

Improvement Bets on Campus

HEERF AND STRATEGIES FOR STUDENT SUCCESS AT DURHAM TECHNICAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Postsecondary education leaders have a tremendous opportunity to reimagine current systems and uplift often underserved adult learners through strategic use of the federal stimulus provided by the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security ([CARES](#)), Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations ([CRRSA](#)), and American Rescue Plan ([ARP](#)) Acts. In alignment with the Accelerating Recovery through Credentials [Rapid Response Toolkit](#) and [Adult-Ready Playbook](#), this case study focuses on Durham Technical Community College's strategic and innovative use of the federal higher education emergency relief funds (HEERF) to scale and test student success initiatives that positively impact both traditional-aged and adult student populations.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- 1** Durham Tech **democratized HEERF spending to fully engage faculty and staff** in operationalizing the institution's newly adopted strategic plan.
- 2** **Strong advising and wraparound support services are essential** to student success at Durham Tech, therefore leaders—both at the institution and within the community—are investing to sustain student success coaching roles.
- 3** To meet students' desire for flexibility, Durham Tech **invested in faculty to develop more online, synchronous coursework** opportunities for high-demand fields.
- 4** **Grassroots support, local government, philanthropic leadership, and braided funding are key** to building a stronger, more robust economy and workforce.

The COVID-19 pandemic required higher education leaders to rapidly respond to the needs of their students and community. Traditional modalities of learning transitioned to virtual formats, personal health was of utmost importance, students' basic needs became a prioritized concern, and seismic shifts in our labor markets displaced a number of workers. When the federal stimulus became available to address these changes, Durham Technical Community College, a public, two-year institution nested in North Carolina's Research Triangle, took it as an opportunity to deliver on their [2021-2026 strategic plan](#). Working closely with stakeholders at the institution and across the service area—Durham and Orange counties—leaders have leveraged key elements of their strategic plan to inform targeted deployment of the federal higher education emergency relief funds (HEERF) in ways that have a deep impact on students, including adult learners.

Democratizing Rapid Response: Identifying 'Improvement Bets' on Campus

Durham Tech approached the newly-available stimulus funds as an opportunity to empower the entire campus community as active participants in achieving the college's strategic priorities. As a first step, leadership met with the Internal Council members to collect initial ideas. Then, an [institution-wide survey](#) was distributed to faculty and staff to weigh in on how HEERF should and could be spent to further student success, namely through retention and completion efforts.

In total, 53 proposals were submitted across the institution. Many of the strategically aligned investments—effectively titled “improvement bets”—are being supported using the federal stimulus. Funded bets either meet a one-time critical need or provide initial support with the intent of later being adopted into the institution's annual budget. Bets include technological innovations and upgrades, coaches for navigational support, additional emergency aid to students, increased capacity for academic advising, and wraparound support services to improve completion rates for non-credit, workforce-aligned programs.

While the institution often relies on philanthropic funding to inspire innovation, HEERF gave faculty and staff an opportunity to be experimental and seek new opportunities to meet and exceed key performance indicators tied to the institution's strategic plan. Further, the funds helped the institution double down on efforts to make data-inspired decisions that inform institutional and student priorities.

A variety of thought partners and philanthropic organizations—including the NC Reconnect initiative launched by the [John M Belk Endowment](#)—have been influential in helping identifying priorities, supporting adults, scaling institutional capacity, and pinpointing labor market opportunities. Institutional leaders, in combination with other funding sources, have used these one-time funds to accelerate community-wide conversations on financial sustainability, student engagement, and the importance of meeting workforce demands.

As part of a democratization of the HEERF spending process, 53 “improvement bet” proposals were submitted from across the institution.

Adult Learners: A Priority for a New Age

It is clear that Durham Tech comprehensively and systemically addresses the needs of adult learners through robust navigational, academic, and wraparound support services provided on campus. Institutional leaders strategically used HEERF to build upon existing efforts to serve adult learners. Durham Tech's success strategies are in line with Education Strategy Group's *Adult-Ready Playbook: A Comprehensive Policy and Practice Guide to Improve Outcomes for Post-traditional Learners*. Core components of the systemic change needed to serve adult learners—**accessibility, program change, operational change, data and partnerships**—have been prioritized at Durham Tech. To assist institutions working to innovate systems that were established to serve traditional-aged students, HEERF can be a tool to expedite action and Durham Tech is an exemplar in this space.

Using HEERF, state, county, and philanthropic funds, Durham Tech's Back to Work scholarship program was scaled to increase **accessibility** of postsecondary education for displaced learners seeking to upskill and re-skill. This grant provides aid to students pursuing careers in high-demand, high-wage fields (e.g., biotechnology, information technology, construction trades, etc.). The scholarship covers students' full tuition cost and issues up to \$250 for other education-related expenses, including textbooks and technological needs. Coursework is completed in as little as six to eight weeks to assist students eager to get back to work. Research suggests that affordability is a primary concern shared among adult learners when considering postsecondary education.¹ While federal guidance precludes the use of HEERF for marketing and recruitment, using the fund to address program costs for adult learners can help build effective on-ramps to postsecondary education and training.

The pandemic shifted our learning environments and required faculty to reimagine how they delivered coursework and developed active learning ecosystems. Using HEERF, Durham Tech has prioritized investing in faculty to deliver more flexible course options, including additional online, synchronous classes for high-demand programs following the pandemic. Durham Tech aims to meet students where they are and expand the reach of postsecondary classrooms through this approach. **Program change**, such as this, is an effective way to engage adult learners who are often juggling multiple obligations and busy schedules.

Leaders at Durham Tech are using HEERF to invest in coaches who connect students to other institutional and social benefits—food pantries, public transportation, academic tutoring, SNAP, and secure housing—that are necessary for their personal well-being and success. In addition, the institution has expanded services at the institution's Center for College and Community Service to better support adult students with children. Staff are also charged with leading a pre-college transition program for adult learners to share the variety of academic and social resources available to them. This added capacity is a completion strategy, one that will help more underserved students attain credentials and cross the finish line into careers with high wage thresholds. This sort of coordinated **operational change** is

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1 Sheffer, H., Palmer, I. & Mattei, A. (2020). The comeback story: How adults return to school to complete their degree. Center on Education, Labor, and Skills. https://d1y8sb8igg2f8e.cloudfront.net/documents/The_Comeback_Story_.pdf

needed to holistically support adult learners as they balance life's challenges with academic coursework.²

Sound **data** use is embedded throughout the entirety of Durham Tech's strategic plan and subsequent "improvement bets." For example, the college formed a data work group consisting of 25 faculty and staff members. This group served on one of six subgroups to assist colleagues in analyzing College data and using it to identify top priorities. To submit a proposal for an improvement bet, it was required to show how the proposed work tied into College metrics. To measure the impact of these investments in the improvement bets, data teams will be tracking withdraw rates, first year progress and credit accrual, retention rates, success rates in college-level mathematics and English courses, basic skill program enrollment, progression, and completion, earnings premiums, work-based learning participation and licensure rates. In doing so, the college used HEERF as a tool to build data capacity and infrastructure at the departmental level. This investment will help the institution identify promising practices that uplift students, faculty, staff, and the community.

Even prior to the pandemic, Durham Tech has forged a number of **community-based partnerships** that have significantly contributed to the success of students and the institution. The county commissioners for Orange and Durham counties are assisting to sustain HEERF investments by covering the cost of newly-hired coaching staff. Further, the Chambers of Commerce and Economic Development Offices for both Orange and Durham counties have proven to be thought partners in enabling student success at Durham Tech. Durham Tech regularly convenes with state and regional partners to discuss labor market shortages, adult learner success, and how to achieve the state's desired economy.

Through each of the priorities listed above, HEERF has been an important tool to expedite strategic work at Durham Tech. It is important to note that each of these uses of HEERF are allowed and encouraged by the U.S. Department of Education (see [ARPA 2021 HEERF III FAQ link](#)).

Conclusion

Tightly aligning HEERF investments to strategic priorities is necessary for student success. Institutional leaders should make investments that they are committed to in the long term. Broadening the scope of decision-making by convening a variety of stakeholders will assist efforts to build strong partnerships and rethink how higher education is delivered. Communicating regularly with students, faculty, and staff will help leaders understand the unique needs of their campus constituents, including adult learners.

2 Blankenstein, M., and Wolf-Eisenberg, C., Measuring the Whole Student: Landscape Review of Traditional and Holistic Approaches to Community College Student Success; September 30, 2020. <https://sr.ithaka.org/publications/measuring-the-whole-student/#post-313888-footnote-33>

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Durham Tech has taken actionable steps to engage their community using HEERF, largely through braided funding and community-based partnerships. Leaders have thoughtfully deployed federal HEERF dollars, allowing for a more democratic approach in its spending. The institution's strategic use of the federal stimulus will have a deep, lasting impact on students and the regional economy. For institutional leaders looking to become an adult-ready institution, ESG recommends leveraging our 'Enroll. Complete. Compete.' framework that highlights strategic stimulus investments to advance adult learner success. At Durham Tech, leaders have invested in a striking 7 out of 10 strategies, and the other 3 are primed to be scaled up in year two of the institution's strategic plan implementation:

- Target aid at post-traditional learners to ensure personal well-being and academic success, while supporting enrollment in high-quality pathways.
- Promote high-quality, in-demand credentials through targeted aid and program support.
- Partner with community-based organizations to provide satellite programs, services, and course offerings to students in diverse locales.
- Incentivize students to move from part-time to full-time status and/or continuously enroll in degree programs following certificate completion.
- Build and sustain capacity for effective and proactive advising.
- Increase course and program structure flexibility to better meet the needs of post-traditional students.
- Integrate career and academic advising that elevates real-time labor market data to inform students of high-wage, high-quality pathways and careers.
- Strengthen relationships with local employers to design programs and enhance regional labor market pipelines.
- Bolster students' social and economic mobility by increasing access to and investing in work-based learning aligned with their academic pursuits.
- Strengthen institutional data capacity to track graduate outcomes and for program quality improvement, especially for programs enrolling large numbers of post-traditional learners, learners of color, and low-income students.