Assessing the Impacts & Identifying a Path Forward: Findings from Carolina Across 100

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Dear reader,

We are thrilled to share with you our report from the listening phase of the Carolina Across 100 initiative.

The report is a summary of the many voices and perspectives we heard from every county in our state. We worked hard to include a full and diverse representation of those voices, and we hope that you see some of yourself and your community reflected here.

We continue to be so grateful for the kindness and candor of those who shared their thoughts with us. Our respondents answered our questions, telling us about the challenges they face in their communities and organizations and how UNC-Chapel Hill can support the ongoing recovery and resilience-building work that is already happening. They also shared openly about experiences of great loss, unexpected opportunities and surprising bright spots, and a range of experiences in between.

This campus has always taken seriously our opportunity to partner with communities across our state to contribute to, and learn from, on-the-ground expertise. These responses are helping us do that now and we are excited about where we go from here, together.

Please stay tuned for Carolina Across 100’s first program announcement. We hope you will be proud of the ways that community input has shaped the design and focus of the upcoming program.

You can keep up with the announcement and our work over the next four years at https://carolinaacross100.unc.edu/.

Also, while the official listening phase of our data collection is complete, the listening does not stop. We want to hear if you have thoughts about this report, especially if you think there is something important that we missed. Please email us at carolinaacross100@sog.unc.edu.

With deep appreciation,

Kevin M. Guskiewicz
Chancellor, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Anita Brown-Graham
Director, ncIMPACT Initiative
North Carolinians, like so many others across the country and the world, have suffered staggering losses during the COVID-19 pandemic. To date, more than 1.8 million people in North Carolina have been diagnosed with COVID-19 and more than 19,000 of those have died. These numbers, which represent grandparents, parents, children, friends, and colleagues, are unprecedented. It is impossible to capture the full impact of loss.

In addition to the loss of life, individuals and communities have been devastated by job losses and business closures. Many families have experienced disruptions in childcare, healthcare, housing stability, food security, and education. Healthcare workers and frontline/essential staff have faced significant risk of disease daily for nearly two years and without a clear end in sight. Many others have felt unsafe returning to workplaces, engaging in social or religious activities, or attending milestone events like weddings and graduations.

While some individuals, communities, and business sectors have borne a disproportionate brunt of COVID-19’s negative effects, no person or place has been spared from this experience. Loss has been universal.

The full scope of the impact is significant and complex, and the ultimate toll is difficult to predict. What is clear, however, is that our communities are facing issues that individual institutions and sectors are not equipped to solve on their own. It will take collaboration across perspectives, sectors, and ideologies, to address these collective challenges.

Carolina Across 100 embodies this University’s mission to “enhance the quality of life for all people in the State” – to be the University For North Carolina as well as being the University of North Carolina. As a public institution of higher education, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has always received state support, and the University has responded by partnering with communities to address challenges when they arise. COVID-19 is no exception. Effective recovery from (and adaptation to and through) this pandemic will indeed rely on the willingness and ability of all to play their part, including institutions of higher education.

Carolina Across 100, a five-year initiative charged by UNC Chancellor Kevin Guskiewicz and led by UNC School of Government professor Anita Brown-Graham, will support communities in building and enhancing this type of community-driven, cross-sector, collaborative problem solving. The initiative, which is guided by the Carolina Engagement Council, will form meaningful partnerships with communities in all one hundred North Carolina counties to address longstanding challenges exacerbated by, and new challenges associated with, COVID-19.

By bringing to bear the University’s rich and diverse resources, including data insights, subject-matter expertise, facilitation and coordination efforts, and program design support, Carolina Across

2. The Carolina Engagement Council is a campus-wide advisory group that supports engagement efforts with communities and organizations across the state.
100 will co-create solutions with communities to aid in their ongoing COVID-19 recovery and overall resilience-building efforts. The initiative will identify a small number of key focus areas in order to target efforts over the next five years as it continuously brings new community teams on board and extends its reach across the state.

This report provides an overview of the findings and insights from the first phase of the Carolina Across 100 initiative and describes next steps for the work that lies ahead.

Listening First

Following the Chancellor’s launch of Carolina Across 100 in March 2021, the initiative’s first task was carrying out a deep listening phase to hear directly from North Carolinians about the challenges facing their communities. This listening phase included three interrelated stages of work. It began in Summer 2021 with key informant interviews with 22 local government, not-for-profit, and private business leaders to better understand experiences in their communities. These individuals represented 26 counties and all eight of North Carolina’s prosperity zones. The findings uncovered multiple high-level challenges facing businesses and communities. These included concerns about the workforce, worker shortages, and employee/employer skills gaps; a lack of reliable broadband connectivity, particularly for rural areas; a lack of affordable and workforce housing; infrastructure issues in areas such as transportation; and learning loss for students.

Insights from these initial interviews were primarily used to inform the design of a larger community listening survey targeting stakeholders in the public, private, and not-for-profit sectors, but also including individuals not in the paid workforce. The survey had several goals: gauge the impacts of COVID-19 on organizations and communities; understand perceptions about the severity and timing of impacts; identify populations most impacted by the pandemic; identify local efforts that have been effective at addressing COVID-19-related challenges; and gather input and ideas about opportunities for UNC-Chapel Hill to partner with communities.

The survey was launched in September 2021 with email invitations sent through multiple targeted lists to reach a range of local, regional, and statewide employees, such as city and county managers,

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3. North Carolina operates eight administrative regions known as Prosperity Zones. Each Zone features a one-stop physical location, allowing individuals and businesses the ability to interact with representatives from multiple state agencies, as well as to encourage better collaboration between the agencies themselves. Find more at https://www.nccommerce.com/about-us/nc-prosperity-zones.
city planners, economic development staff, law enforcement officials, and local public health directors. Surveys were also sent to stakeholders in a variety of not-for-profit organizations as well as business owners and private sector employees. Finally, survey invitations also included all alumni of UNC-Chapel Hill still living in North Carolina. In total, over 100,000 survey invitations were distributed. Responses were received from 4,014 individuals resulting in more than 2,800 completed surveys. The full survey sample represents people living in, working in, or serving every county in North Carolina. Because our survey focused on individuals whose businesses and organizations serve counties or regions across the state, much of our geographic analysis uses a slightly trimmed sample of individuals serving individual counties or small groups of counties. Figure 1 (below) illustrates the distribution of survey responses from these individuals.\(^4\)

![FIGURE 1: SURVEY RESPONSES RECEIVED BY COUNTY](image)

It is clear that stakeholders are ready and willing to share information about their experiences with COVID-19. Responses came in from every county in North Carolina, with some concentration in the Triangle and Triad regions as well as Mecklenburg County. This map shows respondents whose organizations serve individual counties or a small group of counties. The full survey sample includes even more respondents, including those whose organizations serve the entire state.

\(^4\) Many respondents worked for organizations that served more than one county. To address the need to properly balance results according to the number of counties represented when conducting geo-spatial analyses, we trimmed our sample to exclude those respondents who represented more than five counties. The actual counts of responses in each county would be higher than the numbers on this map if we included the full expanded sample, but such a map would not reflect the true number of individual respondents from that county, just that a respondent serves that county. Non-geo-spatial analysis includes the full sample of respondents who completed 100% of the survey (N=2,866). For further explanation, see the Methodology Appendix.
A second round of interviews took place during October and November 2021 with 63 stakeholders from across the state. These individuals represented 54 counties, all eight of the prosperity zones, all 16 of the regional Councils of Government,\(^5\) and all of North Carolina’s economic tiers,\(^6\) with an oversampling in the more economically distressed Tier 1 and Tier 2 counties (Figure 2). These conversations added nuance to the survey findings and revealed critical details about peoples’ experiences in the pandemic – the challenging and the hopeful.

Data from the listening phase is now informing the design phase, which will focus on partnering with communities to address key challenge areas. This next phase will be officially launched with communities in the spring. Additional information regarding methodology for data collection and analysis is included in the Methodological Appendix.

### FIGURE 2: INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS BY COUNTY

Interview participants generously shared their time to help us expand our understanding about challenges and opportunities facing their communities. These individuals represented a wide range of voices and perspectives from more than half of North Carolina’s counties, all of the economic distress tiers, and multiple employment sectors.

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5. North Carolina’s 16 regional Councils of Government provide a range of supportive services to their local governments with specialized topic area expertise as needed and as determined by local priorities. A significant aspect of their work is to provide updated information on state and federal programs with relevance for local governments. Find more information at [https://www.ncregions.org/](https://www.ncregions.org/)

6. Per the NC Department of Commerce, “The North Carolina Department of Commerce annually ranks the state’s 100 counties based on economic well-being and assigns each a Tier designation. This Tier system is incorporated into various state programs to encourage economic activity in the less prosperous areas of the state. The 40 most distressed counties are designated as Tier 1, the next 40 as Tier 2 and the 20 least distressed as Tier 3.” Find more at [https://www.nccommerce.com/grants-incentives/county-distress-rankings-tiers](https://www.nccommerce.com/grants-incentives/county-distress-rankings-tiers)
Diverse Voices

Efforts were made to reach a wide range of individuals and perspectives through our survey and interviews, and the results provide insights from a diverse set of voices from across the state. Specifically, we reached those in urban and rural counties, workers from varied employment sectors, and those who are retired or not currently in the paid workforce. However, because we used existing contact lists, the data are not representative of all of North Carolina.

Thirty-five percent of our survey respondents work in the public sector, 31 percent in the private sector, 17 percent in the not-for-profit sector, and 17 percent are retired or not currently in the paid workforce (Figure 3). For respondents who work in the public sector, 32 percent work at the county level and 27% work at the state level; the remaining work at either the city, regional, or federal level.

Due to the targeted nature of our survey sampling to those who lead their organizations, our respondents are highly educated: 61 percent have a graduate or professional degree and 35 percent have a bachelor’s degree (Figure 4). This is well above the state-wide average of 12 percent of residents with a graduate or professional degree and 24 percent with a bachelor’s degree. Even so, our survey population provide a critical vantage point for assessing organizational and community needs and challenges.

Our interview participants – both the initial key informants and our expanded set of post-survey interviewees – also represent diverse geographies, sectors, and perspectives. These North Carolinians include public school and community college employees, small business owners, city and town managers, economic development directors, healthcare providers, not-for-profit leaders, religious leaders, philanthropic leaders, and retirees. Many have lived in North Carolina for all or nearly all their lives, and while most of those individuals have moved within the state, others were “born and raised” in the community where they still live. A few were newer transplants, most frequently from neighboring states.

Interview participants were heavily sampled from the public and not-for-profit sectors, while the survey reached a broad sample of sectors. Respondents were also highly educated due to the nature of the survey.
Half (50%) of the interview participants (from the key informants and the second-round interviews) work in the public sector, 30 percent work in the not-for-profit sector, 14 percent work in the private sector, and 4 percent are retired or not in the paid workforce (Figure 5). Like our survey respondents, these individuals live in and serve counties across the three economic tiers of the state—with 40 percent of interviewees representing Tier 1 counties (most economically distressed), 42 percent representing Tier 2 counties, and 25 percent representing Tier 3 counties (least economically distressed).

**Analysis to Guide Action**

The information gathered during the listening phase of Carolina Across 100 provides a rich source of unique data that shed light on pandemic-related challenges. Analysis of the insights, observations, and experiences shared by participants will inform the creation of program elements and guide the future actions of this initiative. The next section of the report provides an overview of key insights from the final two parts of the listening phase - the survey and the follow-up interviews. Survey results include responses to questions in two main domains: impacts of COVID-19 on respondents’ organizations and impacts of COVID-19 on their communities. Interview questions focused more on questions about COVID-19 impacts to communities. In reporting our findings, we differentiate between community and organizational challenges and note when data is coming from the survey or from interviews.

“I don’t think there will be a time when COVID is ‘over’”

**Respondents share concerns about the long-term, lingering effects of the pandemic**

Our findings reveal significant concerns about the lasting impacts of COVID-19: over 90 percent of our respondents agree that the pandemic will have long-term effects on their communities (Figure 6). The majority of those (71%) think the greatest impacts from COVID-19 are still to come; less than one-third of individuals (29%) believe that the worst of the pandemic is behind us.

Qualitative data from our surveys and interviews expand our understanding of respondents’ perceptions about the long-term nature of the pandemic’s effects. For instance, a private sector employee from Johnston County stated, “I see these effects as lingering long-term. I don’t think that there will be a time where COVID is ‘over.’” A public sector employee from Orange County shared a similar comment: “We don’t know when this will be ‘over,’ if ever. Likely, we will need to adapt our communities and infrastructure to accommodate pandemic and post-pandemic conditions long-term.”

**FIGURE 6: WILL THE PANDEMIC HAVE LONG-TERM EFFECTS ON YOUR COMMUNITY?**

| Strongly Agree | 54% |
| Somewhat Agree | 40% |
| Somewhat Disagree | 5% |
| Strongly Disagree | 2% |

#CarolinaAcross100
Related to this, a small number of respondents described the compounding effects of the pandemic on top of ongoing recovery from previous disasters, particularly hurricanes. A public sector employee working in Carteret, Craven, and Onslow Counties said, “This comes on the heels of recovery from Hurricane Florence and has been difficult for all.”

The need to manage the effects of multiple disasters not only presents extreme challenges for ensuring peoples’ immediate health and safety but also puts added strain on an already under-resourced infrastructure and creates a tension for how to best use financial and human resources for simultaneous recovery efforts. For instance, a resident in Pamlico stated:

“Just because [the] COVID pandemic has struck our nation and our county, does not mean that those adversely impacted by Hurricanes Matthew and Florence are in safe housing or restored....Pamlico County Disaster Recovery Coalition is still engaged in Hurricane Florence rebuilding in our county. COVID impacted us by drastically reducing the number of rebuild volunteers from our own communities and around the country. We are all struggling due to COVID hitting not only our volunteer numbers, but the fundraising needed to sustain nonprofits that serve the underserved.”

On the other hand, recognitions of resilience, unity, generosity, and hopefulness also surfaced through these comments. The individual quoted above went on to describe the response of local organizations:

“Our community has stepped up to help with housing volunteers so they can have safe spacing. A local camp provides accommodations at greatly reduced rates and a local church has donated the use of their old sanctuary, Sunday school rooms, and [another] sanctuary. Another church has donated a rector home to be used as needed. We also try to share resources with our volunteers and team up with other community nonprofits.”

**Insights**

- Individuals overwhelmingly predict that the impacts from COVID-19 will persist well into the future.
- For some communities, the pandemic exacerbated existing challenges from hurricanes and other disasters.
- Many respondents believe that the next several months to one year will be a critical time for addressing COVID-19 impacts.

**Key Takeaways**

It may be important for program development to focus on resilience-building so that individuals and communities are better prepared for living with and adapting to COVID-19 rather than focusing solely on recovery from COVID-19’s effects. This may include better equipping our current and future generations with the tools and skills they need to be adaptable and flexible to sweeping changes, particularly within the employment and educational landscape, and to help ensure communities have the resources necessary to make this possible.
“All of the above:”

Respondents share broad and consistent concerns about the top challenges facing their communities

Much of the listening phase research focused on the difficulties facing communities and organizations. Our survey and interview questions asked respondents to tell us about the most negative impacts of COVID-19 as well as the challenges that they expected to persist over the longer-term. Educational disruptions, employment instability, loss of small businesses, risk of business closures, housing instability, and childcare availability were among the most frequently mentioned areas in response to both of those questions. In other words, there was significant overlap in issues that respondents identified as negatively impacting their communities at the time of the survey and the issues they expected to be struggling with for years to come.

In a few cases, respondents found it hard to limit the number of top challenges facing their communities. For instance, a private sector employee from Mecklenburg County said:

To some extent, all of the above. I think it can best be described as a large stressor to the general fabric of our local communities that exposed, to some extent, all of the examples [negative impacts] listed above, plus a general weakening of faith in our community to provide and be accessible.

As we will discuss later in this report, most of these issues were not brought about by COVID-19; rather, the pandemic increased the severity of decades-old issues and created an urgency around finding solutions.

The three most-mentioned immediate negative impacts reported were, in order: educational disruptions, employment instability, and loss of small business. When asked which one issue will have the longest-term impacts on communities, respondents selected the same three areas, but with a slight difference in ranking. The top long-term concern, identified by approximately one-quarter of survey respondents as having the longest lasting effect on communities, was educational disruptions. Another 20 percent reported that, notwithstanding new business formations, the small businesses lost during COVID-19 will have the most lasting effects, and fourteen percent think it will be employment instability.

Interestingly, our analysis indicates that these concerns are also remarkably consistent across county and region, despite differences in local economies, population size, and educational systems.

Findings did indicate slight variation depending on respondents’ employment sector. For instance, those working in the private sector showed slightly greater concern about the loss of small businesses. Those in the public sector were evenly split on their concern about small business loss and educational disruptions but were more concerned about employment instability compared to individuals working in other sectors. Those in the not-for-profit sector were slightly more concerned about educational disruptions. Retirees and those not in the paid workforce were the most concerned about educational disruptions and stated high levels of concern about losses in revenue.
A theme of consistency among the challenges for communities also emerged in our interview conversations, which overwhelmingly centered on the same key community challenge areas raised in the survey findings. For example, a respondent from Buncombe County who works for a regional philanthropic foundation said, “...you know, most of the issues I’ve mentioned [job loss, staffing shortages, decreases in healthcare access, and lack of broadband] ... most of them are not unique to Buncombe.”

Another interview participant from the western part of the state, in Macon County, responded to the question about top challenges by stating, “We have several [top challenges], and I’m sure you’ve probably heard them if you’ve talked to any other rural counties; [rural counties] tend to run the same.” He went on to describe three key challenges in his community including 1) workforce development (“like everyone else, we have a ton of job openings and not a whole lot of people to fill them”); 2) issues related to broadband development; and 3) a strained healthcare system with too few medical providers to adequately meet residents’ needs.

On the other side of the state, in Warren County, an interview participant responded to the same question about challenges saying, “I wish that we were unique. We aren’t unique. The things we are facing are the things that others are facing as well.”

It is important to note that while the vast majority of responses to our survey questions fell within the answer categories provided with each question, individuals sometimes offered input in their own words. This feedback frequently focused on concerns about the high numbers of COVID-19 deaths as well as social and political divisiveness among community members that seemed to be deepening.

As mentioned, interview conversations most often focused the same key challenge areas raised in the survey findings – workforce issues and employment instability, educational disruptions, loss of small businesses, and concerns regarding the affordability and access of housing and other services. At the same time, they added depth to our understanding of these concerns. Interview conversations also pointed to issues beyond these most common concerns. Other topics raised by interviewees included a lack of internet/broadband, issues with transportation, and a lack of access to physical and mental healthcare. Interviewees also commented on divisiveness within their communities and expressed concerns about the ways COVID-19-related issues seemed to be pushing people apart at a time when unity and a willingness to work across differences was sorely needed.

**Insights**
- Educational disruptions, employment instability, and the loss of small businesses were the three key areas of concern top of mind for our respondents.
- These concerns were fairly consistent across geography and sector.
- Survey and interview respondents frequently mentioned concerns about the overwhelming loss of life due to COVID-19 as well as a sense that divisiveness in their communities had grown.

**Key Takeaways**
Consistency across the main areas of concern may expand opportunities to scale work regionally and/or share resources and best practices across communities to greater effect. However, while the challenges may be similar, no two communities are the same; tailoring approaches with community guidance will remain critical.
What effects of COVID-19 are hitting North Carolinians hardest?

Based on findings from a three-pronged listening phase that reached thousands of participants covering all 100 North Carolina Counties, Carolina Across 100 gathered information on the top concerns COVID-19 has brought to communities so far, and what community leaders believe will be the lasting effects.

The top three concerns about the negative impacts of COVID-19 on communities were:

- **20%** Educational Disruptions
- **16%** Employment Instability
- **13%** Loss of Small Businesses

When asked about the impacts of COVID-19, the top concerns were consistent across North Carolina counties.

When asked about the challenges for organizations, respondents most often shared concerns about **staffing-related** issues, chief among these was **staff burnout**.

When do respondents think communities will feel the worst COVID-19 impacts?

- **Worst is behind us** 29%
- **A few more months** 24%
- **6 months to a year** 31%
- **Over a year** 16%

Respondents said COVID-19 worsened issues in their communities in a variety of areas:

- **Education** 24%
- **Employment** 23%
- **Mental health decline** 17%
- **Food insecurity** 14%
- **Substance abuse** 11%
- **Child abuse** 6%
- **Other** 3%
- **None** 2%

Our communities are facing issues that individual institutions are not equipped to solve on their own. It will take meaningful collaboration to address these collective challenges. To read the full report and engage with us in this effort, visit [https://carolinaacross100.unc.edu/](https://carolinaacross100.unc.edu/)
“Hit from virtually every direction”

Respondents expand on the ways that COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted certain populations and worsened issues in their communities

While no one has been spared from the wide-ranging effects of the pandemic, some populations have been disproportionately impacted. Older adults, particularly those in congregate settings such as assisted living facilities, as well as individuals with certain diseases and illnesses, have often suffered the most severe health effects. Additionally, healthcare and other frontline workers, who have more potential exposure to COVID-19, have also faced heightened risks. For myriad reasons, parents, low-wage workers, communities of color, and those already facing issues of housing and/or food security, have borne an outsized brunt of the pandemic’s negative effects as well.

According to our survey respondents, working-class individuals, people of color, and mothers have been most deeply affected by COVID-19. The most common response in the “other” category was children/students. Additional responses included the elderly, business owners, and comments indicating everyone was deeply affected (Figure 7).

Along these same lines, our survey asked about community issues that had gotten worse because of COVID-19. Not surprisingly, a majority of responses pointed back to familiar top challenge areas, though a few new issues that had not been previously mentioned or had not ranked among top concerns emerged in response to this question as well. These included mental health decline, food insecurity, substance abuse, and child abuse.

Interestingly, in the case of mental health, our qualitative data included many comments about an increased awareness of the importance of caring for mental health as a positive element of the pandemic. These respondents mentioned things such as normalizing discussions about mental health, reducing stigma around seeking help, and using telehealth to increase accessibility to mental health services. Much more often, however, responses pointed to concerns about mental health – both as a result of the pandemic itself and from the strategies to mitigate the spread, such as limitations on all types of in-person activities. Comments about mental health concerns were not exclusive to children and young people, but they were mentioned frequently, with some referring to the experience of the pandemic, including for youth, as “trauma.”

Several interviewees provided additional useful context regarding the ways that COVID-19 is worsening issues in their communities. These comments often included a description of how the pandemic exposed existing issues that had been “under the radar.” For example, an interview respondent from Buncombe County who described a decline in the local healthcare system that pre-dated COVID-19 but became further hobbled during the pandemic due to a significant

![Figure 7: From your perspective, what individuals in your community were most affected by COVID-19?](image)
loss of healthcare workers put it this way: “I think the cracks in the system have been shown to be as severe as they are because of COVID.”

Another interviewee who works in rural communities discussed the ways that COVID-19 has worsened issues, particularly in rural communities, by stating, “[community challenges] did exist before the pandemic. I think the pandemic has been a further disruption to communities that were already really challenged.” He went on to describe economic impacts in the rural counties where he works:

…while it’s true that some businesses may have found opportunity in the pandemic, that certainly is not true across the board. They’ve probably lost businesses and had businesses to close. Virtually every business that they do have is challenged with finding and keeping employees; and the pandemic continues to disrupt normal economic activity.

Later in the interview he expanded on the ability (or, more often, the inability) for counties and communities to recover and move forward from pandemic impacts. He shared:

I think COVID will persist and be with us a while and gradually we are learning to live with it...[but] not all places are equally equipped with coping with it. Some have done better than others.... We’re gonna have to learn how we live with it to some extent and the communities that we worry about, the most distressed rural communities...it comes back to those capacity challenges that hit them from virtually every direction. That’s going to continue to be a problem.

He went on to talk about how these communities need support to adapt and become better able to meet their own needs. He described needing to “arm them, equip them with better tools for how they manage life in a new COVID world...even though the worst is over, it’s not over.”

As noted earlier, another theme that emerged in our data was a concern among many about a pre-existing but growing divisiveness that was intensified by the pandemic. A not-for-profit employee in Cumberland County said, “Our divisions are deeper than we knew.” Another respondent in Orange County said that divisiveness was “making every negative impact [of COVID-19] exponentially more difficult,” and a community college employee in Brunswick County stated that the increased divisions “were the last thing we need.”

For a majority of respondents who mentioned tension and division among community members, this surfaced in response to a question about what they hope for their community going forward. These North Carolinians described a desire to “heal” and overcome differences in order to work together more effectively. A Wake County resident said it this way: “I wish that we would set down our divisions and remember that we get through all of this better together.”
“Every business I enter is looking for employees”

Respondents describe the challenges facing organizations and businesses

In addition to a focus on community impacts, our survey asked a series of questions about the effects of the pandemic on the organizations and businesses where respondents work. Our findings most clearly point to significant concerns about employees and the workforce (39%). Chief among these was staff burnout, though other concerns, such as early retirements and staff absences due to COVID-19 illness, were also mentioned. Disruptions from virtual work or working from home and an increased need for mental health support for employees were also identified as long-term challenges. Other areas of concern were operational, supply chain, and service disruptions (20%) and cost-related issues (13%), which may also have connections to employee and staffing issues. Another eleven percent (11%) of respondents felt it was too soon to tell what the longest-term impacts would be for organizations and businesses.

Qualitative data from surveys and interviews further underscored these findings. For instance, a public sector employee from Moore County stated that they have “zero workforce right now.” A private sector employee in Nash County shared something similar:

> *Every business I enter is looking for employees. Often these jobs do not pay enough to live on, but I never knew there to be so many vacancies prior to the pandemic. It seems to be that a lot of things are out of whack, and I hope we can get back on a more even keel.*

Some respondents commented on the multiple potential causes of worker shortages. A private sector business owner who splits his time between the eastern and western parts of the state shared that he is “banging [his] head up against the wall, as are many, many employers in North Carolina” when it comes to getting people back to work. He identified COVID-19 health issues, childcare, and a desire on the part of some workers to move to more stable employment (e.g., a restaurant worker who wants to move into a more secure position) as possible reasons people remained out of the workforce. He also indicated that expanded federal benefits were a significant factor keeping workers at home.
This final point was echoed by several other survey and interview respondents. One private sector employee from Forsyth County said that the “government stimulus/unemployment payments disincentivized large numbers of workers from returning to [the] workforce” and felt that the result was taking a particularly heavy toll on small businesses. A Wake County resident whose not-for-profit serves people across the state commented:

*I think the unemployment benefits were both a negative and a positive. Obviously, for people who lost their jobs and/or had no childcare, those funds were lifesaving. I did see a lot of industries and colleagues struggling because of the shortage in available and willing labor."

Another interview respondent discussed how their rural county is beginning to think about how best to address their workforce shortages, which includes a focus on youth and significant efforts to inform students about job opportunities in their county. He said:

*One way we’re addressing that problem [workforce shortages] is by starting to go back to our K through 12, particularly our high school students, and communicate to them that they don’t have to move out of the community to get a good job. You can stay right here at home and get a good job.*

Given the high priority respondents placed on employment, we conducted additional analyses on these employment- and/or staffing-concerned respondents. These individuals, who comprised 79 percent of our total survey sample, were identified as those who selected any employment/staffing concerns among their top three negative impacts for their organization.

We found that employment-concerned respondents are more likely to work in the public sector, a trend that persisted when respondents were asked about impacts in both their organizations and broader communities. For example, when asked to choose which impact would be of most long-term concern for their organization, public sector respondents were more likely to select employment/staffing concerns among their top three negative impacts of COVID-19 on their organization.

Of those most concerned about employment/staffing, 42% are respondents who work in the public sector, 31% are respondents who work in the private sector, and 18% are respondents who work in not-for-profits.

7. Employment-related concerns included any of the following: staff burnout due to the pandemic, staff disruptions from work-from-home/virtual working, staff absences due to COVID-19 or potential exposure, unexpected retirements or resignations of key personnel due to COVID-19, increased need for employee mental health supports, and workforce reductions.
employees comprised the largest proportion of respondents who chose an employment-related impact, whereas private sector employees comprised the largest proportion of respondents who chose an impact that was not employment-related. Based on the qualitative data, we believe this is likely due to both the observed toll on frontline/essential staff along with the responsibility of the public sector for economic development.

While respondents noted staffing shortages among multiple businesses and sectors, concerns most frequently centered on healthcare workers and medical professionals. A resident of Lenoir County working in a health-related field said:

*The human toll has been exhausting for this community...it's just been a tremendous disease burden on the community...but the other thing is that there has been some burnout of staff – health department staff, hospital staff, provider staff – folks that just were in the fight for so long and said, you know, I just, I just can't do this anymore.*

She went on to describe how so much has been asked of these workers, and how those who have remained at their jobs are dealing with a “crushing workload” for which there “is just no end.” She also shared thoughts about the unknown long-term impacts of staff shortages saying, “Maybe for some metrics, the worst is behind us, but, you know, we've lost a lot of seasoned medical staff and how long does it take to recover from that? It may take years and years to recover from that.”

**Insights**

• Major concerns about staffing and workforce exist across all counties and sectors, though those working in the public sector appear slightly more concerned about the range of impacts versus their private sector and not-for-profit counterparts.

• Respondents point to a variety of potential explanations for staff shortages, including business closures, early retirements, health-related absences, interruptions in childcare than impact jobs, workers seeking more stable opportunities (with better pay and better benefits), and the role of financial support from the government which may have kept workers home. Solutions will need to address these multiple and sometimes intersecting factors.

**Key Takeaways**

The issue of employment instability and workforce shortages is clearly top of mind for individuals across our state. There is an urgent opportunity to align the needs of businesses, employers, and local and state economies with the strengths of educational institutions (particularly post-secondary education) to ensure a well-prepared and high-quality workforce to fill critical roles. This process must also meet the needs of workers so that they have access to job opportunities that pay living wages in high-growth, in-demand fields.
“Remember the lessons we have learned”

Respondents share positive impacts of the pandemic and the hopes for their communities

Our survey asked individuals to indicate whether the pandemic had brought any positive impacts to their organizations and communities. Nearly half (49%) said that the pandemic included both negative and positive impacts for organizations (Figure 9).

Qualitative data describing the positive impacts most often focused on advantages of teleworking and expanded opportunities to connect using video communications platforms such as Zoom. Many respondents also commented on increased flexibility and productivity when they were allowed to work from home. For example, a respondent from a not-for-profit organization with locations in Cabarrus and Chatham Counties said that the pandemic “proved we could successfully work remotely and offer flexibility in scheduling for all employees.”

This respondent went on to describe further benefits of this transition, saying that thanks to reduced overhead costs from relinquishing leased office space, the organization “increased our benefits to employees including increased compensation, healthcare, Employee Assistance Program, insurance offerings, and increased paid time off. Successfully pivoting to work-from-home and changing our programming to suit remote options was a big win and morale booster.”

Yet a few individuals noted that not all these positive impacts were experienced equally across organizations. A not-for-profit employee in New Hanover County said, “Higher level employees were given more flexibility in hours and in-office work. Not true for lower-level employees.” Additionally, employees who did not work from home, which included 27% of our survey respondents, may not have experienced significant benefits from these types of work-related changes.

When asked whether there had been any positive impacts of COVID-19 on their communities, significantly fewer respondents felt this was the case. Only one-quarter reported some negative and some positive impacts. Nearly three-quarters (73%) reported only negative impacts while the remaining two percent reported either no impact, only positive impacts, or that it was too soon to tell. For those reporting some positives, many highlighted creative, innovative problem solving and

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**FIGURE 9: HAS COVID-19 HAD POSITIVE, NEGATIVE, OR MIXED IMPACT ON YOUR ORGANIZATION?**

Over half of survey respondents said that COVID-19 has had at least some positive impacts on their organization.

Specific positive impacts mentioned included advantages of teleworking, increased accessibility of remote communication, reduced overhead costs for office space, and a spirit of creative problem solving that emerged in response to the pandemic.
the benefits that came with what several respondents said was “thinking outside the box.” A not-for-profit respondent serving Duplin and Wayne Counties stated, “It ‘forced’ us to think outside the box and offer our services in other formats. It provided us opportunities to assist other non-profits in ways that we have never before.”

Other positives included an increased awareness of community needs, particularly mental health needs, along with a greater ability for residents to seek help and support. Several respondents also mentioned the positives associated with having to be or choosing to be outside more frequently for exercise, activities, and social engagements. A few commented that they had developed new or deeper relationships with their neighbors because they would see them outdoors much more often. In describing some of the positives of outdoor recreation, a respondent from Wilkes County said, “people were reminded of the assets that exist in their own backyard.”

Additionally, respondents mentioned a few small, hyper-local efforts, such as establishing mutual aid groups within their neighborhoods to offer food, transportation, financial and other supports to one another as well as using neighborhood listservs to share information and promote neighborhood businesses.

Perhaps more than any other area of positive comments in our survey, though, respondents shared hundreds of names of organizations that were working to address pandemic-related challenges in their communities and offered examples of local solutions that had been effective at addressing some of the negative impacts. These included a few mentions of large agencies working across the state, such as the United Way and Goodwill industries. It included many mentions of local health departments and Chambers of Commerce. Churches and other faith-based organizations also emerged as a critical source of support to address food, clothing, and childcare needs as well as serving as vaccine delivery sites. A respondent from Gaston County shared, “Local churches have led the way in organizing food drives, vaccine clinics, providing emotional support and offering the community information on other services.” Together all these efforts created a patchwork of critical support that was rolled out relatively quickly and nimbly to address a range of needs.

In response to our survey question about respondents’ hopes for their communities, replies clustered around four key themes: 1) a return to “normalcy;” 2) improved collaboration across organizations and sectors; 3) fewer divisions and less polarization among community members; and 4) a desire to learn from the experience of the pandemic.

For several, a hope of getting back to normal was stated simply. For instance, a private sector employee in Wake County said their hope for their community was “a return to normalcy!” Others mentioned “normal” in the context of getting kids back to school and getting businesses back up and running. A public sector employee serving multiple counties in Eastern North Carolina said their hope for their community was that “the workforce would return so businesses could function at their normal operating hours and volume.” Still others seemed to describe normalcy as having a sense of predictability and fewer fears. A respondent from Burke County said, “Just getting back to normal. Not worrying all the time about what's next.” Another respondent in Wake County said, “Going back to normal as far as...going out in public without the constant worrying of contracting or spreading disease.”
On the other hand, a few respondents described hoping for a new normal. A respondent from Union County said:

"I know, we know, that navigating through this pandemic is hard on everyone, however, we are gifted with something. If we could use those gifts collectively, we can find a new normal that will positively affect every area of our communities, from business to schools to home."

Another respondent from Durham County described that their hopes for their community are to “return to better than ‘normal.’” They went on to mention a focus on equitable recovery and a desire to use rare government funding to invest in community, particularly communities of color.

Hopes about sustaining or even increasing collaborations between organizations, sectors, institutions, and geographies was another theme in our data. A respondent from Mecklenburg shared that their community hopes include “increased regional collaboration as we tackle shared challenges and create vision for a more resilient region.” Another individual from Orange County said, “I hope we will maintain some of the positive feeling of collaboration now that we’re all more conscious of how fragile our systems are.”

As mentioned earlier, statements about divisiveness appeared frequently in response to the question about challenges facing communities and in response to the question about hopes for communities. A respondent from Orange County shared, “I hope the divisiveness and the politicization of this pandemic subsides. It’s awful, making every negative impact exponentially more difficult.” Another from Halifax said, “My greatest hope is that the divisiveness diminishes, and we go back to a unified effort to help each other.”

Related to this, others commented on the need for empathy and compassion for one another. One respondent put it this way: “I think compassion for where people are coming from will be key to all of us moving forward together.” Another respondent who works in multiple Western North Carolina counties said they hope “that citizens will begin to realize what unites us rather than focusing on what divides us.” A respondent from Watauga County stated, “…we are all in the same storm, but we
are in different boats...” and emphasized the need to listen to one another and find opportunities for dialogue.

Finally, many respondents expressed a desire for communities to learn from the experiences of this pandemic. This included a desire to be better prepared for future pandemics. A public sector employee in Transylvania County said their hopes for community are that:

“[Learnings] will lessen the impact of similar pandemics in the future; Our community will continue to build and grow through other challenges, now that we know it is possible in the most challenging circumstances; We will bolster our support for those who are more vulnerable to challenges such as this.

Another respondent from Duplin County who works in the private sector stated:

*I would hope that the community will remember the lessons that we have learned. We have missed out on so much in the past 18 months. I hope we can regain our lost relationships and go forward with the knowledge of how lucky we are. Once this is behind us, I hope we will remember so that we can be better prepared for whatever the future holds.*

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### Insights

- For those able to work from home, greater flexibility around work hours and a sense of increased productivity was a positive impact of the pandemic. However, this did not necessarily benefit those not able to do their work from home or for those without access to reliable broadband internet services.

- The pandemic has exposed some neglected needs, specifically mental health, and helped normalize seeking help.

- Despite significant tragedy, there is a hopefulness that organizations and communities can leverage and enhance a desire towards collaboration to address challenges more fully. To do this successfully, individuals, communities, and organizations must be willing to focus on unifying aspects and approach one another with compassion and a willingness to listen and learn.

### Key Takeaways

The lessons learned through the experience of living through the pandemic need to be captured, understood, and shared so that we make every effort to capitalize on the small, but meaningful, bright spots that emerged and integrate these into a “new normal.” These lessons can also ensure that businesses, organizations, schools, healthcare systems, and our communities in general are better prepared for future disruptions from pandemics and other disasters.
The American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA/ARP) has delivered unprecedented amounts of funding to communities to aid in recovery from COVID-19. While this was not a significant theme from our listening phase, it feels worthwhile to share some of our respondent comments on this topic because of the opportunity this funding presents to address so many of the challenges raised in the data.

“[My hope for my community is] that we can look back years from now and say that we took the recovery funding received and did something truly beneficial for the community long-term.” – Jackson County

“I would love to see the university take our community through a facilitated process to determine the best/highest uses for the recovery dollars coming to our community. An inclusive, strategic, human-centered process could help our community envision a plan that brings everyone together under a common agenda with mutually reinforcing activities. Collective Impact combined with Human Centered Design.” – Wilkes County

“[My hope for my community is] that the ARP funds will have a significant impact on our town’s ability to be competitive economically and in attracting new business.” – Pender and Duplin Counties

“I think the University could support studies and disseminate information about impacts (especially those that help us understand existing inequity within our communities). I think the university could help understand many potential changes that might help us to be better prepared next time - emergency management, supply chain questions, access to mental and physical health care, ongoing support for educators and students of all ages, how parents are impacted by changes in work, school and elder care.” – Wake County


“Walk alongside us and get to know us as we work towards solutions”

Participants share their suggestions for how UNC-Chapel Hill can support recovery and resilience-building efforts

One of the last questions in our survey and interviews asked respondents about the ways they thought UNC-Chapel Hill could partner with their communities to help address their most pressing challenges. Participants freely shared a number of thoughtful and diverse ideas, and they also did not shy away from raising concerns. Many suggestions centered around a few key opportunities for community support. These included providing research and data, planning and facilitation assistance, helping to make connections and enable collaborations, helping to promote or expand existing programs and services, providing skill-building for future workers, helping to fill capacity needs at organizations, and better sharing University capacity and resources with communities.

Here we include several quotes from our respondents that highlight these opportunities. We focus on providing more text in respondents’ own words, in part, because respondents were so thorough in their feedback to this question in particular.

“UNC-CH can help by providing scientific resources and data that help organizations make the best decisions possible.” – Catawba County

“I think the University could support studies and disseminate information about impacts (especially those that help us understand existing inequity within our communities). I think the university could help understand many potential changes that might help us to be better prepared next time - emergency management, supply chain questions, access to mental and physical health care, ongoing support for educators and students of all ages, how parents are impacted by changes in work, school and elder care.” – Wake County

“The American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA/ARP) has delivered unprecedented amounts of funding to communities to aid in recovery from COVID-19. While this was not a significant theme from our listening phase, it feels worthwhile to share some of our respondent comments on this topic because of the opportunity this funding presents to address so many of the challenges raised in the data.

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“I would love to see the university take our community through a facilitated process to determine the best/highest uses for the recovery dollars coming to our community. An inclusive, strategic, human-centered process could help our community envision a plan that brings everyone together under a common agenda with mutually reinforcing activities. Collective Impact combined with Human Centered Design.” – Wilkes County

“[UNC can] help cities and organizations get access to ARP money....I've heard it has been confusing for people and organizations to figure out....” – Mecklenburg County

“[UNC can] help guide communities for effective use of ARPA and other funds [and] highlight and share the best practices that have come out of community efforts.” – Durham County

“[Provide] research. Get to know the people in our community, provide data, walk alongside us as we work toward solutions.” – Wake County

“We need help telling our story in rural areas in particular - collecting data, analyzing data, communicating effectively about public health, challenging misinformation sources, and advocating at the state and federal levels for systems change that makes us more effective and what we are so good at doing.” – Granville and Vance Counties

“It would be nice if UNC Chapel Hill would partner with the County Commissioners to come up with a plan that could work to help to maintain a workforce for the current jobs available and to be able to provide a workforce for new businesses that may come to the county.” – Northampton County

“Create a way to connect employers (who need workers) and employees (who need jobs).” – Durham County

“Paid student internships in community organizations. Created experiential learning for students, builds a workforce that is grounded in reality, and supports community needs and assets. We need UNC to take service learning seriously.” – Orange County

“Identify and share best practices. Serve as a resource for information, much like has been done by School of Government for many years. Translate groundbreaking science into programs that can be ‘shelf-ready’ for implementation by local groups. Use the brand and credibility of UNC to make programs accepted. For example, the NC Cooperative Extension Service (through NCSU, a peer institution), has broad reach into communities and provides valuable services to support local communities and individuals. Perhaps even a partnership or ‘piggyback’ on the infrastructure that already exists there would be possible. No need to reinvent the wheel.” – Buncombe County
“Help develop new partnerships, help us reach new populations who may be in need of our services.”
– Davidson County

“I think if there were some way for local groups/organizations to connect to faculty/staff expertise. For example, I think some organizations could have benefited from UNC IT expertise when entering the world of zoom for the first time.” – Orange County

Other respondents did not know what type of role UNC-Chapel Hill could play in supporting their community. A respondent in New Hanover County simply said, “I don’t see how UNC can help.” Another respondent described a feeling that community members may not feel connected to UNC-Chapel Hill. They said:

_I feel many individuals here do not feel the reach of the University in making positive effects on their lives. Working in higher education, I note how the University works with community colleges and schools in Eastern North Carolina on a regular basis. But I don’t see a level of engagement with the same institutions in the western end of the state. We are here, and we are a part of North Carolina too. I feel that Carolina is often viewed as a far-off institution that at times doesn’t seem to be a part of the same state we are in. I want to see UNC be a greater force in leadership and resources for our region and our population._

Others expressed a sense that help or input from UNC-Chapel Hill would not be welcome. A respondent from Cleveland County stated, “Stay out of local policy - sorry but your ‘blue’ is too blue for our county.”

Engaging in the work ahead will require being aware of and sensitive to the range of experiences and perceptions that North Carolinians may have with regard to the University. We must seek to understand those feelings and create new and better relationships built on trust and respect.

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**Insights**

• Stakeholders from every corner of the state have ideas for how UNC-Chapel Hill can partner with and support their communities.

• The main types of support that would be most beneficial to communities center on research and data, planning and facilitation assistance, helping to make connections and enable collaborations, helping to promote or expand existing programs and services, providing skill-building for future workers, helping to fill capacity needs at organizations, and better sharing University capacity and resources.

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**Key Takeaways**

The pandemic provides an opportunity to reflect on the ways that UNC-Chapel Hill can deepen and expand its partnership with organizations located across the state and the Carolina Across 100 initiative will create an important path for doing just that. As the University seeks to engage with communities, we must continue to listen first, be humble and responsive, to build/rebuild trusting relationships, and to let community members themselves guide these partnerships.
Next Steps

There is still significant work ahead in the next phases of the Carolina Across 100 initiative. The figure below shows the general timeline of the project to date and upcoming program steps.

As this work progresses, with communities guiding the way, there is reason to be optimistic about what can be accomplished through community/campus collaborations. The task is daunting and there will be no singular solution, nor should there be. Still, the opportunity to make headway on complicated and long-running issues and ultimately enable communities to emerge from the pandemic stronger, more equitable, and more resilient is one hundred percent worth the effort.

CAROLINA ACROSS 100 TIMELINE
Year One | June 2021 - June 2022

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<td>Carolina Engagement Council (CEC) met to kick off initiative: Small group of students conducted 19 pilot interviews to inform future research design</td>
<td>Launched statewide survey and collected over 3,000 responses; Recruited and trained 70 students to conduct more than 50 interviews with stakeholders; Analyzed data and presented findings to CEC</td>
<td>Identify and announce focus area for first year and release full findings report; Inventory campus capacity for supporting communities around the focus area and assisting with evaluation efforts; Create the RFP process for community applications; Finalize community resilience index</td>
<td>Launch the cohort application process; host webinars and other activities to raise awareness and build understanding of the process; Review and select the first group of community cohorts</td>
<td>Support the cohorts as they launch; Match-make with campus resources and capacity to meet the specific community needs; Identify and create mini-learning clusters and opportunities for cohorts to engage; Draft year one full report</td>
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Acknowledgements

First and foremost, we thank the thousands of North Carolinians who participated in our listening phase. Your time and thoughtful feedback are deeply appreciated. We have heard you and we will work hard to respond by supporting and enhancing your efforts in your organizations and communities. We also thank our UNC students who played a critical role guiding the first stages of this work and by serving as our ears during so many interview conversations. In particular, we thank Caitlin Lancaster, Chrisy Hayden, Keshav Javvadi, Sneha Pasupula, Patrick Bradey, and Charlie Chapman who served on the student launch team and/or as interview managers. Every step of this initiative has been thoughtfully guided by the Carolina Engagement Council and we are grateful for their expertise. Carolina Across 100 is very much a team effort and many others at UNC-Chapel Hill have supported this work. We extend our thanks for all who have played a role, with a special thanks to nclIMPACT team members, Barbara Steele and Mary Parry, for their support, especially in preparing and sharing information with all of our stakeholders. Finally, we thank Cara Isher-Witt for her amazing editorial and design services.

We’re still listening!
We want to hear from you about this report.

Please visit https://carolinaacross100.unc.edu/ to share your feedback or let us know what we may have missed.
Methodological Appendix

Quantitative analysis of the survey data relied on data cleaning in Python and Excel, as well as visualization and geo-spatial analysis in Tableau. Cleaning the data consisted of identifying unusable responses, such as incomplete surveys or other missing data points. For our main analysis, we also eliminated respondents who did not complete 100% of the survey. We conducted exploratory data analysis using Python’s Pandas library to illustrate initial patterns and relationships among the survey variables. Specific analysis included statistical hypothesis tests to indicate which types of concerns and priorities were most closely related to other respondent characteristics such as education and employment sector. These initial analyses informed our decisions regarding which variables and charts to present in the report. Tableau was used to report descriptive statistics for the sample, create charts illustrating response counts, and identify trends across the sample.

We also extracted subsamples of respondents and examined trends in their answers relative to the complete sample. We compared responses across economic sectors and education levels. For multi-select survey responses – such as questions asking respondents to choose the top three impacts of COVID-19 that they were most concerned about – the dataset needed to be expanded so that each answer choice selected by that respondent could be counted in our analysis.

County-level analysis was more complex, however. The survey asked respondents which county or counties their organization was physically located in, as well as which county or counties their organization served. Many respondents worked for organizations that served more than one county, making it difficult to measure variables at the county level. Our approach to visualizing county-level variation therefore needed to account for the fact that some respondents represented many counties while others represented only one or a few. To address the need to properly balance results according to the number of counties represented, we first trimmed our sample to exclude those respondents who represented more than five counties. This left 79 percent of the original sample. These responses were then weighted by the total number of respondents in each county to create proportions of each county, which were then used to create maps depicting variation in concerns and priorities across the counties in the state.

Our approach to qualitative data from the survey included text analysis in Python. Using search algorithms, we extracted key words and phrases from qualitative responses so that they could be converted to numeric counts and digestible visualizations. Additional qualitative data analysis of survey responses included the creation of several matrices to group responses by key themes and by geographic region. Qualitative data from interviews included summary notes (collected using a document summary template and a short survey form administered in Qualtrics). A pragmatic approach was used to identified themes across our interview conversations. A subset of quotes were included in this report to highlight some of those key themes. In a few cases, interview quotes have been altered slightly to improve readability without changing the meaning or intent.

Photos on pages 4, 16, and 21 courtesy Rob Holliday/UNC-Chapel Hill.