

North Carolina's Targeted Support for Districts: Supporting the Use of Postsecondary Outcomes Data

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INTRODUCTION

About This Document

This case study is one in a set that examines states' practices and policies for providing postsecondary outcomes data to the public and practitioners. This resource provides guidance for state agencies who use and support the use of postsecondary outcomes data. It is designed to help states implement strategies around their use of postsecondary outcomes data and support their stakeholders' use, including districts and schools, parents/guardians, students, and policymakers.

This case study focuses on North Carolina's targeted approach to support the effective dissemination and use of longitudinal postsecondary outcomes data from the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) in districts throughout the state. It highlights the training and technical assistance provided to district and school staff and examples of how school counselors use this data to map student pathways and trajectories to identify trends, patterns, and potential areas for improvement in career and college readiness and postsecondary outcomes.

North Carolina's Investment in NSC Data

In spring 2023, the North Carolina Office of Learning & Research (OLR),^{1,2} which is under the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (DPI), obtained from NSC nearly 10 years of high school graduate data at the student and school levels. To ensure effective dissemination and use of this large NSC dataset, OLR built relationships with district leaders through a proactive approach to district outreach and a staffing model that builds upon relevant local expertise to deliver

- webinars and trainings;
- individualized technical assistance; and
- OLR-built postsecondary reports for each district.

These efforts enabled school counselors, principals, and district leaders throughout the state to understand and become comfortable working with secondary and postsecondary outcomes data from the NSC. More specifically, OLR's targeted supports helped leaders understand how to

- interpret state-, district-, high school-, and student-level data files;
- use postsecondary outcomes data to guide high school students;
- use data insights to learn more about factors that can impact career and college readiness; and
- use NSC data to support decision-making.

OLR leverages NSC data to support state efforts to improve career and college readiness and to identify trends, patterns, and potential areas for improvement in postsecondary outcomes. Its targeted support for districts offers an exemplary model for promoting the effective use of secondary and postsecondary outcomes data to improve pathways for students.

POSTSECONDARY OUTCOMES DATA USE AT THE STATE LEVEL

By connecting NSC data to data from the state’s K-12 student information system and other state initiatives, North Carolina can map student trajectories and gain a better picture of student outcomes. For example, the legislatively mandated Career and College Ready Graduate (CCRG) program^{*,3} provides student assessment data. Under the CCRG program, students complete tier tests in English (two tiers) and Math (three tiers) to ensure they achieve mastery in these core subjects. CCRG students must earn a passing score on a tier test to move along to the next testing tier, ensuring they are prepared for community college-level English and Math courses.⁴ The CCRG program administrator connects NSC postsecondary outcomes data to CCRG’s data about participating students’ tier test scores to help indicate where students need more support.

OLR uses some of the following data to follow student pathways:

- **Enrollment patterns:** NSC data captures shifts in student demographics, participation in dual-enrollment programs, preferences for specific courses or institutions, and seasonal impacts on enrollment. The state uses this information to anticipate and adapt to future enrollment trends.
- **Financial impacts, including Pell Grant funds:** The growing cost of higher education and other financial considerations can be barriers to postsecondary program enrollment and completion. By connecting NSC postsecondary outcomes data with students’ financial aid awards, the state gains insights on how students in North Carolina leverage financial aid from the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and Pell Grants, which can guide the development of financial strategies and policies.
- **Employment after graduation:** NSC data used in combination with datasets from the North Carolina Department of Commerce⁵ highlights the employment sectors that offer the most opportunities, regions with the most job openings, and the alignment between the postsecondary courses students pursued and the professions they entered. Policymakers can use this information to adjust program resources to help students succeed in their postsecondary pathways.

“We’re doing kids a disservice if we graduate them and they’re not ready for college.”

— Program Administrator,
CCRG

NORTH CAROLINA’S TARGETED SUPPORT FOR DISTRICTS AND SCHOOLS

OLR provides dedicated support to North Carolina districts on how to interpret NSC data about North Carolina’s high school graduates. Before the 2022-23 school year statewide contract with the NSC, only larger, more resource-rich districts within the state had the financial and human resources to maintain their own NSC contracts. Statewide access to NSC data has created an opportunity for all districts to benefit from this service.

OLR recognized the need for additional resources and support for districts to use NSC data effectively. Having data on hand from the 2014-2022 school years, the OLR, in partnership with the Office of Data and Reporting at DPI, created a plan to get this data to districts and schools. The plan included specialized support to districts focused on their specific needs.

* CCRG gives students the opportunity to take certain prerequisites while in high school to ensure that they will enter postsecondary education or training academically prepared, reducing financial burdens and time to completion. The CCRG program works to identify students with high or low academic achievement indicators, allowing counselors and educators to target the students they advise from a more informed perspective. This ensures that students have the necessary prerequisites, knowledge, and experience for their selected paths.

State-Provided Training and Technical Assistance

OLR ensures that districts are well versed in the nuances of the data, its potential applications, and its relevance to education strategies by offering

- workshops and seminars;
- on-demand training sessions; and
- technical assistance either in person or remotely.

OLR staff have committed to building trusted partnerships with district leaders and school staff. These partnerships have improved the working relationships between districts and the state, as well as districts' abilities to solve problems and understand data. Districts have a direct line of communication to OLR staff via phone and email when needed. OLR staff respond promptly to requests and needs from districts, instead of leading with mandates.

Supporting the Use of Postsecondary Outcome Data with Local Expertise

North Carolina's efforts to increase accessibility of postsecondary outcome data included creating staff roles to target support for specific district staff, such as school counselors. OLR's approach to staffing ensures that people in these support roles come from the communities they serve and have school-based experience. OLR also provides opportunities for staff to share with one another lessons learned and knowledge about how they support districts and school personnel.

“Our relationship with DPI has allowed for critical analysis [of data] without blame.”

— District Assistant Superintendent,
Haywood County

Support for district staff

After the statewide contract for NSC data began, OLR recognized the need to support district data analysts. To ease the burden on district staff, OLR performed pre-processing of the raw NSC data into a report for districts. The reports have a standard structure and elements defined by OLR that districts can use locally and analyze and/or integrate into their student information system, learning management system, and other systems.

After district analysts receive access to NSC data, OLR staff provide technical assistance and answer questions about the data. For example, OLR provides a more comprehensive webinar to inform district users about error risks and effective strategies to help reduce them.

OLR also held a webinar for district analysts that provided an overview of the data elements and file structures for NSC data to facilitate effective data use. District data analysts also learned about variations in NSC data formats and characteristics that pose challenges when connecting files with other datasets and systems. In addition to webinars, OLR provides in-person technical assistance directly to districts that need further help understanding how to use data files or how to interpret data in district reports.

OLR also works with district staff to help students along their postsecondary pathways. Districts specifically use postsecondary outcomes data to identify potential barriers for students, such as transportation or funding. OLR works with districts and schools to determine whether the policies, programs, or other solutions in place are working and what other supports can help guide students successfully. For example, when completion rates for career and technical education are lower than expected, districts may reach out to OLR for assistance in using data to determine potential ways of increasing completion rates.

Support for school staff

In spring 2023, OLR offered webinars for school counselors and principals that explained the postsecondary data available from the NSC and how they might use this data in their work with schools, school leadership teams, and student support teams. The goal of these sessions was to expose high school leaders and counselors to NSC data so they could more accurately gauge the college success of their students. The state also offers webinars and in-person trainings at schools on the use of career and workforce data. These efforts help school counselors connect postsecondary outcomes data with academic data, informing their support to students and families who are planning for college, career, and postsecondary training.

School counselors can use these webinars in the summer when schools are not in session to help them examine data to inform their work with students during the school year. OLR also encourages school counselors to align their postsecondary planning activities with the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model: A Framework for School Counseling Programs,⁶ school improvement plans, district goals, and state goals.

State-Provided District-Level Reports

OLR uses NSC data to develop multiple reports⁷ that expand beyond the school and state reports specified in the state’s contract with NSC. One key report is a postsecondary outcomes data summary for each district. This report covers multiple areas, such as

- fall enrollment—specifically, the number of students who matriculate the semester following high school graduation; and
- the 25 institutions of higher education most attended by students in each district.

The report includes a series of graphs and data tables to help users interpret the data in them. It also includes an index of all figures, a user guide, and full tables for district use. District staff can pull images as separate files to use in presentations or district-level reports.

Districts can also ask the state to create reports that meet their specific needs. For example, Wake County Public Schools requested information about students who began their postsecondary education at community college and then transferred to 4-year state universities. Other districts use postsecondary outcomes data to examine if students are prepared for community college and have taken the prerequisites needed to avoid placement in remedial courses upon entry.

“We owe it to students to provide the best education. We always feel we can do better. If we’re just washing our hands after graduation, it’s not good for the community.”

— District Assistant Superintendent,
Haywood County

Improving Data Quality Through Good State and District Relationships

While developing their district-level reports, one district found errors in the NSC data: some students who had left the district were still included in the data files, which led to inaccurate summary data. OLR found that the error had occurred on the state end and worked with NSC to correct the files.

This problem was identified through district due diligence and offers a key example of the importance of the relationship between districts and state offices. Sharing data with districts before it is made public allows districts to evaluate the data, vet the data, and consider how to best communicate the data to its community.

Finally, OLR developed code to create district-level data reports in perpetuity. When district staff run these reports themselves, they can customize to make comparisons, such as

- comparing their school to other schools in their region;
- comparing urban areas; or
- comparing their district to similar districts.

HOW SCHOOL COUNSELORS IN NORTH CAROLINA USE NSC DATA

North Carolina school counselors use NSC data to gain information about their students' postsecondary outcomes. Tracking postsecondary outcomes data back to high school data can help school counselors determine what coursework and experiences most likely will help students succeed in different paths and could help school counselors offer more useful suggestions to high school students about their postsecondary options.

DPI has a dedicated school counseling consultant⁸ who works with the student support leadership in each district and college advising partners such as myFutureNC and the College Foundation of North Carolina to use data to help inform their discussions with students about their potential postsecondary pathways long before high school graduation. DPI's school counseling consultant also encourages site-based school counselors to provide more personalized and intentional advising by promoting additional options for students such as

- course enrollment/course selection;
- extracurricular activities;
- internships;
- work-based learning programs; and
- dual enrollment plans.

Counselors help students take advantage of these opportunities by ensuring that qualified students are aware they are eligible for college transfer pathway programs and have the necessary academic supports to take advantage of the college-level courses available to them.

School counselors in North Carolina use the NSC's StudentTracker⁹ to follow students beyond their first year after high school graduation. Assessing higher education retention rates and employment longevity provides relevant indicators related to postsecondary outcomes that give counselors the opportunity for more detailed conversations with students about their options for the future.

Opportunities Beyond 4-Year Colleges and Universities

Robust data about students' postsecondary outcomes helps North Carolina students and parents consider a wider range of options after high school, moving away from what some counselors refer to as the "only college" push. With postsecondary outcomes data, counselors have the means to help students consider multiple paths, such as 2-year college programs, trades programs, and certifications in various areas.

Two-year college programs may be a step toward a 4-year college enrollment and degree or provide the training to move into the workforce, including careers in nursing, early childhood education, web development, or dental assistance. Trade programs also cover many fields, such as automotive repair, cosmetology, or welding.

North Carolina and its districts are expanding their efforts to ensure that students know about these postsecondary options and their potential eligibility for them, as well as the funding and other support available.

HOW MYFUTURENC PROVIDES POSTSECONDARY OUTCOMES DATA

myFutureNC¹⁰ is a state-funded program that aims to help bridge the gap between the skills needed by employers and the education and training opportunities in the state by providing greater visibility and insights into postsecondary outcomes data.

myFutureNC's website provides districts, schools, parents, and students with useful information regarding postsecondary outcomes data, including

- degree and certificate attainment;
- academic readiness;
- college and career access;
- postsecondary completion; and
- workforce alignment.

Users can make comparisons between postsecondary performance outcome metrics for different demographic groups, geographic areas, and institution types.

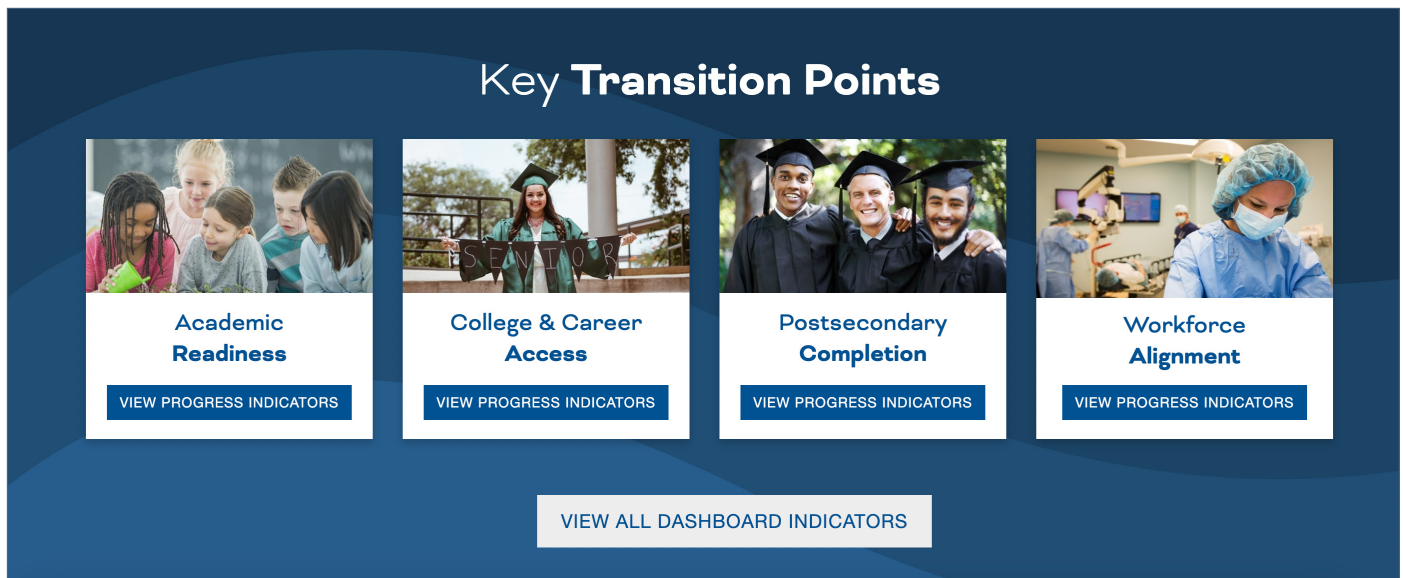


Figure 1. myFutureNC places postsecondary outcomes data in the hands of districts, schools, parents, and students. Source: "North Carolina Degree Production." myFutureNC. Retrieved March 28, 2024, from <https://dashboard.myfuturenc.org>.

County profiles on the website summarize multiple postsecondary outcomes, including

- educational attainment;
- FAFSA completion;
- career and college preparation; and
- postsecondary enrollment rates for varied demographic groups.

Adult Learners

Wake County resident enrollments in NC Community Colleges, Fall 2022

- 3,070** Basic Skills
- 17,413** Continuing Education
- 20,214** Curriculum



19% of Wake County residents have **student loan debt**; **7%** of debt holders had **student loans in default**. 2022

Success of Wake County High School Graduates

- **89%** of students who enroll **persist to their second year** versus **86%** in peer counties. 2022
- **70%** of students who enroll **earn a degree or certificate** within 6 years versus **62%** in peer counties. 2022

Top destinations of all college-goers, Fall 2023

- **24,536** of all college-goers attended **Wake TCC**
- **1,507** of all college-goers attended **Durham TCC**
- **1,394** of all college-goers attended **NC State**

Degree Credentials Awarded, 2022

5,278 certificate | **5,596** associate | **16,200** bachelor's

Postsecondary assets in Raleigh-Durham Prosperity Zone sub-region

Public, 4-year or above

North Carolina Central University, North Carolina State University at Raleigh, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Public, 2-year

Central Carolina Community College, Durham Technical Community College, Johnston Community College, Piedmont Community College, Vance-Granville Community College, Wake Technical Community College

Private not-for-profit, 4-year or above

Campbell University, Duke University, Heritage Bible College, Meredith College, Saint Augustine's University, Shaw University, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Southeastern Free Will Baptist Bible College, Watts School of Nursing, William Peace University

Private not-for-profit, 2-year

Louisburg College

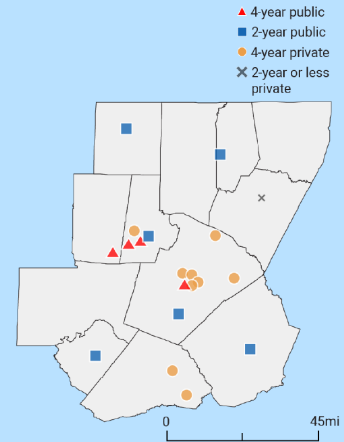


Figure 2. myFutureNC allows users to examine county-specific postsecondary outcomes. Source: “Wake County 2024 Attainment Profile.” myFutureNC. Retrieved March 29, 2024, from https://dashboard.myfuturenc.org/wp-content/uploads/county-profiles/Wake_County.pdf.

CONCLUSION

North Carolina’s approach to acquiring and disseminating nearly a decade’s worth of comprehensive data from the NSC is an exemplary model for leveraging postsecondary outcomes data for informed decision-making. OLR gives all districts access to a rich set of longitudinal data on postsecondary outcomes along with support for using the data. The department facilitates targeted support for districts, ensuring that leaders and educators can effectively interpret and use insights from the NSC data. North Carolina’s emphasis on mapping student pathways, connecting NSC data with other state initiatives, and collaborating with districts reflects a comprehensive and strategic effort to improve student outcomes. Providing training, technical assistance, and district-level reports highlights the state’s commitment to leverage postsecondary outcomes data at both the state and local levels.

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