

State Board of Community Colleges
Access to Achievement Legislative Report FY 2024-25

REPORT SUMMARY

Presenters:

- **Nancye Gaj**, State Director, Access to Achievement
- **Dr. Tashera Gale**, Senior Director of Research and Evaluation, Higher Education Insight (HEI)
- **Dr. Valencia Clement**, Director of Research and Evaluation, Higher Education Insight (HEI)
- **Mr. Michael McGregor**, Access to Achievement Student, Catawba Valley Community College

Brief Description:

The Access to Achievement report provides a comprehensive overview of the Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD) Workforce Training Program for the fiscal year 2024-25, highlighting the initiative's progress, activities, and early outcomes. Administered by the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS), this initiative aims to improve employment outcomes and credential attainment among individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities by offering innovative vocational training and extensive student support across 15 participating community colleges.

The report outlines the development of the state-level infrastructure, including technical assistance, data collection processes, professional development initiatives, online resource creation, and robust marketing efforts. It further elaborates on local implementation activities, showcasing how each participating college addressed legislative requirements through unique, community-responsive strategies.

Nancye Gaj, State Director, will introduce the session and the featured speakers. Dr. Tashera Gale and Dr. Valencia Clement from Higher Education Insight will provide highlights from the summative evaluation being conducted. They will focus on the effectiveness and impact of the initiative.

To highlight the direct benefits of the initiative, Mr. Michael McGregor, a student from Catawba Valley Community College who successfully completed the Turf Grass Management program, will share his personal experience and successes achieved through participation in Access to Achievement.

STATE BOARD OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES
Legislative Report Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD)
Workforce Training Program FY 2024-25

Request: The State Board of Community Colleges (SBCC) is requested to approve the Legislative Report for the Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD) Workforce Training Program.

Background: The General Assembly has established evaluation criteria for the IDD Workforce Training Program. Each year that funds are expended, the State Board of Community Colleges must report on the Program's impact on participants. This report must include information on establishing best practices, providing financial aid and benefits counseling, integrating assistive technology, maximizing access to credentials and degree programs, promoting integration to the greatest extent possible, marketing, needs assessment, and outreach.

Rationale: Reviewing and evaluating the IDD Workforce Training Program is essential for ensuring its continued success. This current report includes information on how the funds were distributed and used, the types of services provided locally, and the number of students served. Additionally, the report includes information on the development of state level infrastructure which includes data collection, professional development, faculty resource creation, website development, marketing, and evaluation. Also included is the preliminary evaluation report developed by Higher Education Insight.

Contact(s):

Nancye Gaj
State Director
Access to Achievement (IDD Workforce Training Program)



NCCCS IDD Training Program

Access to Achievement

Annual Report to the
Joint Legislative Oversight Committee

Submitted by the State Board of Community Colleges

As required by GS 115D-44

May 1, 2025

Table of Contents

BACKGROUND	4
ALLOCATION OF FUNDS	4
STATE LEVEL INFRASTRUCTURE AND INITIATIVES	6
Technical Assistance and Site Visits	
Data Collection	
Professional Development	
Online Program Resources	
Marketing	
Evaluation	
DATA OUTCOMES 2024-2025	9
LOCAL IMPLEMENTATION ACTIVITIES AND OUTCOMES	12
CONCLUSION	26
HIGHER ED INSIGHT REPORT	28

BACKGROUND

In 2021, a two-year pilot project began to provide opportunities for students with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities in the community college system to earn credentials leading to increased employment outcomes.

Following the success of these two pilots, Catawba Valley Community College and Brunswick Community College, in 2022-23 Section 6.9 (a) Article 3 of chapter 115D of the General Statutes was amended to establish a community college training, based on the pilot colleges' strategies and outcomes for students with IDD. In the 2023-2025 session, this new IDD Student Workforce Training Program was awarded \$3, 963,094 in recurring funds for up to 15 community colleges.

In compliance with Section 6.9 of Session Law 2023-134, the program must a) provide opportunities for students to earn a variety of credentials and b) increase employment outcomes for students with IDD by supporting participating colleges in creating and providing innovative vocational training, which includes a) work-based learning (e.g. practicums, internships, apprenticeships, etc.) and b) employability skills and career exploration. The goals of the initiative are implemented through six elements required by the legislation.

The six elements are:

1. Establishing best practices for providing vocational training,
2. Providing financial and benefits counseling,
3. Developing strategies for integrating assistive technology,
4. Maximizing access, with supports, to credentials and degrees,
5. Identifying methods to integrate students into the campus community, and
6. Determining needs and developing marketing and evaluation strategies in response.

ALLOCATION OF FUNDS

On November 14, 2023, NCCCS invited all 58 community colleges to apply to be a part of the initiative. Although 32 applied, only 15 could be funded as outlined in the legislation. Of those 15, two were the original pilot colleges. Interested colleges were required to submit a letter of intent as well as participate in virtual interviews with the NCCCS staff and pilot project site directors. Applications were evaluated based on the college's demonstrated commitment to serving IDD students according to the legislative elements referenced above. The funded colleges are: Alamance Community College, Asheville Buncombe Technical College, Brunswick Community College, Catawba Valley Community College, College of the Albemarle, Guilford Technical Community College, James Sprunt Community College, Johnston Community College,

McDowell Technical Community College, Richmond Community College, Robeson Community College, Sandhills Community College, South Piedmont Community College, Stanly Community College, and Wilkes Community College. Funds were distributed to these colleges in March 2024 for the 2023-2024 academic year; funds for the 2024-2025 academic year were approved by the State Board in July 2024. After funding was initially allocated to the colleges, the initiative became referred to as “Access to Achievement” to reflect its two emphases, eliminating barriers and supporting success.

Of the funds appropriated by the legislature in 2024, a total of 73% was allocated to the colleges. The remaining 27% was retained at the System Office to develop and operationalize an infrastructure and support system for the initiative. NCCCS has established a core team to lead these efforts. The team is made up of a State Director who reports directly to the Senior Vice President and Chief Academic Officer of the community college system, an Associate Director for Implementation and Professional Development, an Associate Director for Pathways and Partnerships and a part-time Administrative Assistant. Through strategic planning, resource development, and robust support, the team assures that each institution has the tools and frameworks needed to successfully implement the initiative’s goals.

2024-2025 Distribution of Funds

College	Allocation
Brunswick Community College	\$194,000
Catawba Valley Community College	\$194,000
Alamance Community College	\$194,000
Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College	\$194,000
College of the Albemarle	\$194,000
Guilford Technical Community College	\$194,000
James Sprunt Community College	\$194,000
Johnston Community College	\$194,000
McDowell Technical Community College	\$194,000
Richmond Community College	\$194,000
Robeson Community College	\$194,000
Sandhills Community College	\$194,000
South Piedmont Community College	\$194,000
Stanly Community College	\$194,000
Wilkes Community College	\$194,000
College Total	\$2,910,000
System Office	\$1,053,094
Total Allocation	\$3,963,094

STATE LEVEL INFRASTRUCTURE AND INITIATIVES

Technical Assistance and Site Visits

The NCCCS Access to Achievement team has provided extensive technical assistance to support local coordinators and college staff in enhancing program outcomes. Between July 1, 2024, and March 21, 2025, there were 54 technical assistance encounters, 15 of which were conducted in person at local colleges. This targeted assistance, which can be initiated by local coordinators, college staff, or System Office representatives, has been instrumental in addressing a variety of needs. Key topics for assistance have included setting program benchmarks, creating pathways for student success, fostering community outreach efforts, and strengthening employer engagement strategies. This hands-on support ensures that local initiatives are aligned with broader legislative and institutional goals, driving success at both the program and community levels.

In addition to providing individualized and targeted technical assistance upon request, the NCCCS Access to Achievement team facilitates technical assistance video calls bi-weekly. These calls provide an opportunity to share initiative updates and information in an environment that allows the coordinators to learn from the System Office team as well as peers from other local colleges.

Data Collection

The North Carolina Community College System partnered with the SO internal IT Service Management and Strategy team to develop a site within the ServiceNow platform that allows for data to be collected that is relevant to Access to Achievement. The data collected includes but is not limited to: student demographics, courses in which students are enrolled and outcomes associated with those courses, professional development offered locally by Access to Achievement Coordinators to staff and faculty at their institutions, any pathways created or expanded as a result of Access to Achievement input or support, and outreach conducted by each Access to Achievement coordinator. This data collection was launched on January 1, 2025, and Coordinators entered data retroactively to the time of their hire. Moving forward, all data for the month will be entered into the ServiceNow system by the tenth of the following month. This allows System Office staff to have an accurate picture of statewide Access to Achievement data outcomes regularly, aiding in decision making and planning as the initiative moves forward. Information collected has been adjusted as the initiative evolves in order to ensure accuracy, relevance and impact.

Professional Development

The NCCCS Access to Achievement team has provided a robust array of professional development opportunities to enhance the skills and knowledge of local coordinators. Key events include the Access to Achievement Conference in July 2024, the December Showcase in December 2024, and the Spring Conference in April 2025. Additionally, bi-weekly calls have featured guest speakers from LiNC-IT, ApprenticeshipNC, ServiceNow, and the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS), providing valuable insights into emerging trends and best practices. Coordinators have also attended state and national-level conferences such as the NCCCS Conference, Challenging the Paradigm, the State of the Art Conference, and the Southeastern Post-Secondary Education Association Conference. To further support ongoing learning, the NCCCS team is developing asynchronous online courses specifically tailored for both new and existing Access to Achievement Coordinators. The NCCCS team remains in continuous contact with local coordinators, sharing professional development opportunities from a variety of sources and organizations at local, statewide, and national levels.

The NCCCS Access to Achievement team is partnering with the College and Career Readiness program to provide Career Exploration Curriculum Training that has been developed specifically for the IDD population. This training is scheduled for June 2025 and will be open to College and Career Readiness programs across the state.

Online Program Resources

In April 2024, as Coordinators were being hired statewide, it became evident that a quick and easy mechanism for sharing resources was needed. Initially, a spreadsheet was used to share resource links, which worked in the short term. However, a more sophisticated solution was necessary for the future. Consequently, Access to Achievement partnered with the Center for Occupational Research and Development (CORD) to design an internal website for use by state-level staff, local Access to Achievement Coordinators, and other college staff and faculty. This site will provide general information about Access to Achievement and also link to resources available across the community college system. Additionally, this site will link to a Moodle portal where Access to Achievement Coordinators and college staff and faculty can access on demand training, exchange ideas and ask questions of one another through a message board.

Marketing

Marketing has been instrumental in establishing Access to Achievement as a brand under the umbrella of the North Carolina Community College System Office. The breadth of materials provided by the marketing firm Honestly, Inc. has allowed System Office staff to provide local

Coordinators with the necessary resources to inform a variety of publics and recruit students. Specifically, marketing materials have been essential in connecting with stakeholders across North Carolina, including state agencies, disability advocacy groups, employers and more. Materials provided include but are not limited to:

- Access to Achievement branding, including usage guidelines, logo, icon, tagline, and standard colors to create a recognizable and consistent brand,
- Business cards for System Office staff and local Access to Achievement Coordinators,
- PowerPoint templates, including tools for presenting data in a variety of graphic formats,
- Fact Sheet to be used with community partners and a student recruitment brochure,
- Display materials including a banner, tablecloth and runner and tabletop materials,
- Success story template allowing Coordinators to share the achievements and personal stories of students. These will be used in a variety of ways to recruit students and express the impact of the Access to Achievement initiative.
- T-shirts and polo shirts to be used for students, staff and faculty to spread awareness, and
- Landing page on the North Carolina Community College System website.

Several marketing projects are still in process and are expected to be finished and available by the end of this fiscal year. They include:

- 2 marketing videos to demonstrate the need and impact of Access to Achievement,
- Social media templates specific to platforms such as Facebook, X (Twitter), Instagram and Linked In, and
- Email templates for state and local staff to use for both recruitment and awareness.

In addition to our collaboration with Honestly, we have partnered with Formation PR + Brand to create targeted marketing videos. The first video, released in October, features Sam, a student from A-B Tech employed at the Biltmore Estate winery. This video aims to encourage employers to hire individuals with IDD by showcasing the valuable skills and opportunities they bring to businesses and organizations.

Evaluation

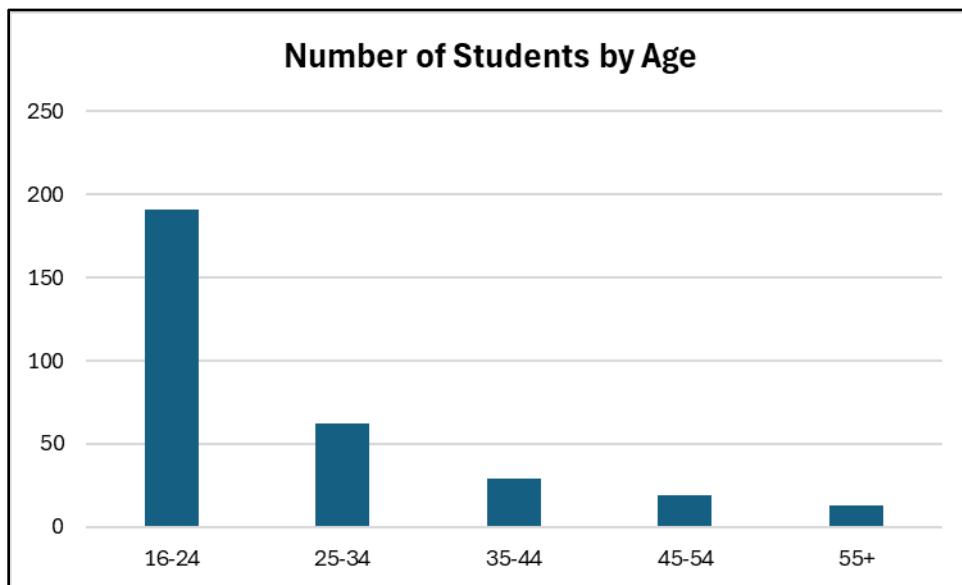
As outlined in the legislation, NCCCS was required to secure the services of an outside evaluator to assess the impact and legislative fidelity of the initiative. In August 2024, NCCCS contracted with Higher Education Insight (HEI) to conduct this external evaluation. Over the last several months, HEI researchers have reviewed initiative-related documents, including initial and

monthly site visit reports, been introduced to the ServiceNow platform, and conducted multiple interviews and meetings with the core team. Additionally, HEI staff reviewed relevant literature and national trends concerning postsecondary educational options for individuals with IDD to place the Access to Achievement Initiative in the appropriate service delivery context. The result of this preliminary analysis is an evaluation plan which outlines the next steps in the process. The process, which will begin in April 2025, will include on-site semi-structured interviews with staff and students, observational site visits to selected colleges, and a student survey. The resulting report will address 1) to what extent Access to Achievement is aligned with best practices in vocational training, 2) how well are local colleges maintaining fidelity to the legislative goals, 3) to what extent has Access to Achievement improved the ability to report outcomes for students with IDD, 4) what has been the overall impact of the initiative, 5) what is the potential for the initiative to serve as an innovative career development model for individuals with IDD.

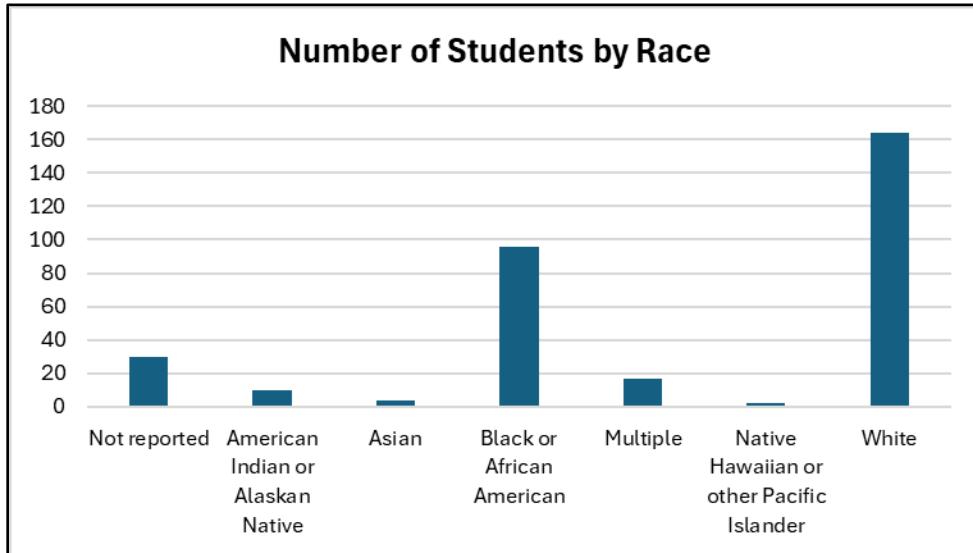
DATA OUTCOMES 2024-2025

Since its inception in spring of 2024, 316 students have accessed high intensity services through Access to Achievement with a Person-Centered Plan. An additional 493 students have connected with an Access to Achievement Coordinator for less intensive support. **In total, 809 North Carolina Community College students have received support from an Access to Achievement Coordinator over the past 10 months.** The data below reflects the 316 students with high intensity services with a Person-Centered Plan.

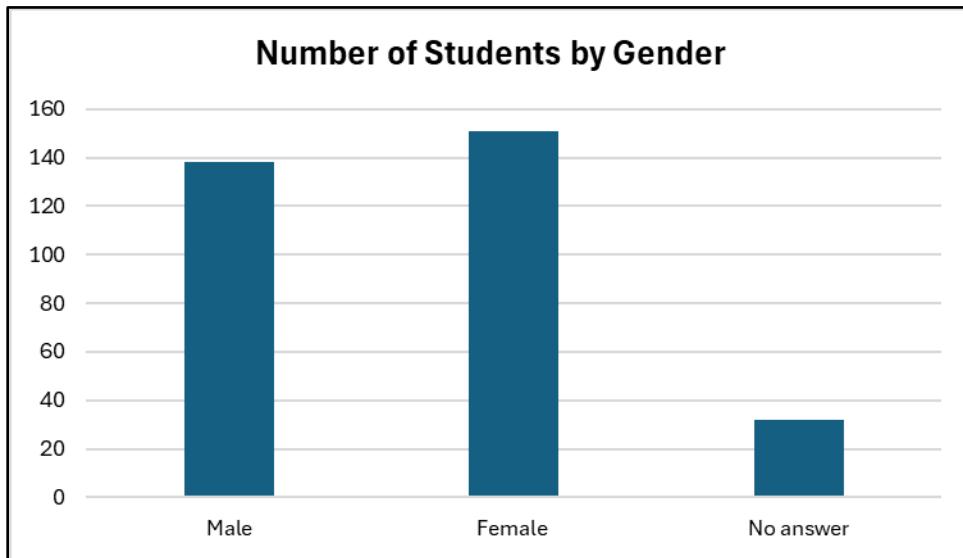
Access to Achievement students represent all age groups enrolled at Community Colleges with the greatest number of students falling into the traditional college student age range, which is similar to the trend in the general population in NC community colleges.



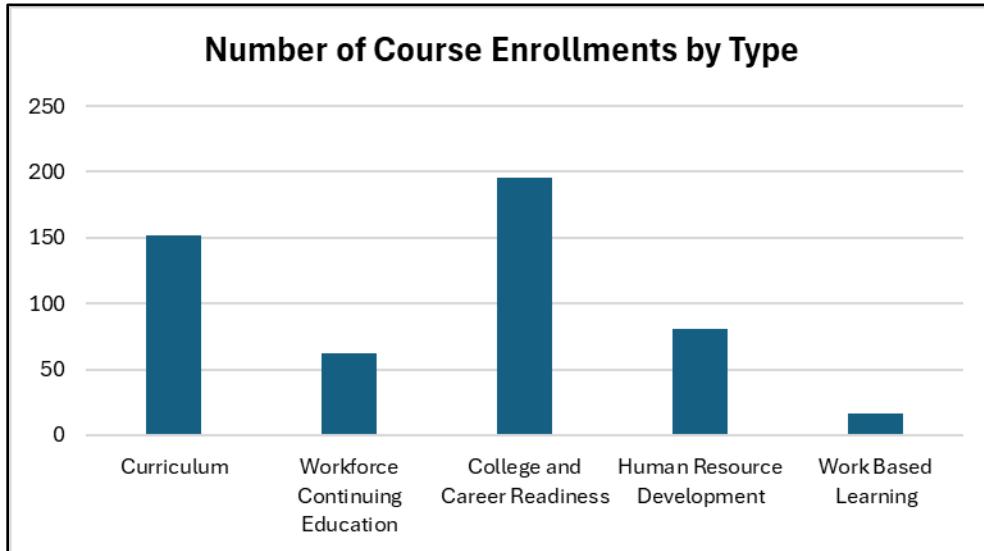
Approximately 75% of Access to Achievement students report their ethnicity as either Black/African American or White, with the remaining 25% reporting their ethnicity as American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Native American or Pacific Islander or Multiple. This data is reflective of the student population across all NC community colleges.



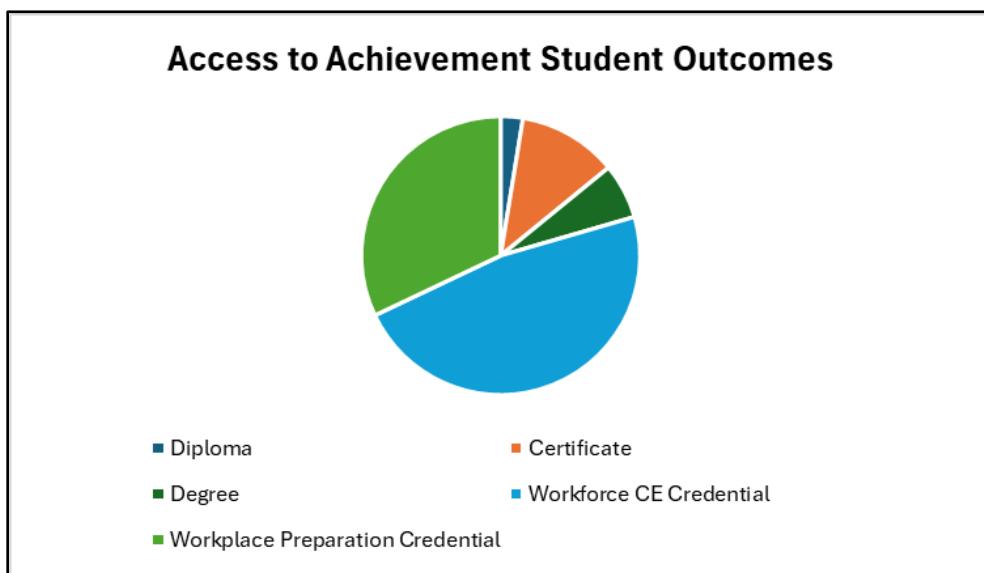
47% of Access to Achievement students report as female while 43% report as male. 10% chose not to answer. This data, too, mirrors the overall student population data across NC community colleges.



Access to Achievement students are accessing programming in all areas of the college with the largest number of students participating in College and Career Readiness classes, closely followed by Curriculum enrollments. Many students are enrolled in coursework in more than one area of the college. Work based learning includes both paid and unpaid internships. The graph below indicates the number of class enrollments for Access to Achievement students in the different areas of the colleges.



Since May 2024, 78 students with a Person-Centered Plan have obtained a credential. This credential may be either a certificate, degree or diploma. This number represents 25% of those students who have such a plan.



LOCAL IMPLEMENTATION ACTIVITIES AND OUTCOMES

The fifteen Access to Achievement colleges have implemented the six legislative elements through innovative strategies tailored to the unique needs of their student populations and communities. Selected examples of these approaches are outlined in the program profiles below.

ASHEVILLE BUNCOMBE TECHNICAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE

1. Establishing Best Practices for Vocational Training

- Supported students by working with instructors to provide course options, tutoring services, and referrals to Disability Services for students with concerns.
- Created a City of Asheville Human Resources team-lead apprenticeship opportunity.
- Offered North Star Digital Literacy to all students.

2. Providing Financial and Benefits Counseling

- Collaborated with EIPD to establish employment and disability benefits requirements.
- Coordinated full scholarships for Early Childhood Education students.
- Met with Student Services to develop funding options for credential and certificate-bearing courses.

3. Integrating Assistive Technology for Students

- Provided option for live captioning using Messenger Pigeon for Audio Recording & Note Taking Services.
- Arranged for IT to install Read&Write text-to-speech software at Madison County Campus.
- Provided tutoring for students on using Google Chrome Web Store to download accessibility extensions such as screen shaders, text simplifiers, reading trackers, and read-aloud functions.

4. Maximizing Access to Credential and Degree Programs, Including Micro-Credentials

- Met with Continuing Education Coordinators to receive updates on credential and certificate offerings and discussed adding potential new courses.
- Enrolled students in Early Childhood Education, Woodworking, Advanced Manufacturing, Nutrient Culinary, and Basic/Advanced Culinary Skills.
- Collaborated with the Advanced Manufacturing Coordinator to develop classes which lead to national certification.

5. Increasing Orientation and Integration into the College Community

- Created an interactive display where over 60 disabilities were identified by students, faculty, and staff for themselves or a loved one.
- Managed the campus RESET room, which offers a calm, quiet, and comfortable space for all students.

6. Conducting Needs Assessment, Marketing, and Evaluation of Current Programming

- Introduced faculty and staff to the Access to Achievement Coordinator position and provided details about Access to Achievement offerings and services.

- Advertised the initiative in the Continuing Education catalog, distributed to all Asheville and Buncombe County residents.
- Participated in a new student welcome event and promoted Access to Achievement services through a display board with graphics and short text explaining services.

ALAMANCE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

1. Establishing Best Practices for Vocational Training

- Arranged on-campus internships and work-based learning placements.
- Established relationship with Workforce Development Department to strengthen program options.
- Collaborated with the Machining/Manufacturing Department to finalize the Manufacturing Module for first-year students.

2. Providing Financial and Benefits Counseling

- Assisted students with FAFSA completion and financial aid verification letters.
- Conducted basic needs assessments and connected students to campus food supports.
- Collaborated with Alamance Community College Foundation to establish guidelines for students' receiving grants.

3. Integrating Assistive Technology

- Consulted with the Accessibility Coordinator to identify assistive apps and software.
- Initiated a pilot trial for the Read and Write program.
- Procured adaptive gardening equipment for the Career College Horticulture class.

4. Maximizing Access to Credential and Degree Programs, Including Micro-Credentials

- Developed a study hall/tutoring program for Access to Achievement students.
- Incorporated OSHA10 content into the Machining/Manufacturing module.
- Facilitated connections with Academic Support Services and tutoring.

5. Increasing Orientation and Integration into the College Community

- Developed a student mentoring program in collaboration with the Student Government Association and student clubs.
- Conducted campus tours and orientations for potential students.
- Collaborated with Elon Buddies mentors to promote participation in campus events and social activities.

6. Conducting Needs Assessment, Marketing, and Evaluation of Current Programming

- Presented information about Access to Achievement at campus meetings and resource fairs.
- Collaborated with Communications/Public Affairs to develop marketing materials.
- Reviewed industry demands in the Alamance area with the Workforce Development Vice President.

BRUNSWICK COMMUNITY COLLEGE

1. Establishing Best Practices for Vocational Training

- Offered certifications, including the National Retail Federation, Certified Nursing Assistant, HVAC, plumbing, and Homecare Health aide.
- Held individual conferences with students to create person-centered plans to ensure student success.
- Led efforts to improve Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance and create accessible resources for students, including the development of ADA-compliant syllabi.

2. Providing Financial and Benefits Counseling

- Connected students to Student Services for registration and financial aid counseling.
- Referred students to staff from Title I the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act and Employment and Independence for People with Disabilities for assistance with tuition and purchase of classroom supplies.
- Attended training to expand knowledge of financial aid for continuing education students.

3. Integrating Assistive Technology

- Met with representatives from TextHelp to explore campuswide assistive technology.
- Worked with the Director of Distance Learning to research accessibility tools for classrooms and Moodle.
- Discussed closed captioning for CNA and Phlebotomy classes with the Director of Health Education to improve accessibility for students.

4. Maximizing Access to Credential and Degree Programs, Including Micro-Credentials

- Created a Student Resource Guide for newly enrolled Brunswick Community College students.
- Assisted in the development of kitchen equipment and safety micro-certification for culinary and food service students, as well as student employees.
- Coordinated 3M Safety Trainer class to ensure Brunswick Interagency Program student employees receive necessary safety training for yard crew employment.

5. Increasing Orientation and Integration of Individuals with IDD into the College Community

- Created "The Oasis," a calming room, by setting up furniture, technology, and sensory items for students.
- Participated in New Student Orientation and Back to School Bash to engage and inform students about available resources.
- Planned a peer mentoring program to pair IDD students with neurotypical peers, promoting integration and support.

6. Conducting Needs Assessment, Marketing, and Evaluation of Current Programming

- Joined the planning committee for a transition night for potential Brunswick Community College students in March 2025.
- Submitted a request to create a dedicated Access to Achievement webpage on the Brunswick Community College website.

- Collaborated with Brunswick Community College marketing team to design promotional materials, including an Access to Achievement flyer and information sheet for the Website.

COLLEGE OF THE ALBEMARLE

1. Establishing Best Practices for Vocational Training

- Provided workforce preparation skills training to students.
- Developed partnerships with local employers, such as Moneysworth Linen Services, to create future employment opportunities for students.
- Facilitated staff and faculty participation in various trainings and conferences to enhance vocational training program delivery and implement best practices.

2. Providing Financial and Benefits Counseling

- Worked with the Financial Aid Coordinator to clarify the FAFSA process and provide application assistance for students.
- Identified the Dare Guarantee Scholarship Program, which offers free tuition for Dare County residents in curriculum and workforce programs.
- Partnered with NCWorks to secure funding for students in specific programs.

3. Integrating Assistive Technology

- Collaborated with the Coordinator of Accessibility and Conduct as well as the Director of Admissions to explore tools like classroom microphones, ReadSpeak, Texthelp, and Kurzweil software for campuswide use.
- Partnered with the Digital Navigator to address student needs related to connectivity, devices, and digital literacy training.
- Presented TextHelp to the Technology Committee for campus-wide implementation.

4. Maximizing Access to Credential and Degree Programs, Including Micro-Credentials

- Developed new program options to include Retail Industry Fundamentals, Supply Chain, Inventory, and Logistics, and ServSafe certifications.
- Planned and implemented a Culinary I class and Culinary 2 class on Dare Campus.
- Facilitated student enrollment in forklift training and the Commercial Driver's License preparation.

5. Increasing Orientation and Integration into the College Community

- Partnered with Early Childhood and Nursing programs to develop clinical/practicum opportunities as peer mentors.
- Organized campus events like Game Day, Icée Day, Fall Fest, and more to promote student engagement and participation.

6. Conducting Needs Assessment, Marketing, and Evaluation of Current Programming

- Worked with the marketing department to promote Access to Achievement on campus and in the community.
- Presented Access to Achievement information to the College of the Albemarle Board of Trustees, leading to a press release and newspaper article.

- Utilized local needs and community health assessments to identify strengths, barriers, and gaps in services.

CATAWBA VALLEY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

1. Establishing Best Practices for Vocational Training

- Secured course-specific tutoring for a photography student and worked with professors to discuss strategies for student success.
- Met with Adult Basic Education students to ensure accessibility and opportunities for meeting their vocational goals.
- Organized team to create a High School Transition Fair focused on diverse educational choices.

2. Providing Financial and Benefits Counseling

- Held financial aid meetings with Access to Achievement students to resolve FAFSA issues and identify scholarship opportunities.
- Assisted students with Residence Determination appeals to secure financial aid eligibility.
- Referred students to CVCC's C.A.R.E. program for assistance with transportation, educational expenses, and safety concerns.

3. Integrating Assistive Technology

- Purchased new Echo II Smartpens, C-pens, and Exam C-pens for student use.
- Purchased and implemented Kurzweil text-to-speech software, with training sessions held for students and staff.
- Purchased 10 licenses for Glean, assistive technology for lecture note-taking.

4. Maximizing Access to Credential and Degree Programs, Including Micro-Credentials

- Enrolled students in the "Working Smart" soft skills credentialing program.
- Planned Hospitality and Dietary Aide programmatic options, including the introduction of the Guest Service Gold credential.
- Provided Adobe Digital Marketing Certification information to students.

5. Increasing Orientation and Integration into the College Community

- Enrolled students in programs such as Mechatronics, Graphic Design, Heating and Air, Photography, Turfgrass, Computer Engineering, Fine Arts/Music, and Welding.
- Supported the move of the Adult Basic Education Academy to the main campus to promote integration and campus engagement.
- Led a discussion with Human Resources on professional development for faculty and staff focusing on IDD services and classroom strategies.

6. Conducting Needs Assessment, Marketing, and Evaluation of Current Programming

- Distributed Access to Achievement program flyers to local high schools, Family Support Network, and behavioral health networks.
- Collaborated with the marketing team to create a branded flyer and a marketing video.

- Presented the Access to Achievement initiative to area high schools, initiating a series of outreach presentations to promote Access to Achievement's benefits for graduating IDD students.

GUILFORD TECHNICAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE

1. Establishing Best Practices for Vocational Training

- Developed a twelve-step plan outlining best practices for vocational training to assess the alignment of POWER Pathways with these standards.
- Explored integrating hands-on training in the business sector through discussions with the Coordinator of Apprenticeships.
- Attended the Southeastern Post-Secondary Education and Association on Higher Education and Disability conferences to learn about best practices for vocational training implementation.

2. Providing Financial and Benefits Counseling

- Assisted students in completing FAFSA forms and scholarship applications.
- Secured funding from the Foundation to purchase Access GSO bus passes for students.
- Partnered with financial aid staff to assist students with class registration and financial aid inquiries.

3. Integrating Assistive Technology

- Purchased iPads and virtual reality equipment to help students explore careers.
- Led efforts to develop rooms on the High Point and Greensboro campuses with virtual reality stations for career exploration and practice simulations in various industries.
- Obtained a grant for \$3,000 to purchase "Bodyswaps" AI powered soft skills training.

4. Maximizing Access to Credential and Degree Programs, Including Micro-Credentials

- Developed a Digital Literacy course with Microsoft Certification.
- Worked with the Implementation Team to adapt pathways by incorporating hands-on components, extending course time, and implementing workforce preparation objectives.
- Met with Continuing Education and Human Resources Development staff to explore new POWER Pathway programs, proposing a two-year program with micro and macro credentials.

5. Increasing Orientation and Integration into the College Community

- Developed plan for creating a peer mentoring program through Best Buddies International.
- Worked with Career Services to promote reverse job fairs and invited students to career evaluations.
- Assisted students in obtaining tutoring services through the Center of Academic Engagement.

6. Conducting Needs Assessment, Marketing, and Evaluation of Current Programming

- Researched high-demand jobs to explore potential new pathways for Access to Achievement students.
- Coordinated the development of a professional video featuring POWER Pathways participants, which was posted on the college website and social media.
- Delivered fliers to businesses and followed up with email contacts.

JAMES SPRUNT COMMUNITY COLLEGE

1. Utilizing Best Practices in Vocational Training

- Met with students to provide ongoing support in tutoring, career assessments, stress-management, and self-advocacy.
- Worked with Employment and Independence for People with Disabilities offices to prepare students for employment opportunities.
- Assisted students with securing transportation, accessing the food closet, and addressing other barriers to success.

2. Providing Financial Aid and Benefits Counseling

- Met with the Financial Aid Director to become familiar with the financial aid processes and available scholarships.
- Assisted students with enrollment and securing financial aid.
- Assisted potential students for Spring 2025 through the enrollment and financial aid application process.

3. Integrating Assistive Technology

- Ensured availability of assistive technology such as laptops, screen magnifiers, large key-high contrast keyboards, and read-aloud features for student use.
- Verified that all students on the Access to Achievement caseload had access to devices and could use read-aloud features in Moodle and Study Island.
- Collaborated with the Disability Services Coordinator to review current resources for students with disabilities.

4. Maximizing Access to Credentials and Certifications, Including Micro-Credentials

- Established relationships with deans and directors to explore pathways in horticulture, early childhood education, and personal care assistance.
- Discussed plans for offering a ServSafe class to expand certification opportunities.

5. Increasing Orientation and Integration into the College Community

- Provided orientation for students and families.
- Delivered professional development to staff, highlighting the importance of fully integrating students into campus life.
- Initiated a peer mentoring program with involvement from the Social Behavior Club and Presidential Scholars.

6. Conducting Needs Assessment, Marketing, and Evaluation for Current Programming

- Conducted professional development to introduce Access to Achievement to campus employees.

- Established partnership with NCWorks to assess local employer needs through data and input on further needs assessments.
- Conducted “Lunch and Learn” event, in collaboration with campus coordinators and NCWorks, to engage area employers about James Sprunt Community College’s offerings.

JOHNSTON COMMUNITY COLLEGE

1. Utilizing Best Practices for Vocational Training

- Established relationships with local business and industry partners, including Amazon.
- Developed internship opportunities in culinary, custodial services, horticulture, and theatre arts, providing hands-on experience and mentorship.
- Met with students to discuss job prospects after earning a BioWork certificate.

2. Providing Financial Aid and Benefits Counseling

- Hosted "Tuition Tuesdays" to assist students with financial aid forms, tuition plans, and scholarships.
- Informed students of financial aid opportunities, including FAFSA, community scholarships, and Amazon's Career Choice program.
- Assisted students in completing JCC applications and creating FAFSA accounts.

3. Integrating Assistive Technology

- Acquired an unlimited campus license for Texthelp Read & Write software.
- Partnered with the Learning Resource Center to provide workshops on assistive technology.
- Planned faculty and staff workshops to review and promote the use of assistive technology.

4. Maximizing Access to Credentials and Certifications, Including Micro-Credentials

- Met with Vice President of Continuing Education to explore courses and programs for students without a high school diploma.
- Created a student interest form to gather feedback on desired courses, helping identify new pathways for Continuing Education.
- Engaged with Occupational Course of Study classes at local high schools to discuss Access to Achievement and gather input on students' career goals.

5. Increasing Orientation and Integration into the College Community

- Developed a therapeutic grade calming room for students to offer a sensory retreat from overstimulation.
- Organized an information session for faculty and staff titled "Empowering Every Learner: Strategies for Supporting Students with IDD."
- Promoted the work-study program, resulting in two students securing employment.

6. Conducting Needs Assessment, Marketing, and Evaluation for Programs Serving Individuals with Developmental Disabilities

- Reached out to Johnston County Public Schools and surrounding counties' Exceptional Children's departments to schedule school visits and promote the Access to Achievement initiative.
- Provided information about Access to Achievement to local employers.
- Posted a QR code survey across campus to gather student feedback about learning opportunities.

MCDOWELL TECHNICAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE

1. Utilizing Best Practices for Vocational Training

- Held introductory meetings with workforce development boards and on-the-job training directors to enhance vocational training opportunities.
- Maintained regular check-ins with students, creating and updating person-centered plans to align with their vocational and educational goals.
- Collaborated with the Director of Early Childhood Education to develop vocational course structures.

2. Providing Financial Aid and Benefits Counseling

- Met with the Financial Aid Coordinator to learn about the FAFSA process and how financial aid is requested.
- Assisted students with the admissions and financial aid application process.
- Encouraged students to consider work-study positions on campus as part of their financial aid package.

3. Integrating Assistive Technology

- Secured approval to purchase TextHelp for campuswide implementation.
- Purchased and installed eight touch screen computer monitors to enhance accessibility.
- Assisted students with setting up Google Calendar reminders and merging emails as time management strategies.

4. Maximizing Access to Credentials and Certifications, Including Micro-Credentials

- Researched campus programs and created a pamphlet to guide students in creating personal plans.
- Assisted in the development of a micro-credential class in customer service.
- Planned a community resource fair focused on credentialing opportunities.

5. Increasing Orientation and Integration into the College Community

- Supported a student with IDD from the College and Career Readiness program in joining the Student Government Association.
- Became an official Student Government Association Advisor and attended Student Government Association and leadership meetings as an advocate for students with IDD.
- Distributed mental health resource packages to students during exam week.

6. Conducting Marketing and Needs Assessment

- Reviewed past needs assessments to inform the development of Access to Achievement services.

- Attended a convocation planning meeting and presented to four faculty groups on Access to Achievement services.
- Conducted outreach at local high schools, introducing Access to Achievement services to counselors.
- Created an Access to Achievement packet for success coaches and advisors, including business cards, fact sheets, and referral templates.

RICHMOND COMMUNITY COLLEGE

1. Utilizing Best Practices for Vocational Training

- Implemented Conover Online software for career interest assessments, hands-on exploration, and workplace readiness certification.
- Developed a competency checklist to set clear goals for student progression and measure engagement and improvement.
- Planned and implemented on-campus internships to provide students with professional experience in a supportive environment.

2. Providing Financial Aid and Benefits Counseling

- Consulted with Department of Health and Human Services to address questions and provide the Social Security Administration's "How Work Affects Your Benefits."
- Provided assistance to students to navigate financial aid options.
- Coordinated meetings with agencies such as NCWorks and EIPD to ensure students have the financial resources needed to pursue vocational and educational goals.

3. Integrating Assistive Technology

- Met with the Student Success and Outreach Coordinator to discuss current accommodations and assistive technology, creating a plan for future integration.
- Provided individualized assistive technology solutions, such as a page magnifier for a student with low vision and resolving login difficulties for a student with mobility challenges.
- Organized and shared webinars on reasonable accommodations to educate faculty.

4. Maximizing Access to Credentials and Certifications, Including Micro-Credentials

- Conducted interest assessments to develop vocational pathways in Hospitality, Retail, Manufacturing, and Healthcare.
- Partnered with program developers to offer classes such as Digital Literacy and CPR/First Aid.
- Developed a Career Exploration course to boost career readiness.

5. Increasing Orientation and Integration into the College Community

- Helped students develop business and life skills through an on-campus business.
- Facilitated students' participation in workforce development and disability-focused workshops, gaining insights into professional environments and self-advocacy.
- Collaborated with maintenance, custodial, and event planning staff to foster on-campus internships and job shadowing opportunities for students.

6. Marketing and Needs Assessment

- Conducted a needs assessment with various campus departments.
- Partnered with the marketing team to create promotional content, including flyers, ads, and Instagram reels.
- Created surveys and distributed them to assess program effectiveness and identify areas for improvement.

ROBESON COMMUNITY COLLEGE

1. Utilizing Best Practices for Vocational Training

- Developed person-centered plans for students and scheduled follow-ups.
- Collaborated with the Disabilities Coordinator and Student Success Counselor to address student needs.
- Met with the Director of Apprenticeships to explore future job placements for students.
- Partnered with faculty and staff to implement support structures and job opportunities, including a work-study program for Access to Achievement students.

2. Providing Financial Aid and Benefits Counseling

- Met with Registrar and financial aid offices to discuss available financial aid and scholarship options for students.
- Worked with students at risk of losing financial aid to find alternative payment solutions.
- Researched funding options for certification costs through donations and foundation.
- Partnered with the college foundation office to identify financial aid and benefits available.

3. Integrating Assistive Technology

- Purchased Read&Write, OrbitNote, and Equatio software to support students.
- Developed an implementation plan for the new software programs and conducted training sessions for staff and faculty.
- Placed quiet study pods across campus.
- Assisted students with study tools like Quizlet, demonstrating alternative methods for exam preparation and study sets.

4. Maximizing Access to Credentials and Certifications

- Distributed a survey for all students to provide information about Access to Achievement.
- Followed up with students who completed the survey and expressed interest in Access to Achievement services.
- Conducted individual meetings with students from High School Equivalency classes that were interested in Access to Achievement services and taking additional classes.

5. Promoting Participation in Full College Experience

- Partnered with Continuing Education and local organizations to offer students internships at a hospital and volunteer work at an animal shelter.

- Encouraged student involvement in clubs, organizations, and sports, helping students secure work-study opportunities.
- Participated in the Native American festival, connecting students with resources from the Lumbee Tribe office.
- Provided input to improve the student onboarding and orientation process to consider the specific needs of the IDD students.

6. Marketing and Needs Assessment

- Developed and distributed a Student Learning Survey to gauge student needs and interests.
- Created an informational video about Access to Achievement and distributed it to program coordinators, instructors, and campus TV monitors.
- Distributed flyers with a QR code for the survey and video throughout campus and local communities.
- Reached out to local high schools to discuss Access to Achievement and scheduled speaking opportunities.

SANDHILLS COMMUNITY COLLEGE

1. Utilizing Best Practices for Vocational Training

- Engaged with cross-departmental partners, local employers, and educational staff to brainstorm program ideas and curriculum development.
- Implemented the PRISM Assessment tool to identify student strengths and match them with suitable career paths.
- Established internship and volunteer opportunities for students.

2. Providing Financial Aid and Benefits Counseling

- Partnered with NC WORKS, Building Bright Futures, and the Financial Aid Department to secure funding for tuition, supplies, and apprenticeships.
- Provided students and parents with information on how Social Security/Social Security Disability benefits are affected by employment and savings plans.
- Assisted students with securing textbook funding through the college's Foundation and explored other financial resources.

3. Integrating Assistive Technology

- Developed a Decision Tree to show instructors how to refer students for classroom accommodations and assistive tools.
- Requested a campus-wide license for TextHelp.
- Created instructional guides for students to access free or low-cost accessibility tools.

4. Maximizing Access to Credentials and Certifications, Including Micro-Credentials

- Partnered with directors and instructors to develop credential and certificate classes.
- Researched digital literacy classes, micro-credentials, and certifications for students.

- Collaborated with Early Childhood department and Building Bright Futures programs to discuss apprenticeships and certifications for students.

5. Increasing Orientation and Integration into the College Community

- Coordinated with the Director of Recruitment to ensure campus tours are wheelchair accessible.
- Created a monthly newsletter to inform students about campus events, clubs, and opportunities.
- Met with faculty to provide support for students with disabilities and discuss strategies for classroom success.

6. Marketing and Needs Assessment

- Met with the Chamber of Commerce and Moore County Economic Development Partners to discuss how Access to Achievement students can benefit local businesses and industries.
- Developed marketing materials, press releases, and social media content to raise awareness of Access to Achievement.
- Conducted outreach with high schools and Sandhills Community College leadership to advocate for students and promote Access to Achievement services across campus.

SOUTH PIEDMONT COMMUNITY COLLEGE

1. Utilizing Best Practices for Vocational Training

- Met weekly with the Access to Achievement team to support students at the college.
- Participated in the July REACH Wrap-Up, highlighting best practices and Universal Design for Learning.
- Partnering with Wingate University, faculty, and administrators to develop an Early Childhood Education pathway.

2. Providing Financial Aid and Benefits Counseling

- Arranged for students completing the 96-hour Digital Literacy Apps course to receive a course voucher for credit or non-credit courses at the college.
- Worked with Admissions staff to assist students with FAFSA applications.
- Provided gas assistance to students in need.

3. Integrating Assistive Technology

- Provided Ablr training for faculty and staff to learn best practices for integrating assistive technology.
- Purchased Livescribe pens for students.
- Taught students how to use built-in assistive technology, such as speech-to-text and read-aloud features, and continues to assist with text editing.

4. Maximizing Access to Credentials and Certifications, Including Micro-Credentials

- The South Piedmont Community College team meets weekly to discuss credentials, certifications, and the development of new programs for students.

- Assisted students transitioning into curriculum classes and certificate programs, including content creation, machining, and criminal justice.
- South Piedmont Community College provides stackable certificate programs that can lead to a degree if students pursue additional classes.

5. Increasing Orientation and Integration into the College Community

- Unified Sports Club was recommended and approved.
- Coordinator completed training for the Special Olympics and Unified Sports Club.
- Working closely with United Way of Greater Charlotte to address the needs of individuals with disabilities.

6. Marketing and Needs Assessment

- The South Piedmont Community College team collaborated with the college marketing department to release information about Access to Achievement to the community.
- The coordinator has been in contact with Union and Anson County schools to schedule visits and provide informational flyers about the program.
- South Piedmont Community College's marketing team shared the Access to Achievement video and information on social media.

STANLY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

1. Utilizing Best Practices for Vocational Training

- Collaborated with Vice President for Career Connections to develop apprenticeship opportunities and build relationships with businesses and local organizations.
- Established partnerships with Employment and Independence for Persons with Disabilities and Stanly County Schools to assist with referrals and student outreach.
- Registered students to attend classes and earn credentials in Early Childhood Education.

2. Providing Financial Aid and Benefits Counseling

- Researched financial aid and other benefits available for students with IDD.
- Explored scholarships for students with disabilities and Work Study opportunities.
- Connected students with financial aid for assistance in completing the FAFSA.

3. Integrating Assistive Technology

- Purchased a campuswide Kurzweil 3000 license.
- Acquired five virtual reality headsets to support virtual learning in trade programs.
- Purchased accessible laptops.

4. Maximizing Access to Credentials and Certifications, Including Micro-Credentials

- Worked with students to complete the WorkKeys communications module and receive certification.
- Assisted in the launch of the Daycare Academy to provide daycare credentials for students.
- Planned the introduction of Culinary, Hospitality, and Agriculture programs on campus in partnership with GHA Autism Supports.

5. Increasing Orientation and Integration into the College Community

- Worked with the Game Club and staff/faculty to expand the club and create formal gaming tournaments campus wide.
- Met with faculty to devise strategies for flexible learning options for online courses.
- Advised students enrolled in various programs, including Adult High School, Technology, Early Childhood, Continuing Education, and Human Resources Development.

6. Marketing and Needs Assessment

- Developed a dedicated Access to Achievement webpage on the Stanly Community College website, along with social media posts, flyers, and a direct contact form.
- Reached out to Occupational Course of Study students at high schools to share information about the Access to Achievement.
- Attended the NC Works Community Partners meeting to present Access to Achievement.

WILKES COMMUNITY COLLEGE

1. Utilizing Best Practices for Vocational Training

- Contacted Wilkes Chambers of Commerce to gather information on local businesses.
- Met with NCWorks to explore job-shadowing and paid internships.
- Advised students in Human Resource Development emphasizing attendance, communication, work quality, direction acceptance, and cultural awareness.

2. Providing Financial Aid and Benefits Counseling

- Assisted students in completing the Proof of Residency form and FAFSA.
- Partnered with NCWorks to provide tuition support for students enrolled in "HOR 235 Greenhouse Production."
- Reached out to the Division of Employment and Independence for People with Disabilities to find a benefits counselor to address concerns about Social Security benefits.

3. Integrating Assistive Technology

- Completed Ablr online training modules to improve assistance with students.
- Met with Access to Achievement students to guide them on accessing their email, checking calendar appointments, and scheduling meetings through bookings.
- Assisted students in setting up tutoring through the college website.

4. Maximizing Access to Credentials and Certifications, Including Micro-Credentials

- Set up times to visit each program on campus for student tours during the first week of classes, including Horticulture, Health Science, and Automotive.
- Reviewed various credentials and programs in the latest catalog with Access to Achievement students while completing their person-centered plans.
- Attended monthly meetings to receive updates on new credential and certificate offerings.

5. Increasing Orientation and Integration into the College Community

- Informed students about Welcome Week activities and guided them to event locations.

- Created a Fall newsletter with important campus-wide events.
- Set up a display Constitution Day to distribute Access to Achievement information sheets.

6. Marketing and Needs Assessment

- Connected with a local winery to discuss internships for students.
- Attended weekly Business Links meetings at the Wilkes Chamber of Commerce.
- Finalized plans for a press release and podcast about the Access to Achievement initiative.

CONCLUSION

As a key component in North Carolina's workforce development strategy, Access to Achievement strengthens the state's commitment to fostering a broad talent pipeline. To date, coordinators have been hired at each of the participating colleges, and a state level infrastructure has been built to support and enhance their efforts. Not only are students receiving the services and training they need, but local results are also being tracked and reported. Over 800 students have been served by the initiative, with a total of 316 students participating in high intensity services which include a customized person-centered plan. Access to Achievement is paving the way for greater economic mobility for individuals with IDD by equipping them with the necessary skills and resources to enter and advance in the labor market. After less than a full academic year of operation, data supports both a need for and the effectiveness of the initiative in accomplishing its legislative goals and serving the citizens of North Carolina.

North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS): Access to Achievement

Formative Memo

February 28, 2025

NCCCS Team:

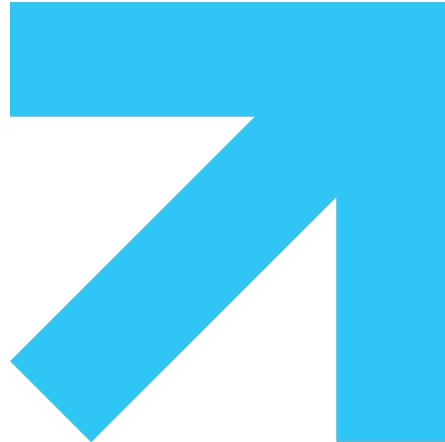
Nancye Gaj
State Director, Access to Achievement
ngaj@nccommunitycolleges.edu

Lindsay Tipton
Associate Director of Pathways and
Partnerships, Access to Achievement
tiptonl@nccommunitycolleges.edu

Vickie Vinson
Associate Director of Implementation and
Professional Development,
Access to Achievement
vinsonv@nccommunitycolleges.edu



Higher Ed Insight Team:



Tashera Gale
Senior Director of Research and Evaluation
tashera@higheredinsight.com

Valencia Clement
Director of Research and Evaluation
valencia@higheredinsight.com



Introduction

In August 2024, the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) engaged Higher Ed Insight (HEI) to conduct an external evaluation of the Access to Achievement initiative and assist with NCCCS's legislative reporting efforts. This memo presents key early findings from HEI's review of initiative-related documents, including initial and monthly site visit reports, an assessment of the ServiceNow platform, and interviews with the Access to Achievement core team. Additionally, it includes insights from HEI's review of relevant literature and national trends concerning postsecondary opportunities for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD).

This formative memo is organized into six sections: Access to Achievement Background, NCCCS Leadership and Support for the Access to Achievement Initiative, Reporting and Infrastructure Development, Emerging Learnings, Next Steps in the Evaluation, and Final Remarks.

Access to Achievement Background

Access to Achievement is North Carolina's pioneering initiative designed to expand educational and economic opportunities for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). This innovative initiative provides multifaceted pathways for students to gain the skills and support necessary for academic success, employment, and independent living.

In 2022, the North Carolina General Assembly allocated funding to establish pilot initiatives at Catawba Valley and Brunswick Community Colleges aimed at expanding career pathway opportunities for individuals with IDD. Following a successful pilot, the General Assembly approved nearly \$4 million in funding to expand the initiative statewide. NCCCS invited all 58 colleges within the system to apply to be a part of the expanded initiative. Interested colleges were required to submit a letter of intent (LOI) and participate in interviews with the NCCCS team. The NCCCS team evaluated college applicants based on their demonstrated commitment to the six legislative elements guiding the Access to Achievement initiative, the elements are listed below with a short description of each element:

1. **Best Practices for Vocational Training:** Establishing evidence-based approaches for delivering vocational training programs tailored to individuals with IDD, ensuring they develop job-ready skills, gain hands-on experience, and receive appropriate workplace accommodations.
2. **Providing Financial and Benefits Counseling:** Offering guidance on financial aid, employment benefits, and government assistance programs to help individuals with IDD and their families navigate funding options, understand the impact of employment on benefits, and make informed financial decisions.
3. **Integrating Assistive Technology:** Implementing effective strategies for incorporating assistive technology into vocational training programs, ensuring individuals with IDD have access to tools that enhance learning, communication, and job performance.
4. **Maximizing Access (Credentials, Certifications, etc.):** Expanding opportunities for individuals with IDD to earn industry-recognized credentials, certifications, and degrees by providing tailored support services, accessible coursework, and alternative learning pathways.
5. **Inclusivity:** Developing comprehensive strategies to enhance the orientation and integration of individuals with IDD into the college community by fostering inclusive learning environments, promoting peer engagement, and strengthening support networks.
6. **Conducting Needs Assessment, Marketing, and Evaluation:** Designing and implementing data-driven needs assessments, targeted marketing strategies, and continuous program evaluations to identify gaps, assess demand, and ensure vocational training programs effectively serve individuals with IDD and other developmental or learning disabilities.

After a thorough review of the applicants, NCCCS selected 15 colleges to participate in the expanded initiative: Alamance Community College, Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College, Brunswick Community College, Catawba Valley Community College, College of The Albemarle, Guilford Technical Community College, James Sprunt Community College, Johnston Community College, McDowell Technical Community College, Richmond Community College, Robeson Community College, Sandhills Community College, South Piedmont Community College, Stanly Community College, and Wilkes Community College. The expanded initiative officially launched in March of 2024.

At the core of Access to Achievement are Access to Achievement coordinators who offer various levels of individualized guidance to students the highest level being through Person-Centered Plans. Through Person-Centered Plans students receive tailored support to enhance

their employability and academic achievement. This planning process empowers them to identify tools and processes to support their success in the classroom and beyond. To date, 316 students have developed individualized Person-Centered Plans in collaboration with their Access to Achievement Coordinators.

As a key component of North Carolina's workforce development strategy, Access to Achievement strengthens the state's commitment to fostering a broad talent pipeline. The program is paving the way for greater economic mobility and workforce participation by equipping individuals with IDD with the necessary skills and resources, ultimately, enriching communities and industries statewide.

Traditionally, individuals with IDD have been placed in segregated educational settings designed to accommodate their unique learning needs. These environments often offer benefits such as smaller class sizes, specialized curricula, sensory-friendly spaces, daily living skills instruction, and increased communication with students and families. However, the long history of institutionalization and segregation has also led to negative consequences, including social isolation and lowered expectations for students with disabilities. Policies like the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) aim to challenge these exclusionary practices by mandating that students with IDD be educated in the least restrictive environment possible.

Access to Achievement acknowledges this history of exclusion and is committed to expanding opportunities across North Carolina. A key principle of the initiative is ensuring that pathways remain open to all students, not just those with disabilities. This approach ensures that all programming at Access to Achievement sites is designed to be accessible and welcoming to all.

NCCCS Leadership and Support for the Access to Achievement Initiative

The NCCCS has established a dedicated core team to lead the Access to Achievement initiative. This team collaborates closely with the 15 participating community colleges, providing guidance and support to ensure successful local implementation. Grounded in the six legislative elements, the initiative's implementation at each college is tailored to meet institutional needs while aligning with statewide objectives.

A central responsibility of the NCCCS core team is developing and deploying the infrastructure necessary to help colleges advance toward these legislative goals. Through strategic planning, resource development, and ongoing support, the team ensures that each institution has the tools and frameworks needed to create equitable learning environments for all students.

A major accomplishment of the initiative has been the successful hiring of full-time Access to Achievement Coordinators at a majority of participating colleges. Currently, 14 of the 15 colleges have full-time Access to Achievement Coordinators, with one campus actively working to fill a recently vacated position. These coordinators play a crucial role in supporting students with IDD, ensuring they have the resources and guidance needed to thrive. Each coordinator is responsible for establishing and maintaining an intra-college support system, working one-on-one with students to develop and implementing Person-Centered Plans, connecting them to campus resources, and providing bi-weekly check-ins throughout their enrollment. Students work with coordinators to determine what level of support they need and coordinators document the various levels of support they deliver to students via monthly site reports.

Across the initiative, coordinators have supported students in developing 316 Person-Centered Plans and have provided individualized advising services to a total of 493 students as of March 10, 2025. These efforts reflect the initiative's commitment to expanding access, strengthening support systems, and empowering students with IDD to achieve their educational and career goals.

Reporting & Infrastructure Development

The NCCCS team has built a robust infrastructure to ensure success and support the network of colleges in implementing best practices aligned with legislative goals. This section explores the key elements of the infrastructure development process and the reporting mechanisms that inform its ongoing evolution.

Site Visits

Throughout May and June 2024, the NCCCS team conducted initial site visits to each of the 15 new Access to Achievement member colleges. During these visits, the NCCCS team met with key members of each college's staff, including Access to Achievement coordinators, Disability Services staff, and faculty members. The NCCCS team summarized their observations from these site visits using an observation template based on the six legislative goals. Each college received a copy of NCCCS' observations and recommendations for future work in each legislative area. The NCCCS team plans to conduct formal site visits annually each spring.

Monthly Site Reports

Access to Achievement Coordinators initially submitted monthly reports to the NCCCS team using a team-developed template structured around the six legislative elements; however, they now report quarterly. These reports provide updates on activities related to each legislative

goal, serving as an agenda for both the NCCCS team and the Coordinators to prioritize student achievement, success, and support across the various dimensions identified by the legislature.

ServiceNow Data Collection Form

NCCCS worked with their data and reporting team to design a data collection tool to collect student and other Access to Achievement data at each network site. The tool has been deployed to all Access to Achievement sites via NCCCS' ServiceNow client management platform. Access to Achievement Coordinators are responsible for collecting and updating the required data via the ServiceNow form. Coordinators log each interaction with students and update the students' relevant information data based on these meetings using the ServiceNow tool. The ServiceNow tool is also being used to collect implementation data, such as vocational pathways offered, credentials offered, and professional development opportunities for faculty and staff.

Currently, ServiceNow's Active Students section only tracks students who have a formal Person-Centered Plan. However, Access to Achievement coordinators have observed that many students they regularly meet with choose not to go through the Person-Centered Planning process. As a result, these students are not being accurately reflected in the system's data.

To address this gap, efforts are underway to modify the ServiceNow dashboard to capture the number of student contacts who do not have a formal Person-Centered Plan. This adjustment will provide a more comprehensive view of student engagement and support efforts. As of March 10, 2025, there are 493 additional students who have been in contact with their Access to Achievement coordinator but are not documented in the Active Students section due to the existing system limitations. By implementing these changes, the platform will better reflect the full scope of student interactions, ensuring that all students receiving support are accounted for and that Access to Achievement's reach is more comprehensively documented and understood.

Technical Assistance

The NCCCS team holds biweekly technical assistance calls with Access to Achievement Coordinators, providing updates, sharing information, and addressing questions. Additionally, technical assistance is available upon request, either virtually or in person.

Professional Development and Training Opportunities

The NCCCS team is committed to providing Access to Achievement coordinators with ongoing professional development opportunities to strengthen their expertise in student support and educational access. In the first year of the initiative, the NCCCS team organized nine professional development sessions featuring guest speakers, including representatives from ThinkCollege and other NCCCS members. Additionally, NCCCS is developing a knowledge

management platform to serve as a central hub for Access to Achievement coordinators. This platform will include key resources, essential documents, and recordings of past professional development sessions to support continuous learning and collaboration.

Access to Achievement coordinators have actively engaged in a range of professional development opportunities and convenings designed to enhance their ability to support their students. These workshops and trainings include *Navigating the Shift: Guiding and Supporting Students Through the Realigned Developmental Education Model*, where coordinators explored strategies for assisting students in adapting to revised academic structures. They also participated in *Advising Updates: Prison Education*, which provided valuable insights into supporting incarcerated students in their educational pursuits. Additionally, coordinators attended *The Foundation of Access to Achievement* and *The Foundations for Access to Achievement*, both of which emphasized institutional accessibility and the creation of supportive learning environments for all students.

External & Cross-Departmental Partnerships

The Access to Achievement program has actively fostered cross-departmental collaborations and external partnerships to ensure that students are supported in equitable ways. Through strategic outreach and engagement, the program has strengthened its presence on campus and beyond, making key institutional stakeholders aware of its mission and services.

To build these connections, Access to Achievement has engaged with various departments and organizations through meetings, presentations, and collaborative initiatives. Some Access to Achievement campuses have partnered with organizations like RHA Disability Services to enhance employment support for students and collaborated with Watauga Opportunities and Recruitment to improve accessibility and awareness through campus tours. The program has also established strong ties with the Student Support Services Director and developed connections with the LGBTQIA+ student group to promote a more welcoming campus environment.

Beyond campus, several Access to Achievement campuses have partnered with Madame Clutterbucket's Neurodiverse Universe to advance advocacy and support for neurodiverse students. Additionally, multiple meetings with Employment and Independence for People with Disabilities (EIPD, formerly Vocational Rehabilitation) counselors at various campuses have helped develop student support strategies. Some programs have also created opportunities for community engagement, such as volunteering with the Special Olympics.

A few Access to Achievement campuses have worked closely with the Workforce Development Division to align with broader educational and employment initiatives. Local campuses have engaged in targeted outreach efforts with key academic units, including Disability Services, the Academic Support Center, the Machining Program, Student Support and Wellness, the Computer-Assisted Design Program, Financial Aid, and Admissions. By actively collaborating with these departments, Access to Achievement has enhanced its ability to provide comprehensive student support that prioritizes accessibility and success for all learners at several community colleges.

Marketing

NCCCS has collaborated with a marketing firm to develop a dedicated Access to Achievement website and establish comprehensive brand guidelines. These resources ensure a consistent and professional identity for the initiative. Access to Achievement coordinators have received the brand guidelines along with marketing materials designed to support their efforts in promoting the program across campuses and within their communities.

Emerging Learnings

HEI conducted a review of Access to Achievement documents provided by NCCCS. Documents included colleges' letters of intent (LOI), NCCCS' initial site visit reports, and colleges' monthly site reports. From the review of these documents, HEI gleaned several emerging learnings.

There is clear student need for and interest in the opportunities Access to Achievement colleges are providing.

Access to Achievement had an initial goal of serving 300 students by June 2025. The initiative surpassed this target well ahead of schedule, reaching 809 students across the state by March 2025 via individualized advising and the development of person-centered plans. In addition to these formal interactions, Access to Achievement Coordinators also connect with students through a range of informal touchpoints including emails, text messages, phone calls, walk-ins, and casual conversations around campus.

Access to Achievement offers comprehensive support for students, acknowledging that success is shaped by multiple factors. The program recognizes that barriers to achievement extend beyond academics and require holistic support to address students' individual needs.

While the six legislative elements outline the initiative's primary goals, an in-depth analysis of site visits and monthly reports highlights a key outcome of Access to Achievement: the comprehensive, holistic support provided to students. Beyond academic assistance, the

program ensures access to essential resources, personalized guidance, and supportive environments that foster overall well-being and success. These supports vary by campus.

Through Access to Achievement, students at one college have received vital support during crises, including assistance with the emergency withdrawal process following Hurricane Helene. To further promote student success, the college has also implemented small-group coaching sessions focused on time management and effective technology use.

Recognizing the importance of mental well-being, one college established a RESET Room—a sensory-sensitive space designed to help students regroup and recharge. Additionally, an Adult Basic Education Coordinator at one college has expanded access to North Star Literacy classes at their college, equipping students with essential foundational skills for academic growth.

To enhance career readiness, research activities at one college have helped students align their curriculum with potential internship opportunities. To support student acclimation, coordinators at one campus have guided students on campus tours, fostering familiarity and confidence in their new environment. Addressing transportation barriers, a coordinator at another college has facilitated transportation services, ensuring students can fully access their educational opportunities.

By addressing both academic and non-academic needs, *Access to Achievement* has created a supportive learning environment, empowering students to thrive in their educational and personal journeys.

Early challenges

One of the most significant challenges in developing the *Access to Achievement* program has been addressing the deeply ingrained misconceptions, preconceptions, and stereotypes surrounding individuals with IDD. Historically, these students have been perceived through a narrow and often deficit-based lens, leading to segregated learning environments that diminish their agency and potential. Too often, decisions about their education and opportunities have been driven by generalized assumptions rather than individualized assessments of their strengths and capabilities.

The name *Access to Achievement* is more than just a title—it is a deliberate and transformative statement that challenges the status quo. Rather than focusing on perceived deficits, the program is designed to identify and implement the institutional supports necessary to make higher education more accessible and welcoming for all students. Traditionally, efforts to improve educational outcomes for students with IDD have focused primarily on changing the

students themselves. *Access to Achievement* shifts this paradigm by emphasizing the responsibility of institutions to create environments that foster success for every learner.

Although reshaping these long-standing perceptions and institutional practices presents significant challenges, *Access to Achievement* collaborates with coordinators and external partners to develop sustainable, systemic changes. Through targeted support, professional development, and structural improvements, the program works to create an environment where students with IDD are not only present in higher education settings but are also fully supported in achieving their academic and personal goals.

Next Steps in the Evaluation

The evaluation plan has been formally developed, with primary data collection slated to commence in April 2025. The evaluation will address the following research questions:

1. To what extent is Access to Achievement aligned with best practices for postsecondary and workforce training programs for students with IDD?
2. With what quality and fidelity are Access to Achievement sites implementing inclusive and accessible educational and workforce training pathways?
3. To what degree has Access to Achievement bolstered its capacity to document the participation (in credit and non-credit pathways) and post-engagement outcomes (labor market or otherwise) of its students?
4. What impacts have Access to Achievement realized?
5. What is the promise of Access to Achievement, in terms of serving as an innovative model for pioneering pathways to success for individuals with IDD in North Carolina?

HEI will collaborate with Access to Achievement to conduct a thorough external program evaluation. Data gathering approaches will include a review of program documentation, interviews with key stakeholders, data collection from students participating in the program, observational site visits, and an examination of extant data to address these questions. Each of these activities are briefly described below.

HEI will **conduct semi-structured interviews** with various Access to Achievement constituents, including the NCCCS project team, institutional site teams, and other stakeholders integral to the success of the initiative.

Additionally, to gather insights into program development and implementation, HEI will continue to collect and assess both physical and digital program artifacts for **document review**.

Relatedly, HEI conducted an extant data analysis to examine comparable initiatives at community colleges across the nation, providing a broader context for understanding trends and best practices for students with IDD.

HEI will also perform **observational site visits** at a sample of Access to Achievement colleges to gain contextual insights into program implementation. These visits will span a range of program formats, sizes, and structures, offering a comprehensive view of programming across the state system. Observational activities may include class and program activity observations, site visits to relevant offices or dedicated spaces, interviews and focus groups with site staff (e.g., instructors, administrators), and, where possible, conversations with student participants.

In addition, HEI will design and implement a **student survey** tool for participants in Access to Achievement programs. This tool will be developed in collaboration with the NCCCS team and relevant stakeholders to ensure accessibility and appropriateness for program participants.

Analyses will commence following data collection, where quantitative and qualitative data will be analyzed separately before being compared, contrasted, and interpreted to answer the research questions. HEI researchers will analyze quantitative data from student questionnaires and extant sources, as well as qualitative data from interviews, site visits, and document reviews. Findings will be triangulated across methods to identify effective program elements, assess progress toward project goals, and ensure a comprehensive understanding of outcomes for students with IDD.

Evaluation efforts will culminate in the production of comprehensive **reporting artifacts**, summarizing findings and insights gained from these various evaluation activities.

Final Remarks

This formative memo presents initial insights informed by HEI's engagements with the NCCCS Access to Achievement core team, alongside a review of program documents and examination of the ServiceNow platform. Preliminary analyses of informational artifacts indicate that Access to Achievement has established a strong program foundation. This foundation is intentionally composed of key elements, including centralized programmatic and data infrastructures, standardized reporting requirements and cadences, and locally embedded Access to Achievement coordinators. In addition to observed strengths of efforts thus far (e.g., relevance of opportunities provided to student interests and needs, robust structures of support), preliminary findings also highlight early challenges being navigated (e.g., addressing and disrupting misconceptions about individuals with IDD). While a more comprehensive evaluation

will be conducted according to the plan outlined above, this memo serves as a fundamental building block for the evaluation process, providing an initial foundation from which early learnings have been gleaned and can be further explored.

Based on this initial inquiry, Access to Achievement is actively advancing in all six legislative elements across the 15 participating sites. The core team is taking a hands-on approach, working closely with institutions, and developing tools informed by these interactions to ensure all sites are equipped for success. Undoubtedly, central to Access to Achievement's work is a commitment to holistic student support, and fostering a belief in every student's potential for success. As we move into the next phase of the evaluation, we will focus on the research questions outlined above to further assess Access to Achievement's progress toward and realization of its student, institutional, and system-wide goals.