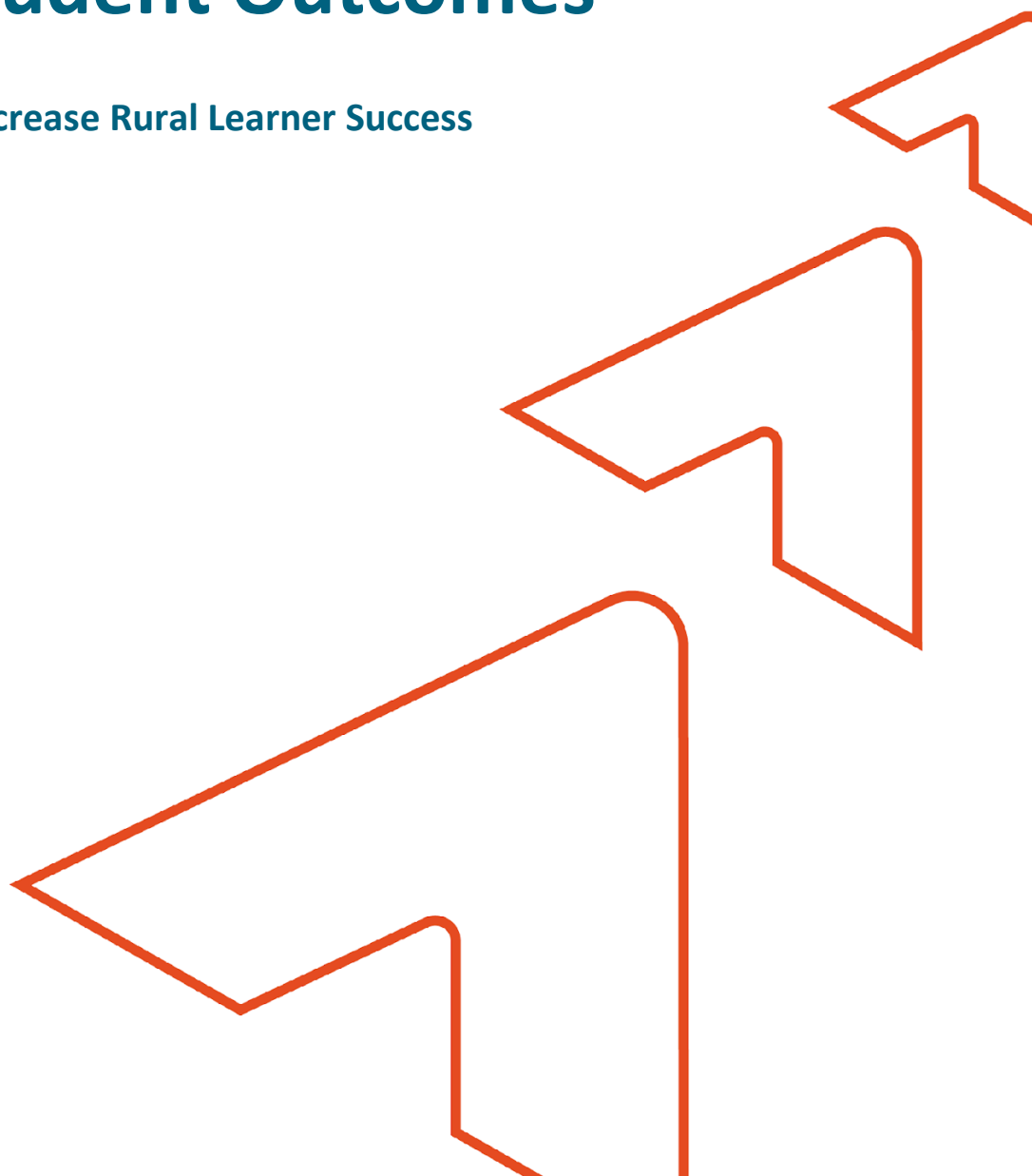


Project Summary

Rural College Leaders Program: Catalyzing Institutions to Improve Student Outcomes

Building Evidence to Increase Rural Learner Success



Rural College Leaders Program: Catalyzing Institutions to Improve Student Outcomes

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Rural college leaders are tireless innovators, yet they often do this critical work in isolation. The Rural College Leaders Program bridges the gap by providing a dedicated space for leaders to synthesize lessons and leverage data together, ensuring that the most innovative solutions for rural learners don’t just stay on one campus—they can reach every community.

– The Belk Center at NC State University

Project Overview

The Belk Center’s Rural College Leaders Program (RCLP) is a 3-year, cohort-based program that provides administrative leaders at 10 rural-serving community colleges in North Carolina with tools to support student enrollment, persistence, and completion. This project evaluated the impact of the RCLP by examining the efficacy of approaches used to help participants identify and prioritize gaps in student success outcomes; participants’ perceived benefits of RCLP convenings and other modes of engagement; and successes and challenges they faced when trying to implement RCLP learnings. The Belk Center also assessed the impact of newly implemented policies and practices on student enrollment and retention within the rural context.

Research Objectives Achieved

1. Determined the most effective approaches for helping rural college leaders identify and implement policies and practices that address the needs of rural, low-income, and adult students.
2. Identified which administrative leaders (e.g., executive, student success, institutional research) in the colleges are involved in prioritizing institutional needs through RCLP and which policy and practice changes were implemented as a result of RCLP participation.
3. Identified which Belk Center resources and supports (e.g., data coaches) are deemed most useful in driving institutional policy and practice change.
4. Assessed the effects of policy and practice changes on student enrollment and retention among the RCLP colleges.

5. Evaluated whether policy or practice changes improve enrollment or retention outcomes for students at these rural and rural-serving community colleges.

Research Methodology

The Belk Center at NC State used a mixed-methods approach to examine what elements of the RCLP facilitated change on campus and what the impacts of those changes were to student success. The team conducted interviews, focus groups, document reviews, and surveys to assess the Belk Center's methods for helping RCLP participants identify and prioritize specific areas for student success improvement. To measure the impact of newly implemented policies and practices on student enrollment and retention, the team analyzed administrative data from the North Carolina Community College System using difference-in-differences analysis to compare treatment and comparison groups before and after the policy was implemented. For this portion of the analysis, one of the RCLP colleges implemented condensed course scheduling at scale within one academic year, rather than piloting the program before scaling, a strategy used by the other institutions. This clear implementation timeframe offered an ideal context for a difference-in-differences analysis. A non-RCLP college, with similar characteristics in size, rurality, student composition, and geographical location had parallel trends in student retention, course success, and student withdrawal rates in prior years and served as a comparison institution for the analysis.

Key Findings

- Leaders at North Carolina community colleges often faced similar challenges in different local contexts. By utilizing a cohort-based model, the RCLP enabled rural community college leaders to engage in collaborative problem-solving and peer learning.
- RCLP participants were primarily vice presidents, deans, and directors, but they also included college presidents, associate deans, executive/assistant VPs, leaders in institutional research, and other support staff.
- Three significant policy and practice changes that were implemented as a result of RCLP were (a) condensed course scheduling, (b) contextualizing English gateway courses to the industrial programs, and (c) redesigning new student orientation to prioritize student belonging, flexibility, and timely information.
- Participating executive teams reported that having dedicated times and places to reflect and plan, with the support of data coaches and peer institution teams, were the most useful benefit of the RCLP.
- Participating colleges advanced student success by (a) leveraging institutional data to guide decisions, (b) fostering transparent communication with internal and external stakeholders, and (c) supporting cross-functional teams to plan, implement, and sustain change.
- Compressed course schedules (e.g., compressing a 16-week course into 8 weeks) show promise as a way to improve outcomes for rural community college students. After the launch of the "Great in 8" campaign, one college saw a 6% increase in both fall-to-spring retention and course passing rates. While withdrawal rates remained stable, this was likely due to external variables affecting data variance.

Implications and Recommendations for Policy and Practice

- **Cohort-based leadership development:** Cohort-based leadership programs improve student outcomes in rural community colleges when presidents are supportive and cross-functional executive teams participate. These efforts are strongest when leaders have protected time away from campus to reflect, plan, and collaborate with data coaches and peer institutions.

- **Innovative student-centered strategies:** Rural colleges can boost enrollment and course success by implementing tailored strategies such as compressed courses, redesigned onboarding, and contextualized general education classes. These approaches align learning with students’ program interests and real-world applications.
- **Building data capacity:** Strengthening colleges’ ability to use student data through staff training, external coaching, and broader data access enables more stakeholders to identify gaps and design targeted interventions. A democratized data approach supports continuous improvement and regular progress monitoring toward student success goals.
- **Transparent and inclusive communication:** Improving student outcomes requires open, honest, and responsive communication with students, faculty, staff, and partners. Leaders who actively listen and clearly show how feedback informs decisions build trust, shared ownership, and a culture of engagement.
- **Strategic support for change:** Rural leaders benefit from assembling cross-functional teams and investing in professional development to drive change aligned with institutional priorities. Flexibility in implementation helps teams respond to student needs and sustain long-term, collaborative progress.
- **Early and broad stakeholder engagement:** Cohort-based programs should support leaders in engaging faculty, staff, and students early to build buy-in and shared ownership. Proactive collaboration with K–12 systems and local employers strengthens alignment and helps sustain improvements across the broader educational and workforce ecosystem.

Resources

For more information on this project, please see:

- <https://belk-center.ced.ncsu.edu/rural-postsecondary-practices-partnership/>
- [Redesigning The New Student Onboarding Experience](#) (2025)
- [Catalyzing Change Through Innovation: Insights from the Rural College Leaders Program](#) (2025)
- [Rural College Leaders Program: Supporting Rural Student Success Through Cohort-based Leadership Development](#) (2024)
- [Responding to Rural Community College Student Needs through “Be Great in 8”](#) (2024)
- [Building Momentum Toward Degree Attainment through Contextualized English Courses](#) (2024)