

# Project Counterbalance Annual Evaluation Report

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Asheville - Buncombe  
Technical Community  
College



**Final Report**  
**Year 4 | 2025**

Dogwood Health Trust

**Asheville-Buncombe  
Technical Community  
College**

**Counterbalance Project  
Dogwood Health Trust  
Program Grant  
December 2025**

**FINAL REPORT PREPARED BY:**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Asheville–Buncombe Technical Community College’s (AB-Tech) Counterbalance Project aims to address barriers that lead to higher deregistration, stop-out rates, lower retention, and lower completion rates among its students. Primary outcomes of the Counterbalance Project during the no-cost extension period included: increase in the number of students on the past due balance list who have received direct outreach; increase in re-enrollment of Counterbalance student participants; increase in the number of enrolled students served via specialized success coaching and education and career advancement; increase in the number of students who receive a combination of debt forgiveness, need-based scholarships, and emergency funds; and increase in number provided workforce development and training. To achieve these goals, AB-Tech implemented several strategies including: wrap-around support navigation for current students; the identification of students at-risk of deregistration; and outreach and recruitment for prospective students. This report, prepared at the end of the project’s no-cost extension, is the final evaluation report of the Counterbalance Project.

*“If it wasn't for the program, I wouldn't be able to attend...and also just how helpful the navigators are with helping with any resources that we may need. They're always asking if there's anything that we need, a lot of follow up, and then also a lot of opportunities with workshops that they provide, and making sure they're keeping us up with the calendar. And then also, the opportunities with the RISE panels granted me the opportunity to meet a whole bunch of different other students.” - Counterbalance Project Student*

*“So like, being able to come back to school means I can better my life and and try to get back into the workforce and actually live and not just barely survive, have a life, you know, be able to afford more than getting by.” - Counterbalance Project Student*

## Year 4 Highlights



### **New workshop and engagement initiative:**

Building Habits for College & Life Success Series was launched to support students in cultivating the skills, habits, and mindsets essential for thriving in college, career, and life.



### **Strengthened student support networks**

By Year 4, 23 project staff, including a Project Director, Strategic Enrollment Manager/Recruiter, Success Coach, Career Coach, and four College Navigators, along with fifteen Faculty Navigators, are serving as trusted guides who build relationships, encourage persistence, and empower students to achieve their goals.



### **Supporting a student cohort**

In all, 550 students participated in or received some form of workforce training, including 1,150 touch points during the reporting terms of this report (SU24-FA25), aligned with their aspirations for stability and upward mobility.



### **Workforce training with purpose and partnership**

As part of workforce training with a clear purpose, project leaders worked closely with campuses, community organizations, and industry partners to connect classroom learning with career pathways. They designed apprenticeships, certifications, and immersive learning experiences that equipped students with practical skills and confidence to enter the workforce. In all, 550 students participated in workforce training.

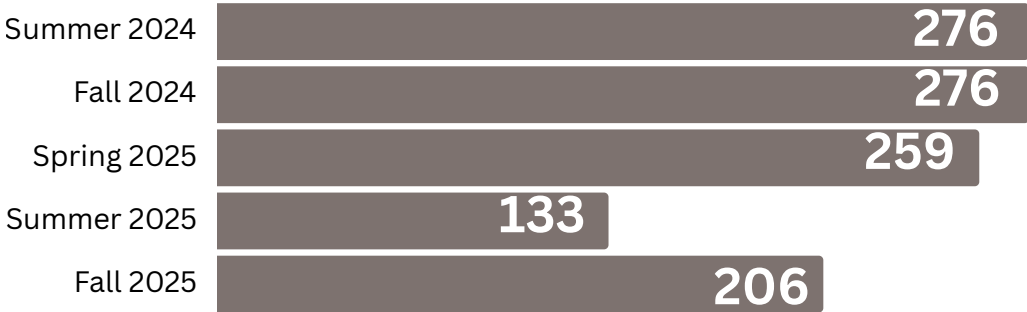
# Findings



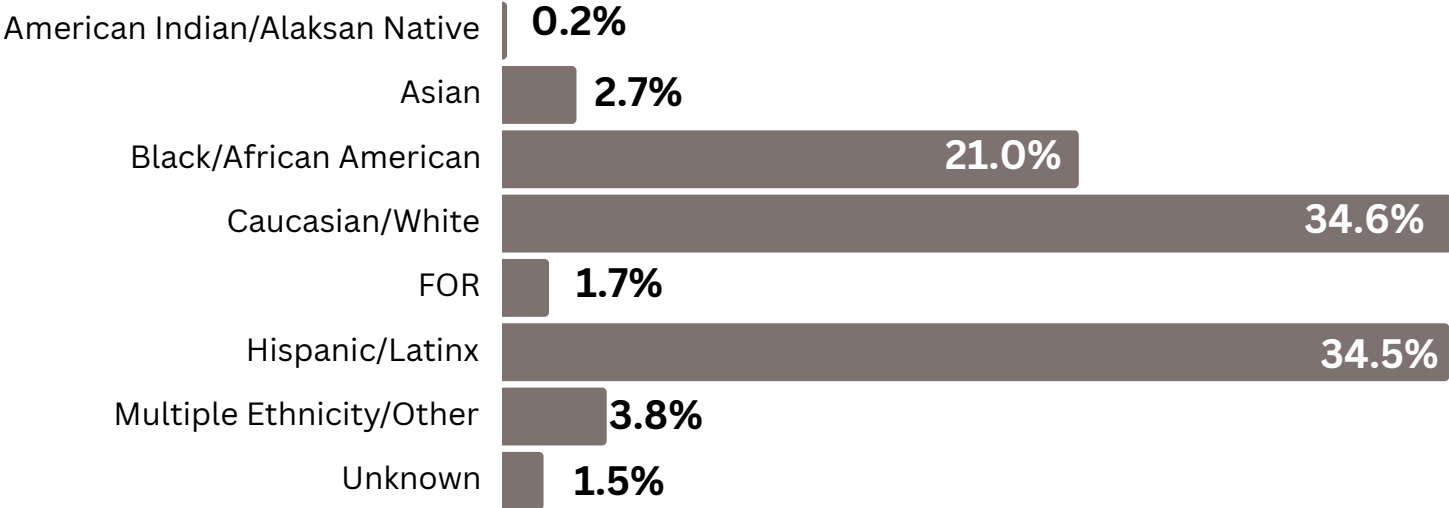
# SUMMATIVE RESULTS FOR ALL TERMS: SUMMER 2024, FALL 2024, SPRING 2025, SUMMER 2025, FALL 2025

## OVERALL SERVED

### Number of Unduplicated Students by Term:

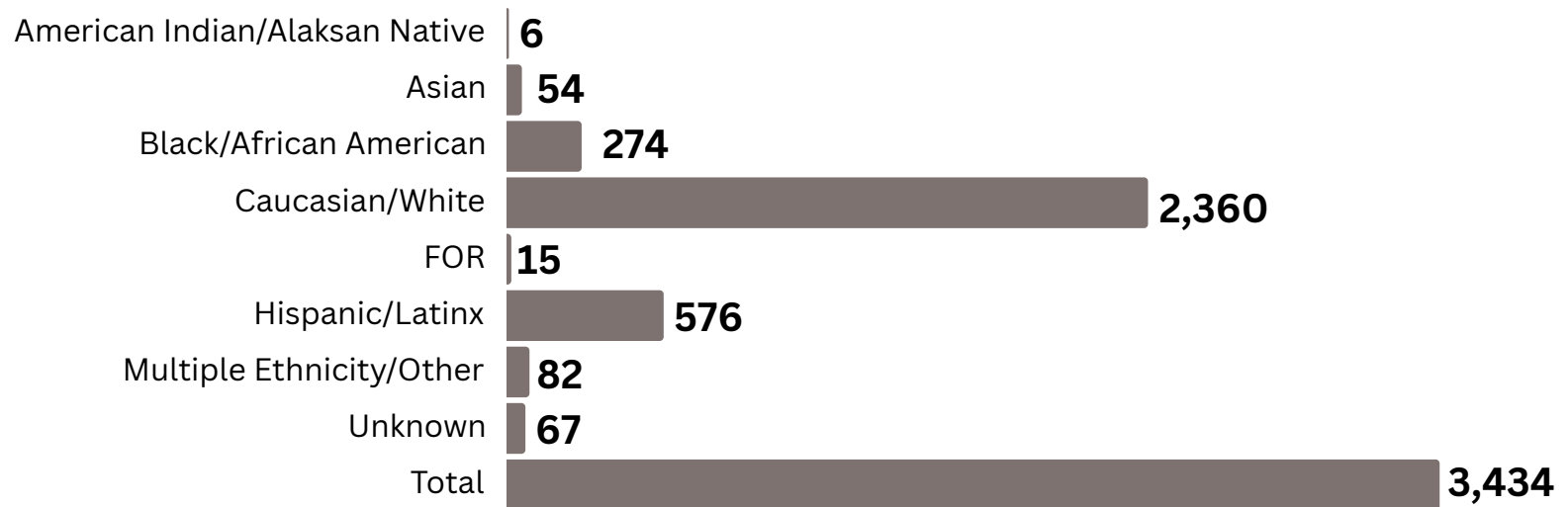


### Percent of Unduplicated Students by Race/Ethnicity (all terms combined):

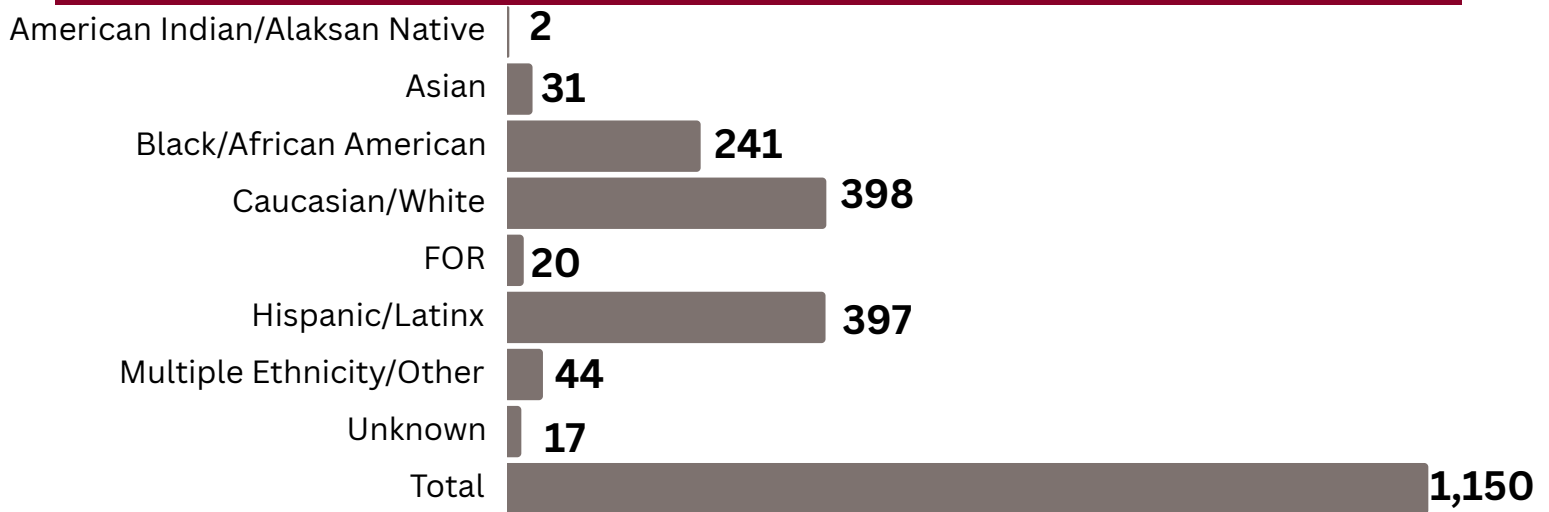


# PRIMARY OUTCOME MEASUREMENTS

## Number of Touchpoints of Support During the Reporting Terms of this Report (SU24–FA25) Provided to Past-Due Students Who Received Direct Outreach, by Race/Ethnicity (all terms combined):

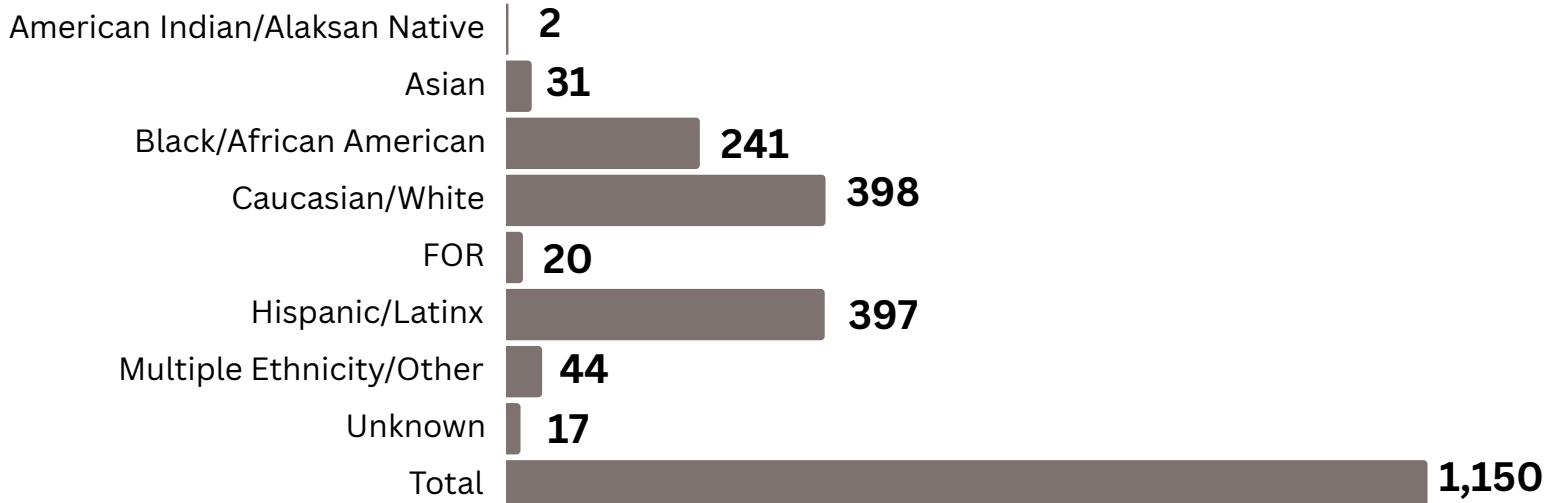


## Number of Touchpoints of Support During the Reporting Terms of this Report (SU24–FA25) Provided to Counterbalance Students Successfully Re-Enrolled, by Race/Ethnicity (all terms combined):

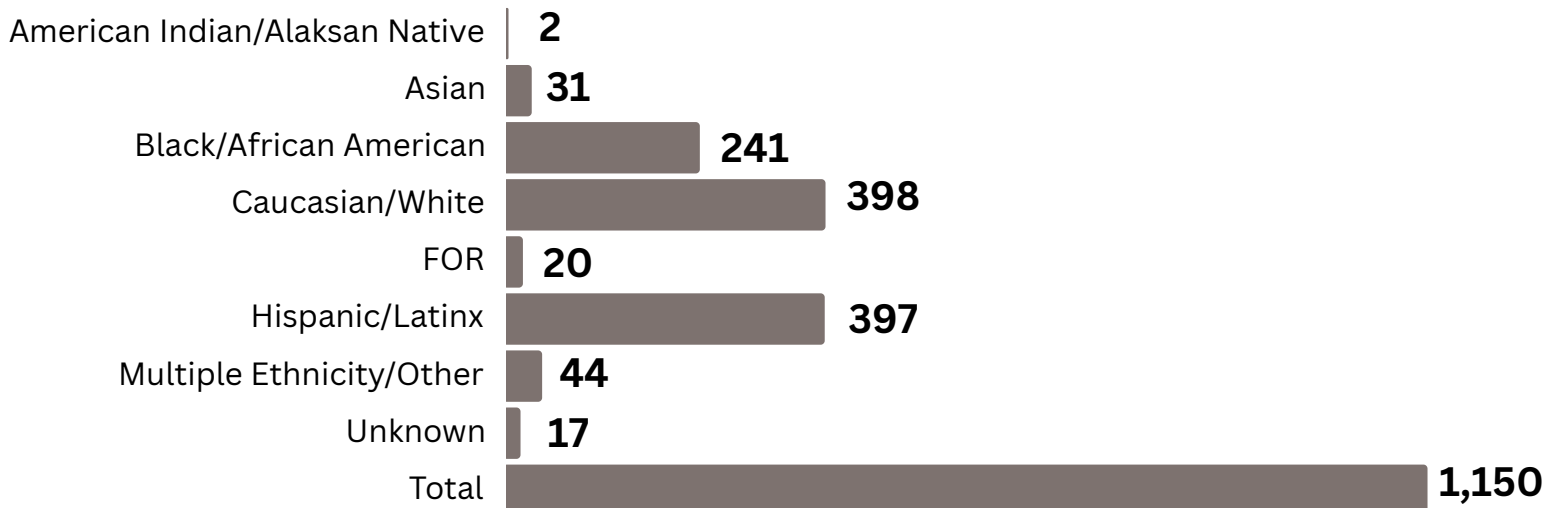


# PRIMARY OUTCOME MEASUREMENTS (CONTINUED)

**Number of Touchpoints of Support During the Reporting Terms of this Report (SU24–FA25) Provided to Unduplicated Enrolled Students Who Received Success Coaching and Education and Career Advancement Services, by Race/Ethnicity (all terms combined):**



**Number of Touchpoints of Support During the Reporting Terms of this Report (SU24–FA25) Provided to Students Who Received Combination of Debt-Relief, Need-based Scholarships, and/or Emergency Funds, by Race/ Ethnicity (all terms combined):**



# # OF WORKFORCE TRAINING & DEVELOPMENT PARTICIPANTS BY TOPIC

In all, 550 students received workforce training and development by either curriculum or continuing education programming. The charts below display the number of participants by topic.

Accounting	1
Accounting and Finance	4
Advanced Machine Operator	9
Air Conditioning, Heating & Refrigeration Technology	2
Associate Degree Nursing	3
Associate in Arts	71
Associate in Fine Arts in Visual Arts	6
Associate in General Education	50
Associate in General Education: Pre Cosmetology	1
Associate in General Education: Pre Medical Sonography	2
Associate in General Education: Pre Medical Assisting	1
Associate in General Education-Nursing	35
Associate in Science	23
Automotive Systems Technology	4
Aviation Management & Career Pilot Technology	2
Aviation Management & Career Pilot Technology: Aviation Mgt	1
Baking and Pastry Arts	1
Brewing, Distillation and Fermentation	2
Business Administration	17
Business Administration: General Business Administration	1
College Transfer Pathway Leading to an Associate in Arts	18
College Transfer Pathway Leading to an Associate in Science	1
Computer-Integrated Machining	2
ConEd	43
Construction Management Technology	3
Cosmetology	1
Criminal Justice Technology	17
Culinary Arts	12
Dental Assisting	1
Dental Hygiene	1
Digital Media Technology	2

# # OF WORKFORCE TRAINING & DEVELOPMENT PARTICIPANTS BY TOPIC (CONTINUED)

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Early Childhood Certificate	3
Early Childhood Education	8
Electrical System Technology	1
Electrical Wiring	1
Entrepreneurship	2
Esthetics Technology	6
Fire Protection Technology	2
General Occupational Technology	13
Geomatics Technology	1
Health and Fitness Science	3
Hospitality Management	3
Human Services Technology	30
Information Technology	11
Information Technology: Artificial Intelligence	1
Manicuring/Nail Technology	3
Manicuring/Nail Technology (Certificate)	1
Mechanical Engineering Technology	2
Medical Assisting	4
Medical Laboratory Technology	9
Medical Office Administration	13
Medical Office Administration - Medical Coding	4
Nurse Aide (Certificate)	3
Office Administration	3
Phlebotomy	5
Practical Nursing (Diploma)	2
Radiography	1
Special Credit Students	66
Teacher Preparation	5
Unclassified General	4
Veterinary Medical Technology	2
Welding Technology	1

# WHAT SUCCESSES HAS THE PROJECT ACHIEVED?

## PROJECT SUCCESSES

### Accessible, Holistic Student Support

A major, consistently reported success of the Counterbalance Project—including in Year 4—was its accessible, holistic student support model. The addition of “Building Habits for College & Life Success Series,” launched in Year 4 enhanced the model by providing workshops to support students in cultivating the skills, habits, and mindsets essential for thriving in college, career, and life. Student support extended far beyond traditional academic advising, encompassing emotional, financial, and academic assistance. Nearly every student interviewed for this report emphasized that without these wraparound services, they likely would not have been able to complete their degree programs. Advisors also repeatedly shared that they felt honored to be part of this work.

*"[Two staff names], they're willing to go bend over for you to get to accomplish your goals. They are texting you, calling you, emailing you, saying, What can we do so you could finish the program."*

-Counterbalance Project student

*"My navigator, and I can say he just motivated me and pushed me, like, not just the monthly checkups, he was checking in more often than that, or I could reach out to him at any time...he's going to respond and he's going to give the best direction or redirect you."*

-Counterbalance Project student

*"I would do monthly check ins with them. We would have meetings. They would submit their grades to me. But it became more about sort of celebrating victories, venting sessions, encouragement, writing recommendation letters, and helping them think about the next step in their lives. So it became sort of a personal touch point for them at AB Tech, and I felt like I became a part of their journey.."*

-Counterbalance Project advisor

*"It's brought a lot of meaning to my life as well, and helped me with my growth and development as well as a person and as a professional."*

-Counterbalance Project advisor

### Financial Support

Financial support was critical for Counterbalance Project students. Funding for both academic (fees, books) and non-academic needs (electric bills, printer ink, eyeglasses, car repairs) helped them navigate the entire college experience—from application through graduation—and many noted that without this assistance, they likely would not have been able to attend college at all.

*"I had a student whose glasses broke, could not see, and so for him to keep taking class, he needed new glasses. We were able to, through emergency funds, immediately get him the glasses that he needed. I have another student who, as textbooks have moved digitally, needed support to buy physical copies of her textbooks ...due to her learning disability. So we were able to help her purchase physical textbooks...the best format for her. Other students wanted support with...locating schools that had free [college] application periods."*

-Counterbalance Project advisor

### Sustainability

The sustainability of campus efforts were exhibited in multiple ways during Year 4:

#### IT support

IT infrastructure built during the four-year project, such as Watermark, “will sustain us [project leadership], not just in our division, but ... processes across the college.” [project leadership]. Particularly IT systems that track student progress, capturing where they are now and how AB-Tech faculty and staff can help adjust their goals.

#### Transfer of Platform

The student success and retention program platform initially funded during the Counterbalance Project has migrated to AB-Tech’s Department of Education Title III project at AB-Tech, and thus will be sustained.

#### The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC)

#### Accreditation

Successes and models of the Counterbalance Project were embedded in the quality enhancement plan for SACSCOC and thus will be sustained.

# WHAT CHALLENGES HAS THE PROJECT FACED?

## Factors Impacting Implementation

### Hurricane Helene

In late September 2024, Hurricane Helene struck Asheville, NC. Project staff reported that the disruption had lasting effects, noting that the momentum lost during the storm was slow to recover even a year later (Year 4). As one staff member explained, “Hurricane Helene blocked a lot of the goals that we had.”

### Limitations of Program Enrollment

Project staff reported that the demand for support exceeded the program’s capacity. Many more students sought assistance than the Counterbalance Project was able to serve, and staff described the inability to support every applicant as disheartening. This limitation not only affected student access but also influenced overall implementation, as staff were required to make difficult decisions about prioritization and resource allocation.

## PROJECT CHALLENGES



### Continuing the Strong Project Staff Model

By the end of Year 4, the project employed 23 staff members, including a Project Director, a Strategic Enrollment Manager/Recruiter, a Success Coach, a Career Coach, four College Navigators, and fifteen Faculty Navigators. Together, these roles formed a robust support network of trusted guides who built relationships, encouraged persistence, and empowered students to achieve their goals. Sustaining this comprehensive student-support infrastructure, however, will pose a significant challenge in the near future.

### Student Engagement

Although most Counterbalance Project students remain engaged, staff reported that a subset of students can be difficult to reach, creating ongoing frustration and time-intensive follow-up demands. As one staff member explained, some students “don’t immediately contact you back... You’re supposed to contact me within 24 to 48 hours... And when you have students who are going through a lot, there’s a tendency to disappear.” Another described the persistence required to maintain connection: “I kept tracking them down... I never lost them. And I would just say, ‘It’s okay, you’re not in trouble. I just want to know that you’re okay.’” Despite staff commitment, the effort required to keep track of disengaged students remains a significant challenge and consumes substantial time and capacity.

# Conclusions & Recommendations



# CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

## Supporting a Large Student Cohort

AB-Tech's Counterbalance Project provided equitable access and holistic student support to 550 students, including specialized workforce development and training. In total, 1,150 touchpoints of support were provided during the four-year project. Although most students served reside in Buncombe County, the Project's reach expanded into 11 counties within the AB-Tech service region. A strong project staff of 23, including a Project Director, Strategic Enrollment Manager/Recruiter, Success Coach, Career Coach, and four College Navigators, along with fifteen Faculty Navigators, served as trusted guides who build relationships, encourage persistence, and empower students to achieve their goals.

***“If it wasn't for counter counterbalance, I wouldn't have been able to attend school again.”***

- Counterbalance Project student

## Student Advising

Students supported by the Counterbalance Project overwhelmingly reported that the program helped them in holistic ways—not just academically. During Year 4, the “Building Habits for College & Life Success Series” was launched to support students in cultivating the skills, habits, and mindsets essential for thriving in college, career, and life. Many students shared that they likely would not have completed their degree programs without this wraparound support.

During interviews, students also identified opportunities to strengthen the program. Several expressed a desire for more peer connection beyond their one-on-one relationships with advisors. As one student explained, “I think more interaction with other people besides your navigator... maybe a meeting in the middle. You meet at first for orientation, but maybe you can meet up six months later and engage... build up another community.”

Students also emphasized the need for broader outreach so that more potential participants are aware of the program. One student suggested, “People who need the program... go out and share with the community. Get somebody to write up their story to tell... like a newsletter or something. Because, like I said, more people would take the opportunity if they knew it was there.”

Looking ahead, both students and Counterbalance Project faculty highlighted the importance of continuing the BIPOC faculty cohort work initiated in Year 4. They emphasized that expanding this model to develop College Navigators who can support all underserved students should be a central focus for future efforts.

## Workforce Training and Development

As part of workforce training with a clear purpose, project leaders worked closely with campuses, community organizations, and industry partners to connect classroom learning with career pathways. They designed apprenticeships, certifications, and immersive learning experiences that equipped students with practical skills and confidence to enter the workforce. In all, 550 students were provided workforce training and development by either curriculum or continuing education programming during the four-year project - despite challenges due to COVID-19, Hurricane Helene, and the federal political context affecting colleges and universities. Key insights from analyses of workforce training and development offerings are as follows:

- Associate-level transfer programs (Arts, General Education, Science) dominate participation - most students fall into this category.
- Career/technical programs (Advanced Machine Operator, Criminal Justice, Human Services, IT, Culinary Arts) have smaller but notable representation thus demanding attention for future workforce offerings.
- Specialized certificates (Esthetics, Manicuring, Early Childhood, Medical Assisting) appear in smaller numbers, but they highlight niche workforce pathways to AB-Tech students.

(See pages 9 and 10 for detailed enrollment data by program)

Interviews with project staff highlighted a strategic opportunity to deepen industry engagement as the Counterbalance Project transitions into its post-grant period. Staff emphasized that increasing visibility among local employers—particularly those who directly benefit from graduates entering their industries—could cultivate stronger community buy-in and possibly engage partners in funding workforce training and development. This suggests a promising avenue for sustainability: proactively engaging industry professionals to secure grants, gifts, or other contributions that align student supports with high-demand technical skills and specialized career pathways.

***“The CDL licensure students for truck driving, it's really awesome to have them come back, pop their head in the door, email me, whatever, and let me know that they've gotten a job at their chosen trucking company, and that they're, you know, making good money and super successful after the help of the Counterbalance funding, because CDL is really expensive, and it helps them get into a quick licensure to get out there, back into the workforce and be successful and make good money.”***

- Counterbalance Project Staff

## Unintended Outcomes

Unintended holistic outcomes also emerged during student interviews. Many Counterbalance Project participants reported that their involvement strengthened their relationships with others, improved their self-perception, and enhanced their overall sense of safety and inclusivity. Illustrative quotes from students—and one staff member—highlighting these themes are provided below.

*“So dealing with Counterbalance also helped me be more friendly and personable to other people as well, because at first, I kind of view people as competition, or what do you want from me, or why are you being nice to me? ...it just feels like a loving place.”*

*“Since access to them [Counterbalance Project advisors], they helped me feel a little bit more safe. And when I felt more safe, I was able to bring my GPA up a little bit...like, the 3.5 I used to have...and that's because of them. Like, when you feel safe, when you feel like you're nourishing, you're not freaking out all the time about work. How am I gonna eat today? How am I gonna work and do and do things today?”*

*“The whole check in thing that we do, like, once a month, it's just it makes me feel like someone cares, that like I have, I have something...like in my corner, to want to strive to be more.”*

*“The whole meditation thing is helpful to me. It unclenches my brain, like, I feel more relaxed this time around, people want to help me. Now it feels like people care at AB-Tech, because the 2017 it felt like they did not.”*

*“Counterbalance is kind of opening me up and making me feel more in this loving energy and all these things, because love is important and hope is important, and all these things, it has me hoping for a better future, like maybe I can do this, maybe I can be an entrepreneur, maybe I can do all these other things. It just empowers me to be more friendly to other people and not be so closed off at times.”*

*“I wouldn't be where I'm at today, like mentally, emotionally and just everything like it, I just can't thank the people enough for giving people like me an opportunity, a push, an extra push, just feeling like somebody caring that you belong. And after so many years I'm I can finally say I finished something.”*

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*“I think the the need for the wraparound services following the hurricane. I'd hate to think what we wouldn't be able to do had we not had that infrastructure of all the career navigators and coaches and and those things that had already been established. We continue to support students and faculty as the recovery efforts. You know, we're six, seven months into it now, and that continues. So I think the unintended support that we're able to offer by having these additional people on our teams has also been very helpful.” (Staff)*