

Southwestern Community College Demonstrates Benefits Of Job Training Grants

By Administrator

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SYLVA Governor Roy Cooper visited Southwestern Community College in Sylva to learn about the impact the Finish Line Grants program is making in students' progress toward good-paying jobs. Governor Cooper launched the Finish Line Grant program in 2018 to help students on the cusp of graduating deal with unexpected financial emergencies.

The Governor was joined by Southwestern Community College President Don Tomas and Southwestern Workforce Development Board Director David Garrett. Governor Cooper spoke with four students who have received Finish Line Grants to help them complete their training and enter the workforce.

"Businesses tell me their number-one need is a better-trained workforce. North Carolina's community colleges can provide the training, but too often financial challenges mean students don't finish their degree," said Governor Cooper. "Finish Line Grants keep students on course, so that unexpected life expenses like car repairs or medical bills do not stand between these hardworking students and their career goals."

Governor Cooper spoke with a group of Finish Line Grant recipients, including Abbie Turner, a Southwestern Community College student working to get her degree in Physical Therapy Assistance. A Mills River resident, Turner daily drives more than an hour one-way to Southwestern Community College. The wear on her tires from the commute—as well as unexpectedly high utility bills—made Turner seek out help from a Finish Line Grant.

"We're a one-income family with two kids, so my husband and I don't have a lot of margin for huge expenses like these while I'm working toward my degree," said Turner. "Because of this Finish Line Grant, I have good tires on my car that will get me through the commutes to Sylva until I get my degree."

Since launch of the Finish Line Grants program, Southwestern Workforce Development Board and Southwestern Community College have partnered to distribute Finish Line Grants to more than 100 students—the third highest number of grants distributed in the state, despite being ranked near the middle in number of students enrolled. Of the student who received Finish Line Grants, 97% either completed their training or are still enrolled and progressing toward completion, exceeding the college's 64% retention rate.

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“I’ve been around community colleges and higher education for a long time, but I’ve never seen any single program make this type of impact on retention numbers,” said Southwestern Community College President Don Tomas. “I want to thank Governor Cooper for his foresight in recognizing what a difference a program like this could make in the lives of our students as well as community colleges across the state.”

“Thanks to the Finish Line Grant program, behind every number reported, there is a story of success instead of failure because funds were available to help students overcome obstacles and achieve their goals in education. We are grateful to the Governor and for the collaborative partnerships that made this program possible,” said David Garrett, Workforce Development Director at the Southwestern Commission.

Finish Line Grants have been launched at all 58 community colleges across North Carolina, in partnership with each of the state’s workforce development boards. Since launch, more than 1,900 Finish Line Grants—totaling more than \$1.3 million—have been distributed to community college students to help them complete their training.