



NC COMMUNITY
COLLEGES
CREATING SUCCESS

2022-2026
STRATEGIC PLAN
FINAL REPORT

Introduction

About the Strategic Plan

In October 2022, the State Board of Community Colleges adopted a four-year strategic plan, **Leading Through Change: 2022-2026**, for the North Carolina Community College System. Developed with broad input from colleges, trustees, partners, and other stakeholders, the plan guided the decisions and actions of the System Office and State Board in support of North Carolina's 58 community colleges and the more than 600,000 students they serve.

Plan Structure and Implementation

Through a comprehensive planning process that included examining the challenges and opportunities facing our state and system, reviewing data, and soliciting stakeholder input, the State Board identified **five overarching goals** focused on ensuring the system remained an engine for economic growth and a gateway to meaningful careers for all who call North Carolina home. These goals are summarized on the following page.

For each goal, the system defined measures of success known as **key performance indicators** to track progress over time. Each goal was further broken down into a set of **objectives** describing what success would look like, and specific **strategies** – practical approaches and actions – were identified to move each objective forward.

The work outlined in the strategic plan was brought to life via a series of **annual implementation plans**, which focused the system's efforts on annual priorities that could be adapted to meet evolving needs and opportunities. When identifying annual priorities, the system focused on work that was:

- Aligned with the goals of the System Office and the current strategic plan;
- Attainable in one year;
- Measurable in impact or progress;
- Transformative in nature, not status quo or routine; and
- Within the control of the System Office.

Annual plans aligned the work of implementation with the efforts of specific State Board Committees and colleges' strategic directions, leveraging the strength and innovation of individual colleges to achieve the system's broader goals. Specific System Office leaders were tasked with coordinating the implementation of each annual priority, and updates were communicated to the State Board's Strategic Planning Committee throughout the year.

Leading Through Change: 2022-2026 Strategic Plan Goals

1

Goal 1: Recruit and retain top talent to enable the North Carolina Community College System to educate and prepare the State's workforce. Faculty and staff provide the education and direct services that students and communities need. Recruiting and retaining top talent require investment, partnership, and workplace innovation.

2

Goal 2: Increase access and enrollment at North Carolina community colleges to meet the state's educational attainment goal and expand postsecondary opportunities. For North Carolina to meet its educational and economic goals, two million North Carolinians will need education and training beyond high school by 2030.

3

Goal 3: Provide resources inside and outside the classroom for all students to successfully enroll, persist, and complete a career program of study. College leaders cite youth disengagement, pandemic learning losses, student mental health challenges, and balancing college with work and family among a long list of significant challenges. Colleges need resources and strong partners to support their students.

4

Goal 4: Provide education, training, and credentials to develop the most competitive workforce in the nation. Community colleges must provide solutions to the talent needs caused by recent economic development success, ensure the economy includes all North Carolinians in its prosperity, and brace against future market disruptions.

5

Goal 5: Increase state funding, streamline the allocation formula, and implement practices to improve system effectiveness. The NCCCS will work with policy leaders to modernize the Community College System funding formula, improve IT infrastructure, and expand information sharing by linking educational data systems. Colleges should be incentivized to provide regional delivery of programs and services and avoid unnecessary duplication.

Plan Progress

Goal-Specific Updates

Leading Through Change guided the North Carolina Community College System through a period of significant disruption and transformation for our students, colleges, communities, and state. The five goals reflected in the plan represent enduring priorities for the system and a unique set of challenges and opportunities that were particularly pressing for our colleges at the time the plan was being developed, amid the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The following updates highlight the collective progress and achievements of the system related to each of the five goals outlined in the strategic plan. For each goal, we:

- **Revisit the critical context** that shaped the goal,
- **Outline the work we prioritized** in response,
- **Describe how we tracked our progress** using specific measures of success,
- **Highlight key actions and accomplishments** undertaken by the system, and
- **Examine gains and opportunities** that help us understand where we made progress and where continued attention and investment are needed.

Taken together, these updates tell the story of how the priorities established in the *Leading Through Change* plan translated into action across the system and provide a strong foundation for building on our progress as we develop the system's next strategic plan.

GOAL ONE:

Faculty and Staff Recruitment and Retention

Critical Context

Why it matters: Faculty and staff are the driving force behind the North Carolina Community College System, delivering the instruction, workforce training, small business support, advising, and other services that help students, colleges, and communities thrive. To fulfill our mission as a system, we must attract, support, and retain the talented people who bring our work to life every day.

What we faced: Our strategic planning process was underway during the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic, as college and System Office leaders found themselves navigating the Great Resignation and an increasingly competitive labor market. Higher rates of faculty and staff turnover and lower rates of workforce participation, coupled with ongoing budget constraints that limited our ability to offer competitive salaries, strained the talent pipeline for our colleges at precisely the moment demand for our services was growing. As employers across the state turned to our colleges for help addressing workforce shortages in critical industries, unfilled positions and increased turnover threatened our ability to respond.

Work we prioritized: Meeting this challenge required investment in our people and new approaches to attracting and retaining talent. *Leading Through Change* identified three primary objectives in support of the system's workforce:

- Addressing faculty and staff shortages through higher salaries and innovative talent sourcing,
- Attracting top talent to and retaining talent within the North Carolina Community College System, and

- Establishing North Carolina community colleges and the System Office as desirable employment destinations.

How we tracked our progress: Primary measures of success associated with Goal One include full-time faculty and staff salary and retention data, which we explored at both the college and system level. We also monitored data about our system's competitiveness, including how our full-time faculty and staff salaries compare to those offered by peer systems in and beyond North Carolina, and we disaggregated faculty and staff retention data to better understand how retention varies by full- and part-time status and instructional area. These and other key terms related to Goal One are defined in **Figure 1.1**.

Figure 1.1: Key Definitions: Faculty and Staff Recruitment and Retention

Faculty are employees whose primary role is instruction and related academic responsibilities.

Staff are employees who support an institution's mission through non-instructional roles.

A part-time employee* is someone who works less than an institution's defined full-time workload.

A full-time employee* works the standard workload defined by an institution and is typically eligible for full benefits.

Earnings for full-time faculty are reported as weighted nine-month average salaries.

Earnings for full-time staff are communicated as annual average salaries.

Employee retention is defined as the percentage of employees who, one year later, were retained at their same institution in the same role or a different role.

* As a system, we do not have a uniform definition of full- and part-time employment, as colleges establish their own policies. For the purposes of this report, we are using the definitions provided here.

Actions and Accomplishments

Advocating for Further State Investment in Faculty and Staff Salaries

State investment is the primary driver of system's ability to compete for talent, with 87% of our full-time salary dollars in Fall 2025 coming from state appropriations. Since the adoption of the *Leading Through Change* strategic plan and with the support of the North Carolina General Assembly, the system has successfully advocated for multiple rounds of legislative investment to increase faculty and staff salaries. These included:

- **A three percent salary increase approved for 2023-24 and a four percent increase approved for 2024-25**, representing a legislative investment of \$91 million and matching the target increase (7%) established by the strategic plan. **Another three percent increase – along with one-time bonuses of \$1,750 for employees earning \$65,000 or less and \$1,000 for those earning more – was recently approved for 2026-27.**
- **An additional \$19 million in recurring funding for the Faculty Recruitment and Retention Fund**, adding to the \$12 million previously appropriated for the Fund in the 2021-23 state budget, representing a total of \$31 million in recurring funding as of 2023-24. This funding helps colleges compete for skilled instructors in high-demand fields by supporting targeted salary increases and bonuses for hard-to-fill and hard-to-retain positions.
- **Targeted salary adjustments for nursing faculty**, totaling approximately \$6 million in recurring funding as of 2025-26, to increase nursing faculty starting pay by an additional 10% and provide other nursing faculty with salary increases up to an additional 15%.

Enhancing Support for College Human Resources Teams

In 2024, the system established the **North Carolina Association of Community College Human Resources Professionals (NCACCHRP)** to support college human resources leaders in sharing best practices related to faculty and staff recruitment and retention. The association is designed to promote collaboration, innovation, and knowledge sharing among human resources leaders across the system.

The System Office invested \$10,000 in start-up funds to help the association incorporate as a 501c3, develop a website, and begin delivering professional development. In addition to offering monthly virtual professional learning opportunities, the association also hosts an annual, in-person conference for human resources professionals systemwide to invest in their professional growth and connect with their colleagues at other colleges. To date, NCACCHRP has provided more than 2,250 hours of training to human resources leaders across the system.

Researching Partnership-Based Salary Funding Strategies

In 2024, the system launched the **Rural Postsecondary Practices Partnership (RP3)** alongside our partners at the Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research at NC State University, EducationNC, and myFutureNC. RP3's goal was to better understand, curate, and share practices and policies that strengthen our state's network of rural-serving community colleges.

Among other creative partnership strategies, RP3 catalogued those pursued by rural-serving colleges to support faculty and staff salaries. These were distributed in two toolkits – one

focused on healthcare and another on advanced manufacturing – and offered examples of how colleges have worked with key partners like employers and peer colleges to pursue creative solutions to funding faculty and staff positions.

Prioritizing Employee Recruitment and Retention in College Strategic Planning

With support from the Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research at NC State University and funding from Ascendium Education Group, the system rolled out several new resources to support rural-serving college strategic planning beginning in 2024. Now known as the **Strategic Planning Institute and Fellows Program**, this year-long, cohort-based program – offered at no cost to participating institutions – supports cohorts of college leaders working to develop strategic plans for their institutions via structured facilitation, tools, and peer mentoring. Participating colleges have consistently identified faculty and staff recruitment and retention as key areas of focus for their plans, and employee-focused goals and strategies are being incorporated into the plans being developed with the support of this growing initiative.

Gains and Opportunities

Takeaway 1: Growth in faculty and staff salaries has outpaced regional and national averages, but gaps in competitiveness remain.

Weighted 9-month salaries for full-time faculty have increased steadily throughout the period covered by the plan, growing by \$8,675 (17%) since the 2020-21 academic year. Similarly, average salaries for full-time staff grew by \$9,918 (20%) during the same period. These increases have narrowed the gap between North Carolina and neighboring states, though our full-time faculty and staff salaries still lag regional and national averages for public two-year institutions, as shown in **Tables 1.1 and 1.2**.

Table 1.1: Average Full-Time Faculty Salaries at Public Two-Year Institutions

Average Salary	NC	SREB	US
2020-21	\$50,252	\$54,054	\$67,613
2024-25	\$58,927	\$61,084	\$77,382
% Increase	17%	13%	14%

Source: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System

Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) states: Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia

Table 1.2: Average Full-Time Staff Salaries at Public Two-Year Institutions

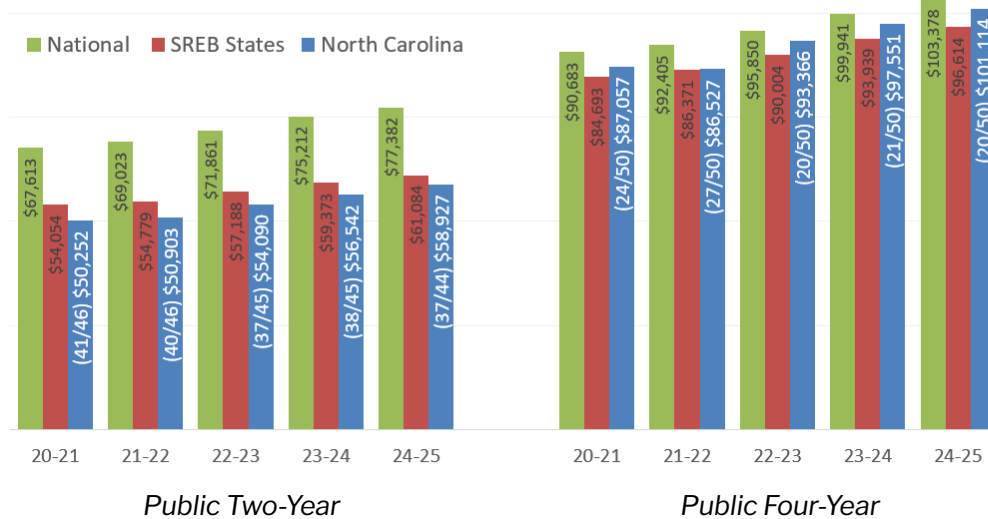
Average Salary	NC	SREB	US
2020-21	\$50,768	\$51,694	\$59,562
2024-25	\$60,686	\$61,153	\$70,044
% Increase	20%	18%	18%

Source: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System

Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) states: Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia

Compared to the average salaries offered to full-time faculty at public two-year institutions in other states, North Carolina's salaries have continued to rank near the bottom nationally for five consecutive years (see **Figure 1.1**). Despite the growth in average full-time faculty salaries the system realized during the period, North Carolina's national ranking has improved only marginally, rising from 41st of the 46 states for which data are available in 2020-21 to 37th of the 44 states for which data are available in 2024-25. For full-time staff, North Carolina's national ranking also improved slightly, rising from 30th of the 47 states for which data are available in 2020-21 to 29th of the 45 states for which data are available in 2024-25 (see **Figure 1.2**).

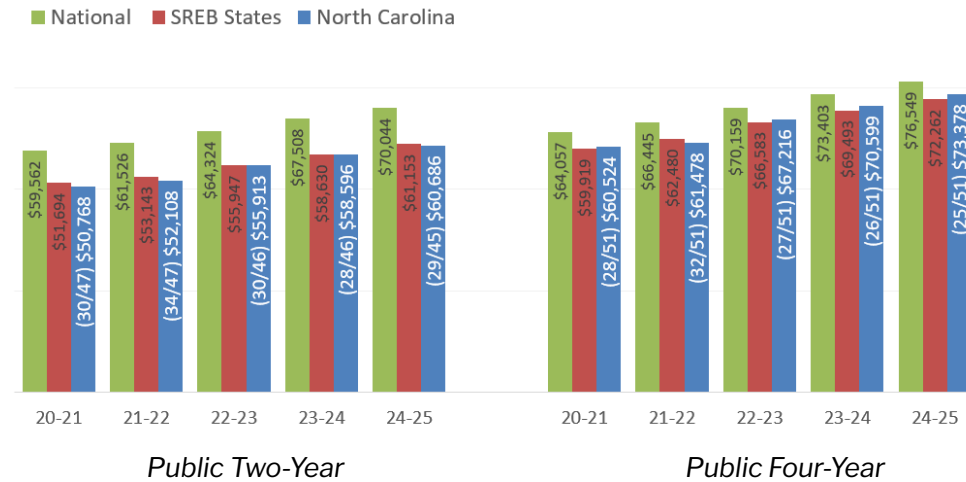
Figure 1.1: Average Full-Time Faculty Salaries at Public Two- and Four-Year Institutions and National Ranking



Source: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System

Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) states: Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia

Figure 1.2: Average Full-Time Staff Salaries at Public Two- and Four-Year Institutions and National State Ranking

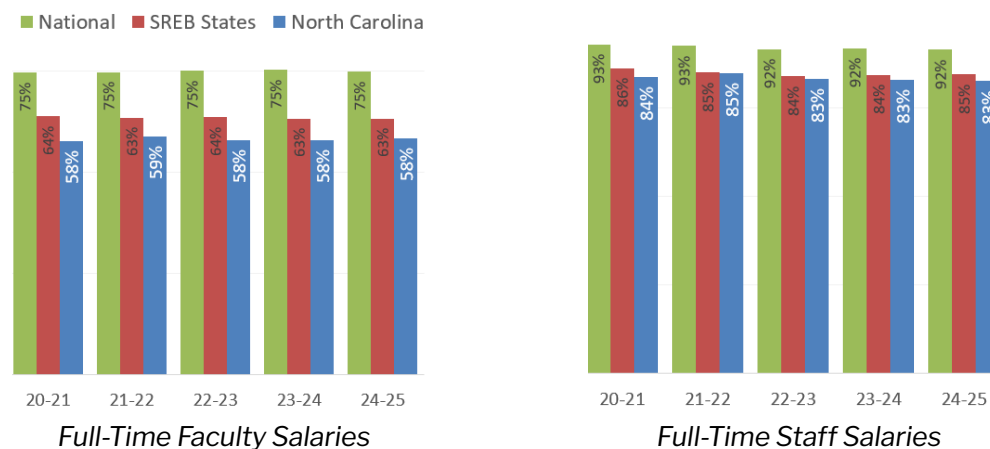


Source: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System

Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) states: Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia

Salary discrepancies also persist across North Carolina's higher education landscape. Comparisons internally show that several of our colleges' faculty and staff salaries fall below the state average for public two-year institutions. Compared to our state's public four-year institutions, our full-time faculty earned only 58 cents for every dollar earned by their four-year peers in 2024-25, while our full-time staff earned 83 cents for every dollar earned by their four-year peers (see **Figure 1.3**).

Figure 1.3: Average Full-Time Faculty and Staff Salaries at Public Two-Year Institutions as a Share of Comparable Salaries at Public Four-Year Institutions



Source: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System

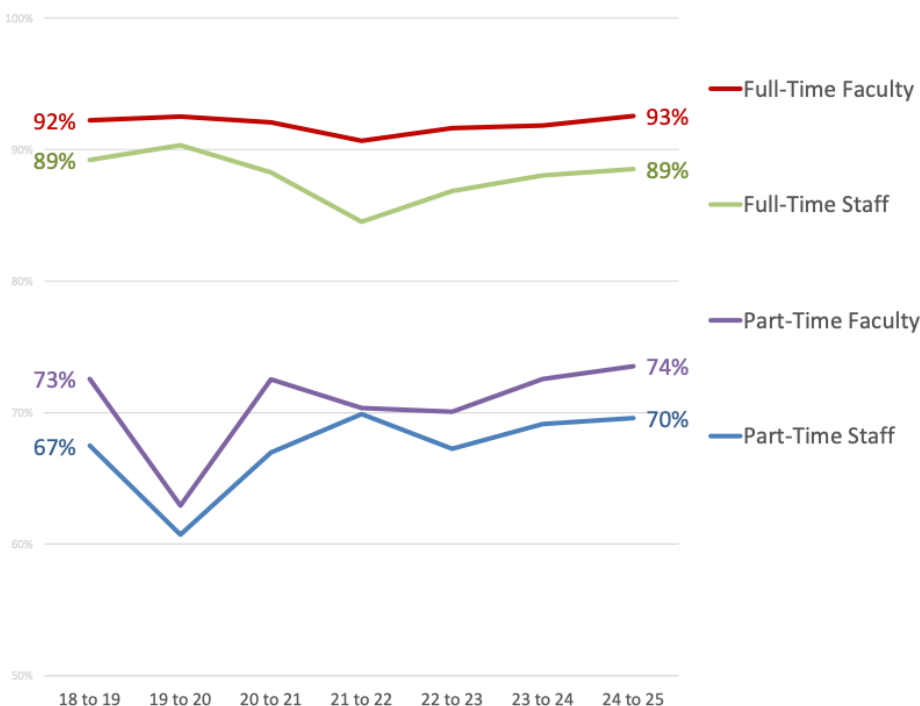
Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) states: Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia

Takeaway 2: Faculty and staff retention have rebounded from pandemic-era declines, yet higher turnover persists among part-time employees, including faculty in workforce continuing education programs.

Over the last five years, faculty and staff retention rates have bounced back from dips that coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic. Full-time faculty and staff are retained at consistently high rates across the system, with 93% of full-time faculty and 89% of full-time staff retained at their same institution between Fall 2024 and Fall 2025. Part-time faculty and staff experience higher turnover, with 74% of part-time faculty and 70% of part-time staff retained at their same institution during that same period (see **Figure 1.4**).

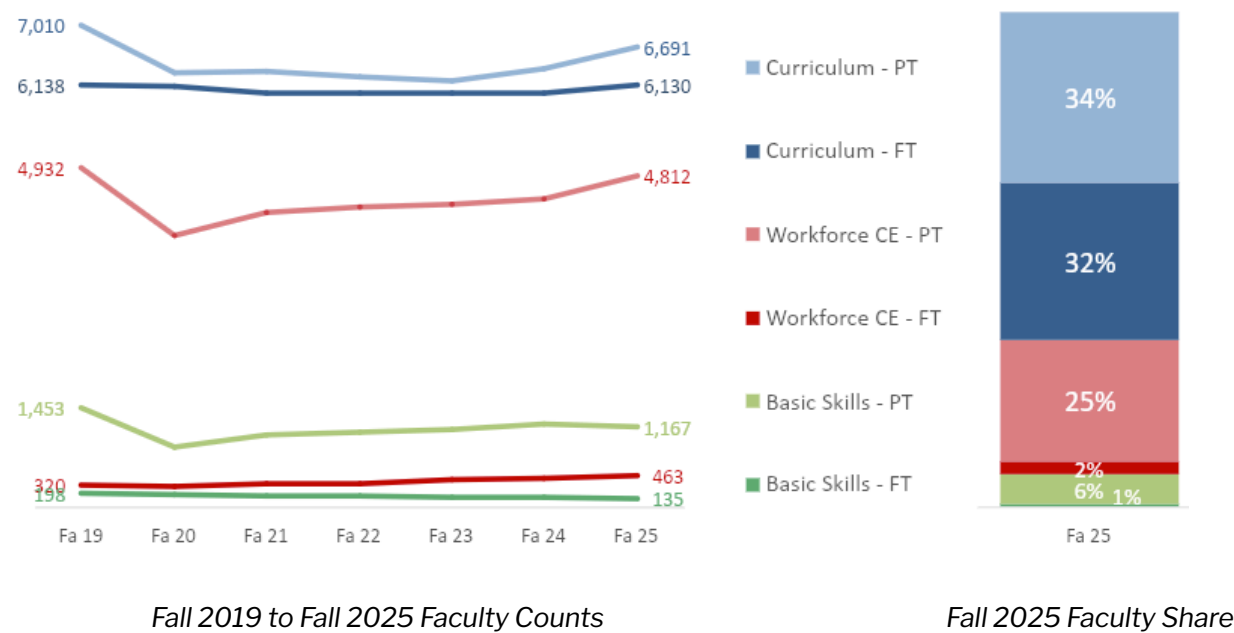
This distinction matters because part-time faculty represent more than half of the system's instructional workforce and are especially critical to the delivery of workforce continuing education programs, which draw on current industry professionals, healthcare practitioners, skilled tradespeople, and other working experts as instructors (see **Figure 1.5**).

Figure 1.4: Full- and Part-Time Faculty and Staff Fall-to-Fall Retention Rates



Source: Institutional Staff Information File

Figure 1.5: Full- and Part-Time Faculty by Instructional Area



Source: Institutional Staff Information File

GOAL TWO: Enrollment

Critical Context

Why it matters: Strong, sustained enrollment is essential to fulfilling our mission of preparing students for the careers that power the state's economy. Because state funding for community colleges is closely tied to enrollment, declines in enrollment can strain colleges' capacity to deliver on that mission by limiting the resources available to hire faculty and staff, maintain facilities, provide student services, and respond to community needs.

What we faced: While the sudden enrollment declines brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic were top of mind for the system at the time the *Leading Through Change* strategic plan was being developed, analysis of statewide demographic trends also pointed to broader, longer-term threats, including a projected decline in the number of high school graduates and ongoing population loss in many of North Carolina's rural counties and communities. At the same time, North Carolina had recently established an ambitious statewide postsecondary attainment goal of ensuring that 2 million North Carolinians ages 25-44 would hold an industry-valued credential or postsecondary degree by 2030. This created additional urgency for the system to reach, enroll, and support more learners, particularly adults who had not yet earned a postsecondary credential.

Work we prioritized: Against this backdrop, the system recognized that strengthening enrollment would require reaching more prospective students and emphasizing the value of our colleges and all they offer. *Leading Through Change* identified four related objectives:

- Increasing marketing and outreach to prospective students and their influencers,
- Increasing enrollment by focusing on career opportunities and the value proposition of community college education and occupational training,

- Streamlining and strengthening the pathways to colleges and careers, and
- Increasing the recruitment and retention of adult learners.

How we tracked our progress: Primary measures of success associated with Goal Two include headcount enrollment and full-time equivalent (FTE) enrollment, terms that are defined in **Figure 2.1**. We explored this data at both the system and college level to get a better sense of how enrollment has varied across time and place and contextualized it by considering the other factors beyond our immediate control (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic and broader economic conditions) that may be responsible for the trends we see. We also disaggregated this data by instructional area and student profile to better understand the types of courses in which our students are enrolling and the types of students our colleges are reaching and engaging.

Figure 2.1: Key Definitions: Enrollment

Headcount enrollment is an unduplicated count of the number of students receiving instruction during a specified timeframe. It does not consider the number of hours of instruction received by those students.

Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) enrollment is a measure of the amount of instruction received by students and is the primary basis upon which our colleges are funded. 512 hours of instruction received by a student equates to an FTE (16 hours x 16 weeks x 2 semesters).

Curriculum enrollment captures students enrolled in credit-bearing courses that lead to a certificate, diploma, or associate degree.

Workforce Continuing Education (CE) enrollment captures students enrolled in non-credit, short-term courses that provide targeted job training opportunities across a variety of programs.

Basic Skills enrollment reflects students enrolled in Adult Basic Education, GED, Adult High School, English as a Second Language (ESL) and Compensatory Education courses.

Dual enrollment is a measure of the students enrolled in community college courses as part of North Carolina's **Career and College Promise (CCP) program**, which connects eligible high school students to college courses on a tuition-free basis. **Cooperative Innovative High Schools** – including early colleges – are part of CCP and allow eligible high school students to simultaneously work toward the completion of a high school diploma and an associate degree, transferrable credit, or certificate.

Actions and Accomplishments

Providing Strategic Enrollment Management Support to Colleges

Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) is a comprehensive approach that connects recruitment, retention, and student success. By coordinating efforts across departments and using data to guide decisions, SEM ensures the right students are in the right programs with the right support needed to reach graduation. This approach strengthens institutional stability, enhances the student experience, and positions colleges for long-term success.

Throughout the last several years, the System Office has provided comprehensive SEM support to all 58 colleges via **professional development sessions, special task forces focused on admissions and financial aid, and written resources and toolkits**. Priorities during the period covered by the *Leading Through Change* strategic plan have included making it easier for prospective students to apply and enroll in our colleges (including via initiatives like NC College Connect, described below) and enhancing colleges' financial aid processes and related communication with students.

Offering Direct Admission to High School Seniors via NC College Connect

Launched in 2024 in partnership with the NC Department of Public Instruction and selected NC Independent Colleges and Universities and UNC System schools, NC College Connect creates a more seamless college admissions process for North Carolina's public high school students, with the goal of **increasing college visibility and enrollment throughout the state**. In Fall 2025, 62,000 high school seniors across the state received a letter telling them they would be offered direct admission to participating institutions, including all 58 community colleges, via NC College Connect. This year, **every public high school senior** across the state will receive a similar letter, further expanding access to higher education opportunities in North Carolina, especially for students who may not have envisioned college in their future.

Modernizing Marketing and Recruitment Efforts

At the same time, the System Office has worked to modernize and unify statewide marketing and recruitment efforts, ensuring that all 58 colleges have access to **high-quality branding, targeted communications, and advanced customer relationship management (CRM) tools**. This supports consistent outreach to prospective students, enhances employer engagement, and promotes community college enrollment by leveraging centralized data, statewide campaigns, and workforce-aligned messaging.

As part of this effort, the system surveyed all colleges to better understand their CRM adoption, usage, challenges, and support needs and piloted the subsidization of CRM costs and the provision of technical assistance to a cohort of colleges. With the support of the North Carolina General Assembly, which **allocated \$10 million in the 2026-27 state budget in support of the project**, the system is developing a systemwide CRM strategy and

roadmap to support continued progress among colleges already using a CRM and enable others to adopt this technology more efficiently, with the goal of transitioning to a more coordinated model that allows for standardized platforms and contracts, level pricing, terms, and functionality.

Expanding the North Carolina Career Coach Program

The North Carolina Career Coach Program, focused on bridging the gap between high school education and workforce success, recently celebrated a decade of impact. Since it was established in 2015, the program has served more than 200,000 high school students across the state, providing direct, one-on-one career guidance to help students navigate their futures. **By embedding community college-employed advisors directly in high schools, the program assists students in defining their career interests and selecting appropriate high school and college courses**, particularly through the state's Career and College Promise (CCP) dual enrollment program.

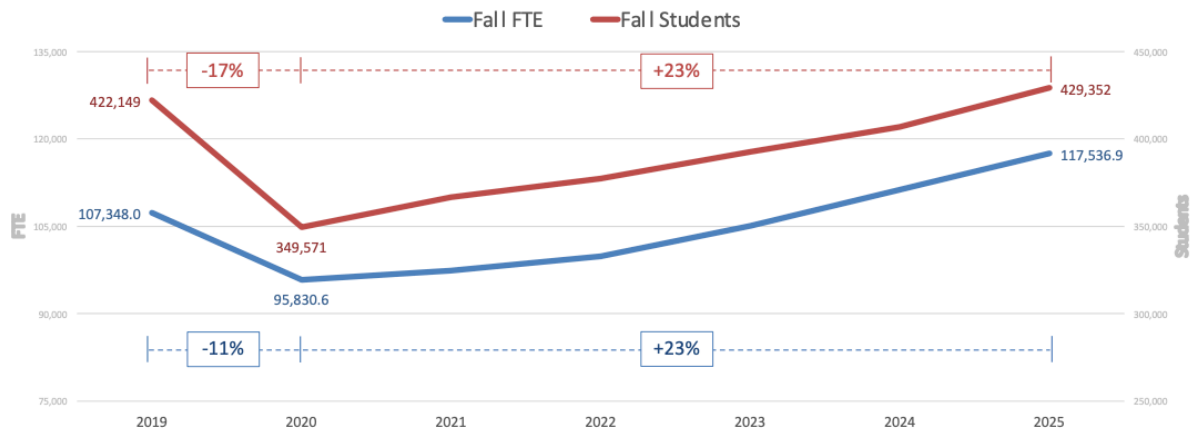
The program's 10-year milestone coincided with a record-breaking year of service, with 31,583 students served in the 2024-25 academic year, a 57% increase over the previous year. This growth continued in 2025-26, with 32,564 students served by 94 Career Coaches deployed across 49 of our state's community colleges. The program was also recently recognized as a **2026-27 myFutureNC Champion of Attainment**, highlighting its significant contributions to increasing educational attainment and strengthening college and career pathways for North Carolina's students.

Gains and Opportunities

Takeaway 1: Sustained growth has carried enrollment past pre-pandemic levels, even as unemployment has declined, and outpaced growth nationally.

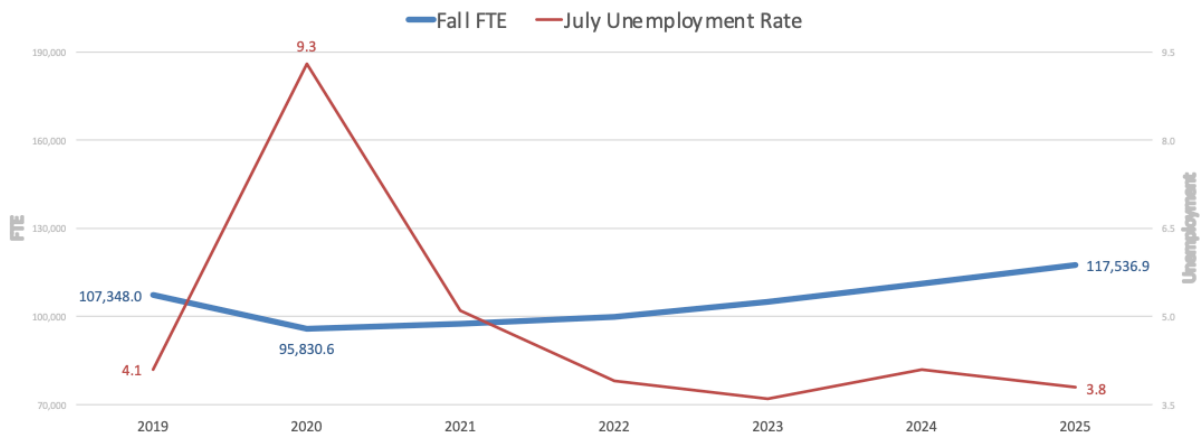
The COVID-19 pandemic caused a sudden, sharp decline in enrollment in Fall 2020. Since then, fall-to-fall FTE enrollment and student headcount enrollment have seen steady growth (at a rate of 23% according to both measures), and enrollment has surpassed pre-pandemic levels (see **Figure 2.2**). Historically, when unemployment increases, community college enrollment also increases. Our current growth defies that trend, as enrollment continues to increase despite a general decline in unemployment over the same period (see **Figure 2.3**).

Figure 2.2: FTE and Student Headcount Enrollment



Sources: Comprehensive Curriculum Student Report, Continuing Education Registration Report, and Institutional Class Report

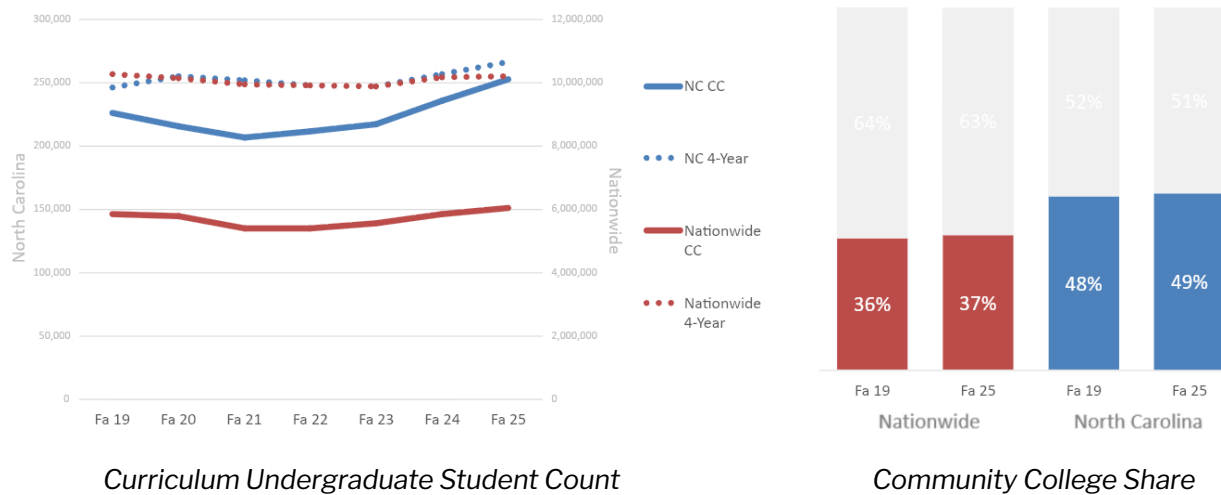
Figure 2.3: FTE Enrollment and Unemployment Rate



Sources: Institutional Class Report and US Bureau of Labor Statistics

This period of enrollment growth for our colleges also outpaces national trends. Since 2019, community college curriculum undergraduate enrollment has increased by 12% in North Carolina, compared to 3% nationally. In Fall 2025, 49% of all curriculum undergraduates enrolled at two- and four-year institutions in North Carolina attended a community college, compared to 37% nationally (see **Figure 2.4**).

Figure 2.4: Comparative National Two- and Four-Year Enrollment Trends



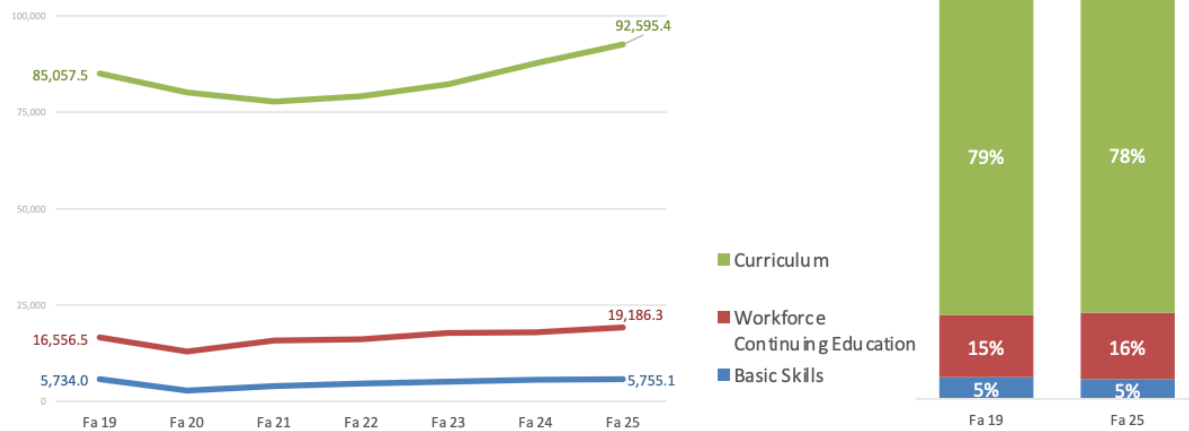
Source: National Student Clearinghouse

Takeaway 2: While enrollment patterns have remained largely stable since the pandemic, how students access instruction has changed significantly, with online and hybrid learning becoming increasingly prevalent.

Looking at FTE and student headcount enrollment by instructional area (Curriculum, Workforce Continuing Education, and Basic Skills), we see that our overall FTE and headcount mix have remained largely the same since the COVID-19 pandemic, with Curriculum enrollment in the majority (see **Figures 2.5 and 2.6**).

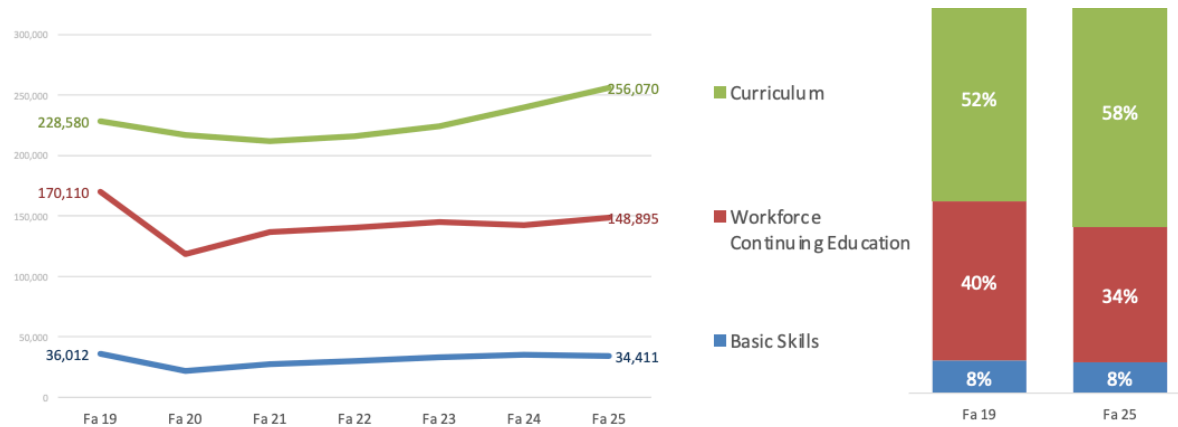
When we break down our student headcount enrollment further, as illustrated in **Figure 2.7**, we see that Transfer and General Education continue to serve the largest number of Curriculum students, reflecting strong demand for the community college as a gateway to a bachelor's degree. Career and Technical Education enrollment has grown alongside labor market demand for a skilled workforce with an associate degree, while Workforce Continuing Education enrolls the largest number of students overall and was the most sharply impacted by enrollment declines brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 2.5: FTE Enrollment by Instructional Area



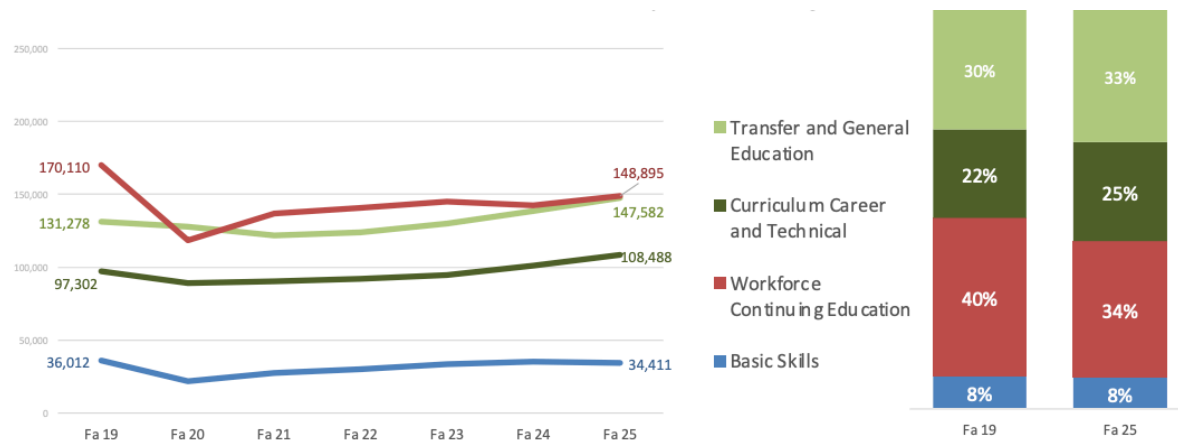
Source: Institutional Class Report

Figure 2.6: Student Headcount Enrollment by Instructional Area



Sources: Comprehensive Curriculum Student Report and Continuing Education Registration Report

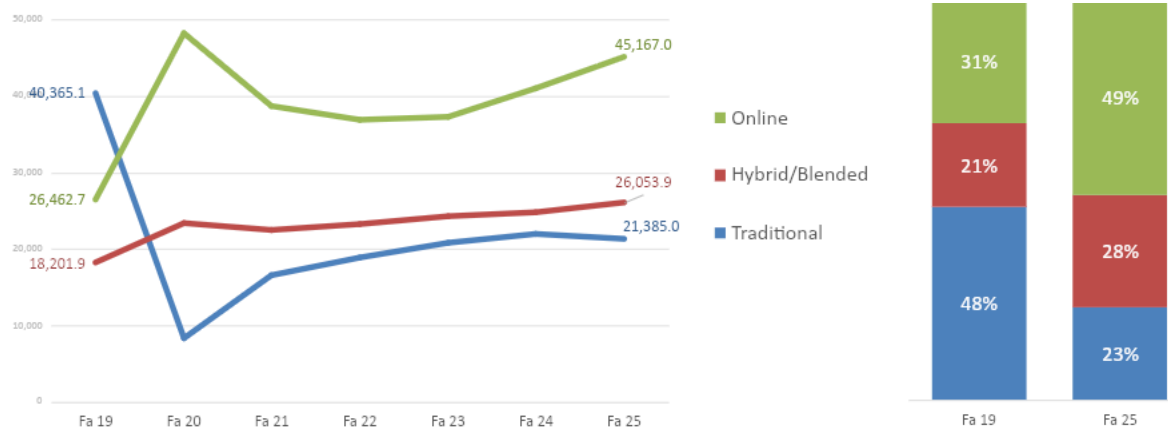
Figure 2.7: Student Headcount Enrollment by Program Area



Sources: Comprehensive Curriculum Student Report and Continuing Education Registration Report

The COVID-19 pandemic also sparked a sizeable shift toward offering more online and hybrid courses (see **Figure 2.8**). In Fall 2025, 77% of the system’s Curriculum FTE was generated by courses offered online or in hybrid/blended formats, compared to just 52% in Fall 2019. Online and hybrid classes are consistently cited by students as being critical to overcoming transportation barriers, navigating work scheduling conflicts, and solving for the other logistical challenges of bringing instructors and students together. This trend is consistent across our urban, suburban, and rural-serving colleges.

Figure 2.8: Curriculum FTE Instructional Method

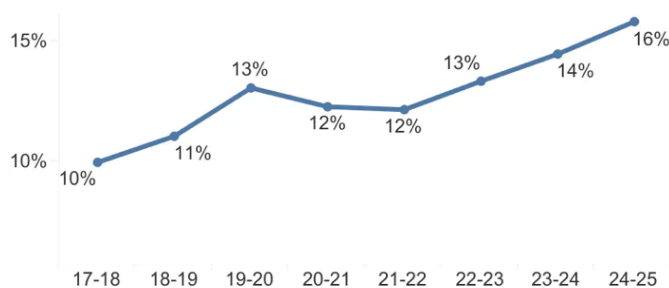


Source: Institutional Class Report

Takeaway 3: Dual enrollment has served as both a source of stability and growth in enrollment for colleges across the system.

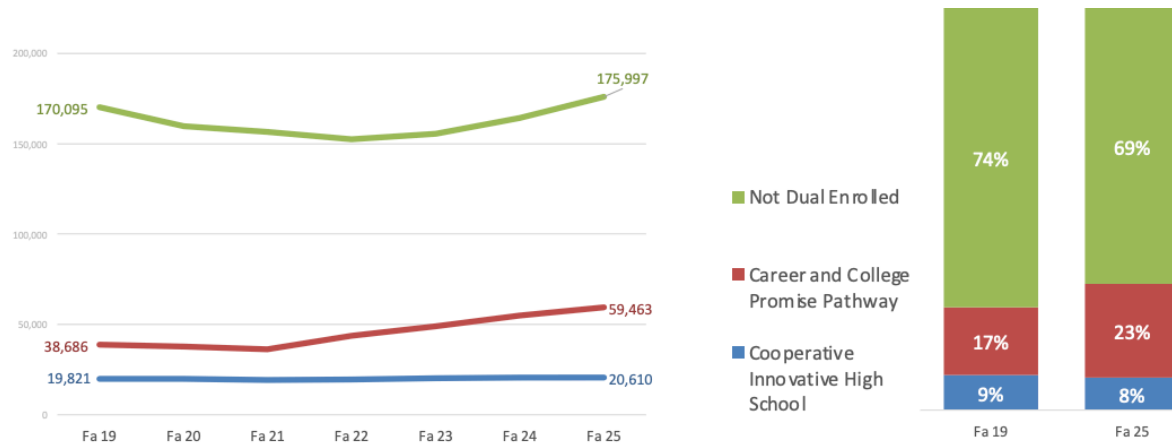
During the 2024-25 academic year, more than 90,000 North Carolina high school students – approximately 16% of the state’s high school population – were dually enrolled in the North Carolina Community College System (see **Figure 2.9**). Since 2019, our dually enrolled student population has grown by 37%. As a percentage of total enrollment, dual enrollment’s share grew by 5 percentage points over this same period to 31% (see **Figure 2.10**).

Figure 2.9: Percentage of NC High School Students Dually Enrolled in NCCCS



Source: Comprehensive Curriculum Student Report and NC Department of Public Instruction

Figure 2.10: Dually Enrolled Curriculum Student Headcount

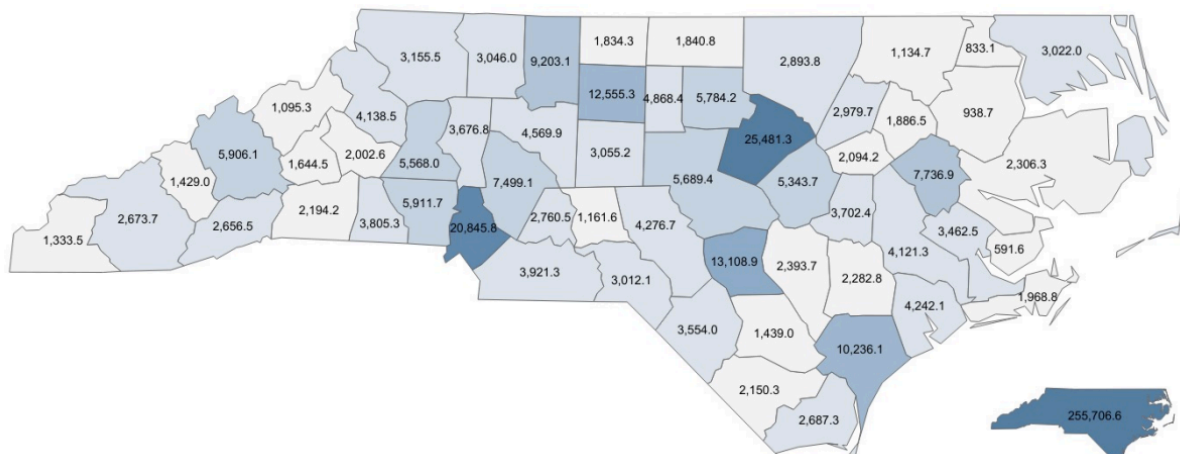


Source: Comprehensive Curriculum Student Report and NC Department of Public Instruction

Takeaway 4: Colleges of all sizes contribute to enrollment growth, with larger colleges driving volume and smaller colleges driving local market penetration.

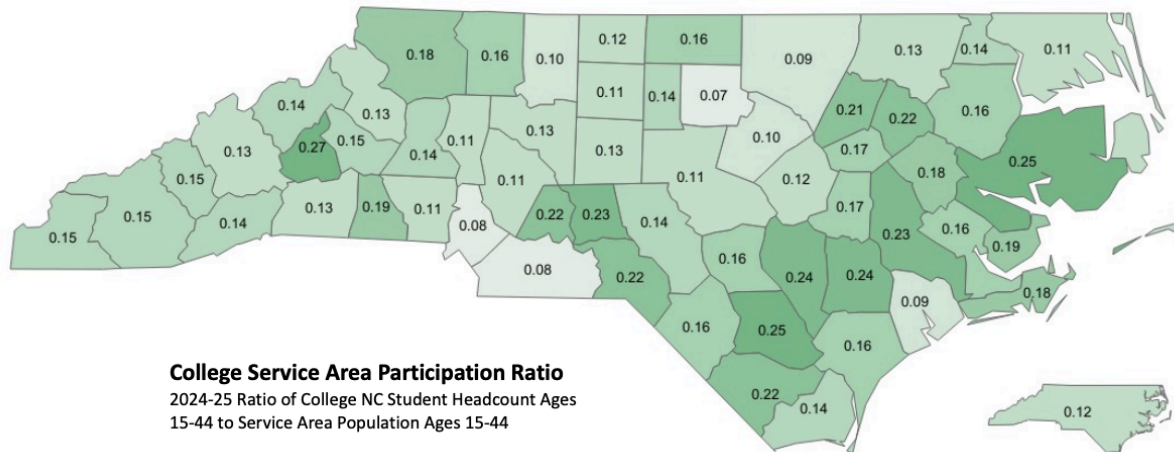
Enrollment growth is broadly distributed across the system, spanning colleges of all sizes and those serving both urban and rural communities. Our largest colleges drive volume, generating the most FTE in absolute terms (see **Figure 2.11**), while our smaller colleges extend the system’s reach, serving the highest percentage of their local populations (see **Figure 2.12**).

Figure 2.11: 2024-25 FTE Generated Across College Service Areas



Source: Institutional Class Report

Figure 2.12: 2024-25 College Service Area Participation Ratio



Sources: Comprehensive Curriculum Student Report and Continuing Education Registration Report, and US Census Bureau

Takeaway 5: Student populations vary across colleges and influence how our institutions adapt to serve them and meet local needs.

Border colleges serve a higher proportion of out-of-state students, as do several of our colleges that offer robust online and distance learning opportunities. Colleges adjacent to prisons and correctional facilities serve higher proportions of incarcerated students, while certain rural colleges serve a higher proportion of high school students (see **Figure 2.13**). These differences reflect the distinct communities and contexts in which our colleges operate and the ways they adapt their programs and services to meet local needs.

Figure 2.13: Variation in Student Populations Served by Colleges

Prison Instruction Share of Total FTE (Fall 25)		High School Students Share of All Students (Fall 25)		Age 18-24 Students Share of All Students (Fall 25)		Out of State Students Share of All Students (Fall 25)	
College	% Share	College	% Share	College	% Share	College	% Share
Pamlico CC	36.5%	Martin CC	34.9%	Pitt CC	39.8%	Tri-County CC	10.0%
Southeastern CC	15.9%	Mitchell CC	31.7%	Central Piedmont CC	39.7%	Stanly CC	8.0%
Mayland CC	14.1%	South Piedmont CC	31.1%	Johnston CC	39.4%	Piedmont CC	5.5%
Richmond CC	12.9%	College of The Albemarle	28.8%	Cape Fear CC	39.4%	Cleveland CC	4.7%
South Piedmont CC	7.4%	Mayland CC	26.7%	Wake TCC	39.1%	Wake TCC	4.4%
		Central Carolina CC	26.7%			Mayland CC	4.4%
System		System		System		System	
2.3%		18.6%		32.7%		2.2%	
1,549 FTE		80,073 Students		140,362 Students		9,460 Students	

Sources: Comprehensive Curriculum Student Report and Continuing Education Registration Report



GOAL THREE: Student Success

Critical Context

Why it matters: Students come to our colleges with different goals, circumstances, and needs, and all deserve the opportunity to succeed. Beyond providing access to high-quality instruction, helping our students achieve their education and career goals involves supporting them as they navigate barriers, work to stay on track, and successfully complete their courses and programs of study.

What we faced: The *Leading Through Change* strategic planning process coincided with significant pandemic-driven shifts to systemwide teaching and learning. As faculty rapidly pivoted to online instruction, students found themselves navigating disruptions to their education alongside the pandemic's other impacts on their personal and professional lives. At the time the *Leading Through Change* plan was being developed, college leaders cited youth disengagement, pandemic learning losses, growing mental health needs, rising costs, and the difficulty of balancing college with work and family obligations among a long list of significant challenges affecting students and their success.

Work we prioritized: These challenges underscored the need for more responsive student supports and new approaches to help students persist and complete education or training in their chosen career path. *Leading Through Change* identified three objectives related to strengthening student success:

- Focusing system policies and practices on inclusive excellence to reduce attainment gaps and cultivate a culture of belonging,
- Promoting excellence in teaching and addressing academic needs of learners, and
- Promoting a safe, healthy, and resilient learning environment.

How we tracked our progress: Success measures associated with Goal Three include success in college-level English and Math/Science courses, first-year progression/persistence rates, Curriculum completion, and Curriculum credential completion, terms that are defined in more detail in **Figure 3.1**.

Figure 3.1: Key Definitions: Student Success

Success in college-level English and Math/Science courses reflects the percentage of associate degree-seeking, non-dually enrolled students who enroll for the first time in the fall semester and pass a credit-bearing English and Math/Science course with a “C” or better within three years.

First-year progression/persistence measures the percentage of credential-seeking Curriculum students who enroll for the first time in the fall semester and graduate prior to or enroll in postsecondary education in the subsequent fall semester.

Curriculum completion reflects the percentage of credential-seeking Curriculum students who enroll for the first time in the fall semester and, after four years, graduate, transfer, or are enrolled during the fourth academic year with 42 successfully completed non-developmental hours.

Curriculum credential completion reflects an unduplicated count of the total number of Curriculum credentials awarded annually by type (associate degree, diploma, and certificate).

Actions and Accomplishments

Investing in Instructional Innovation

In 2021, the North Carolina Community College System and the North Carolina Student Success Center partnered with the Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research at NC State University to launch a **statewide network of Teaching and Learning Hubs**, which offer peer-led, evidence-based professional learning to full- and part-time community college faculty. The Hubs, now operated by the Belk Center, are designed to complement the efforts of individual colleges’ teaching and learning centers. Between Fall 2021 and Spring 2024, the Hubs hosted nearly 200 professional learning sessions, engaging more than 3,000 educators from all 58 community colleges. This training ultimately impacted more than 167,000 students, who enrolled in courses taught by Hub-trained instructors, and these same students were 7% more likely to persist term-to-term.

To continue recognizing and developing exemplary teaching across our colleges, the system launched the **Master Instructor (NC3MI) Program** in 2024 to offer a guided, hands-on experience for educators who aim to sharpen their craft, learn with peers across North Carolina, and model excellent teaching within the system. Candidates for the program are

nominated by college leadership at their home institutions, and graduates earn recognition as Master Instructors and are available to share effective practices, present at statewide convenings, and support peer learning across colleges.

The system also continues to grow its **Open Educational Resource platform, openNCCC**, which offers an online library featuring thousands of open-access educational resources that have been vetted by subject matter experts and a space for educators across the system to collaborate with peers in working groups. Additionally, the system's **Distance Learning Technologies Team** offers monthly professional learning opportunities to support educators in successfully navigating learning management systems, the integrated library system, distance learning technologies, and other tools and resources licensed by the system and colleges.

Promoting Excellence in Online Learning

The North Carolina Community College System's **Virtual Learning Community (VLC)** is a collaborative network that provides colleges with shared digital course repositories, professional development, and quality-assurance frameworks for online education. The VLC Professional Development Center also provides customized webinars, workshops, and face-to-face events to colleges at no cost. In the summer of 2026, the VLC hosted its fourth annual Online Learning Innovations Summit at Surry Community College, where more than 250 attendees from across the state discussed how to leverage emerging artificial intelligence technologies, navigate digital accessibility regulations, and expand workforce pathways to support the next generation of learners.

Supporting Students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities

Access to Achievement, a first-of-its-kind pathway to education and economic mobility for North Carolinians with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), began in 2021 as a two-college pilot and has since expanded with support from the North Carolina General Assembly to serve 15 colleges across the state. Administered by the North Carolina Community College System, program administrators worked extensively over the last two years to develop the state-level infrastructure needed to set the program up for success (including technical assistance, data collection processes, professional development initiatives, and online resources) and market the program to students.

Access to Achievement works to improve employment outcomes and credential attainment among individuals with IDD by offering innovative vocational training and extensive student support. Since the start of the 2025-26 academic year, the program has supported 871 students. Of the courses started by participating students in Fall 2025, 87% were completed, and of those completions, 89% were with a passing grade. To date, more than 300 students served by the program have earned an industry-recognized credential, workforce preparation certificate, or a college certificate, diploma, or degree. Thanks to continued

support from the North Carolina General Assembly, which allocated an additional \$3.85 million in recurring funding to the program in the 2026-27 state budget, Access to Achievement will soon expand to serve up to 10 additional community colleges across the system.

Preparing Educators and Colleges for the Rise of Artificial Intelligence

In response to the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) and its transformative impacts on work and education realized during the period covered by the *Leading Through Change* strategic plan, the North Carolina Student Success Center prioritized supporting educators and colleges in effectively navigating and leveraging AI-driven tools and technologies. Through a partnership with Jobs for the Future and with the support of Ascendium Education Group, the **Artificial Intelligence in NC (AI.iNC) initiative** conducted two regional convenings in Fall 2025 with teams from more than 50 colleges across the state focused on the responsible and ethical use of AI in the classroom and throughout our colleges. During the convenings, the North Carolina Community College System introduced its new AI Guidance Handbook, designed to provide a practical roadmap for colleges about how to responsibly integrate AI into teaching, learning, and operations. **As one of the first systems in the nation to adopt a coordinated, systemwide AI strategy backed by national partners**, our tools and resources – including our AI Guidance Handbook – are being shared with peers and partners nationwide, positioning North Carolina as a leader in helping community colleges navigate the opportunities and challenges presented by AI.

Advancing Credit for Prior Learning

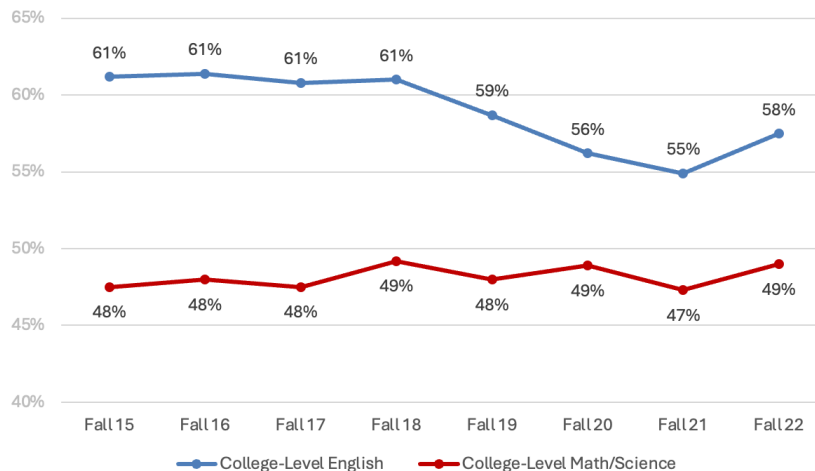
In early 2026, the North Carolina Community College System was selected to **participate in a national, evidence-based community of practice focused on advancing public policy for Credit for Prior Learning (CPL)**, which allows colleges to award academic credit for college-level learning acquired outside a traditional classroom setting (e.g., through military service, industry credentials, apprenticeships, and on-the-job training). Research has demonstrated that CPL increases credential completion, reduces time to degree, and lowers costs for students, while also strengthening alignment between education and workforce needs. Led by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning in partnership with RAND, the initiative will support the system in evaluating and modernizing its statewide CPL infrastructure, with a special emphasis on prioritizing support for adult and military-affiliated learners.

Gains and Opportunities

Takeaway 1: *College-level English course completion rates are still down from pre-pandemic levels but have begun to rebound, while Math/Science completion rates have remained relatively stable.*

Three-year college-level English course completion rates saw modest declines among pandemic-era cohorts, falling for three consecutive years (from 61% for the Fall 2018 cohort to a low of 55% for the Fall 2021 cohort) before rebounding to 58% for the Fall 2022 cohort. College-level Math/Science course three-year completion rates were more stable throughout this same period, hovering between 47 and 49% (See **Figure 3.2**).

Figure 3.2: *College-Level English and Math/Science Three-Year Course Completion*

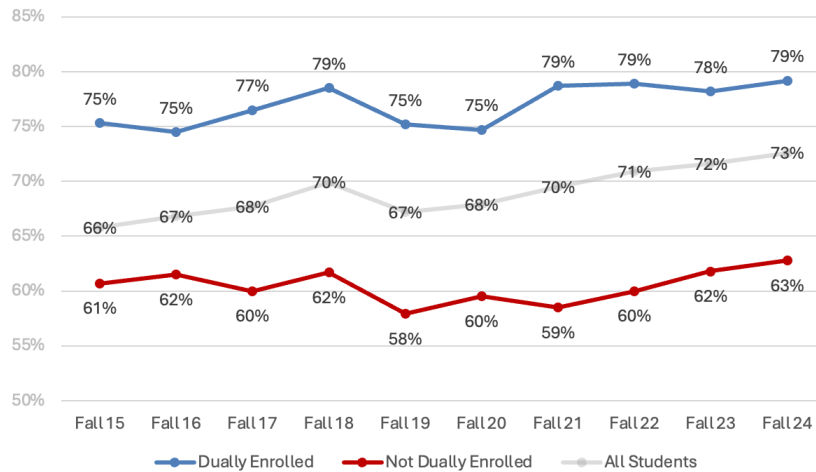


Source: Comprehensive Curriculum Student Report

Takeaway 2: *Aside from a pandemic-era dip, first-year progression/persistence rates have increased to their highest levels in a decade.*

First-year progression/persistence rates for all students increased by 7 percentage points over the last decade, quickly rebounding from a brief dip realized during the pandemic and rising to a high of 73% for the Fall 2024 cohort (see **Figure 3.3**). Rates are highest among dually enrolled students (79% for the Fall 2024 cohort), though non-dually enrolled students have also seen modest growth in progression/persistence over the last decade.

Figure 3.3: First-Year Progression/Persistence Rates

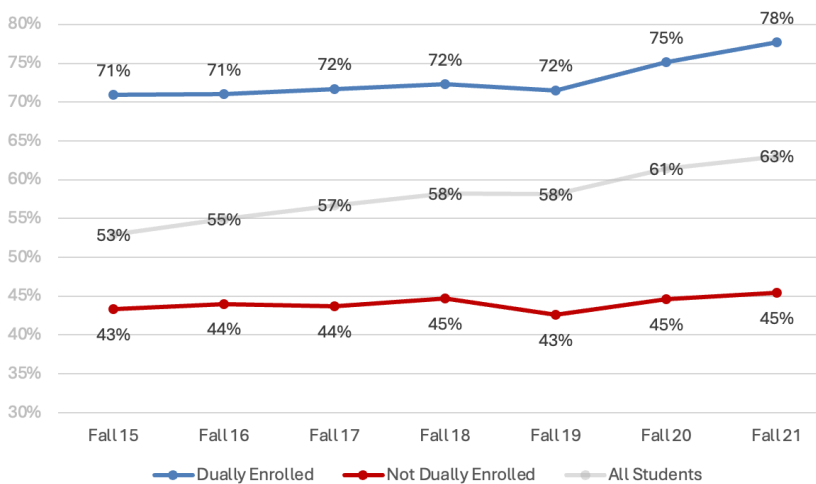


Sources: Comprehensive Curriculum Student Report, Graduation Extract, and National Student Clearinghouse

Takeaway 3: Curriculum completion rates have maintained their upward trajectory, with growth – driven primarily by dually enrolled students – accelerating post-pandemic.

Four-year Curriculum completion rates for all students increased by 10 percentage points (19%) over the last seven years, rising from 53% for the cohort beginning their studies in Fall 2015 to 63% for the Fall 2021 cohort (see **Figure 3.4**). In the last two years for which data are available (beginning with the Fall 2019 cohort), the completion rate for all students has increased by an average of 2-3 percentage points annually. This growth has been driven primarily by increases in the completion rate of dually enrolled students, which reached a high of 78% for the Fall 2021 cohort.

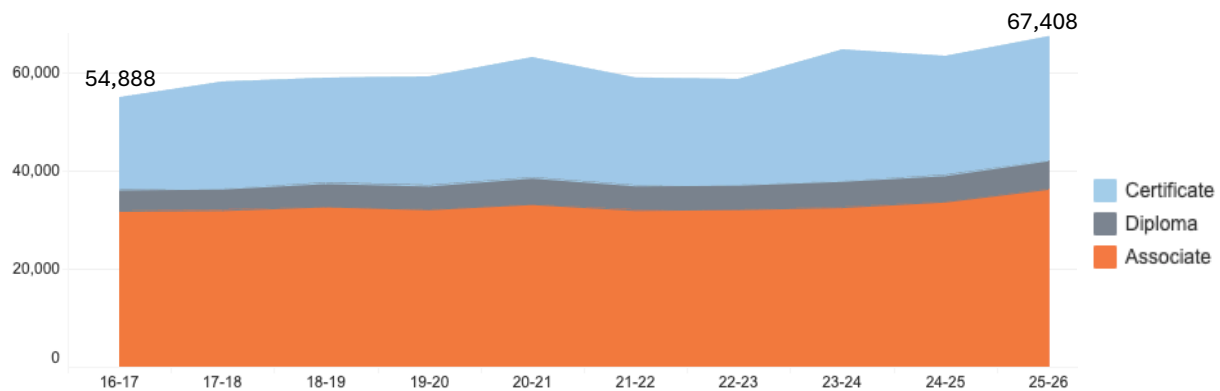
Figure 3.4: Four-Year Curriculum Completion



Sources: Comprehensive Curriculum Student Report, Graduation Extract, and National Student Clearinghouse

The total number of Curriculum credentials awarded by the North Carolina Community College System has also increased significantly over the last decade, growing by 23% since 2016-17 to a high of 67,408 in 2025-26 (see **Figure 3.5**). Growth occurred across all credential types, with the total number of certificates awarded in that same period increasing by 35%, followed closely by diplomas (34%) and associate degrees (14%). Associate degrees continue to account for the largest share of Curriculum credentials awarded by the system (54% in 2025-26), while certificates and diplomas account for 37% and 9% of the credentials awarded in 2025-26, respectively.

Figure 3.5: *Total Curriculum Credentials Awarded*



Source: Graduation Extract

GOAL FOUR:

Economic and Workforce Development

Critical Context

Why it matters: Every day, community colleges across North Carolina equip students with the skills needed to drive local economies and enhance our state's economic competitiveness. Our colleges play an essential role in providing the education, training, and credentials needed to develop the most competitive and agile workforce in the nation.

What we faced: At the time our *Leading Through Change* strategic plan was being developed, pandemic-driven labor market disruptions and the Great Resignation were intensifying an already-tight labor market, leaving employers across industries struggling to find and retain the skilled workers needed to meet growing demand. At the same time, North Carolina – a top-ranked state for business – was continuing to experience rapid economic growth and attracting major business relocations and expansions, creating thousands of new jobs in high-demand industries across the state. As they are today, our colleges were being called upon to strengthen employers' talent pipelines and help the state remain resilient in the face of these market shifts.

Work we prioritized: Meeting labor market needs requires working closely with employers to align credentials with in-demand skills and adopting strategies to help students earn credentials quickly. *Leading Through Change* identified three primary objectives related to meeting the needs of North Carolina's evolving workforce, including:

- Cultivating a robust pipeline of highly skilled workers that meets the needs of employers and helps grow the economies of all prosperity zones,
- Responding to employment preparation opportunities with instruction focused on relevant skills, credential attainment, and competency development, and

- Increasing access to the training, education, and wraparound services needed by students to achieve their career goals and upward mobility.

How we tracked our progress: Success measures associated with Goal Four include Career and Technical Education (CTE) completion and exiter quarterly earnings, along with measures of the individuals, businesses, and programs served through the system's economic development programs. These terms are defined in **Figure 4.1**.

Figure 4.1: Key Definitions: Economic and Workforce Development

Career and Technical Education (CTE) completion reflects the annual unduplicated count of Curriculum CTE graduates and those successfully completing a Workforce Continuing Education course that is credential aligned with 148+ hours of instruction.

CTE exiter quarterly earnings reflect the median quarterly earnings of wage-matched CTE exiters – students who successfully completed at least 9 curriculum credit hours in at least one CTE prefix and did not enroll in further postsecondary education – in their third year after exit.

ApprenticeshipNC (ANC), recognized by the Office of Apprenticeship to act on behalf of the US Department of Labor, is the State Apprenticeship Agency housed within the North Carolina Community College System. ANC works directly with employers, colleges, and community partners to design, launch, and expand Registered Apprenticeship and Registered Pre-Apprenticeship Programs. ANC also acts as an information source for individuals interested in pursuing career opportunities through Registered Apprenticeship.

NCEdge Customized Training is a statewide workforce development and customized training program housed within the North Carolina Community College System. It delivers tailored, no-cost training to qualifying new, expanding, and existing businesses across the state to help companies train employees and build skilled teams.

North Carolina's Small Business Center Network, also housed within the North Carolina Community College System, is North Carolina's largest state-supported small business assistance initiative. Each of our 58 colleges is home to a Small Business Center, which provides no-cost counseling, training, and technical assistance to entrepreneurs and small business owners at any phase in the business cycle.

Actions and Accomplishments

Expanding and Promoting Continued Investment in Registered Apprenticeship

In 2022, the North Carolina General Assembly appropriated nearly \$12 million in non-recurring funding to support the expansion of Registered Apprenticeship programs across the state. In the years since that investment was made, ApprenticeshipNC (ANC) has realized exponential growth – registering a total of 326 new apprenticeship programs and new participating employers and 136 new pre-apprenticeship programs and new participating employers in the 2024-25 fiscal year alone – and seen demand among students and employers continue to rise. In response to this success, **the state reaffirmed its commitment to Registered Apprenticeship as a key workforce development strategy by allocating more than \$3 million in recurring funding to ANC through the 2026-27 budget.**

With core operational costs covered through this recurring state funding, ANC can strategically leverage future US Department of Labor grant investments to increase employer engagement and continue the statewide expansion of Registered Apprenticeship. As part of this work, ANC will research state-funded incentives for employers and other sponsors and identify approaches most likely to increase Registered Apprenticeship starts, improve completion rates, and enhance post-completion outcomes.

Launching Boost, North Carolina's Accelerated College-to-Career Program

With the support of Arnold Ventures, whose \$35.6 million investment in 2025 marked the largest private grant ever awarded to the North Carolina Community College System, the system recently launched Boost, a new program designed to **quickly move students into high-wage, high-demand careers.** An adaptation of the City University of New York's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (CUNY ASAP), a nationally acclaimed and rigorously evaluated model for helping students graduate faster and with stronger outcomes, Boost focuses on removing barriers and keeping students on track to graduation by providing participating students with:

- **Financial resources**, including limited to no tuition and fees, funding for textbooks, and monthly stipends,
- **Comprehensive direct services** like personalized advising, career development opportunities, and community connections, and
- **Structured pathways to support increased academic momentum**, including full-time enrollment, priority registration, and academic supports.

North Carolina's adaptation of the CUNY ASAP model added two new elements that set it apart from other replications: our focus on workforce development (by enrolling participating students in pathways leading to high-demand jobs aligned with Propel NC, our new workforce-aligned community college funding model) and our approach to supporting

smaller, rural-serving colleges in participating via our consortium-driven model. A total of 15 colleges are in the process of implementing Boost, and approximately 5,000 students will be served by the program in the coming years.

In May 2026, the system announced **\$6 million in additional funding for Boost focused on strengthening healthcare workforce pipelines**, including \$3 million from the William R. Kenan Jr. Charitable Trust to serve students pursuing healthcare degrees at Wake Technical Community College, and an additional \$3 million from AmeriHealth Caritas North Carolina to support up to 1,000 more students statewide in earning short-term healthcare credentials in critical roles.

Extending the Impact of North Carolina's Small Business Center Network

North Carolina's Small Business Center Network (SBCN) continues to play a pivotal role in supporting local economic growth, serving more than 6,600 clients in fiscal year 2024-25 and providing more than 16,000 counseling hours and 4,345 training events, which reached more than 44,000 total attendees. That same year, **Small Business Centers contributed to more than 900 business startups and helped to create or retain more than 7,300 jobs** in communities across North Carolina.

In 2025, the North Carolina Community College System announced a partnership with Goldman Sachs to engage the SBCN in launching 10,000 small businesses across the state and approved funding for the Accelerate and Innovate McDowell (AIM) program, which will launch at McDowell Technical Community College before being offered to Small Business Centers at each of our 58 colleges. AIM is intended to provide guidance to local entrepreneurs and cultivate sustainable economic development by connecting them to a variety of resources, including mentors, lenders, and other small business owners.

Meeting Growing Demand Among Employers for Customized Training

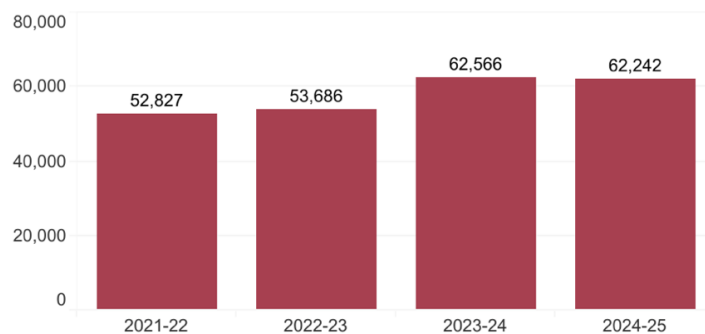
Cross-sector demand for customized training continues to grow among employers in all regions of the state. In response, **NCEdge has steadily expanded its reach over the last five years, supporting 45% more projects and training 48% more employees in fiscal year 2025-26 than in 2021-22**. In the last fiscal year alone, NCEdge supported a total of 867 companies by delivering training to 33,878 employees through a total of 323 projects delivered in partnership with all 58 of our colleges. Highest rates of growth were seen in computer/electrical projects (71%), chemical projects (67%) metals/iron/steel projects (64%), and textiles/apparel projects (63%).

Gains and Opportunities

Takeaway 1: Career and Technical Education (CTE) pathways are producing more completers and meaningful economic returns, with recent earnings meeting or exceeding average statewide living wage thresholds across most colleges.

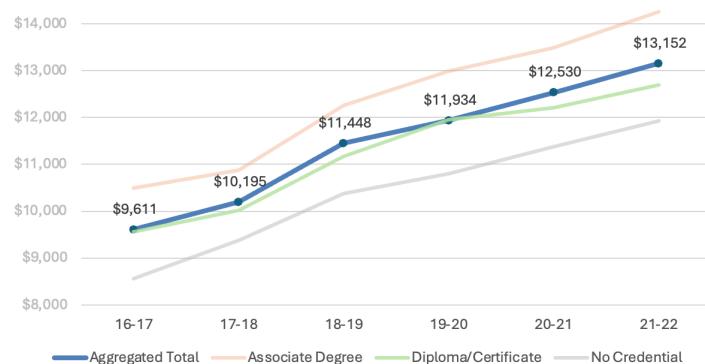
Annual CTE completion increased by 18% from 2021-22 to 2024-25, with 9,415 more completers in 2024-25 than in 2021-22 (see **Figure 4.2**). In the last six years, overall median CTE exiter quarterly earnings (measured three years after exit) grew by 37%, increasing from \$9,611 for 2017-18 exiters to \$13,152 for 2021-22 exiters (see **Figure 4.3**). CTE exiters with an associate degree consistently realized the highest median quarterly earnings, while exiters not earning a credential saw the largest growth in earnings (39%). Recent earnings data also indicate that more CTE exiters are realizing a living wage, with median exiter quarterly earnings exceeding the average statewide quarterly living wage in most college service areas (see **Figure 4.4**).

Figure 4.2: Annual CTE Completion



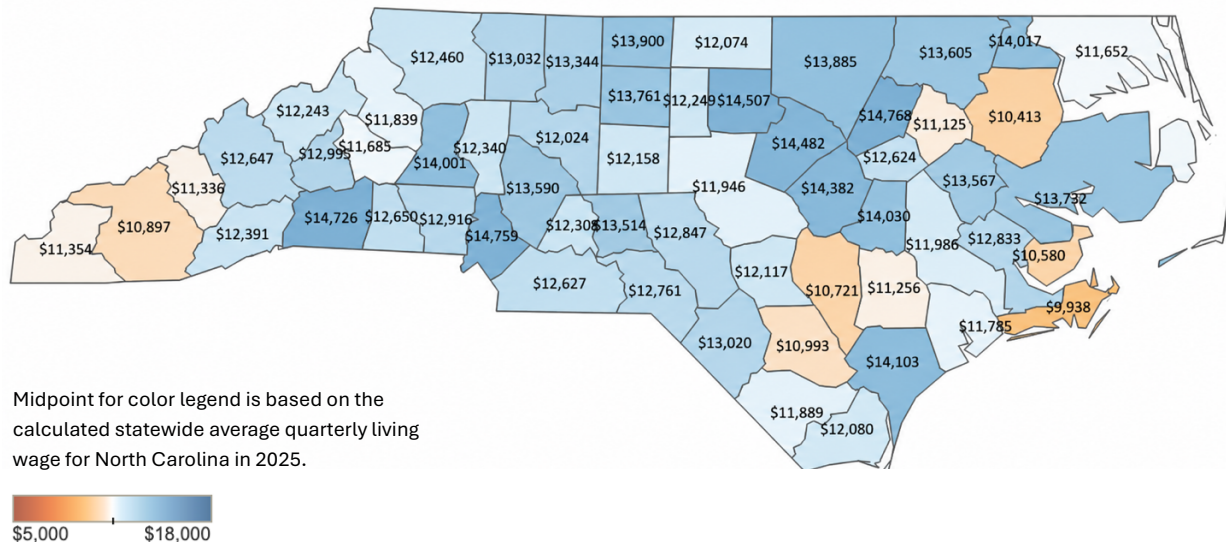
Sources: Comprehensive Curriculum Student Report, Continuing Education Registration Report, and Graduation Extract

Figure 4.3: Median CTE Exiter Quarterly Earnings (Three Years After Exit)



Sources: Comprehensive Curriculum Student Report, Continuing Education Registration Report, Graduation Extract, National Student Clearinghouse, and NC Department of Commerce

Figure 4.4: Median CTE Exiter Quarterly Earnings by College Service Area (Three Years After Exit)



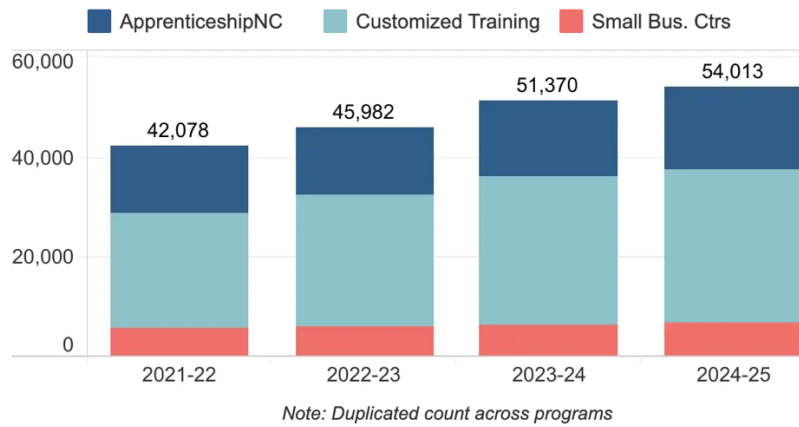
Sources: Comprehensive Curriculum Student Report, Continuing Education Registration Report, Graduation Extract, National Student Clearinghouse, NC Department of Commerce, and MIT Living Wage Calculator

Takeaway 2: The system’s workforce and economic development programs are reaching more students, clients, and businesses, with service to individuals at an all-time high and employer engagement far exceeding pre-pandemic levels.

In 2024-25, a total of 54,013 students and clients were served through ApprenticeshipNC, NCEdge Customized Training, and the Small Business Center Network, reflecting an increase of 28% compared to 2021-22 (see **Figure 4.5**). This surpasses the system’s previous all-time high of 53,418 students and clients served in 2019-20.

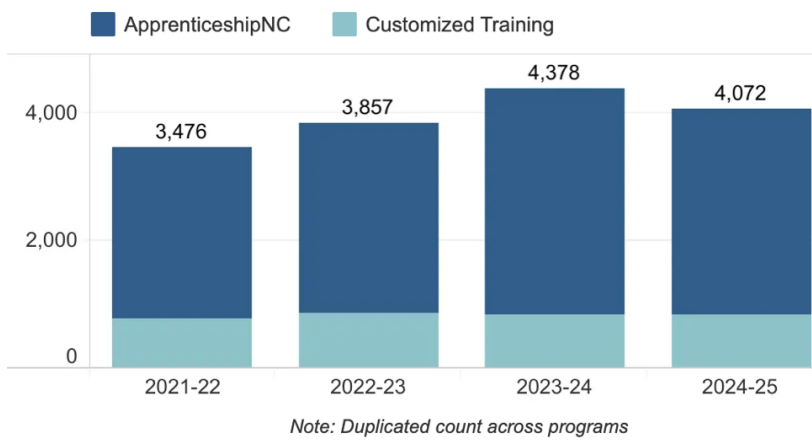
In 2024-25, ApprenticeshipNC and NCEdge Customized Training served 4,072 businesses and programs, a 17% increase compared to 2021-22 (see **Figure 4.6**). While down slightly from the system’s all-time high of 4,378 in 2023-24, this still represents a remarkable 145% increase over pre-pandemic levels (1,660 businesses and programs served in 2019-20).

Figure 4.5: *Individuals Served Through Economic Development Programs*



Source: NCCCS Economic Development

Figure 4.6: *Businesses/Programs Served Through Economic Development Programs*



Source: NCCCS Economic Development

GOAL FIVE: System Funding and Effectiveness

Critical Context

Why it matters: To successfully advance the priorities outlined in the strategic plan and continue serving colleges and the state effectively, the North Carolina Community College System must have the resources, infrastructure, and organizational capacity to continuously adapt and innovate. Strong system-level funding and operations are critical to helping colleges deliver high-quality education and workforce training across North Carolina.

What we faced: At the outset of the *Leading Through Change* strategic planning process, leaders identified several longstanding challenges limiting the system's ability to respond efficiently to meet the evolving needs of colleges and their communities. These included a funding model that had not kept pace with changes in how colleges deliver education and workforce training, aging and fragmented information technology and data systems, opportunities to strengthen coordination and resource-sharing across colleges, and the need for greater investment in statewide marketing and communications.

Work we prioritized: In the strategic plan, the system identified several opportunities to increase its capacity to support colleges, including:

- Advocating for legislative investment reflective of the value the system provides to its employees and the students and businesses it serves,
- Modernizing and realigning the system's funding formula,
- Aligning System Office support to colleges' needs, and
- Equipping the system with the data and technology systems needed to provide best-in-class support for core business functions.

How we tracked our progress: Key performance indicators associated with Goal Five include annual budget allocations per full-time equivalent (FTE) enrollment (see **Figure 5.1**).

Figure 5.1: Key Definitions: System Funding and Effectiveness

Annual budget allocations reflect the system's total **formula allocations** (the primary mechanism through which state funds are allocated colleges and based primarily on enrollment), and **categorical allocations** (a mechanism for providing restricted funds earmarked for specific programs, initiatives, or populations).

Adjustments for inflation are calculated using the Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers (CPI-U) in the South Region. These adjustments allow for year-over-year comparison of budget allocations controlled for inflation. For the purposes of this report, annual budget allocations for 2022-23 through 2024-25 are reported in 2025-26 dollars.

Annual budget allocation per FTE reflects the ratio of inflation-adjusted annual community college budget allocations compared to annual full-time equivalent enrollment generated by colleges in that same year.

Actions and Accomplishments

Adopting Propel NC, a Transformative Business and Funding Model for the System

With the recent adoption of Propel NC, the North Carolina Community College System is modernizing how the state funds its workforce development programs, creating closer ties between what colleges teach and the high-demand fields driving North Carolina's economy. With the support of the North Carolina General Assembly and the passage of the 2026-27 state budget, which **fully funded community college enrollment growth at \$99 million and allocated \$57.5 million in recurring funds to update the funding formula behind Propel NC**, the system is making strides toward prioritizing high-demand, high-wage sectors and establishing parity between workforce continuing education and curriculum programs under a new umbrella of instructional funding.

Under the previous funding model, colleges received funding based largely on enrollment, and the amount of funding they received varied depending on the types of courses they offered. Courses were grouped into funding tiers, with higher-cost programs generally receiving more funding. Over time, those tiers did not always align with North Carolina's changing workforce needs.

The state's recent investment in Propel NC supports the system's transition to a new funding model in which courses are **strategically aligned with workforce sectors** (including healthcare, engineering, advanced manufacturing, trades and transportation, information technology, and public safety) that are **validated, categorized, and incentivized based on regularly updated statewide labor market data**. Additionally, this model **removes the dividing line and creates parity between curriculum and workforce continuing education courses**, grouping both types of instruction into unified workforce sectors funded at the same rate.

The result is a transformative shift in how our colleges are funded that will connect students to high-demand, high-wage career opportunities and encourage colleges to invest in short-term training leading to credentials in key sectors. The system continues to work closely with colleges and college presidents to evaluate the roll-out and impact of Propel NC, with an immediate focus on understanding colleges' initial priorities and plans for using their Propel NC funding and tracking how those funds are ultimately invested, the return on those investments, and anticipated impacts over time.

Additionally, the 2026-26 state budget allocated **\$6 million in non-recurring funding to establish an enrollment increase reserve** for community colleges with eligible enrollment increases that exceed budgeted enrollment levels. This reserve is meant to help ensure stable funding for colleges that experience spikes in enrollment. As part of that request, the system also successfully advocated for a statutory change to proportionately redistribute any surplus tuition revenue back to colleges according to a formula adopted by the State Board.

Stewarding Record-Breaking Private Philanthropic Support

In collaboration with the State Board and System Office, the North Carolina Community Colleges Foundation launched **Soar: The Campaign for NC Community Colleges, a multi-year, \$75 million philanthropic campaign to attract new national and multinational investment**. The campaign is organized around three pillars – opportunity, success, and mobility – focused on attracting students to community colleges, accelerating completion and career success, and strengthening connections between education and employment. As of May 2026, the campaign had secured more than \$60 million of its \$75 million goal, with investments made through the campaign supporting initiatives including Boost, Propel NC scholarships, skills-based pathways, North Carolina's Small Business Centers, digital literacy, and other system priorities.

Modernizing Systemwide Technology and Infrastructure

The North Carolina Community College System's focus on transforming systemwide technology dates back to 2016, when it launched the first of five phases of work to replace aging, fragmented software across all 58 colleges and the System Office. In 2023, the system entered phase four of this plan, focused on **modernizing and upgrading core services at the System Office and preparing a pathway to transition from Ellucian Colleague (in use since 2008) to a new, cloud-based Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) system, the Ellucian Banner Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) Standard Technology Platform**.

Banner, currently being piloted by a cohort of five community colleges, will be configured to serve as a standard student information system template for colleges to manage many of their core operations, including student services, finance, grants, human resources, and payroll. Among other benefits, this new solution is designed to improve the student experience, support data-informed decision-making, increase operational efficiency, reduce risk, and improve security.

At the same time, the System Office has taken steps to transform several of its core applications, which will provide flexibility with the existing Ellucian Colleague ERP and provide a pathway to adopt future modernized ERP solutions like Banner. Related projects have focused on:

- **The Combined Course Library (CCL)**, a statewide portal that enables colleges to work with the System Office to create and revise courses, manage program standards, request program approvals, and complete other academic processes. The CCL also includes a public, searchable catalog of courses offered across the system. Once implemented, updates to the CCL will allow colleges to submit courses electronically rather than by email, provide real-time visibility into the status of a proposal as it moves through review, and post approved courses to the CCL automatically, with minimal manual staff intervention.
- **The College Budget and Accounting System (CBAS)**, which is used by all colleges to transmit cash certification requests to the System Office Finance and Operations division. Banner CBAS is now live and will be the system of record for college budget and financial records for the 2026-27 fiscal year.
- **The NCEdge Customized Training Program's** data systems, which play a critical role in facilitating NCEdge's efforts to provide education, training, and support services for new, expanding, and existing businesses throughout North Carolina. NCEdge successfully transitioned its systems to Banner in 2025.
- **The Data Warehouse**, which provides a centralized repository for the college data used to create reports, performance data, and various data extracts. Updates to the Data Warehouse are still underway as of Summer 2026.

In 2025, the State Board of Community Colleges formed a new Transformation Committee to oversee these and other related initiatives, including the rollout of an enhanced Customer Relationship Management (CRM) platform, highlighted in more detail on pages 15-16 of this report. Another key initiative being led by the System Office under the oversight of the Transformation Committee is the transition to **a unified Learning Management System (LMS)**, in compliance with Senate Bill 133 / Session Law 2025-62. Enacted in July 2025, SL 2025-62 required the solicitation of one LMS for the North Carolina Community College System, the awarding of a contract by 2025 year-end, and a full transition to the awarded LMS by year-end 2027. In December 2025, a systemwide contract was awarded to Instructure (Canvas), supporting alignment with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction and University of North Carolina System institutions already using the Canvas LMS. Across the system, transitions to Canvas – rolled out using a cohort-based approach – began in January 2026 and will conclude by the end of 2027.

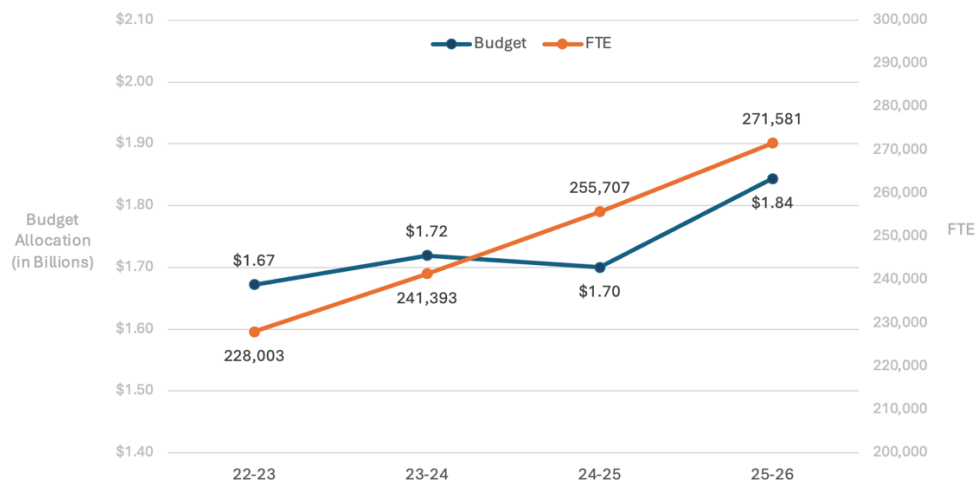
Throughout the period covered by the *Leading Through Change* strategic plan, the system also prioritized the **accessibility and use of systemwide data**. Through enhancements to the system's data dashboards, expanded access to near-time data about enrollment, and the development of new tools and resources focused on equipping colleges with relevant labor market and outcomes data, these advancements align with the broader goals of Propel NC and support colleges and the System Office in accessing and using data to inform decision-making.

Gains and Opportunities

Takeaway 1: State investment in North Carolina’s community colleges is growing, with gains continuing to be realized through the adoption of Propel NC.

Since 2022-23, annual FTE generated by colleges increased by approximately 19%, while inflation-adjusted budget allocations rose by approximately 10%, from a total of \$1.67 billion in 2022-23 to \$1.84 billion in 2025-26 (see **Figure 5.2**).

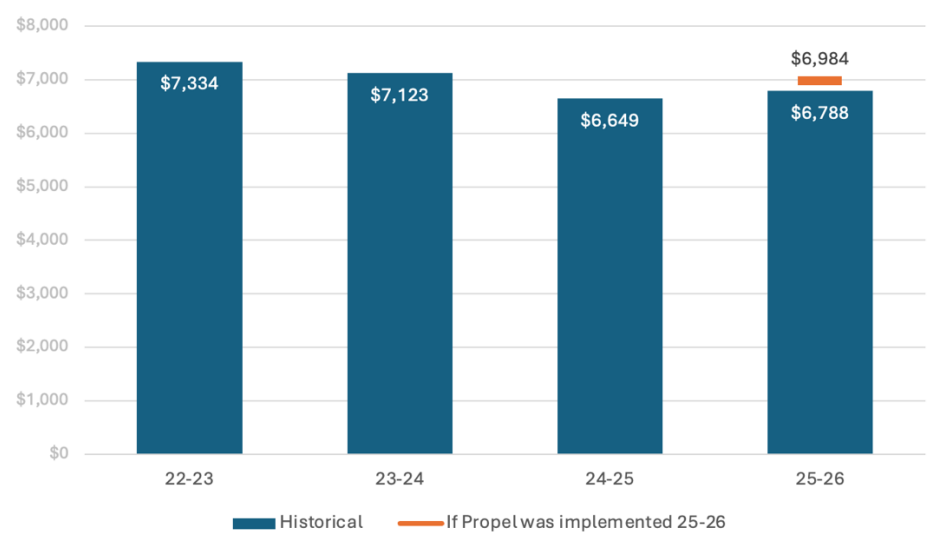
Figure 5.2: Inflation-Adjusted Budget Allocation and FTE



Source: NCCCS Business and Finance and US Bureau of Labor Statistics

While inflation-adjusted budget allocation per FTE declined from \$7,344 in 2022-23 to \$6,788 in 2025-26 (a decline of approximately 8%), the downward trend began to reverse in 2025-26 (see **Figure 5.3**). The passage of the 2026-27 state budget – the first to carry a recurring appropriation to the North Carolina Community College System for Propel NC – contributes to this continued upward momentum. This recurring investment in Propel NC increased the system’s 2026-27 Formula Allocations by 3%. To illustrate the scale of this investment relative to recent funding levels, applying an equivalent increase to 2025-26 Formula Allocations would have raised annual budget allocation per FTE from \$6,788 to a projected \$6,984, as illustrated in **Figure 5.3**.

Figure 5.3: *Inflation-Adjusted Budget Allocation Per FTE*



Source: NCCCS Business and Finance and US Bureau of Labor Statistics