

GOLD RUSH GRANT

(Mecklenburg County)

PROGRAM PROFILE

“People want to finish what they started.” — UNC Charlotte administrator

“I cried when I got the call.” — Gold Rush Scholarship recipient

What is a Gold Rush Grant?

The University of North Carolina at Charlotte (UNC Charlotte) launched its Gold Rush Grant program in 2016. The program seeks to mitigate barriers to timely graduation through the granting of one-time completion micro-grants of \$1,500. The Gold Rush Grant is offered by invitation only to selected students who are within two semesters of graduating from UNC Charlotte and have demonstrated financial need during their senior year. In order to receive the grants, students must agree to participate in two activities designed to help them be more successful in their future careers. These activities may include developing a degree-completion plan, having a resume reviewed, attending a career workshop, or participating in an online financial literacy training module.

Who Are the Partners and What Are Their Roles?

- **UNC Charlotte, Office of the Provost, Division of Enrollment Management:** UNC Charlotte created and implements the Gold Rush Grant program. Staff there engage in active peer learning and research with other universities seeking to boost completion rates through micro-grants.
- **UNC Charlotte Career Services:** Provides some of the activities grant recipients are required to attend.
- **UNC Charlotte Foundation Board:** Pledged \$1 million in matching support for the grant program.
- **Private donors:** Various donors underwrite many of the grants.

How Does the Program Work?

UNC Charlotte had a problem — almost 700 academically eligible students “stopping out,” or leaving school before completing their degrees and re-enrolling later, each year. Of that number, 63 percent had a grade point average over 2.5, and 32 percent had a grade point average over 3.0. UNC Charlotte surveyed the students to understand why they were leaving school before completing their degrees. Seventy-four percent cited financial reasons. Many had holds on their university accounts that prevented them from registering. Others found themselves needing to return to the workforce, but with no degree and significant student loans. (The average student loan debt was \$28,000.) Seeing this, the university’s Vice Provost for Enrollment Management stepped in with an idea that is turning things around at UNC Charlotte.



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Each year, the Gold Rush Grant program mines its database for eligible students. To qualify, a student must have a 2.0 grade point average, have earned 105 credit hours, be a North Carolina resident, and be Pell grant-eligible without having declined financial aid. The scholarship is a one-time grant award of \$1,500 to students within two semesters of graduating. The students identified are invited through a randomized process to apply and demonstrate financial need. Eligible students who are not selected are placed into a control group, which receives “business-as-usual” financial aid, messaging, and supports provided to all students.

As a condition of receiving this grant and to help ensure future career success, each recipient must complete two of the following “skin in the game” activities:

1. Write a degree completion plan that describes which courses the student will take to complete his or her degree in the appropriate amount of time.
2. Have a resume reviewed and approved by a career advisor.
3. Attend a career fair or workshop for resume writing and/or or improving interview skills.
4. Participate in a mock interview.
5. Participate in financial literacy online modules to learn effective ways to save, spend, and budget money in college and after graduation.

Each of these services is open to any UNC Charlotte student, but Gold Rush Grant recipients report that they find them especially valuable and likely would not have engaged in them had they not been required to do so by the program.

What Is the Governance Structure?

The program is now governed by the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences grant program.

Is the Program Data Driven?

UNC Charlotte surveys its students to determine short- and medium-term effects of the Gold Rush Grant. In addition, the campus is leading the way on robust evaluation of “finish line” grants. It is working with the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (APLU) and nine other institutions in a U.S. Department of Education grant to (1) refine its predictive analytic models for identifying students who could benefit from completion grants, (2) assess impacts of the grants on students’ social-psychological well-being, and (3) measure students’ persistence outcomes. UNC Charlotte will also learn more about the effectiveness of its messaging, its cost per participant, and its cost effectiveness.

What Are the Indicators of Success?

Gold Rush Grant recipients are surveyed every semester. Results indicate that students have to work fewer hours; are better able to secure school resources, such as books; and have higher persistence rates.



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

North Carolina has a whopping 905,000 residents who have some college education but no degree or high-quality certificate (see **Figure 1**).

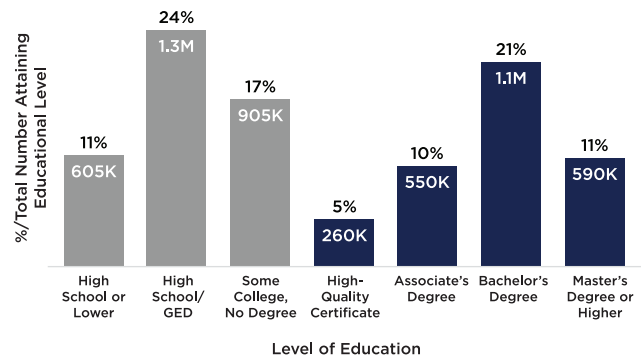
To be sure, some individuals included in that number are still pursuing degrees. Many are not. Given the data demonstrating that “some college, no degree” on average does not result in any significant wage premium, there is pressure on institutions of higher learning to get more students across the finish line. The Gold Rush Grant program offers two areas of promise for North Carolina.

First, the program is part of an emerging national trend that involves using emergency money — often relatively modest amounts — as a tool to help retain and graduate upperclassmen. The Coalition of Urban Serving Universities and the APLU published a 2016 study, entitled “Foiling the Drop-out Trap,” about grants “for retaining and graduating students.” The study acknowledged that evaluation of the programs “is fairly limited” and that more research needs to be done before the grants can be definitively described as boosting graduation rates. The impact “can be difficult to isolate” among many other factors that affect a student’s ability to graduate. In its work with APLU, UNC Charlotte is offering to share the outcomes of a robust evaluation. We will all learn from that work. In addition, while it described such aid as important, the same study said the grants would be “ineffective” as standalone efforts and need to be part of a wider campus culture dedicated to “increasing retention, graduation, and overall success for all students.” UNC Charlotte has made that commitment to all students.

Second, the Gold Rush Grant program is informing, and has been informed by, efforts to help those who have already dropped out return to campus for degree completion. Since 2006, UNC Charlotte has implemented a 49ers Finish Program for non-completers who have attained at least 90 credit hours. The university scans its records to find these former students, reaches out through postcards, offers a customized website, waives the application fee, and offers a special academic concierge program that supports students as they interface with departments on campus. Nine hundred non-completers have graduated from this program since its inception in 2006. These students are specifically recognized by the Chancellor at UNC Charlotte graduation ceremonies.

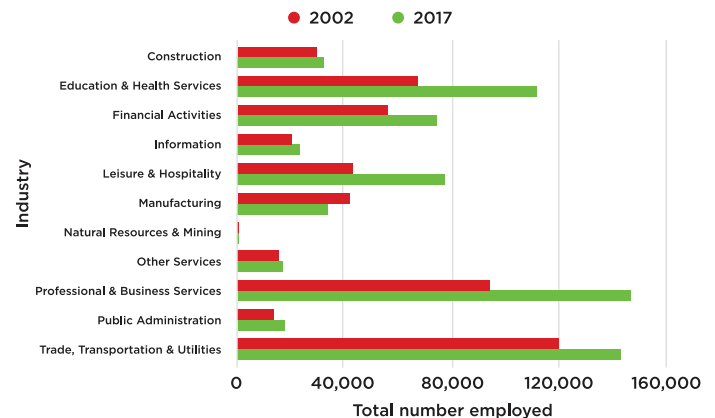
Now, UNC Charlotte seeks to extend the program to students in the Charlotte area who started at other institutions. This new effort will use much of the same approaches used for former 49ers, but it will also rely heavily on digital marketing. This effort is sure to be well-received by employers in the Charlotte region’s industries that increasingly require high-skill workers as they grow (see **Figure 2**).

FIG. 1: EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AMONG NORTH CAROLINA ADULTS (Aged 25-64, 2016)



Source: myFutureNC.

FIG. 2: MECKLENBURG COUNTY EMPLOYMENT (by Industry, 2002 & 2017)



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages.



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