

# Rural Adults: Navigating Transfer and Life Experiences

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## Introduction and Project Background

Since 2021, the Transfer Research Team at UNC Charlotte has sought to examine community college (CC) transfer student experiences in North Carolina (NC) using a multi-method approach including large-scale qualitative data and those from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE). Through a series of research briefs using data from multiple institutions across the state, we have shared findings on student navigation through the complex transfer ecosystem, experiences during the college transition process, and predictors of successful university transfer on a more macro scale. See our prior reports: <https://sites.google.com/uncc.edu/uncctransferresearchproject/home>

While the experiences and outcomes of our current participants paint an important picture about transfer in NC and yield recommendations for policy and practice, we know that not all subgroups of students experience transfer in the same way. The next phase of our project is to tell the stories of students within important vertical transfer student subgroups to explore the nuanced experiences of specific populations seeking to transition to a university. This report describes the vertical transfer journeys of adult students who have attended rural community colleges.

# Literature and North Carolina Context

Low tuition, open access, flexible scheduling, location, and inclusive missions make CCs vital to economic and social mobility<sup>1</sup>. For rural communities, CCs are local, representative, and inclusive institutions for students in more remote areas<sup>2</sup>. Existing literature on rural students highlights barriers related to their college pursuits and successes. Based on their geographic identity alone, rural students have historically experienced greater inequities related to education than students in urban areas<sup>3</sup>. Adult students also face barriers during transfer, such as navigating processes and policies tailored to traditional-aged students<sup>4</sup>. Our previous findings show that a greater percentage of transfer students to UNC System campuses from NC CCs in more economically distressed (often rural) counties make the transition with an Associate in Applied Science (AAS) degree, which is not a part of the state’s Comprehensive Articulation Agreement (CAA)<sup>5</sup>. Although there are many institution-specific articulation agreements for AAS degrees, attempting to transfer with more career-focused degrees can sometimes present challenges.

In addition to their transfer pathway, adult students also must consider childcare, employment, and other essential responsibilities<sup>6</sup>. In NC, the educational attainment rate for adults over 25 in rural counties is 11% for associate degree completion and 14% for bachelor’s degree completion compared to the state average of 10% and 24%, respectively<sup>7</sup>. Within the UNC System, 30% of new or continuing students are from rural NC, and 36% of new or continuing rural students transferred from another institution.

## Current Study and Participants

This report includes findings from a multi-method study using quantitative and qualitative research methods with a total of 222 participants (see Table 1). For the quantitative study, we identified six rural NC community colleges within a statewide 2017-2019 CCSSE dataset (Rural Serving Institutions or Carnegie Classification). The analytic sample for the quantitative study (n=210) included only rural CC students who indicated transfer as a reason for attending a CC, had completed more than 2 semesters, and were 25 years of age or older.

**Table 1: Demographic Profile of Participants from Qualitative and Quantitative Study**

Characteristic	Quantitative Study n=210	Qualitative Study n=12
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	40 (19.0%)	4 (33.3%)
Female	163 (77.6%)	8 (66.7%)
Other	1 (0.5%)	-
Prefer not to respond	6 (2.9%)	-
<b>Age</b>		
25 – 29	77 (36.7%)	6 (50%)
30 – 39	80 (38.1%)	4 (33.3%)
40 – 49	40 (19.0%)	2 (16.7%)
50+	13 (6.2%)	-
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
Asian	1 (0.5%)	-
Black or African American	52 (24.8%)	1 (8.3%)
Hispanic or Latino	11 (5.2%)	2 (16.7%)
Native Hawaiian	1 (0.5%)	-
White	107 (51.0%)	8 (66.7%)
Other	5 (2.4%)	-
2 or more race/ethnicity groups	17 (8.1%)	1 (8.3%)
Prefer not to respond	16 (7.6%)	-
<b>Other</b>		
Dependent children at home	134 (64.1%)	7 (58.3%)

The qualitative portion stems from a statewide longitudinal research study designed to understand NC transfer students' pre- and post-transfer experiences. The present study includes a sample (n=12) of pre- and post-transfer students attending NC CCs, private and independent colleges and universities, and public baccalaureate granting institutions. Participants in the qualitative dataset attended CCs that were identified as Rural Serving Institutions (RSIs) and self-identified as rural students. Collectively, these studies sought to explore the role that rural and adult identities play in their vertical transfer experiences in NC.

## Findings

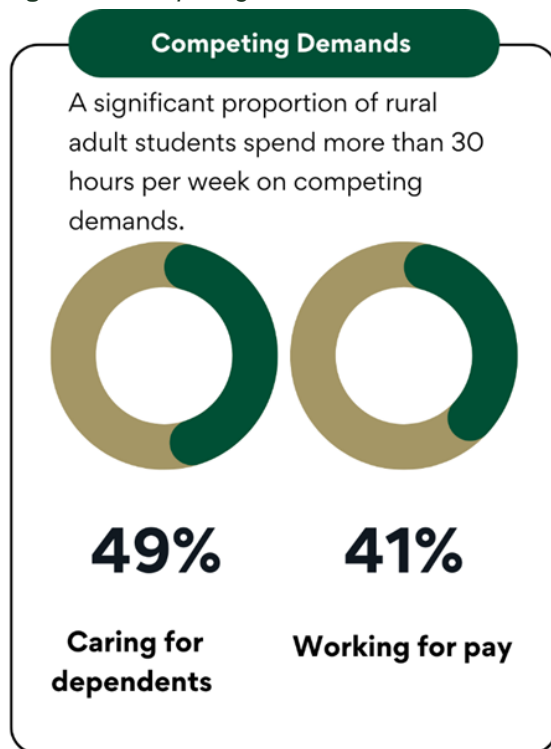
Rural adult students' transfer experiences are shaped by their identities in three ways: 1) competing demands based on familial and work responsibilities, 2) familial motivation and support, and 3) increased cost sensitivity and career motivation that drive transfer choices.

### Finding #1: Rural Adult Student Identities Inform Transfer Choices

Rural adult students navigate competing commitments tied to their adult identities. These commitments include working, caretaking, and commuting to various destinations. For many rural adult students, time management was "the most challenging thing," as they were unsure of their availability because balancing multiple responsibilities was "chaotic." Due to the nature and extent of these competing demands, rural adult students are drawn to institutions based on location and convenience.

The findings from the quantitative study (Figure 1) document how rural adult transfer students have competing responsibilities in addition to their academic work. We observed that 41% of the respondents work more than 30 hours per week and 49% of respondents spend more than 30 hours caring for dependents. These findings show that rural adult transfer students are juggling significant time commitments outside of their academic work. With their time heavily divided between multiple demanding roles, students find themselves having to judiciously navigate the demands between academics, caring for dependents, and full-time employment.

Figure 1: *Competing Life Demands of Rural Adults*



*But that my identity also definitely comes up when I have to talk about care for my son, because my son is autistic. So, I definitely have to go visit him. And he stays with my parents right now, but when it comes to certain appointments for his therapies, and there's just some that I have to be there for. And I can't always necessarily make it back to class. And I have to communicate that with, potentially, well, at least my lab partner.*

**Gladys, post-transfer student, completed AA, attending a public university**

*I also mentioned that the location is convenient. That's one. The second, economically speaking, is actually way more affordable. The third will be that I could actually still manage my life around here. Just, you don't have to drive so much down there. Because what happened is it's a 15-minute drive to have a community college next to you, so you still can have a full-time job around here...Because what happened is you're not only thinking about college, there are other variables involved, other aspects of life that you have to think of.*

**Pablo, post-transfer student, completed AS, attending a public university**

## Finding #2: Family Matters

The role of families in rural adult students' transfer process emerged as an important finding that highlights the types of supports families provide. Rural adult students glean support and motivation from their familial roles while simultaneously acknowledging the competing demands of those roles. Students described feeling motivated by familial circumstances such as growing up in poverty and breaking generational cycles of substance abuse and mental health issues. Other students described how having young children or becoming parents motivated them to seek financial security through higher education.

From the quantitative data, we observed that a vast majority (89%) of students indicated that their family supported their decision to attend the CC. However, about 73% of the respondents stated that, although their family provided support for college attendance, the support did not include financial support for tuition. These findings demonstrate that students received substantial encouragement, advice, motivation, and emotional support from their families, but the financial aspect of their education was left for them to manage on their own as adults. Notwithstanding the fact that most of these students are largely responsible for funding their education, it was evident that family encouragement and guidance are essential for helping them navigate the transfer journey.

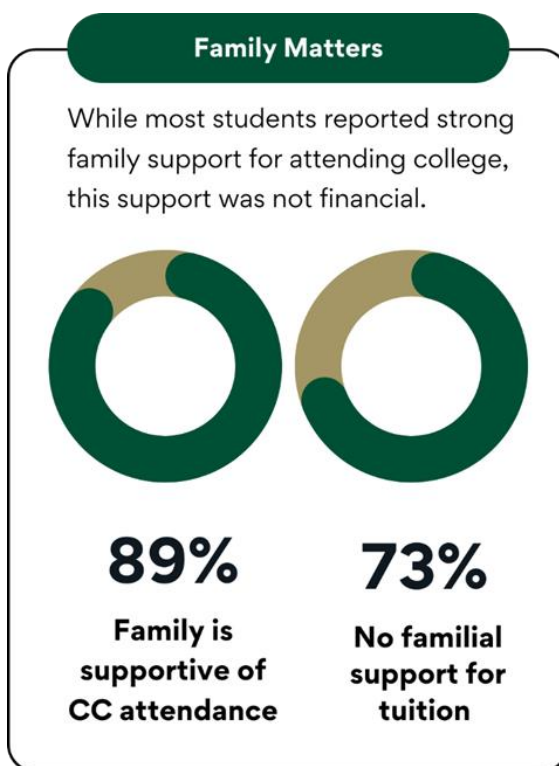
Figure 2: *Familial Support*

*The more I went, the more I looked at, okay, what's the region? What does the region hold? What does it hold for me, my children, et cetera? Poverty is something that we're trying to work out of, so it has to hold those opportunities for me beyond completing my degree, but not just for me, but also for my children...*

**Beth, post-transfer student, completed an AFA, attending a public university**

*It was just me and my son, and I was working full-time. I don't know how I did it. I look back and I'm like, "How did I do this by myself? That's crazy." I was paying bills and a full-time student. But I look back, and I think about it I had a good support system like my mom helped out, my grandma helped out, my sister helped out, her kids helped out, the daycare lady helped out. I had a strong team behind me helping me out with my son.*

**Martha, pre-transfer student, pursuing AS and certificate**

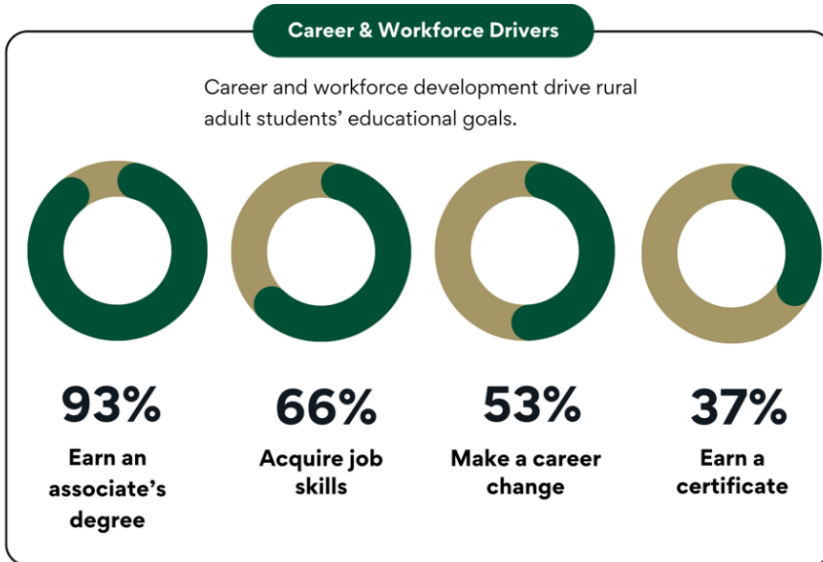


## Finding #3: Career and Cost Drive Transfer Choice

Rural adult students' transfer choices were shaped by the intersection of their adult and rural identities, resulting in increased cost sensitivity and career motivation. Some students in this study experienced a time crunch or a compressed timeline that described their sense of urgency to complete a bachelor's degree. Often, students who described a time crunch had a delayed start or an academic interruption that prolonged their time to degree. This time crunch, layered with rural considerations such as institutional proximity, time to degree, or program length and modality shaped their transfer destination choice sets. Given the importance of cost, students considered the fastest route to the baccalaureate, emphasizing credit mobility and strategic alignment between the CC program, transfer destination, and career and workforce outcomes.

Besides the common transfer goal, rural adult students identified various other goals for attending the CC (Figure 3). We observed that 93% of the respondents sought to earn an associate degree and 37% intended to earn a certificate, indicating that almost all of the students had a primary goal of obtaining a degree or credential before transferring. Career and workforce goals were primary drivers for attending the CC, with 66% of all the respondents attending college to acquire the necessary skills for the job

**Figure 3: Career and Workforce Drivers**



market and 53% seeking a career transition. Overall, these results indicate that rural adult transfer students hold pragmatic motivations related to a combination of educational advancement, career development, and skills acquisition needs.

Although rural adult students are largely driven by career and workforce prospects, the burden of college costs weighs heavily on their decision to attend the CC and fulfill their career aspirations. Rural adults described that cost had a significant influence on their decision to attend the CC and their

transfer destinations. For most students, local and online programs became the most cost-efficient and convenient options. The proximity to home and family, even if attending an online program from a university across the state, offered students the opportunity to lessen their commutes and leverage the support of family. While some students ruled out programs that they perceived to be high cost, others named financial aid programs intended to alleviate costs such as the NC Promise program, demonstrating the potential of these programs to advance educational opportunity to adults in rural NC.

Descriptive results indicate that the cost of attending college was a significant obstacle for rural adult transfer students such that 63% were solely responsible for funding their college costs and 46% perceived withdraw due to the cost burden as a possibility (Figure 4). With 63% managing their own costs, the financial pressure most of them face, indicates that many students may struggle to continue their education hindering their academic and career aspirations.

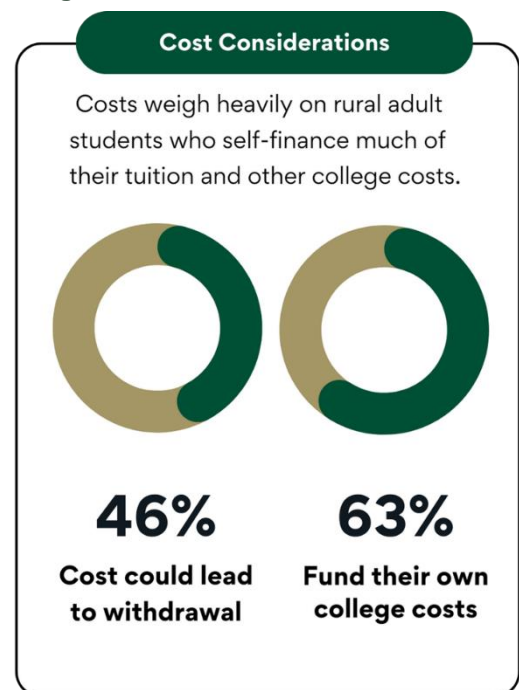
*I think that was a huge factor just in going to a community college in general was, it was pretty much exclusively just the cost. I would've loved to have gone to a university and I think I could have with my grades, but I just didn't want to start my career with that much debt, with all the student loans. And I didn't know enough about the scholarship opportunities available in a four-year to know whether I could afford to do that debt-free or not.*

**Glenda, pre-transfer student, pursuing AAS**

*Well, one attractive component of Flowervalley University (pseudonym) was that they have that NC Promise...the financial aspects hasn't been a huge stress on me and it's been a consideration of why I'm at Flowervalley University in a way... the financial part isn't really a huge concern of mine because of the tuition cost.*

**Caroline, post-transfer student, completed AAS, attending a public university**

**Figure 4: Cost Considerations**



# Implications and Considerations

This report emphasizes the importance of understanding the nuanced experiences and corresponding opportunities and challenges that result from rural and adult identities. While general recommendations for improving transfer mobility exist—such as prioritizing transfer, creating clear pathways, and providing strong advising—we provide specific considerations for serving rural adult students given their unique needs and priorities.

- **Extending Cultural Understanding:** Both community colleges and universities should work to reduce the sense of "otherness" that rural adult transfer students feel. These students often experience feelings of being "behind" due to cultural norms surrounding age and education paths. Institutions can focus on outreach that normalizes adult student participation, offering affinity groups and spaces tailored for adult learners both before and after their transfer to a university.
  - **Providing Wraparound Services:** Providing holistic support services that address the life circumstances of rural adult students is crucial. These services may include childcare, academic support, and technology resources available at various times to accommodate students' competing commitments such as work schedules and familial obligations.
  - **Prioritizing Transparency:** The report highlights that rural adult students are conscious of affordability, program delivery, and credit transferability. Centralized, transparent information about credit mobility, costs, and statewide transfer options could facilitate the decision-making process for these students, who often balance work and family responsibilities, increasing their urgency and motivation to attain a degree. The state's recent work on [Transfer Guides](#) will help this population of students.
  - **Expanding Transfer Pathways:** Two areas needing reform to better support rural adult transfer students include:
    - **AAS Degree Transfers:** Many rural students attempt to transfer with Associate in Applied Science (AAS) degrees, which are not traditionally designed for transfer. Expanding articulation agreements to create more universal paths from AAS to baccalaureate degrees could increase transfer opportunities for rural adults.
    - **Affordability:** Cost considerations are persistent stressors for rural adult students. Institutions that offer increased credit mobility and applicability, discounted tuition (e.g., NC Promise), and flexible or online options that reduce the need for relocation are particularly important to rural adult students.
  - **Understanding Evolving Choice Processes:** With rural adults making higher education choices based on a set of complex circumstances, maximum flexibility and attention to their needs remains paramount. We write this report in the weeks following the devastating impacts of Hurricane Helene on rural counties, particularly in western NC. While we cannot yet predict the long-term impacts on students' lives and the institutions they may attend, we are confident that additional variables will enter the complex calculus associated with rural adult students' higher education transfer journeys.
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## Suggested Citation

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