



SEPTEMBER 2025

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

After Hurricane Helene, community colleges in Western North Carolina grappled with limited digital access which resulted in the under-utilization of newly launched online support platforms like TimelyCare and Single Stop, however, success coaches proved instrumental in student support. To enhance future resilience, we recommend leveraging success coaches as primary points of contact, simplifying digital platform processes, and expanding and standardizing training for faculty and staff on these critical student support resources.

# STUDENTS' ACCESS TO AND USE OF STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES AFTER HURRICANE HELENE IN WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA COMMUNITY COLLEGES

## OVERVIEW

In September 2024, Hurricane Helene struck western North Carolina, bringing widespread devastation to already economically distressed rural communities. Suddenly, students, faculty and staff were experiencing increased housing and food insecurity, limited to no internet access, and spiking unemployment rates. The hurricane's impact further strained this geographical area already characterized with low college attainment and high poverty rates.

Just as Hurricane Helene hit, [Isothermal Community College](#), [McDowell Technical Community College](#) and [Western Piedmont Community College](#) were in their first implementation year of a collaborative student-centered initiative, [Foothills Facilitating an Occupation Ready Workforce by Addressing Regional Demands \(FORWARD\)](#), funded by the U.S. Department of Education's [Rural Post-secondary Education and Economic Development \(RPED\)](#) grant program. These institutions, serving four counties in western North Carolina, support a combined annual enrollment of more than 17,700 students in curriculum and continuing education programs.<sup>1</sup> Together, they share a mission of improving post-secondary outcomes through enhanced student support services tailored to the unique needs of rural learners.

This project introduced new support structures designed to help students persist and succeed, despite the barriers they may face. Specifically, the program

implemented success coaching, and the use of two new technology platforms: [Single Stop](#) and [TimelyCare](#). Success coaches are staff members based at each college, offering in-person guidance tailored to individual student needs and helping them navigate their academic journey. In addition, Single Stop and TimelyCare are virtual platforms designed to extend support beyond the campus. Single Stop screens students for eligibility and connects them to government and local aid resources, including food, housing and financial assistance while TimelyCare offers 24/7 access to medical and mental health services, helping students manage health related challenges.

As part of this initiative, the [Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research](#) partnered with these colleges to assess implementation, student engagement and impact, with a particular focus on how Hurricane Helene shaped student needs and institutional response. This brief explores how the RPED Foothills FORWARD initiative was leveraged during a time of crisis, and the role it played meeting student needs during and after the storm.

## KEY POINTS



Hurricane Helene widened existing digital inequities, disrupting the studies of 70% of students surveyed, delaying assignments for more than half and leaving 85% of the participants without reliable access to internet or technology.



Despite high satisfaction among students who used the online student support services, the number of students who actually used these support systems remained far behind the number of students who were advised to use these services. Interviews revealed early stage rollout challenges, the complexity of the application processes and connectivity gaps as the likely reasons for the under-utilization of online student support services.



Success coaches who were central to the project's goals remained significant contributors to the recovery, together with faculty, staff and campus leaders. This underscores the demand for human-centered support amid disruption, with 51% of survey respondents being referred and 34% engaging with a coach.

## METHODOLOGY

This brief presents key findings from a mixed-methods evaluation of the RPED Foothills Forward Project conducted by the Belk Center in January 2025. The evaluation drew on two main data sources: a student survey (n=143) conducted in person across 12 classrooms at the three colleges, and five virtual focus groups with faculty, staff, success coaches and senior leaders. The student survey explored experiences with success coaching, awareness and use of student support services (Single Stop and TimelyCare), and the broader academic impact of Hurricane Helene. Focus groups provided additional context on service implementation, institutional response during the hurricane and factors influencing student engagement with available supports.



## HURRICANE HELENE'S IMPACT ON STUDENT EXPERIENCES

According to survey data, 70% of student respondents reported that the hurricane directly impacted their ability to succeed in college. The most common challenge students cited was accessing reliable internet or technology for coursework, a barrier reported by 85% of students. A majority of respondents (57%) also struggled to submit assignments on time, and nearly half (47%) had difficulty attending classes. Students also reported trouble reaching faculty, staff or success coaches (29%), and an increased need for food and housing support (19%). Although fewer students cited delays in student support services (6%) or mental health access (5%), these challenges still underscore the importance of timely, accessible and coordinated support during crisis events.

### THE ROLE OF SUPPORT SERVICES IN A TIME OF CRISIS

**Success Coaches:** Central to the project's goals, success coaches provide targeted onboarding, advising and case management, especially for students in high-skill programs. In the aftermath of the hurricane, success coaches were instrumental in the academic recovery process by helping students connect to essential services. Their work was part of a larger, campus-wide response, with faculty and staff working to support students in the wake of the hurricane. Survey results show that 51% of students were referred to a success coach as a result of hurricane-related needs, and 34% actually used the service, which stands out as a strong indication of both the demand for and reliance on human-centered support during disruption.

**TimelyCare:** The TimelyCare platform offers 24/7 virtual access to medical and mental health services. While 29% of student survey respondents were referred to TimelyCare due to the challenges they experienced after the hurricane, only 8% reported using it. However, among those who did, satisfaction was high (78%). Student support staff pointed to two likely

barriers during our focus groups: students' lack of awareness of the platform and inconsistent training among faculty and staff regarding how to promote and refer students to the service. These challenges were likely compounded by the fact that 85% of students reported difficulty accessing reliable internet, making it harder to engage with virtual services like TimelyCare. As fall 2024 marked the platform's first semester of implementation, these combined factors significantly limited its reach at a time when its full utility could have made a substantial impact on student well-being.

**Single Stop:** Single Stop functions as a screening tool connecting students to government benefits and local aid. After Hurricane Helene, 23% of student survey respondents were referred to Single Stop, but only 12% used the platform. Although usage was low, 71% of those who used it found it helpful. Both survey and interview data suggested that the Single Stop application process felt overwhelming to many students. Despite increased outreach efforts, the disconnect between referral and usage highlights the need to simplify the user experience and improve communication about what Single Stop offers.

# KEY TAKEAWAYS: STUDENTS' ACCESS TO AND USE OF STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES AFTER THE HURRICANE

**Hurricane Helene exacerbated pre-existing digital access gaps:** The impact of Hurricane Helene on students' academic lives was significant, with 70% of surveyed students reporting direct disruption. More than half of respondents experienced difficulty submitting assignments on time, and an overwhelming 85% cited a lack of reliable internet or access to necessary technology as a major barrier. It is important to acknowledge that although staff and faculty were not included in the survey, they too faced similar connectivity issues, which further complicated the entire academic cycle, from students submitting assignments to faculty grading and providing timely feedback.

**Online support services were underused, even when students found them helpful:** While student support services like TimelyCare and Single Stop were available in the aftermath of the hurricane, the data reveal a noticeable gap between referrals to these services and actual usage. For example, 29% of student survey respondents reported being referred to TimelyCare, yet only 8% used the service. Similarly, 23% were

referred to Single Stop, but just 12% followed through with accessing it. These low usage rates may be partially attributed to the early stages of implementation, confusion or difficulty in the application processes, and the technology access barriers already highlighted. Despite these challenges, students who did access these services reported relatively high satisfaction levels.

**Success coaching provided critical, centralized support during hurricane recovery:** Success coaching played a pivotal role in supporting students during and after Hurricane Helene and continues to be a valuable resource. While recovery efforts involved collaboration from faculty, staff and various departments, having a centralized point of contact proved especially beneficial. More than half of survey respondents reported being referred to a success coach, underscoring the demand for a dedicated, accessible support figure who can guide students through challenges and connect them to needed resources.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESILIENCE

To improve preparedness for future disruptions and strengthen everyday student support, the following actions are recommended:

- 1. Leverage the Central Role of Success Coaches:** Reinforce the strategy of using success coaches as the single point of contact for referrals. Their ability to coordinate care and connect students with the right services makes them invaluable, especially in emergencies.
- 2. Simplify Systems and Processes for Easy Access:** Consider user-centered design improvements to Single Stop and TimelyCare, such as mobile-friendly interfaces, pre-filled applications or virtual walkthroughs with students and faculty.
- 3. Standardize and Expand Training on All Major Platforms:** Provide faculty and staff with robust training on Single Stop and TimelyCare to equip them with the skills to recognize student needs, refer students to success coaches or appropriate services, and track follow-up effectively using available data tools.





## ABOUT THE BELK CENTER

The Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research works with educators, researchers, and policymakers to further community college outcomes in North Carolina and across the nation. We equip community college leaders with actionable insights and create opportunities for collaboration as we tackle the most pressing issues facing students and campuses to build stronger, more resilient communities. The Belk Center is housed in the College of Education at North Carolina State University, a land-grant university that shares our commitment to community colleges and the critical role these institutions play in creating and expanding opportunities for all North Carolinians.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ece Yilmaz, Ph.D., Senior Research Associate, Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research

Sam Dotson, Research Associate, Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research. Formerly Regional Director of Decision Support and Predictive Analytics, Isothermal Community College, McDowell Technical Community College, Western Piedmont Community College

## SUGGESTED CITATION

Yilmaz, E., & Dotson, S. (2025). *Students' Access to and Use of Student Support Services after Hurricane Helene in Western North Carolina Community Colleges*. Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research. Raleigh, NC.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This brief would not have been possible without the generous support and collaboration of our partners at Isothermal Community College, McDowell Technical Community College and Western Piedmont Community College. We are deeply grateful for their commitment and contributions throughout this surveying process. This work was made possible through the generous support of the U.S. Department of Education's Rural Post-secondary Education and Economic Development (RPED) - Foothills Facilitating an Occupation Ready Workforce by Addressing Regional Demands (FORWARD) grant, whose funding enabled access to these resources and execution of this research. We also extend our sincere thanks to the external reviewers, President Maragaret Annunziata, President J.W. Kelley and President Joel Welch, whose feedback helped strengthen the final product, and to the Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research's review and creative services teams for their guidance, design expertise and production support.



## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>North Carolina Community College System. (2024). *Total headcount*. Retrieved June 18, 2025, from <https://www.nccommunitycolleges.edu/about-us/data-reporting/data-dashboards-page/total-headcount/>