

# North Carolina Community College System Equity Action Plan

## A Targeted Plan to Support Student Success for All Students

North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) has embraced a statewide goal of having two million North Carolinians with a postsecondary, high-quality credential or degree by 2030. These credentials and degrees provide students the skills and professional training needed to be successful in North Carolina's economy. The State's community colleges play a definitive role in the State's ability to achieve this goal. The state's economy continues to shift toward jobs requiring a college-level credential. By 2020, 67% of jobs in North Carolina are projected to require postsecondary education. Yet in 2015, only an estimated 48% of North Carolina's prime working-age (18-64) adults had a postsecondary degree, certification, license or other credential of workplace value.

Equity gaps in North Carolina pose a significant barrier to the State's educational attainment goal. If left unaddressed, this goal for 2030 will be out of reach. Historic and systemic inequities (including poverty) pose barriers to traditionally underserved students, making it all the more difficult for them to attain a postsecondary credential or degree. As open-door institutions, North Carolina's community colleges support hundreds of thousands of underserved and low-income students in their journey toward a postsecondary credential or degree. NCCCS recognizes the need to close equity gaps for students pursuing a credential or degree through our 58 community colleges to more fully realize the philosophy of total education set by Dr. W. Dallas Herring, the Father of NCCCS.

**Vision:** North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) aims to significantly narrow and then eliminate the equity gaps that exists among students across our 58 colleges. We will work to accomplish this goal by adopting, implementing, and improving each of this plan's three focus areas:

1. Climate and culture
2. Faculty teaching and learning
3. Financial stability

Each of these focus areas is a critical component of spurring equitable outcomes for students. Underserved students need community colleges to have a climate and culture that makes them feel safe, welcome, and at home as they pursue a credential or degree. They need highly committed faculty who continuously refine their teaching and pedagogy to meet students'

diverse learning needs. Finally, underserved students need our community colleges to build a financial plan and provide support when financial resources might derail their progress toward a credential or degree, which is particularly important for students trying to manage college expenses with personal life and family expenses. When these focus areas are addressed, students are prepared to be successful, equipped with a plan for what they will study and what career they will pursue.

Equity entails making sure we are serving all historically underserved groups. We have chosen to begin strengthening equity by focusing first on race and ethnicity. We realize there are additional groups to address: gender, first generation, low-income, veterans, and more. We have chosen to start with race and ethnicity since NCCCS' data indicate that largest achievement gaps are indicated by race and ethnicity. The complete 2019 Equity Report can be found [here](#). We will expand our focus to supporting other underserved groups, such as those experiencing poverty, as we make progress in closing equity gaps around race and ethnicity. The experiences of each minoritized group is unique, but the supports community colleges offer oftentimes serve multiple groups needing assistance to be successful. 11/15/2019 1

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These focus areas must work together to create this desired outcome and cannot be pushed forward as stand-alone initiatives. This Equity Action Plan builds on the NC Student Success Center's "best-practices" plan recommendation based on guidance from the Aspen Institute's College Excellence Program, Diversity Officers at numerous colleges across the country, Achieving the Dream, and exemplar workshops and the NCCCS Research and Performance Management Division. We will use the Guided Pathways for North Carolina Framework to unify existing programs and initiatives so we maximize our impact without starting new initiatives that inadvertently compete with our current efforts.

**Overview:** We are pursuing a comprehensive and holistic approach that relies on multiple strategies to close equity gaps in North Carolina and increase our ability to meet the State's educational attainment goal for 2030. This approach also takes in to account the progress colleges have made in closing achievement gaps; however, this approach serves to "level-set" and coordinate our system of community colleges as we pursue the educational attainment goal. Success will be measured for each of the three focus areas:

1. *Culture and climate*: Raise the collective consciousness among all stakeholders across the system

about equity and issues like poverty. 2. *Faculty teaching and learning*: Provide equity-focused professional development to full-time and part-time faculty, and strengthen educational pathways to ensure all students are learning and advancing toward their chosen credential or degree. 3. *Financial stability*: Help underserved students develop a financial plan and connect them to resources when challenges and emergencies, in partnership with state and regional organizations.

Looking into the future, performance data will indicate more equitable student success outcomes in success, completion, and a narrower (and eventually eliminated) equity gap.

**Significance:** The student population in North Carolina’s community colleges is diverse yet underrepresented minority students have lower GPAs than their peers. As a system of open access colleges, we strive to close these achievement gaps for all students. To illustrate this gap, below is data obtained from the 2019 Equity Report (2017 first-time curriculum (non-high school), including summer):

GPA is only one metric demonstrating equity gaps once disaggregated by race and ethnicity. A number of other factors, both in and out of the classroom, compel students (particularly minorities and underserved students) to stop out before earning a postsecondary credential or degree. Poverty, changes in employment status, health, family caretaking responsibilities, transportation, housing changes, and more: community college students oftentimes experience many life transitions while pursuing their studies. These factors and experiences often overlap, so efforts to reduce and eliminate equity gaps for one underserved group have the potential to help other similarly disadvantaged groups.

This equity plan still focuses on providing excellent academic and career training inside the classroom, but its focus on campus climate, culture, and financial stability adds crucial services to

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underserved groups. We anticipate reducing and eventually eliminating equity gaps through meeting students’ on- and off-campus needs so they can complete their chosen credential or

degree and achieve social and economic mobility.

The project will share data, promote promising practices, align programs, and inform policies that lead to equitable outcomes for underserved populations, including, but not limited to, first-generation, low-income, and students of color, adult students, veterans, students with disabilities, and currently and formerly incarcerated persons, among others. As discussed above, the programs will focus initially on reducing race and ethnicity gaps in the first year, then turn to additional underserved groups in subsequent years.

**Background:** Equity and equality are two terms/strategies we use in an attempt to produce fairness. They are not the same. Equity is giving everyone what they need to be successful while equality is treating everyone the same. This can be best illustrated by the following image:

In the top portion of this figure, equality would mean since everyone gets the same size bicycle, everyone is treated equally. In terms of higher education, this assumes all students are on a level playing field and have the same chance of success. Historic and systemic inequities, however, means the playing field is not level for students. In the bottom portion of the figure, each rider gets a bicycle appropriately sized and designed, to ensure a successful ride. They are being treated equitably. As it relates to student success, equity means putting systems, programs, and policy changes into place to ensure each student has the support(s) they need to be successful.

**This Plan:** There are three Focus Areas addressed in this plan. Each Focus Area working in concert with one another will “move the needle” in producing more equitable results for our students. It can best be visualized by the figure below:

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Conditions for Success: **1. Create and Maintain a  
Sense of Urgency 2. Support and Facilitate  
Data-Informed Decision Making**

Focus Area 1:  
**Climate and  
Culture**

Activities to Address  
Focus Area: ○ Implicit  
Bias Training ○  
Courageous  
Conversations

Workshops ○  
Deficit Minded to  
Equity Minded  
Shift ○ Holistic  
Student  
Support  
Services  
Press  
Faculty  
Faculty  
ISE ○  
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Focus Area 2:  
Teaching and Learning

Activities to Address  
Focus Area: ○  
Membership to Aunt  
Activities to Address  
Focus Area: ○  
Membership to Aunt

Bertha ○ Financial  
Literacy-Belk

Bertha ○ Financial  
Literacy-Belk

Bertha ○ Financial  
Literacy-Belk

Center ○ Student  
Survey of Financial  
Stability ○ Cost of  
Poverty Experience  
○ Culture of  
Caring Poverty  
Institute  
Center ○ Student

Survey of Financial  
Stability ○ Cost of  
Poverty Experience  
○ Culture of  
Caring Poverty  
Institute  
Center ○ Student  
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Caring Poverty  
Institute  
Center ○ Student  
Survey of Financial  
Stability ○ Cost of  
Poverty Experience  
○ Culture of  
Caring Poverty  
Institute

Focus Area 3:  
**Financial  
Stability**

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**Foundational Framework: Guided Pathways.** The Guided Pathways for North Carolina Framework unifies the programs and initiatives around the State so they collectively work together. Developed by the Community College Research Center (Columbia University), guided pathways focus on four key goals:

1. Getting students on the right track; 2. Helping students select a program of study; 3. Ensuring students are learning; and 4. Advancing students toward their degree.

The Guided Pathways for North Carolina Framework is well suited to helping NCCCS reduce and eliminate equity goals. Historically underserved students struggle with the aspects of college that are integral to the four goals for guided pathways listed above. Underserved students also have a hard time getting on track and selecting a program of study if they have not been provided the information and guidance they need to successfully navigate college. Data show they place into developmental courses more frequently and

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Foundational  
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Pathways**

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experience numerous barriers to learning (both in and out of class). All of these challenges can slow their credit accumulation and derail them from their chosen degree path.

The Guided Pathways for North Carolina Framework establishes a three-pronged approach to reducing equity gaps and improving student outcomes: improving campus climate and culture, faculty teaching and learning, and students' financial literacy. Guided pathways are designed to lead students to make more informed, deliberate decisions about their careers and programs of study. They contain "default choices" that are in the student's best interest given his or her educational goals. They enable colleges to provide more information to students about choice of major, and to offer meta-majors, or broad programs of study, for students to use while exploring careers and specific programs of study. Academic maps are a resource that colleges provide when implementing guided pathways so students can track their progress toward a credential or degree between semesters and through milestone courses like gateway math and English). The Guided Pathways for North Carolina Framework is strong since it focuses on students' sense of belonging (climate and culture) and financial stability, both of which need to be secure for student learning and progress to occur.

North Carolina's community colleges have devoted time and resources to implementing guided pathways across the State. The State's implementation of guided pathways has been strengthened through appreciative advising, the deployment of success coaches to respond to early indicators and warnings that students might be struggling or veering off track. This work began in conjunction with the revised Comprehensive Articulation Agreement, ratified in 2014. This work has created the infrastructure that will be needed to achieve the State's 2030 educational attainment goal.

**Conditions for Success:** To accomplish these goals, we begin with executive professional development on equity and continuously creating a sense of urgency to reduce and eliminate equity gaps using compelling state data. To create a sense of urgency, we will incorporate case-making skills into professional development so that content knowledge is able to be disseminated when the faculty or staff attendee returns to their campus and work with senior leadership at colleges so they can facilitate a culture of equity.

Activities to Support Conditions for Success:

- Creating and Maintain a Sense of Urgency
  - The Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research convenes

community college presidents and other key leaders to discuss challenges and opportunities for improving college enrollment, student persistence, and credential completion aligned with labor market demand, especially for those who traditionally have been underserved. “The Presidents’ Academy is focused on equipping North Carolina’s community colleges and leaders to fuel North Carolina’s expanding high-skills economy and accelerate economic mobility for larger numbers North Carolinians.” Through its partnership with the Aspen Institute’s College Excellence Program and Achieving the Dream, The Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research is infusing equity into all of its executive development to ensure leaders can guide their colleges in identifying and removing barriers that create equity gaps.

- Support and Facilitate Data-Informed Decision

- Making

- By providing disaggregated college level data to all faculty and staff, NCCCS will prompt

- conversation about what can be done to close observed equity gaps. These

conversations 11/15/2019 5

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will supplement those led by Presidents, who are increasingly using disaggregated data to identify and address equity gaps at their institutions. Through sharing of dashboards created by Institutional Research and Effectiveness, we will develop and inform IR staff on best practices associated with dashboard data so IR staff can coach college faculty and staff. Additionally, we will provide course level disaggregated data to all faculty members so faculty can collectively make small changes to the structure of their courses to address differences in achievement. These dashboards will enable faculty to see specific groups consistently struggling in their courses, prompting opportunities for new approaches to teaching to increase learning outcomes.

**Focus Area 1: Climate and Culture.** Improve access, retention & completion rates of underrepresented students by improving climate and culture around equity across the State. We will do this by providing equity-focused professional development that helps faculty and staff identify and address potential bias they hold, and build a culture committed to and rooted in equity at each of the State’s 58 community colleges. Through this work, individual community colleges and NCCCS will evaluate and change policies and procedures that create equity

barriers for students.

## Activities to Address Climate and Culture Focus

### Area:

- Implicit Bias.

- This workshop will encourage participants to be mindful of the risks of implicit bias by

helping them institute specific procedures for decision making that will help us avoid acting according to biases that are contrary to our conscious values and beliefs. According to the Perception Institute, “Thoughts and feelings are ‘implicit’ if we are unaware of them or mistaken about their nature. We have a bias when, rather than being neutral, we have a preference for (or aversion to) a person or group of people. Thus, we use the term ‘implicit bias’ to describe when we have attitudes towards people or associate stereotypes with them without our conscious knowledge.” Institutions and individuals can identify risk areas where our implicit biases may affect our behaviors and judgments.

- Courageous Conversations.

- Developed by Glenn E. Singleton (M.Ed., Stanford), this workshop will help participants

understand the four agreements and the six conditions necessary in meaningful conversation that promotes positive change, by participating in a reflective practice entitled “All in the Family”. "Courageous Conversations" supports adults by facilitating the conversations necessary to make progress on difficult subjects such as race, privilege, implicit bias, stereotypes, and ethnicity.

- Deficit Minded to Equity Minded – Fixing the Pond: Supporting Students of Color

- Using the 2019 NCCCS Equity Report as a foundation, this interactive and intrapersonal

presentation will integrate various components of equity with student success. It will introduce participants to critical information and various approaches to assist historically marginalized students.

- Holistic Student Supports & Equitable Advising and Economic Mobility

- This workshop, delivered by members of Achieving the Dream’s Holistic Student

Supports team, will help colleges bridge the gap in holistic student supports theory and how this applies at the institutional level as it pertains to addressing the structural,

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process, and attitudinal changes needed to improve holistic student supports to address equity gaps.

**Focus Area 2: Faculty Teaching and Learning.** New and current faculty will receive training enabling them to improve their teaching and ensure all students, including minoritized students, are learning. Educators are well positioned to support underserved students, as the Center for Racial Equity in Education has found. This training will help faculty recognize and appreciate differences. Regionally delivered workshops that are contextually flexible, dependent upon the audience. A main goal is to help faculty adopt a variety of learning tools to include experiential exercises, presentations, small and large group discussion that engage all students and their different learning styles. Additionally, workshops aim to enable faculty and staff to become aware of unintentional statements they may be saying that are widening the diversity gap to achieve emotional literacy and cultural responsiveness.

Activities to Address Faculty Teaching and Learning  
Focus Area:

- Faculty On-Boarding
  - The Student Success Center, NC State University and the Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research are collaboratively creating an online, 20 module onboarding course for new faculty and staff. Each of the modules will be created by subject matter experts. More than one of these modules is directly related to equality/equity and generally diversity/equity/inclusion, others focus on best practices in the classroom for all students (including minoritized students).
- Faculty Workshops centered around changes in the classroom
  - Reverse course/syllabi design. Reverse (or backward) course design faculty structure

student learning based upon assessments that are intentionally designed to provide evidence that students have achieved course goals. Faculty will clearly articulate the final results of the course by asking themselves:

- What do I want my students to be able to think and do by the end of this course?
  - How will my students be different by the end of the course? The answers to these questions are the goals of the Reverse course/syllabi design workshops. ○ Teaching with a lens on equity. Faculty will gain an understanding of how small changes in the classroom can affect change and close equity gaps. Best practices for incorporating diverse, equitable, and inclusive practices throughout the curriculum so that students have examples of their own culture in the learning environment, will be shared. ○ “Tilting” exercises. Faculty will learn instructional strategies to create and promote equitable learning environments.
- RISE (Reinforced Instruction for Student Excellence)
    - Far too many students start in remediation. According to Complete College America in its “[Co-Requisite Data](#)” resource, “Each year, more than one million students begin college in remediation. For most, remediation will be their first and last college experience – a tragedy that is disproportionately true for low-income and students of color. Co-requisite remediation is doubling and tripling success rates in gateway math and English classes and in some states for adults, students of color, and those that score at the lowest level on the ACT exam.” North Carolina’s RISE initiative aims to increase the number of students entering college as “college ready” and not needing remediation.
  - STEM Alliance 11/15/2019 7

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- The NC STEM Alliance's primary goal is to increase the number of students successfully completing high degree programs in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) disciplines. Particular emphasis is placed on populations historically underrepresented in STEM.
- Review of Programs of Study – Examining the enrollment patterns, using disaggregated data, within Programs of Study

- If unsupported, minoritized students tend to enroll in majors with comparatively weaker labor market outcomes. We will examine disaggregated enrollment patterns data to identify the extent to which this trend is happening in North Carolina. Findings will be used to inform refinements to guided pathways and training provided to staff and faculty advisors. These refinements and improved advising will provide more inroads to minoritized students to good jobs, and help the State reach its 2030 educational attainment goal.

**Focus Area 3: Financial Stability.** By assessing students' basic needs, food insecurity, housing, childcare, etc., staff and faculty will provide proactive guidance and support to eliminate these barriers. Convenings will be held to inform colleges of steps that can be taken to help improve the financial stability of students.

Activities to Address Financial Stability Focus Area:

- Membership to Aunt Bertha

- Aunt Bertha provides one-stop for students to easily access both community and college resources. Every college has a membership to Aunt Bertha, purchased by the Student Success Center. "Aunt Bertha began with a simple idea – that every person and family should have one place online where they can find help in a time of need – and we've been transforming the way social services information is organized and delivered ever since. For people in need, Aunt Bertha is building the country's most comprehensive online directory of social service organizations. By putting the information in their hands, we're bringing dignity to the experience of finding help. And for organizations offering help, we are giving them tools and insights to deliver the right services to the right places and to do more with less."

- Financial Literacy

- We will help students improve their financial literacy, specifically to Pell grants, loans, and

percentage of completion in their program of study. ○ Through a randomized controlled trial, communicating with students once/semester

regarding the percentage of Pell funds used, the total amount of any federal and state loans, and the percentage of completion in their program of study. Each college will proactively contact students to suggest ways to mitigate any potential challenges. The Belk Center will be conducting the research to determine if this simple outreach positively affects course success, retention, and ultimately

completion.

- Student Survey of Financial Stability

- Help students with their financial literacy so that finances are not a barrier to student

success and completion. We will utilize the Trellis Student Survey of Financial Stability and other survey instruments to help better inform the institution as to the needs of their students.

- Cost of Poverty Experience 11/15/2019 8

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- The Cost of Poverty Experience is training that offers participants a glimpse into the lives of low-income individuals and families living in our community. It examines the obstacles faced by those in poverty, the decisions they make with limited resources and support, and the consequences those decisions have on themselves and their families.

- Culture of Caring Poverty Institute

- No student should be denied an education because they are poor! Amarillo College conducted faculty, staff, and student focus groups revealing the top 10 barriers our students face do not involve instruction nor handling the coursework. *Poverty, not academics*, was the most significant barrier to student success. Students' concerns about adequate food, housing, transportation, childcare and mental healthcare were weighing them down and preventing greater academic progress. The Culture of Caring Poverty Institute share insights and best practices to address students' poverty.

North Carolina has a prosperous future ahead, but reaching this prosperity entails achieving the State's educational attainment goal by 2030. The State's community colleges are integral to providing social mobility and economic stability to North Carolinians from poverty and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. As myFutureNC notes, "It's our responsibility—as education, business, and civic leaders; parents and students; community members and elected representatives—to ensure all North Carolinians are ready for the future." This equity action plan positions NCCCS and the State's 58 community colleges to provide an exceptional education to all students, particularly those who have been historically underserved, so North Carolina can reach its full economic and social potential.

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