



Building Degree Apprenticeships in North Carolina

A State-Led Approach to Expanding Earn-and-Learn Pathways

Why Degree Apprenticeships?

State Challenge: North Carolina has a long history of work-based learning and apprenticeship options, yet it faces many of the same workforce challenges confronting many states and territories, including healthcare and teacher shortages, and the challenge of retaining talent in local communities. Degree apprenticeships represent one of the state's tools for offering pathways that translate work experience into academic credit and connecting students to careers within the state.

In March 2025, Governor Josh Stein established the [Governor's Council on Workforce and Apprenticeships](#) to amplify strategies that help North Carolinians access education and training for high-wage and high-demand careers. The council has established 11 goals and 30 strategies to expand apprenticeship opportunities in the state, one of the strategies is to embed credentials and degrees into apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs. A guiding vision from the governor's office unites agencies and stakeholders under shared goals, providing clear direction and setting the stage for a collaborative approach.

Snapshot

North Carolina is distinct from other states pursuing degree apprenticeships, as it does not have a degree apprenticeship track. Rather, it has a Registered Apprenticeship System (Apprenticeship NC, housed in the NC Community College System) where associate and bachelor's degrees are embedded into registered apprenticeship program design at the community college level.

State: North Carolina

Priority Sector: Healthcare, Education, Advanced Manufacturing

Current Status: Established degree apprenticeship system with ongoing expansion; statewide degree articulation agreements still in development

Programs Developed: 16 occupational training groups with associate degree apprentices across the North Carolina Community College system

Employer Partners: 3,234 (across all apprenticeship programs) (ApprenticeshipNC, 2026 Q1)

Apprentices Served: 10,341 (total apprentices) (ApprenticeshipNC, 2026 Q1)



Building the Foundation

Governance Structure: ApprenticeshipNC and the community college system lead coordination across agencies to develop programs while the Governor’s Council sets and tracks progress towards goals in detailed reports. In 2017, [HB 646](#) transferred administration of the ApprenticeshipNC program from the Department of Commerce to the community college system to better coordinate with community colleges’ workforce development initiatives and employer connections. This shift has enabled more streamlined coordination between apprenticeship programming and degree offerings. This alignment has made it easier to build apprenticeship opportunities directly into curriculum development.

Lesson for Other States: Structurally aligning apprenticeship offices and higher education agencies can significantly reduce friction in program development and help ensure that competencies, curriculum and employer needs are built together cohesively from the start.

Core Leadership Team

- Governor’s Council on Workforce and Apprenticeships
- ApprenticeshipNC
- North Carolina Community College System

Key Stakeholders

- NCWorks
- ApprenticeshipNC
- NC Career Launch
- Workforce Development Boards
- Department of Public Instruction
- K-12 partners, local schools, and local education agencies



Sector Strategy and Program Design

North Carolina's sector priorities reflect Governor Stein's broader workforce development strategy, which calls for stronger alignment between employers, education, and workforce systems to prepare residents for good-paying, high-demand careers. The state's focus on health care, education, and advanced manufacturing mirrors the Governor's Council on Workforce and Apprenticeships' goals of developing statewide sector strategies, expanding apprenticeships and work-based learning, and deepening employer engagement.

A key strength of North Carolina's approach is the flexibility it provides employers to shape training around real workforce needs. Community colleges can award up to 16 semester credit hours for work-based learning in Associate of Applied Science degree programs aligned with a Registered Apprenticeship, allowing employers to ensure curricula reflect the competencies required on the job. Employers such as Duke Energy have leveraged this flexibility by partnering with community colleges to co-design and support apprenticeship pathways that address critical workforce shortages while strengthening regional talent pipelines.

Successful programs are designed with apprenticeship offices, higher education agencies, and employers all at the table to align core competencies that are accurately reflected in curriculum and meet employer needs.

Moving forward, the community college system plans to develop statewide articulation agreements between community colleges and universities to enable continuing education beyond two-year degrees. Bilateral agreements exist regionally between some institutions, but a statewide agreement will align systems.

Employer Engagement

Employer engagement is at the core of North Carolina's strategy, driven by the [Governor's goal of engaging 50,000 employers](#) in workforce and apprenticeship programs. Most employers are engaged through membership on employer advisory boards for academic programs within community colleges. Community college superintendents also hold one-on-one meetings with top employers in the community and leverage local workforce boards to have conversations around workforce needs.



From the employer perspective, the benefit of collaborating with community colleges is gaining access to real-time data on graduation rates in relevant programs that can feed into recruitment and hiring decisions.

Further, coalitions can help ease the burden on employers and create programs in response to common needs. The Good Jobs Western NC initiative, begun in response to Hurricane Helene, catalyzed a coordinated regional approach with all 11 community colleges in Western North Carolina working in alignment with employers and philanthropic partners to ensure training pathways correspond to labor market needs. AdvanceNC, a regional partnership led by the Central Carolina Community College that brings together community colleges, universities, and workforce boards, worked with manufacturing employers to design a degree program from scratch by bundling a few primary courses together that meet the requirements for an individual to work in an entry level advanced manufacturing position, along with plans to articulate the courses into a two-year degree program. In the long term, these coalitions between higher education and industry will develop regional talent systems that sustain degree apprenticeships as a workforce development tool.

Some employers have expressed that they prefer to deliver instruction in-house and favor shorter, non-degree options over multi-year pathways. Degree apprenticeship programs must intentionally balance meeting immediate workforce needs while keeping educational attainment and degree completion at the center.

Funding and Sustainability

North Carolina receives significant investment in apprenticeship programs from state and private funds. In the most recent state budget, ApprenticeshipNC received \$3 million in recurring state funds to sustain and continue to grow programs. Additionally, employers or philanthropies that have seen the benefits of apprenticeship programs provide grants directly to colleges to amplify programs.

To help students afford the programs, ApprenticeshipNC offers a community college tuition waiver for high school students who begin a Registered Apprenticeship within four months (120 days) of high school graduation. These students are also connected to NC Works Career Centers to leverage federal Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA) funds for equipment or supplies.



In terms of sustainability, the community college funding model provides incentives to develop apprenticeships and the ability to sustain them. Community colleges receive funding based on the number of students enrolled in a program, so the college is incentivized to ensure programs are rigorous and helpful for students and relevant to employers. Based on this funding model, developing robust apprenticeship programs that draw students in and meet the needs of employers can lead to more funding for further program expansion. Combined with the investment of recurring state funds, there is large potential for continued growth of degree apprenticeship programs.

Early Results and Impact

North Carolina is actively working to enhance its metrics infrastructure, including posting outcomes to a public dashboard and using a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system to track longitudinal data. The state currently tracks credentialing test outcomes, enrollment in Registered Apprenticeship Programs, and—for students who have been tagged through the high school tuition waiver—detailed outcome information from high school through program completion.

Evaluations from ApprenticeshipNC show that degree apprenticeship training between 2001-2020 resulted in stronger wage growth trajectories across various industries and both short- and long-term timelines than a Registered Apprenticeship alone, suggesting the economic benefits of state investments in these programs.

Governor's Action Items

- **Establish a clear governance structure.** Steering stakeholders under a clear leadership team gives agencies shared goals and a structured accountability mechanism, moving the work beyond individual agency initiatives.
- **Structurally align apprenticeship and higher education.** Streamlining efforts between apprenticeship programs and the higher education system creates a channel for curriculum and competency development to happen together.
- **Invest in recurring state funds.** Braiding federal and philanthropic funding can get a program off the ground, but recurring state appropriations are what sustain and scale programs.
- **Build regional employer partnerships.** Use employer advisory boards, executive-level outreach, and regional coalitions to ensure education and training programs remain responsive to changing workforce needs while reducing the burden on individual employers.