

Connecting People to Opportunity

Findings from a Survey of Graduates of Partner Colleges
and Universities of Hickory Metro Higher Ed Center



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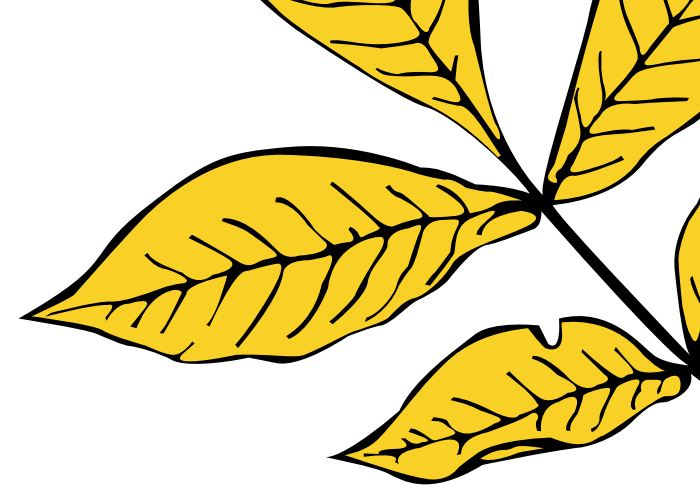
This summary is based on a 2008 study of graduates of the partner colleges and universities of Hickory Metro Higher Ed Center (HMHEC). The study was prepared by South by North Strategies, Ltd., a public policy research and communications firm in Chapel Hill, NC.

South by North Strategies wishes to thank the following HMHEC staff members for their contributions to this project: Jane Everson, Ann Sperry, Karen Summey and Derek Detweiler. In addition, HMHEC staff would like to thank the members of the advisory committee who helped craft the questions to be answered by this study and the Managing Board which approved its funding.

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In a transformed economy, success favors people and places possessing rich stores of skills, education and talent.

1. Filling a Need, Bridging a Gap

The Hickory metropolitan area is in the midst of a profound economic transformation – a transformation that is reshaping the area's economic base and remaking traditional pathways to prosperity. In this transformed economy, success favors people and places possessing rich stores of skills, education and talent.

Yet a sizable number of the Hickory area's 360,000 residents are ill-equipped to navigate this new economic landscape. Some 76 percent of local adults lack a postsecondary credential and are constrained in their ability to compete for quality jobs. Moreover, adults who wish to further their education or acquire new skills through completion of a four-year college degree or graduate degree find their options limited due to the area's relative lack of public colleges and universities.

To fill those gaps, a consortium of civic leaders established Hickory Metro Higher Education Center in 2002. The center enhances the educational attainment and economic development of the region by providing a venue where local residents can earn undergraduate and graduate degrees from colleges and universities across North Carolina. The goal: to provide adult learners with convenient access to educational opportunities that otherwise would be unavailable locally.

The center has grown rapidly since opening its doors in 2003. Today, eight colleges and universities offer a total of 111 degree programs through distance-learning and on-site instruction. To date, some 600 individuals have earned a degree or certificate through the center.

To assess its impact during its first five years of operations, the center commissioned a survey of the individuals who have earned postsecondary degrees and/or certificates through its partner colleges and universities. The study aimed to identify the factors that lead people to enroll in and complete a course of study, the impact that program completion has on graduates' lives, the satisfaction of graduates with their experience and the demographic characteristics of graduates.

Survey responses indicate that the typical graduate is a prime-age adult (ages 25-54) who enrolled to earn more and/or advance in a job or career. Most students earned a postgraduate credential in an education-related program, typically one offered through Appalachian State University. Nearly every graduate reports being employed, and most claim to have increased their earnings. Furthermore, almost all graduates describe the experience as "extremely worthwhile" and say that the flexibility of class schedules and the convenience of the center's location were vital to their decision to enroll and ability to succeed.

At the same time, the survey also raised six questions that the center's leaders must address if the center is to have the broad regional impact envisioned by its founders.

- ✂ Is the success of graduates related to the center's educational delivery model or the particular characteristics of its graduates?
- ✂ Are the area's unemployed or disadvantaged workers being served adequately?
- ✂ Is the region's educational attainment expanding or simply deepening?
- ✂ Are the needs of the region's private-sector employers being met?
- ✂ Do education graduates and/or the education industry possess unique characteristics that make it more likely for an individual to pursue, persist in and complete a course of study?
- ✂ Is the center's success scalable?

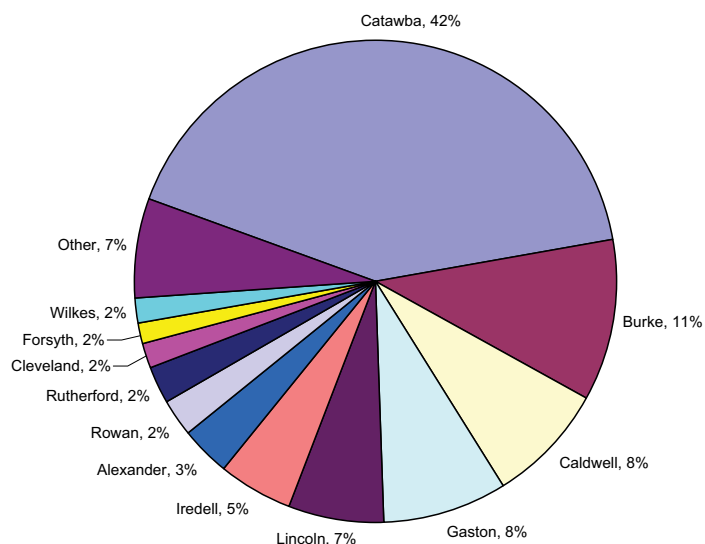
To build off its successes, the center should act upon five recommendations that would improve its ability to bridge the gaps separating local adult learners from educational and economic opportunities.

- ✂ Develop an understanding of why many students fail to enroll in and others fail to persist in a course of study.
- ✂ Intensify strategies with the community colleges for preparing unemployed and disadvantaged workers for college degree-completion programs.
- ✂ Improve data management capabilities.
- ✂ Foster deeper commitments to postsecondary education from non-education fields in business and industry.
- ✂ Intensify relationships with the education field.
- ✂ Maintain and expand a focus on the needs of incumbent adult workers.

2. Who Are the Center's Graduates?

To assess its impact over its first five years of operations, the center commissioned a survey of graduates of partner colleges and universities. South by North Strategies, Ltd., a research and communications firm in Chapel Hill, N.C., conducted the

Figure 2: County of Residence, Graduates of Center-Affiliated Programs



study during the summer of 2008. Over 1,100 persons with ties to the center were contacted through e-mail and the postal service, and some 280 individuals submitted responses. Of those respondents, 136 were graduates of a center-affiliated program.

Graduates of center-affiliated programs tend to be white (92 percent) and female (68 percent). Nine out of every ten graduates are prime-age workers (ages 25-54). Nearly three-fourths are married, but most do not have minor children (**Figure 1**).

The vast majority of graduates were employed on a full-time basis before, during and after completing a course of study. Virtually all work in public or quasi-public fields, such as education, health care and government. Due partly to that industry structure, graduates tend to have modest incomes: 60 percent currently earn between \$30,000-\$49,000 annually.

Most graduates reside in the Hickory metro. Of the graduates who provided residence information, 64 percent live in Catawba, Burke, Caldwell and Alexander counties, and another 20 percent reside in Lincoln, Gaston and Iredell counties (**Figure 2**).



Figure 1: Graduates of Center-Affiliated Programs, by Selected Demographic Characteristics		
	All Graduates	
	#	%
A) Gender		
Male	42	31.6%
Female	91	68.4%
B) Race		
White	122	92.4%
African-American	8	6.1%
Other	3	2.3%
C) Ethnicity		
Hispanic	0	0.0%
Non-Hispanic	132	100.0%
D) Age		
18-24	3	2.3%
25-34	42	31.8%
35-44	42	31.8%
45-54	35	26.5%
55-64	10	7.6%
65+	0	0.0%
E) Marital Status		
Married	95	72.0%
Divorced	15	11.4%
Never Married	22	16.7%
F) Minor Children at Home		
Yes	51	38.3%
No	82	61.7%
G) Current Employment Status		
Employed Full-Time	125	95.4%
Employed Part-Time	2	1.5%
Unemployed	3	2.3%
Other	1	0.8%
H) Current Industry		
Education	101	77.1%
Health Care/Social Services	8	6.1%
Government	8	6.1%
Manufacturing	5	3.8%
Other	9	6.9%
I) Education at Enrollment		
Associate's Degree	12	9.0%
Bachelor's Degree	86	64.2%
Graduate/Professional Degree	32	23.8%
Other	4	3.0%

Note: The total number of all graduates is 136, the total number of electronic survey graduates is 111 and the total number of postal survey graduates is 25. Due to incomplete responses, not all categories will sum.

Specifically, six localities – Hickory, Morganton, Newton, Conover, Lincolnton and Lenoir – are home to half of all graduates.

Because students must have a postsecondary credential in order to enroll in a center-affiliated program, every graduate had at least an associate's degree at the time of enrollment. Half of all graduates had been out of school for at least six years prior to enrolling.

In sum, the typical graduate of a center-affiliated program is a non-Hispanic, white woman between the ages of 25 and 54 who is married without minor children. She typically lives in the Hickory area, works on a full-time basis in the education field and earns between \$30,000 and \$49,999 annually. She normally possesses a bachelor's degree at enrollment.

3. Why Do People Enroll in a Center-Affiliated Program?

Most graduates enrolled in a course of study for a mix of career-related and personal concerns. Some 87 percent of graduates reported that “a desire for personal advancement” was an “extremely important” or “somewhat important” motivation for returning to school. This was followed by a “desire to increase earnings” and a “desire to advance in a current job or career.”

Although personal and career factors motivate graduates to enroll, the actual enrollment decision hinges upon practical concerns. Because most graduates are working adults, convenience and flexibility are paramount concerns. Some 81 percent of graduates said the location of the Hickory facility was “extremely important” to their decision, and 71 percent said that the flexibility of the class schedule was essential to their choice (Figure 3).

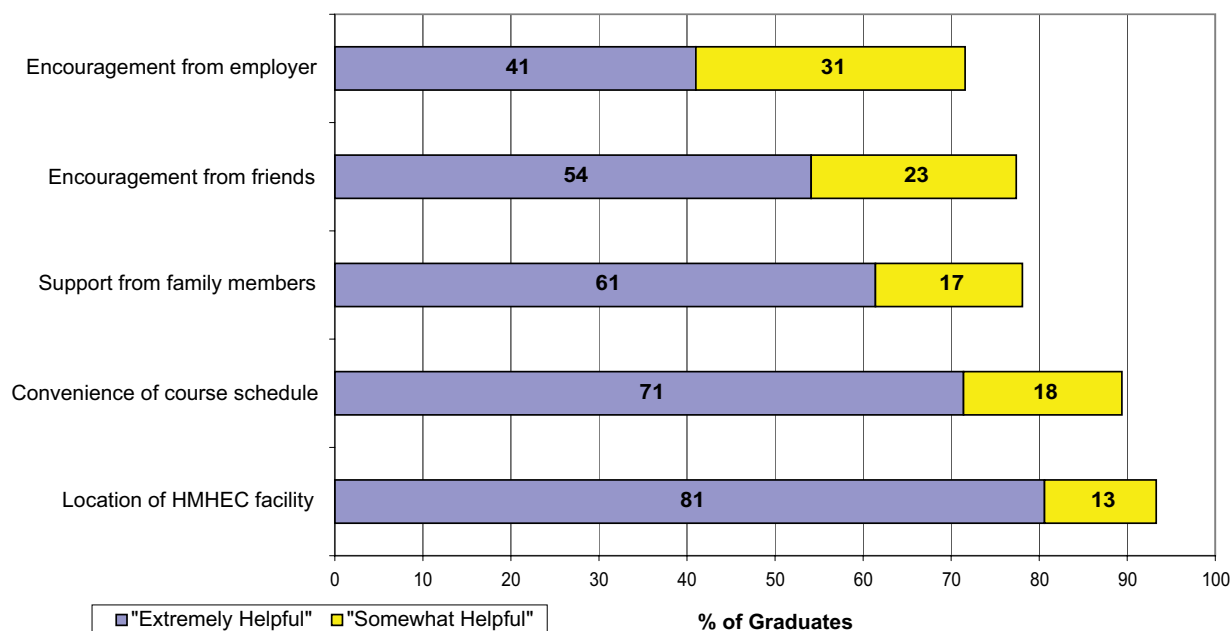
Most individuals are enrolled in an education-related program like special education, elementary education and educational administration. Two-thirds of graduates earned a master's degree; nine percent finished various post-baccalaureate teaching certificate and licensure programs; and 18 percent earned an educational specialist credential, a credential unique to the education field. Only 11 percent of graduates received baccalaureate degrees (Figure 4).

Almost every graduate (92 percent) matriculated in a program sponsored by Appalachian State University. The remaining graduates studied through Western Carolina University, Lees-McRae College, Winston-Salem State University and the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

Figure 4: Academic Profile of Graduates of Center-Affiliated Programs		
	All Graduates	
	#	%
A) Degree Level		
Bachelor's degree	15	11.0%
Master's degree	91	66.9%
Educational specialist	25	18.4%
Graduate certificate or licensure	12	8.8%
B) Partner Institution		
Appalachian State	125	91.9%
Lees-McRae	4	2.9%
UNC-Charlotte	2	1.5%
Western Carolina	5	3.7%
Winston-Salem State	3	2.2%
C) Field of Study		
Education related	107	78.9%

Note: The total number of all graduates is 136, the total number of electronic survey graduates is 111, and the total number of postal survey graduates is 25. Because a few graduates have earned multiple degrees, the total number of degrees earned is 143.

Figure 3: Top Five Factors Influencing the Enrollment Decision of Graduates of Center-Affiliated Programs



4. What Helps Graduates Succeed?

Virtually every graduate (95 percent) worked full-time while matriculating. Most also were married and had family obligations. Considerable research suggests that adult learners juggling employment, academic and family obligations are more apt to abandon a course of study than students with fewer responsibilities. Reducing those barriers is part of the center's mission.

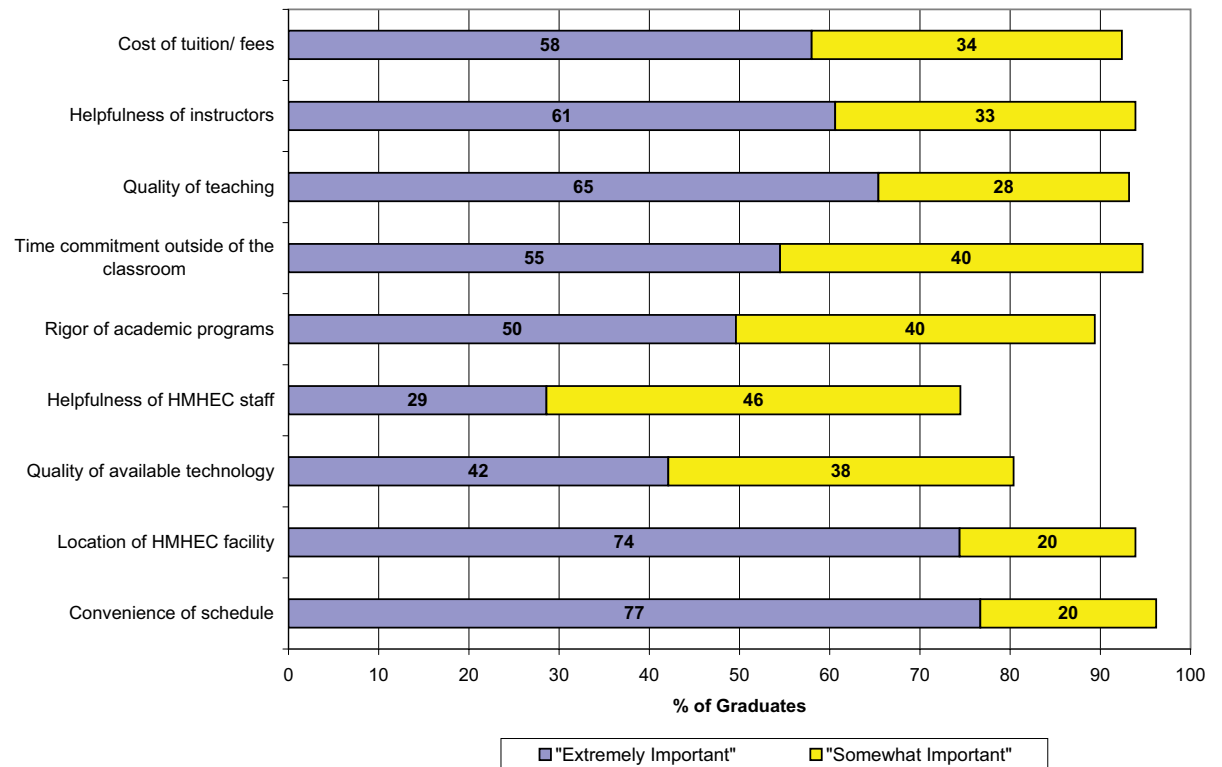
Based on the survey results, it appears that graduates of center-affiliated programs may face fewer obstacles than is typical for adult learners. One such barrier is child-care. Surprisingly, most graduates claimed not to need child-care services in order to attend classes. Just 8 percent of graduates reported needing child-care assistance, but of those with needs, 40 percent said that their child-care situation hindered their academic progress.

A second common obstacle is cost. Yet 76 percent of graduates said that their financial situation had little or no impact on their ability to earn a credential. The relative lack of financial concern may be attributable to the fact that most graduates were employed on a full-time basis while enrolled. Many also were married and likely lived in two-income households. When combined with the relatively low tuition costs charged by North Carolina's public universities, financial pressures appear less pronounced for these students than for other types of adult learners.

A third common obstacle is workplace flexibility. Although the center's programs are designed to be offered outside of the traditional business day, it nevertheless may be difficult for a student to succeed without at least tacit employer support. Yet most graduates said that their employment situation had little (30 percent) or no (27 percent) impact on their studies.

For most graduates, the convenience of the academic schedule and the location of the facility were essential to success. After convenience and location, the majority of graduates described the quality of teaching, the helpfulness of instructors, the cost

Figure 5: Factors Contributing to the Success of Graduates of Center-Affiliated Programs



of instruction and the time commitment outside of class as extremely important success factors (**Figure 5**). In general, many graduates attributed their success in earning a degree to the combination of convenience, location and family – particularly spousal – support.

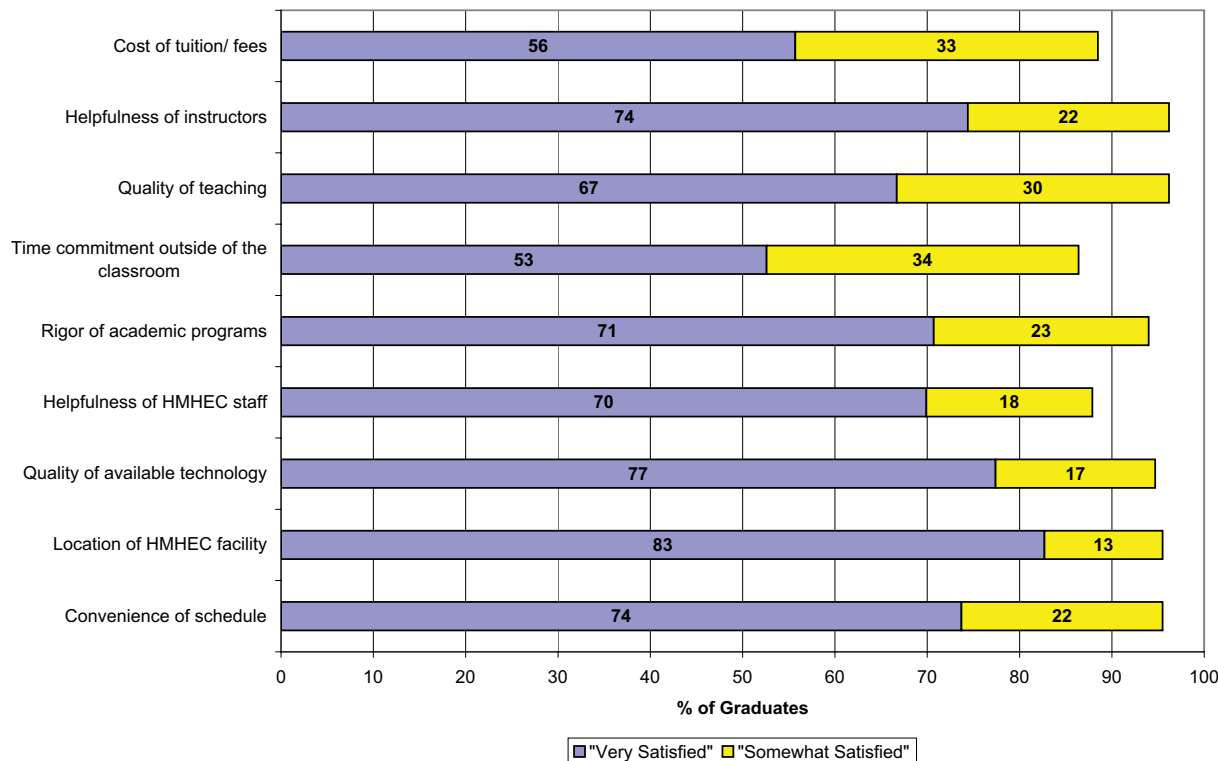
5. What Happens to Graduates Who Complete a Center-Affiliated Program?

Almost every graduate said that completing a degree or certificate positively impacted their lives. Virtually every graduate said they had “a sense of personal accomplishment or satisfaction” and “improved knowledge of a field of interest.” Graduates also reported that completing a degree or credential improved their career prospects (**Figure 6**).

Yet when it comes to the career and earnings realm, opinions were more mixed. Some 28 percent of graduates said that degree completion had “little” or “no” impact on career advancement, and 14 percent saw little or no earnings change. This sentiment may be related to the fact that so many graduates work in public or quasi-public fields characterized by defined advancement paths and regimented pay scales. Thus, even when someone receives a raise, that raise may be modest at best.

Nevertheless, 93 percent of graduates described earning a degree or certificate through one of the center’s programs as “extremely worthwhile.” In regards to individual program elements, graduates generally were “very satisfied” with every major aspect of the center’s model. The location of the facility was by far the most well-received aspect, followed by the quality of available technology, the helpfulness of the instructors and the convenience of class schedules.

Figure 6: Satisfaction with Program Elements, Graduates of Center-Affiliated Programs



6. How Can the Center Improve Its Effectiveness?

Although the survey's findings were generally positive, they also raised six questions that the center's leadership should consider if the center is to better realize its mission.

First, *is the success of graduates related to the center's educational delivery model or the particular characteristics of the graduates?* Research suggests that adult participation in postsecondary education has risen sharply in recent years and that adult learners face unique barriers that increase their odds of abandoning a course of study prior to completion. Graduates of center-affiliated programs, however, appear to be a relatively homogeneous group with characteristics that may make them more likely to succeed than the typical adult student. More



research also is needed to assess whether potential students who face some of these barriers are choosing not to enroll in postsecondary education because of those barriers.

Second, *is the HMHEC model adequately serving the area's unemployed and disadvantaged workers?* Most survey respondents said they were employed full-time at enrollment, while studying and following graduation. In fact, no graduate who responded to the survey reported being unemployed at the time of enrollment, yet the Hickory area has experienced comparatively high levels of unemployment during the center's lifespan. Why then are there not more individuals who had experienced a bout of unemployment in the graduate pool? More research is needed to assess whether these potential students lack the college preparation and/or financial resources needed to enroll and to identify strategies to address the problem.

Third, *is the center expanding or simply deepening the region's educational attainment?* To enroll in one of the center's programs, a student must possess at least an associate's degree, and most have at least a baccalaureate degree. Additionally, most graduates already were residing in the region when they began their studies. So instead of expanding the supply of well-educated individuals, the center simply may be deepening the existing supply by helping well-educated individuals become better educated. As the number of bachelor's degrees offered at the center increases, more research is needed to respond to this question.

Fourth, *is the center meeting the needs of the region's private-sector employers?* The overwhelming majority of graduates work in public or quasi-public fields, and few are employed in private industries, many of which likely face workforce challenges and competitive pressures. Are existing programs relevant to private-sector workers, or are there aspects of the current model that hinder individuals employed in non-education fields from enrolling? More input from the region's business and industry leaders is needed, followed by more communication with partner colleges and universities.

Almost every graduate said that completing a degree or certificate positively impacted their lives.

The center clearly has succeeded in developing a model that serves adult learners well.

Fifth, ***do education graduates and/or the education industry possess unique characteristics that make it more likely for an individual to pursue, persist in and complete a course of study?*** The overwhelming majority of graduates completed education-related programs. Education is a field that attracts people who value education and are comparatively well-educated themselves. Additional study is needed to assess the center's program offerings and whether they met the needs of graduates who earned credentials in other areas of study and/or are employed in private-sector industries.

Sixth, ***is the center's success scalable?*** Given that three-fourths of the region's adults lack a postsecondary degree, is the center really changing the educational composition of the region's incumbent adult workforce? Even in education, a field in which the center is strong, are partner colleges and universities producing enough graduates in certification areas needed by local school systems to substantially improve the quality of the region's teaching corps? If not, what could be done to expand the center's impact?

7. Preparing for the Next Five Years

The center has established itself as an effective intermediary connecting local adult learners to educational opportunities. The results include satisfied graduates, improvements in the quality of the regional workforce and expanded career opportunities for individuals. To build off its successes, the center's stakeholders should consider taking action in six areas.

First, the center and its partners should ***develop an understanding of why some adults fail to enroll in or persist in a course of study.*** Developing an understanding of the factors that hinder students from enrolling or persisting in a course of study could suggest changes that would strengthen the center's need for, and effectiveness in the delivery of, student support and marketing services offered through partner colleges and universities.

Second, the center and its partners should ***re-evaluate strategies for serving unemployed or disadvantaged workers.*** As mentioned previously, few unemployed individuals appear to be taking advantage of the opportunities provided through the center even though the region contains a relatively large share of unemployed individuals. If the center is to reach those individuals during a time of economic unrest, the center will need to develop a more comprehensive outreach plan with community colleges.

Third, the center should ***improve its data management capabilities through collaboration with its partner colleges and universities.*** The center currently lacks the ability to fully identify and contact graduates because key information is held by the degree-granting institutions. In response, the center should aim to create formal data sharing arrangements with its partner colleges. Access to higher quality student and graduate information would permit better tracking of outcomes and improved evaluations of program effectiveness.

Fourth, the center's partners should ***foster deeper connections to non-education fields.*** As discussed previously, relatively few graduates either come from or work in private-sector industries. If the center truly is to have a regional impact, it must strive to serve as many parts of the local economy as possible. To develop a better understanding of regional private sector needs, the center and its partners should continue to undertake industry-



specific semi-structured interviews and/or focus groups with potential students and employers in targeted private-sector industries. This assessment must result in a more diverse array of degree offerings, especially at the undergraduate level – an array that is more closely aligned with the region’s projected economic growth needs.

Fifth, the center’s partners could *intensify their relationships with the education field*. Educational professionals clearly are the center’s core constituency, and local educational systems therefore may be fertile recruiting grounds for additional students. Developing deeper ties to the educational field could be a logical way to increase enrollment numbers and bring more students into the center’s orbit.

Sixth, the center and its partners must *maintain a focus on incumbent adult workers*. The center clearly has succeeded in developing a model that serves adult learners well. The center and its partner colleges and universities must continue to address the needs of incumbent adult workers who currently have or are working towards earning the academic credentials needed to enroll in programs. This is especially critical since the recent launch of full-time, daytime undergraduate programs carries a risk of shifting the center’s attention away from adult learners to younger students.

8. Conclusion

The survey results suggest that the center has had a successful first five years. The core program elements appear to meet the needs of a segment of the region’s adult workforce, and the individuals who earn credentials are highly satisfied with the education and its personal and professional impacts. Nevertheless, questions regarding long-term impact and sustainability remain – questions that have taken on added importance with the economy’s 2008 slide into a recession. Addressing those questions is essential if the center is to build off the successes of its first five years and better connect students to economic opportunities in the Hickory region.





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