

# Finish First North Carolina Evaluation Executive Summary

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Finish First North Carolina (FFNC) is a data tool that draws on current and past transcript records to identify students who have fulfilled requirements to complete credentials, but have not claimed them, as well as students who are close to completing a credential. Developed by Wake Technical Community College, FFNC is free to all community colleges in North Carolina through grant funding. As of October 2020, FFNC has been distributed to over 40 of North Carolina's 58 community colleges.

During the spring of 2020, the Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research conducted an evaluation to learn more about the initial implementation of the tool at North Carolina community colleges. The evaluation team invited 19 partner North Carolina community colleges (PCs) to participate in virtual focus groups. During these sessions, the evaluators spoke to 29 staff members about their experiences regarding the FFNC tool. Guided by the Evaluation Questions (EQs) provided to the evaluators by Wake Technical Community College, this report answers questions across three primary areas:

1. Finish First NC Use
2. Finish First NC Implementation and Utilization
3. Partner Colleges' Perception of Finish First NC.

We conclude with recommendations for Wake Technical Community College and PCs planning to implement FFNC on their campus.

## FINDINGS

### ***FFNC Use***

Of the colleges that participated in focus groups, most use the tool to identify both students who completed a credential and those who are very near completion of a degree or certification. While most colleges use the tool to identify completers and near completers that are currently enrolled, only half used the tool to identify students who were previously enrolled.

In addition to variation in the use of the tool, we found that colleges tasked different offices with running the tool. Generally, colleges chose to house the FFNC tool in one of four offices: office of the registrar, information technology, institutional research (IR), and admissions. Once the tool was run, colleges typically sent lists of completers and near completers to units that award credentials (registrars or records office) and units that advise students (advising centers, faculty advisors, or dean's offices).

### ***FFNC Implementation and Utilization***

In addition to documenting colleges' use of FFNC, we also sought to understand the factors that impacted an institution's ability to implement the tool. We found that a colleges' approach to and

levels of implementation were usually dependent on four factors:

1. Leadership support - Though all colleges expressed that their executive leadership was supportive of bringing the tool to campus, leadership support and direction toward units that would be tasked with utilizing the data varied between colleges. Colleges with leaders that more proactively guided units in how to use the data experienced smoother implementation.
2. Personnel capacity - Colleges with more personnel capacity in the units that validated and processed FFNC data were able to implement all functions of FFNC more quickly.
3. Policies - Colleges that already had policies, such as autograduation, in place that facilitated degree completion were able to implement FFNC more fully in the first year.
4. Organizational culture - Colleges with a culture of adjusting to change more quickly were better able to implement the tool on their campuses.

PCs also identified several challenges associated with FFNC implementation. These challenges center around personnel capacity, ability to run the tool in a timely manner, technology issues, and existing institutional policies.

1. Personnel capacity - In some cases, the units whose workflow would be most impacted by FFNC (usually registrar's office or academic advisors) were not fully involved in the implementation process, which caused confusion and inefficiencies.
2. Ability to run the tool in a timely manner - PCs reported that, if the tool were run on near-completers too close to registration, advisors would not have enough time to meet with students about their schedules.
3. Technology issues - Not all PCs set up their student record platforms in the same way, which sometimes prevented FFNC from running correctly.
4. Existing institutional policies - Some PCs' policies, including required graduation applications and frequent changes to curricula, lessened the efficacy of the tool.

### ***PC's Perceptions of FFNC***

Colleges reported that time - initially learning the tool and acting upon the data in terms of graduating and advising identified students - was the primary cost to implementing the tool. Colleges perceived this cost was far outweighed by the benefits colleges reported, which include: increased completion rates, accelerated internal process efficiencies within units, enhanced ability to plan courses based on students' anticipated needs, and opportunities to increase FTE by re-enrolling previously enrolled students.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on our findings, we offer several recommendations for Wake Technical Community College (the creators and administrators of FFNC), as well as colleges hoping to implement the tool on their campus. Below are highlights from the report.

### ***Recommendations for Wake Technical Community College include:***

1. Create a community forum or opportunities for PCs to share promising practices.
2. When bringing new institutions on board with the tool, incorporate resources for key college leaders with successful implementation recommendations. Consider connecting new PCs with PCs that have successfully implemented the tool to encourage mentorship and sharing of

promising practices.

3. Create a manual with detailed instructions on how to run the tool, as well as screenshots for every step.
4. Update the tool to provide student information like demographics and academic adviser in each report.
5. Provide a report for Career & College Promise (CCP) students who are dually enrolled in the community college and their high school.
6. Consider integrating the tool with existing student advising software like AVISO, so that advisors can not only alert near completers, but recommend courses that would fit their program.

### ***Recommendations for colleges planning to implement FFNC include:***

1. Before implementation, bring campus stakeholders together to discuss:
  - a. For which purpose the PC will use the tool.
  - b. Current graduation policies and any possible changes that should be made.
  - c. Stackable credential policies.
  - d. Creating an annual FFNC data timeline.
2. Once implemented, colleges should consider
  - a. Informing the whole college, particularly academic advisers and faculty members, about the tool to avoid confusion.
  - b. Releasing updates once a semester about the use of the tool and its impacts on completion.
  - c. Specifically incorporate language about FFNC in job descriptions and employee evaluations of personnel who will be interacting with the tool frequently.
  - d. Connecting with other colleges to determine other uses for the tool and to share promising practices.
  - e. Communicate with the FFNC team at Wake Technical Community College about any issues with the tool or areas for improvement.

## **ABOUT THIS REPORT**

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*The Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research at NC State's College of Education develops and sustains exceptional community college leadership committed to advancing college access, the social and economic mobility of their colleges' students, and the economic competitiveness of their regions. The Center conducts and disseminates research to address current and emerging student success challenges facing community college leadership and policymakers in North Carolina and beyond.*