

NC STATE UNIVERSITY

College of Education
Belk Center for Community College
Leadership and Research



RECRUITING ADULT LEARNERS THROUGH NC RECONNECT

Recruiting Adult Learners Through NC Reconnect

INTRODUCTION

Recruiting in today's higher education landscape is not without challenges. Prospective students have options – which means the market is saturated with advertisements and messages from postsecondary institutions of all types. And when you add the layer of recruiting students who are no longer in high school and often have competing demands, the challenges compound.

“There is not an adult learner store where you can go to find them.”

When students graduate or leave high school, postsecondary institutions lose the benefit of a central location where one target audience gathers. Adults live, work, and play in a variety of spaces within their communities – making it difficult for colleges to deliver targeted information about educational and career opportunities.

So how do institutions engage with this hard-to-reach population?

This brief highlights some promising recruiting techniques learned from the first 10 colleges of NC Reconnect – an initiative tasked with connecting adult learners to educational opportunities in North Carolina's community colleges that can lead to better jobs and pay.



LAUNCHING NC RECONNECT

Spearheaded by the John M. Belk Endowment (JMBE), NC Reconnect launched in July 2021 with five community colleges of varying sizes across the state: Blue Ridge Community College, Durham Technical Community College, Fayetteville Technical Community College, Pitt Community College, and Vance-Granville Community College.

By November 2021, NC Reconnect had extended to include five more colleges: Caldwell Community College and Technical Institute, Central Carolina Community College, Forsyth Technical Community College, Lenoir Community College and Wilkes Community College. In fall 2022, five more schools were added: Brunswick Community College, Catawba Valley Community College, College of The Albemarle, Davidson-Davie Community College, and Edgecombe Community College.

NC RECONNECT COLLEGE PARTNERS



NC Reconnect takes a collaborative approach – with as many as eight partners (JMBE, Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research, Crisp Communications, InsideTrack, Finish First NC, myFutureNC, North Carolina Community College System, and VisionPoint Marketing) working alongside the colleges. The partners provide a variety of supports to NC Reconnect colleges, including funding, qualitative and quantitative research, marketing, and direct student outreach.

Colleges receive direct student outreach from InsideTrack, along with marketing support from VisionPoint Marketing, and Crisp Communications. Additionally, institutions receive funding that can be used in various ways including recruitment and outreach.

As NC Reconnect progresses, the Belk Center research team continues to interview presidents, staff and faculty about their experiences launching and sustaining a college-wide program. The team also meets with adult learners to understand more about their decisions to engage or re-engage with the college.

Below are learnings from the Belk Center's interviews about unique ways the first 10 NC Reconnect colleges reach adult learners in their communities.

REACHING ADULT LEARNERS: PROMISING PRACTICES

Special Events

Sometimes you need a reason to celebrate. Several NC Reconnect colleges hosted events as a way to engage current students, prospective students, and their families. The events were engaging and offered activities for the whole family to enjoy. Some colleges used this time to help students enroll, register for classes, and navigate financial aid. Forsyth Tech invited students to sign up for a time slot so they could meet one-on-one with an academic advisor and review course options.

Most events were held on campus, while Central Carolina collaborated with faith-based partners to host a community-wide event to celebrate the coming school year. Those in attendance could receive COVID-19 vaccines and tests, dental care kits, and book bags filled with school supplies. Community members could also register to vote and learn more about short-term training programs at the college.

“Partnering with faith leaders is important because they have relationships with the community the college doesn’t have.”

It is often said that when an adult returns to school, so does their family. Engaging families does several things. First, it recognizes that adult learners have lives beyond their education. Second, it is a chance for those not attending college to feel part of their family member’s educational journey. And third, it creates an awareness about college and future opportunities for family members not currently enrolled.

“We want the message to be that we realize how hard it is to balance work and families, so we want to really put the spotlight on the family event.”

Recruiting does not stop once a student applies and registers for classes. It is an ongoing cycle. To prevent melt – a term that describes when students enroll but never attend classes – many colleges held an orientation specifically for adult learners. Those orientations were unique because they provided an opportunity for adult learners to gather, helping them see they are not alone in their educational journey.

“The coolest thing for them [adult learners] was to get in a room with other adult learners and say, ‘Oh, there’s more of us here.’”

Colleges used the time during the adult learner orientation to review wrap-around services, explain technology that may have changed since the adult learner was last in school, and connect students to leaders and staff at the college. Several institutions provided childcare during the orientation.

One common element across all colleges was free food at events – a detail that almost all adult learners mentioned as positive in their interviews.



Partnering to Outreach

Communicating the educational opportunities available to adult learners can take on many forms. Often the messaging is direct, with flyers about program options, but other times the communication is indirect and looks more like branded apparel and community convenings. Regardless of the type of communication, the delivery often requires strategic collaboration. NC Reconnect colleges partnered with outside agencies to deliver targeted information and boost awareness about the ways in which the college serves adults in their community.

Blue Ridge works directly with the Department of Social Services (DSS) to help spread the word about free college and the variety of educational opportunities available to adults at the college. Mailers went out to DSS clients, and social workers had flyers to share during casework with clients. Blue Ridge also placed informational flyers in food pantry boxes distributed to community members.

Pitt partners with the Pitt County Sheriff's Office to connect with vulnerable populations. The Reentry Program at Pitt helps people get back on their feet after they've been impacted by the justice system. The college sends staff into the detention center to connect with those who may need adult high school opportunities.

Forsyth Tech collaborates with a local nonprofit to host a free, fresh produce community farmer's market twice a month between April and October. College staff wear branded Forsyth Tech apparel during the on-campus event. Caldwell hosted chamber and economic development members, inviting them to learn more about how the college would engage adult learners. This was a chance for decision-makers to be part of the larger conversation and help spread the word about the opportunities available.

Wilkes took their message online and partnered with 75 local employers to generate buzz about curriculum and workforce development programs offered at the college. Employers sent Wilkes their company logo and in turn, the college created social media posts about program options and highlighted local employers who hire graduates from those programs.

Engaging adults is a community approach, which means you need partners who can be voices for the college.

“If you're going to engage community members, you need a champion in the community to help.”

In the Community

“We spend way too much time in our hallowed halls thinking people are going to come to us. We’ve got to go out, we’ve got to meet them where they are. You know – have tablet, will travel.”

Gone are the days of prospective students arriving on campus ready to enroll. NC Reconnect colleges found a solution and took admissions on the road. Several colleges restructured office spaces moving college staff off campus and into the community.

Vance-Granville sent their success coaches traveling. One success coach spends a portion of their time each week at the Economic Development Center, which happens to be located next to a skate park, a playground, and a basketball court. Off-campus employees are equipped with technology to help students apply. Pitt has a mobile vehicle outfitted with the necessary equipment to move students through the admissions process.

College staff are visible in the community – equipped with information about opportunities for adult learners and wearing college-branded apparel. Blue Ridge staff attend local baseball games and show up at Boys and Girls Club events to talk about college options. Colleges also participate in local festivals throughout their region. Fayetteville Tech, along with other colleges, met with faith based groups including churches and ministerial councils to engage populations and share about program opportunities.

At Durham Tech, some faculty members are in the community because of their work in the trades industry. The college hired bi-lingual faculty who work in residential wiring and HVAC areas to teach trades courses for Spanish-speaking day laborers.



College Connections

NC Reconnect colleges realized that sometimes the best opportunity for recruitment is with individuals who already have some type of relationship with the college.

Lenoir offers opportunities for parents of [Career and College Promise](#) students to enroll. Parents who have a high school student enrolled in a dual-enrollment course may be eligible to take the same course through continuing education at no cost. Lenoir also uses graduation events as recruiting opportunities. The college has admissions staff attend adult high school and continuing education graduations in an effort to showcase options that are available to students who wish to continue their education. These events can also be used to recruit family members of those attending the ceremonies.

When a student completes a certificate program, many colleges send information to those students with options to pursue a diploma or degree program. Several colleges map out a student's pathway, should they choose to continue. Several adult learners interviewed, such as students at Lenoir, acknowledged this was the reason they chose to further their studies.

CONCLUSION

Boosting economic and social mobility is directly tied to educational attainment – but sometimes communicating that message to those who need to hear it most is challenging. These 10 NC Reconnect colleges have dialed in to the needs of their community and developed strategies to get the word out about community college opportunities.

As NC Reconnect expands, the Belk Center will continue engaging cohorts, interviewing presidents, staff, and students to identify opportunities and promising practices as colleges enhance how they reach adult learners.

[Check out the Adult Learner Guidebook](#)

