

Elizabeth City State Earns Grant To Bolster Adult Learning

By Donna Martinez

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Elizabeth City State University has received a \$175,000 grant from the Lumina Foundation to help eliminate barriers blocking adult students from the education they need for long-term success.

ECSU is one of five HBCUs in North Carolina to receive the grant.

“This is a capacity-building grant to help us put things in place to better serve our adult learners,” said ECSU’s Vice Chancellor for the Division of Student Affairs, Dr. Gary Brown.

Adults returning to higher education, or coming to universities for the first time, is a growing trend across the country. At ECSU, the number of adult students has consistently grown in recent years, marking a trend that the university is aiming to bolster through its existing and future programs.

“In the fall of 2019, we had 359 adult learners. In 2020 we had 446, now, in 2021, we have 521 adult learners,” said Dr. Brown. “So, we continue to grow in this space.”

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, nearly 40 percent of all enrolled college students are 25 and older, and this number is projected to rise. Dr. Brown says these students come to the university with an existing level of responsibility due to work and/or family obligations, so their needs are different from traditional students.

Dr. Brown said the grant will assist ECSU in developing a three-step strategy to assist adult students. The first step, he said, will be to develop a survey that will help the university understand the experience of the students and, “create a baseline to better serve our adult learners.”

“Two, we want to create a policy that allows us to give credit to our adult learners for the experience they bring,” he said. Work and life experience could, under this policy, be counted toward college credit hours.

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The third step is to look at making education even more accessible to adult students. In the past, ECSU had offered evening and weekend classes. Dr. Brown says his team will look at bringing those back to campus to better assist adult students, for example.

The university will also look at specific degree programs that would be ideal for adult learners. Currently, ECSU offers online degrees such as Interdisciplinary, Homeland Security, and Elementary Education. The online Interdisciplinary Degree program, for example, is growing in popularity and giving students the opportunity to pursue a degree while juggling life responsibilities off campus.

“Our online presence is making an impact for this group,” he said.

In addition, Dr. Brown says because COVID-19 had required remote and hybrid learning through the early stages of the pandemic, university officials began to see the potential of hybrid learning options. The hybrid approach allows students to take classes both in-person and online.

“The hybrid approach to instruction provides a level of flexibility,” he said. “For someone working, that flexibility is important.”

The Lumina Foundation is an independent, private foundation based in Indianapolis, Indiana that is committed to making opportunities for learning beyond high school available to all people. Through their work, they envision a system that is easy to navigate, delivers fair results, and meets the nation’s need for talent through a broad range of credentials. Their goal is to prepare people for informed citizenship and success in a global economy.

ECSU is a University of North Carolina System constituent university in Northeastern North Carolina offering 28 bachelor’s degrees and four master’s degrees and is the only four-year university offering a bachelor’s degree in aviation science and unmanned aerial systems, or drones, in the state.