Building a Regional Plan for Education and the Workforce

Lessons Learned from the Development of the Aligning Educational Efforts Initiative

Prepared by: Emily Antoszyk, Laura Rosof, and Trip Stallings

The Friday Institute for Educational Innovation
North Carolina State University
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Overview

Our Approach to Developing a Regional Plan

**Phase One**
- **DISCOVERY**
  - Pre-plan with project initiators

**Phase Two**
- Define proposed products of the planning process with project initiators
- Open up the planning process to stakeholders beyond the project initiators

**Phase Three**
- **INFORMATION GATHERING**
  - Conduct a Listening Tour and survey stakeholders to gather information from a wider array of voices
  - Host convenings to learn more about similar work across the state
  - Interim Products:
    - Data
    - Ideas
    - Feedback

- **COLLABORATIVE DECISION-MAKING**
  - Propose initial findings and/or recommendations
  - Host convenings to learn more about similar work across the state

- **Finalize the Plan using information collected in the Discovery and Information Gathering Phases**
- Share the Plan with a broader audience for feedback

**Final Product**
- Data- and needs-driven Plan for aligning regional educational and economic goals and efforts

**What We Learned Along the Way**
- Even with buy-in, long-term planning is difficult.
- Encouraging participation in the planning process from some groups requires personal appeals.
- Stakeholders need to develop a common language.
- Long-held perceptions should be voiced and addressed throughout the process.
Introduction

Purpose of this Report

This report tells the story of the development of the Aligning Educational Efforts initiative, which was created to help Alexander, Burke, and Catawba Counties better connect and coordinate education and workforce goals across their region. The John M. Belk Endowment commissioned this report to capture lessons learned from that experience and to provide guidance for other North Carolina communities that want to develop similar plans for their regions. While some of the strategies and lessons learned highlighted in this report are specific to conditions in the region for which the plan was developed, we believe that many of them will be useful in a wide array of community contexts.

Background

About the Region

The Hickory-Lenoir-Morganton Metropolitan Statistical Area (sometimes referred to as the Unifour region) is composed of Alexander, Burke, Caldwell, and Catawba counties in the Catawba Valley region of western North Carolina (Figure 1). The population of the region is sizable and has been relatively stable for the past ten years (Table 1, following page) despite declines in some of the area’s major industries. Only a fraction of the population (roughly 75,000, or about 20%) lives in urban areas, the rest live in suburban or rural areas.¹

Figure 1. The Unifour Region

Table 1. Unifour Region Population Change, 2010-2019²

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>365,565</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>364,478</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>363,670</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>363,379</td>
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<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>363,035</td>
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<td>2015</td>
<td>363,346</td>
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<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>364,798</td>
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<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>367,085</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>368,449</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>369,711</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An important recent defining economic characteristic of the region has been its efforts to diversify beyond the furniture and textile industries, which were the predominant economic drivers of the region from the late 1800s through the early 2000s. Though still a prominent part of the economic landscape, these industries have faced significant competition from abroad in recent years, as well as challenges related to the economic recession that began in 2008. Between the years 2000 and 2020, the Hickory-Lenoir-Morganton Metropolitan

¹ 2018 US Census 5-year population estimates for the area’s principal cities: Hickory, Lenoir, and Morganton.
² Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas Totals: 2010-2018
Statistical Area lost more than half (58%) of its workforce in furniture manufacturing and related industries.\(^3\) In response, the region has attempted to expand its economic portfolio, with many believing expansion of educational opportunities to be one key to this diversification.

The region is served by three community colleges (Caldwell Community College and Technical Institute, Catawba Valley Community College, and Western Piedmont Community College) and three private four-year colleges (Gardner-Webb University, Lenoir-Rhyne University, and Montreat College), but it is one of the largest regions in the country without a main campus of a state university.\(^4\)

**A Shared Vision for Educational and Economic Alignment**

Understanding these challenges and opportunities, and mindful of their institutions’ responsibilities as regional anchors, the presidents at Catawba Valley Community College and Western Piedmont Community College\(^5\) jointly developed a vision for leading an effort to improve the region’s educational offerings and economic prospects—the Aligning Educational Efforts (AEE) initiative. Because of their connections with the five public school systems in the region (Alexander, Burke, and Catawba Counties, along with Hickory City and Newton-Conover) as well as with area businesses, they were well-positioned to lead an effort to rethink education and its connections to the regional economy and create an inclusive plan that could impact the entire region.

A related, smaller-scale effort already was underway at Catawba Valley Community College that served to inspire the desire to develop the broader regional initiative: K-64.\(^6\) Established in 2017, K-64 attempts to meet workforce demands and fill open jobs with qualified workers by connecting students and employers throughout the education continuum—from early education through retirement, as the name implies. The ultimate goal of K-64 is to increase student and employer engagement in educational programs by collaborating with employers to align courses of study with workforce needs, connecting students to curriculum related to real-world careers, and empowering adults to enhance their employability in an ever-changing economic environment.

K-64 was the first of several like-minded organizations from across the region that served as guiding stars throughout the development of the AEE Plan. Collectively, their experiences and efforts provided context during the Plan development process for how a regionally coordinated effort might be built.

**Role of the Friday Institute**

North Carolina State University’s Friday Institute for Educational Innovation\(^7\) was invited to facilitate the development of the AEE Plan. Friday Institute Team members have been involved in similar relevant planning and development projects in education,\(^8\) both within Alexander, Burke, and Catawba counties and across the state. These experiences enabled the team to quickly develop a nuanced understanding of the local education policy landscapes as well as an approach for sharing the results of planning efforts to a wide array of stakeholders.

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\(^3\) US Bureau of Labor Statistics  
\(^4\) Appalachian State University maintains a presence on the multi-partner North Carolina Center for Engineering Technologies campus in Hickory.  
\(^5\) Though Caldwell Community College was not part of visioning efforts from the outset, the president of the college was kept apprised throughout, with the understanding that efforts would be initially limited to the two schools’ three-county service area and scaled later to include Caldwell County.  
\(^6\) [http://www.k-64learning.com/](http://www.k-64learning.com/)  
\(^7\) [https://www.fi.ncsu.edu/](https://www.fi.ncsu.edu/)  
\(^8\) For example, the Friday Institute was instrumental in the development of the state’s plan for transitioning to digital-age learning (the [North Carolina Digital Learning Initiative](https://www.fi.ncsu.edu/)) development of an educational program vision for the new campus of the [North CarolinaSchool of Science and Mathematics](https://www.fi.ncsu.edu/) in Burke County; and the construction of the [myFutureNC Call to Action](https://www.fi.ncsu.edu/), which is a statewide approach to the work proposed by the Unifour.
The primary aims for the Friday Institute Team (from this point forward referred to simply as the *Facilitators* or “we”) in the development of the AEE Plan were threefold:

- Foster collaboration between and gather feedback from *Early Champions* (the presidents of Catawba Valley Community College and Western Piedmont Community College) and a *Core Stakeholder Group* (regional education, business, industry, government, and community organization leaders);
- Provide information from relevant research, model plan practices, and data collected specifically to inform the planning process; and
- Help engage a wider array of stakeholder groups in the planning process and in the broader adoption of the Plan region-wide.

With the support of the Friday Institute Facilitators, the Early Champions, in collaboration with the Core Stakeholder Group, completed their Plan in May 2020. In the next sections of this report, we tell the story of the Plan development and share lessons learned and recommendations for other groups that are considering development of their own educational alignment plans for their communities.

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9 Throughout this report, we use generic terms (highlighted on first use in *bold italics*) to refer to the major players in the planning process. For more about these players, as well as definitions of some of our other commonly-used terms, see the Glossary (Appendix A).

10 The Plan is posted on Catawba Valley Community College’s K-64 website (https://www.k-64learning.com/); to inquire about Plan details, please write to Randy Burns (rburns@wpcc.edu).
Developing a Regional Plan

In the fall of 2018, the presidents of Catawba Valley Community College and Western Piedmont Community College began working with the Friday Institute to develop a data- and needs-driven plan to make the area served by their institutes of higher education a leader in urban-rural collaborative education.

Impetus for the Planning Study

A major motivation for the Aligning Educational Efforts initiative was the community college presidents’ growing awareness of redundancies in educational efforts across the region, with groups in each community replicating (and sometimes contradicting) each other’s efforts but rarely coordinating them. For example, focusing only on their two colleges, the presidents identified several inefficiencies and duplications of effort that presented opportunities for collaboration—after all, both colleges had the same ultimate goal of educating students to ensure their success in the workforce. They knew the same was true in local industry: Collaboration across businesses in the region was uncommon, but could be beneficial to employee preparation and employer satisfaction. Going one step further, these Early Champions of what would become AEE envisioned sharing goals across the education, government, and industry sectors to better pave multiple pathways from education to meaningful and regionally-beneficial careers in Alexander, Burke, and Catawba Counties.

Developing the idea was the easy part; to coordinate these efforts, leaders across the sectors would need a long-range, comprehensive plan for the region that:

- Leveraged existing and emerging education, public, and private entities and initiatives in the region already engaged in similar work by coordinating their work;
- Served the educational and workforce training needs of the community; and
- Established long-term, measurable outcomes.

In addition, the presidents hoped to include elements that would allow for the plan to serve as a model for other communities across the state with similar needs. Ultimately, the success of AEE would be measured by the degree to which the region became a community with a common focus and better coordination of efforts to develop educated minds—not just for the region, but also for western North Carolina and for the state as a whole.

Phases of Development

To develop the AEE Plan, the Facilitators proposed a Researcher-Practitioner Partnership approach. A key component of the approach is that responsibility for the development of all aspects of the plan is shared equally by stakeholders (in this case, the Early Champions and other education partners and regional leaders) and external support staff (the Facilitators).

In a researcher-practitioner partnership, all partners contribute to the identification of the regional and community-level needs that a plan will address, the design of possible ways to address those needs, identification and analysis of relevant contextual information and data, and a plan for the sustainability and scaling of the strategies that emerge.\(^{11}\) Other elements often include:

• Close collaborations with practitioner partners and an advisory board representing stakeholder groups;
• Working groups of practitioners and researchers for each of the major components of the plan;
• Deep-dive site visits to gather on-the-ground information;
• Multiple meetings across the region with stakeholder groups;
• Identification and analyses of existing relevant data, and collection of new data from across the region(s) impacted by the emerging plan;
• Supportive reviews of relevant research; and
• Iterative formulations of the emerging plan.

The Facilitators recommended three development phases for guiding the creation of the AEE Plan: Discovery, Convening and Information Gathering, and Collaborative Decision-Making.

**Discovery (March-July 2019)**

The Discovery Phase included pre-planning meetings, determining and reaching agreement on the products that would come out of the work, and identifying and meeting with a core group of stakeholder advisors who would commit to reviewing and contributing to aspects of the plan.

**Pre-Planning**

The first steps were for the Early Champions to describe their vision and aims more formally, to invite potential stakeholders to the planning process, and to identify related existing resources and efforts. The Facilitators led these conversations with the following questions as a guide:

• What are the purpose and goals of the Plan?
• What is the formal definition of the region to be served by the Plan?
• Which stakeholders and other audiences should be engaged at the beginning of this work?
• What is the baseline value proposition\(^\text{12}\) for these stakeholders?
• What work already is underway that can contribute to the effort, both locally, regionally, and at the state level?
• What existing local and state policies, practices, and laws need to be considered during the planning process?
• What are the most significant barriers to completion and implementation of the final Plan?
• What lessons from other communities, regions, and similar partnerships can inform the Plan?

Using the responses to these questions, the team developed a list of stakeholders (who became the **Core Stakeholder Group**) and a draft **logic model\(^\text{13}\)** detailing the anticipated short- and longer-term goals of the project, as well as the inputs, outputs, and regional leadership needed to achieve these goals. The purpose of the pre-planning process was to create draft products (like the logic model) to present to the Core Stakeholder Group that would help the group to begin to envision the structure of the final organization and the aims of the initiative.

\(^{12}\)A value proposition in this context describes the reasons a potential stakeholder should consider becoming a part of an effort like AEE. The value proposition developed for AEE is included in **Appendix C**.

\(^{13}\)The draft Logic Model is included in **Appendix B**.
Based on their experience on similar projects, the Facilitators knew the value of a pre-planning process for groups embarking on strategic planning work, and they also knew that groups do not always have the luxury of allotting time for this preliminary stage. Fortunately, the Early Champions were supportive of finding the time to document their ideas and to discuss the feasibility of their vision ahead of sharing it with a larger group. Doing so allowed the broader Core Stakeholder Group to react to a cohesive vision during the initial meeting, when the AEE concept was first presented to them. While only a small number of voices contributed during this pre-planning process, the number of contributors grew quickly thereafter, ensuring that the final identification of needs and goals benefitted from cross-sector and region-wide input.

Setting Targets for the Work Ahead

Based on the questions answered during the pre-planning segment of the Discovery Phase, the Facilitators proposed several products to develop during the planning process, and these were vetted and approved by the Early Champions. Products included the Plan itself, along with three supporting documents:

- **An Example Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) document**: A contract shared by leaders across sectors that indicates their commitment to the Plan and its goals;
- **A Value Proposition Statement**: A document describing the value to multiple stakeholder groups of participating in the proposed partnership initiative; and
- **Budget Considerations**: An outline of the suggested personnel, infrastructure, and resources needed to carry out the work of AEE.

Opening Up the Planning Process

With a baseline mission, vision, and proposed products in hand, the Facilitators convened a series of comprehensive working meetings with stakeholders identified by Early Champions during the pre-planning stage. This Core Stakeholder Group included about 25 volunteer members representing community college leadership, the region’s five K-12 public school systems and other institutes of higher education, regional businesses and industries, and local governments.

At the start of each meeting, Facilitators reminded participants of the goals of the planning process and shared updates on progress to date and on adjustments and additions to products made by the Facilitators as a result of feedback from earlier meetings. Facilitators framed each meeting with guiding questions (some of which mirrored the original pre-planning questions) designed to move the group toward completion of various components of one or more of the products identified during the pre-planning stage. The Group was presented with a draft of each proposed product as a starting point, with the disclaimer that each draft was a living document, and that these drafts were intended to be changed as stakeholders contributed their thoughts and suggestions and as the Facilitators gathered new information. All meetings were conducted in person.

These sessions were important for a number of reasons. First, they helped the Facilitators to determine the degree to which the Core Stakeholder Group agreed with the vision of the Early Champions. Second, they helped identify ways to amend and improve that vision to better reflect the broader experiences of the larger group. Finally, the organization, responsiveness, and visibility of the Facilitators allowed for the development of stronger relationships with members of the Core Stakeholder Group. As a result, by August, the Early Champions and the Group had a clear vision of what they hoped to accomplish with the final AEE Plan.
Information Gathering (August-November 2019)

The Convening and Information Gathering Phase included multiple opportunities to gather and analyze opinions from an even broader audience across the region to address key questions and create an initial working version of the AEE Plan. These events included a convening with organizations from outside of the region that have created similar plans, as well as a three-county, nine-stop Listening Tour, which provided Early Champions and the Core Stakeholder Group (together, the Planning Group) with better insights about educational and economic challenges across the region’s communities, as well as possibilities for the structure of the Plan.

Convening

By August 2019, the Aligning Educational Efforts Planning Group had solidified their mission and vision, but had not yet determined how they would structure their organization and the steps they would take to realize their high-level goals. As the Planning Group was fine-tuning the development of its vision, they also were encouraged by Facilitators to identify similar initiatives in other parts of the state that could share the lessons they had learned during their development and early implementation stages.

The Facilitators organized a convening of three of the identified organizations to allow Planning Group members to gather information and share ideas. The organizations chosen were the Eastern Triad Workforce Development Initiative (in Alamance, Guilford, Randolph, and Rockingham Counties), Partners in Progress (in Moore County), and the Strategic Twin-Counties Educational Partnership (in Edgecombe and Nash Counties). These initiatives were selected because they are characterized by at least two of the three major components of the emerging AEE Plan: the project is multi-county, the project is cross-sector, and/or the project focuses both on education and workforce issues.

During the convening, guests presented information about their programs. Presentations were followed by an idea-sharing session in which Planning Group members met in small groups with initiative representatives to discuss topics closely aligned with the work of the initiative. The central questions discussed in each small group were:

- How were you able to reduce redundancies among regional initiatives and create common spaces for bringing together regional voices? (Eastern Triad Workforce Development Initiative)
- What recommendations do you have for attracting new businesses and talent, based on the work that you’ve done in your county? (Partners in Progress)
- How have you been able to identify and create public-private shared spaces where students and industry can meet, interact, and work together? (Strategic Twin-Counties Educational Partnership)

The discussion topics spurred conversations beyond the questions asked. One of the most valuable insights that the Planning Group and the Facilitators gained as a result of the convening was the idea that AEE should be a new, separate organization (instead of an extension of an existing organization), with the ability to act as a liaison between various groups across the region that already were doing work related to the AEE vision and mission.

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15 [https://www.moorebusiness.org/](https://www.moorebusiness.org/)
16 [https://www.step-partnership.org/](https://www.step-partnership.org/)
Listening Tour and Survey

The success of an initiative like AEE depends not only on the Planning Group championing the Plan, but also on residents of the region taking ownership. Beyond aligning sectors, the mission of AEE would need to be adopted region-wide at all levels in order to be successful.

To raise awareness of the effort and to incorporate feedback from a broader array of stakeholders into the planning process, the Facilitators embarked on a nine-stop Listening Tour across Alexander, Burke, and Catawba counties in September 2019. The Planning Group helped secure host locations for three stops in each county: two for the general public, with one morning and one evening option, and one for employees of a representative community business. The Planning Group promoted the Listening Tour stops, encouraging members of their networks to attend and to invite others. The Facilitators created an online invitation for the general public to indicate their interest in attending one or more of the Listening Tour events. The invitation also included a question that allowed attendees to take part in the visioning process by indicating what they believed were the areas of greatest need in their region with regard to educational attainment and workforce development (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Survey Question

If a region-wide effort aimed at education and workforce development launches in Alexander, Burke, and Catawba Counties, I feel we would most need to: (Choose up to 3)

- attract new businesses and new talent to the area.
- coordinate and reduce redundancies across community college offerings.
- develop a region-wide transportation network and encourage adoption.
- promote the acceptance of alternatives to a four-year college degree.
- recruit a four-year public university presence in the area.
- identify/create more public-private shared spaces where students and industry leaders can meet, interact, and work together.
- create a common space for bringing together regional voices to identify assets and challenges.
- Other:____________________

During each Listening Tour session, participants took part in a focus group led by Facilitators. The survey question in Figure 2, along with protocols tailored to the composition of each group of participants (Appendix D), provided the basis for focus group conversations. At the end of each session, participants were asked to respond to the survey question a second time, to see if their thoughts had changed as a result of taking part in the focus group.

Through broad promotion, the Listening Tour attracted a diverse cross-section of participants. Attendees in the general public sessions included government officials, school district and community college employees, local business leaders, and representatives from the non-profit sector. Business leaders in the Core Stakeholder Group helped the Facilitators gather feedback from employees in the healthcare and manufacturing industries.
by hosting Listening Tour stops with their employees at their facilities. The Facilitators targeted health care and manufacturing industries specifically because they are two of the largest employers in the region.

As a complement to the high-level visions that emerged during sessions with the Planning Group, the Listening Tour focus groups provided the Facilitators with specifics about programs already in place that actively work on AEE-related issues, as well as details about each sector’s needs at both the county and cross-county levels. Much of the information collected through the focus groups and the survey became the basis for many of the actions proposed in the final Plan for accomplishing the mission and vision of the Aligning Educational Efforts initiative.

After this data collection period, the Facilitators processed the information and feedback gathered during the convening and the Listening Tour sessions to develop a detailed logic model for the Planning Group that more clearly outlined the emerging structure of the AEE organization and the potential actions and responsibilities of this organization.

**Collaborative Decision-Making (December 2019-May 2020)**

The Collaborative Decision-Making Phase included the refinement of specific alternatives and recommendations to inform the AEE Plan, based upon analyses of all of the data collected in Phases 1 and 2.\(^{17}\)

**Individual and Group Meetings to Confirm Findings**

Meetings with the Planning Group to share findings from the Listening Tour began as information-gathering and processing concluded in November and December.\(^{18}\) These meetings enabled the Facilitators to present synthesized ideas that emerged from all of the data collection up to that point: Planning Group meetings, the Convening, and the Listening Tour. All of this information coalesced into a more detailed version of the logic model (Appendix B), which was divided into two parts—one for the establishment of the organization and one for the planned activities of the organization. These visualizations of the emerging plan became the foundation for all subsequent Group reactions and revisions. As individual Group members raised concerns or shared ideas, the Facilitators scheduled one-on-one conversations to ensure that all feedback was documented. In some cases, Facilitators called upon experts from specific fields to help edit portions of the Plan and Supporting Documents to ensure that the proposed recommendations and actions were realistic and feasible.

**Plan Finalization**

The logic models, in addition to the feedback from the focus groups conducted during the Listening Tour and meeting minutes from the Convening and Planning Group meetings, became the basis for the final Plan. The Plan included detailed text versions of the logic models, along with recommendations for responsible parties, prioritization of proposed actions (both for establishing AEE and for starting to carry out its work), and timelines. The final document also offered budget considerations for starting and sustaining the organization.

**Plan Dissemination**

The final step of the planning process—wider dissemination and “socialization” of the Plan across the region—was derailed by the coronavirus outbreak of Spring 2020. This step was not cancelled, but its delay prevented

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\(^{17}\) While Facilitators were able to carry out the majority of the planned activities without disruption, some of the spring activities had to be modified or put on hold as a result of the spread of the novel coronavirus, which started to affect closures and restrictions in the state of North Carolina in March 2020.

\(^{18}\) Facilitators typically shared information with the Early Champions before distributing that information to the larger Core Stakeholder Group, to ensure that the Early Champions remained in support of the details in the emerging Plan and would continue to voice their support in meetings with the full Planning Group.
inclusion in this report of details about and results of this step. Instead, we share here an outline of the plans for this final step in the process.

First, the Facilitators proposed holding a final in-person meeting for the Planning Group to review the Plan and to transfer ownership to a by-then-appointed AEE leadership group. Other important goals of that meeting include solidifying responsibility for each Plan action and formalizing first steps for putting the Plan into action.

An additional aim of the final meeting is to detail the first steps for socializing the Plan. In essence, socializing means sharing the Plan with stakeholders and targeted leaders outside of the Planning Group, including elected officials, to gain their support and buy-in. This socialization likely will happen in the form of a second Listening Tour of sorts (this time with a focus on sharing and generating support, rather than on collecting feedback for additional revision), during which representatives from the Planning Group will meet with this larger stakeholder group to discuss details of the Plan and to begin to suggest ways in which they could contribute. The Early Champions will lead by example and host the first such event in the form of a retreat for the faculty and staff of their community colleges (including the region’s third community college\(^{19}\)) to begin discussions for how they can take ownership of and act on Plan elements directly associated with community college participation and leadership.

As one Planning Group member noted, rather than giving the Group a reason to delay the establishment of AEE, the Spring 2020 coronavirus outbreak and its significant impact on both the education and economy of the region serve as additional motivation for implementing a vision that has become even more important to the future of the region than it was before the outbreak.

\(^{19}\) Caldwell Community College and Technical Institute (which serves the area of the Unifour region not served by WPCC and CVCC).
What Did We Learn? Reflecting on the Process

Every educational attainment and workforce development initiative is unique, but there are many aspects of the Aligning Educational Efforts development process that may be helpful for other groups embarking on similar processes to review. In this section, we share some of the lessons learned over the course of the development of AEE. The first two segments detail conditions for success that likely will apply in most situations, along with some regional building blocks that were specific to the Unifour region. The third segment outlines lessons learned by the Facilitators and the Planning Group, as well as recommendations based on those lessons.

Conditions for Success

Three factors that are not unique to the Unifour region but that aided the success of the planning process were: internal motivation; charismatic, authentic leadership; and independent funding. While these factors are not necessary for successful idea development, they were critical to the AEE plan development process, and it likely would be difficult to start and sustain a similar process without them.

Internal Motivation

The original motivation for AEE came from within: The leaders of the region’s anchor community colleges saw a need and together developed a vision for bettering the educational and economic prospects for their region. When an effort like AEE is mandated by an outside authority, the result sometimes can produce tension and resentment; because the drive to develop the plan emerged organically and locally, stakeholders were more open to attending meetings and sharing their insights, and they believed that their time was both well-spent and valued.

Charismatic Leadership

Not only did the impetus for the plan originate locally, but it also was initiated by charismatic leaders, which further helped to both generate buy-in from stakeholders and funders and add legitimacy to the effort. These leaders held positions from which they could make changes that impacted the community, and they also had track records and histories that showed their commitment to and roots in the region.

Independent Funding

Finally, independent funding was critical to the success of the planning process. Development of a plan for a new organization requires time, physical space, and the ability to think freely. It is difficult to launch an effort without funding, relying only on volunteered time and resources, but it is equally difficult to launch an effort when funding and resources are plentiful but restricted by the personal or political goals of the funder. The AEE initiative was fortunate to receive backing from a funder who trusted the experts—the regional leaders—to make the best decisions for the creation of a successful Plan.

Regional Building Blocks

The building blocks described in this section are specific to the Unifour region, but similar building blocks may exist or be developable in other regions. In order to identify regional building blocks that can lay the foundation for and contribute to a regional planning process, we recommend that groups begin their work by conducting an Asset Inventory Analysis. Developing large-scale initiatives is not a one-size-fits-all process; while the development processes detailed in the previous section can be repeated from one region to the next, the
resources available in each region will differ. The more the initiators of a planning process are aware of available and reliable resources in their area, the better equipped they will be to harness those resources to develop a strong, cohesive, and sustainable plan.

The building blocks available in the Unifour region that helped in the development of the AEE Plan included:

**Collaboration and Camaraderie Between the Community Colleges**

Strong relationships between leaders at Catawba Valley and Western Piedmont Community Colleges—as well as Caldwell Community College, for future expansion of AEE—laid the foundation for the development of the Plan. They worked together to develop the idea, raise funds, and recruit participants to the planning process. Their colleges also have a track record of successful collaboration, sharing instructors and cross-listing courses to make the best use of available resources. The Unifour is not the only region in which this type of partnership exists between area colleges, but it is not universally common statewide.

**Shared Economic, Industrial, and Cultural History Across the Region**

The region's shared historical economic narrative was an important asset for the development of the Plan. The shared narrative enabled the Facilitators to develop a deep understanding of the regional economic development challenges, and it gave regional representatives a common foundation for developing a plan. In the Unifour, furniture and textile manufacturing were the primary industries until both industries suffered losses from the early 2000s through the economy-altering Great Recession that shuttered businesses and moved jobs elsewhere. It was with this commonly-shared history—as well as with the regional history of the attempts to recover from those losses—that stakeholders approached the planning process. While other common issues surfaced throughout the Plan development process, the overwhelming majority of feedback was colored by shared past economic experiences, which created automatic common ground among stakeholders from different sectors and counties at even the earliest organizational meetings. The process also was helped by the collective cultural history of the Planning Group members, many of whom have deep roots in the region, shared experiences, and similar values.

**On-the-Ground Exemplars**

As detailed in an earlier section, one effort in Catawba County in particular contributed to the initial vision for AEE, but throughout the Discovery Phase, Facilitators became aware of several other groups also working on parallel issues across the region. Groups like K-64, Work In Burke, and others provided examples of the type of work that drives the AEE mission, so there were tangible, on-the-ground resources to rely on for practitioner insight throughout the planning process.

**Lessons Learned and Related Recommendations**

In this section, we share some of the most significant challenges the Planning Group faced, as well as the ways in which the Group responded to those challenges. Because the Facilitator brought strategies developed during previous planning efforts to the AEE planning process, many of the recommended strategies and tools detailed in this section have been tested in other settings and can be applied to different scenarios.

**Lesson 1: Long-term planning is difficult, even when local leaders champion the effort**

As discussed above, the desire to launch the AEE initiative came from within; however, even with local leaders supporting and spearheading the work and asking others to be part of the process, planning a reimagined
education continuum in the region presented a significant challenge.

The most straightforward meetings of the AEE planning process occurred in the beginning with the Early Champions, when sessions centered on pinpointing assets, barriers, and overall goals. The meetings that followed became more challenging as the Facilitators pushed the broader Planning Group to identify the people and groups who would implement the plan, the actions needed to accomplish the goals set by the Group, and potential funders they might approach to provide support for the work ahead. These types of details convert a Plan from an idea into a roadmap for implementation, but they also uncover areas of disagreement and layers of complexity that often are hard to see when the focus is on the bigger picture only.

Even when the roadmap is finished, implementers will need to prepare for a long roll-out period, developing strategies to overcome implementation fatigue and understanding that some of the work will not lead to marked change for years to come.

Recommendations Related to Lesson 1

These recommendations can help stage the planning process and the transition into the implementation phase. They also can help groups create a plan with a detailed, sustainable short-term process of implementation and a more flexible but still cohesive set of actions that can be tackled over the longer term.

• **Gain the support of local leaders**
  AEE was fortunate to have several local Early Champions who initiated the process, and it was these individuals who also encouraged participation from other stakeholders. The support of these leaders provided the external Facilitators with the credibility needed to start the planning process quickly and efficiently. Without the endorsement of influential leaders, a third-party organization will have a difficult time joining a similar endeavor as an outsider.

• **Ensure that the plan reflects the voices of a diverse cross-section of stakeholders**
  For a plan to be embraced and adopted broadly, it must be reflective of the needs of multiple facets of the community. To help manage short-term expectations and shape a longer-term vision for AEE, the Facilitators gathered feedback from as many stakeholders as possible so that ownership of the Plan would extend beyond the primary contributors (the Planning Group), which helped the Plan to gain traction and to secure its longer-term viability.

Stakeholder buy-in is important for mission continuity: Business leaders, educators, government officials, community leaders, and residents of an area are more likely to support and engage with a plan that has elements that align with their personal and professional goals and beliefs. As a result, plan developers should discuss and address stakeholder motivations early in the planning process, and they should continue to engage with stakeholders throughout to ensure that the plan continues to honor and incorporate their visions accurately. Part of this process involves finding reasonable and realistic solutions when stakeholders’ various personal goals conflict. The key is not to try to create a plan that is all things to all parties involved, but instead to draw up a plan that records stakeholder feedback and reflects this feedback whenever practicable, acknowledging when opinions may be in conflict.

• **Take a step beyond just identifying problems and recommending solutions**
  Often, plans identify the needs—the *why*—but not the actions and human resources needed to address those needs—the *how* and the *who*. This specificity is key to creating a viable blueprint for implementation. Guiding questions like these may help developers to clarify finer points of their plan:
What specific actions are needed in order to accomplish the vision and goals of the project, and how do we know that those actions will be successful?

Who will manage the execution of each action, and who will oversee and coordinate all of those individual efforts?

What resources (financial and in-kind) will be needed to carry out each action?

What will be the most effective order of implementing our actions, and how will a timeline be set for each of those actions?

How will success be measured?

In most cases, more detail is better—even if the effort to define that detail is significant. For instance, one benefit of naming responsible parties, actions, and funding sources in the plan up front is that it generates initial support for the work and sends a message to other interested parties that the project, organization, or initiative has a sustainable plan of action.

- Develop leaders and leadership skills throughout the planning process

As a third-party organization invited to facilitate in strategic planning efforts, we recommend that facilitators think carefully about ownership. A critical part of the facilitator’s job as the planning process reaches its end is to actively transfer ownership of the plan to the regional leaders who will be responsible for the plan’s implementation. Ownership transfer is another reason why, in addition to those mentioned above, identifying as early as possible the local leaders who will carry the work forward is important. Early identification enables the planners to build a team that will carry the work forward when the facilitator exits the planning process.

Furthermore, while planning is time-consuming, implementation of a long-range, regional vision takes even longer. Charismatic leaders may kick-start the process, but they may not always be around to see the full vision come to fruition. Planners must prepare for leadership changes as if they were an inevitability by not only recruiting a team of dedicated individuals who will carry out the vision of the project, organization, or initiative, but also by “developing their bench,” and encouraging other leaders to do the same. Developing a bench means that every leader has a second-in-command—an understudy who can continue to carry forth the work when the original leader moves on.

Lesson 2: Engaging some key stakeholder groups will require a personal appeal

Throughout the process, the Planning Group continually discussed the importance of gaining endorsements for the Plan from one key stakeholder group: elected officials. Though invited to participate in planning, in the end, elected officials did not play a big role in the development of the AEE Plan. During the Discovery Phase of development, when Early Champions identified the Core Stakeholder Group for engagement, they included in their list a number of elected officials with whom they had personal relationships. Throughout the planning process, the Facilitators attempted to engage with these officials (for instance, including them on meeting invitations and making personal appeals for their engagement over e-mail and by phone). With the exception of one county commissioner who participated in the first Planning Group meeting and a handful of elected leaders who lent their insights during the Listening Tour, there was very little engagement on the part of regional politicians. Engagement and participation on the part of a wide variety of other stakeholders suggested that a specialized approach for bringing that missing elected official voice into the process was in order.
For other planning processes, the difficult-to-engage stakeholder group is likely to be different, but in most cases, there will be at least one or two such groups who need additional encouragement in order to get them engaged in the planning process.

**Recommendation Related to Lesson 2**

To encourage participation from a difficult-to-engage stakeholder group, planners should seek the support of other stakeholders who have personal relationships with individuals in that group and rely on these stakeholders to engage with those individuals as early as possible in the planning process. Because support from certain key stakeholder groups often will be critical to the success of a regional plan, planners may need to meet with them one-on-one with representatives of those groups more often than they might with other stakeholders, or make other special accommodations for these individuals.

**Lesson 3: Developing a common language for all stakeholders is important**

One of the most important learnings for the AEE Planning Group came during an early meeting of the entire group. In a conversation between a business leader and a school superintendent, the business leader asked the superintendent why schools were unable to meet goals set for them by the state. After all, according to the business leader’s logic, if a school system functions like a business, and all businesses are expected to meet the goals they set, schools should operate in the same way. The conversation that followed was illuminating, not only for the Facilitators, but also for all of the meeting attendees. As the superintendent explained the various pressures on school systems to execute sometimes-conflicting programs and meet a variety of goals, many in the room gained insight into the different challenges each sector faces as well as the different ways in which the two sectors think and act.

A valuable lesson emerged from this interaction: For a cross-sector plan to work, it is important for sectors to gain a working knowledge of not just the vocabulary of other sectors but also the lived realities of people in those sectors, especially the realities of how those sectors function and the values that define them. It is equally important for facilitators of these conversations to understand the nuances across sectors, so that they can steer productive interactions.

**Recommendations Related to Lesson 3**

Reaching agreement and finding common ground is essential for creating a plan that resonates across sectors. One of the best ways for representatives from different sectors to develop a shared language and an understanding of values, goals, and constraints across sectors is to create safe spaces in which all parties can share and learn openly—for example, meetings held in neutral locations, pre-meeting agreements of confidentiality, and press- or spectator-free sessions.

In addition, an experienced, third-party facilitator with knowledge of each sector can be a helpful guide in these meetings; when these facilitators understand the nuanced differences among sector cultures they can create opportunities for more productive interactions.

Over time, regular meetings and guided discussions between representatives from different sectors will help participants develop both mutual trust and a hybrid language that will enable them to communicate with representatives from other sectors in productive ways, as well as to develop and maintain cross-sector partnerships.
Lesson 4: Overcoming long-held perceptions is key to longer-term success

Throughout the planning process, group and individual conversations gave the Facilitators insight into previously-intangible, region-based barriers to working within and across sectors, as well as within and across communities and counties. Many of these intangibles included sometimes-significant differences in each group member’s perceptions of individuals, school districts, business leaders, institutes of higher education, elected officials, and different communities. Some were able to trace their views to an inciting incident, but other impressions were more deeply held and even multi-generational.

The group needed to voice, acknowledge, and, if possible, address these concerns and perceptions. If they failed to do so, it would be hard for Plan implementers to gain early momentum, much less experience longer-term success.

Recommendations Related to Lesson 4

In many cases, one solution to helping groups overcome internal differences like these is to include a neutral party in the group who can serve as a “critical friend.” As a group often called upon to assist in program evaluation, research, and strategic planning, the AEE Facilitators have taken on the role of critical friend on more than one occasion, helping groups reflect on not just their processes and programs, but also their internal differences. Organizations or individuals who take on this role of critical friend during a planning process often can be more successful when they:

- **Recognize that, as critical friends, they are present to document and synthesize, but not to fix problems**
  The critical friend needs to be able to ask questions that steer the process, but not impose a specific agenda. Ultimately, the role of the critical friend is to suggest new ideas grounded in research or culled from other experiences aligned with the work, but also to reflect and synthesize all feedback generated by constituents in a way that is actionable. Sometimes this role involves sharing information or recommendations that may be hard for some members to hear.

- **Take time to develop trust with partners**
  The critical friend is most successful if she or he has taken the time to build relationships and trust. Two essential ingredients can help a critical friend build strong relationships with partners: expertise and presence. Expertise includes a knowledge of the topic and a track record of success, and should be coupled with the willingness to approach a new project with an open mind. While expertise may help the critical friend initially to engender trust, presence is important for sustaining the relationship. The critical friend can demonstrate commitment to the work by attending meetings in person, meeting deadlines, and being easily available to hold additional conversations or answer questions.

- **Work to understand the local context**
  Critical friends who can develop an understanding of local context further demonstrate their commitment to the work and to the community.

The critical friend role can be filled by people or groups with a connection to the region, or by outsiders. Both options have certain advantages, and groups about to embark on a planning process should consider which advantages will be more useful for their efforts.
• Critical friends with local connections (but without a vested interest in the outcome of an endeavor) can remain neutral but still bring more intimate knowledge of the local area, prevailing culture, and politics to the process than can an outside group. Working with local partners who have an understanding of the local history, prejudices, assumptions, and blind spots, as well as of the origins of the effort locally also helps to ensure that the final strategic plan is not an off-the-shelf, one-size-fits-all product. Furthermore, historical knowledge lowers the likelihood that past mistakes will be repeated. Finally, while it may not be true in every case, an added bonus is that local partners often care more about uplifting and supporting local organizations and efforts than do outsiders who have no connection to the area.

• Bringing in an outsider critical friend can help overcome long-held internal differences by bringing a fresh, neutral perspective to the effort. While outsiders may start off behind the curve when it comes to understanding local context, they also are sometimes able to ask difficult questions and reframe the responses to these questions in ways that may not be possible for those closer to the community. As outsiders who are committed to reaching the best outcomes for their partners but who do not themselves have a direct vested interest in the outcome, these representatives can be impartial sounding boards for ideas and concerns.
In Closing: A Word of Caution about Differences across Regions

As we have noted throughout, this report provides a detailed account of a plan development process from the perspective of one region only. Though the Friday Institute team has used variations on this process with success when gathering data and synthesizing feedback for a variety of projects across the state, each region’s needs are different, and each region will need to conduct its planning process in a way that leverages its specific assets and strengths, and that acknowledges and accommodates its particular challenges.

Even so, we believe that many of the techniques outlined in the Phases of Development section above can be adapted for many different planning process scenarios, as long as those processes are grounded in best practices and actively find ways to gather and apply local input. Ultimately, successful implementation of any plan rests with the leaders of the region for which the plan is being developed, but a solid planning process can provide a foundation for getting the work started and moving the work forward.
Appendix A. Glossary of Terms

Aligning Educational Efforts (AEE): Aligning Educational Efforts is an initiative aimed at planning a large scale, long-term plan for education and workforce development in Alexander, Burke, and Catawba Counties in North Carolina.

Asset Inventory Analysis: An investigation that takes stock of available resources, programs, and personnel that are unique to an area, and that can be leveraged for a project or initiative.

Listening Tour: An opportunity for community-wide data collection. Facilitators plan meetings for the general public and with targeted businesses, schools, and community organizations to gather feedback about a particular topic, attempting to elicit feedback from a broad range of potential stakeholders.

Researcher-Practitioner Partnership: An approach to project planning and program implementation in which responsibility is shared equally by all stakeholders (generally third-party researchers/facilitators and boots-on-the-ground practitioners). The end goal is a plan, program, or initiative that is grounded in research but also practical, sensitive to local conditions, and feasible to implement.

Typical groups that contribute to a planning effort:

• **Early Champions**: The initiators of a plan, program, or initiative. The Early Champions for AEE were the presidents of Catawba Valley and Western Piedmont Community Colleges.

• **Core Stakeholder Group**: A group of leaders from different sectors who contribute to the planning process from the beginning. For AEE, this group of around 25 was recruited by the Early Champions, and included business owners, school superintendents, government officials, and representatives from higher education and workforce development.

• **Planning Group**: Core Stakeholder Group and Early Champions

• **Facilitator**: A third-party group that manages the planning process, including scheduling and leading meetings and convenings, collecting information, and synthesizing information into useful products. Members of the Friday Institute for Educational Innovation were the facilitators for the development of the AEE Plan.

**Sector**: Often used to describe entities that share goals or services. In this report, “sector” is used to identify both private and public stakeholder groups: education, community, government, business, and industry. **Cross-sector** refers to combinations of representatives from across different sectors.
Appendix B. Logic Models

Draft Logic Model (Summary Version)

This summary of the full preliminary Logic Model was developed ahead of the start of the initial Planning Group activities to provide a starting point and initial guidance for the group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Potential Barriers to Implementation</th>
<th>Inputs (Resources, Activities)</th>
<th>Outputs (Products)</th>
<th>Shorter-Term Outcomes (1-2 Years Out)</th>
<th>Mid-Range Outcomes (3-19 Years Out)</th>
<th>Longer-Term Outcomes/Goals (25 Years Out)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Possible pressure to grow too quickly</td>
<td>Local-level Operations with a history of success</td>
<td>1. An Expanded Collaborative Education Model that:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possible disconnect between AEE goals and one or more stakeholder group’s goals</td>
<td>Existing stakeholder-generated plans for community partnerships</td>
<td>Outlines alignment strategies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Uncertainty about whether each community will understand and embrace the entire AEE mission/ vision</td>
<td>Series of planning meetings to expand existing work</td>
<td>Establishes measurable outcomes</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>No state-level (e.g., legislative) champion of the initiative</td>
<td>Stakeholders with community-specific local knowledge and connections</td>
<td>Establishes a blurring</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertain fiscal capacity for supporting AEE across communities/stakeholders</td>
<td>Regional needs/asset assessment</td>
<td>Coordinates</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges related to community college service area boundaries</td>
<td>Identification of academic and non-academic barriers</td>
<td>[2] Reporting documents:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential competitiveness among participating communities</td>
<td>External funding for planning</td>
<td>[a] Water Proposition [b] Vision/Strategy [c] Sample Memorandum of Understanding [d] Testing Program [e] Guidesheets [f] Monitoring Materials</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree to which transportation infrastructure can support resident access to key plan components</td>
<td>3. Initial list of potential stakeholder partners</td>
<td>Changes in Cross-Sector Engagement of Education, Business, and Economic Development Stakeholders:</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Economic Development • Business • Education</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Changes in Regional Culture of Partnership</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Changes in K-12 Outcomes</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Changes in Postsecondary/Workforce Outcomes</td>
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<td>Changes in Sustainable, HQ Staffing</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Vision:

AEE will bring together representatives of education, business, and government to develop a needs-driven Plan that leverages existing resources, including current initiatives designed to advance education in the separate geographic areas. This Plan will make the area served by the two anchor public higher education institutions (Central Piedmont Community College and Western Piedmont Community College) a leader in urban-rural collaborative education. The Plan will communicate clearly the contributions needed (time, expertise, funding, leadership) from each sector (education, local government, state government, business/industry, funding partners, etc.) to meet this goal.
Final Logic Models
Establishment of AEE (Summary Version)

**Macro Goal**
(Statement)

A. Establish AEE

**Goals**
(Statements)

1. AEE has a Plan of Action that guides its efforts. Plan ingredients include:
   - Leadership & Governance;
   - Goals;
   - Strategies;
   - Responsible Parties;
   - Measurable Outcomes;
   - Communications; and
   - Funding.

2. Representatives from every AEE community have meaningful roles in AEE and/or in components of the Plan

3. A common space (physical or metaphorical) exists for bringing together regional voices to identify and solve regional challenges

**Tag(s)**

**Outcomes**
(General Actions)

Define the Organization

| CRD | Form the Organization (A.1) |
| CRD | Identify existing regional assets (2) |
| CRD, MSG | Set education, workforce, business development, and AEE partnership goals for the region (1) |
| CRD | Reach consensus among partners on initial strategies for reaching AEE goals (1) |
| CRD | Identify measurable outcomes to track progress toward AEE goals (1) |

Make the Organization Visible

| INF | Secure start-up funding (1) |
| MSG | Establish and enact a communication plan (1) |
| CRD | Establish physical headquarters for AEE (3) |

Make the Organization Viable

| CRD, MSG | Identify AEE champions in each participating county and at the state level (1,2) |
| INF | Establish permanent, ongoing funding (1) |

**Tag Key**
CRD = Bridging & Coordination
ECD = Economic Development
EDD = Education
INF = Infrastructure
MSG = Messaging
WD = Workforce Development

What are AEE’s Roles?

**Convener:** AEE brings together people working on initiatives related to AEE’s goals for the region to promote alignment of efforts and goals and to share and support implementation of the strategies necessary to reach those goals

**Advocate:** AEE promotes and lobbies for new policies, statutes, and programs as well as changes to and reductions in existing state regulations that support the flexibility the region needs in order to move toward achievement of AEE goals

**Connector:** AEE connects people and groups—from grassroots to state-level—that are working on local and regional activities related to AEE goals, both in the Unifour region and beyond

**Capacity-Build:** AEE builds the capacity of stakeholders to carry out all aspects of the AEE Plan. AEE provides opportunities for stakeholders to grow in their leadership and connects stakeholders to regional, state, and national funders

**Storyteller:** AEE shares stories about the successes and challenges experienced by goal-focused people and groups from across the region

**Tracker:** AEE holds the region accountable for progress toward its goals by tracking and reporting on the region’s and each county’s outcomes related to those goals
Action Plan for AEE (Summary Version)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Macro Goals (Statements)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. The region works together to provide the supports necessary to transition all counties into a new economic era</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. The region works together to reimagine the region-wide education continuum</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goals (Statements)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Partner counties identify internally and externally as a cohesive region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Connections, contextual understandings, and trust are formed among and across educators, businesses, and local leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Cross-sector engagement of education, business, and economic development stakeholders is strengthened (e.g., stronger partnerships exist between K-12 and industry)</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. There is measurable improvement in immigration</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. People already in the workforce feel empowered to enhance their employability in a dynamic work environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Mechanisms are in place throughout the education continuum to connect students to real-world careers, employers, and related curriculum choices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Opportunities across all counties (educational, workplace, economic development) are increased</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. There is measurable reduction in unfulfilled positions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. AEE is a sustainable, flexible, living plan</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tag Key</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CRD = Coordination &amp; Coordination</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Tag(s)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Outcomes (General Actions)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

1. Capacity-Building

1. CRD, MSG: Educate the entire citizenry on AEE’s common message/common goals (like promoting community-wide acceptance of an alternative path other than high school to college to work) (1, 8, 9)

2. CRD, INF: Build the capacity of stakeholders to carry out all aspects of the AEE Plan (1, 2, 3, 9)

3. ECD, INF: Reduce state regulations/increase flexibility for schools, local governments, and businesses (7, 9)

4. ECD, MSG, WD: Elevate awareness and acceptance of regionally valuable non-degree credentials (5, 8, 8)

2. Educational Improvement

1. ECD, INF, WD: Develop a region-wide K12 plan that responds to current and projected regional needs (7)

2. ECD, WD: Enhance the presence and availability of non-degree, post-high school skill and talent development options (5, 6, 7, 8)

3. ECD, CRD: Coordinate and reduce redundancies across community college offerings (2, 3, 7)

4. ECD, ECD, WD: Offer four-year degrees via CCAs (5, 7)

3. Workforce Development Pipeline

1. CRD, ECD, MSG, WD: Better coordinate and create equitable career-focused opportunities for students across schools and LEAs (2, 3, 6, 7, 8)

2. ECD, ECD, MSG, WD: Increase postsecondary enrollment in programs that contribute to regional economic needs and goals (2, 3, 5, 6, 8)

3. ECD, WD: Improve within-region student retention (as they transition from K-12 to postsecondary) (3, 8)
Appendix C. Value Proposition Statements

Overall Value Proposition

- There is a reason to engage in the work envisioned by AEE, because there is a shared need. The Region’s three main challenges are:
  1. Filling all available positions in the region
  2. Keeping more students in the area after graduation
  3. Encouraging in-migration

The AEE vision, goals, and Plan of Action present a pathway for addressing those challenges.

- Participation will improve access for participants to opportunities and resources across the region.
  - The Unifour region is host to a wide array of assets and amenities that currently are accessed by only community- or county-wide pockets of citizens. AEE will provide a mechanism for increasing cross-county exposure and access to those opportunities and resources.

- Consensus among partners on an agreed-upon education and workforce development focus and a commitment to cross-community collaboration will promote greater fiscal and programmatic efficiency among the multitude of entities across the region already engaged in work related to the AEE vision.

- Participation will help the region not only focus efforts but also broaden views and improve cross-community understanding.
  - AEE will expand the community conversation beyond standards and tests in schools, or numbers of jobs available—it will encourage action for improving the longer-term career and life goals of every resident across the region.

Value Proposition for Students (K-12 and Community College)

- Awareness & Planning
  - Awareness of the post-schooling pathways available, including job opportunities in the region, and the skills, experience, and credentials needed to secure them
  - Assistance with planning academic and non-academic work and experiences to meet the requirements of a chosen pathway

- Experience & Exposure
  - Experience in and exposure to the world of adult work through experiences such as mentoring and internships
  - Exposure to enrichment experiences—experiences that enhance the traditional academic experience (e.g., opportunities to connect with industry leaders and employees off-campus; experiential learning)
  - Access to off-site facilities—i.e., experience with current tools, machinery, and industry opportunities that schools cannot provide on their own
  - Sufficient work-based preparation for a wide array of post-schooling pathways
• **Personal and Emotional Growth**
  - Increase in confidence in themselves as leaders and engaged citizens who can work for the betterment of their region
  - Opportunities to take ownership of their learning, to work independently, and to advocate for themselves and their goals

• **Academic Skills**
  - Opportunities to advance their knowledge and skills in a topic of personal interest, and gain a different perspective than that which can be provided in a classroom setting
  - Opportunities to test out fields of interest, build curiosity, solve problems, and create and pursue innovative ideas
  - Opportunities to make long-lasting connections in the professional world

• **Workplace Skills**
  - Increase in personal and professional skills that will impact future endeavors
    - Diligence, persistence, resourcefulness
    - “Soft” skills—most importantly, communications skills
    - Awareness of the etiquette of different fields of work

• **Application of Learning and Career Exploration**
  - Opportunity to apply/translate learning in a real-world setting, and to see adults/professionals using the knowledge/practices they are learning in school

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**Value Proposition for Educators (K-12 and Community College)**

• **Learning Environment Enrichment (Capacity-Building)**
  - Enrichment of the expertise available to each school; for example:
    - Via school-industry mentorship partnerships
    - Via increased access to current tools/machines/processes used in industry
    - Via Cross-District Partnerships
  - Increase in the capacity of teachers and support staff who work with partners
  - Enrichment of the facilities available to each school

• **Wider Community Stewardship**
  - Engagement of companies/mentors in school settings via volunteering and mentorships
  - Cultivation of prospective job opportunities for students

• **Improvement of Student Engagement via Real-World Applications**
• **Improvement in Ability to Prepare Students for Regional Career Opportunities**
Value Proposition for Business/Industry

- Development of Regional Workforce Pipeline
  - Potential expansion of workforce through student and employee retention across the region
  - Student exposure to regional career paths they otherwise might not have considered

- Organizational Advancement
  - Exposure of their specialty area (their company’s or industry’s work) to potential future workers
  - Opportunity to harness the creativity and energy of promising students to solve organizational challenges
  - Opportunity to generate public good will and good publicity for the company—particularly true for early investors in AEE/early adopters of the AEE vision and goals
  - Opportunity to work with K-12/Community Colleges to provide training specific to their job opportunities so students graduate ready to work in their organization or industry

- Capacity-Building
  - Opportunity for professionals—especially early-career professionals—to engage with students and add mentoring to their resume and suite of skills
  - Increase access to other opportunities to engage with schools and other businesses

- Opportunity for Greater Exposure beyond the Region
  - Benefit from mentored students who become good ambassadors for companies when they work and study outside the region

Value Propositions for Parents/Families

- Improvement in Access to Information
  - Greater awareness of educational and career pathway options for their children
  - Expansion of the pool of mentors and advisors focused on finding the best pathways for their children

- Increased Post-Secondary Options for Children
  - Expansion in the number of non-traditional, alternative, apprenticeship, two-year, and four-year pathways

- Family Stability
  - Increased likelihood of employment closer to home for their children
Value Propositions for Communities

• **Stronger Communities**
  - Population growth
  - More education-to-workforce pipelines
  - Stronger future economy
  - Increased tax base
  - Mitigation of economically-based social problems

• **United Communities**
  - Greater wealth distribution as a result of educational and economic improvements in multiple communities across the region
  - Increased likelihood for cross-community collaborations on shared challenges and innovations
Appendix D. Listening Tour Protocols

Aligning Educational Efforts Listening Tour

September 4-11, 2019

Background of the Project

In March 2019, Catawba Valley Community College (CVCC) and Western Piedmont Community College (WPCC) were awarded funding by the John M. Belk Endowment to bring together business, education, and government stakeholders in Alexander, Burke, and Catawba counties for the purpose of developing a long-range plan for collaborative education across the region: Aligning Educational Efforts. CVCC and WPCC contracted with the Friday Institute for Educational Innovation at North Carolina State University to aid in the development of this plan. Meetings to date have included a core group of representatives from the region’s five K-12 districts and two community colleges, as well as local business leaders and local government and workforce development representatives.

Goals

The goal of the Friday Institute team is to support leaders from the community colleges as they develop a data- and needs-driven Plan for the three counties that will make the area a leader in urban-rural collaborative education.

Through this process, we will identify educational and workforce training needs and coordinate existing and emerging education, public, and business initiatives by:

- establishing long-term measurable outcomes;
- identifying responsible parties who can advocate for programming;
- estimating the funding needed for program expansion and replication; and
- developing a blueprint for scalability beyond the region.

Ultimately, the Plan will include a:

- **Value Proposition Statement**: A short description of the value of participating in the proposed partnership initiative. The product will include versions appropriate for several different audiences (e.g., educators, non-profits, government, business, etc.).

- **Cross-Sector Partnership Plan**: A viable, long-range (5-year, 10-year, and 25-year), plan that brings public and private organizations and businesses together to create and implement a model collaborative education program that can be measured for success and replicated in other communities, and that communicates clearly the contributions needed (time, expertise, funding, leadership) from each sector (education, local and state government, business/industry, funding partners, etc.)

- **Memorandum of Understanding Template**: A statement of overall goals and commitments that is broader and less specific than the Plan
Work to Date

To date, we have held three initial meetings to gather feedback from a core group of stakeholders (one each in May, June, and August).

During the May and June meetings, initial planning participants were introduced to the goals of the project and began work on expanding those goals, developing value proposition statements, and identifying stakeholders.

In August, representatives from similar initiatives from other regions (Eastern Triad Workforce Initiative, Partners in Progress, and the Strategic Twin-Counties Educational Partnership) shared their experiences with the group.

What we hope to accomplish through the Listening Tour

This fall, we are sharing the initial results of these efforts with a broader audience to gather feedback about the ideas and goals that resonate the most with stakeholders, as well as your impressions of your region’s strongest assets and greatest needs.

When we split into groups, we will guide you through questions designed to gather feedback on the various aspects of the plan and the ideas generated to date. Please speak candidly in these small groups - this is the best way for us to provide an accurate reflection of voices from across the region in the final Plan.

Feedback we received in your county from RSVP

In order to maximize chances for success, the final plan will benefit greatly from incorporation of two or three overarching stretch targets or goals to serve as unifying forces and to encourage participation from a wide variety of stakeholders. During our first two meetings, we started to generate a list of possible targets, and we also received feedback from some of you in your RSVPs. At the end of today’s session, we will revisit this list to get your feedback or to see if your thinking has changed with respect to the unifying targets that you think have the most promise.

In the RSVP, we asked, “If a region-wide effort aimed at education and workforce development launches in Alexander, Burke and Catawba, I feel we would most need to…” The top three responses were:

- promote the acceptance of alternatives to a four-year college degree (over half of respondents)
- attract new businesses and talent to the area (over half of respondents)
- identify/create more public-private shared spaces where students and industry leaders can meet, interact, and work together

Other options, each of which were priorities for about a quarter of respondents:

- coordinate and reduce redundancies across community college offerings.
- develop a region-wide transportation network and encourage adoption.
- recruit a four-year public university presence in the area.
- create a common space for bringing together regional voices to identify assets and challenges.
Directions

- Ask for assent to record session.
- Begin with introductions: name, organization, role, what brought them to this session today; ask core group members to identify themselves.

Protocols for General Sessions

1. How would you characterize the careers that are most readily available for high school graduates in this area? College graduates?
2. Most participants who RSVPed said that the area would benefit most by attracting new businesses. How would you like to see this area’s business and employment opportunities grow?
3. What do schools in this area do well when it comes to preparing students or adult workers for jobs in your community? What could schools do differently?
4. What do businesses in this area do well to prepare students or adult workers for jobs in your community? What could businesses do differently?
5. What are this region’s greatest draws for potential employers? What are the biggest barriers to attracting more employers?
6. What makes people want to stay in the region or return to the region?
7. What are the most pressing educational challenges in this region?
8. What are the most pressing economic challenges in this region?
9. What programs/resources would you prioritize strengthening in your community to address the challenges you have mentioned so far?
   a. What are the programs, resources, or partnerships that are already working well that can be built on or expanded?
   b. What additional programs, resources, or partnerships do you think the region needs?
10. New initiatives like the one being developed by AEE can be risky. What would it take for you to buy into or champion AEE?

Protocols for Business Site Visits

1. What makes your community a desirable place to live and raise a family?
2. What work/education options did you have as a high school student after graduation? If you attended community college or a four-year university, did your options change once you had a certificate or degree?
3. Were your peers in school interested in getting a job in this area after high school? If yes, were you or others concerned about being able to do so?
4. What experiences would most help students learn more about job opportunities at businesses like yours? Are there ways for them to see applications of what they are learning in school? (e.g. internships, mentorships, career days, field trips to companies, etc.)

5. What could your school have done differently to prepare you as a student for jobs in your community? At your current place of employment? What did they do well when you were in school? What kind of additional training did you need when you started the job?

6. Thinking about your personal goals for education and work, what supports helped you achieve your goals? What was missing?

7. Compare yourself to a friend who did not have the same opportunities you had after high school. What helped you to take advantage of those opportunities? What prevented your friend from following a similar path?

8. What options are available in your community to you if you want to gain new skills in order to change jobs or to advance in your career? What options are missing?
**Contact Information:**
Please direct all inquiries to Emily Antoszyk
[eaantosz@ncsu.edu](mailto:eaantosz@ncsu.edu)

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