

A PROMISING START:

FIRST-YEAR ENROLLMENT PATTERNS IN NC COMMUNITY COLLEGES' BOOST PROGRAM

SEPTEMBER 2026

OVERVIEW

This brief examines first-year enrollment in the North Carolina Community Colleges Boost Program across the eight participating community colleges in the program's first cohort. The program aims to accelerate students' credential attainment into high-demand, high-wage, or high-value fields. Findings suggest that colleges successfully recruited local students while adhering to program guidelines. The following analysis describes the demographic characteristics of enrolled students and examines the extent to which early enrollment reflects the program's original eligibility and participation criteria.

INTRODUCTION

The North Carolina Community Colleges Boost Program (Boost) is a replication of the City University of New York (CUNY) Accelerated Study in Academic Programs (ASAP) model, which aims to improve community college graduation rates and workforce outcomes through wraparound advising and financial supports. Boost was designed with an explicit workforce development focus on the state's high-demand, high-wage, and high-value occupations. This program is supported through a partnership with Arnold Ventures with the North Carolina Community College System Office (NCCCS). The original ASAP model has demonstrated significant improvements in graduation rates among participating students (Weiss, et al., 2019; Weiss et al., 2026). Boost maintains core ASAP features by providing students with comprehensive advising, financial supports and opportunities for campus involvement. Specifically, dedicated advisors maintain low caseloads capped at 150 students (approximately 45% of the state average), while financial supports include textbook stipends and a \$100 monthly incentive for meeting program participation requirements.

To be eligible for Boost, students must be North Carolina residents enrolled in degree or diploma programs linked to high-demand, high-wage, or high-value careers identified through the [Propel NC](#) funding model. During early implementation, eligibility was limited to students who qualified for the [NextNC Scholarship](#), though this was later expanded to include students who qualified only for Pell Grants. Additionally, students must have completed high school, cannot possess a bachelor's degree, and must not have taken more than 24

program-applicable credit hours prior to entering Boost. The program has a statewide enrollment goal of 4,995 students through 2028, revised from the original target of 5,325 students in response to early recruitment challenges.

Boost is being implemented in two phases. Eight colleges began rolling out the program in fall 2025, while seven others comprise the fall 2026 implementation group. Each college will enroll three annual student cohorts.

BOOST COLLEGE IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

Boost is being implemented at 15 North Carolina community colleges in two phases.

 FALL 2025 IMPLEMENTATION	 FALL 2026 IMPLEMENTATION
☒ Alamance Community College	☒ Bladen Community College
☒ Caldwell Community College and Technical Institute	☒ Central Carolina Community College
☒ Cape Fear Community College	☒ Isothermal Community College
☒ Central Piedmont Community College	☒ McDowell Technical Community College
☒ Cleveland Community College	☒ Robeson Community College
☒ Forsyth Technical Community College	☒ Sampson Community College
☒ Johnston Community College	☒ Western Piedmont Community College
☒ Wake Technical Community College	

KEY POINTS

Early Boost enrollment reflects the broader population of eligible students. Demographic patterns among Boost participants generally resembled the population of eligible students at the eight participating colleges, though a few notable differences were observed. Boost enrolled a larger proportion of Black students, women, adult learners, and students enrolled in arts and sciences programs compared to the eligible population.

Student enrollment was largely aligned with the program’s original eligibility and participation requirements. More than 98% of Boost students were identified as Pell-eligible. All students possessed a high school diploma or equivalency and, in accordance with program stipulations, did not possess a bachelor’s degree. More than 95% of students were enrolled in a designated high-demand, high-wage, or high-value Boost program. Additionally, 67% of students had already met the annual 24-credit hour milestone by the end of spring 2026, while another 18% were positioned to reach the benchmark through summer coursework.

Early implementation reflects a balance between statewide program fidelity and local flexibility. As colleges adapted Boost recruitment and enrollment practices to meet local needs, NCCCS worked in tandem with colleges to refine statewide guidance and eligibility expectations. This flexibility supported student access and recruitment, though it is important to note that variation in implementation may make it more difficult to evaluate program effectiveness. Continued documentation of implementation procedures and tracking of student data will remain pivotal as Boost continues to evolve and expand.



PROJECT DESCRIPTION

This analysis draws on two primary data sources: ServiceNow advising records and administrative data from NCCCS. ServiceNow is a centralized, cloud-based platform used by Boost colleges to track student engagement with the program. The Belk Center utilized ServiceNow data to identify students enrolled in Boost during the fall 2025 term, then linked records with administrative data to examine demographic characteristics of students and alignment with the original Boost eligibility requirements.

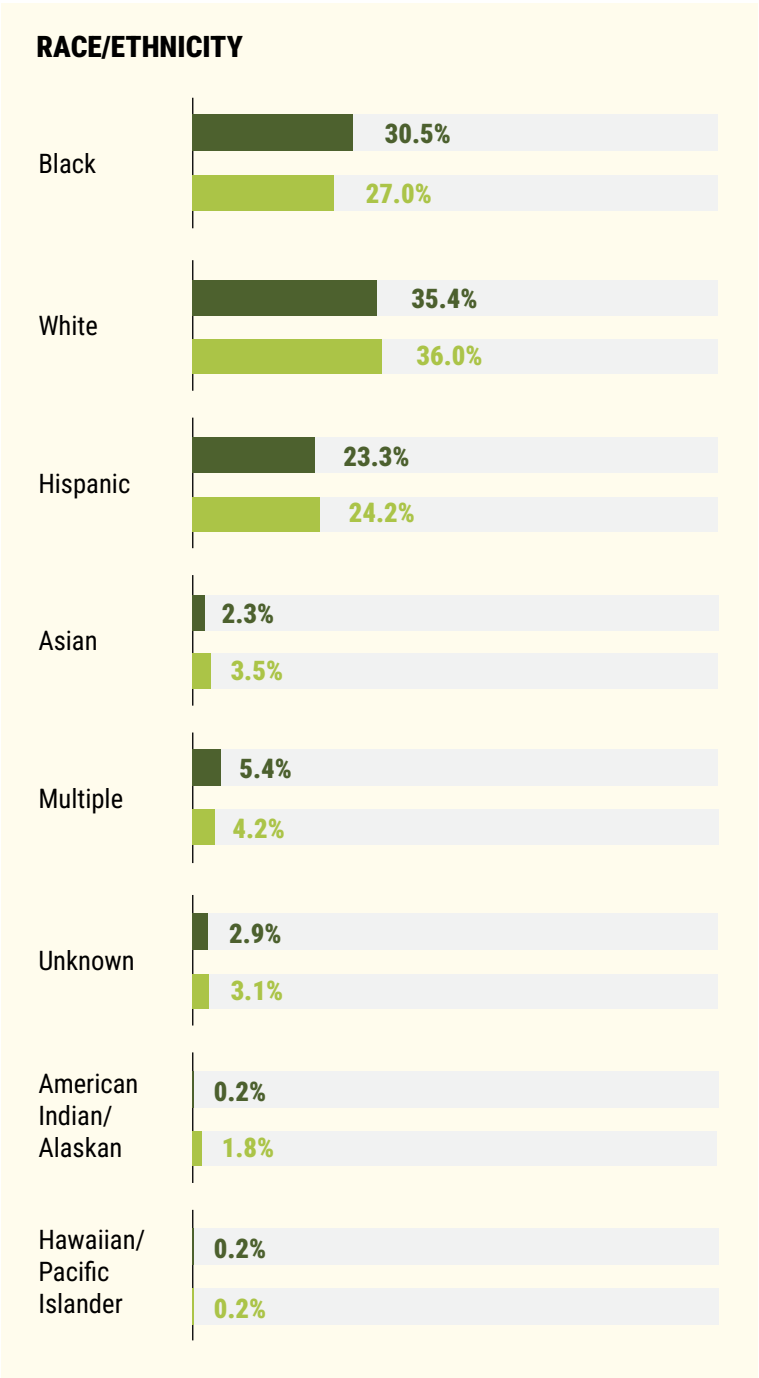
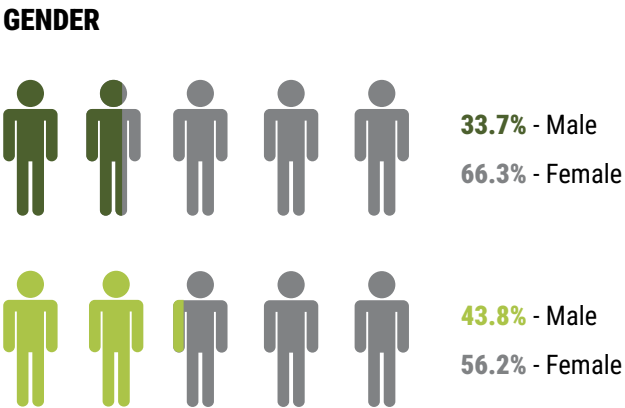
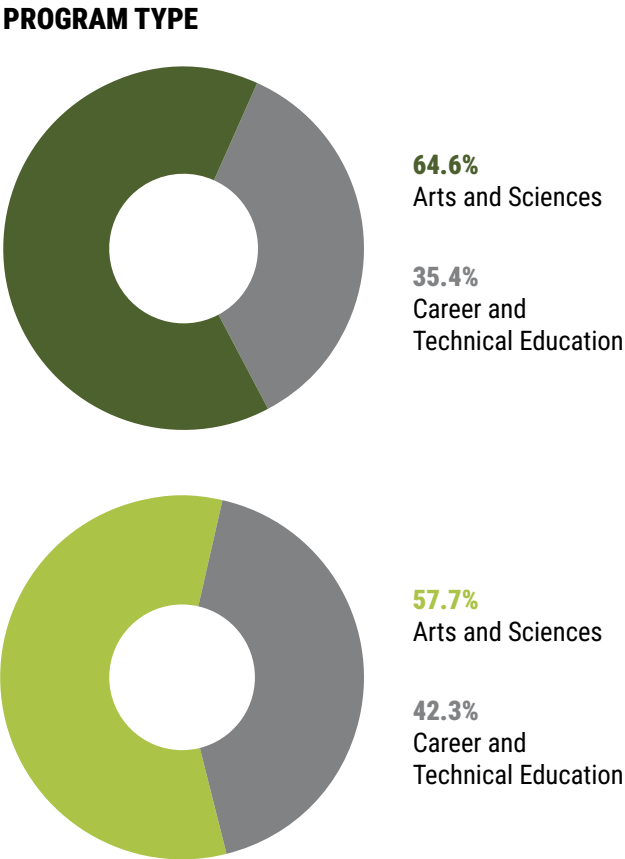
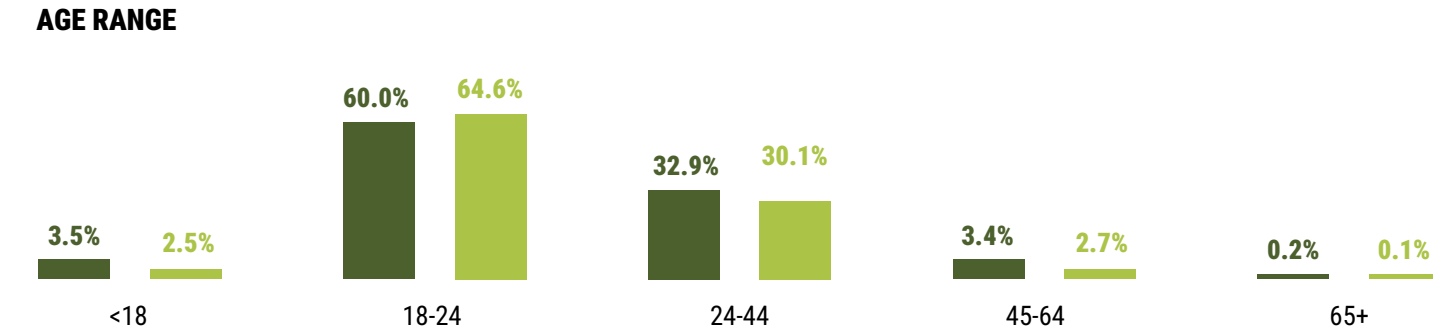
Analyses are intended to provide an early snapshot of enrollment patterns during initial program implementation. The analytic sample includes 653 students, though we note the actual Boost enrollment figure may be larger or smaller given the dynamic nature of program enrollment and the data tracking challenges associated with early program implementation.

As illustrated in Figure 1, students enrolled in Boost generally reflected the broader population of eligible students, though several notable differences emerged during the program's first year. Boost enrolled a higher share of Black students than the eligible population at participating colleges (31% vs. 27%). The proportions of white students (35% vs. 36%) and Hispanic students (23% vs 24%) were nearly identical across the two groups. Women also made up a substantially larger share of Boost enrollment, accounting for nearly two-thirds of participants (66%) compared with 56% of eligible students overall.

Differences were also observed across academic pathways. Students in Boost were somewhat more concentrated in arts and sciences programs (65% vs. 58%), while career and technical education students represented a smaller share of enrollment (35% vs. 42%). In addition, adult learners aged 25 and older comprised a slightly larger portion of Boost participants than of the eligible population overall (36% vs. 33%).

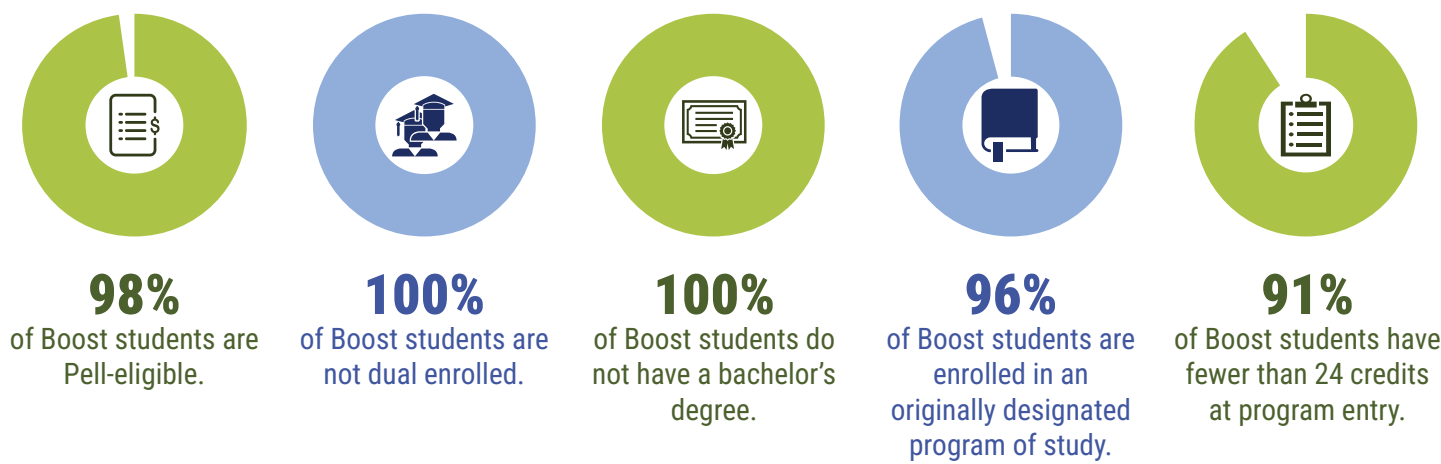
Figure 1. **DEMOGRAPHIC COMPOSITION OF BOOST-ENROLLED AND BOOST-ELIGIBLE STUDENTS**

Boost-Enrolled (n= 653) Boost-Eligible (n= 16,725)



Enrollment into Boost is largely guided by pre-established eligibility and participation criteria, though NCCCS has worked with colleges to allow for flexibility in applying specific expectations to meet local contexts and individual student needs. The following analysis examines enrollment patterns in relation to several components of the original Boost model. Overall alignment between enrollment and eligibility criteria is summarized in Figure 2.

Figure 2. **BOOST ENROLLMENT ALIGNS WITH ORIGINAL ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA (FALL 2025)**



To be eligible for Boost, students must have North Carolina residency. While residency status for Boost students was not available in the administrative data used for this analysis, NCCCS dashboards indicate that 96% of non-dually-enrolled students at participating Boost colleges were North Carolina residents.

Boost also requires that students receive federal and/or state financial aid (e.g., Federal Pell Grant, Next NC Scholarship), or utilize veterans' benefits. Accordingly, more than 98% of students were identified as Pell-eligible. In terms of education level, students must have graduated high school and must not possess a bachelor's degree. While 13% of Boost participants (82 students) held dual enrollment status at some point prior to entering Boost, all 653 held a high school diploma or high school equivalency by the time they enrolled in the program. No students possessed a bachelor's degree.

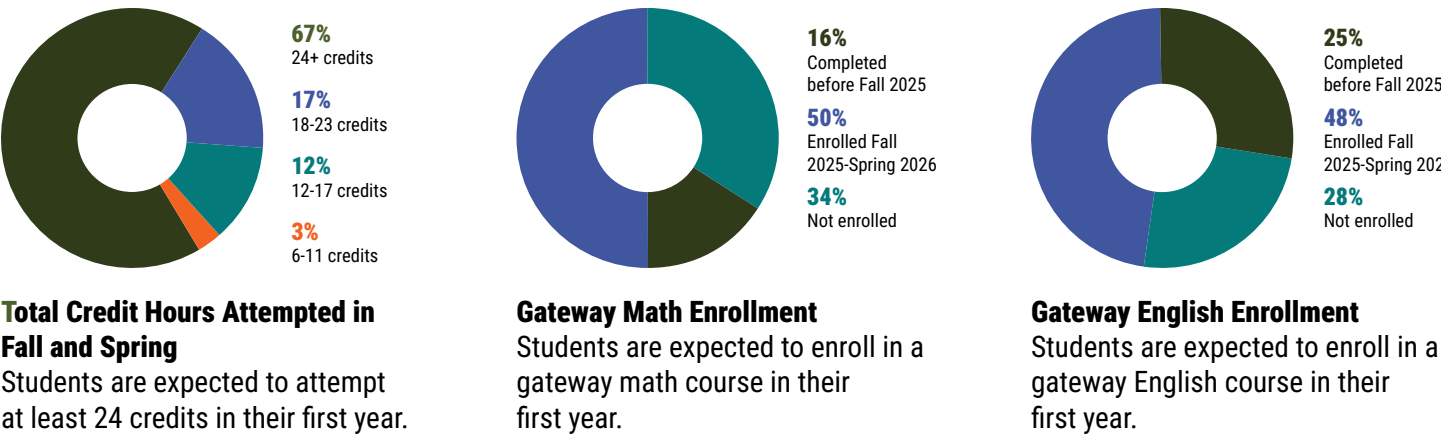
Another eligibility requirement dictates that students must be enrolled in an eligible high-demand, high-wage, or high-value program of study. Boost-eligible associate degree and diploma programs are aligned with Propel NC and include the following workforce sectors: healthcare, engineering and advanced manufacturing, trades and transportation, information technology, and public safety and first responders. Boost is also open to students enrolled in any of the following transfer programs: Associate of Arts, Associate of Science, Associate of Arts in Teacher Preparation, Associate of Science in Teacher Preparation and Associate of Engineering. More than 95% of students were enrolled in programs originally designated as Boost-eligible. Of these 625 students, all were enrolled in associate degree programs rather than diploma programs. Among the 28 students who were not enrolled in an originally designated Boost program, 19 were enrolled in the Associate in General Education program, which may indicate students who are in the process of applying to limited-admission health degree programs. These figures provide a snapshot of students' programs of study at the time of analysis and may change as students transition between programs. In addition, the list of Boost-eligible programs has continued to evolve as NCCCS works with campus leads to identify additional programs that align with Boost's workforce priorities, using workforce sector classifications and labor market data.

Because Boost is intended to serve students near the beginning of their academic journeys, students are required to have completed no more than 24 program-applicable college credits earned for two-year programs or no more than 14 program-applicable college credits for diploma programs. Although the available data do not distinguish program-applicable credits from other credits, total baseline credits provide a conservative proxy. More than 91% of participating students entered Boost with fewer than 24 total credits. Because this measure includes credits that may not apply toward a student’s program of study, it is likely that the percentage of students who meet this requirement is even higher.

In addition to these eligibility criteria, the Boost model establishes academic participation expectations intended to help students maintain momentum toward credential completion (Figure 3). Students are encouraged to attempt at least 24 credits during their first academic year, including the fall, spring and summer terms. Although administrative data for summer 2026 were not yet available for this brief, 67% of students had already attempted at least 24 credit hours by the end of spring 2026. An additional 18% had attempted between 18 and 23 hours, positioning them to reach the original 24-credit benchmark with additional summer coursework. The remaining 15% (100 students) had attempted fewer than 18 hours by the end of the spring term. Fifty-seven of these students had enrolled in the fall but did not re-enroll in the spring. Taken together, these patterns indicate that a majority of students who remain enrolled as of spring 2026 are on track to meet this credit milestone.

The Boost model also encourages students to enroll in one non-developmental gateway math course and one gateway English course during their first year in the program if they have not already completed those courses. With regard to gateway math course enrollment, 16% of students had already completed an eligible course prior to fall 2025, while an additional 50% enrolled in one during fall 2025 or spring 2026. For gateway English, 25% had completed an eligible course prior to fall 2025, with another 48% enrolling in one during fall 2025 or spring 2026. Because students have through the end of their first academic year to meet these expectations, summer 2026 enrollment and completion data will provide a more complete picture of gateway course progress.

Figure 3. **BOOST ENROLLMENT ALIGNS WITH PARTICIPATION REQUIREMENTS**
Percent of Boost-enrolled students meeting each participation requirement



FOR DECISION MAKERS: IMPACT ON PRACTICE AND POLICY

Early Boost enrollment patterns highlight the importance of balancing statewide consistency with institutional flexibility during initial program implementation. Since launching Boost, NCCCS has worked in tandem with participating colleges and regularly updated program policy guidance as colleges adapted recruitment and enrollment practices to fit local contexts. Continued communication and technical assistance will be important to ensure that colleges have a clear and shared understanding of program expectations as eligibility requirements evolve.

Findings from the first year also underscore the importance of maintaining alignment with core components of the Boost model and Boost's workforce focus. While local flexibility may support recruitment and access, substantial variation in eligibility interpretation or program implementation may make it more difficult to evaluate long-term program effectiveness.

Finally, we encourage colleges to continue to monitor student enrollment and document recruitment procedures. Lessons learned from the Boost rollout will support stronger implementation consistency, data quality and program refinement as Boost expands in the coming years.

CONCLUSION

First-year enrollment patterns provide important insight into how colleges operationalized Boost's workforce adaptation of the CUNY ASAP model during early implementation. While participating colleges successfully enrolled eligible students, findings also suggest some variation in how eligibility and participation criteria were applied across institutions. These results can inform future technical assistance, implementation monitoring and policy refinement as Boost expands to seven more colleges in fall 2026. Continued analysis of enrollment, engagement and student outcomes will help determine how early implementation decisions shape longer-term program effectiveness.

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 efforts are North Carolina-focused and nationally informed.

The Belk Center was launched in 2019 as a research center within the College of Education at NC State, a land-grant university that shares our commitment to community colleges and the critical role these institutions play in creating and expanding opportunities for all North Carolinians.

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FURTHER READINGS

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SUGGESTED CITATION

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