-day conference were filled with applicable notions that included actionable ideas and concepts I anticipated applying at my institution.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) reshapes higher education by streamlining processes, customizing instruction and refining administrative systems. At the conference, words such as “innovation,” “change,” “adapt,” “immerse” and “transformational” were repeatedly used. This allowed me to envision the bigger picture: Change is sitting here, looking us right in the eyes, waiting to see if we are ready to accept it. To progress and evolve, community colleges must move beyond the mindset of “we’ve done it this way for a long time” and acknowledge that AI inclusion is a fundamental necessity and a critical piece of applicable education in a quickly changing technological environment.

As an academic advisor and community college instructor, I am always interested in new approaches and innovative concepts for students. Attending multiple sessions about AI use in higher education at the conference was most intriguing. AI is undoubtedly the technology of the times – our students are using it, so why do we, as educators, frown upon it so much? As innovators, it’s our responsibility to prepare our students for the future, and that means embracing the tools that are shaping how we teach and connect with them. For centuries, we have said, “We must meet the students where they are.” In doing that, I learned at the Innovations Conference that we must be willing to learn, engage and apply these new concepts of AI use in our instruction, planning and leadership.

This made me reflect on my role as a part-time community college instructor, and the fact that my syllabus states that AI use is strictly prohibited. After attending the Innovations Conference, I quickly realized that this approach is flawed and will likely lead to a division between me and my students. The conference taught me that the ideal approach for a community college instructor is to plan lessons that incorporate proper AI use, enabling me to teach my students effectively. AI can effectively enhance students’ experiences by adopting a more relational approach, which is particularly needed on college campuses.

Teaching students proper AI use can help prepare

them for workplaces where these tools are already standard. Instructors should incorporate lessons that show students how to fact-check information given through AI instead of prohibiting its use, as I previously did. Students should be guided on when AI use is appropriate vs. inappropriate, which will allow for overall student success. Essentially, instructors should redesign their student evaluation design from easily AI-replicable assignments to meaningful assessments that involve true critical thinking that AI cannot alter.

As an academic advisor, I recognize various ways AI can enhance student support while freeing more time for meaningful social connections between advisors and their advisees. For instance, AI can assist advisors in developing customized degree plans, allowing them to concentrate more on building relationships with their advisees. AI tools can also support advisors by informing them about changing program requirements and ensuring consistent messaging. Lastly, AI can help advisors with tasks such as appointment scheduling.

When the focus at community colleges shifts from viewing students as merely a tuition number to seeing them as regular people with unique and varied stories and aspirations, we can better learn to build relationships. This approach, deeply grounded in compassion and respect, fosters student success. Attending the Innovations Conference challenged my thinking as both an instructor and an academic advisor on using AI technologies. By leading students in trustworthy AI use, I can give them appropriate tools that will help them take part in more interactive, mindful learning.

The League for Innovation in the Community College Conference aims to help community college leaders, instructors and staff discover new ways to reach their students. Integrating AI and developing concepts similar to “Caring Campus” are two strong ways community colleges can become innovative and adapt to the current times.



CHANGING MENTAL MODELS: REIMAGINING FACULTY LEARNING FOR THE FUTURE OF WORK

TONYA GREENE

Attending the League for Innovation in the Community College's 2025 Innovations Conference was inspiring—but also a wake-up call. The conference, which centered on reimagining teaching, learning and leadership in a rapidly evolving world, challenged us to think differently about the future of faculty and student success.

Research across K–12 and higher education confirms that strong professional development enhances student engagement and outcomes. When faculty grow through meaningful, student-centered learning, students benefit—through greater engagement, stronger performance and a deeper sense of belonging. But as workforce demands and student expectations evolve, traditional models of professional development will no longer suffice. To stay relevant and impactful, we must rethink how we support faculty—so students are ready for the jobs of tomorrow.

The sessions I attended focused on innovation in teaching and learning, and one thing became clear: the role of faculty is changing—and it must. With shifts in funding models, rapid advances in technology and evolving workforce expectations, we can no longer rely on the same approaches to teaching or faculty support. It's time to rethink how we onboard, develop and empower faculty to meet the needs of today's "new majority" students—those balancing work, family and school while seeking direct pathways to meaningful careers.

One of the biggest takeaways for me was that traditional methods of preparing faculty are no longer enough. [Employers are seeking more than degrees](#)—they want graduates who can think critically, collaborate effectively, adapt to change and navigate AI-driven workplaces. To meet these demands, curriculum must align with emerging technologies and the skills required in the 21st-century workforce. The conventional model of earning credit through seat time is shifting toward one focused on demonstrated skill mastery. For our students to thrive, faculty need meaningful support to teach in ways that build those essential competencies.

So how do we support faculty in this new reality?

We need to move beyond one-size-fits-all professional development. Instead, we should offer flexible, relevant and accessible learning pathways—opportunities that allow faculty to grow at their own pace and on their own terms. These could include self-paced modules, open-access content and recognition through digital badges or microcredentials that validate faculty learning in real time.

But more importantly, we need to reimagine what it means to be a faculty member. Imagine a curriculum faculty practitioner who brings both disciplinary expertise and real-world industry experience—someone who co-teaches with an employer partner or engages in a short-term externship to bring fresh, practical insights into the classroom. These models help students connect course content to career realities while helping faculty stay current and energized in their teaching.

Just as we're redesigning career pathways for students, we need to apply that same level of innovation to faculty development. That means giving instructors the tools and experiences to make learning relevant and inspiring—linking lessons to career stories, industry examples and hands-on opportunities that build student confidence and career readiness.

In North Carolina, where 58 community colleges serve diverse regions across the state, we face both a challenge and an opportunity. Access to resources and industry partnerships isn't always equal, especially in rural communities—but we already have a powerful tool in place: the statewide [Teaching and Learning Hubs](#). These Hubs offer scalable, sustainable professional learning for full- and part-time faculty. By building stronger connections between the Hubs and regional industry partners, we can create just-in-time training, support faculty in developing career-connected content and expand experiential learning for students.

We can also strengthen regional communities of practice that bring educators and employers together

to co-design curriculum, share resources and build bridges between instruction and workforce needs. These partnerships can help level the playing field—both for faculty and for students—across the state.

At the end of the day, our mission is to help students succeed—and that means offering more than content. We must give them context, confidence and the ability to apply what they learn in the real world. To do that, we must support our faculty in new ways. That means investing not just in pedagogy, but in professional relevance and innovation.

If we continue to rely on outdated models of faculty development, we risk falling behind. But if we choose to lead—by rethinking what faculty need, building stronger industry ties and creating accessible, engaging professional learning—we can keep our institutions at the forefront of student success and community impact.

This is our moment to shift—not just in practice, but in mindset. The choice is ours.



**“WE MUST TAKE PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE
AND CARRY THEM AS FAR AS THEY CAN GO.”**
ELIZABETH HAM

W. Dallas Herring, known as the “Father of the North Carolina Community College System,” was a visionary leader dedicated to expanding educational opportunities for all North Carolinians. Born in Rose Hill, N.C., he championed technical and vocational education, emphasizing accessibility regardless of background or socioeconomic status (James Sprunt Community College, 2020). His philosophy of “total education” promoted lifelong learning, workforce development and the integration of trade and academic instruction. Herring’s grassroots approach helped establish North Carolina’s community colleges as a cornerstone of the state’s economic and educational progress. His legacy endures as community colleges continue to uphold his belief that they should “take people from where they are and carry them as far as they can go.”

While I have heard this quote many times in the context of the Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research (Belk Center) at NC State and the North Carolina Community College System, I realized this week that Herring’s vision of learner-centered experiences and the role of community colleges in supporting economic and academic mobility is more important than ever.

As a Belk Center Fellow at the 2025 Innovations Conference, it became clear that community colleges nationwide urgently need a paradigm shift. The current structures, systems, processes and policies supporting these institutions are no longer effective. Higher education is resistant to change and is struggling because of the prioritization of prestige and profit over student success and job readiness. Rising costs, growing debt and a disconnect from the job market have eroded trust, making college feel more like a risk than a path to a better future (Lumina, 2024). In response, we must lead the change we want to see. To transform our institutions for the learners of tomorrow, we must lead with passion, resilience, clarity and purpose.

THE CURRENT LANDSCAPE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The landscape of higher education and the workforce continues to change rapidly because of technological advancements, shifting demographics, evolving public policies and changing employer needs (Levine & Van Pelt, 2021; Ellingrud, 2024; Melhorn, et al, 2023). Despite these challenges, projections indicate significant growth in “good jobs,” defined as occupations paying at least \$43,000 annually for workers aged 25–44 and \$55,000 for those aged

45–64, offering economic stability and upward mobility for the American workforce (Strohl, et al, 2024, p. 14). According to the [Future of Good Jobs Report](#) (2024), the number of “good jobs” is expected to increase by 15.2 million, with a rising share of these jobs accessible through various educational pathways, from high school to bachelor’s degrees by 2031. However, access to the highest-paying roles will increasingly depend on postsecondary education and training.

While this is positive news for the modern workforce, a [2025 SHEEO survey](#) reveals that higher education leaders still have ongoing concerns. Specifically, economic and workforce development was revealed as a [top policy priority](#) for three years in a row. SHEEO defines economic and workforce development as the strategic alignment of education with job market needs to create a skilled workforce and drive economic growth. This includes expanding access to degrees, certificates and industry-recognized credentials to meet the demand for skilled workers. By creating clear pathways from education to employment, these efforts strengthen local economies and help individuals advance in their careers (2025, p.9).

Community colleges are essential in training current and future workers, addressing workforce shortages and preparing for shifting job demands (Young-Babb, 2023). As technology reshapes industries, aligning workforce development with regional economic strategies is crucial to equipping workers with the skills needed to adapt and succeed (Nzau & Palmer, 2024). Community colleges must adapt to serve as a better bridge between workforce demands and learners.

SKILLS-BASED PATHWAYS AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR TRANSFORMATION

By learning from leaders nationwide who are addressing this real-world challenge, I recognize that skills-based pathways with stackable credentials provide learners with a clear entry into the workforce and continuous educational opportunities. Aligning credentials with employer needs and actively engaging industry partners can strengthen the credibility of learners’ skills in the job market. However, ensuring a strong return on investment for learners, employers and institutions remains a challenge—one that requires intentional collaboration and strategic policy development to maximize impact.

TAKE PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE...

To help learners reach their full potential, we must recognize that each individual’s educational journey begins at a different starting point. Community colleges serve a varied population across race, gender, age, identity and economic background. By recognizing that not all students fit the traditional mold of who a learner “should” be, we can step back and see the full

picture of those we actually serve. As educators, it is our responsibility to support both traditional students and the new majority learner—defined by Education Design Lab as anyone for whom college was not originally designed.

The 2025 Innovations Conference highlighted how community colleges can adapt to evolving societal needs by aligning with the workforce through regional collaborations, labor market analysis, apprenticeships, dual enrollment and career pathways. A key theme was the role of skills as a common language linking employers, higher education and learners.

In the session, “Job Ready or Not? Help Students Cross the Experience Chasm,” Melissa Vito, Luke Dowden and Kathleen deLaski explored skills-based pathways in both credit and non-credit spaces. These flexible pathways emphasize demonstrated competencies over traditional credentials, helping learners advance their careers. Luke Dowden of Alamo Colleges District shared his team’s three-year effort to use skills as both a currency for communication and a measure of return on investment, ensuring meaningful outcomes for learners and employers.

While many workforce pipeline models exist, few prioritize the learner by examining their impact on job attainment, continued learning and economic mobility. Dr. Rufus Glasper, president of the League for Innovation in the Community College (League), highlighted three leading models for bridging the gap between Americans’ skills and the needs of the modern workforce.

 **FastTrack Programs:** Accelerated programs allowing students to earn degrees or certificates in a condensed time frame.

 **Micro-credentials:** Verified learning achievements that demonstrate specific skills or knowledge, issued by a trusted provider and aligned with quality assurance standards.

 **Micro-pathways:** Co-designed with learners and employers, these stackable credentials (including durable skills micro-credentials) can be completed in under a year, lead to jobs at or above the local median wage and provide a pathway to an associate degree.

Aligned with Dallas Herring’s vision, these models meet learners where they are by offering small, portable learning opportunities with clear on- and off-ramps between education and employment. Community colleges, in turn, reinforce their role as engines of economic mobility in their communities, regions and states.

CARRY THEM AS FAR AS THEY CAN GO...

Although some models exist for bridging the gap between Americans' skills and the needs of the modern workforce, there are scattered examples of their implementation in community colleges nationwide. While pockets of innovation are emerging, true transformation requires developing a new, adaptable and flexible college model that responds to the needs of all stakeholders.

To help learners reach their full potential, I've gathered key insights from the League that can guide higher education in aligning the future of work with the future of learning. Through the embedded links, explore how North Carolina community colleges are leading the way by enhancing education with innovative instruction, comprehensive student support, workforce-driven programs and dynamic leadership. Together, these efforts are shaping a more resilient and equitable future.

🔗 **Learner-Centered Pathways and Stackable Credentials:**

Education must be designed to meet learners where they are, recognizing prior learning and diverse needs. Stackable credentials provide clear entry and exit points, celebrating progress and aligning with industry standards to ensure long-term value.

🔗 **Funding, ROI and Workforce Alignment:** To secure ongoing support, institutions must demonstrate a clear return on investment for both learners and employers. Strong employer partnerships and skills-based education ensure programs align with workforce needs, maintaining relevance and funding.

🔗 **Institutional Readiness and Faculty Development:** The urgency for change is clear—if community colleges don't adapt, they risk losing critical resources. Early faculty training and leadership investment are key to preparing institutions for the future of education and work.

🔗 **Digital Credentialing and Lifelong Learning:** A connected digital credentialing ecosystem can enhance lifelong learning, supporting seamless transitions for learners. Institutions must explore ways to integrate these tools to improve career mobility and learner success.

🔗 **Clarity in Communication and Shared Definitions:** Effective transformation requires clear, consistent language. Institutions must collaborate with stakeholders to define key terms, ensuring accessibility and alignment across education, workforce and funding partners.

Leaving the 2025 Innovations Conference, I felt energized and deeply committed to driving this transformation. As a nation, we are at a turning point. To truly support our learners and help them reach their full potential, we, as community college leaders, must step outside our comfort zones and embrace technology, structural changes, new initiatives, innovative engagement strategies and creative partnerships.



THE NEXT PHASE OF NC CAREER COACHING

AARON MABE

In the future, the role of [NC Career Coach](#) may become a pivotal position for community colleges to continue bridging the gap between education and industry, especially for underrepresented student groups. The world of work is drastically changing, prompting

colleges to adapt to [new methods](#) of conducting business. To fulfill the future needs of industry partners, community colleges are engaging with employers in new, meaningful ways by updating technical curriculums, expanding articulation agreements and

adopting student coaching models to strengthen learning and engagement opportunities.

These changes align with the themes of the [2025 League for Innovations Conference](#) in San Antonio, Texas, “leading through change.” Amid the challenges and changes occurring in postsecondary education, innovative approaches will be needed to sustain academia while staying true to its core value of challenging inequality. In her presentation, Monique Umphrey, Executive Vice Chancellor for the Future at Austin Community College District, expressed that “the way we think, work and lead must evolve just as quickly as the world around us. It’s no longer enough to rely on what worked yesterday—we must be willing to embrace new methods and ideas.” Several other concepts emerged from the conference, focused on partnerships, dual enrollment, student success practices, expanding contextual learning opportunities and more particular enriching coaching models.

While coaching may be more synonymous with advising, it also refers to a career pathway center approach (Nachman, Maldonado, Hartman & Deal, 2019). These highly motivated champions, embedded within local high schools, inspire young learners to explore in-demand career options and align those interests with career pathways. While carrying many roles, they serve as student mentors, cheerleaders and sometimes counselors (Nachman et al., 2019). The NC Career Coaches are specifically tasked with creating a shared understanding about student vocational goals and how they can be achieved. Using a hands-on approach and leveraging learning opportunities, individuals can leverage Perkins dollars to incorporate guest speakers, administer career assessments, take students on industry tours and develop other unique immersive learning opportunities to engage students in career options. Laura Leatherwood, president of Blue Ridge Community College, recently published her thoughts on EdNC, noting that their career coach program was the intersection between industry and learning. “And there’s also [Blue Ridge Career Pathways](#), a collaborative partnership that links business and industry with secondary schools, career technical centers, and Blue Ridge Community College. They [coaches] have an overarching economic impact on the community at large. They’re helping to educate and train people who are about to enter the workforce, so the community benefits too” (Leatherwood, 2022).

To meet tomorrow’s workforce needs, colleges may strategically consider how and to whom opportunities that inspire a diverse future workforce are broadly communicated. The League for Innovations College and Career Transition Initiative reports that 30% of first-year high school students leave school without a diploma; in urban areas, that number may go as high as 60% (Warford, 2006). For career coaches, that may

mean more latitude is needed, beyond just course selection, transfer guides and case management. It may mean infusing career pathways into more conversations with counselors, parents and teachers. It may mean engaging with community members and industry leaders in developing accessible contextual learning opportunities. It could also mean streamlining articulation opportunities with district leaders and having the latitude to directly engage in local workforce boards.

In 2019, the Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research at NC State provided several key recommendations for NC Career Coaches, noting that many are caught up in a more transactional approach to this work, rather than transformational. While vital to ensure institutional stability, students also need coaches to play the key role of community connectors. Note that additional duties can sometimes “limit coaches’ abilities to accomplish core elements of their role. The ambiguity and variability in the career coach role within and across school(s) or district(s) led to confusion about how to serve students best” (Nachman, Maldonado, Hartman & Deal, 2019, p. 9). Some of the more specific recommendations included minimizing administrative burdens, while engaging with local Chambers of Commerce, and building regional industry partnerships (Nachman et al., 2019).

This work aligns with the goals of the NC Community College’s proposed funding model PropelNC, which supports funding based on workforce sectors. Board chair, Tom Looney was recently quoted by EdNC, “This is an orchestrated effort with businesses in all 100 counties and across all 58 colleges. Exciting times are ahead for us here in the North Carolina Community College System.” The System believes aligning efforts with the NC workforce will support the needs of colleges but also continue to expand opportunities for NC workforce capacity and strengthen talent pipelines.

The relationship with business partners must be strategic and carefully considered. While the potential for economic impacts is exciting, colleges should consider first enhancing the capability of career coaches, free from unnecessary obstacles and focused more on tasks that enrich students’ opportunities and stakeholder collaborations. As colleges welcome and begin understanding the new complexities of our evolving educational landscape, we can engage all learners in spaces that speak to their values and interests and our economic needs.

APPENDIX - “We must take people where they are and carry them as far as they can go.” Op-Ed.

Learner-Centered Pathways and Stackable Credentials: North Carolina community colleges are committed to meeting the various needs of learners across the state, including adult learners, individuals with disabilities, rural learners, and those seeking mental health support. While the system has demonstrated strong service to these populations, there is still an opportunity to further strengthen this commitment through innovation. One key area of growth is the development of stackable credentials that offer clear entry and exit points into both the workforce and higher education. By clearly communicating the return on investment of these industry-recognized learning experiences and credentials, colleges can better support learners in making informed decisions and achieving their goals.

ADULT LEARNER ENGAGEMENT AND RE-ENGAGEMENT

-  [Forsyth Tech Celebrates Adult Learners with Special Event](#): Forsyth Technical Community College hosted an event celebrating adult learners and reaffirmed its commitment to flexible, career-focused pathways that support their success.
-  [NC Reconnect: What Have Colleges Learned?](#): Through NC Reconnect, 24 North Carolina community colleges have redesigned systems to better support adult learners who are balancing jobs, families and education.

PATHWAYS

-  [Providing ‘Access to Achievement’ for All](#): The Access to Achievement initiative expands credential-bearing pathways for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities across all 58 North Carolina community colleges.
-  [Johnston Community College Receives Grant to Support Minority Male Success Initiative](#): Johnston Community College received a \$20,500 grant to expand its Minority Male Success Initiative, providing mentorship and resources to empower minority male students.

RURAL STUDENT SUCCESS AND GUIDED PATHWAYS

-  [Central Carolina Community College](#) and [Davidson-Davie Community College](#): Selected for National Rural Student Initiative.
-  Central Carolina Community College and Davidson-Davie Community College joined the national Rural Guided Pathways Project, aimed at improving credential attainment and economic opportunity for rural learners through learner-centered design.

NEW MAJORITY LEARNERS AND INNOVATION

-  [Education Design Lab Focused on New Majority Learners](#): Forsyth Technical Community College participates in a national cohort with Education Design Lab, redesigning community college pathways to better serve New Majority Learners through skills-based, stackable credentialing models aligned with workforce needs.

STUDENT WELLNESS AND HOLISTIC SUPPORT

-  [Blue Ridge Community College Launches Mental Health Service TalkCampus to Support Students](#): Blue Ridge Community College partnered with TalkCampus to provide students with 24/7 mental health support, reflecting the institution’s commitment to supporting learners’ well-being as part of their academic success.

FUNDING, ROI AND WORKFORCE ALIGNMENT: North Carolina's community colleges are aligning more closely than ever with workforce needs, showcasing a strong return on investment for both learners and employers. Institutions across the state are expanding hands-on, industry-aligned training programs, developing cross-sector partnerships and enhancing career pathways that lead directly to in-demand jobs. New statewide funding proposals, public-private investments, and a growing emphasis on apprenticeships and work-based learning support these efforts. Colleges are also strengthening their infrastructure and launching initiatives that address critical workforce gaps, ensuring programs remain relevant and responsive to labor market demands. Simultaneously, they are investing in student support systems, programming and data-informed practices to improve access, completion and employment outcomes. Together, these strategies highlight the system's collective commitment to demonstrating value, scaling success and securing the resources needed for continued growth.

STATEWIDE POLICY AND FUNDING INITIATIVES

-  [N.C. Community College System President Highlights Propel NC in Budget Request to Lawmakers:](#) President Jeff Cox urged lawmakers to invest over \$68 million in recurring funds and other supports to modernize North Carolina's community college system and better align it with workforce needs through the Propel NC initiative.
-  [NC Governor Proposes Free Community College for High-Demand Sectors:](#) Governor Josh Stein proposed making community college tuition-free for students entering high-demand fields, aiming to strengthen the state's workforce and expand apprenticeships.
-  [Governor Stein Signs Executive Order to Strengthen Workforce and Apprenticeships:](#) Governor Stein's executive order established a cross-sector Workforce and Apprenticeship Council to expand job training, credential programs and access to high-quality employment.
-  [Duke Energy Invests \\$600,000 in North Carolina's Community Colleges To Build Next Generation Workforce:](#) Duke Energy awarded \$600,000 to support training programs across 19 community colleges, continuing its long-term investment in workforce development across North Carolina.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT AND CAREER TRAINING

-  [Central Piedmont Launches the Community Lifeline to Strengthen Emergency Response Training and Workforce Development \(\\$118M\):](#) Central Piedmont Community College has launched the \$118 million Community Lifeline initiative—funded through county and private support—to expand emergency response training and workforce development, with a new multi-phase facility set to be fully operational by 2028.
-  [CFCC Launches New Heavy Equipment Operator Course to Meet Growing Industry Needs:](#) Cape Fear Community College launched a 300-hour Heavy Equipment Operator course on May 13, 2025, offering hands-on training with bulldozers and excavators to prepare students for entry-level construction jobs in response to local industry demand.
-  [Halifax CC Partnership with Local Auto Industry:](#) Halifax Community College has partnered with White Motors to bring the Ford ACE program to campus, offering students hands-on automotive training aligned with industry needs.
-  [A-B Tech Offers Free IT Support Training Starting Feb. 24, Helping Bridge Tech Workforce Gap:](#) Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College launched free IT support training funded by a \$1 million grant to address local technology workforce shortages.
-  [Navy Veteran Finds Path to IT Career Through Work-Based Learning:](#) Cleveland Community College showcased how its IT internship programs are helping adult learners, including veterans, transition into tech careers through real-world experience.

INSTITUTIONAL READINESS AND FACULTY DEVELOPMENT: Community colleges must evolve to remain relevant and secure essential resources. Early investment in faculty training and leadership development is crucial for preparing institutions for the future of education and work. In North Carolina, community colleges prioritize professional development to foster innovation, collaboration and improve teaching. By offering tailored programs, these colleges ensure faculty remain up-to-date with changing educational and workforce needs, enabling them to better support students and employers. While progress is being made, this initiative has the potential to gain even more momentum, strengthening education, aligning with industry trends and helping sustain resources. Ultimately, it will drive economic mobility by equipping faculty for the future of work and learning.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

How the Piedmont Teaching and Learning Hub is empowering North Carolina community college faculty:

The Piedmont Teaching and Learning Hub is empowering North Carolina community college faculty by providing tailored, free professional development opportunities that promote innovation and collaboration, enhancing educational quality and faculty effectiveness across the state.

DIGITAL CREDENTIALING AND LIFELONG LEARNING: North Carolina community colleges are supporting lifelong learning by offering flexible educational opportunities for a wide range of learners. Programs focused on workforce development, certifications and adult education help students build skills for career success. To strengthen this effort, integrating digital credentialing systems can provide students with clear proof of their skills, improving career mobility and making transitions between education and work smoother. Expanding these tools will enhance lifelong learning by offering more flexibility and recognition of achievements.

LIFELONG LEARNING

Wake Tech IGNITE Celebrates Life Changing Journeys: Wake Technical Community College's eighth annual IGNITE event highlighted the transformative power of education, with over 800 community and business leaders gathering to celebrate the college's impact on student success and personal growth.

CLARITY IN COMMUNICATION AND SHARED DEFINITIONS: North Carolina Community Colleges are improving communication by building strong partnerships with educators, businesses and communities. This helps align educational programs with local needs, making the value of education clear and driving higher graduation rates and community impact. However, there is room to improve by ensuring consistent communication across all partners, especially in defining key terms and expectations. Clearer communication will help strengthen collaboration and benefit students and communities more effectively.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

How One County Worked Together to Create a Culture of Attainment: Burke County's successful increase in high school and postsecondary graduation rates is attributed to collaborative partnerships among educators, businesses and community organizations, aligning academic programs with local industry needs and promoting the value of education.

Why Our Community Colleges Are the 'Best Decision Ever': North Carolina's 58 community colleges are transforming lives by providing affordable, high-quality education, career training and local support, offering students academic, economic and personal benefits while ensuring equitable access to higher education.