

PROJECT SEARCH

(Buncombe County)

PROGRAM PROFILE

“We believe every student deserves the skills needed to secure employment.”

— Program partner of Project SEARCH

“I love my job.” — Graduate of Project SEARCH now employed at Mission Hospital

What Is Project SEARCH?

In Asheville, Mission Health Project SEARCH helps secure competitive employment for individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities through postsecondary education and work-based learning. The international program began in 1996 when Erin Riehle, the Director of the Emergency Department at Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center, partnered with Susie Rutkowski to fill a handful of jobs with people with disabilities. More than 20 years later, Project SEARCH has grown from one site at Cincinnati Children’s to a comprehensive internship and employment model in more than 400 sites across 46 states and almost a dozen countries. North Carolina has 12 Project SEARCH sites. Although only in its third cohort, the site in Asheville is already seen as a remarkable success. This is due, in large part, to the program’s employer partner, Mission Hospital, which The Arc of North Carolina named its employer of the year in 2017. The Arc is a membership organization committed to securing for all people with intellectual and developmental disabilities the opportunity to choose and realize their goals of where and how they will learn, live, work, and play.

Who Are the Partners and What Are Their Roles?

Project SEARCH is driven by collaboration among the following community partners:

- **Mission Hospital:** Hosts the program and supplies the unpaid internships, often hiring interns into permanent paid positions.
- **The Arc of North Carolina:** Supplies the teacher, who serves as the program coordinator, job coach, and case manager for the students and refers students to the program.
- **Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College:** All interns are enrolled college students and the school provides an employability skills training curriculum, which consists of 12 different units that teach skills necessary to succeed on the job.
- **Job Coach:** Works on-site with interns and supervisors.
- **Business Advisory Council:** Offers ongoing insights into local labor market needs.
- **Vocational Rehabilitation:** Funds job coaching, job development, and provides vocational guidance.
- **Vaya Health:** Funds instruction and job coaching after an intern has graduated and completed 90 days in a qualifying permanent job.



AUTHOR

Anita Brown-Graham

nclIMPACT at the UNC School of Government



AUTHOR

David Brown

nclIMPACT at the UNC School of Government



AUTHOR

Emily Williamson Gangi

nclIMPACT at the UNC School of Government



AUTHOR

Nathalie Santos

nclIMPACT at the UNC School of Government



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- **North Carolina Council on Developmental Disabilities:** Provided the initial funding for the program.
- **Families:** Support their students through the process and assist with the job search.
- **Students:** Bring their desire to learn and work.

How Does the Program Work?

On average, Buncombe County has a lower percentage of people possessing less than or only a high school diploma or less as compared to the population of North Carolina as a whole (see **Figure 1**).

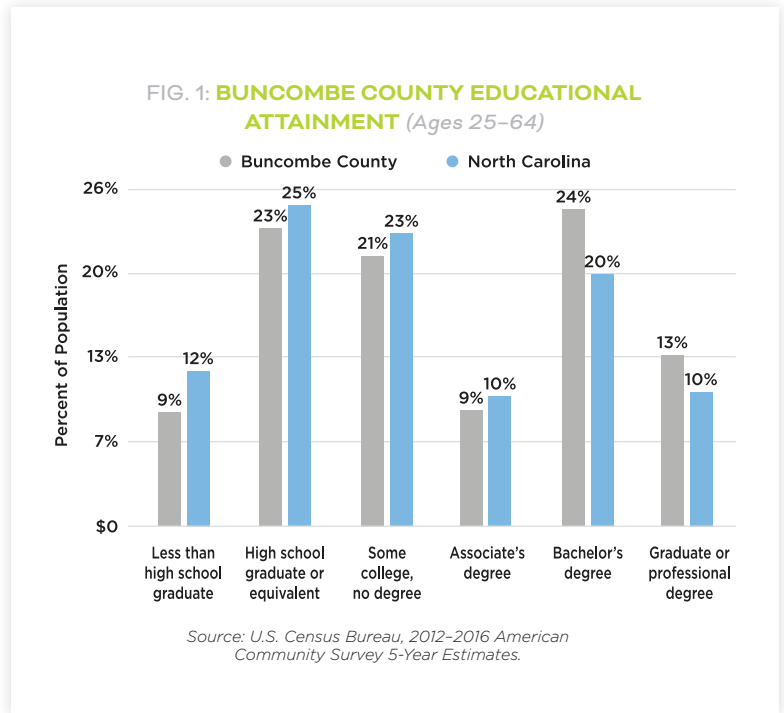
Project SEARCH is working to make Buncombe County's percentage even lower by focusing on special education students who have completed high school. Both Asheville City Schools and Buncombe County Schools are common referral sources for these students, but service providers and social clubs also refer some interns. The program hosts informational sessions for parents and families at Mission Hospital to expose them to the program and host site. During the sessions, partners explain their respective contributions to the program and current interns share their experiences.

Applicants must interview, provide references, and participate in hands-on assessments. The final selection is based on performance and overall aptitude, as well as on the applicant's demonstrated desire to work in the community at the end of the program. Over the three years of the program, there have been approximately 13 applicants per year, with a participant limit of 12 per cohort.

Interns begin with a four-week summer boot camp at Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College (A-B Tech). The camp runs classroom instruction for four hours a day, five days each week. There are also some on-site learning trips. Thereafter, there is classroom instruction from 8:30-9:15 a.m. and from 2:30-3:15 p.m. Students receive adult basic education content standards consistent with the Workforce Investment Opportunity Act.

This classroom training is supplemented with on-site job coaching by someone located at Mission Hospital who gives guidance and support to interns and managers. Much of the coach's time is spent teaching managers how to get the most out of the interns.

All interns are placed at Mission Hospital or its related facilities, including the childcare facility and the laundry. Interns are placed in a variety of departments and settings for the three required internship rotations. The first placement seeks to match the intern's expressed interests and strengths. The second is designed to be more of a stretch experience, often pairing the intern with a position he or she finds challenging. For example, an intern who prefers to work in a more social setting might be placed in a position that requires working alone for periods of time. The third experience is usually tailored to the type of position in which the intern would excel. The interns engage in systematic tasks that are time-intensive, equipment-intensive, or administration-intensive. Some examples include organizing the many instruments on surgical trays, cleaning and



sterilizing equipment, stocking supplies, performing maintenance on patient rooms and public areas, and customer service. Taking these tasks from the job duties of existing employees allows those employees to focus on other productivity-enhancing tasks for Mission Hospital.

A new iPad application has been a game changer for the program by offering easily navigable work autonomy supports. The WorkAutonomy app, by Able Opportunities, includes production charts that help each intern manage daily tasks and messaging that helps him or her communicate with the supervisor and team. Interns have made such significant gains using the iPads at Mission Hospital, that the program now seeks to ensure that all graduates of the program have them at their places of employment.

Finally, Project SEARCH hosts a recognition ceremony for its graduates. At the ceremony, all graduates receive a certificate of program completion.

What Is the Governance Structure?

The program is business led, operating on a hub-and-spoke model with the instructor serving as the hub. Program guidance is provided by a Steering Committee of stakeholding partners. There is also a Business Advisory Council, which meets quarterly.

Is the Program Data Driven?

The program pays close attention to the number of interns who secure permanent employment, whether at Mission Hospital or elsewhere. Students are required to work at least 16 hours per week to be considered employed.

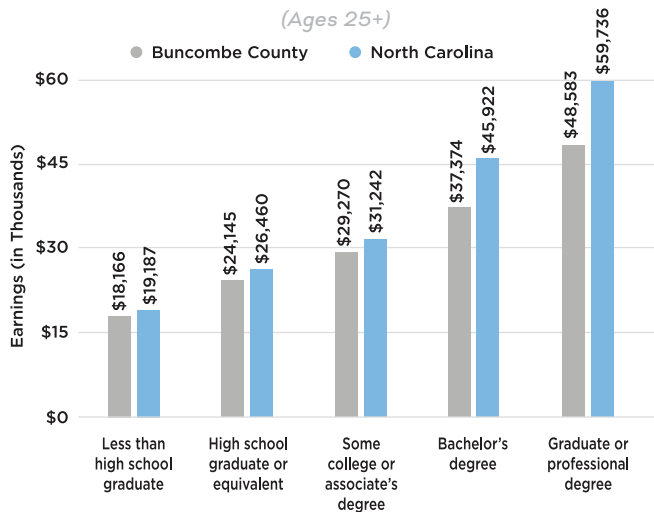
In addition, the program provides skills and educational attainment assessments of interns at the beginning, midpoint, and end of the program. Project SEARCH interns consistently make greater gains on the midpoint and end-of-program assessments than those in a control group.

What Are the Indicators of Success?

Core partners continue to expand investments and involvement in Project SEARCH. Already, Mission Hospital has made permanent offers to a third of Project SEARCH graduates, while almost all of the other graduates are employed elsewhere in the county. Graduates make between \$11-\$12 per hour; \$11.50 per hour — approximately \$24,000 per year for full-time work — is considered a living wage in Buncombe County. This is comparable to the median earnings for high school graduates in Buncombe County, as shown in **Figure 2**. As a whole, Project SEARCH graduates are well-prepared and there's an expectation that they will require less training on the job.

Furthermore, A-B Tech is building a Hospitality Certificate internship program through its Continuing Education

FIG. 2: BUNCOMBE COUNTY MEDIAN EARNINGS BY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT (Ages 25+)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2012–2016 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

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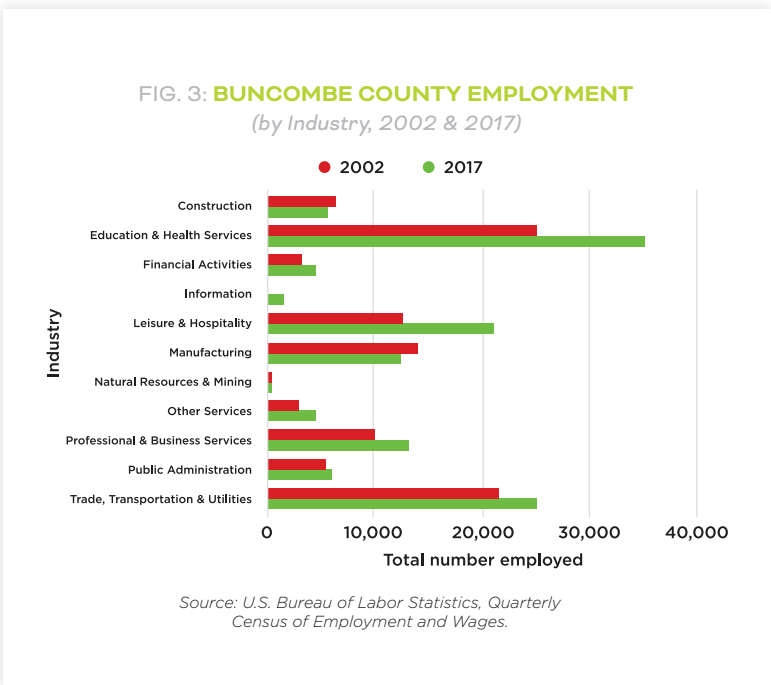


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program that will resemble Project SEARCH. It could even include graduates if they choose to further explore a career in the industry. This program will give students a certificate from the Guest Services Professional Industry. The expansion is not surprising. Some of Buncombe County's largest hospitality industries are represented on the Business Advisory Council (Biltmore Farms and Biltmore Estate). There is also participation from the growing craft beer brewing industry. With a 3.1 percent county unemployment rate as of August 2018, these employers often must bus employees into Buncombe from surrounding counties. As such, they are eager to mine the promise of Project SEARCH to expand the available local labor force. See **Figure 3** for employment trends in Buncombe County over the past 15 years of available data, with Leisure and Hospitality being one of the county's growing industries.



What Is the Promise of the Strategy for Increasing Educational Attainment in North Carolina?

The promise lies in the ability to deliver this program in more communities in North Carolina and the impact that replication will have on employees who do not have disabilities. First, people with disabilities are facing a national unemployment rate in excess of 50 percent. In the Bureau of Labor Statistics Jobs Report released October 5, 2018, the employment-to-population ratio for working-age people with disabilities was 31.4 percent for September 2018. In comparison, for working-age people without disabilities, the employment-to-population ratio was 74.0 percent for the same period.¹ Also, the research literature affirms Mission Hospital's experience. Making accommodations for interns with disabilities results in benefits for all employees. Incorporating the principles of universal design in plans for office buildings, terminals, hotels, stadiums, and other facilities promotes integration and inclusion for people with disabilities. The concept also applies to "soft" elements of the workplace. Participating in a truly inclusive environment allows all workers, including individuals with disabilities, to achieve their employment goals.

1. Anna Brennan-Curry, Research on Disability, Employment Policy and Measurement, Rehabilitation and Research Training Center, *nTIDE September 2018 Jobs Report: Promising Job Gains for Americans with Disabilities* (Oct. 5, 2018), <https://researchondisability.org/epm-rrtc/epm-news/2018/10/05/ntide-september-2018-jobs-report-promising-job-gains-for-americans-with-disabilities>.