



# PAPER CHASE

From certificates to diplomas, N.C. colleges, universities offer abundant possibilities.

Above | Pitt Community College welding program; Cloud Infrastructure class at Wake Technical Community College

North Carolina has 58 community colleges and 68 four-year institutions, including 16 public universities. Nearly every acre of the state's 100 counties is within a 30-minute drive of a campus of higher learning, according to the N.C. Community Colleges System.

Course options accommodate students' individual needs – class combos with a side of financial assistance, employer-paid skill-enhancement, remote and work-based learning, and connections to MBAs and doctorates.

"What's disappearing from the picture is someone graduating from high school, then getting a job that has a good career attached to it (without further studies)," says Anthony Clarke, president of Guilford Technical Community College, which has six campuses in the Triad. "Our apprentice programs prepare students to work in good-paying technical jobs, and once they start, they can get a bachelor's degree and go into management or leadership. Once you get in, for the first job on your career path, you can build from there. That first job is not the end; it's the start."

Industry needs evolve rapidly, says East Carolina University Chief Innovation and Engagement Officer Sharon Paynter. "While the traditional path to a university still works for many, there are others with drive and the potential who may not have the option of pursuing the standard educational journey," she says. "Also consider professionals who followed a career path but are now faced with gaps in skills due to advances in technology or processes. The continuing education options ECU offers allow professionals to progress in their expertise and capacity while on the job, offer field-specific upskilling and provide non-traditional pathways to degrees that ultimately strengthens our workforce."

"In today's ever-changing job market, advancing skills and education is more critical than ever," says Pooneh Lari of NC State's Department of Educational Leadership, Policy and Human Development, and assistant teaching professor and program coordinator for the M.Ed. in Training and Development / Adult & Lifelong Education. "Professionals seeking to stay

competitive and advance their careers must continually update their knowledge and capabilities."

Scott Ralls, president of Wake Technical Community College, calls it "laddering up," or ladder economics.

"It's not how many programs you put out there but how you connect the rungs on that ladder, how you can move up," he says, "and with us, it's our four-year partners. Every one of our degree programs has a four-year partner. You can start in high school, or you can start as an adult. Our programs are stackable, meaning they can lead to different certifications along the way."

## WHAT'S OUT THERE

High school graduates and adults returning for personal goals, through employer-financed upskill or for higher certifications and degrees have multiple choices.

Wake Tech's Propel – free, accelerated Workforce Continuing Education (WCE) courses in biotechnology, business, construction and maintenance, healthcare, hospitality, IT, public safety and

transportation – and WakeWorks, a school-county partnership for technical workers training; NC State’s Continuing and Lifelong Education (NCSCaLE) and ELPHD; Guilford Tech’s FAME (Federation for Advanced Manufacturing Education, a side entity of Toyota) and GAP (Guilford Apprentice Partnership) and others match careers with curriculums.

NC State’s continuing education sector, which marked its 100th anniversary in August, has newly-added artificial intelligence and cyber security paths. Top fields of study include data science, data analytics, human resource management and AI-powered tools like Copilot for Windows, an evolving switch from a decade ago when enrollment leaned toward graphic design and Excel training. The school partners with local manufacturers and others, who enroll employees in non-credit certificate courses.

Industry relevance in adult learning is also noted in master’s courses.

“The upward trend in working professionals enrolling in our training and development master’s program is a testament to the value placed on continuous learning and professional development,” Lari says. “Many professionals recognize that a master’s degree can significantly enhance their career prospects, offering opportunities for advancement and higher salaries.”

## PAYING FOR IT

The College Foundation of N.C. outlines more than 100 aid and scholarship options.

Its FELS (Forgivable Education Loans for Services) path targets critical employment shortage professions (such as rural-area nurses); N.C. Student Assist Loans bridge the gap between financial aid packages and total costs.

High school grads have the required FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid), and Next NC, which combines a federal Pell Grant with state-funded financial aid to provide a minimum of \$3,000 to any North

Carolina community college and \$5,000 to any of the 16 four-year public universities, based on income.

“Ten years ago, 98% of parents wanted their kid to go to a four-year college, then get a job. Now only 50% of parents feel that way,” says Ralls. “Part of the reason is that what we think of as traditional college has become way too expensive. For many students, when they come out, they’re still struggling and unemployed and can’t get that first job.

“We have low tuition, and for many students our growing trend is that they start jobs while they’re going to college. That’s the new norm, especially with programs such as automotive and biopharma.”



## THE INDUSTRIES OF NC

In the past few years, North Carolina has seen large investments in aerospace and aviation, automotive via Toyota and VinFast, and biotechnology and pharmaceuticals, among others. N.C. Edge is the customized training program that collaborates with the N.C. Community Colleges to help all-size businesses’ employees “master new technologies, keep pace with business trends and unlock their potential,” according to the website, through business-specific training in advanced manufacturing, aerospace, automotive, biotech and pharma, business and financial, IT,

food processing, textiles, furniture and distribution.

“There are a lot of opportunities, but you’ve got to sell it,” Clarke says. “This is where you start; this is where you can end up. We continually work with Guilford County Schools, the private schools, the home schools. We can pull in a bunch of things – construction, healthcare, public safety – and there’s the challenge of finding workers across these industries. We can help them, their families and the state. It’s a good thing, overall.”

Wake Tech, North Carolina’s largest community college, serves more than 70,000 adults annually, in addition to incoming freshmen. “Most have some

inkling when they come in of what they want to do. We have more than 250 degree programs and 1,000 training programs,” Ralls says. “They may say ‘healthcare,’ but then there’s nursing, or imaging or other healthcare areas. So you have to let them explore. We have Care Teams in 13 different career areas, and a 14th for veterans. Over time, they become aware of the companies that are out there, and we make it as easy as possible to hire Wake Tech students.”

“Our Training and Development department has an advisory board that is composed of expert leaders from different industries in the Triangle who help us keep our master’s program aligned with industry trends,” Lari says.

“Our Master of Education in Training and Development (M.Ed.) program is designed to equip working professionals with the knowledge and skills necessary to lead and innovate in the fields of workforce training and development. Our curriculum covers essential areas such as instructional design, adult learning theories, training delivery methods and evaluation techniques.

“The T&D program offers support to our students in job placement assistance, resume workshops and interview preparation. Our graduates are highly sought after by employers in various sectors including corporate training, higher education, healthcare and government.”

In March, ECU joined with the Institute for Defense and Business for customized continued education and leadership development for military, government and industry leaders. Programs are offered through ECU’s Office of Continuing and Professional

Education and in consultation with ECU’s Office of National Security and Industry Initiatives.

## STEP BY STEP

According to EducationNC and Lumina Foundation study data from 2022, 54.4% of working-age adults in North Carolina earned a post-secondary degree or credential, the highest increase being in certificates.

Wake Tech’s ladder economics is the promotion of economic mobility through education and workforce training courses that foster career upgrades and salary gains, such as the climb from certifications and licensures, to an associate degree, to a bachelor’s and master’s or doctorate.

Wake Tech’s laddering “rungs” include: foothold training through Propel, short-term workforce training courses that lead to industry certifications; aligned dual enrollment, a Career and College Promise path

for high school students; stackable credentials, which give specific training in larger categories such as a commercial wiring certificate with an electrical systems technology degree; work-based learning, for degree credit through on-the-job experience and WakeWorks apprenticeships; strategic workforce transfer, through pairings with four-year schools in the UNC System; and degree-plus skills, advanced training in fields such as biotechnology and IT.

## BUILDINGS AND APPRENTICESHIPS

In Winterville, Pitt Community College’s welding program, the largest in the state, soon will be housed in a 30,000-square-foot facility, to be completed in 2025. The building will have 96 welding booths and space for robotic instruction, says John Carrere, director of the office of recruitment and first-year experience at PCC.

Pitt is the eighth-largest community college in the state, with 18,000 curriculum and continuing ed students in 2022–23.

In July, Guilford Tech announced groundbreaking in 2025 on a \$55.8 million, 100,000-square-foot aviation training center at its Cameron Campus near Piedmont Triad International Airport, with Phase 1 opening in January 2027. “We’re in the design phase right now. It will allow us to consolidate all our aviation training in one location,” Clarke says, “and focus more on providing for the aviation partnerships.”

The college works with Boom Supersonic at PTI, and with Marshall and C-130s for the military, Honda Aircraft, HAECO and FedEx. “We have more than 400 students and we’re looking to expand to over 600. We’re a key partner with PTI, and they do rely on us to provide the right skills they’re looking for.”

Guilford Tech started its Toyota-supported FAME avenue in August 2023.

“When Toyota opens a plant, FAME comes along. When they opened in Kentucky (the assembly

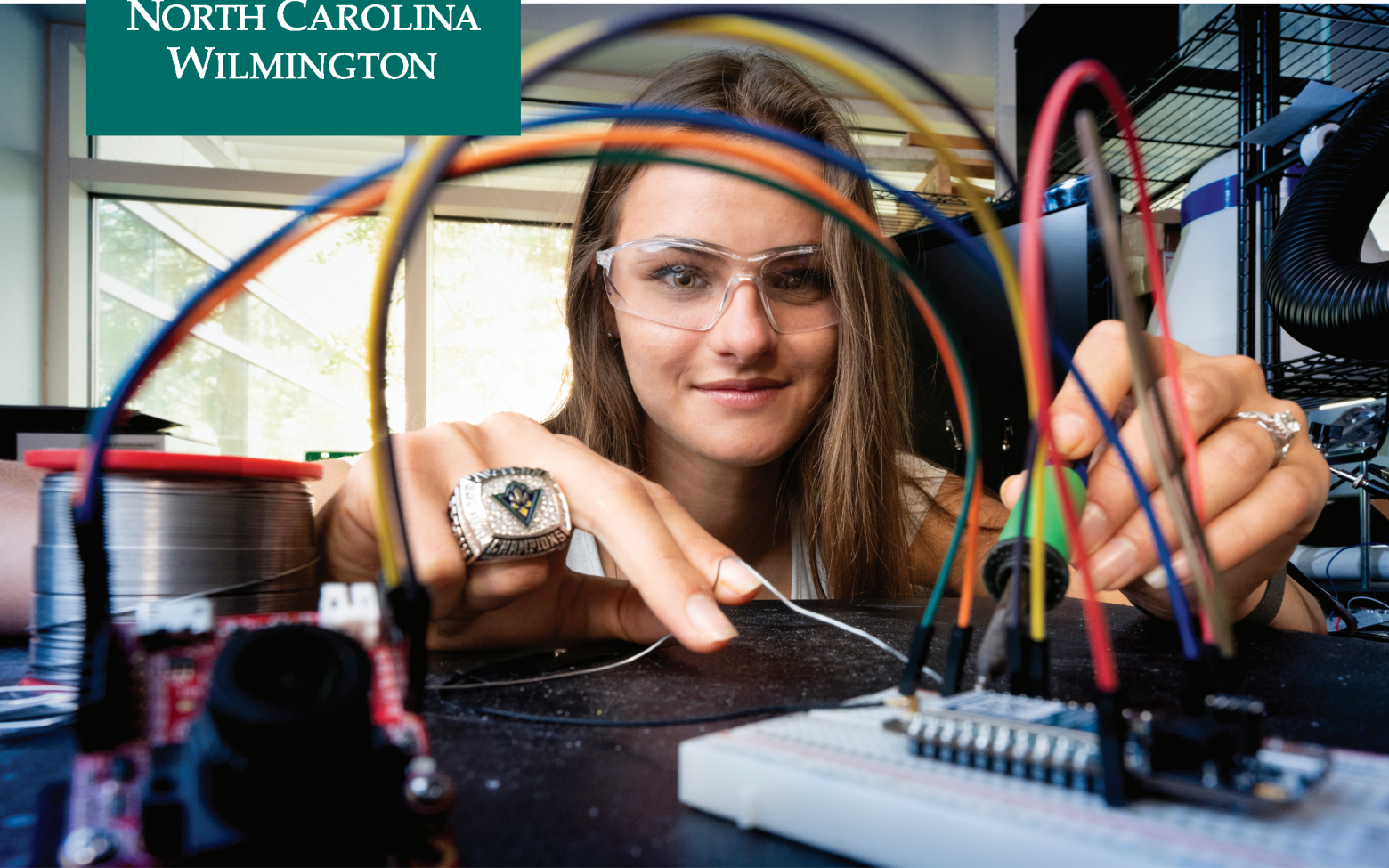
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## CAMPUS CLOSE-UPS

**Appalachian State University in Boone:** The university has more than 150 degree programs, 80 graduate programs, 36 graduate certificates and two doctoral programs (psychology and education). Its Cratis D. Williams School of Graduate studies' enrollment tops 2,000.

**Campbell University in Buies Creek:** The private Christian university in Harnett County, north of Fayetteville, has online certificate programs, eight different eight-week accelerated associate degrees, 23 bachelor programs and two master's programs. Most are available online and at its Camp Lejeune and Fort Liberty campuses (military discount available.)

**Catawba College in Salisbury:** The school has an 11-1 student-to-faculty ratio, average class size of 13 and more than 70 academic programs. Students in each program can participate in



Guildford Technical Community College, Jamestown

plant in Georgetown), they had a FAME," he says. "We have about 13 students who are apprentices, or FAME students, going into their second year, and we have 29 more who are starting their first year in this advanced manufacturing technology apprenticeship program."

The college's GAP program lets students work paid apprenticeships for local companies. They're paid for on-the-job time as well as time spent

in class. "It started as manufacturing-based, with different companies in the Triad, and it's expanded to include HVAC, accounting, IT," Clarke says. "We're bringing in about 50 new apprenticeships in GAP."

ECU's Eastern Region Pharma Center in its Life Sciences and Biotechnology building, which opened in 2021, is supported through Golden Leaf and partners with 15 pharmaceutical companies in workforce development.



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micro-internships in which businesses hire personnel to meet short-term project needs or alleviate staff shortages. The college's career database uses Handshake, a platform to connect with careers, internships and businesses.

**Central Piedmont Community College in Charlotte:** In partnership with Ed2Go, CPCC has online open enrollment programs to help students acquire skills for professional level positions in nine fields, including computer science, information technology and teacher professional development.

**ECU in Greenville:** Bestcolleges.com notes that ECU has 69 master's programs. STEM programs are the most in-demand. ECU is an educational partner with the N.C. Economic Development Association, with a certification program for developers, elected officials, business leaders and others. Its School of Dental Medicine has state-of-the-art learning halls,

simulation labs, patient clinics, clinical research areas, and faculty and administrative offices.

**Fayetteville State University:** The college has 12 online degree programs, and 50% of students are age 24 or older. Its four main areas are business and economics; education; health, science and technology; and humanities and social sciences. FSU offers Military Tuition Assistance.

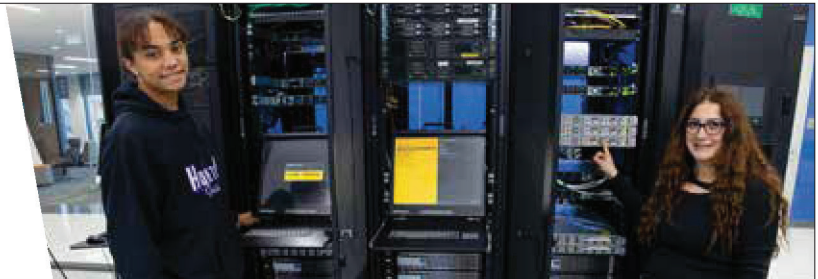
**N.C. A&T State University in Greensboro:** Selected as the nation's No. 1 public HBCU in 2019 by *U.S. News & World Report*, the school offers 58 undergraduate degree programs, 18 minors, 13 doctoral degrees, 36 master's and 41 graduate certificates.

**NC State University in Raleigh:** NCSCaLE's customized training caters to a range of employers such as recent collaborations with Hitachi Energy, a project management program for the town of Cary and a leadership

program for DHHS. ELPHD credentials include master of education or master of science in adult and community college education, graduate certificate program in teaching, training and educational technology and a Ph.D. in educational leadership, policy and human development with specialization in adult and lifelong education.

**Pitt Community College in Winterville:** "Pitt Community College awards associate degrees, diplomas and certificates in more than 80 programs of study," Carrere says. "It also provides adult basic education and literacy training, English Language Acquisition courses, small business assistance, customized training for business and industry, workforce development classes and personal enrichment courses. Combined, PCC offers more than 280 credentials through curriculum and continuing education programming."

Graduates from the University Transfer programs who receive an



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associate's degree in arts, science or engineering are eligible to enroll in any four-year university to add a bachelor's degree. Pitt has "additional program-transfer agreements with colleges such as Fayetteville State, Elizabeth City State, ECU, and N.C. A&T," Carrere says.

"Our associate of applied science degree in biotechnology prepares students for work as laboratory technicians and allows students to save time and money if they are interested in completing a two-year associate degree in biotechnology," Carrere says. "Our continuing education program offers a BioWorks certificate that can be completed in one semester. Our cosmetology program offers preparation for licensure in just one year, and we offer real estate pre- and post-licensure classes in online, hybrid and remote format, as well as auto dealer licensing preparation programs."

**UNC Wilmington:** For the eighth-consecutive year, UNCW is mentioned in *Fiske Guide to Colleges*, which notes UNCW's "strong programs, including marine biology, chemistry, ecology, film studies, creative writing, nursing, business administration and communication studies," according to the college website. Its CSURF (Center for the Support of Undergraduate Research and Fellowships) supports "advising, providing funding, supporting travel to conferences, programming and more" to help students seeking national and international fellowships.

### 'ALWAYS REACHABLE'

"Getting an associate's degree and a high-paying job can lead to a great career," Clarke says. "But you have to have the mindset that it's sort of a new start. You don't get your degree and you're done. It's the start of your career, and you can build from there."

"It's important to see the ladder going up," says Ralls, "and you can go as high as you want to. You can always see the next rung, and the next rung is always reachable." ■

— Kathy Blake is a writer from eastern North Carolina.




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# REPORT CARD

## Putting N.C.'s higher education system to work.

High school students, and adults wanting to further their education, have numerous options in North Carolina's community colleges and universities, paper trails of certificates and diplomas for industry specific training, executive education, bachelor's and MBAs, many available in-person and online.

"It's really about connecting programs vertically for career mobility," says Wake Technical Community College President Scott Ralls. "There's a place for everyone to start."

Some examples:

BHUSHAN DESAI

**Bhushan Desai** is executive director of operations at Eli Lilly in the Research Triangle Park. He immigrated from India in 2006, enrolled in Wake Tech that fall and graduated in 2008 with an associate of science degree.

"The institution was crucial not only for my academic growth but also for providing stability as an 18-year-old navigating a new country," he says. "Wake Tech also offered me the opportunity to apply for and be selected for the Carolina Student Transfer Excellence Program."

C-STEP partners with 14 N.C. community colleges, focuses on associates of arts and associates of science degrees and has GPA requirements.

Desai started classes at UNC Chapel Hill in 2008 and graduated in 2010 with a degree in biochemistry. At Wake Tech, he had multiple jobs and served as public information officer for the Student Government Association.

"The ladder of educational opportunities provided a solid foundation for my personal and professional growth. The academic curriculum at college equipped me with a robust understanding of my field, essential for tackling complex problems in my career," he says.

A Brookings Institute report notes that between 2020 and 2022, life sciences companies committed to invest \$9.1 billion and create 12,500 jobs across N.C., many in biopharmaceutical manufacturing.

Desai has advice for those considering that career path.

"Embrace curiosity and explore. This industry beautifully blends science, business and exceptional people," he says. "We have the chance to work toward a common goal that profoundly changes lives for the better — an immensely rewarding endeavor. Additionally, this field offers a wide array of career opportunities, including technical roles, quality assurance, quality control, engineering, human resources and manufacturing operations."



DEREK WILLIAMS

**Derek Williams** knows about stackable credentials.

He graduated from Duke University in 2011 with a degree in sociology and certificate in markets and management studies. He then earned two business analytics certificates, in marketing analytics and business intelligence, from Wake Tech while simultaneously working at the Rural Economic Development Center as a program manager and overseeing a \$2.1 million micro-loan fund. His employer paid for several classes in the business analytics program.

He returned to school at UNC's Kenan-Flager Business School and graduated in 2018 with an MBA in management consulting and entrepreneurship while interning at Triangle Angel Partners and a venture capital fund in Durham, IDEA Fund Partners.

"While working at the Rural Center, I knew I wanted more of a business background," he says. "I was interested in data and learning how to properly dig into it to identify trends and the story within the data. It would be a useful skill to me while managing a loan portfolio of small business loans. This led me to taking the Wake Tech business analytics classes. After completing those classes and a couple of more years at the Rural Center, I kept moving forward to pursue my MBA."

His words to prospective students: "If you can combine technical skills with your academic knowledge or learn new skills that will supplement your practical work experience, you'll greatly benefit."

"New, refined skills add to your value as an employee, or business owner, and enhance your ability to understand multiple areas of industry, general business and the broader economy. Take advantage of evening and weekend programs at the community college, or those sponsored by your employer. Simply put, enhance your value and make sure employers, or clients, will need and want you working for them."



JAYLON MARTIN

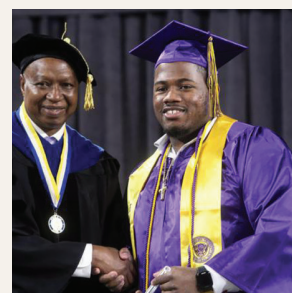
Jaylon Martin graduated from Fuquay-Varina High School and started at Wake Tech in 2020, majoring in mechanical engineering technology. His degree allowed him to transfer to East Carolina University's industrial technology program and, in 2022, using online and in-person classes at Wake Tech's Raleigh campus, he became Wake Tech's first student to receive a bachelor's degree in industrial technology from ECU. His employer, RoviSys, provided tuition assistance.

"I didn't want to have to commute to Greenville or to move there," Martin says. "It worked out perfectly with ECU."

Martin's career ladder has one more rung. He's been accepted into ECU's master's program and hopes to advance with RoviSys.

"I'm looking to grow within that company," he says. ■

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



PHOTOS COURTESY OF WAKE TECH AND DEREK WILLIAMS

# Freedom to pursue Your Dreams

Meet Chaundra Roberson, a dedicated professional who's transforming her career with the BioWork Certificate program at Pitt Community College. Chaundra knew that to open new doors and expand her opportunities, she needed a program that combined cutting-edge science with practical skills. That's why she chose BioWork. This certificate is not just about learning—it's about advancing in her current role and making an impact in her field, offering skills that set her apart in the job market and provide opportunities for career advancement.

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