

RESEARCH BRIEF

CASE STUDY

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From Goals to Graduation to Post-Completion Success: Why Every Student Needs an Educational Plan

CASE STUDY 5:

How Durham Technical Community College Made Career and Educational Planning Unavoidable for Students

By Davis Jenkins

Durham Technical Community College in North Carolina has spent the past several years working toward a deceptively simple goal: making career and educational planning an expected part of every student's experience rather than a specialized service available only to those who seek it out. The college serves more than 18,000 students across seven campuses in Durham and Orange counties and offers more than 90 associate degrees, diplomas, and certificates. Its students pursue everything from short-term workforce credentials to associate degrees and university transfer pathways. Its challenge has been helping students across those different programs understand where they are headed and develop a plan for getting there.

What makes Durham Tech's approach distinctive is that it did not create a standalone educational planning initiative. Instead, it connected and strengthened existing structures—professional and faculty advising, a required first-year college success course, transfer planning resources, dual enrollment, educational planning technology, and student support services—around a common framework. It organized programs into seven guided career pathways—broad fields encompassing short-term workforce programs, career-technical degrees, and university transfer. Its One College philosophy breaks down traditional divisions among those programs and student services. And a series of required touchpoints makes it difficult for students to proceed without discussing their goals with an advisor and developing educational plans.

The result is a system in which nearly every student participates in a common planning process tailored to their individual career interests, educational goals, and circumstances. The experience

shows how a college can scale individualized planning not by asking a single group of advisors to do everything but by transforming planning into a shared responsibility across the institution.

This case study of Durham Tech is based on interviews with 14 administrators and staff conducted via Zoom in July 2026. It tells the story of how Durham Tech embraced a collegewide framework for change and made planning impossible for students to miss through required onboarding experiences.

A Common Framework for Change

Durham Tech's approach grew out of a broader effort to create a more consistently high-quality student experience. When J.B. Buxton became president in 2020, he championed what his predecessor had launched and the college calls its One College philosophy. Historically, as at many community colleges, for-credit academic transfer and career-technical programs, short-term noncredit workforce training, and student services operated through different structures. One College reduces those divisions so students can move more easily among short-term credentials, associate degree programs, and transfer pathways as their educational and career goals evolve.

Building on that philosophy, the college fully implemented guided career pathways in 2021. It organized its degree credit and noncredit continuing education offerings into seven broad career pathways: building, engineering, and skilled trades; business and entrepreneurship; creative and liberal arts; health and wellness; human services and public safety; information technology; and science and math. Each encompasses different types of educational options, from short-term workforce training through associate degrees and university transfer. Whenever possible, programs within a pathway share a common first semester so students can refine their interests or change programs without losing substantial progress toward a credential.

Durham Tech redesigned its website around the same framework, allowing prospective students to explore careers and compare short- and longer-term educational options before applying. The Human Services & Public Safety pathway page, for example, displays short-term training, longer-term degree programs, and university-transfer options together and provides local occupational and wage information (see screenshot on next page). Rather than asking students to begin by choosing from a long list of credentials, the pathway framework starts with broad questions: What field interests me? And what educational route might help me get where I want to go?

The college has also benefited from North Carolina's unusually well-developed statewide transfer framework. The state's Comprehensive Articulation Agreement provides common transfer protections and pathways in specific major fields or programs. Durham Tech built on that foundation by developing detailed transfer course selection guides tailored to specific majors and common destination universities. Professional and faculty advisors help students arrive at a university prepared to enter their intended major with the right credits.

Together, One College, guided career pathways, and the statewide transfer framework created the architecture for a more integrated planning system. Rather than inventing a new process, Durham Tech connected planning activities already occurring at different points of the student experience.

Screenshot of Durham Tech Human Services & Public Safety Pathway Webpage

Human Services & Public Safety

Programs and Pathways

Programs by Name

About Guided Career Pathways

Pathway Contacts

Search Programs 

Human Services and Public Safety programs study diverse subject areas including public safety administration and education, interagency operations, crisis leadership, government and agency financial management, professional standards, incident management, administrative law and supervision. Careers may lead to work in private business, government, or independent work.



Short Term
(12 months or less)

Courses, programs, or certificates provide focused training for entry-level positions.

Long Term
(More than 12 months)

Degrees or diplomas prepare graduates for entry-level positions in specialized fields.

University Transfer

Degrees tailored for a smooth transition to a 4-year college or university.

Career Services

Honors Program

Transfer Programs

Pathways Map

Short Term (12 months or less)	Long Term (More than 12 months)	University Transfer
911 Training (Continuing Education)	Criminal Justice Technology AAS Associate	Criminal Justice Baccalaureate Transfer Option
American Heart/CPR Training (Continuing Education)	Emergency Medical Science AAS Associate	Emergency Medical Care Baccalaureate Transfer Option
Basic Detention Officer Course (Continuing Education)	Public Safety Administration AAS Associate	Leadership in the Public Sector Baccalaureate Transfer Option
Basic Law Enforcement Training (Continuing Education)	Social and Human Services AAS Associate	Parks and Recreation Management Baccalaureate Transfer Option
Behavioral Health (Continuing Education)		
Criminal Justice and Digital Forensics Certificate		
Criminal Justice Professional Training (Continuing Education)		
EMS Professional Training (Continuing Education)		
Show more 		

Career Explorer

Recreation Workers

Recreation Workers organize, lead, and promote interest in recreational activities, such as arts, crafts, sports, games, camping, and hobbies.

Correctional Officers and Jailers

Correctional Officers and Jailers monitor conduct of prisoners according to established policies, regulations, and procedures, to prevent escape or violence.

Forensic Science Technicians

Forensic Science Technicians collect, identify, classify, and analyze physical evidence related to criminal investigations.

\$22,287
Starting Salary

\$31,445
Median Annual Wage

+4.2%
5-Year Job Outlook

\$40,428
Starting Salary

\$51,884
Median Annual Wage

-6.2%
5-Year Job Outlook

\$41,876
Starting Salary

\$53,935
Median Annual Wage

+7.5%
5-Year Job Outlook

Source: Durham Technical Community College webpage, <https://www.durhamtech.edu/pathway/human-services-public-safety>.

CCRC | 3

How Planning Works for Students

Career and educational planning at Durham Tech begins before students register for their first classes. Information on academic programs on the website is organized by broad career pathways. When they apply, they select a pathway or program within it, giving advisors a starting point for discussing their goals.

All new students encounter an important stop at the college's front door: An advising hold prevents them from registering until they meet with a professional advisor. That requirement applies not only to first-time students but also to students returning after taking time away or returning to complete another Durham Tech credential certificate or degree.

The requirement creates an opportunity for a conversation that might otherwise never occur. "That allows us to review the program of study or the courses that you are interested in seeking and planning that pathway," explained Holly June, assistant vice president for student services. Advisors can show students considering short-term certificates how they might stack into additional credentials and eventually lead to better-paying work. "It gives us that intentional conversation," June said.

A team of seven professional advisors work with students during their first one or two semesters. Advisors review prior coursework and placement information, confirm whether the program selected on the application fits the student's goals, help students choose first-semester courses, and begin laying out a longer-term plan using the timeline feature in the Self-Service interface for students and staff on the college's Colleague ERP system. Students intending to transfer can use the transfer course selection guides to align their courses with an intended university and major; students interested in selective health programs can plan prerequisite courses while also discussing alternatives if they are not admitted.

Rather than simply listing courses, the educational plan helps students see how immediate decisions fit into a larger pathway. Guided career pathways program maps show how credentials connect, while common first-semester courses allow students to explore related options without starting over if their goals change.

Making Planning Part of the First-Year Curriculum

Durham Tech gives students more time for exploration and planning through ACA 122, Transfer and Career Success, a required first-year course completed by nearly all entering curriculum students, whether they intend to transfer or enter the workforce.

The course provides a scalable way to ensure that career exploration and educational planning do not depend entirely on students making appointments with advisors. Students explore occupations, examine how programs connect to careers, clarify their educational and career interests, and develop or refine their educational plan in their portal. They also learn about transfer policies, prepare resumes and cover letters, and explore internships and job opportunities.

Because the course enrolls students pursuing different kinds of programs, it can expose them to possibilities they had not considered. LaDelta Williams, who directs and teaches in the college success and first-year experience program at the college, described hearing students learn from classmates with very different goals and sometimes reconsider their own direction: "Sometimes they'll learn something about another pathway that they didn't know before."

After that, ongoing advising generally shifts to faculty in students' program areas. Faculty advisors typically work with 25 to 50 students, reviewing their plans in Self-Service and helping them select

and register for subsequent courses. Seven success coaches, each aligned with a guided career pathway, provide another layer of support. They do not generally advise students about course selection, but they respond to alerts, help students address academic and personal barriers, connect them with resources, and engage in career discussions when students are uncertain about their direction.

Together, professional advisors, Transfer and Career Success course instructors, faculty advisors, and success coaches allow planning to continue across the student journey without making any one role solely responsible for it. The plan provides continuity, but the value comes from the conversations between students and faculty and staff to make informed choices, adjust when their interests change, and maintain momentum toward longer-term goals.

Starting Even Earlier: From Dual Enrollment to “Dual Graduation”

Durham Tech’s high school dual enrollment program provides perhaps the clearest example of what sustained support for student planning can look like. Rather than waiting until students graduate from high school to help them make plans for college and career, the college begins those conversations while they are still in high school.

North Carolina’s Career and College Promise (CCP) program gives Durham Tech an unusually strong foundation for dual enrollment that motivates and prepares students to pursue postsecondary education in a field aligned with their interests and aspirations. Instead of allowing dual enrollment students to accumulate an assortment of college courses, the state organizes participation into structured College Transfer, Career and Technical Education, or Cooperative Innovative High School (Early College) pathways.

Durham Tech leverages those statewide structures through close partnerships with local school districts and a team of college liaisons assigned to particular high schools. Liaisons help dual enrollment students explore careers, choose a pathway, and develop an educational plan in the same Self-Service timeline used by other Durham Tech students. Dual enrollment students meet with their liaison before registering each term to review what they have completed, what remains in their pathway or degree, and whether their goals have changed. Some liaisons have offices in the high schools, allowing them to work closely with students, counselors, families, and college faculty and staff.

Planning can begin before students are even eligible to take most dual enrollment courses. Lead College Liaison Tevin Jones talks with ninth- and tenth-graders about their possible academic and professional goals and uses career-interest inventories with students who are undecided. “Because of the planning, I have to start some of those conversations early,” he explained.

Buxton describes the larger goal as shifting the conversation from “dual enrollment to dual graduation.” The college does not want high school students simply to accumulate credits. “We’re trying to build those pathways out so [dual enrollment students] complete something, not just start something,” he said. The aim is for students to leave high school having completed, or substantially completed, a credential or degree that has value in the labor market or positions them to transfer efficiently to a university.

That approach makes dual enrollment an early stage of career and educational exploration and planning rather than a separate experience that precedes it.

How Durham Tech Scaled Educational Planning

Durham Tech's approach to scale differs from one built around a single advising model or technology platform. Many of the pieces were already present. The innovation comes from connecting those pieces so students repeatedly encounter opportunities, some of them mandatory, to consider where they are headed and how their current choices contribute to those goals.

Make Planning Difficult to Avoid

Durham Tech does not rely on students to recognize that they need planning assistance. Career pathways shape the information they see before applying. Registration holds remain in effect until students meeting with their advisor. The required Transfer and Career Success course embeds career exploration and educational planning into the first-year curriculum. Faculty advising continues the process within the student's program, while success coaches intervene when students encounter difficulties.

The result is built-in redundancy where if one interaction does not cause a student to reconsider an uncertain program choice or recognize how courses fit a longer-term goal, another check follows. Planning becomes part of how students experience the college rather than an additional service they must seek out.

Organize Around Academic and Career Pathways

Guided career pathways give those interactions a common organizing framework. Rather than treating each certificate, degree, and transfer program as an isolated option, the college places them within broader fields so students and advisors can see connections among them.

That is particularly important at a college serving students with very different starting points and circumstances. A student may initially want a short-term credential to enter the workforce quickly, then later decide to pursue an associate degree. Another may begin intending to transfer and discover that an applied program better fits their career goals. Organizing programs around broad career fields makes those choices easier to make and helps students change direction without necessarily losing momentum.

As professional advisor Eliza Murphy explained, the college's open-door mission means "meet[ing] students where they are and help[ing] get them to where they want to go." Guided career pathways make it possible to ask students not only what they want to study but how much time they can invest in education now and where different options might eventually lead.

Make Planning a Shared Responsibility

Individualized support for planning comes primarily through people rather than separate systems for different student populations. Professional advisors bring expertise in career and educational planning to the onboarding experience. Transfer and Career Success instructors create structured opportunities for career and college exploration. Faculty advisors contribute knowledge of programs, disciplines, transfer requirements, and careers. Success coaches help students navigate barriers. CCP liaisons provide unusually intensive guidance to students still in high school.

This division of responsibility also reflects the One College philosophy. Scaling planning requires academic affairs and student services to work together because students' experiences do not fit neatly within organizational divisions. As Assistant Vice President of Academics and Guided Career Pathways Jen Servi-Roberts, put it, "You can't do one without touching the other."

The college is also expanding relationship-centered training for student-facing staff through the InsideTrack coaching model. Instead of every faculty member or advisor to becoming an expert on every possible student need, they develop the skills to help students think through decisions and take greater ownership of their choices. "We're here to help provide that support for students in making their own decisions," Murphy said.

Use Technology to Connect the Pieces

Technology makes the distributed model manageable, but college leaders consistently describe it as enabling rather than replacing human relationships.

Students' educational plans reside in the Self-Service timeline, where advisors and faculty can review them. Element451, the college's customer relationship management system, supports communication from application through program enrollment. It can generate individualized admissions checklists, track whether students have completed enrollment steps, and support targeted outreach. The Early Success early alert system incorporates faculty referrals and student pulse checks that identify a range of needs from academic support to transportation or food insecurity.

These systems give advisors, faculty, and success coaches better information for conversations with students and help coordinate interventions across offices. But as Lead CCP Liaison Jones said, "The tools can help, but they're not everything. It's really just about building that rapport with the students."

The college also has used new technology as an opportunity to rethink existing processes. When it introduced its customer relationship management system, for example, staff reviewed admissions requirements and eliminated steps that unnecessarily delayed students from moving into advising and enrollment. Once students meet basic age and citizenship admission criteria, the college can admit them and begin the enrollment process without waiting for every document to be complete.

That sequence is important: Examine the student experience and redesign the process first, then use technology to make the redesigned process easier to carry out at scale.

Sustaining and Further Improving the Model

Leaders do not view the current system as finished. Having embedded career and educational planning across much of the student experience, their next challenge is less about expanding reach than improving quality and ensuring that students' plans lead somewhere valuable.

The college's emerging strategic priorities emphasize post-completion outcomes: successful transfer into a bachelor's program, employment in a living-wage career and career advancement. That means identifying transfer destinations and intended majors earlier, strengthening job advancement advising and planning for students in short-term workforce programs, developing alternatives for students who are not admitted to selective programs, and ensuring that all programs connect to strong employment and further-education opportunities.

College leaders see opportunities to engage employers more deeply in career exploration, program improvement, work-based learning, and transitions into employment. The goal is for students to understand not merely which credential they are pursuing, but how it connects to careers and longer-term economic mobility.

Durham Tech also plans to improve the information available to the people helping students make those decisions. Together with Achieving the Dream, the college is developing a data warehouse to integrate information housed in multiple systems. It also is exploring predictive analytics and AI-supported tools that could give advisors and faculty more timely information about individual students and groups needing support. But the intended role of these technologies remains consistent with the college's existing philosophy: Use better information to make human guidance more individualized, not to automate the relationships at the heart of advising and planning.

Conclusion

Durham Tech's experience shows that colleges do not necessarily need to create an entirely new initiative to bring individualized career and educational planning to scale. Most colleges already have pieces of the necessary infrastructure: first-year experience courses, professional and faculty advisors, program maps, transfer resources, dual enrollment programs, student-success staff, and planning technology. The challenge is connecting those pieces around a common purpose.

Durham Tech has done that by organizing programs around career pathways, requiring planning at critical points in the student journey, distributing responsibility across complementary roles, and using technology to connect rather than replace relationships. The One College philosophy provides the larger institutional frame: Whether students enter through dual enrollment, short-term workforce training, a workforce associate degree, or a transfer program, they will encounter a college organized around helping them understand where they are going and how each step can move them closer to that goal.

The distinctive lesson is about making planning unavoidable. When a college weaves career and educational planning through the structures that students routinely encounter, individualized planning can become the way it does business for everyone.

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