

Disaster Preparedness Project

August 2026 Updates

Why it matters:

Natural disasters have long shaped life in North Carolina, and every region of our state has experienced the disruption and hardship they can bring. In the wake of Hurricane Helene, the North Carolina Community College System set out to answer an important question: **How can we learn from the experiences of our disaster-impacted colleges to better prepare our system for what lies ahead?**

When disasters strike, our colleges become **indispensable partners in community response and recovery**, transforming into emergency shelters, staging grounds for first responders, distribution centers for food and supplies, temporary homes for displaced government agencies and K-12 schools, community gathering spaces, and engines of economic recovery for entire regions. Our faculty, staff, and students think creatively about the resources at their disposal – facilities and grounds, equipment and expertise, partnerships and programs – and put those resources to work for their communities, all while navigating a disaster's many personal, professional, and academic impacts.

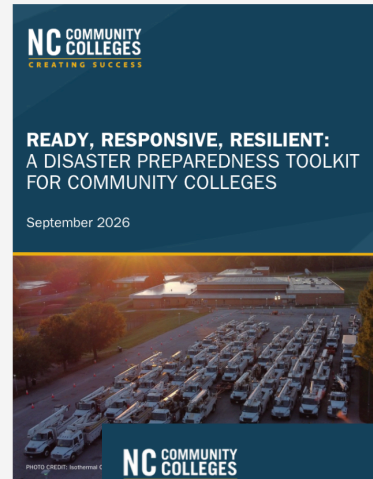
Along the way, our colleges gain a wealth of hard-earned knowledge about how to prepare for, respond to, and recover from a crisis. Individually, these experiences belong to a single college or community. Together, they represent one of our system's **greatest resources for strengthening disaster preparedness**. While we can't predict exactly what future disasters will look like or anticipate every scenario they might bring, we *can* work together to build colleges and systems that are better prepared, better connected, and better equipped to lead through whatever is around the corner.

What we've created:

Over the last four months, more than 120 disaster-impacted leaders – representing two-thirds of our colleges – generously shared their experiences via a series of surveys, interviews, and conversations. This group includes presidents and leaders focused on academic affairs, student services, finance, facilities, information technology, public safety, communications, workforce development, human resources, and foundation relations, among other college functions.

Drawing on their experiences, we developed a **disaster preparedness toolkit** that distills the lessons and recommendations that emerged across leaders' more than four decades of experience navigating hurricanes, floods, tornadoes, wildfires, winter storms, and other natural disasters in and beyond North Carolina. While informed primarily by leaders' experiences with natural disasters, many of the principles and practices described in the toolkit apply to any emergency our community colleges may face.

The toolkit is organized into two complementary sections. The first introduces **six core commitments** that emerged consistently in colleges' experiences navigating previous disasters. These commitments offer a framework for college leadership teams to reflect on their preparedness and take a closer look at the **practices, relationships, and mindsets that can help their institutions successfully navigate future crises.**



For each commitment, we describe **what colleges experienced, lessons leaders learned, and recommended actions offered by leaders for peer institutions**. Each commitment is also accompanied by a set of **reflection questions and links to relevant resources**, including emergency management guidance, scenario-based training exercises, and various tools and templates shared by our colleges for inclusion in a digital resource repository.



The second section of the toolkit offers a **series of checklists organized around key college functions and the different phases of a disaster**, including specific steps that leaders in different roles might consider taking on blue sky days, when a threat is imminent, and throughout the response and recovery period. Drawn directly from the experiences of cross-functional leaders across our system, these recommendations lift up concrete actions that colleges can adapt to their own needs and contexts.

What's Next:

We're previewing the toolkit with contributors and gathering feedback before it is shared more widely across the system, with a **public launch planned for September**. In addition to serving as a resource for our colleges and the System Office, it's our hope that this toolkit will also contribute to a broader state and national conversation about disaster preparedness by elevating practical lessons our colleges have learned while serving their communities through crisis.

We look forward to working with presidents, philanthropic partners, the System Office team, and the State Board to explore **how we can bring these new resources to life in partnership with our colleges**, including potential future opportunities for professional learning and grant funding focused on college and systemwide disaster preparedness.

If you have questions about this project or would like to learn more, please reach out to Dr. Kimberly Gold (goldk@nccommunitycolleges.edu) and Virginia McIlwain (virginia@eastthirdgroup.com).

