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Client Success Story

Demonstrating the value of academic programs across the University of North Carolina System



Client

The University of North Carolina (UNC) System is comprised of 16 constituent universities and the NC School of Science and Mathematics. Chartered in 1789, the System today enrolls more than 260,000 undergraduate and graduate students, employs nearly 13,000 faculty, and confers more than 55,000 degrees annually.



Issue

In November 2021, the North Carolina General Assembly directed the UNC Board of Governors to evaluate academic programs across the UNC System based on the return

on investment (ROI) to the institutions, to the State of North Carolina, and—most importantly—to the students themselves. The General Assembly required this analysis to utilize consistent metrics for almost every undergraduate and graduate program offered at each UNC institution.

This was a complex mandate. The 16 universities differed in cost structures, organizational models, academic missions, programmatic offerings (918 total programs), and data practices, making apples-to-apples comparisons difficult without a common methodology and governance model. Furthermore, significant amounts of data from outside the UNC System itself would be needed to understand the various factors of ROI being assessed.



Approach

Deloitte's Higher Education practice was selected to support UNC and brought together a team that included rpk GROUP and The Burning Glass Institute to combine higher education strategy, academic costing, labor market analytics, and outcome modeling capabilities.

The team began with discovery interviews across UNC—inclusive of both System Office stakeholders and leaders from each University—to build consensus on a fair, replicable analytical framework guided by three principles: adherence to legislative mandates, prioritization of available and replicable data, and enablement of

meaningful comparison across institutions. This process led to a multi-faceted definition of ROI which expanded beyond the standard “post-graduation earnings less the net cost of attendance” to include elements such as socioeconomic mobility, regionally focused comparative outcomes to workers without college degrees, and alignment with State of North Carolina workforce needs.

Deloitte then tested the methodology at three pilot UNC universities before scaling it across all 16 institutions. Over the course of the engagement, the team gathered feedback from more than 100 stakeholders through review sessions, office hours, surveys, and ongoing collaboration with Steering Committee, Advisory Committee, and Data Owner groups.

To make the analysis practical and durable, Deloitte compiled UNC data, Department of Commerce wage data, and proprietary workforce data into an evaluation model that powered a visualization platform-based solution for the UNC System Office – integrating over 48 million records. The final product included three dashboard series.

Institutional Context, Student ROI, and State ROI—which were designed to support data-informed decision-making as well as an extensive executive report summarizing the methodology and outcomes.

Impact

Deloitte helped the UNC System translate a highly visible legislative requirement into a scalable decision-support capability. The study created a consistent framework to evaluate program value across a large and diverse public university system, helping leaders better understand instructional costs, graduate outcomes, labor market alignment, and the public value of state investment.

The findings reinforced the value of a UNC education. The analysis showed an average lifetime ROI of approximately \$497,123 for undergraduates and \$919,422 for graduate students and found that graduates, on average, break even on their educational investment in less than 10 years. The State ROI analysis also found that for every incremental dollar the State provides in appropriations, a graduate earns \$23.07 more, in incremental lifetime earnings. The study also surfaced strategic insights for

policymakers and university leaders. One year after graduation, North Carolina retained 82% or more of bachelor’s degree recipients in 28 of 29 fields of study, demonstrating the System’s role in fueling the state’s workforce and economy.

Just as important, Deloitte developed the dashboards to be living tools that can support annual refreshes, future trend analysis, and better coordination among system leaders, campuses, and policymakers. In a higher education environment increasingly focused on affordability, workforce relevance, and measurable outcomes, this engagement showed how Deloitte can help institutions move beyond fragmented data toward practical, trusted, and actionable insight.

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