![Lumina Foundation logo]

GRANTEE FINAL NARRATIVE REPORT OUTLINE
(https://www.luminafoundation.org/grantee-reporting-forms)

Lumina Foundation Issued Grant Number: 1809-1109055

Grant start date: 11/15/2018   **Grant end date:** 12/31/2020
Period covered by report: 11/15/2018 to 1/31/2021

Legal Name of Organization: Wake Technical Community College
Common Name of Organization: Wake Tech

Major Outcomes

1. **List each objective/outcome as it appears in your proposal (Section III / Project Outcomes / Question 3). Please describe the final outcome of each objective and provide a short (1-3 sentence) explanation on the extent to which each was or was not met.**

   The outcomes for the Finish First NC (FFNC) project included:
   a. Deployment to 15 community colleges by May 2019.

      Achieved: Wake Tech successfully deployed the FFNC tool to all 15 pilot colleges. A list of the pilot 15 colleges and all colleges reached can be viewed in Attachment A.

   b. Identification of more than 30,000 non-completers (at least 50% of whom will be minority students) who may receive credentials by May 2019.

      Partially Achieved: Data from test runs from the beginning of the project through December 2020 show that FFNC has identified 67,027 new completion credentials and *232,462 near completion credentials*. Additionally, in the fall of 2020, the Finish First NC team collected data from colleges for the Spring 2020 and Summer 2020 semesters. Twenty-three colleges submitted data, indicating that FFNC identified 15,952 unique new completion students and *36,186 unique near completion students* (non-completers) for the two semesters. Of these students, 45.7% of new completers and *45.5% of near completers* were minority students.

2. **Comment on additional outcomes not directly associated with the project's objectives (e.g., partnerships formed, additional funding support gained).**

   a. **FFNC Expansion to NC Community Colleges:** To continue scaling the Finish First NC data tool beyond the initial pilot 15 colleges, Wake Tech received grant funding from the John M. Belk Endowment in December 2018 to extend the tool and project to the remaining 43 colleges in the NC Community College System (NCCCS). As of January 2021, Wake Tech has shared the FFNC tool with 32 additional community colleges, bringing the total number of NCCCS colleges with access to FFNC to 47. The project team anticipates scaling the tool to all NCCCS colleges by August 2021.

In addition to the ability to share the FFNC tool with 81% of the community colleges in North Carolina, this additional funding has supported the creation of several implementation materials that assist FFNC partner colleges in fostering buy-in with key stakeholders, training personnel, and communicating with students and relevant employees about the importance and potential impacts of using FFNC at their campuses. These materials are detailed in the Evaluation and Communication section.

b. **Insights from, Partnerships with Completion Stakeholders:** In September 2020, Wake Tech hosted a meeting with statewide and national stakeholders interested in student completion and success to gather insightful input and discuss potential future trajectories for the FFNC tool in North Carolina and beyond. Attendees at the meeting included representatives from Lumina Foundation, the John M. Belk Endowment (JMBE), myFutureNC, the NC Department of Commerce, the NC Governor's Office, NC Independent Colleges and Universities (NCICU), the NC Community College System Office, the University of North Carolina (UNC) System Office, and the Belk Center for Community College Research and Leadership. More partnerships are in development.

c. **Louisburg College Pilot:** In November of 2020, Wake Tech received a Lumina Foundation grant to pilot FFNC at Louisburg College, a private, two-year residential college in Louisburg, NC, as an exploratory step for scaling FFNC outside of the NC community college environment. This project is currently underway.

d. **Next Steps for FFNC Being Determined:** The Finish First NC team is currently developing a business plan to scale the data tool beyond the NCCCS. Wake Tech received funding from the JMBE to contract a business consultant to explore and share the best options for a clear path forward for FFNC. The consultant will share guidance on sustaining FFNC in the NCCCS, scaling the FFNC product and process to UNC, NCICU, and higher education systems outside of North Carolina, as well as financial and market projections and analyses.

e. **Stop-Out Student Outreach and Scholarships:** Thanks to Wake Tech's partnership with the UNC System, the Finish First NC project team secured a grant to conduct outreach to Wake Tech "stop-out" students. Stop-out students are those who began a curriculum program at Wake Tech, but left for one, two, or three semesters without completing the program and are not studying at any other institution. Wake Tech partnered with the company InsideTrack, Inc. to reach out to the students identified as stop-outs by FFNC data and encourage them to re-enroll. To further incentivize students to finish their credential, Wake Tech offered scholarship funding to cover a portion of the costs of returning to complete. In the fall of 2020, InsideTrack began reaching out to 1,288 students who were active in the Fall 2020 semester. Of those students, 558 are within 15 credit hours of completing degrees/diplomas, and the rest of them have between 15 credit hours and 50% of their degrees/diplomas remaining to complete. So far, 201 students (15% of the 1,288 students active in the Fall 2020 semester) have registered for the 2021 spring semester.

f. **Academic Rumble Strips:** Because the FFNC tool can identify where students have registered for courses that do not count toward their declared programs of study, the Finish First NC team developed a new application of the FFNC tool called "Academic Rumble Strips" (ARS). This feature identifies where students are veering off the pathway for their declared program of study so college personnel can help them get back on track. This assists both the student and the college. Students can avoid mistakenly taking courses that do not support their completing the intended credential and therefore avoid incurring unnecessary educational expenses. College personnel can use this as a tool for student advising and/or

for compliance. For example, Wake Tech has used this FFNC data for compliance audits for Career and College Promise (CCP) students—NC high school students who are dually enrolled in community college courses at no cost to them. CCP students are required to take only courses in the pathway of the declared program of study, so identifying non-major courses for CCP students as early as possible prevents the college from having compliance audit issues. Since the state only funds CCP tuition for courses the high school students take in their stated major, catching these students helps Wake Tech avoid financial losses for students taking courses outside of their majors.

Wake Tech has also used FFNC's ARS feature for curriculum education (for-credit college) students. ARS supports enhanced proactive advising of transfer students who aim to complete courses that they are confident will transfer to a four-year institution. This helps ensure they remain on track for baccalaureate degree completion after they leave Wake Tech and saves students tuition costs for courses that may not transfer per established articulation agreements.

g. **Performance Funding for Partner Colleges:** Some institutions in the NCCCS may have been able to take advantage of an increase in performance funding from the state due to increasing their completion rates as a result of using FFNC. These funds can be used to hire individuals to help process completions, or for other purposes deemed necessary by the institution.

3. Specify any unanticipated positive and/or negative project developments.

The Finish First NC team has seen many unanticipated positive project developments, which are listed below.

a. **User-Focused Software Enhancements:** After releasing the first version of FFNC (Version 1.0), Wake Tech solicited and received feedback from stakeholders in the 15 pilot colleges to help improve the tool and user experience. The project team used the valuable input to add enhancements to the data tool. Initial and continued feedback fueled the improvements included in Versions 2.0 and 2.5, both released in 2020.

Version 2.0, Version 2.5 and the latest release, Version 3.0, include features such as Grade Point Average Calculation, Institutional Credit Data, Prior Graduation Check, Course Substitutions, Cutoff Percentage Control, Review of CCP and Career and Technical Education (CTE) Credentials, Student Information Integration, Data Collection Integration, Push-Button Interface, Output Overwrite Prevention, and Continuous Evaluation. These new features allow for greater accuracy and streamlined user experience, and provide colleges with more options to achieve completions. For example, FFNC users can review the courses students have taken that are not used for the evaluated credential in order to identify suitable course substitutions for courses they still need to take. A description of these features is included in Attachment B.

b. **User-Centered Implementation Support:** Wake Tech also developed a greater focus on the end user to ensure ultimate success for students and colleges. Below are some examples:

• **Intentional Communication with Users:** The Finish First NC project team developed a systematized email communication process to onboard new users, user webinars to provide technical support and highlight exemplar users, and a Web site (www.WakeTech.edu/FFNC) to share information with new, current, and prospective users. The team also scheduled

user check-ins and systematized follow-up communications after site visits, software updates, and version upgrades.

- **Support Materials for Users:** The project team has created several resources for FFNC users at partner colleges to consume and share with others at their institutions. The team drafted sample letters and communication pieces colleges can use to increase personnel and student engagement. A major resource for colleges is the FFNC User Companion Guide, which is now in its second edition.

- **Greater Buy-In through Product Demos and Delivery:** For colleges that adopted FFNC earlier, project staff conducted general product demos during site visits. We later decided to have colleges send us their program requirements before the site visit, enabling the team to complete the product customization, train users and deliver the product to stakeholders before the site visit with more key college stakeholders. This helps FFNC users at the college act on the momentum of the site visit more immediately. Pre-site visit configuration has also allowed the team to use the partner college's own data to demo the FFNC data tool during the site visit with key college leaders. We found this to foster greater buy-in among stakeholders.

c. **Review of Policy Efficacy and Utility:** Another unanticipated development is that the use of the FFNC tool has raised valuable policy questions for some of the partner colleges. Using FFNC may expose institutional barriers that prevent the completion or awarding of credentials that students have earned, and therefore prompt useful conversations regarding the effectiveness and utility of completion and advising policies, as well as communication with students about those policies.

Below are the unanticipated negative project developments the Finish First NC team has encountered and has made efforts to address:

a. **Sporadic Engagement:** While most colleges (particularly, those in the 15 pilot colleges) remain engaged, the level of engagement with the FFNC tool that we are aware of varies by institution. Some colleges have received the tool, but seem to be inconsistent in their use of it. One school that was not one of the pilot colleges, opted out of using FFNC in favor of keeping their previously established local procedures for processing completers.

b. **Stalled Progress:** Progress with some of the early colleges was stalled. While the Finish First NC team delivered the tool and trained users, the frequency and extent to which the trained users engaged with the tool and engaged other stakeholders for successful implementation varied. The Finish First NC project team responded in a number of ways to address these issues: (1) Intentional outreach and follow-up. We have implemented a process of conducting check-ins with colleges to provide opportunities for them to make us aware of and receive support for technical or implementation concerns and to maintain open communication. Even if colleges were disengaged, the project team continued to include them in communications. (2) Dedicated time to discuss impacts, benefits, and implementation of FFNC during the site visit. (3) Regular webinars with partner colleges in which we share additional information about technical and implementation topics to support current and new colleges. (4) The team has also been open to conducting second site visits if needed. This occurred with one of the colleges at its request after staff turnover resulted in key FFNC contacts at the institution changing. By implementing these strategies and tactics, we have seen what was an initially negative situation improve. Three schools in the group of pilot colleges had become somewhat disengaged but have now re-engaged due to our proactive outreach and persistence. One of the colleges expressed thanks to

the team for "not giving up" on them when its stakeholders were unresponsive due to prioritizing other work duties. Additionally, one of the larger colleges that the project team visited early on (that was not in the pilot group) initially decided to not adopt FFNC, but has recently decided to test it at their campus starting in January 2021.

c. **Barriers to Completion:** Another unanticipated negative development is a lack of consensus regarding completion policies and practices at colleges, which impacts their ability—real or perceived—to award credentials. Examples of this include questions about the financial aid implications of awarding credentials and ethical questions of awarding credentials for programs of study in which students did not enroll. These are considerations that go beyond the data and automation solutions that FFNC provides. The project team's usual practice is to not explicitly advise colleges on what to do with FFNC data, but to encourage them to rally their stakeholders to make decisions about what works best for their students and institutions. Some of the policy barriers raise questions to which the team does not always have answers. As a practice (and as a result of feedback from partner colleges), the project team now encourages new colleges early on in the adoption process to identify their current completion policies. This will, at a minimum, help them to have in mind what their current practices and constraints are before they churn out an FFNC output file and will help them more efficiently arrive at answers about how to approach FFNC output data. Additionally, thanks to Lumina Foundation connecting Wake Tech to the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, the project team is expanding its knowledge and seeking out the expertise of those in financial aid and related areas in order to better support FFNC partner colleges.

4. **If applicable, comment on any longer-term outcomes you anticipate from your Lumina-funded project.** Also, please estimate anticipated achievement dates (month and year).

Wake Tech anticipates a number of longer-term outcomes from the 15 pilot colleges and the other NCCCS colleges implementing the Finish First NC data tool. The benefits of using FFNC for colleges last beyond funding, and include:

a. **Increased Higher Education Attainment in North Carolina:** The number of degrees, diplomas and certificates awarded to students will increase, both from identifying students who have already completed credentials and from identifying and advising students close to completion. This will increase completion rates in NC and also increase performance funding partner colleges can receive. We anticipate this to be an on-going outcome.

b. **Impact on Reverse Transfer Completions:** In addition, there is the opportunity for the FFNC tool to support efforts to automate reverse transfer across the state. Agreements are already in place to support former community college transfer students at four-year institutions receiving their associate degrees for subsequently completing the remaining credits for the degree at their four-year schools. Transfer students rarely realize they have completed all the required credits for the associate degree and are almost never awarded the earned credential. Reverse transfer degree awards are particularly important for those who do not complete their four-year degrees. For most institutions, the process to audit student records has been manual. Finish First NC can increase the efficiency of this process and project staff have been in discussions with those coordinating statewide reverse transfer efforts. We anticipate this to be an on-going outcome once course cross-walks are established.

c. **Greater Efficiency and Data-Informed Policy Changes:** Using the Finish First tool is prompting some colleges to re-examine their graduation policies and requirements. For example, prior to adopting FFNC, one college awarded credentials only if a student had completed 33% or more of

the course credits at the institution. Upon adopting FFNC, the college decided to examine the need for that higher percentage threshold rather than the 25% required by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC). Changes to such policies will result in long-term impacts for colleges. The analysis of policies and opportunities has resulted in Wake Tech creating scholarships specifically for stop-out students to return to college. One of the other NCCCS colleges reached out to Wake Tech about utilizing FFNC to identify students who have stopped out and is actively exploring how to engage them. In addition, the workflows, engagement policies, and communication practices participating colleges put into place for Finish First NC implementation will help them achieve the long-term, ongoing outcome of increased cross-departmental collaboration and efficiency.

d. **Expansion of Finish First NC:** Another outcome that will come from this Lumina grant is expanding FFNC beyond the NCCCS environment. As mentioned above, a business plan is in development to help inform next steps, and should be completed by June 2021. This will help inform Wake Tech's next steps for Finish First NC.

e. **Baccalaureate Degree Attainment and Labor Market Impact:** Another longer-term impact beyond the initial pilot colleges adopting FFNC is all 58 NCCCS colleges having access to the data tool. By adopting the FFNC tool, the NCCCS colleges can help students with next steps after they are awarded credentials, which will have a longer term impact on students' employment, the NC workforce, and the overall economy. Wake Tech hopes to provide access to FFNC to all 58 community colleges by August 2021. Students who are identified by FFNC at that time will be awarded credentials immediately or by the end of the Fall 2021 semester. We anticipate the outcomes from implementation to continue beyond this time, since these students will potentially transfer by Spring 2022 or Fall 2022 semester, and obtain their baccalaureate degrees likely by 2024 or 2025, with jobs to follow. Another longer-term outcome is labor market impacts on students who have completed credentials thanks to a partner college's use of FFNC. Wake Tech is currently collaborating with the NC Community College System Office to determine how to best examine these ties.

5. In your opinion, what is the most remarkable accomplishment or finding of your project?

a. **Student Success:** Finish First NC began with a desire to examine whether community college students were more successful than assumed with respect to completion. This project has affirmed this notion. In test run sessions conducted with 39 of the 47 NCCCS colleges using FFNC from January to December 2020, the project team recorded a total of 28,391 credentials for which students had already completed requirements but had not obtained (new completion credentials) and 102,653 credentials that students could obtain within one semester (near completion credentials). These figures include a total of 4,332 new completion credentials and 19,265 near completion credentials from the pilot 15 colleges. This brings the total number of FFNC new and near completion credentials captured during test runs with colleges through December 2020 to 67,027 and 232,462, respectively.

b. **"Pathways" Actualized:** Colleges have been attempting to identify degree-eligible and near-degree-eligible students for many years with limited resources. Finish First NC has made this process possible and efficient, giving "teeth" to the otherwise aspirational notion of pathways to completion, and allowing college personnel to focus their efforts on student *communication* rather than student *identification*. Identifying these students helps them realize that their efforts have led to student success.

c. **Engaged Partner Colleges:** Another accomplishment of the project has been the overwhelming support, interest, and concrete action on the part of personnel at partner colleges with respect to using this data tool to enhance their student completion and success efforts. The interest has only grown as the project team has intentionally engaged partner college stakeholders more. In recent feedback, colleges have shared information that exemplifies how they are engaging with the FFNC tool, such as: academic advisors personally contacting 1,000 near-completers in the Fall 2020 semester to discuss pathways to completion and encourage graduation; hiring technical assistants to assist with reviewing evaluations of near completion students and new completion students; and stakeholders from various colleges working together to proactively review policies and procedures that serve students better, in light of the college using Finish First NC.

6. **Indicate the geographic region(s) targeted by your Lumina Foundation funding. For example, if your funding went to multiple sites in multiple states, list the number of sites by location (city, state, zip); if your grant funded a state initiative, list the state.**

    North Carolina

Priorities for Action

1. **To what extent did this work contribute to Lumina's Priorities for Action (Section III / Project Outcomes / Question 1).**

    a. *Advocate for the redesign, rebranding and improvement of developmental education.*
    N/A

    b. *Promote strategies that improve attainment of degrees and certificates, particularly by traditionally underrepresented students.*
    Finish First NC contributed to this priority. Limited Spring 2020 and Summer 2020 semester data from 23 partner colleges showed that, at those institutions, FFNC identified 15,952 unique new completion students and 36,186 unique near completion students for the two semesters. Of these students, 45.7% of new completers and 45.5% of near completers were minority students.

    c. *Explore the development of alternative pathways and credentials.*
    FFNC output files generate lists of courses that students have taken, some of which are not applicable to the evaluated credential. These "unused" courses can inform colleges about opportunities to award potential credentials of value that serve the student, the college, and the community. FFNC staff are also discussing ways the tool can support automation of the reverse transfer efforts in North Carolina as mentioned above.

    d. *Implement stronger transfer and articulation systems that keep students moving toward completion of degrees and credentials.*
    FFNC empowers advisors and registration personnel with information about proximity to completion. Letting community college students know about their progress toward degrees can allow them to make better informed decisions about their education and help them stay on track. This includes students who want to make sure they are taking the correct courses to transfer according to articulation agreements. Using FFNC for reverse transfer also supports this priority.

e. *Advocate for the use of quality data in higher education, through universal nationally linked state student record data systems that follow students to the workforce, as well as data that facilitate alignment of higher education and the workforce.*
The Finish First NC team is working with the NC Community College System's data team to consider how to leverage current data to benefit the whole system.

f. *Define and measure student learning outcomes and align them with workforce needs.*
While this priority was not directly explored in this project, FFNC has the potential to connect students with degrees to help them chart clear next steps after they have achieved credentials, including transfer to four-year institutions and entry into the workforce.

Evaluation and Communication

1. **Provide a summary of your evaluation activities and/or results, if available. If applicable, please attach copies of all evaluation reports produced since your last Lumina report.**

Wake Tech has engaged the Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research at North Carolina State University to conduct an independent evaluation of the FFNC project. Evaluation activities conducted by the Belk Center and project staff have included focus groups with partner college stakeholders, interviews with partner college stakeholders, and collection of quantitative and qualitative semester data. A total of 29 individuals from 18 partner colleges participated in the focus groups in June of 2020. The Belk Center also conducted interviews with staff from partner colleges.

In the independent evaluation report, Belk Center researchers listed recommendations for the project team. The Finish First NC team has either already implemented those recommendations or is in process of implementing them. More information about Belk Center's evaluation activities is laid out in the evaluation report included in the report attachments. Due to the timing of the semester data collection, the independent evaluation team was unable to include the Fall 2020 semester data collection in their report. Information about this effort continues below.

Participation in the collection of quantitative and qualitative semester data for the Spring 2020 and Summer 2020 semesters was close to 50% of current partner colleges. Some actions colleges are taking and changes they are implementing as a result of using FFNC are:

- Using FFNC to help the process of creating stackable credentials and working with faculty and department heads to align coursework in a manner that facilitates students earning stackable credentials (certificate first, then the diploma on the way to earning the degree);
- Coordinating messages and outreach plans to near completers, as well as student outreach to increase awareness of when to apply for graduation;
- Removing financial barriers to credential completion through the creation of scholarships for near completers, by eliminating graduation fees and by implementing administrative graduations to allow students identified by Finish First NC to be graduated without further barriers;
- Revising or discussing the revision of graduation policies and updating graduation procedure information to include notification of the college's automatically awarding credentials;
- Coordinating with personnel across different departments to proactively review policies and procedures that serve students better;
- Hiring personnel to review FFNC new completion and near completion output lists; and

- Strengthening protocols and workflows for using Finish First NC more efficiently by defining and refining them to be well-structured.

Quantitative data collected for the Spring 2020 and Summer 2020 semesters suggest the potential for Finish First NC to optimize colleges' completion efforts to make a high impact on student completions.

- For just these two academic terms, 23 of the partner colleges reported 15,952 new completion students identified and 36,186 near completion students identified. Nearly half of those identified are students of color, close to half of students identified are age 25 and older, students identified are overwhelmingly female, and more than a third of students identified have a Pell funding indicator, signaling a potential impact on students from lower income backgrounds.
- The 23 partner colleges that submitted data reported that FFNC identified 28,936 new completion credentials and 93,460 near completion credentials. Of the 28,936 new completion credentials identified by FFNC, 5,474 were awarded to students. These colleges also shared that 3,787 near completion credentials that were identified by FFNC during the Fall 2020 semester were awarded to students during the 2020SP and 2020SU semesters after the students registered for and passed the necessary classes that were displayed in FFNC.

There are a few limitations of the Spring 2020 and Summer 2020 semester data that should be taken into consideration:

- The data is dependent upon colleges maintaining documentation of and running their input files with accurate timeframes to support data reporting requests. Not all colleges maintained documentation, and therefore had to run the FFNC program during the Fall 2020 semester, at which time some of the completions that were actually identified during the reporting periods (Spring 2020 and Summer 2020) and awarded quickly may not have been accounted for in the reporting. To remedy this, the newest update of the program—FFNC Version 3.0—automates some aspects of the data collection request that would otherwise be tedious, time-consuming, and prone to user error.
- The FFNC project team requested that colleges report on identified credentials regardless of how or if the colleges had acted on the identified credentials. Timing is likely to have impacted the data reported, since a college's procedure for when to run FFNC and award credentials and/or advise students may not have necessarily coincided with the timing of our data collection request. In other cases, several colleges mentioned they had planned to award identified credentials, but at the time of the data pull had not yet done so. Any credentials that were identified but awarded after the data request were not accounted for.
- Capturing the number of near completion credentials that FFNC identified in previous semesters which were later awarded to students in subsequent semesters is a challenge. If colleges did not maintain records and if the staff member conducting the data pull (who may or may not be an FFNC user) does not take the care to ensure the data request was accurately fulfilled, the data may go unaccounted for.
- With only 23 colleges responding, along with the limitations mentioned above, it is likely that the number of identified credentials, identified students, and percentage of awarded credentials is understated.

Data from the Spring 2020 and Summer 2020 data collection are included in Attachment C.

2. **If applicable, provide a summary of your communication activities and/or results, if available. Please attach copies of all communication products produced since your last Lumina report.**

The Finish First NC project team has created the following communication pieces to support partner colleges implementing the data tool:

- Web site
- Brochures/flyers
- Informational and instructional videos
- Coordinated email communications to support new colleges
- User Companion guide to support implementation of the data tool
- Site visit presentation
- Demo presentation
- Sample messages for colleges to use to engage personnel and students

Copies of these pieces are included in the report attachments.

Lessons Learned

Comment on the lessons your organization learned through this grant.

1. **Reflecting on strategies and activities, what worked and what did not work?**

Wake Tech gained several lessons learned from the Finish First NC project. Some strategies and activities that worked include the following:

- **Timing of Test Runs:** Conducting test runs with a partner college's own data ahead of site visits has proven very useful. Stakeholders are able to see their colleagues run the program onsite at the site visits. Users are able to experiment with the program and become more comfortable with using it; some users have also made suggestions for improving the tool through this process. We have also been able to show the potential immediate impact that the FFNC data tool can have on a school's completions and the (usually large) numbers of near completion students that can finish a credential in the following semester.

- **Timing of Product Delivery:** Delivering Finish First NC program files to colleges prior to the site visits helps the implementation move forward more quickly. As long as the colleges provide us with their information ahead of time, this is possible.

- **Communication with Colleges:** The success of the project has come not just from the delivery of the data tool; communication with the partner colleges has also been vital, as well. Engaging, organized, purposeful, and consistent touch points with stakeholders from preliminary conversations at the beginning of the adoption life cycle to the site visit and beyond have been important.

- **Encouraging Intentional Conversations Among Stakeholders:** The Finish First NC team has made improvements to the site visit presentation that encourages targeted conversations among key stakeholders at the start of the FFNC adoption process. While college leaders are present, we create the opportunity for them to discuss potential ways FFNC will impact their college, the benefits they will gain from using FFNC, perceived needs and barriers to

implementation (and how to address them), and what other stakeholders should be involved. During the site visit, the project team now encourages college stakeholders to consider meeting again on their own to develop a workflow that fits with their current work and efforts, as well as to identify and consider their graduation policies at the beginning of the FFNC process.

- **Implementation Support and Materials:** The FFNC project team has developed several resources for colleges to use or tailor to support their implementation. One example of this is letters/sample messages for colleges to use to engage personnel and students.

- **Outreach Message via NCCCS:** In the Summer of 2020, we asked the NCCCS to help connect us with unreached colleges. Their sending out a message we drafted helped us reach 11 additional colleges in the Fall 2020 semester.

The project team also gained insights about activities that were less successful or did not serve project purposes as hoped:

- **"Free and Simple" Messaging:** Starting with the assumption that framing the FFNC data tool as "free and simple" was a selling point may have worked against our efforts in some cases. Some individuals may mistakenly have the perception that the simplicity of the tool and the fact that it is free means it is not valuable or effective. Those who have implemented the tool have found this is not at all the case. In our presentations, we are now intentional about branding the FFNC data tool as a "high-impact, high-volume, low-resource, low-cost" solution. In site visits, we now also highlight successes and feedback from FFNC users, and we share the numbers of new and near completion credentials identified during a college's test run so colleges can immediately see the observable impact. The conversations broached in the test runs also promote stakeholder buy-in since they are sharing and listening to their colleagues express how using FFNC will benefit their college and fit into their strategic plan.

- **Initial Point-of-Contact not Necessarily Ideal:** At the beginning of the project, the project team would invite a variety of types of stakeholders to engage with the data tool in an effort to begin implementation at new colleges. However, we have observed that the initial point-of-contact may not necessarily be the right person to effectively champion the implementation/use of the tool at the college. It can sometimes be a challenge to tell if this is the case or not, particularly when a single employee fulfills the duties of more than one position. Initial assumptions about who should be involved, and specifically that the data tool could or should be framed as an information technology solution, did not serve our goals. For two of the colleges, the head of distance education was the point of contact. We have since been able to re-establish a better point of contact, and also work to engage multiple stakeholders to ensure others are involved. Additionally, in our beginning communications with new colleges, we are now more explicit in requesting buy-in from leadership and we spell out that vice presidents of specific areas of the college or the college president should be involved.

- **Single-Contact Colleges:** Initially, we were very much hands-off with respect to the question of who colleges wanted to involve in using FFNC, even if there was only one contact person at the institution. While this could functionally work at smaller colleges, it presented a vulnerability: If the sole stakeholder were to leave the school, we would lose our only point-of-contact and would have to work to re-establish rapport with the college. We are now more directive about:
    o Expressing the types (roles) of individuals who are ideal contacts;
    o Urging colleges to invite multiple stakeholders to be a part of the implementation;
    o Requiring colleges to ensure that at least two employees are trained on how to run the tool at any given time; and

- Sharing FFNC support materials with multiple stakeholders after site visits and inviting *all* stakeholders at a college to webinars and events.

2. What would you do differently next time?

We would avoid implementing the above actions/processes that did not serve the project as we had hoped. We would also present Finish First as a solution for "whole institutional improvement," rather than just a technology solution. We would also consider the idea that early adopters of a solution may not need as much hand-holding (since they have higher levels of interest and engagement), but that the laggards (in this case the final 11) may be more reluctant and require more time, effort, and patience as they are brought on board.

3. **What did you learn about the populations targeted in your effort (i.e., traditional-aged students, returning adults, adults with no recognized postsecondary education, Black, Hispanic, or Native American students), if applicable (Section III / Project Outcomes / Question 2 and Lumina's Commitment to Racial Equity)?**

The data from the Spring 2020 and Summer 2020 reporting show the following:

- The racial/ethnic demographic distribution of students identified by Finish First NC as new completers and near completers is similar to the demographic distribution of the population of the state of North Carolina.
- Nearly half of new and near completers identified are students of color (45.7% for new completion students and 45.5% for near completion students).
- Students identified are overwhelmingly female (around 60%) for both new and near completion students.
- Close to half are age 25 and older for both new and near completers (44.6% and 46.8%).
- A significant number of students identified are either Pell eligible or have received Pell funding, metrics often used to indicate lower income status (37% for new completion students and 34% for near completion students).

4. If applicable, describe any links you have made or would like to make between this project and other Lumina grants.

In November 2020, Wake Tech received a new Lumina Foundation grant to pilot the project at Louisburg College, a private two-year institution outside of the NC Community College System. Additionally, we look forward to the potential for new research grants that would provide insight into what will help students be successful and into barriers to their success, and we look forward to potential future partnerships with Lumina's research team.

<u>Lessons Applied</u>

How will the lessons learned from this grant affect your future work or the work of others?

1. What additional questions about student postsecondary attainment did this project raise?

- What are barriers to student completion? Are they a question of financial resources, institutional processes, myths among college personnel, something else?
- Can Finish First NC be successfully scaled beyond NC community colleges, specifically to state and independent universities in North Carolina and outside of North Carolina? How should we

plan to achieve the level of leadership buy-in outside of the community college network that we have experienced from our NCCCS colleagues?

- How can the University of North Carolina System Office and North Carolina Community College System office collaborate for student success? What barriers can be removed between institutions?
- How can we maintain sustained funding for initiatives like this in ways that keep students at the center, and, if necessary, are institution agnostic?

2. How have you sustained, or will you sustain, the benefits, momentum and spirit of this project?

Wake Tech's Finish First NC team is committed to building on the successes of this project. Our next steps include the Louisburg College pilot and the creation of a business plan to inform future efforts. We also continue to speak with foundations and other sources to secure future funding to ensure the sustainability of our efforts.

As mentioned above, with respect to individual NCCCS institutions, we host trainings and urge partner colleges to engage multiple, appropriate stakeholders in FFNC activities to promote institutional sustainability.

3. Any other comments or concerns?

Wake Tech looks forward to strengthening our partnership with the Lumina Foundation to increase higher education credential attainment and to make an impact on equitable student success and completion.

Financial Report

Using Lumina's budget template, please account specifically for the use of Lumina grant funds and indicate how these funds have been spent according to the categories submitted in the proposal budget.

Lumina does not require the return of unspent grant funds, provided that these funds are no more than $1,000 and that the balance is used for the grant purpose. The total for unspent funds includes any remaining earned interest. Please note any unspent funds in your financial report and indicate the grant-related purpose for which you will use the funds if retained. No further report on the funds is required.

If unspent funds are more than $1,000, you may request a no-cost grant extension of up to one year to spend the funds, or you may choose to return the unspent funds to the Foundation. Please submit any budget modification or no-cost extension requests on official letterhead, specify the grant-related purpose for which the funds will be used and include a revised budget. *A no-cost extension must be requested **before** the expiration date of the grant, not by the due date for final reports.* A final accounting will be required upon the conclusion of the grant-extension period.

Project Director (or person who prepared this report): Laila Shahid-El, Project Director
Date: 1/26/2021