



Since its founding in 1927, the University of North Carolina Asheville has been proud to call Buncombe County home. The enviable location of our 360-acre campus, nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains and in the largest metropolitan area of Western North Carolina, expands the four walls of our classrooms and offers exceptional opportunities for hands-on learning. We are deeply committed to providing access to educational experiences that directly address regional issues and to clear pathways for impactful careers.

We offer a top-flight mechatronics program, only one of five of its kind in the nation, where our students earn an undergraduate engineering degree in partnership with NC State. Our new master's in public health program, created in conjunction with the UNC Chapel Hill Gillings School of Public Health, addresses critical health force needs in WNC. Our New Media program, one of the fastest-growing majors on campus, brings together art, design, engineering, and cutting-edge digital technology. Our acclaimed STEAM studio provides students and community members with access to and training on a wide array of technologies and tools.

UNC Asheville students have a clear advantage in professional preparation as well. Our pre-med program is a leading reason some of our top students choose UNC Asheville, because they know they will be exceptionally well prepared for medical school and other health fields. In 2020, all our students applying to medical school were accepted at their first-choice school. The opportunity to conduct research and work with advanced instrumentation often reserved for graduate programs makes our undergraduate students highly competitive in graduate programs across STEM fields. The technology driving our programs provides a clear edge for students in the digital humanities, mass communications, and the social sciences.

From a business perspective, I would add that UNC Asheville is also an engaged and enthusiastic neighbor that drives over \$500 million in economic impact each year. Our championship NCAA Division I Athletics Program brings thousands of fans and enthusiastic sports camp participants to campus every year. The Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) provides educational and service opportunities to retirees and is a leading reason many choose Buncombe County as a retirement destination. And our students are already working across the region in internships at many of our leading businesses and non-profit organizations.

UNC Asheville works hard to strike the perfect balance between thought-force and workforce, between a rigorous liberal arts foundation and career preparation. We ensure that every student has high-impact educational opportunities that prepare them for the jobs they will want throughout their careers – and for careers that don't yet exist and which they may themselves create. These high-impact practices include things like undergraduate research and creative activity, public- and private-sector internships, capstone courses, and study abroad – all of which provide exceptional preparation for lives of consequence and innovation.

Our motto is "Levo Oculos Meos In Montes," which translates to "I lift my eyes to the mountains." For UNC Asheville, these words remind us that we should always look up, look ahead, and look to the innovations of the future, fueled by this amazing location that expands our classrooms far beyond the footprint of our beautiful campus.



Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kimberly van Noort". The signature is fluid and cursive, written in a professional style.

Kimberly van Noort
Interim Chancellor



Its economy thrives with national companies, homegrown businesses and tourism.

While Asheville and Buncombe County are beloved by tourists who provide a huge economic impact, the county's economic narrative has two more storylines: big, national companies choosing western North Carolina for manufacturing sites and entrepreneurs excelling locally and nationally.

"When talking about economic development, my mind goes to two extremes," says Clark Duncan, senior vice president of economic development at Asheville's Chamber of Commerce. One is the changing economic landscape of western North Carolina.

"This current fiscal year, we just had the ribbon cutting of the Pratt & Whitney turbine airfoil manufacturing plant, the largest investment west of Charlotte, at \$650 million and 800 new jobs. That's a scale of project we aren't used to winning out here in the west."

P&W wages, he says, will average \$68,500 annually, higher than the county average of \$40,000.

"They're 250 hires in on the way to their 800 and probably will employ 1,000 to 1,500 in due time," Duncan said in mid-June. Manufacturing, healthcare and leisure and hospitality are key economic drivers, with Mission Health

employing more than 1,000 and top manufacturers including Eaton (electrical and components), Continental Teves, (transportation manufacturing), GE (electrical, appliance and components) and BorgWarner Turbo Systems.

Then, the other extreme is the success of small start-ups. "Venture Asheville [an entrepreneurship initiative] is an intentional effort started about 10 years ago to diversify our strategy and grow our own. Call it economic gardening," Duncan says. "That 10-year trajectory has passed really significant milestones. In April, we put out a release that says our startups have exceeded more than \$100 million in revenue.

"The common thread is it's a region that champions economic development. It has a common goal, a shared goal across the region, across the communities and a lot of teamwork to make things happen."

Homegrown Success

The Economic Development Coalition's board launched Venture Asheville in 2015 as part of its "AVL 5X5 Strategic Plan," which laid out directives to add 5,000 new jobs and \$500 million in capital investments. As of April, its mentorship-based incubator, Elevate, had raised upward of \$50 million in capital

and generated more than \$100 million in revenue. It has served more than 70 Asheville-headquartered start-ups that have created more than 360 jobs with wages averaging \$78,000 a year.

"In the world of entrepreneurship, success often hinges on the ability to navigate complex and rapidly changing environments," says director Jeff Kaplan. "At Elevate, we believe that mentorship, experiential learning and competency assessments are essential tools for founders seeking to build resilient and sustainable businesses. Investing in this community of founders is a smart long-term strategy, as these entrepreneurs will become our region's future philanthropists, civic leaders and possibly elected officials."

One company that grew through Venture Asheville's Elevate incubator is Poppy Handcrafted Popcorn.

Company founder Ginger Frank started Poppy in 2014 as a one-woman show. She now employs 45, has more than 30 flavors, and her Parmesan & Black Pepper variety ranked No. 1 of all bagged popcorns by Tasting Table, a popular website for food and beverage connoisseurs.

"Venture Asheville came along at a very pivotal point in the Poppy journey. I didn't even know VA existed and Josh



Ginger Frank, owner of Poppy's Hand Crafted Popcorn

Dorfman reached out to me in 2017," Frank says. "After joining VA, I was assigned an incredible team of mentors: Robert Anoff, Dawn Walker, John Forrester, John Bernard. This group of volunteers jumped in with me with both feet. They offered advice, helped me carve out direction, provided connections to financial resources, helped me solve problems, even showed up at times to help fix machinery or fill orders."

In mid-June, Frank announced a \$4.3-million investment to double Poppy's

manufacturing space with 45,000-square-foot of new production facilities and the creation of 66 jobs in the next five years. Wages will be \$26.40 per hour.

Venture Asheville and the camaraderie of entrepreneurs helped guide her success. She credits Kaplan, the organization's director, for helping build that sense of community and being a confidence builder and source of wisdom as each entity grows. Frank and other entrepreneurs started a peer mentorship group that has grown from five members to more than 30.

"While we're all at different stages, we know where to turn if we need advice or guidance," she says. "We truly want to see each other succeed. We are each other's biggest fans."

Buncombe County's list of growing and big businesses includes many breweries, which make up the largest employer within the manufacturing sector, according to Duncan.

The Asheville-Metro Breweries Industry saw a 357% increase in jobs from 2014 to 2019, the largest increase among manufacturers in the Asheville area. In 2019, the industry had a \$935 million

overall total economic impact. Its 3,471 jobs pay an average annual salary of \$51,844, according to research done for the Economic Development Council.

David and Christina Ackely's entrepreneurial journey was also guided by Venture Asheville and Elevate. After living in Panama, where they discovered ginger beer and a way to make it themselves, they returned to the United States and started showcasing their product at homebrew festivals. In 2015, the couple officially incorporated their beverage and Ginger's Revenge opened in 2017. Now, it employs 23, is brewed in batches of 472 gallons at a time and is distributed to more than 650 locations in North Carolina, South Carolina and Ohio. Ginger's Revenge has four year-round flavors and small-batch seasonal varieties.

Education gearing up for Pratt & Whitney

Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College's Manufacturing Center announced in February it was accepting applications for its free Pratt & Whitney Fast Track training program, designed to put county residents into full-time aerospace manufacturing jobs.


"We have been preparing for this important step for several years through new equipment acquisitions, adding key staff members, and developing training curricula," Kevin Kimrey, A-B Tech's director of economic and workforce development says in a release. The Appalachian Regional Commission awarded the college two \$1.5 million grants for technical equipment purchases for specialized Pratt & Whitney training. The commission is an economic development partnership that exists to strengthen economic growth in 423 counties in 13 states across Appalachia.

A-B Tech training areas include: introduction to lean manufacturing, work instructions, communication skills, employer expectations, shop math, problem solving, team building, computer skills and online learning modules.


This is just one example of how area community colleges cater training programs to employers' needs.

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Together, we are more.

PHOTO COURTESY OF GINGER FRANK, OWNER OF POPPY'S HANDCRAFTED POPCORN

Part of the plan

The "AVL 5x5 Strategic Plan" has five areas of focus: nurture local growth in sectors with a homegrown competitive advantage; recruit new growth; fast-track startups; integrate and strengthen workforce systems; develop industrial sites and buildings.

The 2020-2025 outline is the plan's third cycle. It also is targeting growing and recruiting in five employment sectors: advanced manufacturing (automotive, aerospace, food and beverage), life sciences (biotech and medical devices), climate technology, outdoor products and office/information technology.

The EDC plans to conduct retention interviews, consult companies about such things as expansion, recruiting workforce and financial needs, and visit at least one national headquarters a year for companies that have branch offices in Buncombe.

The report notes: "We find a strong positive correlation between the employment rates of adults who live in a tract and rates of upward mobility for children who grow up there. Evidently, what predicts upward mobility is not

proximity to jobs, but growing up around people who have jobs. ... Research is making it clear: If we want better outcomes for our next-generation residents, we must work to provide jobs to their parents and neighbors."

"For the west, it really is about attracting the next generation and the technological state of our workforce," Duncan says. "We are one of those regions that lags behind the rest of the state in a wage perspective, so that's the highest priority of our coalition – mobility and career paths that will sustain us for the next several generations. Our automotive and aerospace sectors and our entrepreneurship really speak to our innovation."

The AVL 2015-2020 report notes the EDC and its partners assisted in attracting three new companies, eight expansions and 1,180 direct jobs, with an investment total of \$198.9 million.

"We have a very specific focus. We have always been a low-unemployment market, and in the five years going into 2020 we had the lowest unemployment in all 100 counties," Duncan says. "That also speaks to a tighter market. So, we

want to, number one, grow our economic participation, and two, create partnerships to bring more people into economic opportunities. When I say that, I'm talking about populations that are typically disconnected, whether through poverty, substance abuse or re-entering the economic picture from justice involvement. We see great value in fast-tracking those individuals to high-wage employment opportunities.

"We're really focusing on growing those pipelines and bringing more people into western North Carolina's success."

Getting there and living there

With business growth comes the need for more housing, health care and transportation. Buncombe County has several projects in the works.

The YMCA of Asheville and First Baptist Church of Asheville are collaborating on Project Aspire, a proposed 10-acre mixed-use and mixed-income development that would serve as the "gateway to downtown Asheville," according to a release. Greenville, South

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Buncombe County
Manufacturers gather at
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OUT AND ABOUT

Things to do around Buncombe County:



ARDEN

Named for the Forest of Arden from the Shakespeare comedy "As You Like It." Your to-do list includes visiting Lake Julian Park for fishing, paddle boats and fishing.

BILTMORE FOREST

Located between the Biltmore Estate, Blue Ridge Parkway and the City of Asheville. In December, its 100th Anniversary Committee will host trolley rides through town.



BLACK MOUNTAIN

Hike the 4.8-mile Graybeard Trail to the sixth-highest peak [2,400 feet] in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Play the Donald Ross-designed golf course. Visit downtown for the eateries, Black Mountain Center for the Arts and Lake Tomahawk, with a half-mile hiking loop around the water.



MONTREAT

Home of Montreat College, an independent, Christ-centered four-year liberal arts institution. The town of Montreat has about 700 residents and 4,000 acres of land, the Billy Graham Conference Center at the Cove is open for tours.



Carolina-based developers Furman Company will begin construction in late 2024 if the project is approved by Asheville City Council. The master plan shows Project Aspire going up between Central Avenue, Woodfin Street and Charlotte Avenue.

The church and YMCA have had plans for about five years to create a walkable urban village, according to First Baptist senior pastor Mack Dennis.

"We were able to confide in them about our own big dreams, and then we decided that we could really do a lot more together than we could do respectfully on our own," Dennis says in a press release.

Twelve miles from downtown, Asheville Regional Airport is steadily growing to serve the Asheville-Buncombe County metro area's 450,000 residents and its many visitors.

The airport authority's recent request for \$175 million in transportation revenue bonds was approved by the N.C. Local Government Commission, making way for the second phase of construction to expand from a single-story, seven-gate terminal to a two-story, 12-gate building. The airport serves six airlines: Allegiant, American, Delta, JetBlue, Sun Country and United. With 25 domestic and international destinations, it's the third-busiest airport in North Carolina, according to a release from the N.C. Department of State Treasurer. Asheville Regional served 1.8 million passengers in 2022.

The region's healthcare is ever growing, too. AdventHealth has proposed developing a \$254 million, 67-bed hospital in the Candler area, 20 miles west of Asheville. It's projected to be completed in 2025.

The facility, to be named AdventHealth Asheville, will also have a cesarean section operating room and five procedure rooms. Last November, AdventHealth, Mission and Novant each submitted bids to bring a new project to the area, with AdventHealth winning approval from the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services. ■

— Kathy Blake is a freelance writer from eastern North Carolina



THE MOUNTAINS ARE CALLING

Along with natural wonders, themed hotels and local food are additional tourism lures.

Buncombe County's mountains, abundance of arts galleries, varied culinary experiences, music scene and historical buildings are tourism magnets. The N.C. Department of Commerce reports Buncombe ranked second in N.C. traveler expenditures in 2021, with visitors dropping \$2.6 billion. (Mecklenburg County ranked first.)

The Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority recently announced a new course for tourism that "includes the adoption of strategic imperatives that are informing and guiding the direction of Explore Asheville's program of work and community investments," according to a release.

The five 'strategic imperatives' touch on sustainable growth, safe and responsible travel, engaging more diverse audiences, promoting and supporting Asheville's creative spirit and running a healthy and effective organization.

Cass Herrington with Explore Asheville says a trend for 2023 is to promote group travel experiences and places for parties to stay that "foster meaningful connections and integrate wellness into their corporate and event travel itineraries."

"Asheville is known as one of the most

colorful fall destinations in the nation, and one of the longest leaf seasons in the world due to the biodiversity combined with staggered color change at different mountain elevations," she says. "This is a great time to take in the scenes with trail running, hiking, mountain biking and forest bathing."

Theme hotels such as The Flat Iron (prohibition-themes, with hidden speakeasy), The Radical (also with speakeasy) and Zelda Dearest (as in novelist Zelda Fitzgerald, wife of F. Scott Fitzgerald) are on the list for group experiences. Wrong Way Cabins & Campground, which opened in 2022 with 16 tiny A-frame cabins near the French Broad River, is another addition to the lodging mix.

Herrington points to Wrong Way River Lodge & Cabins, on the French Broad River. "It's one of the few rivers in the world that flows north, thus inspiring the 'wrong way' moniker," she says. "The riverside accommodation is a first-of-its-kind lodging option that combines the casual nostalgia of a campground with hotel conveniences."

Destinations for animal enthusiasts include Mountain Horse Farm, Montgomery Sky Farm and Dr. King's Farms.

Outdoor activities are a big focus, she says, with 2023 being Buncombe's 'Year of the Trail,' touting its proximity to state parks. Outdoor tour company Asheville Wellness Tours has several guided experiences for groups.

Foodies have continued reasons to treat their palates in Asheville. The area offers popular farm tours, farm-to-table restaurants and the NC Green Travel Initiative, which "recognizes North Carolina restaurants (and other businesses) who go above and beyond to reduce their carbon 'forkprint.'" Cheese enthusiasts love the WNC Cheese Trail, which pairs western North Carolina cheeses with wineries as well as the Blue Ridge Mountain Creamery and Round Mountain Creamery.

"Asheville during the fall season is more than colorful leaves and stunning mountain vistas," Herrington says. "Shaped and nurtured by nature, Asheville speaks to the growing number of travelers seeking to authentically connect with the natural world and the local community." ■

— *Kathy Blake is a freelance writer from eastern North Carolina*