Systems of Success for Adult Learners:
The Value of Corporate Partnerships

ULEAD 2023 Team 5

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Introduction: Who are adult learners?

More than 60 percent of American adults do not have a college degree, according to a report by Gallup and Strada Education Network. (Strada/Gallup, 2019) As trends like the rise of technology, remote work, and globalization change the nature of an adult's career and life, educational institutions must also adapt themselves to serve the needs of this group.

To begin with, adult learners have different needs than the traditional college students that most educational institutions are accustomed to working with. They are, almost by definition, older and often have competing work and family priorities. They frequently need to put these other priorities first, and education must find space inside a complex schedule that doesn't allow for taking classes at the most offered times on weekdays.

One challenge of serving adult learners is that different sources have different definitions of them. A common definition is based on age; 25 or older is seen as a threshold where someone is considered an adult learner. (EAB, 2019) But actual age is just one marker; adulthood can also be defined by the social, psychological, or economic roles typically borne by adults. For instance, a person younger than 25 might have children or need to care for an aging family member, making their "psychological age" older than their functional (physical) age. In addition, a working professional yet to attend college might have a stronger connection with their professional colleagues, who might be older than they are, thus making their "social age" higher than their functional age. (Sage Publications, 2010) These measurements can impact a person's desire to pursue further education.

The National Center for Education Statistics does not have a strict definition of an adult learner; their closest description is that of a "non-traditional student," which they define based on three criteria:
1. **Enrollment criteria** – Students who delayed enrollment in postsecondary education by a year or more after high school or who attended part-time were considered nontraditional.
2. **Family and financial status** – Family responsibilities and financial constraints used to identify nontraditional students included having dependents other than a spouse, being a single parent, working full-time while enrolled, or being financially independent of parents.
3. **High school graduation status** – Students who did not receive a standard high school diploma but earned some kind of certificate (GED, certificate of completion, etc.) were also considered nontraditional.

Combining these categories, there were seven criteria to gauge whether a student was nontraditional. Students with one characteristic were considered "minimally nontraditional," those with two or three characteristics were considered "moderately nontraditional," and those with four or more characteristics were considered "highly nontraditional." (https://nces.ed.gov/pubs/web/97578e.asp)

A problem with this definition is that it pertains only to undergraduate students and does not capture that an adult seeking education might already have completed undergraduate courses or even have a college degree and be seeking additional credentials.

Adult learners' needs and preferences

Adult learners have unique needs and challenges that can impact their ability to learn and succeed (Kasworm, 2013; Sage, 2010; EAB, 2019).

Needs:
- **Relevance**: Adult learners want to understand how the information they are learning applies to their life and career goals. They need to see the practical value of what they are learning.
- **Flexibility**: Adult learners often have work and family commitments, so they need flexible learning options that fit into their schedule. This might include online courses, evening classes, or weekend workshops.
- **Support**: Adult learners benefit from a supportive learning environment where they can ask questions and receive feedback. They may also need help with time management, study skills, and other aspects of learning.
- **Personalization**: Adult learners have diverse backgrounds and experiences, so they benefit from personalized learning experiences catering to their individual needs and learning styles.

Challenges:
- **Time management**: Adult learners often have busy lives, so finding time to study and complete coursework can be challenging.
- **Technology**: Many adult learners are returning to school after years away, so they may not be familiar with the latest technology and online learning platforms.
- **Motivation**: Adult learners need to be self-motivated to succeed, but this can be a challenge when they are balancing multiple responsibilities.
- **Financial concerns**: Adult learners may have to balance the cost of tuition with other financial obligations like rent, bills, and childcare. This can create added stress and impact their ability to focus on learning.
- **Previous negative educational experiences**: Some adult learners may have had negative experiences with education or training, which can create anxiety or a lack of confidence in their ability to learn.

Furthermore, one of the biggest challenges schools face in meeting the needs of adult learners is that they are not the preferred provider of additional education for this population. The same study from Gallup and Strada that identified the significant pool of adult learners also asked adults without degrees where they would seek additional education. The chart on the next page shows that an adult's employer is the preferred provider by a significant margin, with 33 percent of adults without degrees either highly likely or somewhat likely to seek out education from their employer. Compare this to the 17 percent for traditional four-year institutions, a rate lower than or comparable to community colleges, trade schools, professional associations, or online training and certificate programs. (Strada/Gallup, 2019)

% of adults without degrees who say they are likely to seek additional education from various sources
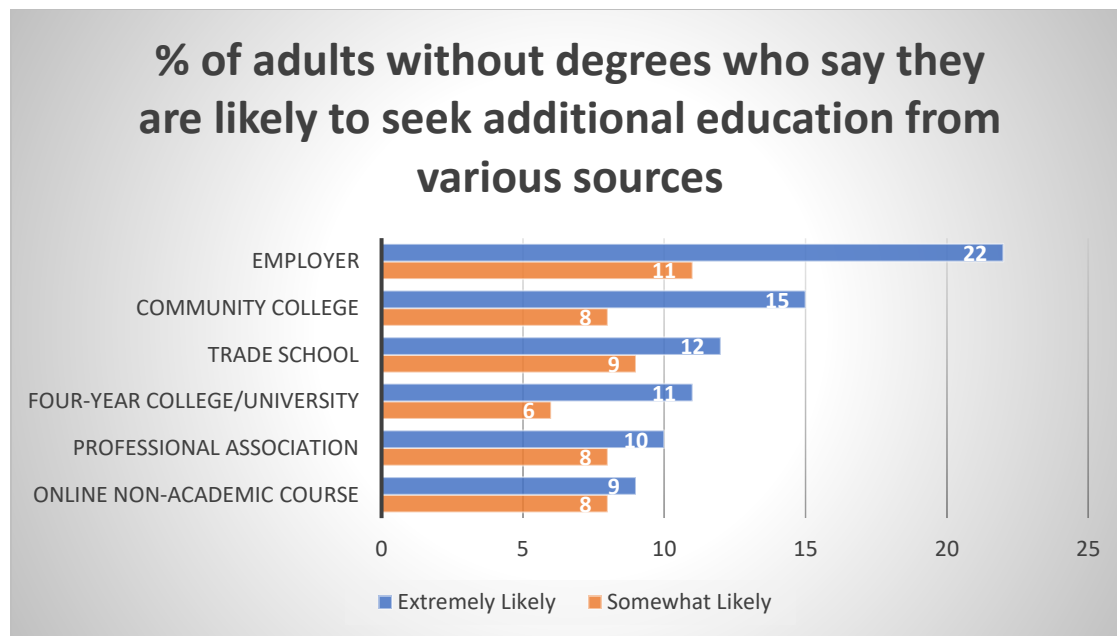
Gallup and Strada also found that adult learners' biggest enrollment driver was a "guaranteed employment outcome such as job placement, wage increase or promotion." This is something an educational institution has little to no control over. Low-cost tuition and flexible scheduling also drove the enrollment decision, and schools can directly address these concerns. (Gallup/Strada 2019) But with employers driving the primary criterion for enrollment, we believe schools would do well to partner with employers where both sides bring resources to the table.

A large research university like UNC-Chapel Hill (referred to as UNC moving forward) brings subject matter experts, a top-tier reputation, and an infrastructure for learning and research that can ensure a learning program has high quality. Meanwhile, a corporation or other organization brings the financial resources to support an educational program, a built-in student body that is motivated, direction on the skills needed for employees to develop, and the all-important control over job outcomes their employees' desire.

Our focus for this research paper is on a model where UNC can partner with local corporations to develop customized academic programs for these organizations and their employees, thereby meeting the needs of corporations and their employees while furthering the school's mission and increasing revenue opportunities.

UNC's current capabilities in serving adult learners

UNC has many opportunities for adult learners within the traditional graduate program academic structure.
- The Hussman School of Media and Journalism offers a variety of online certification courses and programs for working professionals in the media industry that can be transferred to their online degree program *(Online Graduate Certificate | UNC Hussman School of Journalism and Media, n.d.)*.

- The Kenan-Flagler Business School offers online, hybrid, or in-person Master of Accounting, Master of Business Administration (MBA), doctoral, and executive development programs. The online MBA program is ranked number one in the United States by US News & World Report *(2023 Best Online MBA Programs - US News,* n.d.).
- CareerWell is a program in the UNC Graduate School that provides courses in business communication, leadership, applied project management, marketing, and technology commercialization *(Courses - CareerWell - Professional Development - The Graduate School,* n.d.). CareerWell also provides coaching on professional development and teaches individuals how to be self-aware, communicate effectively, and be a leader *(Courses - CareerWell - Professional Development - The Graduate School,* n.d.). They even provide mentoring on creating an individual development plan for a learner's career *(Individual Development Plan (IDP) - CareerWell - Professional Development - The Graduate School,* n.d.).
- The Gillings School of Global Public Health offers degrees but also has some institutes or centers that focus on public outreach and training. These include the North Carolina Occupational Safety and Health Education and Research Center (NC OSHERC), North Carolina Institute for Public Health (NCIPH), and the UNC Injury Prevention Resource Center (NCIPRC) *(North Carolina Institute for Public Health (NCIPH) - UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health,* n.d.; *Outreach, Training and Continuing Education - UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health,* n.d.)*(Outreach/Training/Education - UNC Injury Prevention Research Center,* n.d.).
- In addition, UNC Digital and Lifelong Learning (DLL, formerly known as the Friday Center for Continuing Education) offers multiple classes to both degree- and non-degree-seeking students, individuals in prison, and high school students *(Students - Digital and Lifelong Learning,* n.d.). They also offer assistance with instructional design and development, conferences, and program development *(Home - Digital and Lifelong Learning,* n.d.).

These are only a cross-section of the programs offered to adult learners at UNC, with many more programs in the UNC School of Government, Carolina Health Informatics Program, and others.

Unfortunately, only a few programs geared toward adult learners would apply to the workers looking for directly applicable career advancement. Many of the programs mentioned, including the Hussman School of Media and Journalism, Kenan-Flagler Business School, and CareerWell, are designed to support graduate students earning a master's or doctoral degree. Or others, like the Kenan-Flagler Business School Executive Development program, focus on higher-level executives and management leaders *(Executive Development | UNC Kenan-Flagler Business School,* n.d.).

A few directly applicable programs could be integrated into the custom curriculum of an employer-based program. For instance, the NC OSHERC and NCIPRC offer on-site safety training to employers, such as an Industrial Technician Certificate Program, Safety Technician Certificate Program, and Environmental Technician Certificate Program *(Outreach, Training and Continuing Education - UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health,* n.d.; *Outreach/Training/Education - UNC Injury Prevention Research Center,* n.d.). These skills help

trainees keep others safe at work from falls, interpret Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) data, and appropriately apply personal protective equipment.

The most promising and relevant UNC program is DLL. DLL currently offers training programs in digital marketing, coding, project management, and data analytics, with coding being the most requested boot camp (*UNC-Chapel Hill Boot Camps*, n.d.) (Interview with Tyler Ritter). In the last several months, DLL has also started rebuilding portfolio programs to partner with employers, similar to what we propose here. DLL is working toward a hybrid, in-person, or online service to build custom training for employers. Employers may pay for custom programs or, if a need is established upfront, DLL may initiate a training program to attract businesses (Interview with Tyler Ritter). DLL would lead the development of the program but work with the employer, subject matter experts, course design experts, and media designers to create the program. Course instructors are vetted before they are brought into the program and course evaluations are completed throughout the course.

DLL is still in the listening tour process of building the program. They are gaining an understanding of the needs of employers in the area and the current programs available within UNC. These portfolio programs are being recreated because many were not needed, or the funding was not available to sustain the programs and they were no longer available (Interview with Tyler Ritter).

A model for corporate partnerships

Our research found a potential model for corporate partnerships within the UNC System. The mission of the UNC Charlotte School of Professional Studies "ensures that all learners, regardless of age, level of experience, or previous education, have opportunities to learn, grow, and achieve their personal and professional goals." (https://professional.charlotte.edu/about-us) The Employer Solutions (ES) program exemplifies that mission at work. ES was established in 2009 to provide customized training services to corporations in the Greater Charlotte area. Amy Wartham is the founding director of UNC Charlotte's ES and brings more than 25 years of professional development experience to her role. She shared that her organization has built more than 200 corporate partnerships, largely from scratch. Amy regularly attended networking events in the city, and ES still has no budget for marketing or promotion. Their primary source for recruiting new partnerships has come from referrals, which is a testament to the success of ES (Interview with Amy Wartham).

In 2009, the first ES corporate partnership was with a small business in Charlotte. ES provided customer service training, which was a success, and through word of mouth came other corporations interested in professional development training for their employees. At the end of year one, ES revenue was $114,000; the next year, they doubled that amount (Interview with Amy Wartham).

The success of the program can be attributed to several things. (Much of the below is taken from their course catalog here: https://employersolutions.charlotte.edu/sites/employersolutions.charlotte.edu/files/media/employer-solutions-catalog-spring-2023.pdf).

- **Customizable Content:** With more than 150 courses, ES can customize current course content or build courses from scratch to address the specific skills-based training employees need. Their mission is to understand an organization's goals, challenges, corporate style, fiscal demands, and competitive arena, among other factors.
- **Personalized End-to-End Support:** The Employer Solutions Team has a client-first mentality, supported by staff, instructors, instructional designers, coaches, and faculty.
- **Talented Instructors:** ES contracts outside of UNC Charlotte for 100 percent of their instructors, some of whom have supported this program for over 10 years. The School of Professional Studies evaluates instructors for their professionalism, presentation/facilitation style, and experience (Interview with Amy Wartham). Their instructors are thought leaders, subject matter experts, bestselling authors, and award-winning industry practitioners. Instructors provide engaging, practical, application-driven instruction.
- **Proven Track Record:** UNC Charlotte's ES program has worked with over 250 organizations across 28 states. Clients include Duke Energy, Goodwill, Lowe's, Eaton Corporation, and Continental Tire.
- **Flexible Delivery Methods:** All programs can be delivered online, at the corporate partner's location, or the UNC Charlotte Dubois Center. More than 50 percent of trainings are delivered virtually. This also helps ES design programs within corporate budgets, with most courses being offered at a flat rate.
- **More Than Just Training:** ES supplements its trainings with tools such as group and 1:1 coaching, advising services, assessments, materials licensing, instructional design, and train-the-trainer.

Piloting a program for adult learners

In looking for a potential partner for UNC DLL to pilot a corporate-learning program, team member Gary Tyson leveraged contacts within Chatham County, a growing area of the Triangle. Gary is the former chief of police of Siler City, N.C., and is a native of that town of 7,700 located about 30 miles from Chapel Hill. Gary contacted Karan Howard, Chair of the Chatham County Commissioners, who mentioned the excitement around two companies coming to the area: Wolfspeed, a Durham, N.C.-based semiconductor manufacturer set to build a manufacturing facility in Siler City, and VinFast, a Vietnamese/Singaporean-based electric vehicle manufacturer (Interview with Karan Howard).

With Gary's roots in Siler City, he contacted Wolfspeed and spoke with Christina Piard, the Upskilling Relationship Manager. Wolfspeed recently announced a $5 billion investment for its new facility, which will create 1,800 new jobs and expand its semiconductor production capacity. The plant will generate positions with an average salary of more than $77,000, about triple the current average salary in the community.

Christina told Gary that Wolfspeed was interested in a partnership with UNC DLL, and we have connected Christina with Tyler Ritter to potentially bring this partnership to fruition. We recommend moving ahead with the partnership for the following reasons:
- **Demand:** Wolfspeed identified several immediate needs in training as they begin hiring for the new facility. Christina told our team that the most immediate needs were:

- o Frontline supervisory leadership training
- o Emotional intelligence training
- o Communication skills for team leaders
- o Managing conflict
- o Basic computer skills
- o Clean room technology
- **Skill Match:** Tyler explained that UNC DLL did have some programs in place, particularly in soft-skill training, that could be applied in the short-term to Wolfspeed, providing the ability to capitalize on this opportunity.
- **Opportunity for Differentiation:** Wolfspeed has a partnership with Durham Technical Community College, which has provided a 12-week course that teaches chemistry, electronics, mechanical, programmable logic controllers, sensors, robotics, safety, quality, statistical techniques, problem solving and Lean Six Sigma to people training for work at Wolfspeed's planned facility in Chatham County. By focusing on supervisory soft skills, UNC DLL would provide something complementary to Wolfspeed's existing training programs rather than a redundancy.
- **Mission:** The mission of UNC is to "invest our knowledge and resources to enhance access to learning and to foster the success and prosperity of each rising generation. We also extend knowledge-based services and other resources of the University to the citizens of North Carolina and their institutions to enhance the quality of life for all people in the State." (https://www.unc.edu/about/mission) Partnering with a growing North Carolina company bringing a measure of economic independence to a previously disadvantaged area lines up perfectly with this mission.

Christina Piard indicated that the location and modality for the training would be important to Wolfspeed. She said a hybrid training model using online learning and some on-site teaching would be preferred.

Our team recommends using Wolfspeed as a pilot for a training program that could relaunch DLL into corporate partnerships. Our proposed pilot includes focusing on just one or two courses/skill focus areas, to be determined by Wolfspeed and DLL based on demand and availability. These would be offered in a hybrid method, then we propose evaluating the partnership no later than six months after the first course is offered to determine successes and additional needs. From this pilot, we recommend expanding to other corporations and organizations with a need for upskilling adult learners within their organization.

Expanding beyond the pilot; Leveraging the UNC System

During our research, we also learned about VinFast, the Vietnamese-founded, Singaporean-based private automotive company.

Established in 2017, VinFast is a member of the conglomerate organization Vingroup, one of the largest private conglomerates in Vietnam. It is the first Vietnamese car brand to expand into global markets. The company plans to invest $4 billion in its new factory in the Triangle Innovation Point complex in Moncure, N.C. They expect to start operations in 2025 and hire 7,500 employees in various roles, such as assembly line workers, technicians, engineers, and

supervisors. In addition, spin-off companies providing equipment to VinFast are expected to bring an additional 5,000 jobs to Chatham County by 2030.
(https://chathamnewsrecord.com/stories/training-for-jobs-part-of-preparing-for-vinfast-arrival,12930)

Our team sees VinFast as a prime opportunity to add a second pilot program like the one with Wolfspeed. On April 19 of this year, North Carolina Governor Roy Cooper announced a training partnership between VinFast and Central Carolina Community College, similar to the one Wolfspeed has with Durham Tech. This training mainly focuses on assembly line roles and technicians. This leaves us with opportunities to reach front-line supervisors with the soft skills needed within their operations.

VinFast also highlights potential challenges in UNC's reach to potential corporate partners. With so many employees at Wolfspeed, VinFast, and other tech companies being engineers, for example, UNC's lack of an engineering program could be seen as a partnership limitation. However, this drives our strategy for a second phase of corporate partnerships, focusing on leveraging the UNC System's resources and collaborations to create successful programs.

UNC DLL can build on its pilot programs in three ways:
1) **Differentiation:** To differentiate itself from other local providers, UNC can focus on mid and upper-management training, soft-skill development, and leadership skills training. This approach would capitalize on the reputation of UNC as one of the top public schools in the country, known for its competitive programs, certifications, and boot camps. DLL enables us to deliver high-quality training programs that meet the needs of clients, offering a unique advantage in the market. DLL could also collaborate with the Kenan-Flagler Business School and its well-respected Executive Education programs to reach more senior leaders within its partner corporations. These comprehensive, personalized, locally relevant programs would allow UNC to differentiate from online training sources like LinkedIn Learning, which are popular with adult learners.
2) **Collaboration:** Collaboration is critical to the proposed program's success. By collaborating with local government, we would seek to secure government grants to provide financial support for the training programs. Furthermore, partnering with other UNC System schools (see more below) allows us to expand our offerings and provide comprehensive training programs across various disciplines. This collaborative approach enhances the program's reach and effectiveness, strengthening its impact on the local community.
3) **Expansion:** To facilitate expansion, the program would partner with other UNC System schools that offer engineering programs, such as North Carolina State University and North Carolina A&T State University. This collaboration ensures the delivery of comprehensive training programs that can meet the needs of a wider range of clients. By leveraging the resources and expertise of partner schools, we can effectively address the demands of employers like VinFast, who require skilled senior engineers and supervisors in addition to assembly line workers and technicians. The UNC System's collaboration and expansion efforts allow customized education programs tailored to local employers' requirements. This collaboration enhances the program's effectiveness and fosters growth and innovation, benefiting UNC and other UNC System schools.

Furthermore, the incorporation of flexible delivery models, such as online courses or weekend classes, ensures that the program meets the scheduling needs of working professionals. By offering accessible and convenient training solutions, UNC can cater to the busy schedules of adult learners, making the program more effective and impactful.

UNC's reputation and existing resources provide a unique opportunity to enter the adult learning program field with minimal costs and significant impact.

Integrating adult learners into the UNC community

UNC's Carolina Blue colors and reputation as a public university extend its brand beyond state borders and should be incorporated into any successful employer-based program. Our interview with Wolfspeed revealed that in addition to their training needs, Wolfspeed values the UNC brand and its dedication to excellence in the community and that many of its employees feel that UNC is unattainable for their educations (Interview with Christina Piard).

Staging community-building or celebration events benefits the learners themselves. Hybrid, online-only, or isolated learners often miss opportunities for continued growth through networking and connecting with others (Mullinix et al., 2021). Isolated students may also be more likely to feel burnout and not complete courses (Rovai & Jordan, 2004). Reward-based or enjoyable learning situations also enhance learning (Knowlton & Castel, 2022). Learners need a hand in building their community to feel vested (Mullinix et al., 2021). For that to happen, educators must provide a space for community creation and rewards outside of the learning environment.

Here, we propose four strategies for building community.
1) Social events, such as sporting events or on-campus meet-ups, would provide protected time for socialization and touring the campus. They will also offer engaging activities in contact with other UNC populations, including students, faculty, and medical providers.
2) Coupons or vouchers for UNC-branded apparel or other "SWAG" will also increase a sense of connection to the larger community.
3) Providing official certificates, either paper certificates or digital badges, with the UNC brand upon course or class completion will instill a sense of accomplishment and provide training documentation. DLL has traditionally offered these types of credentials (Interview with Tyler Ritter). Digital badges are an electronic tool implemented and validated by the awarding institution that can also include additional information such as equivalent courses or course details. These micro-credentials come in various forms and are even available to potential employers on professional social media platforms like LinkedIn (Shanahan & Organ, 2022).
4) A graduation ceremony or event, either on-campus or at the employer site recognizing participants' hard work and dedication will provide additional acknowledgment. Graduation could be held for individual companies once or twice a year, depending on the level of training and involvement. Group graduations with multiple companies could be had for those with a smaller enrollment.

Overall, UNC has several additional benefits for including a sense of community in their employer-based adult learner programs. It advertises the program to potentially interested businesses by associating the UNC name with continuing education on a resume, an official certificate in a colleague's office, or an announcement at a sporting event welcoming employer-based program participants. Providing a platform for students to create a sense of community will attract more students to the program within currently partnered employers when workers hear about the program from their peers.

In addition, it may recruit more workers to apply for jobs at partnering companies that offer training, especially if potential workers identify with the UNC brand or are friends with current students. Creating a sense of community for employer-based learners will increase perceived cognitive learning as well as satisfaction and completion rates (Rovai, 2002). A completion rate of 75% is one of the proposed measures of success for the program.

Challenges, mitigations, and measurement

Instituting new corporate training programs within DLL is not without challenges. Some of those challenges are listed in the table below, along with mitigation strategies.

Potential challenge	Mitigation approach/strategy
Leadership support – Necessary for funding and resource allocation. A lack of support from university leaders would make it difficult to move forward.	Tie to the university's mission "to serve as a center for research, scholarship, and creativity and to teach a diverse community of undergraduate, graduate, and professional students to become the next generation of leaders." (https://www.unc.edu/about/mission/)
Cost/staffing – A major concern when a project is initiated and over time as a project grows.	Use existing DLL courses where possible to minimize staffing and keep costs controlled at the start. After a year, UNC can more accurately see the finances required to support the program after evaluating the pilot.
Competition – The presence of local community colleges, online training programs, and other universities offering similar corporate programs could dampen interest.	Leverage the strong UNC brand for providing excellence in education in addition to our world-class instructors (as Wolfspeed noted). UNC also should foster a collaborative position with community colleges to leverage their strengths to provide the best training and professional development options.
Mismatch of skills – UNC may receive training requests outside of its scope and core competencies.	This is why we recommend starting with a manageable pilot and then expanding to other companies that could present an opportunity to collaborate with other UNC System schools to create a referral system for those requests UNC can't fulfill.

Low demand – With an impending recession, UNC may experience slow demand from corporations for training. Often, these are the first things cut from budgets during lean economic times.	Start with a small pilot utilizing existing UNC resources, focusing on companies moving ahead with expansion/hiring plans, such as Wolfspeed and VinFast. It is appropriate to be cautious about demand, but the Triangle shows no signs of slowing job growth compared to other parts of the country, and UNC is well-positioned at the heart of it.

Finally, it is essential to consider the right metrics for the success of a corporate program. For our pilot, we recommend four metrics focused on uptake, completion, employee outcomes, and engagement.

- Establish two new corporate partnerships (with Wolfspeed being one of those) by the end of 2024.
- Achieve a completion rate of 75 percent for employees enrolled within the first year of these programs.
- Document career advancement for 15 percent of participating employees within one year of program completion.
- Conduct two social engagements, such as UNC events or graduations, per corporate program by 2025.

Conclusion

Corporate partnerships present a significant opportunity for UNC, particularly in Digital and Lifelong Learning, to reach adult learners and extend the Tar Heel brand further into the community. New initiatives like this are not without risks, but by identifying an expanding local company like Wolfspeed with a built-in demand for soft skills and front-line leadership training, the school has a chance to get a quick win in this space.

By leveraging the resources and collaborations within the UNC system, UNC can create a successful corporate-sponsored adult learning program. The proposed differentiation, collaboration, and expansion strategies enable the program to offer comprehensive training programs, address diverse workforce needs, and provide personalized and flexible learning experiences. Through this initiative, UNC-Chapel Hill can generate revenue, support adult learners in the community, strengthen its ties with local businesses and partner schools, and advance its mission within the state.

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- **Vanessa Doriott Anderson –** Assistant Dean for Academic and Career Development, UNC Graduate School
- **Karan Howard –** Chair, Chatham County Commissioners
- **Christina Piard –** Upskilling Relationship Manager, Wolfspeed
- **Tyler Ritter –** Chief Operating Officer and Director of Professional Education, UNC Digital and Lifelong Learning
- **Amy Wartham –** Director of Corporate and Custom Training, UNC Charlotte