PRIORITY AREAS OF FOCUS FOR A PIVOTAL FIVE YEARS

The Durham Tech 2026–2031 Strategic Plan is not a response to the past. It is a bet on the future — a future that, by nearly every economic indicator, is arriving faster than anyone expected.

This plan was shaped by a core planning team, input from across the College, and guidance from its Board of Trustees. What emerged are five interconnected priority areas that, taken together, constitute a comprehensive response to where the regional economy is heading.

Increase enrollment and completion in high-opportunity, living-wage programs.

Durham Tech's first priority is to dramatically expand access to programs that lead to above-average wages. The College aims to serve 10% of the region's population between the ages of 15 and 44 by 2031, with particular growth in nursing, biotechnology, teaching, and high-demand skilled trades. This isn't simply about enrollment numbers. It's about ensuring that the people who live in Durham and Orange counties — many of whom work multiple jobs, raise children, and face the constant pressure of an expensive and fast-moving regional economy — have a clear path to a career that pays well and the ability to support themselves and their families.

The living wage target embedded in the plan — $45,552 per year, or $21.90 per hour — is not an abstract benchmark. It is a concrete definition of what economic mobility looks like in this region. By 2031, the plan calls for at least 80% of students in applied degree programs to achieve employment at or above that threshold. Given that AbbVie's entry-level manufacturing operator positions are expected to average well above that figure, the trajectory is clear: high-skill, high-wage employment in life sciences, healthcare, and technology is within reach for community members who have the right training and credentials.

Lead the state in university transfer success.

Durham Tech has long served as a gateway for students who want to earn a four-year degree but need a more affordable or flexible starting point. The new strategic plan sets an ambitious target: by 2031, at least 77% of transfer-ready students will matriculate to a four-year college or university upon completing their associate degree. That would position Durham Tech as the state leader in transfer success — and reflect a conviction that community college is a powerful on-ramp to a bachelor's degree and the career opportunities it opens.

This priority is particularly significant in a region where knowledge-intensive employers consistently say that educational attainment matters — even for roles that don't require four-year degrees. Research by RTI International has found that while employers value candidates with technical credentials, the ability to continue growing academically is an asset companies often prioritize.

Build robust talent pipelines in key sectors.

Durham Tech is committing to expanding workforce-aligned pathways in building, engineering, healthcare, life sciences, and skilled trades — the exact sectors that regional economists and employers identify as experiencing the most acute talent shortages.

The construction sector alone is facing significant pressure. Industry modeling indicates that the U.S. construction sector needed an estimated 501,000 additional workers in 2024 beyond normal hiring levels, and that pressure is expected to persist. Locally, the scale of construction underway and planned means that demand for skilled tradespeople in Durham and Orange counties will intensify considerably over the plan's five-year horizon.

In life sciences, the story is similarly urgent. North Carolina is already home to more than 860 life sciences companies employing more than 76,000 people statewide, and the industry generates more than $80 billion in annual economic impact, with a target of $100 billion by 2030. Community colleges have historically been recognized as critical partners in building the biotech talent pipeline — North Carolina's BioNetwork consortium has worked alongside community colleges across the state to prepare students for pharmaceutical manufacturing careers. Durham Tech's strategic plan positions the College to deepen that role substantially, building pipelines for the campuses of the coming years, not just the ones already here.

Improve community well-being to drive economic mobility.

Of the five priority areas, this one is perhaps the most distinctively ambitious. Durham Tech's plan articulates something that workforce development practitioners have known for years but that strategic plans often hesitate to state plainly: You cannot reliably educate and train working adults if their families are not stable. Childcare, family health, and community well-being are not separate from workforce development. They are prerequisites to it.

By 2031, the College aims to partner with community organizations to support the development of a childcare center serving students, employees, and community members. It also plans to expand the use of its Community Health Lab, increasing services that improve child health by 15% while connecting families to educational opportunities, health resources, and workforce pathways. The logic is straightforward: A parent who cannot find affordable, reliable childcare cannot reliably attend class or hold a job. Addressing that barrier is not charity — it is strategy.

Align the College's footprint with regional growth.

Durham and Orange counties are changing. Residential growth, commercial development, and the expansion of RTP itself are reshaping where people live, work, and need access to education and training. Durham Tech's fifth priority is to ensure that the College's physical presence is aligned with those shifts — that the College is where its students and partners need it to be, not simply where it has always been.

This is particularly relevant given RTP 3.0's vision for transit-oriented development. The Triangle Mobility Hub — a multimodal transit center supported by a $25 million federal transportation grant and expected to generate $270 million in economic returns over 30 years — represents the kind of infrastructure investment that changes patterns of movement throughout the region.

In Orange County, the concentration of industry growth in the Hillsborough and Buckhorn Economic Development Districts along I-40/I-85 is expected to continue to boom. The county projects an average tax base growth of 7.2% annually over the next five years.

Central to Durham Tech's new strategic plan is the College's role as a central node in the region's economic infrastructure, vital to the Triangle's growth story.