

Excellence Across 58 Colleges: NC Community Colleges Names 2026 Award Winners

NC Community Colleges announces 2026 statewide excellence award winners for students, faculty, and partners

Every year, the proof of what North Carolina's community colleges accomplish walks across the stage at the [NC Community Colleges Awards Dinner and Celebration](#). This year, the spotlight shines on nine standing awards plus a new special recognition award, honoring a student who rebuilt her life after a career-ending accident, a motorsports legend who has spent decades investing in the state's workforce, and educators who have turned their classrooms into launchpads.

Together, the North Carolina Community College System, State Board, and Foundation are proud to name the statewide winners of the 2026 excellence awards.

Signature Awards

- Dallas Herring Achievement Award Winner: **Ms. Cheri Landreth, Surry Community College**
- I.E. Ready Lifetime Achievement Award Winner: **Mr. Rick Hendrick, Hendrick Motorsports**

Faculty and Staff Awards

- Excellence in Teaching Award Winner: **Ms. Tonya Stephens, Blue Ridge Community College**
- Staff Person of the Year Award Winner: **Ms. Heather Pack, Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College**
- President of the Year Award Winner: **Dr. Janet Spriggs, Forsyth Technical Community College**

Workforce Development Pinnacle Awards

- Apprenticeship Champion: **Caterpillar, Inc. with Central Carolina Community College**
- Innovative Leadership Award Winner: **Okuma America Corporation with Rowan-Cabarrus Community College**
- Business of the Year (<500 Employees): **Aegis Power Systems, Inc. with Tri-County Community College**

- Business of the Year (>500 Employees): **Pratt & Whitney with Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College**
- Pathways to Employment Leadership Award: **Senator Michael Lee, Ms. Lisa Estep, and Ms. Nancye Gaj**

“These honorees represent community colleges at their best, meeting people where they are and giving them something that lasts. A student who started over and came out leading. Businesses that didn’t wait for the workforce to show up—they helped build it. Educators who refuse to let a single student fall through the cracks. That’s the work. And North Carolina does it better than anyone in the country,” said Dr. Jeff Cox, President, NC Community College System.

Duke Energy serves as the presenting sponsor for the awards event, which will be held at The Angus Barn Pavilion on April 15, underscoring their commitment to workforce development and the success of students across the state.

“At Duke Energy, workforce development isn’t a side effort – it’s fundamental to how we serve our customers and communities,” said Kendal Bowman, Duke Energy North Carolina state president. “North Carolina’s community colleges are where talent is discovered, skills are built and futures take shape. Being the presenting sponsor of these awards is about recognizing the partners who are doing the hard, intentional work of preparing people for careers that power this state forward.”

SIGNATURE AWARDS

Dallas Herring Achievement Award Winner: *Ms. Cheri Landreth, Surry Community College*

Named in honor of Dr. Dallas Herring, the architect of North Carolina’s open-door community college philosophy, this award goes to the student who best embodies his belief in “taking people where they are and carrying them as far as they can go.” This year, the honor belongs to Cheri Landreth of Surry Community College.

A long-haul trucker for most of her adult life, Landreth’s career ended abruptly in 2019 when a devastating accident forced her to rebuild from the ground up. She enrolled at Surry Community College not just to retrain, but to reinvent. What followed was a transformation that extended well beyond the classroom: Landreth rose to serve as president of Phi Theta Kappa, spearheaded the PTK Veterans Memorial Monument Project in Dobson, forged community partnerships, and secured grant funding for

initiatives that extended her college's reach. Her journey is a testament to what community colleges do at their best.

I.E. Ready Lifetime Achievement Award Winner: *Rick Hendrick, Hendrick Motorsports*

Named for the System's first president, this award recognizes individuals whose leadership has made a lasting, statewide impact on North Carolina's community colleges. This year, it goes to Rick Hendrick, chairman and CEO of Hendrick Automotive Group and founder of Hendrick Motorsports.

Hendrick has spent decades turning a passion for cars that began in a teenager's garage into a sustained investment in the future of automotive training across North Carolina. His support has funded state-of-the-art facilities at three colleges: the Hendrick Center for Automotive Excellence at Wake Technical Community College, the Joe Hendrick Center for Automotive Technology at Central Piedmont Community College, and the soon-to-open Hendrick Center for Automotive Training at Richmond Community College. Through apprenticeship programs and sustained industry partnerships, Hendrick has helped build a durable pipeline of skilled technicians at a time when North Carolina needs them most.

FACULTY & STAFF AWARDS

Excellence in Teaching Award Winner: *Ms. Tonya Stephens, Blue Ridge Community College*

This award recognizes outstanding faculty members who exemplify the highest quality of instruction and make significant contributions to the North Carolina Community College System. This year, it goes to Tonya Stephens, an instructor at Blue Ridge Community College.

With more than 25 years in the field, Stephens has built a reputation for teaching cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, and networking in ways that demand real engagement. She developed one of the System's first artificial intelligence pathways, leads award-winning cyber defense teams to national competitions, and has built intentional pathways to expand access for women and underrepresented students in technology. Her students don't just pass certifications, they enter the workforce prepared to solve problems they've already encountered in her classroom.

Staff Person of the Year Award Winner: *Ms. Heather Pack, Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College*

This award acknowledges non-teaching staff members who exemplify exceptional performance and dedication to the community college mission. This year, it goes to Heather Pack, ADA Coordinator and Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselor at Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College.

Pack has spent years systematically closing gaps in mental health access on campus, and well beyond it. She built the infrastructure that makes care continuous: 24/7 virtual counseling through TalkCampus, the Reset Recovery Room, and mobile wellness spaces that bring support directly to students in crisis and in everyday need. She pioneered T-STEP autism supports, veteran-focused initiatives, and universal design practices that have reshaped how A-B Tech approaches student well-being. Her influence extends to the State Board's Disability Services Advisory Board and NC AHEAD, where her expertise shapes policy and practice for the entire System.

President of the Year Award Winner: *Dr. Janet Spriggs, Forsyth Technical Community College*

This award recognizes exceptional leadership and achievements of a community college president who has significantly contributed to their institution and the broader North Carolina Community College System. This year, it goes to Dr. Janet Spriggs, president of Forsyth Technical Community College.

Under Spriggs' leadership, Forsyth Tech has become a destination model for demand-driven education. Programs like the Learn and Earn Apprenticeship Program (LEAP), College Lift, and the Future-Ready Workforce Alliance connect students directly to paid apprenticeships and family-sustaining careers. Her use of technology-enabled enrollment strategies and her commitment to equity have driven measurable improvements in completion rates and access for underrepresented students. Spriggs has also invested deeply in the broader System — through mentorship, professional development, and regional partnerships with employers and K–12 schools that strengthen North Carolina's workforce pipeline well beyond Forsyth County.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT PINNACLE AWARDS

The Workforce Development Pinnacle Awards, presented by Duke Energy, recognize exemplary employers, businesses, or industry groups that have demonstrated extraordinary engagement and a firm commitment to the education and professional development of their employees and to the development of North Carolina's workforce through their partnership with one or more of the state's 58 community colleges.

This category includes four awards: Apprenticeship Champion, Innovative Leadership, Business of the Year (<500 Employees), and Business of the Year (>500 Employees).

Apprenticeship Champion: *Caterpillar, Inc. with Central Carolina Community College*

The 2026 Apprenticeship Champion recognition goes to Caterpillar, Inc. and Central Carolina Community College for a Youth Apprenticeship program that has served as a model for the state since its launch in 2012.

The program combines paid, hands-on training at Caterpillar's Sanford facility with coursework at CCCC, placing high school juniors and seniors on a direct path to welding certificates, state apprenticeship credentials, and full-time careers. The results are concrete: 224 inductees, 136 graduates, and a sustained 84% completion rate since 2019. Today, more than 30% of Caterpillar's Sanford welding workforce traces its roots to this pipeline — a figure that has inspired the company to expand into Industrial Maintenance and Mechatronics pathways. The partnership is not just workforce solution; it is a replicable model for what apprenticeship innovation can look like statewide.

Innovative Leadership Award Winner: *Okuma America Corporation with Rowan-Cabarrus Community College*

This award honors a business that demonstrates innovative approaches in partnership with community colleges. This year, it goes to Okuma America Corporation and Rowan-Cabarrus Community College.

At the center of this partnership is the Okuma Machine Tool Academy, the only global training facility of its kind for Okuma anywhere in the world. Housed in North Carolina, the Academy bridges traditional education and modern manufacturing through high-level technical training that has reached more than 800 students from world-class companies including SpaceX and Harley-Davidson. By anchoring this international hub in the state, Okuma and Rowan-Cabarrus have not only strengthened the local workforce but positioned North Carolina as a leader in global industrial innovation.

Business of the Year (<500 Employees): *Aegis Power Systems, Inc. with Tri-County Community College*

Aegis Power Systems, Inc. is recognized as Business of the Year for its transformative partnership with Tri-County Community College in Cherokee County, a region still rebuilding in the long aftermath of the textile industry's decline.

Rather than a single program, Aegis has championed a “four-legged stool” model of regional economic stability, advancing advanced manufacturing alongside healthcare, tourism, and public service. Through its partnership with Tri-County, Aegis has provided critical workforce retraining that has broadened career pathways for residents who needed them most. Its commitment to Cherokee County is not just a workforce investment, it is an act of economic stewardship for a community in transition.

Business of the Year (>500 Employees): *Pratt & Whitney with Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College*

Pratt & Whitney has been named Business of the Year for its landmark collaboration with Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College, the largest economic development project in the history of Western North Carolina.

When Pratt & Whitney announced a \$650 million investment in 2020 to build a state-of-the-art manufacturing facility in Asheville, the company made A-B Tech a partner from day one. The result is a deliberate, deeply integrated pipeline aligned to fill 800 high-wage positions with workers prepared for the precision demands of advanced aerospace manufacturing. That alignment, from earliest recruitment through curriculum design and training delivery, is what makes this partnership a model for how industry and higher education can build the future workforce together.

Pathways to Employment Leadership Award: Senator Michael Lee, Ms. Lisa Estep, and Ms. Nancye Gaj

The Pathways to Employment Leadership Award is an inaugural recognition of outstanding leadership in advancing inclusive workforce pathways that connect education to meaningful employment. This award honors champions of initiatives like North Carolina’s Access to Achievement program, which creates opportunities for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities to gain skills, independence, and career pathways. It celebrates collaborative efforts among policymakers, educators, and community partners who are working together to remove barriers, expand access, and build a more inclusive workforce across the state. This year, the award goes to Senator Michael Lee, Ms. Lisa Estep, and Ms. Nancye Gaj for their visionary leadership, unwavering commitment, and enduring contributions to the advancement of student success throughout North Carolina.

All winners will be honored at the [NC Community Colleges Awards Dinner and Celebration](#) on the evening of April 15 at The Angus Barn Pavilion in Raleigh.

About the North Carolina Community College System

The North Carolina Community College System is the engine for workforce development in North Carolina and the only public entity dedicated to providing affordable college access to anyone in the state. The System is governed by the NC State Board of Community Colleges with administration from the NC Community College System Office, and support from the NC Community Colleges Foundation, and is powered by the 58 community colleges and their respective foundations. Together, the System serves 600,000 students and awards more than 60,000 degrees, diplomas, and certificates annually.

About the State Board of Community Colleges

The State Board of Community Colleges is the policy-making arm of the NC Community College System. The Board consists of 22 members, who have either been assigned by the Governor, the State House or the State Senate. The Lieutenant Governor, State Treasurer, Labor Commissioner, and President of N4CSGA (Student Government Association) also serve on the board.

About NC Community Colleges Foundation

The NC Community Colleges Foundation (Foundation) is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization founded in 1986 to support the NC Community College System. The Foundation is governed by a diverse board of directors who, together with staff members, raise awareness and funds to advance the System's mission, manage several scholarship and award programs that honor excellence, and support public-private partnership programs that foster innovation.

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