

LAVERNE BANQUET HALL, WINGATE UNIVERSITY

**UNISON**  
my FUTURE NC  
2 million by 2030

# HEALTH CARE ROUND TABLES

**FEBRUARY 21, 2025**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On behalf of the Labor Market Alignment Committee of Our Future in UNiSON, a healthcare roundtable was held at Wingate University to assess workforce alignment and training gaps in Anson and Union counties. The event brought together stakeholders from K-12 education, community colleges, universities, and the healthcare industry to discuss key challenges and opportunities in aligning educational pathways with labor market needs. This report contains key insights, recommendations and next steps collected by attendees.

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## **Overview of Our Future in UNiSON**

Our Future in UNiSON is a collaborative initiative designed to align education, workforce development, and economic mobility strategies in Anson and Union Counties. The initiative brings together education institutions, industry leaders, workforce agencies, and community organizations to create pathways for individuals to gain skills and secure sustainable employment. By leveraging data-driven decision-making and cross-sector partnerships, UNiSON ensures that local talent development efforts meet the evolving needs of regional employers.

A key component of UNiSON's strategy is its connection to myFutureNC, a statewide initiative focused on increasing educational attainment and workforce readiness across North Carolina. UNiSON aligns with myFutureNC's goal of ensuring that at least two million North Carolinians hold high-quality postsecondary credentials by 2030. This alignment helps bridge the gap between state-level workforce strategies and local implementation, ensuring that talent pipelines remain strong and responsive to labor market demands.

UNiSON collaborates closely with local education partners, including Anson and Union County school systems, South Piedmont Community College, and Wingate University, to develop structured career pathways that guide students from education to employment. These partnerships support dual-enrollment opportunities, career exploration initiatives, and industry-specific training programs to equip students with the skills needed in high-growth sectors such as healthcare, manufacturing, and information technology.

Additionally, UNiSON engages with community partners and employers to ensure that workforce development efforts align with real-world industry needs. By working with local healthcare providers, economic development organizations, chambers of commerce, and nonprofit agencies, UNiSON fosters an ecosystem where businesses, educators, and policymakers collaborate to address skills gaps and create a more inclusive and resilient workforce. Through this multi-stakeholder approach, UNiSON strengthens career readiness, promotes economic mobility, and enhances the long-term prosperity of Anson and Union Counties.

### **Event Overview:**

The Healthcare Roundtable event was expertly facilitated by Melissa Smith, Senior State Director of Health Science Programs for the North Carolina Community College System. With over 25 years of experience in healthcare education and workforce development, Melissa brought valuable expertise to the discussion, emphasizing the importance of industry-education partnerships. She highlighted recent investments in healthcare training

programs and encouraged stakeholders to actively contribute to shaping solutions that bridge workforce gaps.

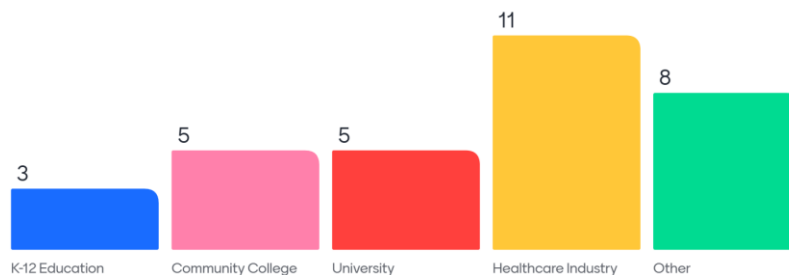
To enhance engagement and capture real-time feedback, the roundtable incorporated Mentimeter, an interactive polling tool. Participants responded to a series of open-ended questions, providing data-driven insights into workforce alignment, skill gaps, and training priorities. The use of Mentimeter allowed for the collection of diverse perspectives, enabling a structured discussion that identified key areas of improvement and action items.

### **Key Areas & Insights**

#### **Participant Representation:**

A diverse group of stakeholders attended the roundtable, reflecting a broad spectrum of perspectives essential to understanding workforce alignment in healthcare. Industry representation was notably strong, underscoring the urgent need for talent development and sustainable workforce pipelines. The inclusion of educators at multiple levels emphasized the importance of early exposure to healthcare careers and structured training pathways.

What sector do you represent today?



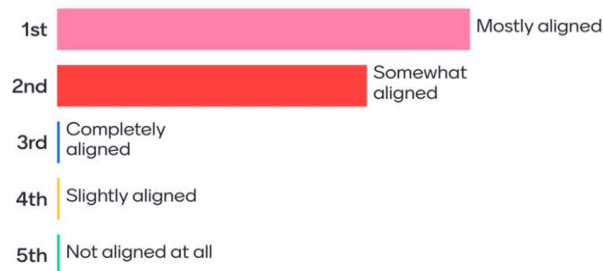
A balanced representation from various sectors enabled a multi-faceted discussion that considered both employer demands and the realities of educational training programs. Additionally, the broad participation underscored the necessity of a collaborative approach to workforce alignment that brings educators and employers into direct conversation about labor market needs.

#### **Alignment of Healthcare Pathways with Industry Needs:**

A well-aligned workforce pathway is critical for ensuring a seamless transition from education to employment. While most participants rated current pathways as "Mostly Aligned" or "Somewhat Aligned," concerns emerged regarding specific shortages in high-demand roles such as Registered Nurses (RNs), Imaging Technicians, and Surgical Technologists. These gaps mirror national trends, where evolving healthcare needs, an

aging population, and technological advancements necessitate continuous curriculum updates and expanded hands-on training opportunities.

Industry leaders emphasized that while some programs adequately address foundational knowledge, they often lack flexibility in accommodating non-traditional students and career changers. A recommendation arising from this discussion was to enhance healthcare programs through stackable credentials, allowing students to progress gradually toward higher qualifications while gaining meaningful employment along the way.



### Needed Improvements:

Successful workforce development hinges on creating clear, accessible, and flexible career pathways. Stakeholders called for expanded specialization tracks, particularly in fields like dietetics, rehabilitation, and pharmacy technology. Early intervention strategies, such as introducing healthcare career awareness at the K-12 level and providing more structured mentorship programs, were highlighted as keyways to improve engagement and readiness.

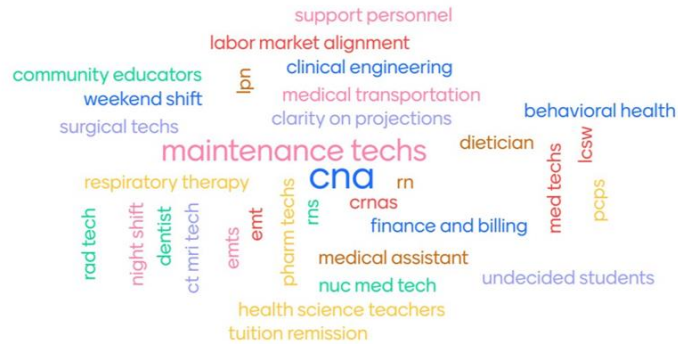
Additional adult learner support, including career counseling and case management, was identified as crucial for workforce retention. Employers suggested increased partnerships with community colleges and universities to provide accelerated training programs that meet industry demands while accommodating adult learners. The importance of offering financial aid incentives for short-term certification programs was also discussed as a means to reduce barriers for those transitioning into healthcare careers.

need more RNs, Imaging, Surge Techs.	really struggling to fill med surge RNs	UC has done a wonderful job partnering with K-12, Kingette, and SPOC. Students have had the opportunity to learn about healthcare pathways from elementary school.	Learner perspective: awareness of pathways and options. Student placement; alignment of mid level management; Career services; healthcare is not just giving care, education on all aspects of the work.	Supply doesn't meet the demand of the market - Nursing, Imaging, Imaging More defined pathways to various degree levels. Creating articulations to shorten the process.	Older adults- population is aging and may not be prepared for the demands of having adequate resources and staffing to meet these needs	tier 1 counties struggle to attract and retain talent, more recruitment based on existing pathways would be helpful.	specialized pathways for specialty positions
need pathways for dieticians, rehab, OT, PT	Start earlier with initial entry points (e.g. work more closely with k-12 and help adults see options earlier)	More guidance for adults along way	Lack of alignment between the short and long term visions. Difficulty placing students if there is not enough open positions- better forecasting; also in the work hander communication.	There should be a pathway or a journey in industry to help workers achieve their career goals. CNA is a good place to start. The conversation should start in elementary.	In high school, there are so many initiatives, it's hard to focus on any one. Need to focus more on industry needs.	Start the pipeline earlier, with what students in high school should be focused on.	Some improvement in k-12 literacy, awareness of what's available in future openings, literacy is reading, vocab, math, science, they're now getting more application experience, connecting content with
Some are only thinking along the lines of entry level positions because they are limited in literacy and critical thinking.	We're missing social workers in health care, need someone to focus on social factors of health care students need to understand social factors, demand for social workers in the healthcare	Apprenticeship might help with this. And pre-apprenticeships in k-12	Pharm techs				
Surgical techs	Unskilled students trying to determine which major/ pathway to pursue	CNA, surg tech, CMA, EMTs, paramedics, clinical engineering					

## Underserved Roles in Current Training Programs:

What healthcare roles in your organization or community are underserved by current training programs?

36 responses



While traditional healthcare roles receive significant attention, there is a growing demand for allied health professions such as behavioral health specialists, clinical engineers, and maintenance technicians. The discussion highlighted the need for more intentional outreach to students who may be undecided about healthcare careers.

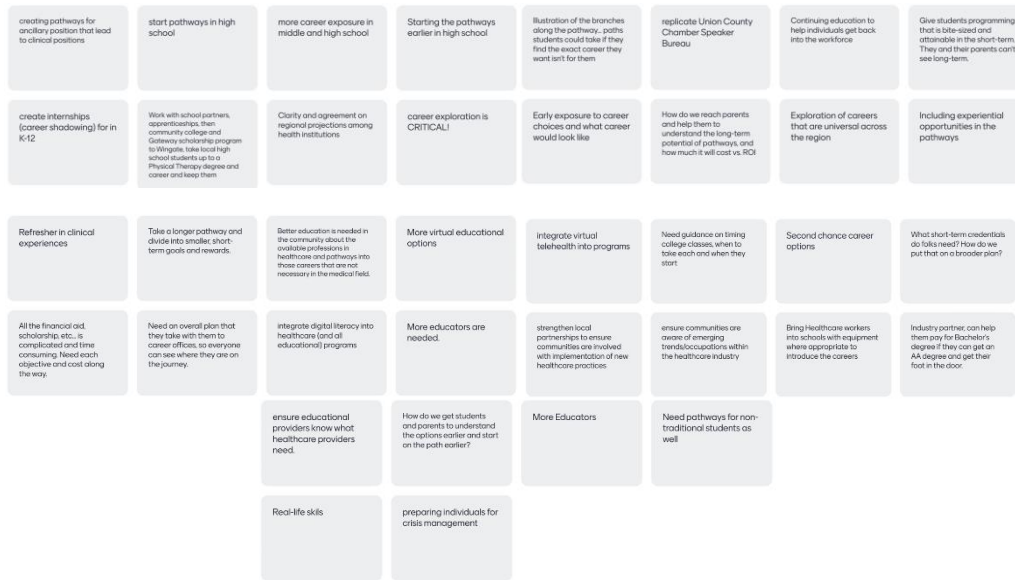
Developing new training pathways for these in-demand roles can help bridge gaps in patient care, operational efficiency, and support services within healthcare institutions. Employers also stressed the need to expand exposure to these roles through job-shadowing opportunities and career exploration workshops targeted at high school students and career changers. Additionally, better employer incentives for hiring and training within these less-explored areas were proposed as part of the solution.

### Addressing Regional Labor Market Needs:

Workforce development strategies must be data-driven and responsive to local employer needs. The roundtable emphasized the importance of better alignment between workforce supply and demand, with a focus on job shadowing, apprenticeships, and career coaching. Employers expressed interest in deeper collaboration with educational institutions to ensure graduates are prepared for evolving healthcare roles.

Strengthening employer engagement can help create a more dynamic talent pipeline that addresses regional shortages effectively. One key takeaway was the need for continuous labor market research to identify emerging job trends and adapt training programs accordingly. Establishing a centralized platform for data sharing among workforce stakeholders was also recommended to streamline communication and decision-making.

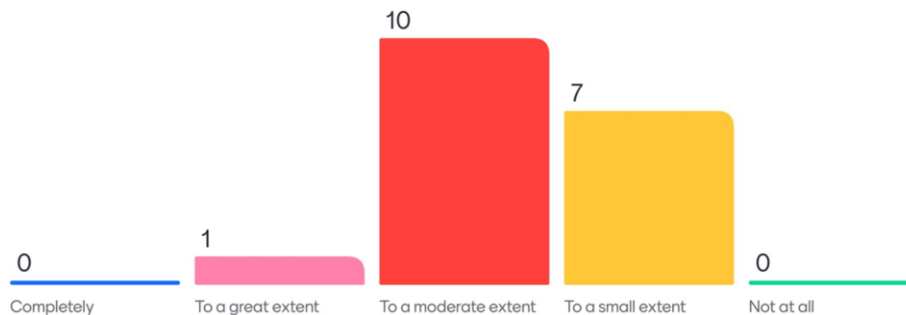
## How can pathways better address regional labor market projections?



### Graduate Preparedness & Skill Gaps:

Employers across the industry stress the importance of both technical and soft skills in ensuring workforce success. While graduates demonstrate moderate competency in core technical areas, gaps persist in communication, critical thinking, and emotional intelligence.

To what extent do graduates from healthcare training pathways demonstrate the skills required to succeed?



Participants noted that real-world experiences, such as clinical rotations and internships, are essential for bridging these gaps. Enhancing competency-based assessments and incorporating industry-driven feedback into training programs can further refine graduate preparedness. An additional recommendation was to integrate more project-based learning experiences to simulate real-world healthcare challenges within educational programs.

## Where do you see the greatest gaps?

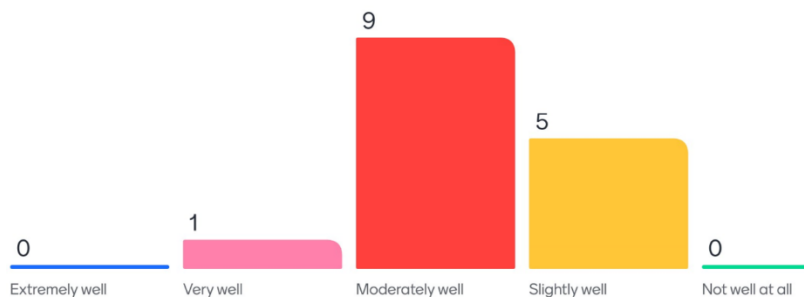
Need more real life application earlier on, instead of simulations, like more internships.	Soft skills	Durable skills	Time management
Emotional intelligence and self awareness	Need more understanding of this new insurance reimbursement environment	Communication skills	Lacking in essential soft skills: emotional intelligence, interacting with real people, communication skills, customer service skills, resilience

How do you teach self care and emotional wellness?	Balance of communication and training between novice and veteran professionals	Need more modelling exposure to how to act like a professional, shadow professionals	Students can sometimes have the necessary skills, but not the ability to articulate them.	Emotional well-being	Resiliency	Logistics of travelling to internships and shadowing, HIPAA, safety, are complex and need support	Follow Up
ensuring that those entering industry fully understand the hazards of the work, really is	Critical thinking skills, resilience, and setting expectations	mental health training	Problem solving	Task-oriented vs seeing the big picture	patient engagement skills	onboarding training	customer service
patient registration	Essential skills	needs to be more work based learning in healthcare training programs	Could have job shadowing as a course requirement, and require reflection follow up on it linking to career awareness.	Students have to work to support family and have to turn down high impact experiences like internships	Critical thinking skills	How do we educate professionals on the impact of politics on policy and regulations in health care?	Lack of innovation
Narrative care	It's so hard to find placements for internships and apprenticeships. Needs a lot of coordination and incentive for students to do it.	generational gaps	Grow more leaders	Need strong partnerships between employers and educators to support apprenticeships, shadowing, etc.	emphasis on self awareness		

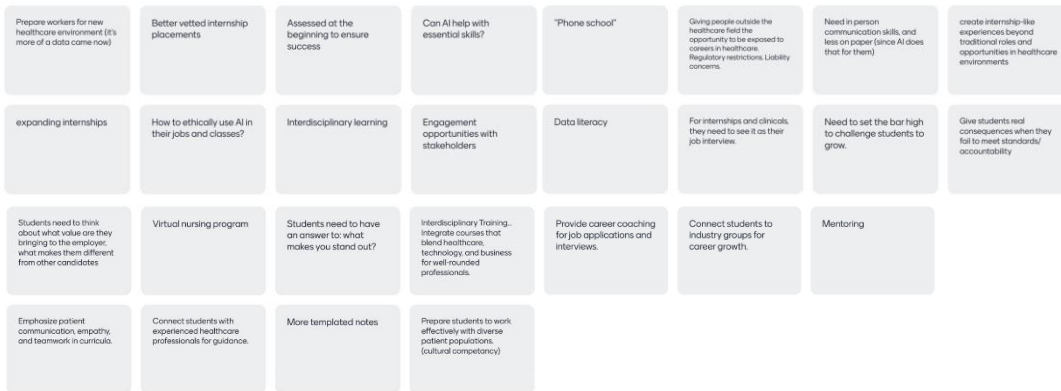
## Enhancing Career Readiness:

How well do current programs integrate real-world experiences, such as clinical placements or internships?



Career readiness extends beyond technical knowledge to include professional development and workforce adaptability. Participants recommended improving internship placement processes, expanding interdisciplinary learning, and leveraging technology, such as AI and telehealth training, to better equip students for modern healthcare roles.

### What improvements would enhance career readiness?



By fostering a culture of continuous learning and professional mentorship, healthcare education can better prepare individuals for long-term career success. Another key recommendation was to formalize industry-recognized micro-credentials that allow students to demonstrate proficiency in key skills before entering the workforce.

The expanded insights and recommendations outlined above serve as a foundation for future strategic actions aimed at closing workforce gaps and fostering a stronger healthcare talent pipeline in Anson and Union Counties.

### Next Steps:

To build on the momentum from the roundtable discussion, it has been proposed that a regional advisory council be established to oversee ongoing collaboration between educational institutions and healthcare employers. This council can facilitate regular employer feedback sessions, ensuring that training programs remain responsive to industry trends and emerging workforce needs. This feedback will be shared with educational partners for consideration. Additionally, leveraging labor market data to track employment outcomes and training efficacy will be critical in refining program offerings and identifying areas for improvement.

Another next step involves expanding work-based learning opportunities, particularly in underserved healthcare roles. Schools and community colleges should work with industry partners to create more apprenticeships and internships, while employers must commit to hiring and training students directly out of these programs. Increased employer participation in skills-based hiring initiatives and tuition reimbursement programs can further strengthen workforce alignment and employee retention.



**Conclusion and Acknowledgments:**

The UNiSON Healthcare Roundtable provided a vital forum for discussing workforce alignment challenges and opportunities in Anson and Union Counties. Through collective efforts, stakeholders identified actionable strategies to enhance career readiness, improve access to training, and foster stronger partnerships between education and industry. Moving forward, sustained collaboration will be key to addressing workforce shortages and ensuring that healthcare pathways remain viable and accessible to all learners.

We extend our sincere appreciation to all industry, education, and community partners who participated in this discussion. Your commitment to workforce development and economic mobility is instrumental in shaping a stronger, more resilient healthcare workforce for our region. Together, we can continue to build meaningful career pathways that support both individuals and employers in Anson and Union Counties.