
A Community Response for Partway Home Students

“First, we have to find those who could most likely complete and then think about what it is that we’re asking them back for, if not for a better job with better benefits. [Our] job is not just to prepare them, but to prepare them to do better.”

— *A UNC chancellor*

Introduction

Of more than 36 million Americans who began but did not complete a postsecondary credential, more than one million reside in North Carolina, including some 643,000 early and mid-career adults.¹ More than 50,000 adults have left the UNC System in good academic standing, with 60 or more credits, but without a credential.² There is clear evidence that North Carolina’s fastest growing jobs require more than a high school diploma—higher levels of education are linked to higher wages, and state-level job growth is outpacing the availability of resident skilled workers,³ all of which add up to a rationale for helping adults who are partway to completing a postsecondary credential cross the finish line.

Students leave postsecondary institutions for a variety of reasons, including work and family obligations, physical or mental health concerns (theirs or family members’), and financial difficulties. Once students leave an institution, they are more difficult to locate and track. Additionally, those same demands that hindered their completion (family/childcare needs, finances, health needs, transportation, and employment) can still create barriers to continuing education.

In 2016, the North Carolina General Assembly approved a one-time appropriation to the University of North Carolina System Office to research and develop strategies and technology to recruit and retain these adult learners who have completed some college but have not earned a degree. In 2017, MDC was engaged by the Community Foundation of Greater Greensboro, in partnership with the UNC System Office, to explore a community network strategy for “re-aligning services to meet the needs of nontraditional learners.” These partnerships of higher education institutions, community-based organizations, local governments, and employers can help connect students to postsecondary institutions in their area and support them as they re-enroll to complete their education.

¹ A Stronger Nation: Learning Beyond High School Builds American Talent. 2017. Lumina Foundation. <http://strongernation.luminafoundation.org/report/2017/#nation>;

² Cazier, Joseph, Nathan Weigl, Gerald Hutchens, et al. “Partway Home Exploratory Analytics Report.” Appalachian State University. Memo to University of North Carolina General Administration, July 2017.

³ Tippett, Rebecca. Demographic Change & Educational Attainment: Connecting the Educational Continuum. (PowerPoint presentation) March 31, 2017, University of North Carolina Population Center.

WHY A COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACH FOR PARTWAY HOME STUDENTS?

In our survey of the landscape for partway home students in North Carolina, MDC saw a supply and demand disconnect, with scattered public and social supports not sufficiently aligned to meet the disparate needs of a potential student population that is difficult to target. Indeed:

- Higher education institutions are aware of the adult learner population needs, but struggling to prioritize these needs, given demands of their current student bodies and the resource-intensive outreach to students who have already left postsecondary study.
- Employers need qualified workers and have advancement opportunities, often supported by education assistance, but have difficulty both connecting with education institutions and creating incentives for widespread use of education benefits.
- Public agencies have funds available for re-training and upskilling, but they are often underused because of eligibility requirements that aren't responsive to local realities of income and need.
- Community-based organizations focus limited resources on helping individuals and families move from crisis to stability, but are not always able to connect clients to education and employment opportunities that would lead to longer term economic security.
- Partway home students are dispersed across this landscape, as former students of their local institutions, employees, clients of public and community-based organizations, and others are likely disconnected from all of these institutions—but without accessible data collection and sharing, it's difficult to know how many and how far they are from reconnecting and making use of the advantages that exist in our state.

The need for community-based support to reduce the transaction cost of exploration and decision making—and the risk of selecting programs that don't deliver better long-term opportunity—is crucial for North Carolina near-completers who are already strapped for time and other resources. The Integrated Services Delivery (ISD) approach provides several principles for consideration. Based on a model pioneered by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the goal of the ISD approach is to help organizations work in partnership, build off their unique strengths to leverage knowledge and resources, find efficiencies that will ultimately improve the service delivery system in a community, and ultimately improve the lives of low-income working families. There are three core elements, all of which could be beneficial to partway home students:

- **Employment and career advancement services**, including educational offerings, job training, job search, job placement, job coaching, and retention supports.
- **Income and work supports**, including public benefits screening, assistance with benefit applications and submission, and provision of (or referrals to) tax assistance services.
- **Financial services and asset-building supports**, including financial education and access to affordable, fairly priced financial products (like flexible checking accounts, low-cost loans, savings accounts, first-time homebuyer financing, and Individual Development Accounts).

North Carolina needs a postsecondary completion infrastructure that:

- Defines expectations, roles, and return on investment for each institution and system that has a role in providing education and supportive services, as well as employers who need qualified, credentialed workers

- Sends clear messages about how to reconnect with viable pathways from education to employment that allow for multiple entry points—and the support and value proposition to encourage adult learners to invest in completion and credential attainment
- Facilitates comprehensive data collection and sharing that makes it easier to identify partway home students and understand the most efficient path for them to reach individual postsecondary goals
- Sets specific completion targets for partway home students that are part of a broader completion goal, providing direction and incentives for higher education institutions to prioritize efforts to serve these potential students

The pieces of the completion infrastructure and the capacity for Integrated Service Delivery exist in many communities across North Carolina, but without a shared understanding and commitment to improving postsecondary attainment in general, and outcomes for partway home students specifically, we are unlikely to see more of these potential students cross the credential finish line. Through a literature review, labor market and demographic analysis, and interviews with higher education administrators, employers, and workforce development system and community-based organization leaders, we explored the capacity and appetite for a community network approach for partway home students in North Carolina. Here, we provide a snapshot of three parts of the state to illustrate the particular opportunities and challenges for the development of an aligned community response to reach partway home students in North Carolina.

Snapshot: Cumberland County

The county seat of Cumberland is Fayetteville, the sixth most populous city in North Carolina. Fayetteville is home to Fort Bragg, one of the largest military installations in the world, with more than 50,000 active duty personnel. In Fayetteville, there are three prominent institutions of higher education. Fayetteville State University (FSU) is a historically black, public regional university, part of the University of North Carolina System, with an enrollment of roughly 5,000 undergraduate students each year. Methodist University is a private, four-year institution serving just over 2,000 students. Fayetteville Technical Community College serves more than 41,000 students annually, making it the fourth largest community college in North Carolina. The college offers more than 190 occupational, technical, general education, college transfer, and continuing education programs.

Cumberland County has a similar poverty rate as the state, but people with some college or an associate's degree make up 38 percent of the people in poverty. In Cumberland County, educational attainment looks different for men and women in poverty. When looking at men for whom poverty status has been determined, the statistics look like the population as a whole: most of the men in poverty do not have postsecondary credentials. The data portray a different picture for women in poverty, especially in Cumberland County. More women in poverty have attempted college or have received an associate's degree than any other category of education.

Cumberland	Of the males in poverty	Of the females in poverty
Less than high school graduate	24.8%	19.5%
High school graduate (includes equivalency)	36.5%	29.7%
Some college, associate's degree	31.6%	41.3%
Bachelor's degree or higher	7.2%	9.4%

A WORKFORCE PERSPECTIVE

To understand the region's workforce development initiatives, the practices of the NCWorks Career Center, and the feasibility of a partway home student focus, we conducted individual and group interviews with the Workforce Development Board director and NCWorks Career Center staff, local employers, local community-based organizations, and the community college.

The Fayetteville NCWorks Career Center was established in 1965 and is the only one in Cumberland County. The Center strives to establish links between partners, enabling customers to seamlessly navigate between different services. For example, in Cumberland, two representatives from higher education institutions have offices in the Center: Fayetteville State University and Fayetteville Technical Community College, making it easier to connect customers with higher education options.

Career Center staff noted how they use 27 state-certified career pathways in industries such as healthcare, manufacturing, IT, and transportation to give customers an introduction to the benefits, pay, demands, and requirements for advancement. The pathways allow individuals to develop short-term goals

within a longer career trajectory. Collision Repair and Allied Healthcare are the two statewide career pathways that many Career Center customers in Fayetteville take advantage of. These programs are highly sought after, but because of federal funding eligibility requirements, customers must qualify as dislocated workers to receive all related support and services from the Center. During the focus group discussion, Center staff identified truck driving, certified nursing assistance, cabling, and wiring jobs as common employment opportunities for customers. These jobs require less training and may come with benefits packages.

Career Center staff in Cumberland said that customers in the partway-home student category are often underemployed and fall in the grey area above the poverty line, where they have some earnings but not a living-wage income. Strict eligibility requirements of WIOA legislation means these customers are penalized for not being “poor enough” and have access to fewer of the Center’s services. (Recent changes lowering eligibility from 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Line (FPL) to 80 percent FPL have further restricted who can benefit.) Partway-home student customers may be discouraged to learn they are ineligible for subsidies, but may not recognize other services the Center provides. A lot of these customers, especially if they stopped out a long time ago, also have other responsibilities that are financially burdensome and make it more difficult to return. Previous education history may present additional barriers; if customers defaulted on student loans, carry existing financial debt, or university policies don’t allow the transfer of credit, there is little desire to finish the program they began.

FOR CONSIDERATION

Center staff shared that many customers may not recognize themselves as “partway home” and called for targeted outreach and marketing that would help individuals see themselves—and the related opportunities—this way. The staff acknowledged need for support on revising their current customer experience to better meet the needs of this population. Centers across the state could benefit from professional development to codify and implement a more integrated bundle of services for partway home students that includes targeted outreach and supportive services that directly address barriers to reconnection.

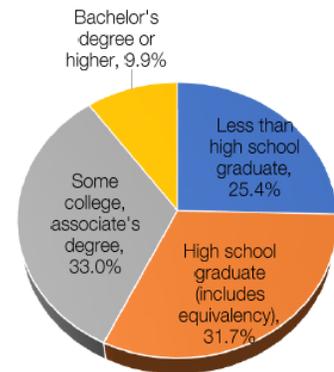
The Cumberland NCWorks Career Center has significant relationships with community colleges and employers through veteran-focused pathways; these relationships could provide a starting point for similar efforts with different populations. It would be worth exploring whether career pathway programs could apply to partway home students. There is also an opportunity to establish formal data-sharing agreements with local two- and four-year institutions and NC Works to track current program participants and to test the feasibility of a larger, statewide effort to merge data sets in order to identify and support the progress of partway home students.

Snapshot: Pitt County

Pitt County, located in eastern North Carolina, has seen a population boom since the 1990s. Greenville, the most populous city in the county, and has become a hub for health, education, and technology in the state.

Of the three counties featured, income inequality is greatest in Greenville and Pitt County. Economic mobility is low, with only between 4 and 6 percent of children born to parents in the lowest income bracket rising to the top bracket as adults. The poverty rate in Pitt County is 14.9 percent, with one-third of the county's impoverished population falling into the "some college, associate's degree" category. With so many partway home students in poverty, an approach to increase the completion of additional credentials that have immediate and local market value could have a significant impact on economic security in the region.

**Pitt County
Poverty Rate = 14.9%**



Greenville is home to East Carolina University (ECU), the fourth-largest university in the UNC system. ECU comprises nine undergraduate colleges, a graduate school, and four professional schools. Pitt Community College (PCC), established in 1961, is the other prominent higher education institution of the region, with several satellite campuses across the county. The school has an enrollment of over 9,000 undergraduate students with a total of 11,771 students enrolled in curriculum programs. In Pitt County, the community college is the primary training arm of the workforce development system. Pitt County is one of five eastern North Carolina counties that make up the Region Q Workforce Development Board.

In line with national trends, two major growth industries in Pitt County are healthcare and advanced manufacturing. Greenville is the hub of Vidant Health, the major medical provider for Eastern North Carolina and the largest employer in Pitt County. Vidant Health includes Vidant Medical Center, community hospitals, physician practices, and community-based partners. The primary medical center, as well as the Vidant Radiation Oncology Center, James and Connie Maynard Children's Hospital, and Vidant Cancer Center, are all located in Greenville. In alignment with the robust health technology industry of the region, the pharmaceutical industry is one of the fastest expanding markets in Pitt County.

Technology advancements have bolstered the manufacturing industry for Pitt County. The emerging employment opportunities in advanced manufacturing are highly skilled, and involve the use of cutting-edge technologies. Patheon Manufacturing Services LLC and Nacco Materials Handling Group are the fifth and sixth largest employers in Pitt County, each with more than 1000 employees.

A WORKFORCE PERSPECTIVE

To understand the region's workforce development initiatives, the practices of the NCWorks Career Center, and the feasibility of a partway home student focus, we conducted individual and group interviews with administrators and staff from the Region Q Workforce Development Board and NCWorks Career Center, as well as staff from Life of NC (an employment agency), and the county departments of Vocational Rehabilitation and Social Services.

The Pitt County NCWorks Career Center serves roughly 12,000 individuals each year and caters to a predominantly low-income, low-skill population. Most training and education programs are offered through Pitt Community College. There is not a specific staff person who serves as a liaison between the college and the Center, but there are several formal and informal connections between the two institutions. (For example, the president of Pitt Community College sits on the Workforce Development Board.) There are very few customers coming into the Center with a four-year degree. Since the Center primarily focuses on one- or two-year degree holders, there is little communication between the Career Center and ECU. Anecdotally, service representatives could identify many customers who would be considered partway home students, but that designation is not part of routine data collection, so it was difficult to provide an estimate of this population.

Most customers of the Center are seeking immediate employment, often connecting to an available, but low-wage, job. In North Carolina, individuals are eligible only for 13 weeks of unemployment benefits; although customers understand the long-term return on investment of completing a degree program, their immediate needs supersede their ability to make the front-end investment that is required to return to a degree program. Beyond the immediate financial barriers that impede a customer's ability to return to a degree program, the following challenges were also identified:

- **Transportation:** Although Greenville, located in the center of Pitt County, has a robust public transportation infrastructure, outside of the city it is much less developed. The few transportation resources outside the city are dedicated to the elderly population. In the Career Center's service data review, the team learned that the lion's share of their service base is customers within or near the city center.
- **Childcare:** Quality childcare is particularly expensive in Greenville. The size of the funding allocations for child care subsidies is also far less than the total needs of consumers.
- **Prior offenses:** The Center in Pitt County sees many customers who have criminal records from when they were younger. Prior offenses limit the number of opportunities for customers to connect to living-wage work.

In the past year, the Center has shifted their services away from resource provision toward career advising. Service providers are encouraged to ask more aspirational questions and deliver individualized support. The service team is currently following an Integrated Service Delivery model for youth and certain adult populations enrolled in training programs. Before WIOA reauthorization, the model was very process oriented and focused on moving customers through the system. Providers now use career assessments, such as Trait-ify, to guide customers to suitable and desirable career pathways. The Workforce Development Board is looking for opportunities beyond the traditional one-on-one appointments, (i.e.

seminars, trainings, industry tours), as methods to encourage interest in emerging industries and provide more holistic support to their customers.

The Center also has taken steps to make advanced manufacturing careers more appealing to young adults. A stigma about these jobs as manual labor or simple button pushing makes it difficult to garner interest from young adults seeking high-skill, exciting jobs. The Workforce Development team has organized tours at newer advanced manufacturing sites that have fostered attention to the industry and encouraged enrollment in training programs connected to relevant employment opportunities.

FOR CONSIDERATION

Career Center staff and workforce partners were receptive to a targeted partway-home student approach. In Region Q, they already are exploring the addition of a “success coach” who would help customers make the transition from education to employment; they hope to secure employer investment to sustain the programming. A success coach could also help partway home student customers identify pathways to degree completion. In Pitt County, the Center is pushing for more on-the-job training opportunities that support education pathways while enabling customers to maintain an income stream; these efforts are in line with related state-level initiatives. The Center is already following key Integrated Service Delivery principles for certain populations, but financial coaching, access to financial products, and advising for degree completion are not currently included in the standardized client flow; these additional services would enhance the holistic customer support that the Center wants to provide.

Snapshot: Western NC

Western North Carolina often takes a regional approach to education, workforce, and economic development, with the Southwestern Commission leading many of these collaborative efforts in Cherokee, Clay, Graham, Haywood, Jackson, Macon, and Swain counties and the Eastern Band of Cherokee. Western Carolina University is the region's only public comprehensive university; Southwestern Community College offers more than 70 curriculum programs and varied continuing education courses in multiple locations in Jackson, Macon, and Swain counties. Tourism has been a critical industry in this part of the state for years; manufacturing, farming, and construction also provided a significant number of jobs until a major downturn in the first decade of the 2000s. Gaming has been growing since Harrah's Cherokee Casino & Hotel opened in the late 1990s, and some manufacturing remains, but it's a tough job market.

For the purpose of our data analysis, we focused on Jackson County, home to Sylva, the county seat. When compared to the state average, Jackson County has a lower living wage and a lower share of jobs with pay at that level. (This wage is calculated for a single adult caring for one child.)

	NC	Jackson
Living wage⁴	\$22.23	\$21.29
Share of jobs paying a living wage	28%	17%
Unemployment rate	9%	6%

However, 88 percent of these jobs require a postsecondary degree or certificate. These data reinforce the rationale for increasing educational attainment, but also highlight the challenges that our more rural counties face when it comes to providing employment opportunities that create economic security.⁵

A WORKFORCE PERSPECTIVE

To understand the region's workforce development initiatives, the practices of the NCWorks Career Center, and the feasibility of a partway home student focus, we led a group interview with members of the Workforce Development Board and staff, as well as NCWorks Career Center staff. We spoke with NCWorks Career Center staff serving Jackson, Macon, and Swain counties. Staff members split their time at different sites to meet the needs of the large service area. Their customers have significant but similar barriers to those named by staff in other parts of the state:

- Transportation—no vehicle or a license suspension are particular problematic in a rural region with little public transportation
- Homelessness—the Center services individuals who have lost homes after losing jobs; recovery is difficult in a region with high housing costs and limited rental properties
- Child care—cost and access—compounded by transportation and distance concerns—make this a complex challenge for many customers

⁴ Chart sources: U.S. Census 2016 American Community Survey one-year estimates; MIT Living Wage Project, Economic Modeling Specialists International, Inc.

⁵ These challenges and suggestions for linking education and workforce development are explored in more detail for each of these counties in MDC's 2016 report, *North Carolina's Economic Imperative: Building an Infrastructure of Opportunity*.

But even if these immediate barriers are addressed, customers face a tough question: if I enroll in additional training or degrees, where is the job going to be? Staff members noted that customers have seen friends and family members take on debt to complete a degree ... and come back to wages that don't change much with or without postsecondary education. The Workforce Development Board staff emphasized the need for additional career exploration in the context of the local labor market: "There needs to be a hard conversation about assessment and 'Where am I?' and 'Is the job I want going to be available when I get there?'"

Career Center staff have organized their work to help them address these challenges: they have adopted an Integrated Service Delivery model that enables them to connect customers with local resources, but noted a need for more regular support for financial coaching and education. They also allocate time each week for staff training and building relationships with local business and community college programs. With this outreach, employers know what services the Center offers and Center staff know about education and employment opportunities for their customers.

Commission and Career Center staff shared that, for example, in the manufacturing sector employers are more concerned about entry-level employment and related soft skills, not credentials. In fact, many aren't thinking about an advancement trajectory and may even worry that they "might be training people to leave." The vice-chair of the Workforce Development Board, Doris Johnson of Harrah's Cherokee, reiterated that there is a disconnect between what employers want and what employees need. She emphasized the importance of regular communication among educators, businesses, and workforce development boards and staff to address these gaps.

FOR CONSIDERATION

The experiences of workforce development staff in Western North Carolina highlights the necessity of engaging education, industry, and local government leadership for any continuing, substantive conversation about a community-based approach for serving partway home students, and that buy-in and input from these sectors, especially, mark the only road to success. The unique challenges of rural residents demand that any effort to increase educational attainment be paired with job development efforts—and a stronger link between additional training and additional economic security. Career Center staff are already committed to an Integrated Service Delivery approach that incorporates education and employment training, financial education, and income and work supports; additional resources for more regular financial coaching would enhance their holistic approach. Waivers on WIOA and TAACT income eligibility requirements would enable more individuals to participate in the full-time career pathway programs that lead to credentials; these supports could encourage participation from partway home students who are skeptical about the value of investment in additional training.