

# Serving **ADULT** and **RETURNING** Students:

## One College's Experience

BY MICHAEL A. KENNAMER AND J. DAVID CAMPBELL

In 2009, *Community College Week* named Northeast Alabama Community College (NACC) one of the fastest growing community colleges in America. In the early 2000s, the college, which is located in the rural Appalachian region of Alabama, had begun efforts to increase enrollment. These efforts included providing online registration, online courses, an expanded class schedule, a student loan program, dual enrollment courses at area high schools, intensified student recruiting, focused marketing and promotions, and community events on campus to bring area residents to the college. As a result, the college saw a jump in credit headcount enrollment from 1,659 the fall semester of 2000-2001 to 2,247 the fall semester of 2005-2006.

Although there were a few workforce training programs offered, such as registered nursing, drafting and design, emergency medical services, and industrial electronics, the college had historically focused on academic transfer. In an effort to become a truly comprehensive

community college, additional career and technical education (CTE) programs were added to the curriculum to meet future workforce needs. To accomplish this, college officials sought guidance from the U.S. Department of Labor on what were anticipated to be high-growth jobs of the future. Additionally, officials were advised by local industry and business leaders as to what their employment needs were and would be in the future; advisory boards were established to provide frontline input. As a result, numerous career programs were added to the college, including practical nursing, medical assisting, industrial systems technology, welding technology, machine tool technology, cosmetology, criminal justice, and child development.

Noncredit certificate training programs in the college's Skills Training Division were also added, particularly in health fields. On-campus partnership programs were established with Wallace State Community College at Hanceville in the areas of physical therapy assistant and respiratory therapy. An adult education program,

leading to the GED, also became a part of the college. With the addition of these new programs, NACC became a truly comprehensive community college with a far-reaching and varied mission.

### The Boom Began

By 2005, enrollment was increasing significantly. This upward pattern was accelerated with the downturn that occurred in the U.S. economy beginning locally in 2007 and 2008; the area that the college serves was hit especially hard. This area includes Jackson County, the northern half of DeKalb County, and a small part of Cherokee County. The textile industry had served much of this area, particularly DeKalb County, whose county seat had been dubbed the "sock capitol of the world." Changes within the textile industry led to plant closings and layoffs—the unemployment rates shot up to 15 percent in DeKalb County and 13 percent in Jackson County. In DeKalb County, the number of those directly employed in the hosiery industry decreased from 8,000 in 2001 to some 1,200 today.

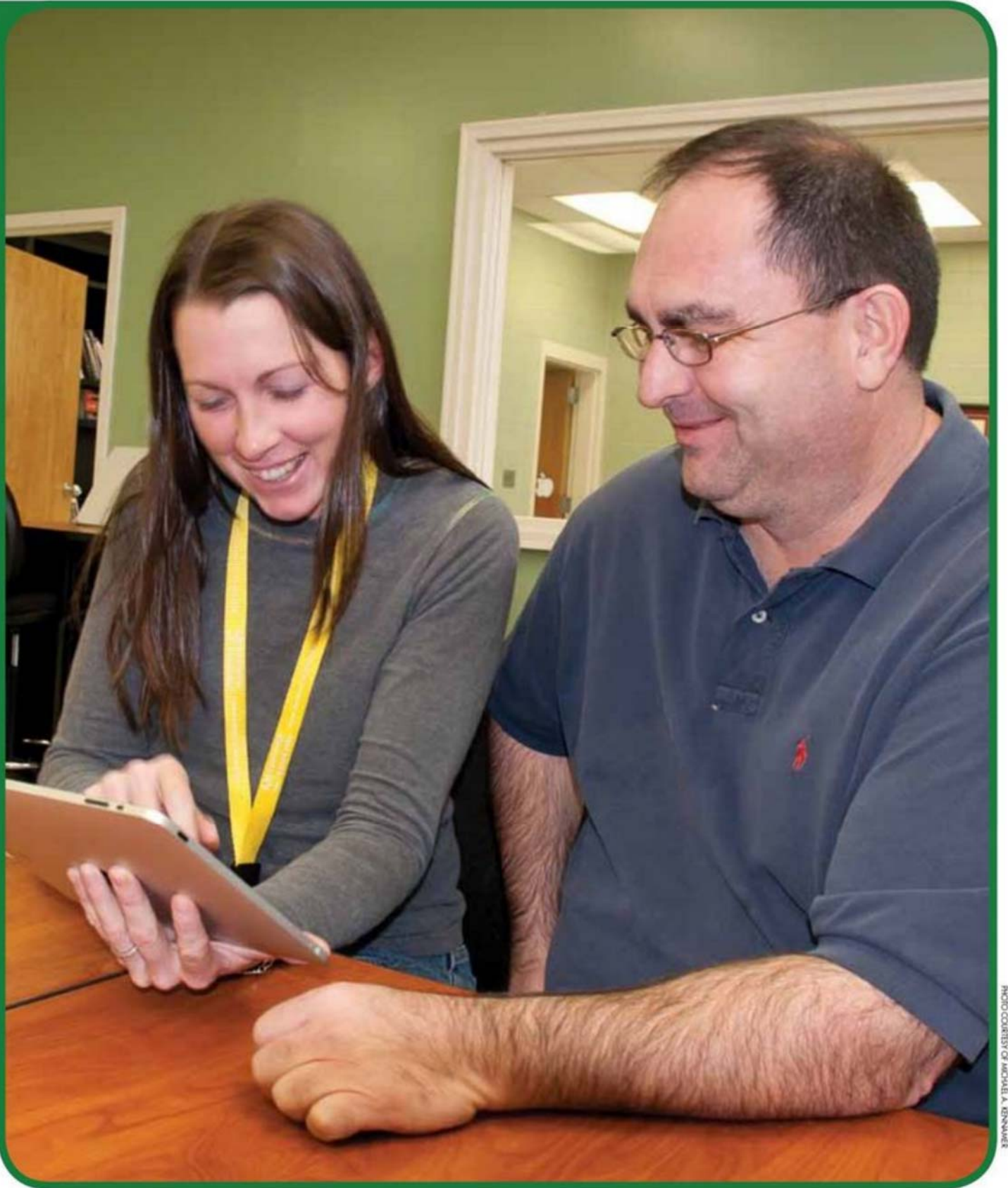


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▲ Students and faculty visit the Technology Learning Center to learn and experience new technologies. Here TLC tutor Amber Mathewson (left) shows student William McNally (right) how to log in to Blackboard on an iPad.

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▲ Instructor Will Roberts (left) inspects a part produced on a CNC lathe by student Stacy Woolten (right).

Fortunately, NACC was prepared to help serve those who lost their jobs by providing them with new training opportunities and vital student services.

Those enrolling at the college due to the economic downturn added to the college's already surging numbers, and many of these new students were adult learners. The number of students 40 years of age and older increased from 233 in 2005 to 479 in 2009, a 106 percent increase in this age group and an increase from 10 percent to 14 percent of the total college enrollment. New challenges in educating larger numbers of adult learners had now arisen.

From their experiences, NACC officials note that preparing to serve these students is not accomplished with a single step, but rather a series of steps that work together. From the organizational structure of the college to the services provided to its students, NACC has prepared to serve this important group of students. In many ways the college, through its numerous support programs, provides a one-stop center for adult learners.

### Best Practices Support Services

Parallel to the enrollment increases and the addition of new programs, administrators, faculty and staff sought to expand the infrastructure of the college to provide the best support services to students. Although these efforts were geared toward all students on campus, it was soon realized that a number of these services were especially valuable to adult learners. These support services include:

- **The Center for College Success (CCS):** Established in 2005, CCS offers counseling, advising and tutoring and provides a central point of contact for students who need developmental education courses. Working from the Student Services Office, a coordinator of developmental studies was hired to assure that the needs of students in developmental studies are met. In addition, tutoring is available for almost every subject from the 15 tutors hired by the college. The services these tutors provide are vital to students who

have been out of school for several years and need a refresher in basic skills. In fact, 95 percent of first-time freshmen ages 40 to 49 and 97.4 percent of first-time freshmen 50 and over require at least one developmental education course (compared to 59 percent of the under-39 student population).

- **College and Career Planning Center:** Also part of the Student Services Office, this center was established in 2009 to provide information, assessment and counseling regarding career choices. Especially useful for those re-entering the workforce after spending many years at one job (and who never thought they would be in a position to change careers), this center provides resources to students regardless of whether they plan to seek a certificate, associate degree or a more advanced degree.
- **Student and Faculty Technology Learning Center:** Funded in part by a U.S. Department of Education Title III grant and established in 2010, this center provides opportunities for students and community members to learn how to best utilize technological resources. A coordinator was hired to train faculty and students on the latest educational technology. Adult students with limited computer experience find these services especially helpful and are frequent visitors to the center.
- **Adult Basic Education/GED Preparation:** NACC took over management of the Northeast Alabama Adult Education Program in 2004. This organization's presence on campus provides a natural transition between adult basic education (ABE) and college work. Students may enroll in ABE courses, take the GED exam and seamlessly move into a college program of study. The physical presence of ABE on campus provides a sense of familiarity

and helps negate fears of stepping onto a college campus for the first time.

- **Alabama Career Center:** The college houses a satellite of the Alabama Career Center System, which provides a variety of services, including resume preparation, job search and funding for job training.
- **Financial Aid Office:** Regardless of the source of financial assistance, the financial aid office provides students with a one-stop resource for all their financial aid needs. Financial aid counselors consider the special circumstances frequently encountered by displaced workers and work closely with students to navigate the financial aid application process. The college hired an assistant in the Financial Aid Office to work solely with Workforce Investment Act (WIA) and Trade Readjustment Allowance (TRA) students. A student loan counselor was also hired.
- **Career Pathways Guides:** Though the guides were conceived as a Tech Prep project and were intended primarily to help facilitate the matriculation of high school students into CTE programs, the college has discovered that adult students and dislocated workers find them helpful. Since they provide a clear pathway through a program, adult students are able to visualize what it takes to complete a given program of study.

To expedite the organizational structure at NACC, the college places both credit and non-credit career/technical training under a single administrative entity—the Office of Workforce Development and Skills Training. This structure evolved from a mid-2000s reorganization that resulted in this office being changed from the Technical Division to the more encompassing Office of Workforce Development. Under the reorganized structure, NACC personnel can now provide the

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most appropriate training option for an individual student. In a world where there is so much competition for funding and attention, NACC's structure seeks to provide necessary services without regard for what might be competing interests on many campuses.

### A Sense of Community

To make all students feel comfortable on campus, college officials strive to provide a safe, attractive environment with a sense of community. The pedestrian-friendly campus grounds feature courtyards, flower gardens, tables, benches and sitting areas designed to make students feel welcome and at home. Additionally, many community members visit the campus to take part and enjoy cultural events and activities. This sense of familiarity and ownership of their community college helps returning students feel comfortable on campus and builds an atmosphere of collegiality.

To accommodate the needs of students from all backgrounds, class scheduling is a deliberate process. Proposed class schedules are minutely analyzed each semester to assure that students may develop a full schedule using various scenarios (*i.e.* two nights a week, three days a week). This attention to meeting student needs helps to assure that adult students who may be juggling work, family and school are able to develop a full schedule.

### Looking Ahead

How can a community college help meet the needs of adult and dislocated workers? One should first remember that many of the initiatives and services that benefit traditional age students also benefit adult

students and dislocated workers. While adult students have specific needs, these needs are not always unique. An attempt to meet these needs should be part of a coordinated plan—a process that will take time and resources. Resources should also go beyond the boundaries of programs, departments and divisions to be institutionalized campus wide.

Much of what has been accomplished at NACC is due to college personnel listening to students in an attempt to understand their needs and how the college can better accommodate their educational goals. The decisions that have been made are driven by student needs and confirmed by statistical data.

In short, it is about listening to students, listening to industry leaders, being aware of national and local workforce trends, and applying strategies designed to meet those student needs and industry requirements. The end result is greater educational opportunities and support for everyone, but in particular for those adult learners who are enrolling in large numbers in our colleges and technical schools throughout the nation. These adult learners whose world changed practically overnight deserve no less than the best in opportunities and support in pursuing their career goals. **I**

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