



# 2025 Community College Presidents & Superintendents Convening



Grandover Resort and Conference Center | Greensboro, NC | Grandville Ballroom

## Meeting Summary and Resources

Over 150 North Carolina community college presidents and local school superintendents gathered to address our state's most pressing education and workforce opportunities. This annual, joint convening brings these two key education systems together to collaborate on promising practices and shared goals that lead to improved student outcomes, increased economic mobility, and producing a diverse talent pipeline that meet North Carolina's growing workforce needs.

A summary of each session is provided below, and the slides from the meeting have been shared with attendees.

### Economic Realities in and out of Public Education

**Presenter:** Laura Dawson Ullrich, PhD, Senior Regional Economist, Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond

- The [Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond](#) is an independent, non-partisan research organization focused on North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, Washington DC, and West Virginia. Its core function is to provide data-driven insights to help institutions, policymakers, families, and other stakeholders make well-informed decisions about where they should spend their resources.
- The **economic growth post-pandemic** has been very strong nationally, with the US seeing above trend GDP growth since mid-2020.
- However, there is **uncertainty** how the economy will shift in the coming months. Consumer confidence and sentiment are falling, which could impact spending. While consumption overall has remained strong, higher income families are dominating that growth. Low- and moderate-income families have been hit hard by inflation.
- **Unemployment rates** in North Carolina have exceeded its pre-pandemic trajectory, but labor force participation remains below pre-pandemic levels.
- Worker demand is outpacing supply, with fewer people actively seeking work. The aging population and baby boomer retirements could exacerbate **labor force** shortages.
- **Housing** is a significant, and growing, cost burden on North Carolinians. Homes are not being built at a rate that matches growth, and many existing homes in rural areas are aging and of poor quality. While the reasons for housing struggles differ regionally (urban areas typically face a lack of inventory and higher costs, while rural areas lack quality options), the percentage of a family's income that is spent on housing remains high across the state. In particular, families in many rural counties along the I-95 corridor are spending from 28-37% of their income on housing.
- **Inflation** has decreased rapidly, but concerns remain about potential inflationary policies.

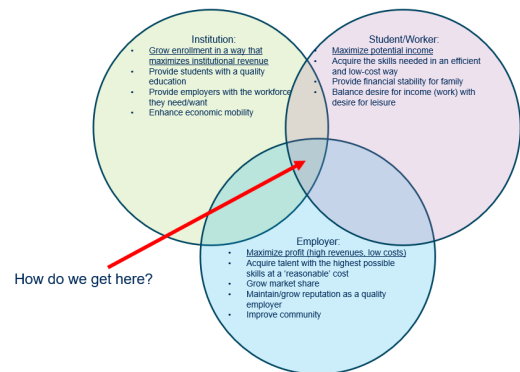


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- A “2025 cliff” is expected, where the number of high school students nationally will begin to fall due to decreasing fertility rates. This, combined with the fact that fewer students are already choosing to pursue higher education after graduating high school (especially among male students), is likely to lead to a long-term decrease in post-secondary enrollment.
- More education typically leads to higher wages and labor force participation, but there is a “leaky pipeline” from K-12 education to the workforce. Notably, only 22% of adults say that the cost of college is worth it even if loans are needed to pay for it.
  - Dr. Ullrich noted two ways to plug leaks in the pipeline;
    - Restructure funding models for education and workforce development that align institution-student-employer incentives more efficiently.
    - Shift towards short-term and stackable credentials that reflect student preferences.
- In the education space, **IPEDS data** on graduation rate are often viewed as the primary indicator of success for IHEs, but this measure does not accurately capture the work of Community Colleges. As a result, the Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond created its own measure that considers the attainment of shorter-term credentials, transfers and persistence.
  - This survey found that community colleges saw far more success than is captured in the IPEDS graduation rate figure.
  - North Carolina Community Colleges scored highest on this figure among states within the region.
- Community College Presidents should have received a **report from Dr. Ullrich** that provides this data for their institutions.





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## Lessons learned from Natural Disasters and Crises: Insights from Community College Presidents and K-12 Superintendents

**Moderator:** Mr. Mike Krause, Senior Advisor, John M. Belk Endowment

**Panelists:** Dr. Eisa Cox, Superintendent, Ashe County Schools  
Dr. Rob Jackson, Superintendent, Buncombe County Schools  
Dr. Tracy Mancini, President, Carteret Community College  
Dr. John Gossett, President, Asheville-Buncombe Community College

Panelists discussed lessons learned from the first 72-hours after a natural disaster, with representatives from both the eastern and western part of the state sharing their experience with emergency response.

- **Proactive Preparation:** Prepare staff, identify resources, and work with partners to update MOUs to ensure a quick response.
  - Ensure that these materials are accessible offline, in case power and internet are unavailable.
  - Include contact information for vendors for food, laundry, shower trailers, and other necessities that may be unavailable in a natural disaster.
- **Communication Systems:** Develop reliable communication plans, including backup systems when traditional methods fail.
  - At Carteret Community College, every member of the storm response team has a laminated card with contact information, addresses, and emergency contacts for every member of the response team.
  - For Ashe County Schools, Starlink satellite internet proved to be critical in keeping lines of communication open, allowing them to reach out to neighboring counties and assist with mutual support.
- **Flexible Response:** Breaking traditional rules and creatively working around bureaucracy to meet urgent needs.
  - Buncombe County Schools used school buses for evacuations and donated food from school freezers to families in need.
  - Recognizing the need for childcare for first responders, Ashe County Schools opened a childcare facility, calling it a “workday camp” and creatively shifted grant funds to cover expenses.
- **Mental Health & Emotional Support:** Address both immediate and long-term emotional and psychological needs of students and staff.
  - Over 250 social workers and counselors traveled from almost every school district in the state to support Buncombe County Schools’ students in their first 3 days back to school.



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- Asheville-Buncombe Tech provided trauma-informed training to employees to address emotional strain for students.
- **Community Partnerships:** Create strong relationships with local emergency management services, area institutions, local businesses, churches, and organizations to coordinate response and provide essential supplies and support.
  - Buncombe and Ashe County Schools both provided fuel for emergency services in the first 72 hours of the storm, even transporting diesel fuel to cellphone towers to keep communication online.
  - While school districts and community colleges traditionally serve as shelters for emergencies, serving this purpose can extend the time that students are out of school while those facilities are in use. Consider establishing relationships with other organizations, like churches or the YMCA, that can serve as shelters to decrease the amount of time students are out of school.
- **Employee Relief:** Establish funds and resources to help employees affected by the disaster.
  - Carteret Community College set up an employee relief fund where donors could contribute specifically to help faculty and staff members in need. This fund was critical because many employees had lost homes or faced major personal challenges yet continued to show up for their students.
- **FEMA and Long-Term Recovery:** Consider what requirements are in place for receiving federal relief and recovery in advance.
  - Carteret Community College partnered with an external company to streamline FEMA reporting and record-keeping to ensure timely assistance.
  - Buncombe County Schools maintained detailed records (e.g., taking pictures of damage, documenting fuel distribution) to expedite recovery and reimbursement.



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## Collaborative Table Discussion and Reporting Equity and Access to Higher Education

**Facilitator:** Mr. Mike Krause, Senior Advisor, John M. Belk Endowment

Table groups discussed how they are approaching building a pipeline of talent through career and technical education, apprenticeships and dual enrollment, creating seamless pathways for students from K-12 to community college through college readiness, academic support, and strategic planning.

- **Caldwell County Community College** provided **Watauga County Schools** with five classrooms to house middle school classes displaced by damage from Hurricane Helene. In doing so, the community college has been able to begin building relationships with students and their families, exposing them to opportunities they may have through the community college.
- **Central Carolina Community College** has used Title III grant funds to improve onboarding and advising of students through a CRM platform that sends personalized communication to students and families in **Chatham, Harnett, and Lee** counties. In partnership with these districts, the College crafted and disseminated targeted information around education pathways to 8,000 students and have seen a 60-80% open rate among recipients.
  - **Lee County Schools** noted, in this partnership, counselors work hand in hand with community college staff to identify students and create a personalized checklist for what they need based on where they are right now. The district also created a [Red Carpet Registration](#) event to further assist students in matriculating from high school to community college.
- **Surry-Yadkin Works** continues to be a model for partnerships between industry leaders, community colleges, and K-12 school districts. The [Surry-Yadkin Works FLEET](#) (Fostering Learning through Education, Employment, and Trades) recently opened a high school inside an advanced manufacturing facility at Altec Industries.
  - A students' eight-hour day is split evenly between classes and working for Altec, and they will graduate with a 22-credit diploma and a job.
  - Students also receive an hourly wage from Altec.
  - Currently 16 students are enrolled, and this figure will increase to 25 by August and 50 the following year.



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## A Conversation on Mental Health Services for Students and Staff

**Moderator:** Dr. Don Phipps, President, NC School Superintendents Association

**Panelists:** Dr. Lew Honeycutt, President, Nash Community College  
Dr. Tony Jackson, Superintendent, Chatham County Schools

Dr. Honeycutt and Dr. Jackson shared how wellness initiatives in their organizations are evolving to meet the growing needs of both students and staff.

- Each **highlighted impactful wellness programs** offered for employees and students.
  - Chatham County Schools (CCS) offers teletherapy services through Day Break, allowing access to family and student therapy 24/7 and provides resources such as Parent University to help families navigate challenges. Dr. Jackson also emphasized the underutilization of Employee Assistance Programs (EAP).
  - Nash Community College (NCC) offers a wide range of wrap-around services including HIPAA-compliant clinical therapy with licensed social workers, a collegiate recovery program, and a [Single Stop Office](#), which syncs up services resources to address barriers to student success. NCC has also trained staff in Mental Health First Aid and provides serenity rooms and fitness facilities to support staff and students.
- To **evaluate the effectiveness of programs** and identify ways to strengthen offerings, consider program usage data, post-service satisfaction surveys, and including feedback opportunities embedded within the service.
- CCS uses **pilot programs** to identify challenges and opportunities within an initiative before scaling. For example, the district is currently implementing a student cellphone management system and was able to identify critical changes needed to effectively scale to a district-wide initiative.
- As initial grant funding for mental health initiatives ran out, NCC made the decision to **prioritize investing** in sustaining the college's most utilized and effective wellness initiatives. At the same time, they continue to pursue grants, sponsorships, and community collaborations that can continue to support key wellness initiatives.
- NCC uses student groups, CRM systems, chatbots, and digital signage to **raise awareness** of these initiatives. They have also found success integrating wellness services into student orientations and campus events.
- Finally, each leader shared their organization's **long-term wellness goals**.
  - CCS wants to implement early warning systems to detect students' mental health or academic struggles early and offer support before problems escalate.



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- NCC plans to continue strengthening wellness programs and further integrate wellness into the institution's fabric by promoting preventative and holistic health for all members of the community.
- NCSSA has partnered with SREB to create the **NC Crisis Recovery Network**, which will train school counselors on trauma response. This initiative involves 30 counselors and will train all eight regions to effectively deploy resources during crises.

The executive summary was provided in conjunction with RTI International. Thank you for your leadership and the partnerships across our state. I want to personally thank MC Belk Pilon and the John M. Belk Endowment for providing the resources to make this event possible.

Sincerely,

Jack Hoke, Executive Director,  
North Carolina School Superintendents' Association