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An Educational Mismatch: Today's Economy Demands Skills and Education, But Two-Thirds of NC's Adults Possess No More Than a High School Degree

Two-thirds of North Carolina adults older than 25 lacked a postsecondary degree in 2005. Of these 3.7 million adults, one million had not finished high school, 1.6 million only possessed a high school degree and 1.1 million had completed some college. At the other end of the educational spectrum, one-third of Tar Heel adults had earned a postsecondary credential. Half a million adults held an associate degree, one million a bachelor's degree and 400,000 a graduate or professional degree.

These data come from the recently released 2005 American Communities Survey (ACS), conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau. Designed to replace the "long form" portion of the decennial census, the ACS collects detailed demographic, socio-economic and housing data on an annual basis for the nation, states and, new in 2005, counties and cities with populations exceeding 65,000. In North Carolina, data are available for the state, 37 counties and 12 cities.

Figure 1 presents the highest level of formal education completed by adults over the age of 25 in North Carolina, five South Atlantic states and the nation. North Carolina lags behind the nation in every category except for the share of adults with an associate degree. Relative to the South Atlantic, North Carolina generally ranks in the middle of the pack, ahead of South Carolina and Tennessee but even with or behind Georgia, Florida and Virginia. North Carolina performs best in the shares of adults with an associate degree or some college.

The new ACS data also show wide geographic variations in the educational attainment of North Carolina's adults. **Figure 2 (over)** presents the highest level of formal education completed by adults over the age of 25 in each of the 37 counties with populations exceeding 65,000.

Compared to the state as a whole, 23 counties have higher proportions of adults with no more than a high school degree. In six counties – all of which are rural ones – over 60 percent of the adults ended their formal education with high school. Nearly seven out of every ten adults in Robeson County, for example, hold no more than a high school diploma. At the other end of the spectrum, North Carolina's metropolitan counties, especially those in the Triangle, possess well-educated adult populations. Roughly half of all adults in Wake County hold at least a bachelor's degree, as do 56 percent of the adults in Orange County and 43 percent of the adults in Durham County.

Figure 1: Educational Attainment for Adults Ages 25+, South Atlantic States, 2005

	High School or Less	Some College	Associate Degree	BA+
FL	46.0%	20.5%	8.4%	25.1%
GA	46.9%	19.6%	6.3%	27.1%
NC	47.1%	19.6%	8.2%	25.1%
SC	49.8%	19.1%	8.2%	23.0%
TN	53.4%	19.3%	5.6%	21.8%
VA	41.3%	19.0%	6.5%	33.2%
US	45.3%	20.1%	7.4%	27.2%

Source: 2005 American Communities Survey

Geographic variations also appear among North Carolina's 12 largest cities. In general, the adults in large cities are better educated than their rural counterparts. Every large city except for Gastonia has a smaller share of adults with no more than a high school degree than the state as a whole. Ten cities have higher proportions with at least a bachelor's degree than the statewide level. The three cities in the Triangle – Raleigh, Cary and Durham – have the state's best educated populations.

This educational profile points to a workforce, especially a rural one, ill-prepared to compete in a world where postsecondary education is a minimum qualification for economic success and a middle-class life. National estimates show that 28 percent of all job openings between 2004 and 2014 will require workers with an associate degree or postsecondary vocational credential. Such jobs typically pay a good wage, provide basic benefits and offer a chance at upward mobility. Yet a sizable number of Tar Heel adults lack the educational requirements needed to obtain such jobs. Investing adequately in North Carolina's workforce development system, especially its model system of community colleges, is vital to helping adults compete in a changing labor market. Efforts to improve the affordability, accessibility and adequacy of the state's workforce development system therefore are vital for growing the prosperity of individual families and the entire state.

Figure 2: Educational Attainment, Adults Ages 25+, Large Counties, 2005

	High School or Less	Some College	Associate Degree	BA+		High School or Less	Some College	Associate Degree	BA+
Alamance	50.3%	21.1%	8.6%	20.0%	Lincoln	56.2%	20.8%	6.7%	16.3%
Brunswick	47.4%	24.0%	8.9%	19.8%	Mecklenburg	32.8%	19.7%	8.5%	39.0%
Buncombe	40.5%	20.2%	8.1%	31.2%	Moore	45.7%	22.6%	7.4%	24.3%
Burke	57.6%	16.0%	9.7%	16.7%	Nash	56.0%	16.8%	9.1%	18.1%
Cabarrus	48.4%	20.7%	9.1%	21.8%	New Hanover	33.3%	20.9%	9.8%	36.0%
Caldwell	61.0%	18.6%	8.3%	12.2%	Onslow	48.9%	25.7%	11.1%	14.3%
Catawba	50.7%	19.7%	7.5%	22.1%	Orange	27.3%	10.7%	6.2%	55.8%
Cleveland	56.0%	21.3%	6.3%	16.4%	Pitt	43.1%	18.6%	9.0%	29.4%
Craven	45.1%	22.8%	10.6%	21.4%	Randolph	64.4%	14.5%	8.0%	13.2%
Cumberland	44.1%	26.4%	9.3%	20.2%	Robeson	67.6%	14.8%	5.4%	12.2%
Davidson	59.1%	20.6%	6.4%	13.8%	Rockingham	64.7%	18.3%	6.4%	10.7%
Durham	34.2%	16.8%	6.0%	43.0%	Rowan	55.1%	19.2%	8.9%	16.8%
Forsyth	42.2%	19.9%	8.0%	29.9%	Surry	64.4%	15.1%	8.0%	12.5%
Gaston	54.9%	20.6%	8.3%	16.1%	Union	46.5%	21.8%	8.4%	23.3%
Guilford	40.5%	20.9%	6.7%	31.8%	Wake	26.6%	17.6%	7.6%	48.2%
Harnett	51.9%	23.1%	9.7%	15.3%	Wayne	52.9%	20.8%	10.4%	15.9%
Henderson	42.1%	23.3%	10.7%	24.0%	Wilkes	64.3%	16.5%	7.4%	11.8%
Iredell	52.2%	21.6%	7.7%	18.5%	Wilson	58.3%	16.5%	7.5%	17.8%
Johnston	49.3%	22.0%	10.9%	17.8%	State	47.1%	19.6%	8.2%	25.1%

Source: 2005 American Communities Survey

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