



# Does College Focus Matter?

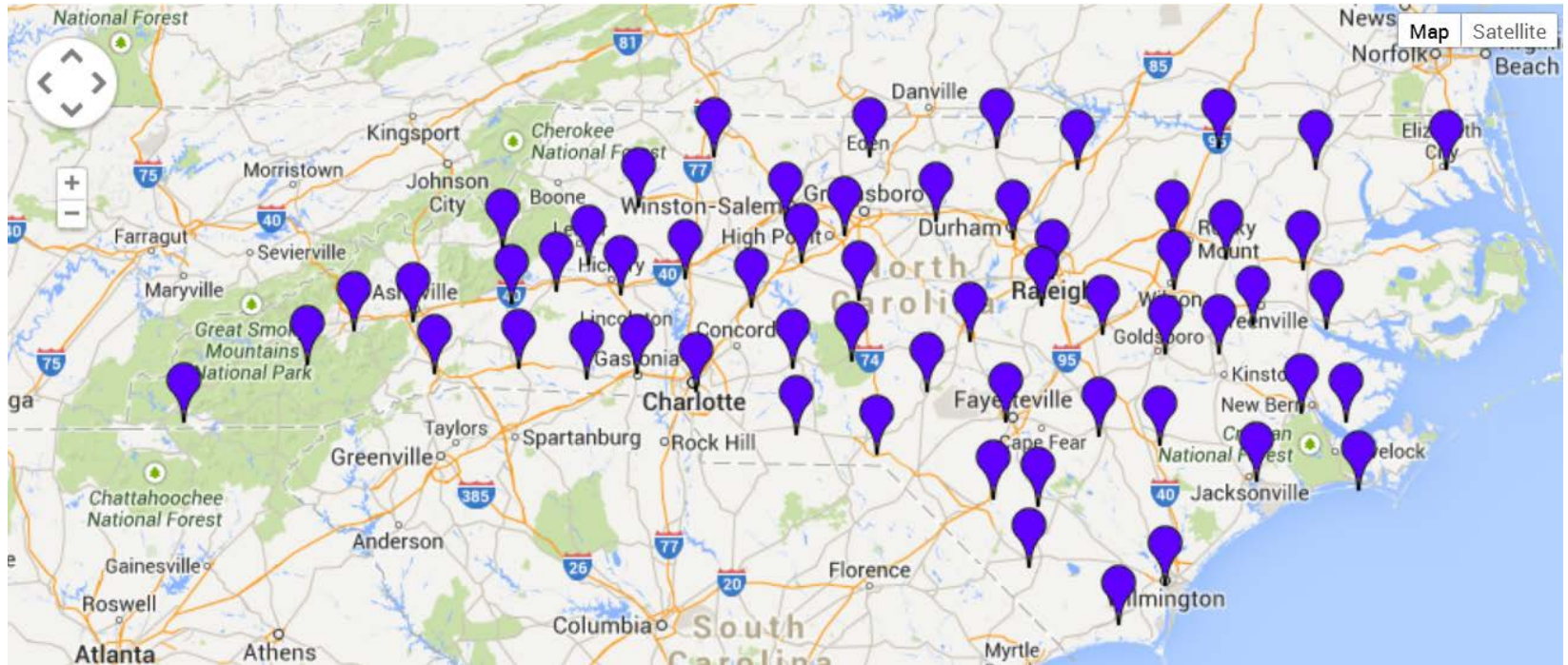
## Explaining Differences in Performance Among Community Colleges in North Carolina

Michael Dunn  
Arne L. Kalleberg

University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill

April 6–7, 2017 | Washington, DC

# North Carolina Community College System



- 58 community colleges
- 3rd largest system in the country (NC is 10th in population)
- 99% of NC residents are within a 30 minute drive from a college

# Community College Characteristics

- 1 in 9 NC citizens (18 or older) are enrolled
  - 48% of higher education enrollments in NC
- Highly centralized budgeting and curricula
  - Budget allocated based on enrollment
  - Standardized curricula across entire system
- Characteristics that make NC system ideal for study
  - Standardization of budget and curricula allow for more effective institutional-level comparisons
  - Represents considerable percentage of higher education students in NC

# Research Question and Design

**Question** – How does college “focus” influence the labor market returns for community college students?

**Hypothesis** – Students from career-focused community colleges will have better labor market performance as reflected by higher earnings, because such colleges are better able to put more attention, resources and development into workforce preparation

**Design** – (Community Colleges as 58 units of analysis); create measure of college focus and six types of institutional variables that we are regarding as controls:

- General institutional characteristics
- Student body composition characteristics
- Community college service area characteristics
- Labor market characteristics of community college service area
- Institutional labor market focus
- Dependent Variable: (log) 2011 earnings

# Overview of College Focus Variable

- Evaluated college's mission statement and website messaging
  - Coded colleges: academic, career or comprehensive on both measures
    - Colleges with academic on both measures coded “academic” in college focus – 5 in total
    - Colleges with career on both measures coded “career” in college focus – 7 in total
    - Remaining 46 coded as comprehensive or “non-specified”

# Examples of College Focus Variable

| Academic-Focused   | Career-Focused  | Comprehensive  |
|--|---|--|
| <p>“The mission of...Community College is to provide accessible, high quality learning experiences to meet the <b>educational needs</b> of the ...community.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Your Success is Our Goal – Supporting students in their <b>academic</b> endeavors”</li> <li>• “Build Your Future Not Your Debt: Four degrees designed for <b>transfer</b>”</li> <li>• “Success Starts Here! <b>Earn a Degree</b>”</li> </ul> | <p>“... Community College ... is committed to providing affordable, open admission, post-secondary education that is relevant and responsive to <b>labor market and community needs.</b>”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Enhance Your <b>Career</b>: Over 50 programs to study”</li> <li>• “Earn a Stackable Credential – Providing <b>opportunities to go to work</b>”</li> <li>• “Quality Programs for <b>In-demand Jobs</b>”</li> </ul> | <p>“...Community College is a dynamic, diverse learning community that supports all students in their education, leading to a <b>career, transfer to four-year institutions</b>, and the pursuit of lifelong learning.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “One College. <b>Many Paths.</b>”</li> <li>• “Choose Your Perspective – <b>Degrees, Transfers, and Job Training</b>”</li> <li>• “<b>Something for Everyone</b> – over 100 programs of study”</li> </ul> |

Table 3. Logistic Regression Results

| Variable   | Model 1<br>College Focus Only |                  | Model 2<br>Focus + Institutional<br>Characteristics |                  |
|--|-------------------------------|------------------|---|------------------|
|  | Coefficient                   | S/E              | Coefficient   | S/E              |
| <b>College Focus</b>   |                               |                  |   |                  |
| <b>Career Mission and Career Messaging</b>                     | <b>0.117***</b>               | <b>0.033</b>     | <b>0.056*</b>                                       | <b>0.024</b>     |
| <b>Academic Mission and Academic Messaging</b>                 | <b>-0.062</b>                 | <b>0.038</b>     | <b>-0.031</b>                                       | <b>0.027</b>     |
| <b>Comprehensive or Mixed Mission and Messaging</b>            | <b>0</b>                      | <b>(omitted)</b> | <b>0</b>  | <b>(omitted)</b> |
| General Institutional Characteristics                          |                               |                  |   |                  |
| Student Enrollment in 2002-2003 (log)                          |                               |                  | 0.081***  | 0.021            |
| Percent of Full-Time Faculty                                   |                               |                  | -0.103  | 0.107            |
| Student Composition Characteristics                            |                               |                  |   |                  |
| Proportion of Student Body Entering to Finish High School      |                               |                  | -0.407***   | 0.093            |
| Percent of Student Body Applying for Financial Aid             |                               |                  | -0.133  | 0.996            |
| Community College Service Area Characteristics                 |                               |                  |   |                  |
| Single County Service Area                                     |                               |                  | 0.042*  | 0.017            |
| UNC Campus in Service Area                                     |                               |                  | -0.016  | 0.026            |
| Labor Market Characteristics of Community College Service Area |                               |                  |   |                  |
| Rural or Urban Service Area                                    |                               |                  | -0.113  | 0.057            |
| Service Area Unemployment Rate, 2008-2010                      |                               |                  | 0.003   | 0.016            |
| Institutional Labor Market Focus                               |                               |                  |   |                  |
| Rate of Student Transfer, 2002-2003 Cohort                     |                               |                  | 0.032   | 0.116            |
| Proportion of "applied" Offerings in Curricula Programs        |                               |                  | 0.104   | 0.107            |
| Proportion of FTE enrollments in CE offerings                  |                               |                  | -0.257  | 0.153            |
| Proportion of instructional budget allocated to CE             |                               |                  | 0.022   | 0.045            |
| Constant   | 8.72***                       | 0.012            | 8.02***   | 0.258            |
| r-squared  | 0.2069                        |                  | 0.7477  |                  |
| Notes: Dependent variable is logearnings.                      |                               |                  |   |                  |
| * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001                            |                               |                  |   |                  |

# Findings and Results

- Students from community colleges that focus on career or workforce preparation had higher labor market earnings than did students from comprehensive community colleges or colleges with an academic focus.
- One fifth of the variation in students' earnings across community colleges was due to the college's mission focus
- A number of other community college variables also enhanced students' earnings, such as larger institution size, serving a single county, and having low proportions of remedial students



# Policy Implications

- Social context is important for understanding returns to schooling
- Dual purpose mandate for community colleges may negatively impact students
- College focus is a direct intervention within the control of college administrators. However, their control is constrained in part by the pressures—often conflicting ones—on administrators to emphasize career or academic foci (or perhaps give equal weight to both)

# Concluding Thoughts for Future Research

- Construct objective measure(s) of college focus
- Account for determinants of college focus
- Explore academic outcomes (not labor market) for academic-focused institutions for a more complete picture on the effect of “specialization”
- Include non-credit continuing education offerings into analysis

**Visit our website at [capseecenter.org](https://capseecenter.org)**

**You can also follow us on Twitter at @capsee  
and like us on Facebook.**

**Center for Analysis of Postsecondary Education and Employment  
Teachers College, Columbia University**

525 West 120th Street, Box 174, New York, NY 10027

TEL: 212.678.3091 | [capsee@columbia.edu](mailto:capsee@columbia.edu)