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Our **Community Colleges** series is a look at how these institutions do so many things for their community: They can help a student earn a GED or a skilled trade, train for a specific job with a local employer, earn an associate degree in a high-demand field, or serve as a springboard to a four-year degree at a fraction of the cost.



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Community Colleges: The Swiss Army knives of higher ed

RALEIGH (February 9, 2022) – They're the Swiss Army knives of higher education.

That's because North Carolina's community colleges do so many different things, whether it's helping a student complete a GED, learn a skilled trade, train for a specific job with a local employer, earn an associate degree in a high-demand field, or transfer to a four-year university at a fraction of the cost.

Or – yes – go to a wildly popular 'traditional plus' music festival, to quote Doc Watson, hosted by the college.

There's a reason they're called community colleges – they serve the unique needs of their local community, its employers and, most of all, its people.

"The North Carolina Community College System serves as the job engine for the state," Thomas Stith III, President of the System, says in the accompanying video.

"We have over 1.7 million graduates or individuals that have participated in community college programs serving in the workforce in North Carolina. In 2020, that equated to 60 billion dollars' worth of wages. So our graduates or our students have a significant impact in the economy of North Carolina," Stith says.

"After three years, 77% of our students remain here in North Carolina and contribute to their local communities. So the Community College System provides the highly trained, highly educated workforce."

In a second video, Stith hops across the state to point out how community colleges are responding to plans for a \$650 million Pratt & Whitney plant in Asheville; the state's traditional furniture industry in central North Carolina; the impending arrival of Google and Apple in the Triangle; and growing biotech/biopharma companies in Eastern North Carolina.



He notes that community colleges also provide essential nurses and other health-care workers across the state.

Over the coming weeks, Higher Ed Works will examine how community colleges serve as a springboard to a four-year degree at much less cost. We will include an exciting new effort to let aspiring teachers spend their first two years at community college, then transfer to a four-year school to complete their degree, limiting their debt as they enter a profession with modest pay.

We'll look at the considerable wraparound services that colleges – often aided by local foundations – provide for students who might be adult learners, have children or need help with food, bills or transportation. And we'll look at specific examples of that support.

We'll look at how our neighbors in Tennessee offered "free" community college that's been copied across the country – but not across the board in North Carolina.

We'll look at how, despite the colleges' popularity, pay for North Carolina community college instructors ranks 41st in the country – less than for K-12 public school teachers.

And we'll look at the critical role community colleges will play in helping the state meet its ambitious goal to have 2 million North Carolinians age 25-44 with a degree or credential by 2030.

So stay tuned – this Swiss Army knife has a variety of very useful tools.



Forsyth Tech Aviation: 'A wonderful opportunity'

WINSTON-SALEM (February 4, 2022) – There's a whole lot of aviation happening at Piedmont Triad International Airport – and with it a whole lot of really good jobs.

With HondaJet's manufacturing facility,¹ FedEx Express's Mid-Atlantic hub,² and now Boom SuperSonic's plan to bring more than 1,700 jobs and a \$500 million investment to PTI,³ the Triad is a burgeoning aviation cluster.

"The aviation industry in North Carolina is booming and is growing," Forsyth Tech President Janet Spriggs says in the accompanying video.

Boom CEO Blake Scholl says the supersonic Overture jet should take passengers from Newark, N.J. To London in 3-1/2 hours.⁴ The company has already secured contracts to supply jets to United Airlines and the U.S. Air Force.

While Guilford Technical Community College has an established aviation program as well, Spriggs says Forsyth Tech's new Mazie S. Woodruff Aviation Technology Lab is a state-of-the-art facility to train aviation mechanics.

Spriggs notes that the state legislature and Gov. Roy Cooper already have approved \$106 million in incentives for Boom, and that the jobs will carry a starting salary of \$60,000.

The aviation industry is clamoring for workers these days. Spriggs and Gregory Purvis, Coordinator of the Aviation Program, both refer to Forsyth Tech's partnership with North State Aviation in Winston-Salem.

"Some of our students are able to get a job and work while they're in this program," says Spriggs. "They're getting paid to come to school – it's a wonderful opportunity."

"They'll take the students before they even enroll in our program, hire them, and then pay for their education all the way through," adds Purvis.

Aviation workers make \$20 to \$45 an hour – or more, says Spriggs.

"These are jobs that will create family-sustaining career pathways," she says.



Purvis provides an overview of more than 2,000 hours of classroom work in the aviation program, delving into sheet metal, electricity, welding, composites and turbine engines. Students also get to taxi the aircraft from one point to another at an airport, he says.

Due to the demand, when a student enters the program, "The one question we ask is, 'Where do you want to go?'" Purvis says.

"And then we start advising them and talking to the right people to get them on track... to where they want to go. You know, private industry, or going to the airlines, or maybe even go somewhere around the world."

¹ https://greensboro.com/business/local/after-decades-of-work-honda-quietly-delivers-the-200th-hondajet-from-greensboro-factory/article_5a8e9470-5f79-11ec-85ac-a38bd87557e2.html

² <https://flyfrompti.com/fedex-express-mid-atlantic-hub-to-hire-400-new-workers/>.

³ https://greensboro.com/news/local_news/here-comes-the-boom-in-choosing-pti-the-jet-maker-takes-region-and-state-to/article_bfegc2e8-7ebb-11ec-b715-1f7f91dc7c89.html#tracking-source=home-top-story.

⁴ https://greensboro.com/opinion/editorial/our-opinion-the-sonic-boom-heard-round-the-state/article_410d05b4-7ed1-11ec-8902-7bcafbf2f40c.html



Community College: Seamless pathway to a four-year degree

RALEIGH (February 16, 2022) – As tuition at four-year universities climbed over the past decade,¹ increasing numbers of students chose to start their college careers at one of North Carolina's 58 community colleges.

"We provide two-year associate's degrees, but also a seamless transition for those individuals that want to pursue a four-year degree," Thomas Stith III, President of the N.C. Community College System, says in the accompanying video.



The community college system's two-year associate's degrees in teacher preparation cost about one-third as much as starting at a four-year institution, Stith says.

The UNC System is also working to establish common course numbers across its 16 universities to make transfers easier, especially for community-college transfer students.

After an agreement between the two systems in 2014, community-college transfers to the UNC System steadily grew, peaking at 11,159 students in Fall 2018 before slight declines in 2019 and 2020, due in part to enrollment declines during the COVID pandemic.

Community-college graduates who completed their associate degree before transferring to the UNC System as juniors in Fall 2019 had an average grade point average of 2.89, versus an average GPA of 2.90 for students who started at a UNC campus as freshmen.²

"Our data shows that individuals that pursue and complete a two-year associate's degree at one of our 58 community colleges perform as well as individuals that start their higher education at a four-year institution," Stith says.

"The North Carolina Community College System provides a seamless pathway to educational success."

¹ Tuition at UNC System universities has remained at the same level for at least five years, however: <https://www.higheredworks.org/2021/03/five-years-of-flat-unc-system-tuition/>.

² https://myinsight.northcarolina.edu/t/Public/views/db_transfer/TransferEnrollmentTrends?%3Aiid=1&3AisGuestRedirectFromVizportal=y&%3Aembed=y&%3Amobile=true&%3AdeepLinkingDisabled=y; <https://www.northcarolina.edu/apps/bog/doc.php?id=66242&code=bog>, pp. 30-35.



A new, more affordable way to become a teacher

GREENVILLE (February 16, 2022) – In a state with a growing population but a shortage of teachers, North Carolina's state colleges and universities offer a new way to make college both more accessible and more affordable for would-be teachers.

NC Community College System President Thomas Stith III notes in the accompanying video that the Community College System signed an agreement with the UNC System in August to provide seamless transfers for aspiring teachers from 55 community colleges to UNC campuses.

Teacher candidates can earn a two-year associate's degree in teacher preparation in arts or sciences, Stith says. Then they can transfer to a university in the UNC System to complete their teaching degree.

North Carolina saw a 30% decline in enrollment at UNC colleges of education during the last decade as the state also saw a surge in population to 10.4 million people. Stith says the aim is to provide more teachers for the children of both existing residents and newcomers.

"We want to ensure that we have excellent teachers in our classroom, and this agreement between our community colleges and our university system provides that pipeline for excellent teachers," he says.

In a 2018 interview with Higher Ed Works, Peter Hans – then President of the Community College System, now President of the UNC System – noted that teachers have modest salaries.

But limiting their college debt should make it easier for new teachers to stay in their communities, Hans said, rather than migrate to the state's metropolitan areas for better pay.

Dr. Lawrence Rouse, President of Pitt Community College, notes in another video that teacher-prep classes started at Pitt last fall. After two years at PCC, students can transfer to North Carolina's public universities, and their community-college credits transfer as well, Rouse says.



"We're hoping this will work to supply additional teachers in the teaching profession," Rouse says.

"They can transfer to any state college or university in North Carolina, coming in as a junior with two years left to complete their teaching license degree," says Melissa Rees, PCC's Department Chair in Early Childhood Education "So we're really excited for our students to take advantage of this program."

Rouse takes it a step further and extends the recruitment of teacher candidates to local high schools.

"We've also reached out to our local superintendent – very interested in starting while they're in high school to identify individual students who may be interested in becoming a teacher," Rouse says.

"We'll probably offer courses on the high school campus through Career & College Promise. So they can take those courses free of charge, then come to Pitt, complete that two-year teacher preparation, and then go on to one of our universities," he says.

"We're trying to address the teacher shortage as well, and kind of keeping that pipeline moving."

Nikki Miller, an instructor and coordinator of Pitt's Teacher Preparation Program, notes that teachers are vital in modern society.

"Teachers are the foundation for everything that we have and that we can become as citizens in America," Miller says. "Without teachers, there could not be doctors or scientists or any other profession.

"We are in dire need, we are in desperate need, for individuals to join us in education – to become teachers in order to impact the next generation, to make this world the best place that we can possibly be," she says.



Pitt VISIONS: 'If we just helped four or five students...'

GREENVILLE (February 23, 2022) – At the outset in 2004, Eddie Smith thought his family's support might help four or five students at Pitt Community College.

It's since helped more than 1,200.

The family foundation run by Smith, the owner and CEO of Grady-White Boats in Greenville, has poured more than \$4 million into VISIONS, a program that reaches out to at-risk high-school students, mentors them and provides financial and technical support for them to get a degree or certificate at Pitt Community College.

PCC President Lawrence Rouse explains how VISIONS identifies students in high school and offers a summer bridge program to help them get comfortable with the idea of college. Rouse notes that the program has a high graduation rate – even for students who weren't expected to finish high school.

"There's a lot of support for them to be successful," he says.

Smith says he initially thought VISIONS might help four or five students prepare for college, a career and a better life.

"I would have never dreamed that VISIONS would have grown to where it is today," he says.

Rebecca Warren, Director of VISIONS, says the root of the program is a personal relationship with each and every student. Counselors share their cell-phone numbers with students to call any time they



need help – sometimes in the middle of the night. If the students have a high school football game or play, their VISIONS counselors are in the audience.

"That's going to let them know we're there for them to succeed," Warren says.

A highlight is a visit to Grady-White Boats, where some students see what their relatives do to earn a living, hear from the company president and get a sense of what it means to work in a thriving local industry.

Warren notes that the program includes scholarship help of \$500 a semester – and 98% of its graduates graduate without any student debt. But the goal isn't simply to get students into college – it's to get them *through* college and into a profession.

Robynique Willis-Brown discusses how VISIONS gave her financial help she needed and helped her understand "how to go to college and be an adult."

Willis-Brown recounts how she graduated from high school in 2012, then from PCC, then earned bachelor's and master's degrees from nearby East Carolina University. She now works as an oncology case manager at Vidant Health.

Warren also describes the fruit of the VISIONS vine: Graduates who join the military. A student in law school. Teachers. Social workers.

"A career that they would have never thought about until they got into VISIONS, and they saw some of what we did through VISIONS and they thought, 'Oh, I really want to help people,'" she says.

Some of those graduates come back to share with VISIONS students.

"They come back and share with our students because they know how much VISIONS meant to them," Warren says. "They want students to see the success."

"We know that we're making an impact on these students," she says. "But the greatest part of that is that they're now making an impact on the community that they came from."





Stith: Wraparound support for students

RALEIGH (February 23, 2022) – North Carolina's community colleges don't help students just in the classroom.

They also provide students with the support they need to make college work. The colleges know many of their students have children or a full-time job to perform at the same time they try to earn a degree or credential.

"Child care. Transportation. Connection to services in the local community," Thomas Stith III, President of the NC Community College System, says in the accompanying video.

"These are the wraparound services that our community colleges provide to our students to ensure that their educational experience is as supportive as possible."





Forsyth Tech Cares: Help when life happens

WINSTON-SALEM (March 3, 2022) – Life just happens to many community college students. Many have jobs. Some have children. Some have unreliable cars. Some don't have a computer. Some need to put down security deposits. Some can't afford groceries.

Forsyth Tech Cares is an effort Forsyth Technical Community College launched in the early days of the coronavirus pandemic to give its students and their families support with those challenges.



"When March of 2020 rolled around and the world changed, our students were in crisis – and we knew we had to react. We had to support our students," Stacy Waters-Bailey, Associate Vice President for Academic Strategy & Partnerships at Forsyth Tech, says in the accompanying video.

"Whatever it was that the student was needing assistance with, we knew at that moment that we had to jump in and help students."

The college assembled a team of volunteers to answer calls and emails and help students one by one with their challenges. Some didn't have a laptop to use for remote classes, she says. Some couldn't find baby formula.

Later, a grant from the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust helped the college establish an office with three "care navigators" to help students work through their non-academic challenges.

Many needed help with technology or child care. And yes, food.

"Food insecurity is a major issue with our students," Waters-Bailey says.

The college now has four food pantries on its campuses. In addition to food staples, they provide toiletries, personal care items, school supplies, detergent and even pet food.

"We've paid for car engines. We've paid for transmissions to be put in cars," Waters-Bailey says. "We've paid for security deposits for rent and utilities. Many times our students might have a little bit of money to get what they need, but not the full amount, so we can step in."

Forsyth Tech Cares has important partnerships with Second Harvest food bank and even with Wake Forest University's legal clinic to provide non-criminal legal advice for students.

"We do believe that if they feel like they have support, and they feel like there's somebody in their corner that can help them and be an advocate for them ... that goes a long way in the classroom in terms of being successful," Waters-Bailey says.

"I think the biggest thing is we're there for our students, but we're also there for their families," she says.

Waters-Bailey notes that the entire family makes sacrifices when a spouse or parent goes to school.

"It is a true sacrifice for not only the student but the family as well," she says. "So we want to be able to help ease that burden, that stress, and allow them to spend that time focused on school and their family."

"Now we certainly hope that the state will look at different models and help us to decide is there some way that we can offer tuition free for our community colleges – we would certainly like that. We think it would just help when it comes to workforce development, as well as a higher attainment rate."

At this point, at least 28 of North Carolina's 58 community colleges offer last-dollar scholarships that cover tuition and fees, according to the NC Community College System. A statewide program of tuition-free college is not part of the System's formal legislative agenda, however.

NCCCS President Thomas Stith says that federal Pell Grants, in addition to the state's Longleaf Commitment grants and the Community College Grant and Scholarship program, already provide tuition and fee assistance for eligible students, he says.

The federal dollars that underwrite the Longleaf Commitment Grants expire at the end of 2023, however.

"We appreciate state leaders allocating grant funds for the Longleaf Commitment," Stith said in a statement. "And while we have Pell Grants, we will continue to pursue other funds that provide higher education opportunities for all."

IF THERE'S ANY DOUBT about the appeal of tuition-free college, though, just listen to Mark Plymale, a welding student at Forsyth Tech's Stokes County Center in Walnut Cove.

Relying on the state's Longleaf Commitment grants, Forsyth Tech announced free tuition for all students last year.

After two years of high school disrupted by the Covid pandemic, Plymale says, he intended to simply start working once he graduated – until he heard Forsyth Tech's announcement about free tuition and saw its Stokes campus.

"Forsyth Tech made sense for me when they announced that they were going to do the free college," Plymale says.

"I've been telling all my friends. I've got a lot of buddies who decided not to go to school, and I'm like, 'Guys, come on, y'all are smart guys. This is a smart opportunity'.

"I had the two-year ability to get free college. I saw all those zeroes in my student debt just drop, and I was like, 'That's crazy.'"



Background: NC and 'free' community college

RALEIGH (March 9, 2022) – The Republicans in Tennessee get it. In 2014, the state legislature and then-Gov. Bill Haslam approved Tennessee Promise, which let the state's recent high-school graduates attend community college free of tuition and fees.

In its first year, the program boosted the college-going rate of Tennessee high-school graduates by 6 percentage points, from 58.6% to 64.4%, though it has subsided slightly since. Over three years, the state saw a 15% increase in the number of students who attended community college.¹ And by 2019, at least 30 other states had launched similar programs.²

Here in North Carolina, Gov. Roy Cooper has long proposed "last-dollar" scholarship programs that cover the full cost of community college tuition and fees after taking a student's federal Pell Grants and other aid into account. But he couldn't get support from the General Assembly.

So last year, Cooper used \$31.5 million in federal pandemic relief dollars that he controlled to create the Lingleaf Commitment, a scholarship based on financial need that provided 2021 (and later 2020³) high-school graduates with \$700 to \$2,800 a year to cover community-college costs beyond other sources of aid.⁴

In their budget agreement in November, Cooper and legislative leaders agreed to add \$25 million to extend the Lingleaf Commitment to 2022 high-school graduates.⁵

After an 11% decline in community college enrollment in Fall 2020, some colleges have taken the program further, offering free tuition to all students, regardless of their ability to pay.

Forsyth Technical Community College and other colleges saw applications increase after they announced free tuition for all 2021 North Carolina high-school graduates.⁶

And last week, Wake Technical Community College – the state's largest, with 70,000 students – announced it will provide 2022 high-school graduates who enroll for Fall 2022 with a year of tuition and fees, no matter their financial need.⁷

"The past two years have been particularly challenging for high-school graduates and their families," said Wake Tech President Scott Ralls.

"Now as they plan for education beyond high school, they are facing rising gas and other costs. We don't want the cost of college to be a barrier to anyone in our community in pursuing their college dreams."⁸

So far, nearly 12,000 students have received Longleaf Commitment grants, and 70% of the grants have gone to students with family incomes under \$60,000.⁹

The federal dollars that support the program will expire after two years, however.

At least 28 of the state's 58 community colleges offer last-dollar scholarships from a variety of revenue sources to cover students' tuition and fees, according to the NC Community College System.

But it remains a patchwork – there's no uniform statewide free tuition program, as Tennessee has.

Whether the state's initial step to expand the Longleaf Commitment becomes permanent support for North Carolina's community college students remains to be seen.

¹ <https://comptroller.tn.gov/content/dam/cot/orea/advanced-search/2021/TNPromiseUpdate.pdf>, pp. 2-3.

² <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2019/05/06/five-things-to-know-about-the-tennessee-promise-scholarship/>.

³ <https://spectrumlocalnews.com/nc/charlotte/news/2021/12/22/tuition-free-community-college-extended-to-2020-high-school-graduates>.

⁴ <https://governor.nc.gov/news/press-releases/2021/05/24/governor-cooper-announces-514-million-education-grants-new-financial-aid-program>.

⁵ <https://www.wral.com/more-need-based-financial-aid-in-new-nc-budget/19998709/>; <https://webservices.ncleg.gov/ViewBillDocument/2021/53493/2/S105-BD-NBC-9300>, p. 76 (B50).

⁶ <https://www.ednc.org/2021-07-27-colleges-offering-free-tuition-this-fall-are-seeing-a-jump-in-applications/>.

⁷ <https://www.wral.com/wake-tech-offering-free-tuition-for-north-carolina-high-school-grads/20169399/>; <https://www.newsobserver.com/news/local/education/article258964903.html>.

⁸ <https://www.waketech.edu/post/wt-news-story/11269>.

⁹ <https://www.iredellfreenews.com/news-features/2022/gov-cooper-highlights-longleaf-commitment-community-college-grant-program/>.



Forsyth Tech: What is it that Stokes County needs?

WALNUT COVE (March 17, 2022) – When Forsyth Technical Community College set out to start a campus in Stokes County, college officials didn't assume – they asked.

"We try to meet the individual needs of the counties that we serve," Forsyth Tech President Janet Spriggs says in the accompanying video, explaining that the college serves both Forsyth and Stokes counties. In Forsyth County, programs are tailored to the employers of Forsyth.



"In Stokes County, that looks very different than Forsyth County – but we're doing the same thing," Spriggs says.

Rather than simply pronounce what programs the Stokes campus would offer, the college surveyed Stokes residents to understand what they wanted from their community college.

"What is it that Stokes County needs from their community college to be able to provide a gateway for students to get into a college-transfer pathway, or to provide them with career and technical education that they need?" Spriggs asks.

The survey revealed great interest in Early College, where a student enrolls in high school and community college at the same time and can earn both a high-school diploma and a two-year college degree – for free.

"They loved the Early College model, because it helps students get a head start on college and getting ready for a bachelor's degree or an associate's degree," Spriggs says.

Stokes folks also wanted to focus on the trades. The Stokes campus offers licensed practical nursing, welding and plumbing. A new trade center opened at the Walnut Cove center in 2020 to provide hands-on career and technical or vocational training that residents said they want.

"It helps prepare people to own their own businesses or to work in these industries right here at home," Spriggs says, "and be able to live in beautiful Stokes County."





'Customized training just for them'

WINSTON-SALEM (March 17, 2022) – One of the reasons they're called community colleges is they provide precisely the training that local employers – and employees – need.

"At Forsyth Technical Community College, that means we work with employers like Reynolds American," President Janet Spriggs says in the accompanying video.

"We provide for them education – training for their workers in whatever area they need that support ... customized training just for them."

For example, Forsyth Tech has helped Reynolds managers with "crucial-conversations" training – how to have difficult conversations with employees – as well as instruction as varied as leadership training and safety training.

"We focus on who our employers are, and then what kinds of customized skills they need their workforce to have – and we provide it, usually, at their locations for them," Spriggs says.

That's pretty hard to beat.



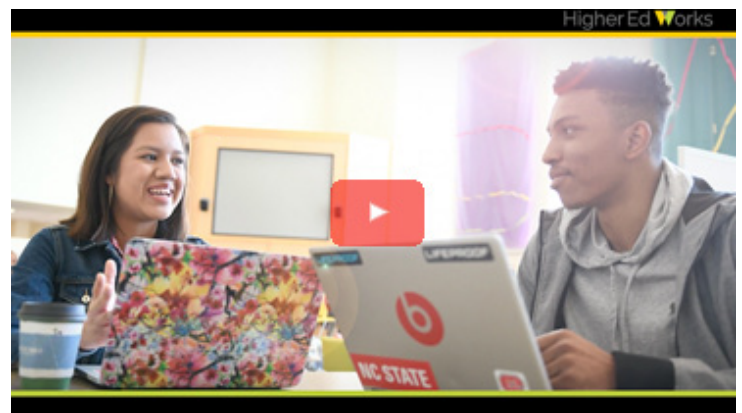


Community college: Critical path to NC State

RALEIGH (March 23, 2022) – NC State University Chancellor Randy Woodson knows the importance of community colleges – the state's 58 colleges send NC State about 1,000 students a year.

"Community colleges across the state have become a critical pathway to NC State, and I know that's true for many other universities in the UNC System," Woodson says in the accompanying video.

"We need to make sure that all the young people across our state know a pathway to get to one of our great universities."



Students can transfer to NC State from any of the state's 58 community colleges, Woodson says.

But through its Community College Collaboration (C3) program, NC State has formed deep partnerships with 13¹ colleges within about 100 miles of Raleigh from which it receives the most transfer students.

"A student can enter one of these 13 community colleges with the express goal of coming to NC State, and they're admitted simultaneously with the community college and NC State," Woodson says.

"So from their first day of classes at one of the community colleges, they're advised by NC State advisors on what courses to take, how to transfer those courses to the university, and how to be prepared to enter the degree program at NC State that's your ultimate goal. That's gone phenomenally well."

Woodson understands that not every student knows what they want to do when they're 18 – and says we need to pay attention to those students.

"You know, I may have been one of those," he says. "Not everyone as a senior in high school knows, 'I want to go to Central Carolina Community College with a goal of getting to NC State.'"

"But we want those who are at a community college like Central Carolina to have a clear understanding of what the pathway is. And we're getting much better at this as an institution. The System is getting better at it. And it's so critical for the state.

"Because a community college represents a great affordable education where you're typically staying at home and attending classes – you may be working at the same time. And that gets you to the finish line with much less debt, and in a short amount of time."

¹ Since our interview with Chancellor Woodson, the C3 program has announced expansion to six additional community colleges, including four campuses that are part of its new Military Connect Program. The new colleges include Coastal Carolina, Craven, Fayetteville Technical and Wayne community colleges, all part of Military Connect; as well as Catawba Valley Community College and Gaston College.



Goodnight Transfer Scholars: 'They're phenomenal'

RALEIGH (March 23, 2022) – Jim and Ann Goodnight understand the value of community-college students who transfer to universities.

The Goodnight Scholars Program that they launched in 2008 is NC State University's largest scholarship program; it is expected to grow to 350 or more students.

In 2017, the program began gradually increasing the number of community-college transfer students who are granted scholarships. And by Fall 2022, those students will account for 50% of the Goodnight Scholars on NC State's campus.



Transfer Scholars receive a 3-year, full-ride scholarship. To be eligible, students must come from a low- or middle-income family and transfer with an associate's degree from one of North Carolina's 58 community colleges into one of NC State's STEM or STEM-education majors. The program accepts North Carolina residents, as well as refugee, DACA and undocumented students who will graduate from a North Carolina community college.

A breakdown of transfer students in the program for 2021-22 reveals great diversity – and great aptitude:

- **63%** study engineering, and 37% other STEM or STEM-education majors;
- **56%** are students of color; and
- **58%** are part of the first generation in their family to go to college.

"They're phenomenal," NC State Chancellor Randy Woodson says of the students in the accompanying video. "And the priority of that scholarship is first-generation talent that has financial need.

"When I meet those kids, they're focused. And they've been in the world."



Stith: Invest in our faculty and staff

RALEIGH (March 30, 2022) – It's shameful.

North Carolina's community colleges are a linchpin of economic development and social mobility in our state. Yet what we pay instructors at those colleges is shameful. From a national perspective, North Carolina's community college instructors rank even lower than our K-12 public school teachers.

"The North Carolina Community College System is the third largest system in the country – yet we rank 41st in faculty salaries," Thomas Stith, President of the NC Community College System, says in the accompanying video.



"We have to invest in our faculty and our staff on our community college campuses to ensure that we have high-quality instructors in front of our students and the support staff to provide an excellent experience for student success."

Like other state employees, community-college faculty and staff received 5% raises in the budget that state legislators and Gov. Roy Cooper adopted in November – 2.5% raises this year and next.¹

But they still have a long way to go.

In January, the State Board of Community Colleges endorsed a proposal to raise employee pay by 8% over the next three years so that average faculty salaries increase to \$56,693 – the projected average for community college instructors in our neighboring states of Virginia, South Carolina, Tennessee and Georgia.

Similarly, the State Board wants legislators to increase funds for instruction and student support to the projected average at community colleges in our four surrounding states – or 66% of the funding level for freshman and sophomore students in the UNC System.²

NORTH CAROLINA COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM LEGISLATIVE BUDGET REQUEST					
Year	Employee Salaries	% Salary Increase	Student Value	Total	% Increase over 2021-22 Budget Package
2022-23 Short Session	\$12,050,000	1%	\$49,357,000	\$61,407,000	4.0%
2023-24	\$42,200,000	3.5%	\$49,357,000	\$91,557,000	5.9%
2024-25	\$42,200,000	3.5%	\$49,357,000	\$91,557,000	5.9%
Total Three-Year Request	\$96,450,000	8%	\$148,071,000	\$244,521,000	15.8%

The State Board recently honored leaders across the 58-college system. These educators do heavy lifting in our higher-education system. And they deserve a lift themselves:

- **Dr. Laura Leatherwood at Blue Ridge Community College, President of the Year.** Leatherwood has helped recruit seven companies to Henderson County and added new technology across departments. The college also partnered with the John M. Belk Endowment to launch a new initiative for adult learners, contributing to a significant increase in enrollment.
- **Melissa Smith, Magnetic Resonance Imaging Coordinator at Forsyth Technical Community College, Excellence in Teaching Award.**³ Smith worked to purchase and install a one-of-a-kind MRI simulator at Forsyth Tech. She uses games and other creative assignments to keep students engaged. The program had a 100% pass rate for the MRI national registry three times in the last nine years. "The teacher I had in the radiography program saw me as a person," Smith said. "I wasn't one of 200 students."⁴ Now she's paying it forward.
- **Greg Singleton, Director of Workforce Readiness, Craven Community College, Staff of the Year.** Singleton launched a Job Readiness Boot Camp in 2017 and has expanded it to rural parts of Craven County. The boot camp supports the unemployed, underemployed and formerly incarcerated with soft skills such as resume writing, interviewing and communication help. Singleton managed to place the Craven-Pamlico Re-Entry Council under the auspices of Craven Community College and serves as a guest speaker at several state prisons.
- **Catawba Valley Community College and Catawba Valley Furniture Academy, Distinguished Partners in Excellence.** The academy is an industry-driven training program that serves as a pipeline of furniture workers. The CVFA partners with 35 furniture manufacturers in the region, and to date, 100% of students trained in the program have been hired by local furniture makers.⁵

¹ <https://www.higheredworks.org/2021/11/nc-budget-a-remarkable-start-on-a-new-era/>.

² https://www.nccommunitycolleges.edu/sites/default/files/state-board/legislative/leg_01_-_sbcc_ncccs_legislative_budget_request_2022-25_0.pdf.

³ <https://www.forsythtech.edu/forsyth-tech-instructor-named-north-carolinas-teacher-of-the-year/>.

⁴ https://journalnow.com/news/local/education/forsyth-tech-instructor-wins-states-top-teaching-honor-for-community-colleges/article_dc6938f2-95ab-11ec-a21f-dfc396b718.html.

⁵ <https://www.nccommunitycolleges.edu/news-center/news/state-board-community-colleges-announces-2022-award-winners>.



MerleFest 101: Music. Moments. Memories.

WILKESBORO (April 14, 2022) – It all started with the campus gardens. And oh, how it's blossomed.

What started in 1988 as a one-time fundraiser for campus landscaping at Wilkes Community College has grown into an annual, four-day event with 12 stages that feature bluegrass, country, gospel, zydeco, fusion music and everything in between, fueling a \$12 million regional economic impact.

MerleFest resumes its regular schedule from April 28-May 1 this year.



"We are basically all about the music, and having great moments, and creating memories," Allison Phillips, Executive Director of the Wilkes Community College Foundation, says in the accompanying video. "And that is our motto: Music, Moments and Memories."

The festival has featured iconic performers in bluegrass, country and folk music: Dolly Parton. Willie Nelson. Del McCoury. Sam Bush. The Nitty Gritty Dirt Band. Emmylou Harris – a UNC-Greensboro alumna¹ who performed at the first festival – will return this year. And country star Josh Turner will headline the 2022 festival.

But it's also featured talent in eclectic genres that aren't so easily pigeonholed: The Steep Canyon Rangers. Elvis Costello. Mavis Staples. The Avett Brothers. Molly Tuttle. Celtic/Ukrainian/Americana band Scythian. The Kruger Brothers – classically trained musicians who moved from Switzerland to live near Doc Watson's home. And this year, Greensky Bluegrass.

Phillips shares a story about how Doc Watson was riding through Boone one day, heard Old Crow Medicine Show busking on the street, and said, "Wait – we need to hear them."

"That was what Doc was all about – 'traditional-plus' music," Phillips says. "The only thing Doc asked in the beginning was that we name it after his son, Eddy Merle Watson." Merle Watson, who began accompanying his father on guitar when he was 15, was killed in a tractor accident at age 36 in 1985.²

"When you talk about coming full circle to the festival and what it means – that's what it means. It's a homecoming for Eddy Merle Watson. Of course, it's our number one fundraiser," she says.

The festival is also the largest fundraising event for dozens of local nonprofit organizations, as well as an economic driver for the entire region.

"Really, helping the students is what is most important to us," Phillips says. MerleFest generates dollars not just for student scholarships, but for student clubs, which they in turn use for pinning ceremonies, testing, tools – you name it.

"I think that's been the beauty of the community piece within the community college," Phillips says.

She notes how Doc and Rosa Lee Watson both died in 2012.

"It's been a loss, losing Doc. And we lost Rosa Lee. But we're still doing OK. And we're excited about the future," she says.

¹ <https://news.uncg.edu/uncg-to-honor-rhiannon-giddens-emmylou-harris/>.

² https://merlefest.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Remembering_Merle_Watson.pdf.



MerleFest: \$12 million shot in the arm for NW NC

WILKESBORO (April 14, 2022) – Community colleges benefit their communities in all sorts of ways. But for the past 34 years, MerleFest has benefited Wilkes County and surrounding communities in a way that's unique to the people and music of the North Carolina foothills.

"MerleFest is a great example of what the community colleges in our state can do," Wilkes Community College President Jeff Cox says in the accompanying video. "It would be hard to find a better entrepreneurial example than MerleFest."



The annual festival of what Doc Watson called "traditional-plus" music – which returns to its normal schedule this month – began in 1988 as a one-time effort to raise money for campus gardens and memorialize Watson's son Eddy Merle Watson.¹

It's since grown to an annual celebration not just of bluegrass music, but of multiple genres – and one that's known not just in Wilkes County, not just in Northwest North Carolina, not just along the Eastern Seaboard, but around the world.

"It's tremendous," Cox says. "But the legacy of that and what it means not just for the college, but for the whole community – year in and year out, all these nonprofits ... use this as the biggest fundraiser they have all year."

MerleFest raises money for student scholarships and clubs – more than \$500,000 for scholarships through 2019. And local nonprofits earn \$400,000-500,000 a year through their work helping run the festival.

"That doesn't even touch all the gas stations and restaurants and hotels," Cox says.

"The four-day weekend has a \$12 million economic impact on the region."

According to MerleFest's Economic Impact Report for 2019 – the last year the festival was held in full splendor:

- 73,356 fans participated over the four-day festival.
- Fans came from 48 states, the District of Columbia, and 10 foreign countries.

- The economic impact on Northwest North Carolina was \$12.8 million.
- The economic benefit in Wilkes County alone was \$6.8 million.
- Over 80 civic, community, and institutional groups and more than 4,500 volunteers participated. Those organizations earned an estimated \$479,178 through their participation.

"For one long weekend, that's a tremendous shot in the arm for the community," Cox said. "Not to mention it's put us on the map worldwide."

Kim Faw, Wilkes' Vice President of Instructional Support & Student Services, can attest to that.

Faw recalls how she and her husband were once sitting in an outdoor café in La Grand-Place square in Brussels, Belgium – and both had on their MerleFest T-shirts.

"A couple from Brussels passed by and got really excited, pointing at our T-shirts and saying, 'MerleFest,'" Faw said. "They had traveled from Belgium to attend MerleFest!"

¹ https://merlefest.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Remembering_Merle_Watson.pdf.



NC Community Colleges: \$19B Impact, 300K Jobs

RALEIGH (April 20, 2022) – A recent economic-impact study shows that not only are North Carolina's community colleges important to education in our state – they're important to our economy.

"Not only do we fuel the job engine – we literally fuel the state's economy," Thomas Stith, President of the NC Community College System, says in the accompanying video.

"We have over a \$19 billion impact on the state's economy, supporting over 300,000 jobs – and that's rippling through our economy."¹

The study by Emsi Burning Glass found the biggest effect community colleges have is on their graduates' income.

"When you look at the impact of our alumni – a little over \$17 billion in earnings and contributions to the community. Then that's going to the corner store and utilizing those earnings," Stith says.

FOR THE INDIVIDUAL STUDENT, the results are tangible and significant.

The study found that on average, an NC community college graduate with an associate degree earns \$30,900 a year, or \$6,900 more than a high-school graduate.

It's a sound investment. Community college students reap an annual rate of return of 22.3%, versus an average annual return on the S&P 500 of 10.6% over 30 years, the study says.

"Every dollar invested results in four times the return," says Stith.

"So a dollar invested is 4.5 dollars, multiplied in our economy. It's a significant impact, not only from an educational point of view. But this study clearly shows the economic impact of our community colleges."²



¹ <https://bigroifornc.org>.

² *Ibid.*



VINFAST: 'North Carolina's future is bright'

RALEIGH (April 20, 2022) – North Carolina has longed for an auto plant for decades.

Now, with Vietnamese electric automaker VinFast's announced investment of more than \$4 billion in a plant in Chatham County,¹ coupled with Toyota's announcement in December of a \$1.3 billion battery plant in Randolph County,² North Carolina is on a battery-powered roll.

"This is huge for North Carolina, and we can't underestimate it," Thomas Stith, President of the NC Community College System, says in the accompanying video. "It will have the ability to attract other industry – this is a global announcement.



"VinFast is a global company. They could have selected any country in the world. They chose the United States, and they chose the leading economic engine in the United States, and that's North Carolina."

The state's surge in electric vehicle (EV) manufacturing underscores our community colleges' economic value to the state. On an ambitious schedule, VinFast hopes to start producing SUVs by 2024 and employ at least 7,500 workers by 2027.³

Stith says community colleges will work hand-in-hand with VinFast to provide training for its employees. VinFast's plant will be near Moncure in Chatham County, so Central Carolina Community College will be the lead institution for training.

"But because of the size and scope of this plant, we will respond in a regional manner," Stith says. Several colleges will provide training for VinFast employees.⁴

And as for the state's future with the EV industry?

"North Carolina's future is bright. We will be powered by some of the batteries that we produce here in the state," Stith says with a grin.

"You'll see now with these two announcements – Toyota and VinFast – just the infrastructure and supply chain that will develop around these plants, and others that will be coming. That's why it's so significant for North Carolina to secure these two companies ... but also the additional global companies that will locate in

North Carolina really makes our future extremely bright.

"And we can power that with some of the electric batteries that will be produced."

¹ <https://www.newsobserver.com/news/business/article259878320.html>.

² https://greensboro.com/news/local_news/its-official-greensboro-randolph-megasite-to-be-new-home-of-toyota-plant/article_e175d622-568e-11ec-83a9-5fd541022701.html.

³ <https://www.newsobserver.com/news/business/article259878320.html>.

⁴ <https://wraltechwire.com/2022/03/30/preparing-a-workforce-nc-community-college-system-creates-training-programs-for-vinfast/>.

Davidson-Davie Community College

Davidson-Davie: Students improve their lives

THOMASVILLE (April 27, 2022) – Communities need to stick together. And Davidson-Davie Community College serves as the glue for two counties just south of Winston-Salem.

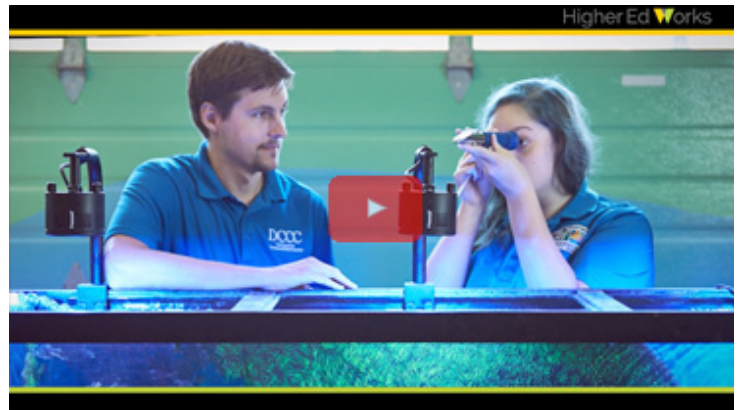
In the accompanying video, Davidson-Davie President Darrin Hartness describes how the college serves as an integral part of community.

"We now serve over 12,000 students each year with over 40 different programs of study," Hartness says.

Hartness then outlines the diverse diplomas and credentials the school offers citizens of Davidson and Davie counties, in Swiss-Army knife fashion:

- Associate degrees that lead to transfer to a four-year university.
- One of only two community-college zoo and aquarium science programs in the country.
- Health sciences that range from nursing to sterile instrument processing and surgical technology.
- Trade programs that include truck driving, plumbing, welding and electrical work.

"We have students of all ages that come to our college to gain better skills for a better job, improve their life and the life of their family," Hartness says.





DDCC Davie Campus: 'Tremendous impact on the workforce'

MOCKSVILLE (April 27, 2022) – In January 2021, the trustees at Davidson County Community College voted unanimously to add an important word to the college's name: Davie.

"That new name better reflects the service district that we serve," Darrin Hartness, President of what's now called Davidson-Davie Community College, says in the accompanying video.

"Davie Campus is part of workforce development, economic development in the community. It serves a unique need – proud to have 170 students on this campus that are part of an Early College program. A lot of those students are on an associate's degree pathway to transfer to a university," Hartness says.

"But we also have some unique health-science programs here – a central sterile processing program, a surgical technology program, and (a) practical-nurse education program that leads to an LPN, and most of those students go on to become nurses."

The Davie Campus also offers instruction in trades such as truck-driving and welding.

"So you may come to this campus to earn an associate's degree," Hartness says. "Or you may come to this campus on a Saturday morning and get re-certified to be a plumbing inspector or an electrical contractor or a construction contractor."

HARTNESS ALSO HIGHLIGHTS the Ignite Davie College Promise Program, which guarantees that any student who graduates from high school in Davie County is guaranteed tuition, fees and a book stipend to attend Davidson-Davie Community College.

Hartness says foundations and corporate and community leaders came together to agree that it's simply the right thing to do for Davie County.

The initiative has raised \$2 million so far toward a \$3 million goal to support the program. And since the program started, enrollment of local high-school graduates at Davidson-Davie has almost tripled.

"That's going to have a tremendous impact on the workforce and the future of this community," Hartness says.



Higher Ed
Works



Davidson-Davie basketball: 'Let's go Storm!'

THOMASVILLE (April 22, 2022) – You've got your Tar Heels. You've got your Wolfpack. You've got your Blue Devils.

Better add the Storm.

We don't often hear much about athletics at community colleges.

But in a streak that local papers call "staggering," Davidson-Davie Community College's men's basketball team has reached the National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA) Division II Final Four and played for the national championship the past two years.



Under Coach Matt Ridge, this year's team had three players who returned to play even though they had scholarship offers from four-year schools. They never lost a single game on their home court. And Davidson-Davie has won its regular-season conference title 13 of the past 15 years.

"We try to get guys that want to be a part of something bigger than themselves," says Ridge.¹

Davidson-Davie President Darrin Hartness is understandably proud.

"Davidson-Davie is really fortunate to have the No. 2 seed – ranked No. 2 in the country – men's basketball program in Division II," Hartness says in the accompanying video.

"Last year we were really proud that these young men went to the national tournament in Danville, Illinois – the first time a North Carolina team in Division I or Division II had played in a national championship."

Indeed, Hartness is proud of Davidson-Davie's entire athletics program – it's yet another *spirited* effort that builds community at the community college.

"So let's go Storm!" Hartness proclaims.

¹ <https://www.the-dispatch.com/story/sports/2022/03/09/davidson-davie-basketball-playing-3rd-straight-juco-national-championship/9426637002/>.



'Always a demand for truck drivers'

MOCKSVILLE (June 1, 2022) — With the supply-chain delays we face these days, there's never been a more important time to train truck drivers.

"Even your automobile came to the dealership on a truck. Everything you own at some point was on a truck," Jeff Ferguson, Director of the Truck Driver Training Program at Davidson-Davie Community College, says in the accompanying video.

"If we have a truck shortage or a driver shortage, parts shortage for the trucks, it all affects the supply-chain issues," Ferguson says.

Indeed, the entire nation faces a shortage of truck drivers — some estimates place the shortage of drivers at 12,000 in North Carolina alone.¹

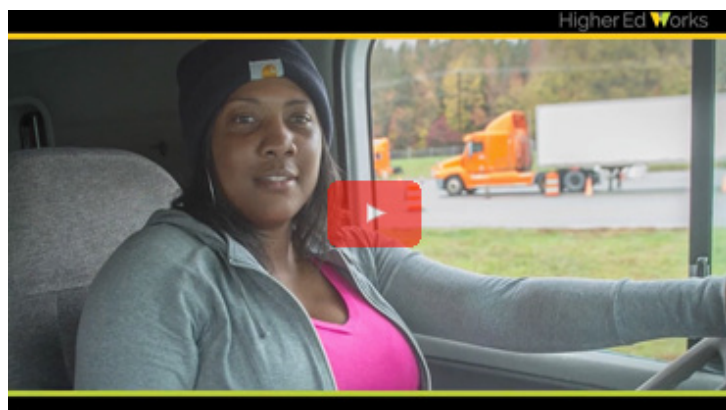
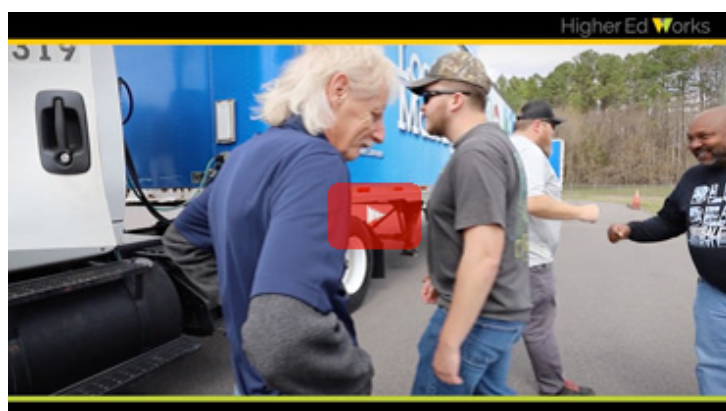
In response, the N.C. General Assembly included an extra \$5 million in the state budget this year to help community colleges train more drivers.²

In addition to Davidson-Davie, for example, Randolph Community College in Asheboro partnered with Sandhills Community College in Pinehurst and Central Carolina Community College in Sanford to offer new truck-driver training this spring.³

AT DAVIDSON-DAVIE, Ferguson says the return on an eight-week training program for a Commercial Driver's License can't be beat.

"When they leave here they can pretty easily make \$50,000 or \$60,000 their first year. Second year drivers, \$70,000. And as you travel the highways right now, you'll see billboards advertising driver openings with pay like \$100,000, \$110,000 for a solo driver," Ferguson says.

"The return on the investment – you're not gonna find this anywhere else. An eight-week school at a very reasonable cost, and you go straight into a \$50,000- or \$60,000-a-year job."



Even at the depths of the Great Recession in 2008, "There were really no jobs to be found except for two categories: nursing and trucking," Ferguson says.

"There's always going to be a demand for nurses, always going to be a demand for truck drivers, no matter how bad the economy."

DAVIDSON-DAVIE puts its students behind the wheel early on in their training.

"There's gotta be a first day at some point. So we make that first day early," Ferguson says.

"We get them as much seat time as possible. You're not gonna learn to do this sitting in the classroom driving a desk. You're gonna have to get out and drive the truck."

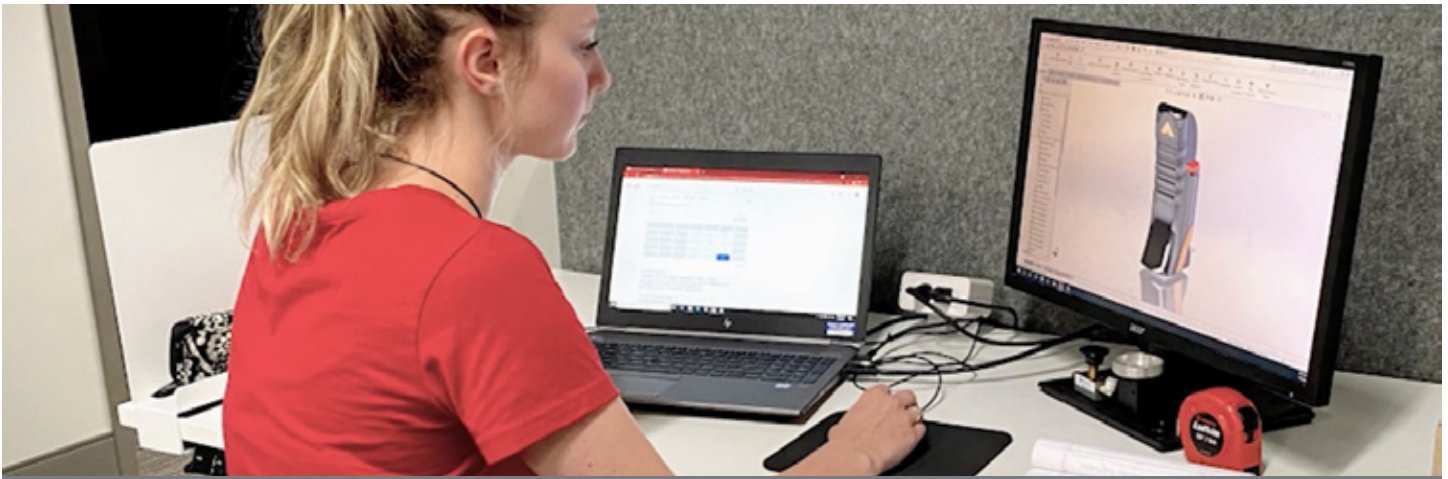
He also notes a growing phenomenon in the trucking industry: Female drivers.

A few years ago, he says, women accounted for about 10% of truck-driving students, but now they account for about 20%.

¹ <https://www.wfmynews2.com/article/news/education/randolph-community-college-partnership-truck-driver-training-courses/83-cece155c-a775-4f67-9b76-69e7d13608d8>.

² <https://webservices.ncleg.gov/ViewNewsFile/59/S105-CCSMLxr-3v5>, p. 457.

³ <https://www.wfmynews2.com/article/news/education/randolph-community-college-partnership-truck-driver-training-courses/83-cece155c-a775-4f67-9b76-69e7d13608d8>.



Davidson-Davie and a different furniture industry

THOMASVILLE (June 1, 2022) – With storied names like Lexington and Thomasville in its back yard, you'd expect Davidson-Davie Community College to have a long history with the furniture industry. And it does.

But that relationship has "morphed" over the years, Dr. Darrin Hartness, President of Davidson-Davie, says in the accompanying video.

The college supplies the industry not so much with craftsmen or woodworkers these days as it does with technicians to keep its robots running.



With furniture makers like Ashley Furniture and EGGER Wood Products nearby, "The majority of the support we provide for those advanced manufacturers (is) through industrial maintenance," Hartness says.

"The industry is looking for great minds who are problem solvers who can ensure that their machinery and their robotics are efficient and are running properly."

WHEN EGGER WOOD PRODUCTS, an Austrian wood-panel manufacturer with 20 plants around the globe, opened its first North American plant in 2020 in Linwood, near Lexington, the company brought with it a new apprenticeship program, Hartness says.

Davidson-Davie provided customized training for workers at the \$700 million plant. But the college also worked with EGGER to develop an apprenticeship consortium among manufacturers in Davidson and Davie counties who offer apprenticeships to the college's students.

"Not only do they get a great job," Hartness says. "They work on the job and learn skills that you can only learn on the job, but they're also getting an associate's degree."

"So what an awesome opportunity for students in Davidson and Davie counties to be a part of that apprenticeship consortium."



Wilkes: 'Lifting a generation out of poverty'

WILKESBORO (June 15, 2022) – Something remarkable is happening in Wilkes County.

First, with a goal to lift a generation out of poverty, Wilkes Community College has dramatically improved completion rates for its students over the past four years.

Second, an ardent new initiative will attempt to connect Wilkes graduates with high-paying jobs in the tech economy – jobs they can do from home in the hills of Wilkes, Alleghany and Ashe counties. Officials think the effort can serve as a national model for rural communities.

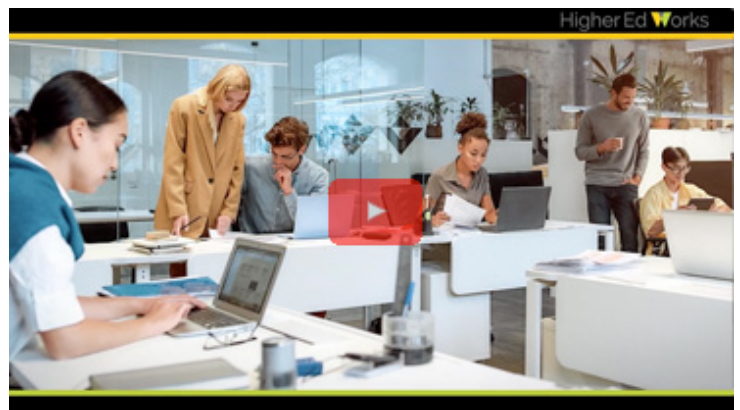
After adopting an ambitious strategic plan four years ago, "We've gone from a 25% completion rate to a 45% completion rate, which is absolutely astounding," says Craig DeLucia, CEO of the Leonard G. Herring Family Foundation, which provided \$2 million for the planning process.

A key element? Career coaches for students in the six high schools that feed the college. The schools have great guidance counselors, DeLucia says, but five years ago, each counselor had more than 400 students to advise.

Most of the college's students are the first generation in their family to go to college, DeLucia says, so officials studied methods that work for first-generation students in rural areas across the country. The coaches get to know students, their hobbies and fields that both interest and don't interest them.

Another help is North Carolina's Career & College Promise – students can sample subjects and earn college credits for *free* while they're still in high school.

With the credits earned in high school, "Now we can graduate students with a two-year associate degree 12 to 18 months after they've graduated high school and help them get out into the workforce," DeLucia says.



The college also supplies wraparound services – help when life happens and makes school more of a challenge. Even before the current spike in gas prices, a student told Higher Ed Works how gas cards from the college are critical to helping her get to school.

As they put together these services, Wilkes officials also developed a notion that they could connect graduates with tech companies – but keep them home in Wilkes, Ashe and Alleghany counties to do the work.

ENTER COVID-19. Telework. A remarkable broadband network in a rural community. And a new nonprofit called NC Tech Paths.

"When COVID hit, what seemed like a lofty vision that we're gonna go sell these companies on allowing their workers to telework from Wilkes County became an instant reality when suddenly the whole world was teleworking," says Wilkes Community College President Dr. Jeff Cox.

"If there's any blessing in the COVID pandemic, it was that it shined a light on the possibilities with telework."

Due to critical investments by local telecom companies during the Great Recession, "We have the strongest, most consistent broadband connectivity in the state of North Carolina," says DeLucia. "We have gig-plus fiber available to almost 90% of households."

Cox shares how one woman who works at Red Hat in Raleigh must cross two creeks to reach her cabin in Alleghany County.

"I mean like, literally driving through the creek to get over to a little mountain cabin where they had a full gig of fiber connectivity – better than you'd have in downtown Charlotte," he says.

"She could work remotely from her beautiful cabin in remote Alleghany County and stay connected to the urban center where her job was."

Zach Barricklow, Executive Director of NC Tech Paths, says the effort focuses on tech jobs because they are remote-friendly – only 5-7% of tech workers were interrupted at all during the pandemic, he says.

The aim, of course, is economic mobility – but not necessarily geographic mobility.

"These jobs pay on average 50% more to 200% more than our median household income. Not individual income – household income in this region," Barricklow says.

"And when we think about lifting a generation out of poverty ... that's a great opportunity."



NC Tech Paths: Live. Train. Remain.

WILKESBORO (June 15, 2022) – The nonprofit NC Tech Paths has a three-word slogan: "Live. Train. Remain."

"We're not going to reach our goals for this community if we continue to educate our best and brightest and export a high number of them to other communities around the state and around the country," says Craig DeLucia, now President/CFO of NC Tech Paths.

"Company after company has said, 'We are in a fierce competition for talent, and we will hire it and allow it to live wherever we can find it.' That's the opportunity in front of us."

Because every company is in some measure a tech company these days, DeLucia says, NC Tech Paths will aim to connect Wilkes Community College graduates with jobs in software engineering, network support, IT positions and cyber security.

Winston-Salem-based Inmar Intelligence – a data-analytics and marketing firm with 5,000 employees in the U.S., Mexico and Canada – has been an "amazing" partner, DeLucia says. The company plans to send its software engineers to local high schools to talk with students about tech careers.

Wilkes Community College President Dr. Jeff Cox says that with the first group of NC Tech Paths grads this spring, "We've got companies ready to interview those students as soon as they graduate."

In fact, all 10 students in NC Tech Paths' first group of software engineering graduates already have job offers – and they're expected to more than *double* their income.

The effort has even become part of a downtown redevelopment initiative in North Wilkesboro.

The Herring Family Foundation and NC Tech Paths bought both the former Wilkes Journal-Patriot building and a former American Drew furniture plant site to serve as "Regional Tech Outposts" and be developed into a makerspace, housing and a riverside park to link downtown Wilkesboro and North Wilkesboro.¹

The former newspaper building will open this fall as "The Masthead" and provide spaces for workers to collaborate – co-working and event spaces, as well as company-dedicated "pods" for remote teams to work together.



Lee Herring, president of the Herring Family Foundation that contributed \$2 million for implementation of the college's strategic plan, says that for too long, talented students in Wilkes, Alleghany and Ashe had to leave the community to find good jobs.

"Now, with this initiative, they will be able to stay and help us improve the community and enjoy it as well," Herring says.

¹ https://www.journalpatriot.com/news/land-sold-for-tech-job-outdoor-economy-plans/article_5fa561fc-a1c8-5b36-a8fg-b858dbgccc3e.html.



The Groundwork: A plan and philanthropic partners

WILKESBORO (June 15, 2022) – Wilkes Community College's effort to connect graduates with the tech economy didn't happen out of the blue – it took a plan. And it took generosity.

"Wilkes is suffering from a lot of the same challenges that many rural communities are across the nation," Lee Herring, President of the Leonard G. Herring Family Foundation that sponsored the college's strategic plan, says in the accompanying video.

Herring lists globalization of the textile and furniture industries among the factors that hurt local workers. "The consequence is that to get a living-wage job in Wilkes, you needed an education," he says.

Wilkes County saw the second-biggest drop in median per-capita income in the nation from 2000-2014, says Wilkes Community College President Dr. Jeff Cox¹

Zach Barricklow, the college's Vice President for Rural Innovation & Organizational Change, says a statistic in one study² became a driving factor in efforts to counter the decline.

"Two in three kids born into poverty were statistically likely to remain in poverty the rest of their lives," Barricklow says. "I have three kids. And if I think about two out of my three kids struggling to survive for the rest of their lives, that's *heartbreaking*. And as I look around the community, I know those kids."

"No one was satisfied with that statistic," says Cox. College leaders adopted a goal to flip the numbers so that two out of three children would escape poverty.

"That kind of became our rallying cry here at the college," Cox says.

Barricklow notes that the college already had a strong "culture of caring."



"When I came into the institution, it was very obvious that people genuinely cared.... And you can't buy that," he says with a chuckle.

Cox says the entire college – administrators, faculty and staff – bought into its new five-year strategic plan. And the plan wasn't a simple one.

"It wasn't one single thing – it was 20 different initiatives," he says. "There's not a simple fix for this. If there was, we would've already fixed it."

IT ALSO TOOK INVESTMENTS from critical philanthropic partners.

The family foundation of the late Lowe's CEO Leonard Herring contributed a total of \$2 million to the strategic planning process and has committed \$3 million to the nonprofit NC Tech Paths.

Starting in 2018, Robert L. Strickland, another Lowe's executive, and his wife Betty Strickland donated \$1.2 million to provide career coaches in each of the six high schools that feed Wilkes Community College.³

"That allowed us to start talking with kids when they're still in high school and make sure they really had a solid plan for their future," says Cox.

Then the family of late Lowe's executive Petro Kulynych gave \$1 million to the college to revamp student advising on campus.⁴ One aim is to make sure students think deeply before they choose their field, so they don't waste time and switch majors.

"We knew we needed to do more in-depth advising with those students to make sure they understood what were they getting into, and what was their plan to go through college and into a career, or on to a university," Cox says.

And things certainly appear to be headed in the right direction.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/26/us/feeling-let-down-and-left-behind-with-little-hope-for-better.html>.

² <https://www.mdcinc.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/North-Carolinas-Economic-Imperative-Building-an-Infrastructure-of-Opportunity.pdf>, pp. 41-47.

³ <https://www.wilkescc.edu/news/wilkes-community-college-announces-robert-l-strickland-career-coach-program-following-1-1-million-donation/>; <https://www.wilkescc.edu/news/wcc-receives-250000-donation-for-strickland-career-coach-program/>.

⁴ <https://www.wilkescc.edu/news/kulynych-family-donates-1-million-to-wilkes-community-college/>

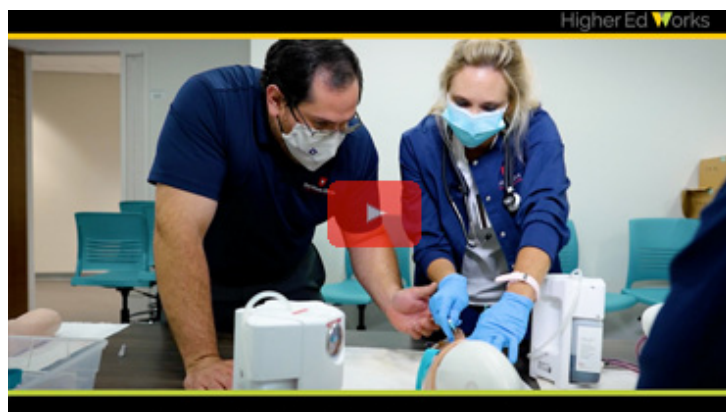


Davidson-Davie: Health-care support jobs

MOCKSVILLE (June 22, 2022) – The Davie campus of Davidson-Davie Community College sits not far from major health-care providers in the Piedmont Triad and Charlotte: Atrium Health Wake Forest Baptist, Novant, you name it.

"They're excellent partners with our college, and there's a lot of workforce in this region related to health care," Davidson-Davie President Darrin Hartness says in the accompanying video.

Davidson-Davie produces about 80 nurses a year from its Nursing program.



"But you cannot forget all the supporting jobs that go along with health care," Hartness says. "We have other programs that lead to nursing."

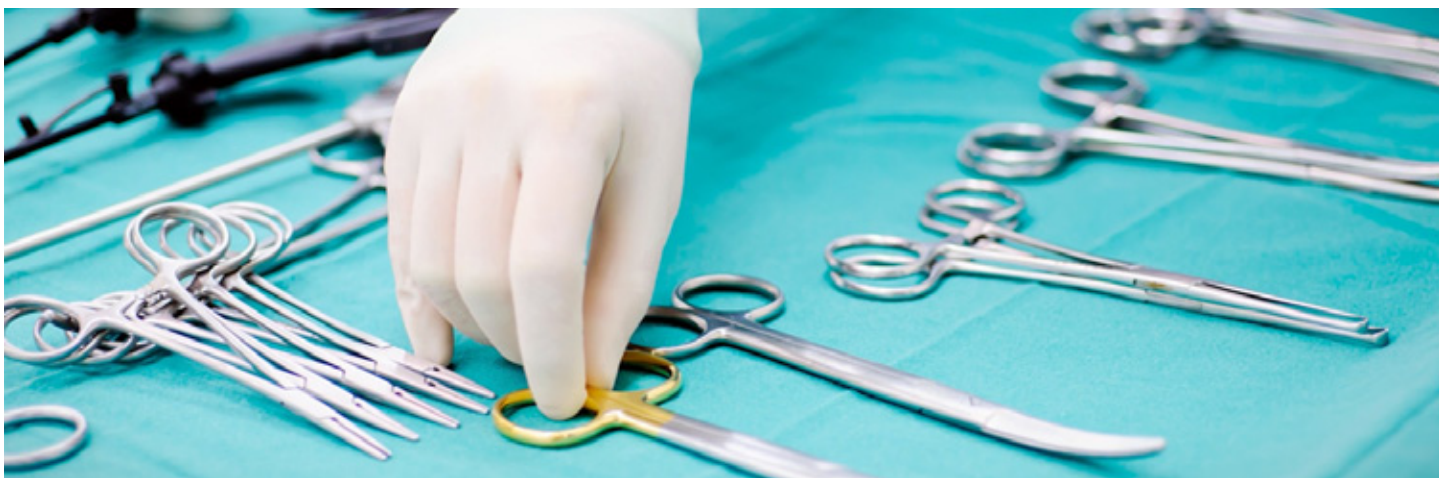
He lists Emergency Medical Science, Medical Assisting, Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA), Practical Nurse Education (PNE), Central Sterile Processing and Surgical Technology among the related fields.

In Central Sterile Processing and Surgical Technology, Hartness says, "Those students play a critical role in operating rooms. Operating rooms could not function without the support services of those critical positions in that workforce."

Other health fields include Pharmacy Technology, Esthetics Technology and Massage Therapy.

"So there's a holistic view, there's the medical view, and just lots of jobs around the health-care field," Hartness says.

"This is an excellent opportunity for students to get an introduction to working in a medical environment."



Central Sterile Processing: Who cleans those instruments?

MOCKSVILLE (June 22, 2022) – We don't usually think about who prepares the instruments a surgeon uses – but they're *very* important people.

And situated as it is between major health providers in North Carolina, Davidson-Davie Community offers a nine-month program in Central Sterile Processing that's designed to meet considerable demand for those technicians.

"Students who complete that pathway are then prepared to work in an operating room in a hospital, or in a surgical sterile environment where they're preparing instruments for the operating room," Darrin Hartness, President of Davidson-Davie, says in the accompanying video. "Or they may be working in a surgical center at an outpatient center."

"It's a very necessary part of an operation that you just don't really think about – somebody has to clean, somebody has to put out the right types of instruments for whatever procedure or whatever operation is going on," says Allison Carr, Dean of Academic Programs at the Davie Campus.

"You just don't think about the behind-the-scenes part of it."

But health-care executives say there's strong demand for these specialists.

The nine-month program starts in August and ends in April or early May, Carr says. Starting salaries range from \$35,000-40,000 a year.

"It has increased a little bit most recently because of the demand," she says.





Central Piedmont: Bridge to Careers

CHARLOTTE (June 30, 2022) – The Bank of America Bridge to Careers program at Central Piedmont Community College is an effort to connect Black and Hispanic/Latino students with high-demand careers that pay family-sustaining wages.

Bridge to Careers is part of a \$25 million initiative by Bank of America in collaboration with two dozen community colleges and several historically black institutions across the country. It supplies tuition, fees, books and materials for eligible students, as well as advising, career counseling and placement.



In the accompanying video, Central Piedmont President Kandi Deitemeyer outlines the opportunities in each of the fields the program offers.

"Each one of those, as you think about growing and think about continuing to be a vibrant city, are so important to the well-being of our community," she says.

- **Health Care:** "If we've learned anything in the pandemic, the wellness of who we are, whether it be mental health, our physical aspects, our physical wellness, is so important," Deitemeyer says. As some have chosen to leave health-care jobs during the pandemic, "this is a great opportunity for students to advantage themselves to go into a health-care field," she says. Of more than 200 students enrolled so far in Bridge to Careers, more than half aim to go into health care.
- **Construction Trades:** "There are always cranes available, moving about and standing up the next headquarters in our city, or the next building, or even residential housing or commercial," Deitemeyer says.
- **Advanced Manufacturing:** "Advanced manufacturing is certainly coming back to the U.S., and certainly in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg region. The jobs are absolutely coming back," she says.
- **Information Technology:** "Information technology really does drive everything we do, from health care to construction to our computers at home – really not a job in the U.S., really, or globally, that information technology doesn't touch."
- **Transportation:** "In Charlotte-Mecklenburg, transportation is always a hot topic. The mobility of our citizenry, as we think about the future, is very important," Deitemeyer says. Transportation itself is a broad

field that includes logistics, automotive technology, diesel and heavy equipment and truck-driver training, she says.

"Every single one of those aspects of transportation – when we think about mobility, we think about building a community – are right and available within Bridge to Careers, as well as a career for family-sustaining wages."



Bridge to Careers: 'Anything that they need'

CHARLOTTE (June 30, 2022) – The Bridge to Careers program at Central Piedmont Community College provides Black and Hispanic/Latino students tuition, fees, books and materials.

But it provides a lot more, says Central Piedmont President Kandi Deitemeyer.

"What I love about this program just beyond the financial capacity ... is the wraparound services that we provide," Deitemeyer says in the accompanying video.



Every student gets an advisor and mentor. "They really learn how to navigate not only an institution of higher learning, but they also learn how to navigate life," Deitemeyer says.

Students learn from their mentors about the soft skills employers expect in the workplace. The college has a clothes closet to supply students with a suit or a dress to wear to their first interview, for example.

Some students struggle with food or housing, so the college has a food pantry and an office of Single Stop, a nonprofit that helps students find a variety of services.

"Anything that they need in order to feel a whole person, to show up and feel supported as they are making the steps across that bridge," Deitemeyer says.



Central Piedmont: So many health fields

CHARLOTTE (June 30, 2022) – Central Piedmont Community College offers training in more than 20 health-care fields.

There's Nursing, of course, and nurses are in great demand.

But Karen Summers, Dean of Health Sciences at Central Piedmont, says many students simply aren't aware of all the other opportunities in health care.

"If they've never really been sick, then they know a nurse and a physician. And they don't know what a respiratory therapist does, what an occupational therapist does, what a physical therapist does, what a massage therapist does," Summers says in the accompanying video.

"We hope we have something for everybody."

Summers lists some of those professions, including Dental Assisting and Dental Hygiene – she notes that dental hygienists make even more than nurses, with a two-year degree.

Some students aren't comfortable working with blood or other body fluids, Summers says. So Central Piedmont's Cardiovascular Technology program has both an invasive track that involves working in a cardiac catheterization lab and inserting stents; and a non-invasive track that involves administering stress tests and EKGs.

Central Piedmont offers a Surgical Technology program, Summers says, where instructors tell students: "That's (the) closest you're gonna get to being a surgeon without being a surgeon, standing in the OR, assisting the surgeon."

The college is also considering a program in Sterile Processing that would serve as an entry to surgical technology.

There's also Medical Laboratory Technology, a two-year degree with possibilities for a 2+2 bachelor's degree. Or Cytotechnology, where technicians study Pap smears for cancer.

"We're the only community college in the country that offers that program – it's a post-baccalaureate certificate," Summers says. "In 11 months, our students take 57 credits, but they're graduating and taking



their biology degree where they couldn't get a job and 11 months later, making \$65,000, \$75,000, going all over the country."

There's training for Medical Assistants, who work in doctor's offices taking vital signs, removing sutures or delivering immunizations.

"That's a profession that's in very high demand and we can't graduate 'em fast enough," Summers says.

Or there's Ophthalmic Medical Personnel, where students can earn an 11-month diploma or a two-year associate degree as they learn to check eyeglass prescriptions, set up exam rooms and conduct glaucoma pressure tests. The program has been well-received by Charlotte's high concentration of ophthalmologists, Summers says.

"There's over 250 allied health professions," she says. "So we really have something for everybody – it's kind of finding the right fit for our students."



Community Colleges: Vital work for North Carolinians

RALEIGH (July 13, 2022) – If you didn't already, we hope our series on North Carolina's community colleges helped you appreciate the *many* services these 58 colleges provide their communities – the Swiss Army knives of higher education, we called them.

TRAINING FOR NEWCOMERS

As new employers like Toyota, VinFast and Boom Supersonic make huge investments in North Carolina, community colleges will play a critical role in training workers for those facilities.

In fact, an economic-impact study found that North Carolina community colleges add more than \$19 billion a year to the state's economy – \$17 billion of it in increased earnings for their graduates. The study found that on average, an NC community college graduate with an associate degree earns \$6,900 more a year than a high-school graduate.



"We have over a \$19 billion impact on the state's economy, supporting over 300,000 jobs – and that's rippling through our economy," said Thomas Stith, President of the NC Community College System.

TAILORED TO LOCAL JOBS

Community colleges serve the unique needs of local employers – and workers. For example:

- Pitt Community College trains at-risk high school students to become workers for Grady-White Boats and other employers in Greenville;
- Forsyth Tech provides customized training for employees at Reynolds American;
- Davidson-Davie Community College provides technicians to keep the robots used by local furniture factories running;
- And Davidson-Davie provides central sterile processing technicians to sterilize instruments for local hospitals and surgery centers.

"We focus on who our employers are, and then what kinds of customized skills they need their workforce to have," Forsyth Tech President Janet Spriggs told us.

The truck-driver training Davidson-Davie and other colleges provide meet not just a local need, but a critical *national* need, given the shortage of drivers that existed before the pandemic and the nation's supply-chain woes since.

And Wilkes Community College makes an economic splash of its own by hosting the MerleFest "traditional-plus" music festival every year. The festival attracts fans from across the world and generates a \$12 million economic impact for the region.

ON-RAMP TO A 4-YEAR DEGREE

Increasingly, North Carolinians view their community colleges as a way to get a head start – at a very reasonable cost – on a four-year degree.

Stith told us students who obtain an associate degree from a community college can expect a seamless transition to a four-year university at one-third the cost – and they perform every bit as well as students who start at a four-year school.

In particular – to address other shortages that existed before the pandemic – the state has launched "2+2" programs for aspiring teachers and nurses to start at a community college and limit their student debt.

At Forsyth Tech's Stokes County campus, Spriggs told us a survey revealed Stokes residents wanted Early College for their kids to get a head-start on college – so that's what the campus provides.

NC State University Chancellor Randy Woodson told us how community colleges offer a critical path to NC State, sending about 1,000 students a year to State and still more to other universities across the UNC System. NC State formed partnerships with 13 colleges in particular to ensure smooth transfers.

And by this fall, half of the 350 Goodnight Scholars at NC State are community college transfer students – most of them first-generation or students of color, and all of them majors in STEM fields.

WRAPAROUND SERVICES ESSENTIAL

Students at community colleges are sometimes more economically fragile than students at four-year universities. We learned that wraparound services to support them are critical to their success: Child care. Transportation. Car repairs. Utilities.

And yes, sadly, food.

These students are striving to better themselves and their families' futures. But they need help: The four food pantries at Forsyth Tech's campuses even stock pet food. Forsyth Tech also connects students with non-criminal legal services through Wake Forest University's Law School.

Even before the current spike in gas prices, a student at Wilkes Community College told us how helpful the gas cards are that the college provides her. And a clothes closet at Central Piedmont Community College



supplies students with dresses or suits to wear to job interviews.

At Pitt Community College, Rebecca Warren, Director of the VISIONS Program, told us it all starts with a *personal relationship* – if a high-school student has a football game or a school play, their VISIONS counselor will be there. Students have their counselors' cell-phone numbers and call at all hours.

"That's gonna let them know that we're there for them to succeed," she said.

LOUSY FACULTY PAY

Yet despite the *many* services these colleges provide – many uniquely tailored to their local economy – we also learned NC community-college instructors are paid even less, on average, than K-12 public school teachers.

Though North Carolina has the third-largest community college system in the country, its instructors rank 41st in pay, Stith told us.

And even though the State Board of Community Colleges offered a well-thought-out plan to raise faculty pay 8% over three years to reach the average faculty pay in neighboring states, the General Assembly gave state employees a raise of just 3.5% this year – despite 8.6% inflation and a \$6.5 billion surplus.

That's an embarrassment. The folks who equip North Carolina students to be the workforce of tomorrow deserve better.

'FREE' COMMUNITY COLLEGE? NOT HERE...

Our Republican neighbors in Tennessee broke new ground in 2014 with the Tennessee Promise – free community college for high-school graduates. In just three years, the state saw a 15% increase in community college students. And by 2019, at least 30 other states had launched similar programs.

North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper gets it – he's repeatedly proposed free community college in North Carolina, and he used federal pandemic relief money to provide tuition-free community college known as the Longleaf Commitment for just two years.

Yet Tennessee seems to understand something North Carolina doesn't. Though some colleges in North Carolina have found resources to offer tuition-free college, our legislature won't go for it.

Pitt Community College President Lawrence Rouse and Forsyth Tech President Janet Spriggs both endorsed a statewide system of free tuition as a way to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty.

Forsyth Tech welding student Mark Plymale told us he planned to start working after high school until he heard about tuition-free community college through Cooper's program.



"Forsyth Tech made sense for me when they announced that they were going to do the free college," Plymale said.

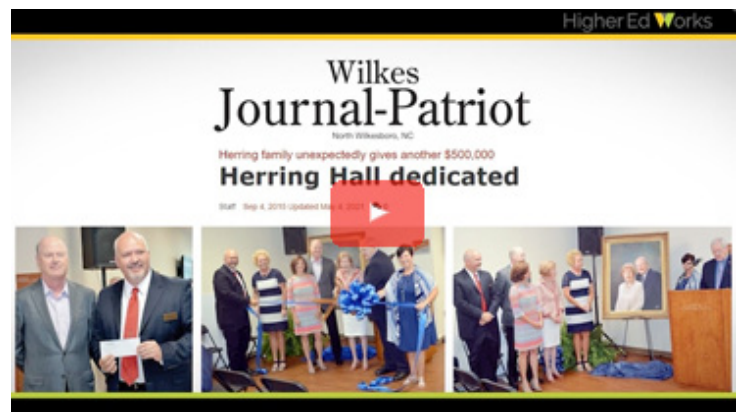
"I had the two-year ability to get free college. I saw all those zeroes in my student debt just drop, and I was like, 'That's crazy.'"

TRUE LOCAL SUPPORTERS

There's a reason they're called *community* colleges – they enjoy incredible support in their communities.

Throughout our series, we discovered how local businesses and philanthropists step up to support into their local colleges:

- Through his family foundation, Grady-White Boats owner Eddie Smith has put \$4 million into the VISIONS Program at Pitt Community College – not just to train workers for Grady-White, but to reduce dropout rates and build an educated workforce in Eastern North Carolina.
- At first, Smith says, he thought the program might help four or five at-risk students.
- It has since helped more than 1,200.
- As part of a \$25 million nationwide initiative, Bank of America put \$1 million into the Bridge to Careers program at Central Piedmont Community College in Charlotte to connect Black and Hispanic/Latino students with high-demand jobs. More than half chose to pursue jobs in health care.
- After Wilkes County saw the second-biggest drop in per-capita income in the nation, the Leonard G. Herring Family Foundation and families of other former Lowe's executives provided support for a strategic plan that put career coaches in every high school that feeds Wilkes Community College; increased the graduation rate at the college from 25% to an astounding 45% in just four years; and created a non-profit that aims to connect graduates with jobs in the digital economy without leaving Wilkes County. "Live. Train. Remain," its slogan says.



We hope this look at North Carolina's community colleges leaves you with profound appreciation for the important work they do – vital work for the *North Carolinians* in their communities.