Project start date: December 2018
Project end date: December 2022
Period covered by this report: December 2019 – December 2020 (you're welcome to include information about work completed through January and February of 2021 if you'd like)

Thank you for updating us about your work and progress over the last year! We appreciate the time and effort it takes to share this information with our team and look forward to reviewing your responses. We intend to use these reports to:
- *Inform our board and committee members about your accomplishments to date;*
- *Identify ways to better support you in the months ahead;*
- *Capture the lessons you're learning to share with others who could benefit from your insight and experience; and*
- *Generate leads about promising ideas, future projects, and prospective partnerships.*

We encourage brevity, admire candor, and welcome your feedback for our team.

Looking Back:

1. **What have been your most significant successes in the last year? Tell us about any big wins or things that went especially well for you.**

   a. **Adoption of FFNC at North Carolina Community Colleges**
   Grant funding from the John M. Belk Endowment has enabled Wake Tech to extend the Finish First NC data tool to more colleges in the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS). As of January 2021, a total of 47 NCCCS colleges have access to FFNC, comprising 81% of the community colleges in North Carolina. Two additional colleges have expressed interest in using FFNC, and their site visits are currently being scheduled. The project team anticipates scaling the tool to all NCCCS colleges by August 2021. A list of all colleges reached can be viewed in Attachment A.

   b. **User-Focused Software Enhancements**
   After releasing the first version of FFNC (Version 1.0), Wake Tech solicited and received feedback from stakeholders at colleges using FFNC 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 Career and College Promise (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.

   c. **User-Centered Implementation Supports**
   During Year 2, Wake Tech 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.

- **Implementation and Support Resources for Users:** The project team has created several resources for FFNC users at partner colleges to consume and share with others at their institutions. These implementation materials assist FFNC partner colleges in fostering buy-in and engagement with key stakeholders, training personnel, and communicating with students and relevant employees about the importance and potential impacts of using FFNC at their campuses. A major resource for colleges is the FFNC User Companion Guide, which is now in its second edition. These materials are detailed in the Evaluation Updates section.

- **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.

d. **Overall Project Accomplishments**
- **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 unclaimed credentials for which students had already completed requirements (new completion credentials) and 102,653 credentials that students could obtain within one semester (near completion credentials). 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 (through February 2021, a total of 70,878 and 255,557, respectively).

- **"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 colleges realize that their efforts have led to student success.

- **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 at one college 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 now using Finish First NC.

e. **Additional, Unanticipated Positive Outcomes**
   - **Review of Policy Efficacy and Utility:** An unanticipated positive development from this project 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.

   - **Stop-Out Student Outreach and Scholarships:** The Finish First NC project team participated in a joint effort with the UNC System 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 reached out to 1,288 students who were last enrolled in the Fall 2019, Spring 2020, or Summer 2020 semesters, but were not 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 16 credit hours and 50% of their degrees/diplomas remaining to complete. As a result of this effort, 201 students (15% of the 1,288 stop-out students) registered for the 2021 spring semester. This increase in re-enrollment is five percentage points higher than re-enrollment increases from Wake Tech's regular stop-out campaign activities.

     While this use of FFNC for stop-out student outreach has made an impact at Wake Tech, FFNC project staff have also communicated with users from another North Carolina community college about using FFNC for this advanced purpose, and opportunities exist for other high-power FFNC users to take advantage of this feature.

   - **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." 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, which 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 Academic Rumble Strips feature for curriculum education (for-credit college) students. Academic Rumble Strips 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.

     Opportunities exist for other FFNC high-power institutions to take advantage of this advanced FFNC feature.

2. **What challenges have you faced in the last year? Briefly describe what you did to address them and any lessons you learned in the process. How could we have done a better job of helping you navigate these challenges?**

   Below are some challenges the Finish First NC team has encountered and made efforts to address:

   a. **Sporadic Engagement**
   While most colleges (particularly, the early adopters) 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 opted out of using FFNC in favor of keeping their previously established local procedures for processing completers. To combat inconsistent engagement and disengagement, the Finish First NC team has worked to develop support resources and maintain intentional communication with all FFNC stakeholders, as mentioned above.

   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 that were sent to all FFNC colleges. (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 that were in the group of 15 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, initially decided to not adopt FFNC, but has recently decided to test it at their campus starting in January 2021.

   c. **Barriers to Completion**
   A challenge for some FFNC colleges is a lack of consensus regarding completion policies and practices, 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 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 for 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, the project team is expanding its knowledge and seeking out the expertise of those in financial aid (such as the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators) and related areas in order to better support FFNC partner colleges.

   d. **Data Collection Challenges**
   The FFNC team has encountered the following challenges regarding collecting data about the numbers of credentials and students identified and awarded from partner colleges:

- Colleges maintaining proper documentation for data collection periods
- Timing of requests versus differing timeframes of data pulls for each college
- Capturing the number of awarded near completion credentials
- Sufficient participation in data collection

These challenges are explained in detail in Question #1, Item B of the Evaluation Updates section. The project team has made changes to the newest update of the program, FFNC Version 3.0, that will automate some aspects of the data collection request that would otherwise be tedious, time-consuming, and prone to user error. We anticipate this will alleviate some of the data collection challenges in the coming year.

e. **COVID-19 Challenges and Responses**
    The COVID-19 pandemic caused major shifts to learning, teaching and working for all of North Carolina's community colleges in 2020. During this time, personnel from NCCCS colleges prioritized minimizing interruptions to student learning and mitigating the challenges of working from home with limited technology, delayed communication, and strained coordination with other areas of their colleges. Because of this shift in focus, the pandemic affected the extent and consistency of some colleges' ability to engage with the Finish First NC tool and team, and caused the need for some funds intended for travel to be reallocated. However, thanks to the leadership and swift action of the FFNC project team and Wake Tech's culture of excellence, the situation had no adverse impacts on the project scope, timeline, deliverables or operations. The following actions of Wake Tech and the FFNC project team ensured the continued progress of the project:

- Acting quickly, Wake Tech developed a campus-comprehensive COVID-19 Response Plan which represented a rapid innovation targeting the immediate needs caused by the unprecedented situation and served as a hedge against major disruptions.
- In March of 2020, in-person site visits scheduled with new colleges were quickly switched to virtual site visits, and the FFNC team increased communication with partner colleges to maintain uninterrupted support as all NCCCS colleges responded to the disruptions.
- During the Summer of 2020, project staff contacted all FFNC stakeholders to ensure proper functionality of the tool, to offer technical and implementation support, and to connect with any users who were seemingly disengaged due to COVID-19 interruptions or for other reasons.
- The FFNC project team also shared with colleges various new resources to assist FFNC users with effective implementation of the data tool, including a Web site (www.WakeTech.edu/FFNC), how-to videos, webinars, and boiler plate messages to help communicate the benefits of FFNC to stakeholders at partner colleges.
- Wake Tech and its Information Technology Services department implemented and expanded access to remote meeting tools—particularly, Microsoft Teams—which greatly facilitated the project's ability to continue on schedule. This adaptation resulted in cost savings for the project and demonstrates how the team could expand the rollout of Finish First NC to include 4-year UNC institutions and colleges/universities in other states, while holding expenses and time requirements at a minimum.

These responses supported the project's success and helped the Finish First NC team exceed the planned number of colleges scheduled to be reached during 2020.

3. **In what ways have your original plans changed, and what was behind these changes? We're especially interested in whether changes were driven by external factors (e.g., you received feedback from partners that encouraged a change in your approach, new research influenced your project's direction, etc.), internal factors (e.g., staff or personnel changes, evolving organizational priorities, etc.), or a combination of both.**

There have been no changes to the project budget, timeline or deliverables. The project team has submitted a change request to the Belk Endowment to modify the project scope to include exploring technical requirements for expansion outside of the NC community college system. This broadened scope would help the project team

gather important information about considerations for scaling up the FFNC tool to institutions outside of the NCCCS. This proposed change would not have any impact on the project budget.

Based on feedback from partner colleges, Wake Tech updated the Finish First NC tool to be more responsive to stakeholder needs, and added the supports mentioned above in Question #1 to ensure stakeholder success and to promote sustainability.

There are other additional insights that the project gained into strategies and activities that did and did not serve the project purposes well. These insights are captured in Attachment C.

4. **With whom have you partnered or collaborated in the last year? If applicable, please describe how these partnerships have influenced your project.**

   In addition to the North Carolina Community College System Office, Wake Tech has collaborated with several organizations, including the University of North Carolina System Office (UNC), North Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities (NCICU), Lumina Foundation, Louisburg College, Student-Ready Strategies, the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, and the 47 NCCCS colleges that have adopted the Finish First NC data tool. We have also met with other organizations about potential future partnership opportunities. Information about the collaborations continues below:

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

   b. **Collaboration for Independent College Pilot:** Thanks, in part, to collaborations with UNC and the NCICU, in November of 2020, Wake Tech received a Lumina Foundation grant to pilot the FFNC data tool 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 and will provide the FFNC team with important information about resource requirements for scaling up the FFNC tool to other spheres of higher education.

   c. **Consultants Provide Guidance for Potential Next Steps:** The Finish First NC team is currently working with the educational consultant agency Student-Ready Strategies to develop a business plan to scale the FFNC data tool beyond the NCCCS. Wake Tech received funding from the JMBE to contract with SRC business consultants to explore and share the best options for a clear path forward for FFNC. The consultants 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.

   d. **Connecting FFNC Users with Financial Aid Policy Leaders:** The Finish First NC team was able to connect with the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA) regarding common questions FFNC users at partner colleges have regarding the financial aid implications of credential completion. Representatives from the NASFAA have expressed their willingness to connect with users from other NC community colleges who may have questions regarding completion and financial aid. We hope this partnership will result in fewer policy barriers to credential completion.

   e. **Research Partnership:** 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 focus groups that took place during 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.

f.   **Finish First NC Partner Colleges:** As of January 2021, 81% of the community colleges in North Carolina have access to FFNC. Feedback from partner colleges about the FFNC data tool and process of using and adopting the tool has shaped improvements to the tool and to support materials shared. Additionally, partner colleges have shared how the use of Finish First NC has impacted policies and procedures at their institutions regarding completion and advising. Some actions colleges are taking and changes they are implementing as a result of using FFNC include:
   - 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 when a college automatically awards 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.

Looking Ahead:

1.   **What are you most excited about as you reflect on your work in the year ahead? Are there specific milestones or accomplishments that you're especially eager to achieve?**

   a.   **Broadening FFNC access in the NCCCS**: Currently, 81% of community colleges in North Carolina have access to the Finish First NC data tool. The project team hopes to provide access to a FFNC license to all 58 community colleges in the state by the end of August 2021.

   b.   **Developing and formalizing best practice models**: Wake Tech will continue to gather feedback from institutions using FFNC, highlight partner colleges' use of FFNC, and engage colleges in project evaluation activities. This information will be used to develop models of best practices to be shared with current and new partner colleges to ensure that their work is successful and project goals are realized. During the last several partner support webinars, colleges have provided frameworks for using FFNC and shared their best practices and lessons learned with other FFNC users. As we gather more input, we'll be able to formalize these frameworks in our support materials.

   c.   **Increased Clarity on the Impact of FFNC on NCCCS colleges:** Wake Tech began sharing the FFNC tool with NCCCS colleges in 2018. We anticipate being able to begin noting, in earnest, the first impacts of FFNC on Fall 2018 cohorts in NCCCS performance measures very soon. Impacts may be seen on Fall 2018 cohort

students who have received credentials identified in FFNC in May 2021 NCCCS data and impacts on four-year completion measures should be more evident in performance data in May of 2022.

d. **Determining Next Steps for FFNC Expansion**: As mentioned above, Wake Tech is currently working with a consultant to develop a business plan regarding viable options for expanding the reach of Finish First NC. The plan should be completed by June 2021 and will help inform Wake Tech's next steps for the robust data tool. The FFNC team looks forward to learning more about the possibilities for extending access to FFNC to more of North Carolina's colleges, leading to more higher education credentials.

In addition to these shorter-term aspirations, Wake Tech anticipates a number of longer-term outcomes from the NCCCS colleges implementing the Finish First NC data tool. The benefits of using FFNC for NCCCS colleges will last beyond Belk Endowment funding, and will 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 North Carolina 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. **Baccalaureate Degree Attainment and Labor Market Impact:** System-wide adoption of the FFNC tool means increased credential attainment statewide, 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 to four-year institutions by the 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.

2. **What obstacles or roadblocks do you anticipate facing in the coming months? How might we offer our support as you work through these?**

   Reaching the final 11 colleges in the NC community college system will likely be more challenging than reaching the early adopters and other colleges that have already adopted FFNC. There may be reasons that colleges have not yet chosen to find out more about FFNC. The FFNC team is working with the NCCCS to reach out to colleges to provide the opportunity for all community colleges in the state to have access to the Finish First NC data tool.

   Additionally, as mentioned above, data collection for semester data has been a challenge. The team has faced hurdles regarding sufficient participation in data collection, timing of requests and timeframes of data pulls, colleges maintaining proper documentation for data collection periods and capturing the number of awarded near completion credentials (these challenges are detailed in Question #1, Item B of the Evaluation Updates section). The project team has made changes to the newest update of the program, FFNC Version 3.0, that will automate some aspects of the data collection request that would otherwise be tedious, time-consuming, and prone to user error. We anticipate this will alleviate some of the data collection challenges in the coming year.

3. **With which organizations or groups are you interested in partnering in the coming year? If there are specific introductions or connections that we could help to facilitate, please mention them here.**

   Wake Tech will continue to work with the NC Community College System Office to discuss the best ways to maintain support for NC community colleges as the FFNC project begins to come to a close. We will also continue conversations about options for extending access to Finish First NC to UNC System and NCICU member colleges. Belk Endowment support for the business plan development will be instrumental in these efforts in the coming year.

   Wake Tech is interested in working with groups focused on completion, such as the National Student Clearinghouse, myFutureNC, Lumina Foundation, the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) and others, as well as exploring how to bring the success of FFNC to other states. Wake Tech is open to any suggested partnerships.

Financial Updates:

1. **Have there been any changes to your organization's federal tax-exempt status since you were awarded this grant? If so, please describe them.**

   There have been no changes.

2. **Have there been any changes to your organization's financial governance structures or processes in the last year? Examples might include changing auditors, hiring new personnel, instituting new policies, etc.**

   In March of 2020, Wake Tech hired a new internal auditor to assist its Financial and Business Services department.

3. **Describe your work's overall financial sustainability. Have you secured any new funding partners for this work in the last year? How much have they committed and over what period of time? Have they placed any restrictions on their funding? Are you exploring other potential sources of funding (or opportunities to generate revenue)? If so, tell us more about them.**

   While we have not secured any new funding partners, we are appreciative of new support from the following agencies, as mentioned above:

- Lumina Foundation: $31,000 to pilot Finish First NC at Louisburg College, a private, two-year college in Louisburg, NC.
- John M. Belk Endowment: $12,000 to explore the expansion of Finish First NC with the group Student-Ready Strategies.

Other than spending funds according to each grant budget, there are no particular restrictions on the funding. The second award from JMBE will inform Wake Tech's future efforts with Finish First NC, including its sustainability.

4. **Have there been any substantial changes to your organization's expenses as reported in the operating budget you provided with your grant application? If so, please provide a brief explanation (including the dollar amount of change).**

Wake Tech is carrying over $131,704.86 in unexpended funds from Year 2 to Year 3. This carryover amount includes $48,129 that was carried over from Year 1 to Year 2, due to prior funding from the Lumina Foundation (Adult Promise grant) being utilized during Year 1 of the project, as well as delays in spending for the project from Year 1 (as detailed in the Year 1 annual report).

Unspent funds were also due to funds that were dedicated to support travel funds for project staff and personnel at partner colleges. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the vast majority of these funds went unspent.

As mentioned in the Year 1 annual report, personnel expenses originally budgeted for Years 1 and 2 were reorganized to support positions that were deemed a priority once the project began. This included hiring a project director, hiring a second part-time data analyst, and placing a hold on hiring an application developer. Funds originally budgeted for the application developer were reallocated to cover the cost of the two added positions, with no negative impact to the overall Personnel budget.

5. **Please share an updated project budget that compares your actual spending to date with the amounts you originally budgeted for this work in your grant application. If you've experienced variance greater than 10% in your spending as compared to your initial grant budget, please include a brief explanation.**

Please see the attached budget template. As we enter Year 3 of the project, we request a modification of the budget to realign projected expenses with the remaining objectives and deliverables for the project. There is a total Year 2 carryover balance of $131,704.86. We request to allocate these funds as follows:

Personnel: We request to allocate $54,721.73 of the Year 2 carryover balance to personnel expenses. This brings the total Year 3 Personnel budget to $296,060.33. These funds will be used to cover the cost of personnel working through January 2022, increase co-PI Dr. Wang's percent of effort to 30% starting in December 2020, increase PI Ryan's percent of effort to 10% starting in January 2021, and removing the application developer position.

Benefits: We request to allocate $12,040.60 of the Year 2 carryover balance to benefits for the budgeted personnel positions (as realigned above).

Travel: We request to decrease the Year 3 travel budget by $2,750, bringing the Year 3 balance to $22,250. Travel funds will be used to support local staff travel and registration costs for all 58 colleges to the NCCCS Fall Conference.

Trainings/Conferences: We request to allocate $11,500 of the Year 2 carryover balance to cover the cost of training opportunities for the FFNC project team.

Materials & Supplies: We request to allocate $4,892.28 of the Year 2 carryover balance to cover the cost of general office supplies and procurement of project management and email management software.

Communication: We request to allocate $6,000 of the Year 2 carryover balance to cover the cost of communication materials, such as manuals, flyers, palm cards, and education content for colleges.

Consultants: We request to allocate $45,300 of the Year 2 carryover balance to cover the cost of the Belk Center evaluation contract as well as hiring training consultants for Partner College webinars.

Evaluation Updates:

Please take a moment to review the attachment summarizing the desired activities/outputs, outcomes, and impacts of your project, which we pulled directly from your grant application. This information will guide your responses to the questions in this section.

1. **Where do you currently stand with respect to your project's anticipated activities and/or outputs? Please be as specific as possible when providing updates about your progress. For future outputs (things that will be measured in the coming months but have not yet occurred), briefly describe whether you anticipate being on track.**

   a. **Output #1: This project will identify students who have completed the requisite credits to earn a credential and students who are within a defined number of credit hours from earning a credential.**
   In the fall of 2020, the Finish First NC team collected data from colleges for the Spring 2020 and Summer 2020 semesters. Twenty-five colleges submitted data, indicating that FFNC identified 18,537 unique new completion students and 45,296 unique near completion students for the two semesters. Due to the timing of the semester data collection, the independent evaluation team at the NCSU Belk Center was unable to include the Fall 2020 semester data collection in its report. Information about this effort is described further below.

   Additionally, data from test runs from the beginning of the project through February 2021 show that FFNC has identified 70,642 previously unawarded credentials for which students across North Carolina have completed the requisite credits and 254,894 credentials for which students are within one semester of completing the requisite credits.

   b. **Output #2: The colleges will then use this information to <u>contact students</u> about receiving the credential or <u>re-enrolling</u> to complete the additional credits required for the credential. (Note that colleges have different capacities to re-connect with students and guide them to completion. Such resources are outside the scope of this request.)**
   For the recent data collection for the Spring 2020 and Summer 2020 semesters, FFNC users shared the following feedback on how their colleges are using data from the Finish First NC data tool to contact students who are close to completion about completing the evaluated credentials:

   - "The Advising Center reviews the lists, contacts the students via email and/or phone and encourages the students to register for classes to complete their current degree as well as any newly identified degrees, diplomas, or certificates. This is used as an advising and registration tool to ensure that students are on track for successful completion of as many stackable credentials as possible that are available to the student."
   - "This has been a collaborative effort between Advising and Records to process near completers and new completers. Our Advising team is directly reaching out to near completers to assist them in registering and understand courses remaining to graduate."

- "The data was pulled and reviewed by the Registrar's office. If programs were complete, they were completed in the system. If they were close to completion, their information was sent to the advising office and academic program deans for outreach."
- "Student Records staff also sends the "Near" completers list to our Advising Center staff for review. Part-time advising center staff reach out to the "Near" completers who have completed 75% or more of a degree, diploma, or certificate. They encourage registration in those classes to complete the new program option and also explain how the coursework may or may not correlate to their current program of study."
- "Over 1,000 near completers are being contacted personally by Academic Advisor[s] this semester to discuss plans to completion and encourage graduation."

To further encourage colleges to contact students identified by the Finish First NC tool, the most recent version of the data tool has the added feature of including student contact information directly in the FFNC output files. This reduces the time it takes for FFNC users to search for contact information for each student, and frees them up to focus more immediately on reaching students to encourage completions.

Additionally, as mentioned above, Wake Tech partnered with the company InsideTrack to reach out to Wake Tech students identified as stop-out students by FFNC data and encourage them to re-enroll. Of the 1,288 stop-out students that InsideTrack contacted, 558 were within 15 credit hours of completing degrees/diplomas, and the rest of them had between 16 credit hours and 50% of their degrees/diplomas remaining to complete. This effort resulted in more than 200 students who were previously not enrolled registering for courses for the 2021 spring semester.

For the recent data collection for the Spring 2020 and Summer 2020 semesters, the 25 participating colleges reported 6,602 new completion credentials awarded during those semesters thanks to Finish First NC. In this same data collection, the FFNC team also asked colleges to report on the number of near completion credentials awarded to students who were active in the semester immediately preceding the reporting period (that is, students active in the Fall 2019 semester for the Spring 2020 report or students active in the Spring 2020 semester for the Summer 2020 report). Colleges reported awarding a total of 9,104 previously identified near completion credentials in the subsequent semester.

It is worth noting that credentials that are accurately identified by FFNC are sometimes unable to be awarded for policy reasons, such as students previously receiving a higher-level credential in the same area of study or the termination of a program at the time of credential verification preventing the credential being awarded. Each college develops and abides by its own policies regarding whether legitimate identified credentials can be awarded.

The Finish First NC regards the above Spring 2020 and Summer 2020 semester data as highly understated. There are a few limitations of the data that should be taken into account:

- 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 such 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 ensure the data request was accurately fulfilled, the data may go unaccounted for.
- With only 25 colleges reporting, the project team is unable to fully document awarded FFNC credentials from all colleges using the Finish First NC data tool.

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

c. **Output #3: A secondary output is understanding why the student did not complete the credential.**
Independent evaluators from the Belk Center at NCSU are currently in the process of developing research protocols for interviewing students. Student interviews will likely take place during the final months of the Spring 2021 semester. We look forward to better understanding barriers to student completion in the coming year.

2. **Do you have any specific outcomes (results) to report at this time? For outcomes occurring in the future that cannot yet be measured, briefly describe whether you anticipate being on track.**

a. **Outcome #1: Increase completion rates among curriculum students.**
As stated in Question #1 above, 25 FFNC colleges reported awarding 6,602 new completion credentials and 9,104 near completion credentials for the Spring 2020 and Summer 2020 semesters alone.

Additionally, to date, the Finish First NC team has verified that at just Wake Tech, more than 11,000 credentials have been awarded to students since it began using Finish First NC in 2015.

The completion rate at Wake Tech has increased by 6 percentage points from the Fall 2015 cohort. Since Wake Tech began disseminating the FFNC tool to NCCCS colleges in the Spring of 2018, impacts on four-year completion rates for Fall 2018 cohorts at colleges using FFNC should begin to be observable in NCCCS dashboard data in May 2021. We anticipate being able to measure this target outcome at that time and also anticipate observing a greater impact in May of 2022 NCCCS dashboard data.

b. **Outcome #2: Increase the number of NC adults with a credential beyond high school.**
Quantitative data collected for the Spring 2020 and Summer 2020 semesters suggest that Finish First NC will make a significant impact on the number of NC adults with a credential beyond high school.

For just these two academic terms, 25 of the partner colleges reported 18,537 new completion students identified and 45,296 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. Data from the Spring 2020 and Summer 2020 data collection are included in Attachment D.

As stated above, 25 FFNC colleges reported awarding more than 6,600 new completion credentials and more than 9,100 near completion credentials for the Spring 2020 and Summer 2020 semesters. Participation in this data reporting period was about 60%. The project team will continue to track this measure and looks forward to sharing additional results.

c. **Outcome #3: Develop measures to help more students complete and attain credentials of value.**
The FFNC project team has developed the following tools to help colleges successfully encourage students to complete and claim their credentials of value:

- Training on using the FFNC data tool and implementing FFNC at the host institution sustainably, including fostering longer-term buy-in with personnel of interest.
- Sample email messages to send to students regarding their unclaimed completed credentials or regarding credentials that can be claimed in the following semester. The team also developed sample messages for advising personnel about encouraging students to complete near completion credentials and registration personnel about awarding unclaimed completed credentials. FFNC users can send these messages as they are or customize them for their students and personnel.
- A robust user companion guide that includes instructional and support materials for FFNC partner colleges. The content in the guide helps users run the FFNC program, establish a workflow at their college for working cross-departmentally with FFNC, tips for when to run the FFNC tool, fostering buy-in among key stakeholders, etc.
- On-demand videos that provide step-by-step instructions on how to run the FFNC data tool and read its outputs, as well as the necessary input files.
- One of the most popular resources for partner colleges has been Partner Support Webinars, particularly Partner College Spotlight segments. During Partner College Spotlights, FFNC users share with other colleges, their purposes for using the FFNC data tool, their institutional workflow, any impacts from or policy changes due to using FFNC, lessons learned, institutional best practices for using FFNC and recommendations to new colleges adopting the data tool.

Examples of these measures are included in the report attachments.

3. **How are you thinking about tracking the impact of your project? Are there things we can do now to set you up for success in evaluating whether your work leads to the longer-term changes you hope to make?**

   a. **Impact #1: The primary impact of this project is improved labor market outcomes for students. Data shows that individuals with postsecondary credentials have better labor market outcomes than those earning only a high school diploma. Further, on average individuals' earnings increase with higher educational attainment. This project will not only provide students with the immediate benefit of having a credential, it will also encourage them to build on this success and continue their education.**
   While tracking employment and salary information after credential attainment is a challenge, the FFNC project team is continually considering how to access labor market outcome information for students in the 58 NC community colleges. We are currently discussing feasible ways to track and report on this data with the NC Community College System Office information technology team.

   b. **Impact #2: The information gathered from the individuals identified will assist colleges in reducing the number of students who do not finish and earn a credential.**
   The Finish First NC tool identifies unclaimed credentials for which students have fulfilled the requirements and credentials that students are within striking distance of completing. Since FFNC output files contain student information, colleges are able to contact students to encourage them to claim their completed credentials or to complete credentials within striking distance, reducing the number of students who do not finish and earn a credential. The most recent version of FFNC, Version 3.0, also displays student contact information directly in the FFNC output files, reducing the amount of time FFNC users spend searching for contact information for students, and empowering users to focus more immediately on reaching students to encourage completions.

   As mentioned above, 25 partner colleges reported awarding more than 6,600 new completion credentials and more than 9,100 near completion credentials for the Spring 2020 and Summer 2020 semesters.

   Additionally, researchers at the NCSU Belk Center are currently developing protocols for interviewing students identified by the FFNC tool regarding their perspectives on credential attainment. We look forward to the results further informing our efforts to reduce the number of students who do not finish and earn a credential.

4. **If applicable, please describe any changes you've made to the evaluation plan you shared in your grant application. Are you still evaluating your progress in the way(s) you anticipated? Why or why not?**

   a. **Original Shared Evaluation Plan: Both a summative and formative evaluation will be conducted. Information will be gathered about the number and rates of credentials conferred prior to implementation and post-implementation at each participating institution. A survey instrument will be created that will inquire about the barriers and challenges these students faced and why they did not finish.**
   The FFNC project team continues with its plan to conduct a summative and formative evaluation. In addition to seeking input from students concerning barriers to completion, the project team and researchers continue to gather input from stakeholders at partner colleges regarding their experiences using and implementing FFNC at their institutions, including information regarding challenges, successes, and their processes of implementation.

Feedback for JMBE:

1. **What questions are we not asking you that we should be? Conversely, are there questions we're asking that we shouldn't be?**

   Some additional questions to consider include the following:
   1. How does the project/intervention impact completion across demographic and socioeconomic groups?
   2. How is the project/intervention promoting solutions that are high impact? High volume? Low resource? Low cost?

2. **Are there any people or groups doing great work with whom you think we should connect? We also welcome your thoughts and ideas about what to consider as next steps for our grantmaking more generally.**

   The Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP), a research and policy organization focused on increasing access and success in postsecondary education.

3. **While not required, we'd love for you to share any stories, photos, videos, or other materials related to your work that you'd like our team to see. If we're allowed to share these on our website or social media, please indicate your permission for us to do so. These might be emailed to us as attachments, shared via Google Drive or Dropbox, mailed on a flash drive, etc. – pick whatever method works best for you!**

   The following items are included in the report attachments. All may be shared except instructional videos, the companion guide, and the site visit and demo presentations.

   - Finish First NC Web site
   - Finish First NC Brochures/flyers
   - Informational videos
   - Instructional videos
   - Partner College Spotlight videos
   - Coordinated email communications to support new colleges
   - User Companion guide to support implementation of the data tool
   - Site visit presentation
   - Demo presentation

4. **Do you have any suggestions or general feedback for us? How can we be better partners to you in the year ahead?**

Wake Tech looks forward to strengthening our partnership with the John M. Belk Endowment to increase higher education credential attainment in North Carolina and to make an impact on equitable student success and completion.