STRATEGIC EVALUATIONS INC.

NOVEMBER 2024

# NCWORKS COMMISSION

# LOCAL INNOVATION COMMITTEE

# WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT BOARD (WDB)

## OPT-IN and J.E.T

# EVALUATOR MIDTERM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The NCWorks OPT-IN and J.E.T. programs, funded by a $225,000 grant, aim to support opportunity youth in Burke County, North Carolina, by facilitating career readiness through paid internships, mentoring, and professional development. Our external evaluation, commissioned in May 2024, uses an Outcome Mapping approach to assess the programs' initial impacts, evaluate implementation processes, and support sustainable growth. The evaluation also incorporates a participatory model to build capacity within the program teams, ensuring that program leaders can maintain effective assessment practices beyond the scope of this evaluation.

### *Key Findings*

**Participant Satisfaction and Skill-Building** - Overall, participants expressed satisfaction with their experience, particularly valuing the certifications (e.g., OSHA 10) and practical job skills provided by the program. Feedback indicated that the professional development and mentoring aspects of OPT-IN and J.E.T. programs enhanced participants' confidence and communication abilities, crucially addressing the social impacts of post-COVID isolation.

**Career Pathways and Mentorship Challenges** - The programs have been instrumental in providing a “foot in the door” for many participants, clarifying career pathways and opening opportunities aligned with individual career goals. However, feedback on the mentoring component was mixed; while some mentors were highly supportive, others were inconsistent in engagement, revealing a need for improved mentor training and structure.

**Strengthening Cultural and Social Connections** - Activities like cultural walkabouts and regular social interactions helped foster cultural awareness and strengthened social skills among participants. These experiential learning elements were noted as essential for enabling participants to navigate diverse workplaces and build peer connections that support their career journey.

### *Evaluation Limitations*

The evaluation has faced timing and process-related limitations. Although the programs were funded in 2023, our team began evaluation activities a year later, limiting the time available for formative assessment. Additionally, our collaborative and participatory approach, intended to respect program culture and avoid duplicative efforts, initially slowed tool development and access to internal data. As a result, this mid-term evaluation provides a foundational assessment, with summative impacts to be examined in greater depth by the project’s conclusion in June 2025.

### *Lessons Learned and Recommendations*

Moving forward, program leaders are encouraged to:

- Enhance mentor engagement by establishing structured mentoring guidelines.
- Continue incorporating hands-on activities, like walkabouts, that promote cultural understanding.
- Clarify eligibility criteria and program requirements to streamline participant onboarding.
- Expand partnerships with diverse employers to broaden internship opportunities and better align with participants’ career interests.

This mid-term evaluation underscores the OPT-IN and J.E.T. programs' potential to build lasting pathways for opportunity youth. As the program progresses, the evaluation team will refine insights on these early impacts, providing a comprehensive assessment upon program completion.

## 1. Introduction

The Commission awarded funds to two grantees (Local Innovation Funds). Both of the grantees are North Carolina Workforce Development Boards (WDB). The two fund grantees are: Capital Area WDB / Hope Renovations and Western Piedmont WDB / OPT-IN and J.E.T. (Opportunity Internship and Jobs, Education, & Training).

### *1.1 Evaluation Context, Purpose, and Scope*

As stated in the Invitation for Bid #: 43-1365-23…

> *This 3rd Party Evaluator shall review the work done with the money that each WDB received and determine if the funds used did in-fact improve the employment services that are being offered in the areas of North Carolina where those 2 WDB operate. If it is determined that the processes implemented in those 2 areas did work, then NCWorks will consider awarding future grants to other Workforce Development Boards across North Carolina to hopefully improve the services of workforce development that is being offered to citizens in other areas within North Carolina by replicating these innovative ideas across the state.*

The scope of the external evaluation is four-fold: (1) to address the extent to which OPT-IN andJ.E.T. is meeting stated outcomes; (2) to identify challenges and suggest solutions around these challenges; (3) to search for statistical correlations between program components and outcomes; (4) to strengthen capacity and develop evaluation tools and mechanisms that are able to be internally sustained beyond the time the external evaluation team is involved.

### *1.2 Evaluation Methodology*

Our evaluation methodology for this impact evaluation primarily follows an Outcome Mapping approach, designed to explore and clarify the program's theory of change. This approach enables us to systematically gather data on immediate, foundational changes that serve as precursors to more transformative impacts, while also assessing the program's contributions to the broader goals and outcomes of its stakeholders.

Additionally, our methodology incorporates a participatory and empowering approach, engaging OPT-IN and J.E.T. leaders in the decision-making processes of the evaluation. This involvement not only enriches the evaluation with insights from project leaders but also builds their capacity for ongoing monitoring and assessment, potentially reducing the need for future external evaluation resources from the NCWorks Commission.

The evaluation is conducted by a team of four, comprising two senior and two junior team members. One senior-junior pair primarily supports the OPT-IN and J.E.T. evaluation efforts, while another senior-junior pair supports similarly funded grantee (Building Hope). To ensure cohesive insights and continuity, the two sets of senior-junior pairs collaborate closely, sharing notes and findings to facilitate flexibility and interchangeability in evaluation responsibilities as needed.

## 2. Background

### *2.1 OPT-IN and J.E.T. Goals, Activities, and Audiences*

As stated in the Invitation for Bid #: 43-1365-23…

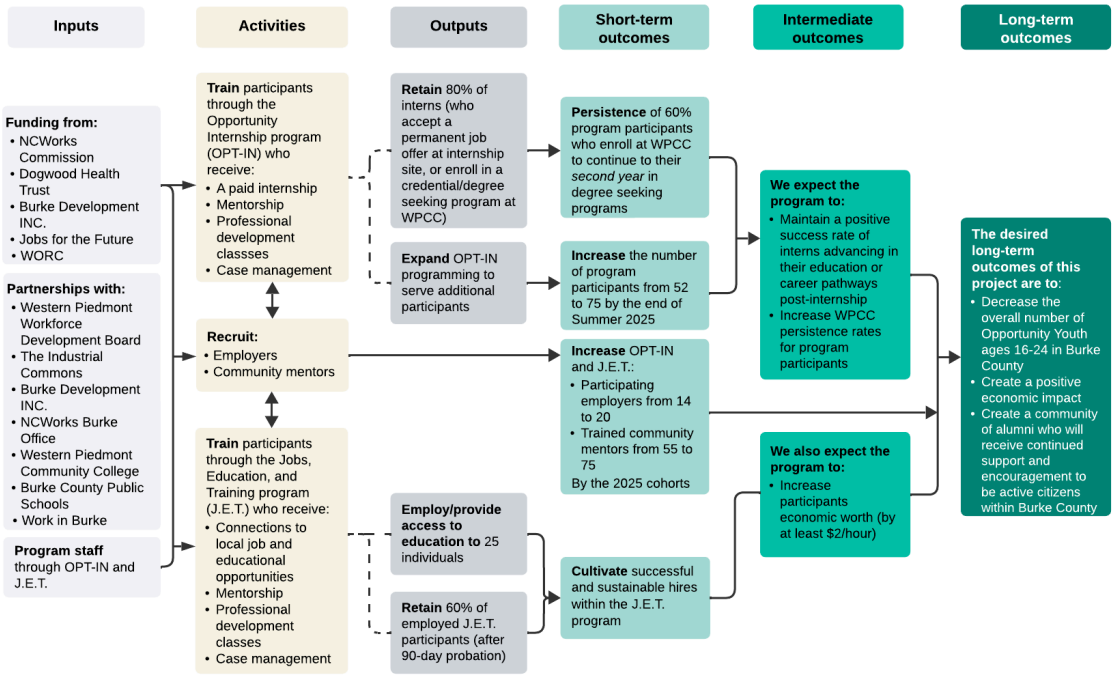
> ***OPT-IN and J.E.T.*** *- Creating Opportunities for Opportunity Youth (Burke County) - A $225,000 grant was awarded to support "opportunity youth" (those who are currently neither in the labor force nor in school) and help meet Burke County's workforce needs by expanding the "OPT-IN" (Opportunity Internship) program and launching the "Jobs, Education, and Training" (J.E.T.) program. OPT-IN serves recent high school graduates by matching them with local employers for an eight-week, paid exploratory internship. Participants also receive mentoring and professional development classes. Similarly, J.E.T. can serve any opportunity youth between the ages of 18-24, connecting them to local companies offering family-sustaining wages, while providing mentoring and professional development. Both programs will focus outreach on communities of color. Partners include Western Piedmont Workforce Development Board, The Industrial Commons, and its affiliate program "Work in Burke," Burke Development, Inc., Western Piedmont Community College, Burke County Public Schools, NCWorks Career Center - Burke County, N.C. Division of Vocational Rehabilitation and Meridian Specialty Yarn Group, Inc.*

As part of the external evaluation team, our work began with drafting an evaluation logic model to provide a foundational structure for assessing the OPT-IN and J.E.T. programs. This initial phase focused on mapping the inputs, activities, outputs, and anticipated outcomes of the programs, setting the stage for a focused evaluation strategy. A current version of the logic model is pasted below and also viewable at a larger scale at this link.

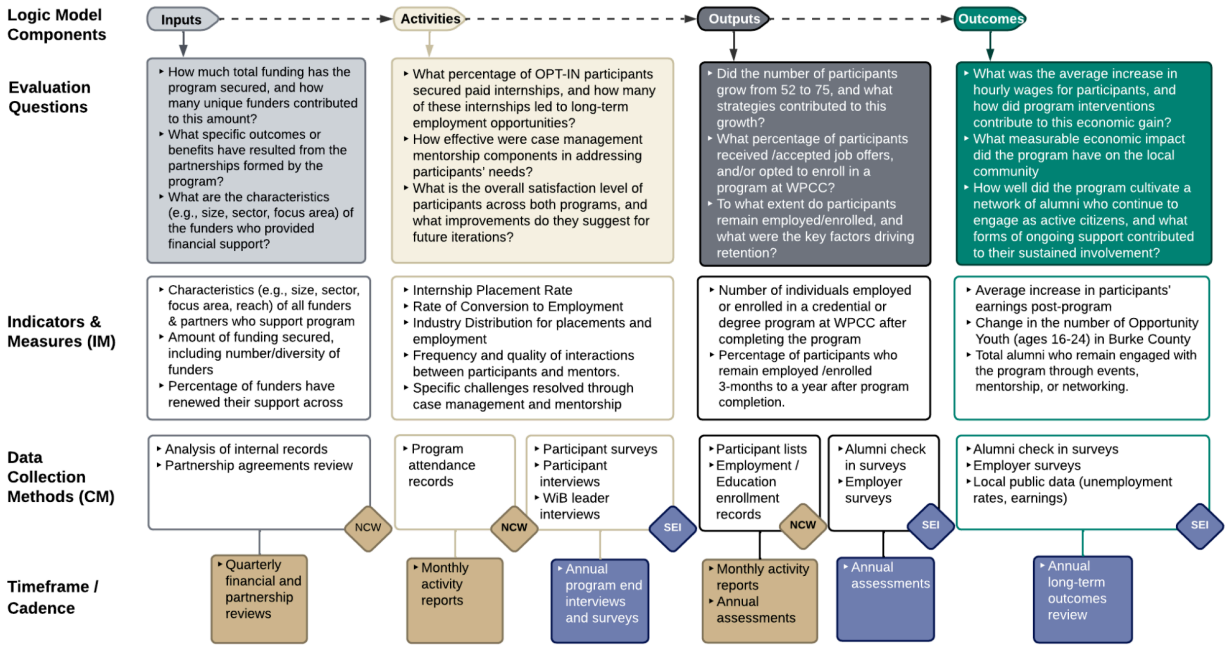
## 3. Evaluation Questions

Following the development of the logic model, the external evaluation team developed a broader evaluation framework. This framework incorporates 2–3 key evaluation questions for each logic model component that serve as guides for the data collection and analysis. Similarly, a current version of the evaluation framework is pasted below and also viewable at a larger scale via this link.

## NC WORKS: OPT-IN & J.E.T. LOGIC MODEL
## STRATEGIC EVALUATIONS, INC. | Nov 7, 2024




## NC WORKS: OPT-IN & J.E.T. EVALUATION FRAMEWORK
## STRATEGIC EVALUATIONS, INC. | Nov 7, 2024



The evaluation questions for each section are aligned with the logic model components based on the provided framework and are presented below, as well as in the figure above.

### *3.1 Evaluation Questions Aligned with Logic Model Inputs*

- What characteristics (e.g., size, sector, focus area, reach) define the funders and partners supporting the program?
- How much total funding has the program secured, and what diversity exists among the funders?
- What percentage of funders have renewed their support across funding cycles?

### *3.2 Evaluation Questions Aligned with Logic Model Activities*

- Did the number of participants grow from 52 to 75, and what strategies contributed to this growth?
- What percentage of OPT-IN participants secured paid internships, and how many of these internships transitioned into long-term employment opportunities?
- How effective were the case management and mentorship components in meeting participant needs?

### *3.3 Evaluation Questions Aligned with Logic Model Outputs*

- What percentage of participants received or accepted job offers, and how many opted to enroll in a program at *Western Piedmont Community College*?
- What is the overall satisfaction level of participants across both programs, and what improvements do they suggest?
- How frequently and effectively do participants engage with mentors, and what challenges are addressed through case management and mentorship?

### *3.4 Evaluation Questions Aligned with Logic Model Outcomes*

- To what extent do participants remain employed or enrolled, and what key factors drive retention?
- What was the average increase in hourly wages for participants, and how did program interventions contribute to this economic gain?
- What measurable economic impact did the program have on the local community?
- How effectively has the program fostered a network of alumni who continue to engage in community activities, and what forms of ongoing support sustain their involvement?

## 4. Methodology

Within the evaluation framework, we also specified indicators and measures for each evaluation question, outlined appropriate data collection methods, recommended timeframes and cadence for data collection activities, and clarified responsibilities between the internal program leaders and our external team. To refine these elements, we held a one-hour work session with project leaders. During the work session, both teams collaborated to adjust the evaluation questions to ensure alignment with program goals and operational context. Lastly, the team discussed feasibility and agreed on the timing, and responsible party for each data collection effort. Below

are additional details on the methodology that will guide the approach for evaluating the program's progress and impacts.

### *4.1 Sampling Strategy and Priorities*

Given the nature of our role as external evaluators of the OPT-IN and J.E.T. program, our sampling strategy looks to prioritize comprehensive data collection across stakeholder groups. Our approach centers on representativeness, aiming to capture insights from the full range of participants within this relatively small-scale program. Consequently, we seek data from all involved students and internship/employer partners, allowing us to capture diverse perspectives across the program's primary stakeholders. Our current sampling prioritizes individuals directly engaged in the most recent internships, specifically the latest graduates and the internship partners who served as hosts.

One limitation to our sampling strategy and priorities is the lack of externally collected data from training facilitators, whose perspectives may enhance the evaluation by shedding light on professional development/training outcomes. While we are in the early stages of data collection and no adjustments have been made to the strategy, we are considering including facilitator insights in future phases, if the program outcomes suggest their relevance to participant success and budget allows.

### *4.2 Data Collection Methods*

The evaluation strategy for the OPT-IN and J.E.T. program incorporates a blend of quantitative and qualitative data collection methods to assess program outcomes, stakeholder satisfaction, and long-term impact. These methods are structured to gather information from multiple stakeholders, including participants, internship hosts / employers, program administrators, and local data sources.

- **Surveys:** Participant and employer surveys are administered at multiple intervals, capturing feedback at program start, mid-program, and conclusion. These surveys are designed to measure program satisfaction, perceived benefits, and specific outcome metrics such as job placement rates and skill development.
- **Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews with participants, employers, and Workforce Investment Board (WiB) leaders provide qualitative insights into program effectiveness and highlight areas for improvement. These interviews focus on mentorship experiences, career progression, and overall satisfaction with the program's support services.
- **Administrative Records:** Data from participant lists, internship placements, and program attendance records are analyzed to track participant engagement and retention across both programs. Additionally, quarterly financial and partnership reviews, alongside partnership agreement documents, are assessed to evaluate the sustainability and reach of program funding.
- **Local Public Data:** Public data sources, including local unemployment rates and average earnings, supplement the program data, providing a broader economic context to measure community-level impacts.

### *4.3 Data Sources*

The current evaluation framework agreed upon with the OPT-IN and J.E.T. program leaders include five key data sources. These sources include:

1. **Participant Lists and Attendance Records:** These records provide information on participant demographics, attendance, and program completion rates, enabling evaluators to assess reach and engagement.
2. **Employer and Alumni Check-In Surveys**: Surveys collected from employer partners and alumni allow for longitudinal tracking of participant outcomes, such as employment retention, wage progression, and ongoing educational enrollment.
3. **Program Activity Reports:** Monthly activity reports from program administrators serve as a basis for evaluating the frequency and quality of mentorship interactions and participant progression through the program stages.
4. **Financial and Partnership Documentation:** Quarterly financial reviews and partnership agreements provide insight into program sustainability, funder diversity, and the continuity of funding sources.
5. **Public Economic Data:** Local economic indicators are sourced from public databases to contextualize participant earnings gains and community-level impacts on employment and income.

### *4.4 Data Analysis Techniques*

The data analysis techniques employed in this evaluation are designed to provide a rigorous assessment of program impacts and identify areas for improvement across key outcomes.

- Quantitative Analysis: Survey data and program records undergo quantitative analysis to calculate employment rates, wage changes, and retention percentages among program participants. Descriptive and inferential statistics are employed to draw comparisons across participant cohorts and assess any significant economic impacts.
- Thematic Analysis: Interview data from participants, employers, and program administrators are analyzed thematically to identify common experiences, challenges, and recommendations. This qualitative approach ensures that nuanced feedback is integrated into the evaluation, especially regarding mentorship quality and skill acquisition.
- Comparative Analysis: Data from alumni and employer surveys are compared annually to observe trends in employment retention, wage growth, and continued program engagement. Cross-year comparisons of public economic indicators with participant outcomes further strengthen insights into the program's broader community impact.

## 5. Findings

Below are key preliminary findings, organized by logic model component and evaluation question. It is worth noting that in most cases the evaluation questions within the logic model have a summative lens. Given that our work is in the early stages, we are establishing a plan to answer all summative questions in the final report. For now, we include findings from our formative work to date and/or the agreed upon plan for answering the questions in the future.

### *5.1 Findings Aligned with Logic Model Inputs*

The external evaluation team is working with project leaders to analyze internal records to provide evidence on impacts in this area. This work includes tracking the list of funders and partners into the next cohort of students.

### *5.2 Findings Aligned with Logic Model Activities*

**Overall Satisfaction**

**Participants expressed that the OPT-IN program generally met or exceeded their expectations, providing valuable skills and certifications.**

- *"[The OPT-IN program] actually did meet my standards because I feel like it actually taught us some valuable things that we'll need for the rest of our life."*
- *"[The OPT-IN program] exceeded mine, because it helped me learn newer things I didn't know about beforehand, so it helped in the long run."*

**Case Management / Leader Support**

**Students overwhelmingly praised the support they received from the OPT-IN leaders. Students most appreciated the leaders for helping them find internships and opportunities for employment. They also thought the leaders' communication was extraordinary.**

- *[The OPT-IN leaders are] great.*
- *Thumbs up on [the OPT-IN leaders]; they did their jobs correctly.*
- *[Communication from OPT-IN leaders is] amazing. They made a discord for us all to keep in contact and understand of what needed to be done.*
- *[The OPT-IN leaders are] awesome…They chose opportunities outside of the internship, like say we don't get the job at our internships, they're giving us opportunities to go to different places for jobs.*
- *Helping us line up the OPT-IN internships, the different places, so we could find what we would like to do.*
- *I went in for my interview, walked around, and later that day [one of the OPT-IN leaders] personally contacted me saying, "Hey, there's a construction internship open," because I wanted to do construction.*
- *My interview, surprisingly when I went to the building, [two of the OPT-IN leaders] were there at the building, because where I'm working at is exactly where they're at. So almost every day there I had contact from them, because they're in that very same office building.*

**Mentoring Component**

**The majority of students indicated that their mentor was inconsistent and did not seem to care much about their individual development.**

- *[The mentoring component] was very disappointing.*
- *[The mentoring component] feels disconnected almost.*
- *My mentor had to be asked like daily to text me.*
- *[It felt like the mentors are] just there.*
- *They're only texting you because they have to.*

- *[Other mentors] cared, mine was non-existent.*
- *[My mentor] was forgetful as all hell (laughter).*
- *I think some of our mentors showed up, but for instance mine didn't.*
- *With our mentors, some of them, they didn't text them very often, mine, like texts every two or three weeks a very bland.*

**In a few cases, students thought the mentoring relationship started off strong but became less effective by the end of the program. The introductory meeting organized by OPT-IN leaders was an effective catalyst for launching mentor/mentee relationships, but support beyond the introductory meeting weakened.**

- *The Palooza [introductory meeting], [my mentor] was there and she was nice to me, like I thought she cared, but she never reached out afterwards.*
- *I got messaged like for the first three weeks and then she didn't say anything for the rest of that*
- *I really liked mine, [but] we just talked one day.*
- *Really it was just like that one event at the beginning that I ever actually saw him.*
- *[My mentor] was really sweet, and she definitely cared and stuff, and she definitely did give me pertinent information, but like I don't think I've gotten a text from her from like a couple of weeks now, and it's like, 'checking in.'… I didn't really get much from her.*

**A little less than half of the students expressed satisfaction with the support they had received from their mentor. Frequency of communication and showing a desire to help students navigate the early employment season of their lives were the most valued aspects of the relationship.**

- *I'd give her like a B. It was good, it wasn't great, but it wasn't like terrible.*
- *I liked her, she was nice, she checks up on me every week*
- *I'd say [my mentor would get a grade of] 75… If you want to round down you can (laughs).*
- *My mentor's pretty good, he works at the trade school where I'm going to go, so it really helped right there asking a few questions, he answered them responsibly and professionally, and he checked up on me here and there.*
- *[My mentor] was making sure I got registered and everything, and he asked me what I was doing at the job site or whatever and everything, and made sure I was like okay, and if I had any questions and everything.*
- *This was her first year being a mentor, so I understood, but I could feel that she really cared, because even before I got to know her, she went out of her way to look for me, like before even the whole thing happened, so I could tell she cared.*
- *I loved my mentor. She checks on me weekly, she like asked me questions and she came to my work and bought me ice cream.*

### *5.3 Findings Aligned with Logic Model Outputs*

Many of the key outputs are set to be documented at 3-months to 1-year after program completion. However, the external evaluation team is working with project leaders to put procedure in place to gather evidence for the outputs listed in the logic model.

### *5.4 Findings Aligned with Logic Model Outcomes*

**Impacts on Career Pursuits**

**Students thought that participation in the OPT-IN program was most impactful in opening pathways to make their career pursuits easier and more accessible.**

- *[The OPT-IN experience] gives us a foot in the door.*
- *This program lets you get your foot in the door. So like I didn't know what I was going to do, I had no clue, I was just flying blind and then found this program, that that's what I need to do, it gives me opportunity to get work experience and an opportunity to get paid as well and gives me a lot of life skills and stuff that I needed to have in order to move on with my life. So I think it's a good opportunity for younger people.*
- *I was an electrical lineman coming out of school… I couldn't get to it, and the construction really stuck with me. That's with the schooling, at Western Piedmont they had a trade school they just opened, so it basically opened that pathway for me.*
- *Normally applying for a job they're going to not expect you to know some stuff, even with construction. Basically [the OPT-IN experience] told my employers, like I know some things, not everything, so basically [makes it] a little bit easier.*
- *I feel like I can't say for everybody else, but for [me] personally, I gained a sense of work experience and can help me find a job in the future.*

**Impacts on Career Clarity**

**Participating in the OPT-IN program also helped students further clarify their career interests. In several cases, the OPT-IN experience helped them narrow their options and realize that the career they were planning to pursue was NOT a good fit.**

- *I decided that I'm either going to be a factory worker or automotive technician... I was originally just going to go with automotive.*
- *[The OPT-IN program] helped me be certain in my future career.*
- *I know what I don't want to go into (laughter)… It takes a certain kind of person to be able to work with kids, and I am not that type of person (laughs).*
- *I have heard that one too, I don't think construction's my way to go… No, considering I tried to cut my own finger off, but you know, we're not going to really talk about that.*
- *I actually got to be in the Shipping Department for a couple of days and I know I don't want to do that, but I do want to go into IT, which is what they had me in.*
- *I know what I don't want to do for the rest of my life. So I want to be here and gain as much experience as I can, but that's it, and then move somewhere else.*
- *I know that I really don't want to work in a factory in a long while. I guess the colors is very grey and dull and a little bit depressing. I mean there's some green and blue in there, but it's mostly light grey and sometimes black.*

## 6. Conclusions

In summary, this mid-term evaluation captures the initial impacts, strengths, and areas for growth within the OPT-IN and J.E.T. program. Although time and process limitations have influenced the depth of current findings, this evaluation has highlighted the program's value in supporting career readiness, fostering community connections, and equipping participants with foundational skills. As we continue toward a summative assessment in June 2025, we will build on these insights, deepening our analysis and broadening our scope to capture the program's full impact on participants' long-term success.

## 7. Recommendations

### *7.1 Participant Recommendations*

The section below contains recommendations from OPT-IN recent graduates. Direct quotes are also included *(in italics)* to help stakeholders better understand the context in which the recommendation emerged.

- **Clarify the age requirement posted on the application website. The required age that is advertised on the website caused confusion and almost led to a couple students not applying.**
  - *I was still 17 and well, when I first applied they said, "You need to be 18 by May 26th," I wasn't going to be 18 so I was scared I was going to lose it, they were going to get me. But they didn't, surprisingly, and that's the one thing I almost stepped away from it because of it. Definitely…be more clear on [the age requirement].*
  - *I'm still 17 and to work in a pharmacy, well you have to be 18, but this is sort of an exception for how it's run, but definitely clarify age.*
- **Revisit the design of requiring all participants to complete OSHA 10 certification. Look to free up space in participants' schedules and allow subsets to work additional hours if they already have OSHA or don't need OSHA given their career interests.**
  - *If they got rid of the OSHA 10, like I don't feel like it'd have any effect on it at all.*
  - *I did pretty much have to do the thing twice already, because I did it once and I passed everything flying colors.*
  - *One I would take away is the OSHA 10… Because like if students have already took construction programs at school they automatically make you have it. I already had mine before I even came here.*
  - *I'd keep everything but OSHA 10 to be exact.*
- **Revisit the overall schedule and consider moving classes to days other than Mondays. Movement would break up the work schedule in ways that students thought would make for a stronger schedule.**
  - *I think it would be kind of cool if-- You know we have class every Monday, maybe like on a Wednesday or Thursday they kind of split up the week more. Because I know what I do, our company isn't open on the weekends, but some companies are open on the weekend and they work the weekend. I just think if Deisy and Sarah and Ricky were to kind of come in on Wednesday or Thursday and kind of*

*just split up the week and we do something, like on a Thursday we all meet up somewhere and we do something, or we meet up here and we do something, like i9t9 doesn't have to be a sit down, take notes, listen.*

- *I agree with them, because the Tuesday and the Friday, it's long, boring, drawn out.*
- *Also having Fridays for the students to come in. So like Monday's class, Friday just a free day to come in [and] do whatever…because on Fridays everybody at work feels so slow and monotonous to wait for the time to go by.*

➢ **Review pedagogical practices within courses and incorporate more hands-on activities and interactions.**

- *Oh, instead of sitting down and taking notes, what if we could do Kahoot!… like that kind of interaction, that would be awesome.*
- *Make it like a competition. We compete to answer the questions and we get like candy, I don't know. But just break up the monotony.*

➢ **Adjust the Finance and investment module to make it shorter. Consider removing some of the investment content.**

- *I think you can take away maybe like, I'm trying to remember, like the investments and stuff like that part, of the Finance.*
- *They went with Money Market accounts, I would get rid of that, to be honest with you, because like your bank automatically does that anyway.*
- *Just make it shorter.*

➢ **Increase Choice in Internship Placements**

- *I need to research before they even think about applying for that place.*
- *I mean we got to pick a one through five at the kickstart thing--But we weren't guaranteed.*

➢ **Improve the mentoring component**

- *[I suggest] improving mentors or getting rid of it. One of these dudes here they got a very good mentor, most of us got a little bit mundane one and then one of us didn't get one, so get mentors that care.*

➢ **Broaden Certification Offerings**

- *Especially more emphasis on construction, because the construction had different schedules, like basically for more safety and OSHA 10, there's not any more emphasis on like hospital, industrial, they're mostly focused on construction because it was the first year doing it, but they should have widened it a bit for like every other program*

➢ **Assist with connections to others and other opportunities**

- *As I said earlier, a little bit more social interaction with each other I think.*

➢ **Look to broaden partners for the job fair to be more diverse. A few students thought that the offerings were too heavily skewed toward furniture and healthcare companies.**

- *With the job fair there's definitely a saturation in furniture companies… I get this area's known for furniture and factory work, but I don't want to do that.*
- *I wish there was more opportunities, not just like the three or four construction, one or two factory, the three or two health things.*

- *They had one thing that was food related…that was culinary. Because I like culinary, that was the only thing that was good there to me. Everything else just felt like they were copying and pasting different companies just to be there.*

➢ **Maintain the Discord Communication Channel for Alumni**

- *I hate to sound like a broken record, the Fonta Flora, that has showed us another opportunity for us to, say some of us aren't going to have a job after this, that opened up a job for us to go and take up on, so it's a great thing if that Discord stays open for us. That's my brains on it.*

### *7.2 Evaluator Recommendations*

The section below contains recommendations directly from the evaluation team. While these recommendations may not have emerged explicitly from OPT-IN participants, the evaluation team offers them for consideration based on data and/or prior experience with similarly funded projects.

➢ **Work to strengthen the community mentor component of the program. Interview data suggest that the OPT-IN mentoring component has strong promise but needs more structure and consistency in order to be as impactful as intended.**

- Develop and distribute a checklist of minimal activities for mentors to complete to increase engagement. Include a suggested frequency for communication and sample ideas for engaging their mentee.
- Consider workplace proximity and/or prior relationships as you assign future mentors. Both of these variables appear to facilitate strong mentor/mentee relationships.

➢ **Look to integrate a session where the group walks through the class registration process for Western Piedmont, collectively.**

Comments from students suggest that they needed leaders to be more readily available to help them with technology challenges. Consider the idea of incorporating food and having the session be peer facilitated.

➢ **Look for ways to increase differentiation within the program to further build upon the impacts the current design offers, e.g., allowing students to opt-out of some certifications in favor of ones that fit their interests.**

➢ **Begin a process of documenting internship partners that are a better fit for the experience levels of program participants.**

Data suggest that at least one or two sites may not be supportive environments for younger workers with less experience.

➢ **Look for ways to engage program alumni with newly selected students, including orientation to job site, peer mentoring, etc.**

## 8. Lessons Learned

During each work session with OPT-IN and J.E.T. program leaders, the evaluation team discussed noteworthy components of the evaluation tools and standout findings from recent reports. In addition, the evaluation team invited leaders to send all written comments on any of the evaluation tools or reports, which has resulted in leaders sending back a recent report with margin notes. These work session transcripts and margin notes were reviewed for the lessons learned listed below.

- **Facilitating Career Pathways and Early Workforce Access**
  Leaders recognized that the OPT-IN program's most significant impact lies in its role as a bridge to career opportunities, providing participants with "a foot in the door" for meaningful work experience. By offering paid internships and skills training, the program helps demystify professional expectations and make career pursuits more accessible. Moving forward, leaders may continue to emphasize hands-on opportunities and partnerships with local trade schools and employers, ensuring that the program remains a valuable entry point for young adults navigating early career stages.
- **Fostering Cultural Understanding Through Experiential Learning, e.g. Walkabouts**
  Leaders learned that experiential activities like the hometown walkabouts play a vital role in developing participants' cultural awareness and sensitivity. This approach not only enhances personal growth but also equips participants with essential skills for interacting with diverse groups in professional settings. Going forward, leaders may consider integrating similar hands-on, locally relevant activities to reinforce cultural understanding and interpersonal skills that are directly applicable in the workplace.The team has learned that the walkabouts were recognized for fostering cultural understanding, which was seen as valuable in both personal and professional interactions.
- **Emphasizing Social Skills and Networking Post-COVID**
  Leaders have learned the importance of incorporating social and networking opportunities within the program, especially for participants impacted by the isolation of COVID-19. Social activities, such as icebreakers and collaborative experiences, have been crucial for helping participants build communication, conflict resolution, and networking skills. Recognizing the long-term value of these "soft skills," leaders may continue to prioritize structured social interactions that allow participants to practice respectful discourse, collaboration, and connection-building, enhancing their preparedness for diverse professional environments.
- **Using Icebreakers to Strengthen Peer Connections**
  Leaders found that incorporating icebreaker activities was effective in building strong connections among participants, enhancing their sense of support within the program. Initial icebreaker sessions helped participants establish friendships early on, which contributed to a more positive and collaborative program environment. In future iterations, leaders may continue to utilize structured icebreakers to foster community and consider expanding these activities to further strengthen peer interaction and support networks.
- **Improving Clarity on Program Eligibility Requirements**

Leaders learned that clearly communicating eligibility criteria, such as age requirements, is essential for reducing confusion and ensuring that potential participants feel confident in applying. Ambiguity regarding age restrictions nearly deterred some students from joining the program. Going forward, leaders may enhance the clarity of application materials and eligibility guidelines to help applicants better understand the program requirements and avoid unnecessary barriers to participation.

## 9. Limitations

### *9.1 Limitations due to Time*

The most significant limitation in this evaluation (to date) arises from the timing of our engagement as external evaluators. Although the OPT-IN and J.E.T. project was initially funded in 2023, our contract to begin evaluation work was only formalized in May 2024, one year after the program had already commenced. The 6-month timeframe that has passed so far has limited our ability to fully answer many evaluation questions. Furthermore, with the project scheduled to conclude in June 2025, some components are just beginning to collect and prepare summative evidence on their impact. These timing constraints affect the depth of findings at this interim stage and highlight the need for ongoing data collection to capture the program's full range of outcomes.

### *9.2 Limitations due to Evaluation Process*

Admittedly, the collaborative nature of our own evaluation process has posed a limitation. As a new external partner working with the OPT-IN and J.E.T. team, we aimed to build tools and frameworks through a participatory approach, which has slowed development timelines. This careful approach, aimed at respecting the program's existing culture and avoiding duplicative efforts, has limited our immediate access to resources like internal data and images. During this time period, we prioritized obtaining permissions and establishing collaborative agreements before incorporating such materials, which limited images for this mid-term report. We do not expect this limitation to persist, asd we have recently received permission to use project photos and have an agreement to capture non-people photos as we make our future visits.

## About SEI

Strategic Evaluations, Inc. (SEI) has served as the 3rd party evaluator for the NCWorks Commission Workforce Development Board (WDB) Local Innovation Committee since May 2024. SEI is a HUB-certified, minority-owned evaluation consulting firm located in Durham, North Carolina. For more than 20 years we have helped organizations and institutions apply for, win, and sustain funding for science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and medicine (STEMM) grants. Our team specializes in designing, reviewing, and implementing rigorous evaluation efforts for STEMM education initiatives. The team's current work includes the evaluation of state, federal, and privately funded projects designed to enhance the performance, capability, and career trajectories for trainees ranging from high school to postdoctoral/early career level. These training initiatives often span several years and are housed at a range of institutions and organizations, including large state and private institutions of higher education, small liberal arts colleges, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and science professional societies.