



Western Piedmont
Council of Governments
Workforce Development Board



October 31, 2025

NC WORKS Commission Local Innovation Committee

FINAL REPORT

Workforce Development Board: OPT-IN and
J.E.T.

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Executive Summary

The OPT-IN / J.E.T. program, a collaboration between Western Piedmont Council of Governments and local workforce and education partners, was funded by the NCWorks Commission through the Local Innovation initiative to serve opportunity youth ages 16–24 in Burke County.

With a focus on career readiness, financial stability, and equitable access to employment, the program helped reconnect young adults to educational and economic pathways, while building connections to local employers and resources.

Strategic Evaluations, Inc. (SEI) served as the external evaluator from May 2024 to June 2025. Drawing on an Outcome Mapping framework, the evaluation captured participant outcomes, alumni engagement, and system-level shifts. Data sources included program records, staff reflections, alumni surveys, and interviews with stakeholders and participants.

Key Findings

Program Participation and Satisfaction:

Participants expressed high levels of satisfaction with the program's relevance and support systems. Over 90% of respondents reported still living and working in Burke County, and 85% indicated they would recommend the program to peers.

Employment Outcomes:

Employment outcomes were notable, with 60% of employed alumni reporting wage increases after the program. Most earned at least \$13/hour, and cited the workplace environment, skills gained, and flexible scheduling as key contributors to their job retention.

Local Economic Impacts:

Participants showed strong community anchoring, with 78% still residing in the county and many citing housing and higher wages as factors influencing their decision to stay. The top three areas alumni were actively working on—purchasing a vehicle (22%), securing stable housing (18%), and improving their credit score (17%)—highlight the intersection of economic mobility and regional retention.

Financial Health and Advancements:

The program contributed to improved financial

stability for a substantial portion of participants. Over 60% of alumni reported feeling more financially stable as a result of the program, and half of those with dependents said they were now better able to support their families. Participants cited continued education, financial literacy, and budgeting as key enablers of this progress. While not all alumni reached full financial independence, many described taking actionable steps—such as reducing debt, saving for major purchases, and improving credit—which position them for longer-term success. These findings suggest that integrating financial coaching or targeted financial tools into the alumni experience could further enhance program outcomes.

Post-Program Engagement:

Graduates expressed a desire for occasional access to trusted mentors for questions or motivation. Participants also called for clearer guidance around networking and how to maintain professional relationships. Simple affirmation and recognition (e.g., “a pat on the back”) were viewed as meaningful sources of encouragement.

Lessons and Recommendations

OPT-IN / J.E.T. illustrates that targeted, place-based programs can re-engage disconnected youth and create lasting local impact. To sustain momentum, evaluators recommend expanding alumni-facing supports such as light-touch advising, peer ambassador models, and “ask me anything” sessions. Additional opportunities include offering employer recognition, collecting regular employer feedback, and exploring financial literacy modules tied to alumni goals. Housing stability and livable wages emerged as central to long-term retention, suggesting future program investments may benefit from integrated partnerships with local housing and economic development agencies.

Introduction

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

Evaluation Context, Purpose, and Scope

The scope of the external evaluation was four-fold:

1. Address the extent to which the OPT-IN & J.E.T. met its stated outcomes
2. Identify challenges and suggest solutions around these challenges
3. Search for statistical correlations between program components and outcomes
4. Strengthen the team's capacity and develop evaluation tools and mechanisms that were able to be internally sustained beyond the time the external evaluation team was involved.



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.

Evaluation Methodology

Our evaluation methodology for this impact evaluation primarily followed an Outcome Mapping approach, designed to explore and clarify the program's theory of change. This approach enabled us to systematically gather data on immediate, foundational changes that served 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 incorporated 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 enriched the evaluation with insights from project leaders but also

built their capacity for ongoing monitoring and assessment, potentially reducing the level of external evaluation resources needed in the future.

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



Outcome Mapping was used to track foundational changes leading to impacts and the assessment of outcomes, while using a **participatory approach** engaged leaders in the evaluation decision-making to enrich findings and empower project leadership.

Background

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

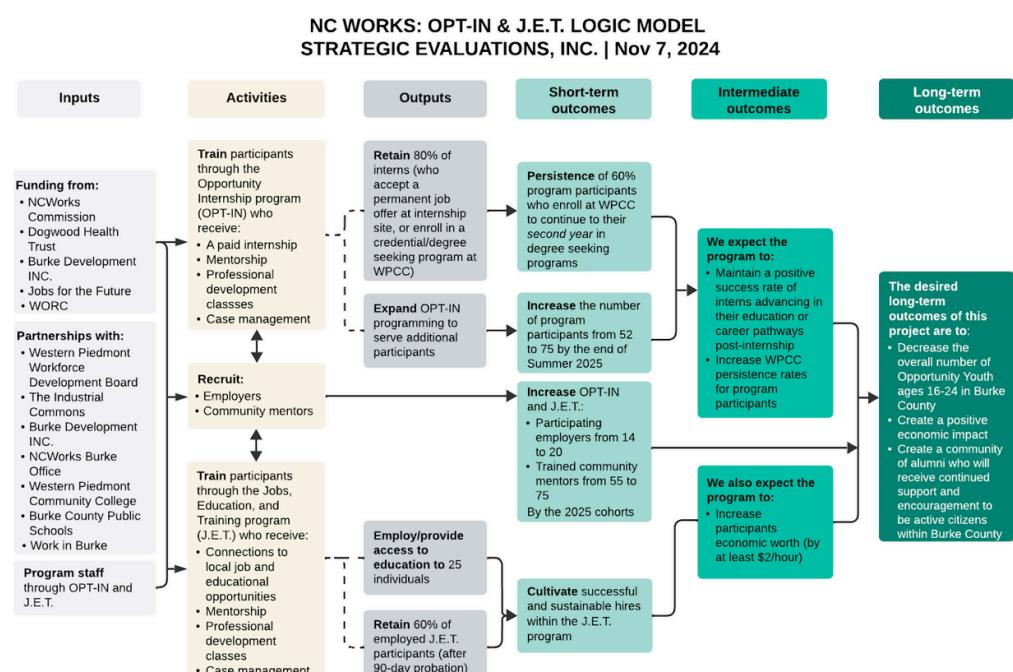
OPT-IN and J.E.T. - Creating Opportunities for Opportunity Youth (Burke County) - A \$225,000 grant was awarded to support “opportunity youth” (those who are currently neither in the labor force nor in school) and help meet Burke County’s workforce needs by expanding the “OPT-IN” (Opportunity Internship) 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. 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, and N.C. Division of Vocational Rehabilitation.

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](#).

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 on the next page and also viewable at a larger scale via this [link](#).

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



Input Questions

- 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?

Activities Questions

- 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?

Output Questions

- What percentage of participants received or accepted job offers, and how many opted to

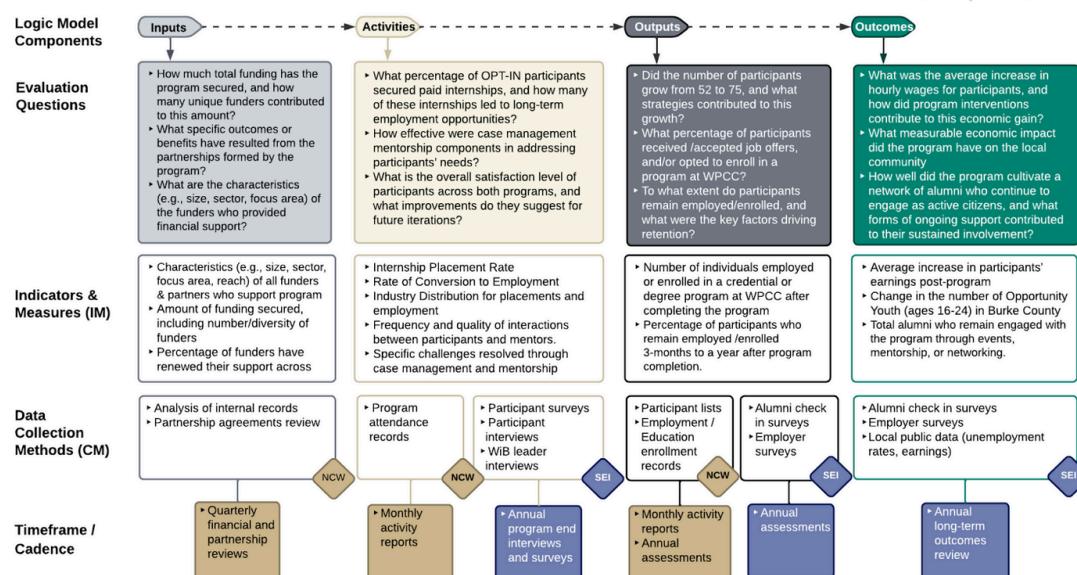
enroll in a program at Western Piedmont Community College?

- 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?

Outcomes Questions

- 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?

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



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.

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 prioritized comprehensive data collection across stakeholder groups. Our approach centered on representativeness, aiming to capture insights from the full range of participants. Consequently, we sought data from all involved students. Our sampling prioritized individuals directly engaged in the most recent internships, specifically all participating cohorts of students funded by this initiative and all recent alumni.

One limitation to our sampling strategy and priorities was the lack of externally collected data directly from internship partners and training facilitators, whose perspectives may have enhanced the evaluation by shedding more light on placements and professional development/training.



Data Collection Methods & Sources

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

Internally Collected Data

- **Surveys:** Participant and employer surveys were administered at multiple intervals, to capture program feedback. These surveys were designed to measure program satisfaction, perceived benefits, and specific outcome metrics such as job placement rates and skill development. In both cases, these surveys were designed and administered internally, with highlights shared with the external evaluation team. Project leaders also deployed a parent/guardian survey throughout the funded period.
- **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 reports submitted to the LISC by project leaders were also shared with the external evaluation team
- **Public Economic Data:** Local economic indicators are sourced from public databases to contextualize participant earnings gains and community-level impacts on employment and income.
- **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.

Externally Collected Data

- **Participant Focus Group Interview Sessions:**

In both August 2024 and August 2025, Strategic Evaluations, Inc. (SEI) conducted focus group interviews with graduating program participants at the Foothills Higher Education Center in Morganton, NC. Each year, two simultaneous sessions were held with randomly assigned student groups (9 and 10 participants respectively, capturing >90% of all participants), using a collaboratively developed interview protocol. The SEI team moderated, recorded, and transcribed the sessions, then analyzed them to surface key themes related to program impact, internship quality, support received, and skill development. Findings from both years helped shape the evaluation reports and informed recommendations from both participants and the SEI team for strengthening future program cycles

- **Semi-structured Zoom Interviews with Project Leaders:**

Throughout the funding period, semi-structured Zoom-based work sessions and interviews with OPT-IN and J.E.T. program leaders provided additional insights into program effectiveness and areas for improvement. These insights have been integrated within this report.

- **Alumnae Surveys:**

SEI led the administration of follow-up surveys with program graduates to understand long-term outcomes and ongoing engagement with the field. A total of 16 alumnae completed the survey, making for a response rate of roughly 38%.

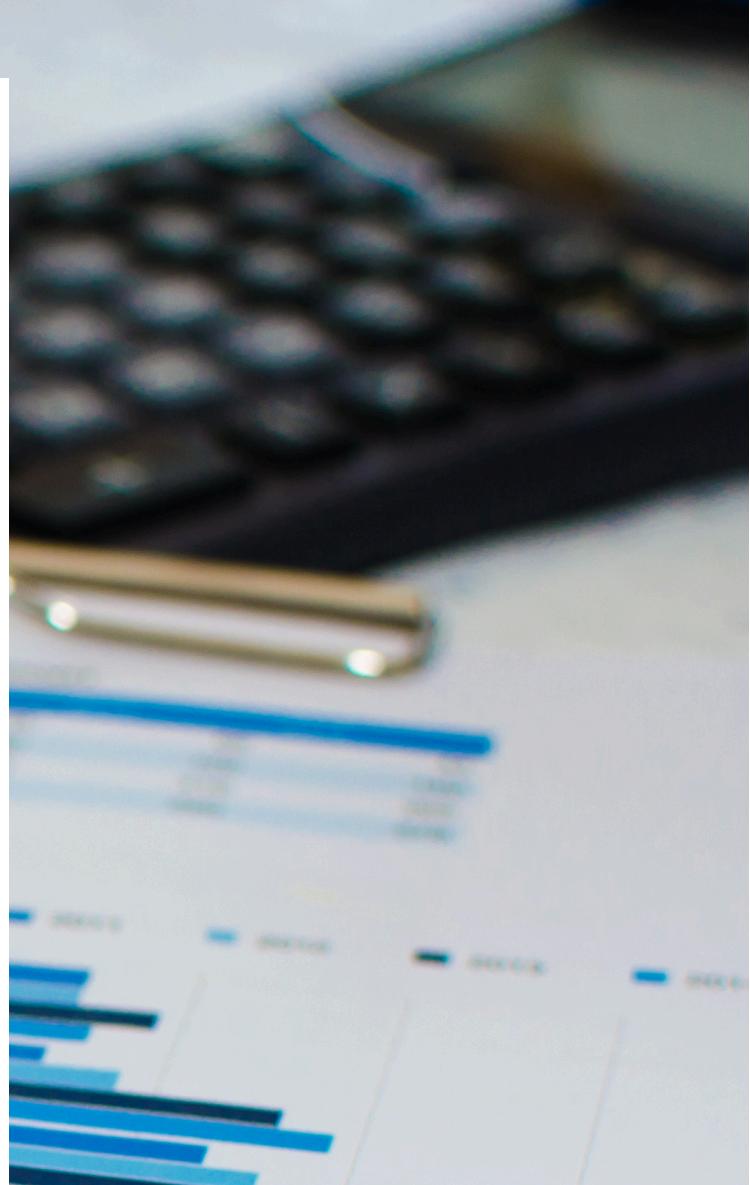
- **Local Public Data:**

Public data sources, including local unemployment rates and average earnings, supplement the program data, providing a broader economic context to measure community-level impacts. Both the internal team and external evaluation team worked to collect relevant public data for use in this report.

Data Analysis Techniques

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

- **Quantitative Analysis:** Survey data and program records underwent quantitative analysis to calculate employment rates, wage changes, and retention percentages among program participants. When appropriate, inferential statistics were employed to draw comparisons across participant cohorts and assess any significant economic impacts.
- **Thematic Analysis:** Interview data from participants were analyzed thematically to identify common experiences, challenges, and recommendations. This qualitative approach ensured that nuanced feedback is integrated into the evaluation, especially regarding mentorship quality and skill acquisition.
- **Comparative Analysis:** Data from alumni were analyzed to document trends in employment, wage growth, and continued program engagement.



Data analysis combines quantitative metrics (employment rates, wages, retention), qualitative thematic coding (participant/employer feedback), and comparative trend analysis to assess program effectiveness and community impact.

Findings

Training Experience

Key Evaluation Questions:

To what extent do recruited participants complete the key program components?

How effective are mentoring and case management in addressing participants' needs?

Across three years of implementation, the OPT-IN J.E.T. program has maintained consistent participant engagement, with at least 20 students completing the full set of program components annually (22 in 2023, 20 in 2024, and 22 in 2025). Each cohort had a 100% internship placement rate, reflecting the program's strong ties to employer networks and its commitment to ensuring every student receives hands-on industry experience.

The mentoring and case management components were intentionally structured to support participants in overcoming personal and logistical barriers. Weekly mentor check-ins were encouraged through automated text reminders, and mentors were also engaged in key milestone events such as the Meet and Greet, formal mentor training, and the graduation ceremony.

Case managers played a critical role in supporting students through five key challenge areas: transportation, tools of the trade, resume support, FAFSA completion, and individualized career guidance.

Feedback from alumni points to the importance of these structures in shaping their success. When asked to identify the most impactful program features, 22% of alumni highlighted soft skills and professional development, 20% pointed to internship placements, and 17% emphasized networking opportunities. One participant summarized this impact by saying, "I got to learn financial literacy, network in my area of study, learn the hard skills and work on the soft skills of my future career on the job, and secure a part-time job while in school."

“I honestly feel like it was already a great experience to have for my long term success.”

OPT-IN/J.E.T. Participant



22%

of alumni identified professional development as a top feature

“ [The OPT-IN program]...taught us some valuable things that we’ll need for the rest of our life. ”

Program Satisfaction

Key Evaluation Questions:

What is the overall satisfaction level of participants, and what improvements do each stakeholder suggest?

How effective is the case management component in addressing participants' needs?

External evaluation data suggest that the OPT-IN J.E.T. program met or exceeded expectations for most participants, particularly in terms of building skills, providing access to internships, and offering high-touch case management. Students frequently emphasized the value of the staff's communication, responsiveness, and proactive support in helping them access internships and employment opportunities. As one participant shared, "I went in for my interview... later that day [an OPT-IN leader] personally contacted me saying, 'Hey, there's a construction internship open,' because I wanted to do construction."

Alumni also described the leaders as "awesome" and "amazing," often noting that staff members remained present throughout their experiences, including in-person visibility at internship sites. One alumnus highlighted this by saying, "[They] were there at the building... almost every day there I had contact from them."

The program's structure embeds strategies to maintain this level of engagement even after graduation, including alumni events, ongoing mentorship, and outreach from program staff. These efforts appear to be effective: 88% of alumni indicated that they referred others to the program, and 76% reported continued engagement after program completion.

These data point to high levels of satisfaction and enduring loyalty—suggesting that the program has successfully built a community that participants value beyond their initial involvement.

89%

of alumni have referred others



Employment

Key Evaluation Questions:

To what extent do students obtain and retain employment after completion of OPT-IN JET?

Findings from the 2025 alumni survey suggest that the OPT-IN/JET program has been successful in equipping participants to secure and maintain employment, as well as increase their earnings over time. A \$2 per hour average increase in wages was observed among employed alumni post-program, with 60% of alumni reporting a pay raise after their participation. Notably, 78% of employed alumni reported making at least \$13 per hour—an important threshold for self-sufficiency in the region.

Multiple case examples of wage gains support these findings. Several participants entered the program unemployed or earning less than \$10/hour and now report wages between \$13–\$18/hour.

Survey data also point to three major factors that supported employment retention: skills gained through the program (28%), a supportive workplace environment (28%), and flexible work schedules (20%). The program's investment in mentorship, soft skills development, and hands-on training appears to have helped participants thrive in the workplace.

“The most significant way participating in this program has changed my future prospects is having connections in my workplace.”

OPT-IN/J.E.T. Participant



60%

of employed alumni reported an hourly salary increase following participation

Financial Health and Advancement

Key Evaluation Questions:

To what extent does the program improve participants' financial stability and self-sufficiency?

How has the program influenced participants' educational and economic advancement?

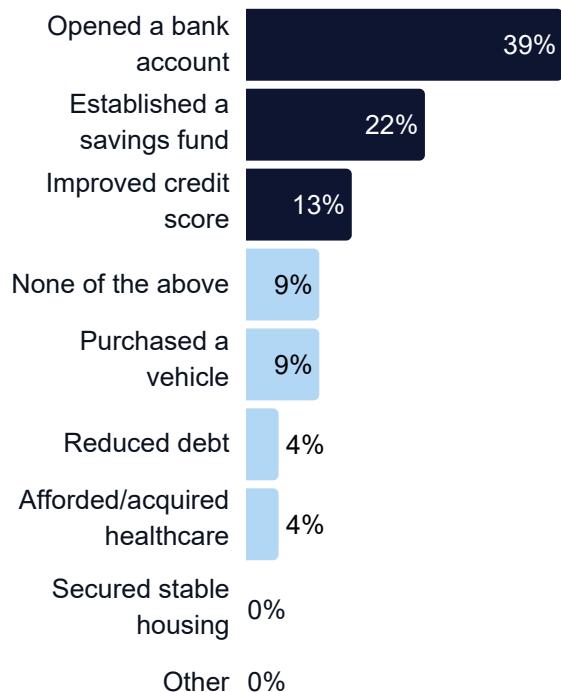
Findings from alumni surveys and internal records suggest that the OPT-IN/J.E.T. program has yielded tangible improvements in participants' financial and educational outcomes. Internal tracking showed that 85% of program completers remained employed or enrolled in further education 3 to 12 months after finishing the program. Many alumni described being better able to meet their financial obligations and less reliant on family support. One participant summarized this shift plainly: "It's giving me more opportunities and a stable workplace, as well as made me less dependent on my family for financial support."

Of those who were employed, 78% reported earning wages sufficient to cover their basic needs without struggle. Additionally, 86% indicated they were either less financially dependent on their families or had gained the ability to provide financial support to others in their households. These data suggest that the economic return on participation extends beyond individual earnings to broader household stability.

The program's impacts were not limited to short-term employment. Among alumni, 62% had enrolled in a new training or education program since completing OPT-IN/J.E.T., and 75%

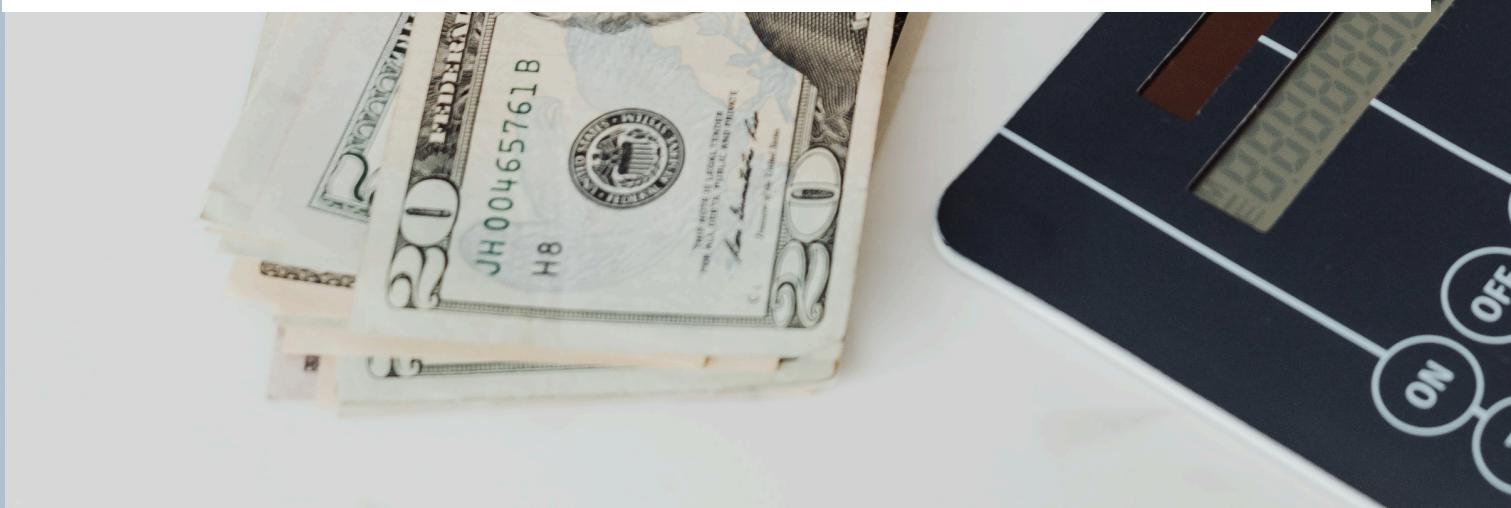
reported that the program increased their educational aspirations. This dual impact—on both immediate financial stability and longer-term advancement—underscores the comprehensive value of the program. As one participant put it, "I learned the value of money," a reflection echoed in other comments about the financial literacy training and advising provided through the program.

Participant Milestones



“It's giving me more opportunities and a stable workplace.”

OPT-IN/J.E.T. Participant



Program Impacts and Attributions

Key Evaluation Questions:

What long-term impacts did the program have on participant career pathways?

What outcomes do participants attribute to participation in the OPT-IN/J.E.T. program?

Findings from focus group interviews and alumni surveys indicate that the OPT-IN/J.E.T. program had a lasting influence on participants' career clarity and perceived readiness for the workforce. Many participants reported that the program helped them better understand their interests, reject certain career paths, and take more confident steps toward sustainable employment. As one participant shared, "I know what I don't want to do for the rest of my life... I want to be here and gain as much experience as I can, but that's it, and then move somewhere else."

For others, the program provided not just clarity but a meaningful first step into careers they hadn't considered before. One student reflected, "I never thought I wanted to be a baby nurse... but when OPT-IN started I fell in love with the delivery and labor." These stories underscore how critical hands-on exposure and mentorship were in shaping students' career trajectories.

The quantitative data support these narratives.

When asked which components of the program most contributed to their success, alumni cited soft skills and professional development (22%), internship placement (20%), and networking opportunities (17%) as top contributors.

Importantly, 93% of alumni directly attributed their current employment or economic outcomes to participation in the program, and more than half (56%) said their current job was directly or somewhat related to the training they received in OPT-IN/J.E.T.

These findings suggest that the program has delivered meaningful gains for participants both in shaping long-term career direction and in enabling tangible economic opportunities—results that speak directly to the core goals of the initiative.

“ This program lets you get your foot in the door... I didn’t know what I was going to do...and then found this program. ”

OPT-IN/J.E.T. Participant



Local Economic Impacts

Key Evaluation Questions:

To what extent do participants remain in and contribute to the local economy following program completion?

The OPT-IN/J.E.T. program appears to be making measurable contributions to Burke County's local economy by both supporting workforce development and anchoring young adults in the area. Since the program's inception, the proportion of Opportunity Youth (ages 16–24 not in school or employed) in Burke County has declined from 20.5% in 2023 to 17.4% in 2025. While multiple factors may contribute to this trend, the consistent enrollment, successful placement, and supportive services offered by OPT-IN/J.E.T. have positioned the program as a meaningful part of the county's workforce solution.

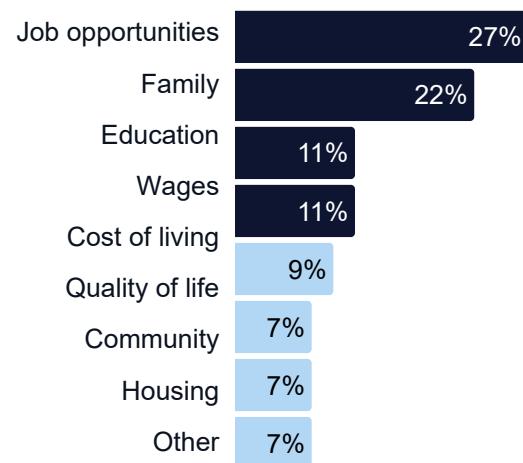
Alumni survey data reinforce this connection to local economic vitality. Over 90% of alumni reported still living and working in Burke County, and 63% plan to remain in the region for at least five more years. Importantly, 56% indicated that they spend more than half their income within Burke County, a key indicator of local economic circulation and retention of earnings.

Job availability was the top factor influencing participants' decisions to remain in the area, with access to education and adequate wages also playing prominent roles. These findings suggest that the program is intentionally aligned with three of the four most important factors cited by alumni—further strengthening the case that

OPT-IN/J.E.T. is helping to cultivate conditions that increase the likelihood of young adult retention and engagement in the county's workforce.

Job opportunities top influencer for participants to remain in Burke County, with education and wages also remaining high on the list of influence. Data suggest that OPT-IN / JET is centered on 3 of the top 4 drivers for remaining in the area for the short term.

Participants' Reasons to Stay In Burke County



“ This program lets you get your foot in the door... I didn't know what I was going to do...and then found this program. ”

OPT-IN/J.E.T. Participant

90%

of participants live and work in Burke County

Key Employment, Economic Impacts, and Local Impacts Highlights

90%

of alumni indicate they still live and work in Burke

63%

of alumni plan to stay in Burke at least 5 years

56%

of alumni spend half or more of income in Burke



\$2 average increase in participants' earnings after participating in the program

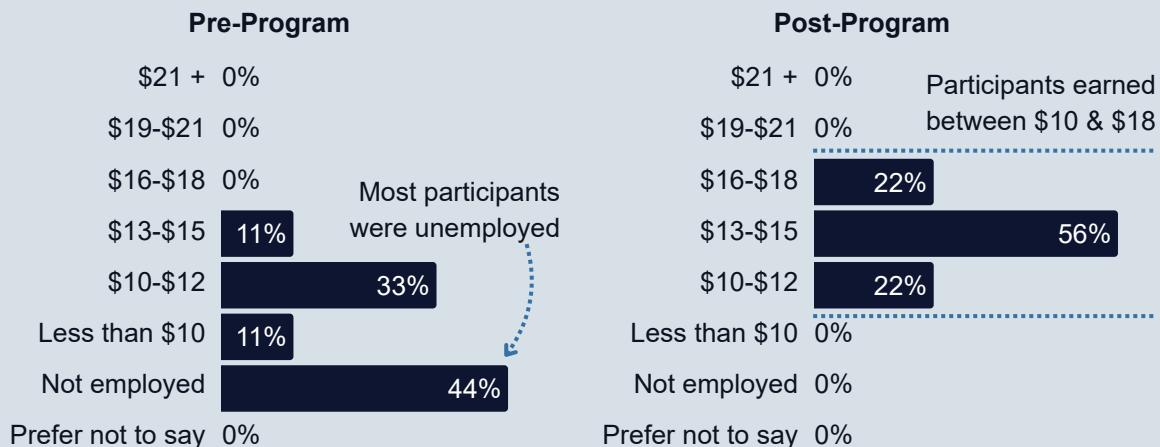


93% of participants attributed their current employment/economic outcomes to the program



85% of participants remained employed/enrolled 3-months to a year after program completion

After participating in the program, all alumnae (100%) who responded to the survey earned **between \$10 and \$18** in wages per hour.



Conclusions

The OPT-IN/J.E.T. program has demonstrated strong alignment with its core goals of building professional readiness, supporting career advancement, and stabilizing financial outcomes for youth in Burke County. The program maintained a 100% internship placement rate across cohorts, and survey findings consistently pointed to high levels of participant satisfaction with mentoring, case management, and skill-building supports. Alumni highlighted the program's ability to deliver both immediate benefits—such as increased wages and reliable employment—and longer-term gains, including educational aspirations, financial independence, and career clarity. Over 90% of participants credited the program with improving their employment or financial situation, and many reported remaining connected to the program even after completion.

The program's contributions extend beyond individual success stories to broader local economic outcomes. With more than 90% of alumni still living and working in Burke County and a substantial proportion spending their earnings locally, the program supports regional workforce development and economic retention. These impacts are further supported by a decline in the county's Opportunity Youth rate since program inception, suggesting that OPT-IN/J.E.T. is playing a meaningful role in reducing disconnection among young adults. The combined effect of career exposure, mentorship, and wraparound supports appears to be fostering durable progress for participants and measurable gains for the community.



Students found OPT-IN/JET to be a life-changing experience—offering paid internships, career clarity, and the confidence to pursue their next steps.

Recommendations

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.

Provide Light-Touch Alumni Advising or “Ask Me Anything” Support:

Several participants noted the need for occasional access to someone they trust for questions, motivation, or basic guidance. One participant shared, “Just someone that's there to always ask questions to,” while another expressed, “Continued mentorship.” These comments suggest a desire for a familiar, low-barrier source of support post-program. Hosting periodic “Alumni Office Hours” with program staff or rotating mentors could fill this gap without requiring intensive ongoing advising.

Offer Targeted Networking Guidance and Soft Navigation Skills:

Although participants expressed appreciation for the program, some conveyed uncertainty about

how to maintain or use professional relationships. One commented, “I'd like to have some interaction maybe with the people that held OPT-IN because they were super cool and nice but I don't know honestly what I'd even talk about like networking wise. I don't know really how it works.” Creating brief, alumni-friendly resources—such as “how to network” guides, sample conversation starters, or peer-led Q&A sessions—could demystify this area and extend program impact.

Maintain Encouragement and Recognition

Touchpoints:

Small gestures of affirmation remain meaningful to participants, as reflected in the simple request of one alum: “Pat on the back or a thumbs up.” Incorporating shoutouts in alumni newsletters, recognition in social media spotlights, or digital badges for milestones could sustain motivation and reinforce a sense of belonging.



Evaluator Recommendations

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

Consider Creating a Formalized Peer Ambassador Program:

Many alumni expressed pride in referring peers to the program, but this behavior could be more systematically supported. A peer ambassador model—where select alumni are trained and recognized for community outreach, onboarding support, or storytelling—could reinforce pipelines, extend reach into disconnected youth populations, and formalize the social capital already driving referrals. The design of the model could also help address the gaps that were sometimes present with industry mentors.

Leverage Employer Feedback Loops for Program Refinement:

Although participant experiences are well-documented, employer perspectives (on intern preparation, work ethic, and placement fit) would

further enhance the program's dataset. We recommend building a quarterly employer feedback loop—possibly via short pulse surveys—to inform both curriculum adjustments and career readiness supports.

Incorporate an Employer Recognition Program:

Introduce an “OPT-IN/J.E.T.” designation for companies that consistently hire or mentor participants. Public recognition (e.g., at graduation events or NCWorks meetings) can deepen commitment and attract new partners.

Use Alumni Data to Inform Targeted Program Enhancements:

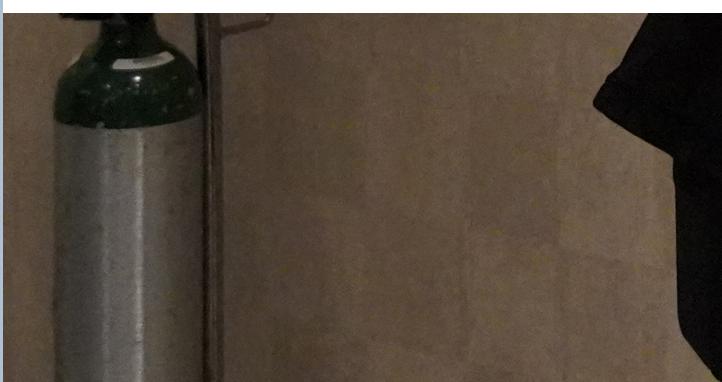
As the alumni dataset continues to grow, we recommend disaggregating outcome data to identify patterns among participants with the strongest wage gains. Analyzing characteristics of top earners—such as internship placement sites, industries of employment, credential pathways, and support service utilization—can yield valuable insights. These findings should be leveraged to refine curriculum, strengthen employer partnerships, and better position future participants for entry into high-wage sectors.



Lessons

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.

- **Alumni Aspirations Signal Clear Areas for Program Expansion:** When asked about their current priorities, alumni consistently identified three goals: purchasing a vehicle (22%), securing stable housing (18%), and improving their credit score (17%). A fourth priority—affording or acquiring healthcare/insurance (14%)—also emerged. These goals provide a clear roadmap for how the program might evolve to offer wraparound supports that align with alumni needs and extend impact beyond initial training.
- **Alumni Outcome Tracking is Feasible with Incentives:** Reaching graduates directly (with modest incentives) proved to be the most practical path to document employment status and wages.
- **Housing Stability and Higher Wages Are Central to Long-Term Retention:** Data suggest that participants are more likely to remain in the area if two conditions are met: access to stable, affordable housing and the ability to earn a livable wage. These structural supports appear to be critical levers for economic mobility and community anchoring.



Limitations

Time Limitations

One minor limitation in this evaluation stems from the timing of our involvement as external evaluators. Although the OPT-IN/J.E.T. project began receiving funding in 2023, SEI's evaluation contract was not established until May 2024—approximately one year into implementation. This delayed start constrained our ability to capture early process data. However, we believe we've mitigated this limitation by ensuring the Building Hope leaders had strong internal data collection processes and leveraging some of those data for our reporting.

Limitations on Wage Data

A second limitation involved access to comparison wage data. The evaluation team initially planned to obtain wage information through the Local Innovation Fund or the Department of Commerce to compare participant earnings with those of a similar group of non-participants. However, those data were not being captured as anticipated, and subsequent efforts to locate a suitable alternative data source were unsuccessful. As a result, the evaluation could not conduct the planned comparative wage analysis, limiting the ability to contextualize participants' post-program earnings within a broader labor market framework.





About SEI

Strategic Evaluations, Inc. (SEI) has served as the third-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, SEI has helped organizations and institutions apply for, win, and sustain funding for grants in science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and medicine (STEMM), workforce development, and community advancement.

Our team specializes in designing, reviewing, and implementing rigorous evaluation frameworks that strengthen evidence-based decision-making and demonstrate measurable impact. Beyond STEMM and higher education, SEI's portfolio includes extensive experience evaluating initiatives that advance workforce development, reentry and employment readiness, housing stability, and nonprofit capacity building.

We frequently partner with state agencies, workforce boards, and community-based organizations to assess outcomes that improve economic mobility and quality of life for underrepresented populations.

Across more than 40 active evaluations nationwide, SEI supports projects that build the performance, capability, and career trajectories of trainees and participants ranging from high school students to justice-involved adults. Our clients span large public universities, small liberal arts colleges, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), workforce development boards, and nonprofit organizations. This range of experience enables SEI to deliver culturally responsive, utilization-focused evaluations that link program design, implementation, and outcomes—helping partners strengthen their impact, secure future funding, and scale their success.

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