

# Fayetteville Tech's Path to Data-Driven Decision-Making and Student Success

Written by Fraser Martens

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## Case Study at a Glance

*Economic Impact Studies give President Larry Keen a trustworthy summary of the school's value.*

*Career Coach shows the public how valuable a degree from FTCC can be.*

*Using Analyst and Career Coach to understand the local economy makes decision-making easier for FTCC's staff.*



*The county's workforce board is based at FTCC, a relationship strengthened by labor market data.*

*Being data-informed helps FTCC make better grant applications.*

*Using data has led to major infrastructure developments within the college.*

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Fayetteville Technical Community College (FTCC), in Fayetteville, North Carolina, is one of the strongest examples of just how powerful labor market data can be. FTCC has been working with EMSI for several years and currently employs the complete suite of EMSI products to inform decisions throughout the institution—from program review to grant writing, from marketing to workforce development.

## **Using EMSI's Economic Impact Study to Prove FTCC's Value**

The impetus for integrating labor market data into FTCC's practices—and the college's ensuing success—began with college president Dr. Larry Keen. While FTCC now uses the full spectrum of EMSI's data products, Keen told us a story that begins more modestly: with his confidence in EMSI data's ability to inform and quantify the college's economic impact for its students, taxpayers, and community.



When he arrived at FTCC eight years ago, Keen (along with, in his words, “all of the educational world”) already knew that making the right decisions required using up-to-date data. Keen began by purchasing an Economic Impact Study (EIS) for the college. “I had been exposed to EMSI prior to the time that I came to FTCC,” he said. “So before I arrived, I had already made the decision to get an EIS to give the college’s team a picture of where we were in the community with analysis of how significantly we contributed to the economic vitality of the community.” The data in that first impact study was so helpful that the school commissioned another study a couple of years later, and now intends to commission future impact studies every other year.

One of the EIS’s key values was its legitimacy as an independent testimonial to the benefits the school provided. “It’s not something that can be seen as self-serving,” Keen said. “There are legitimate economic models used to analyze, review, and report on the collected data.” Having that yardstick remains helpful to faculty, staff, and even students. “It means something to them, because they have a metric bringing EMSI’s expertise to demonstrate the net result of all college faculty, staff, and administrator’s efforts.”

The EIS has also proved useful in maintaining funding for the college in a tough economic environment. In fact, Keen reports that in the years FTCC has used the impact study to present its impact to county officials, the college has seen steady increases each time. “We can report to our county: ‘This is the economic impact that we have. This is what it means to our students and this is what it means to the community at large.’ While others have experienced reductions in their funding from local sources, each year we’ve had at least a slight increase.”

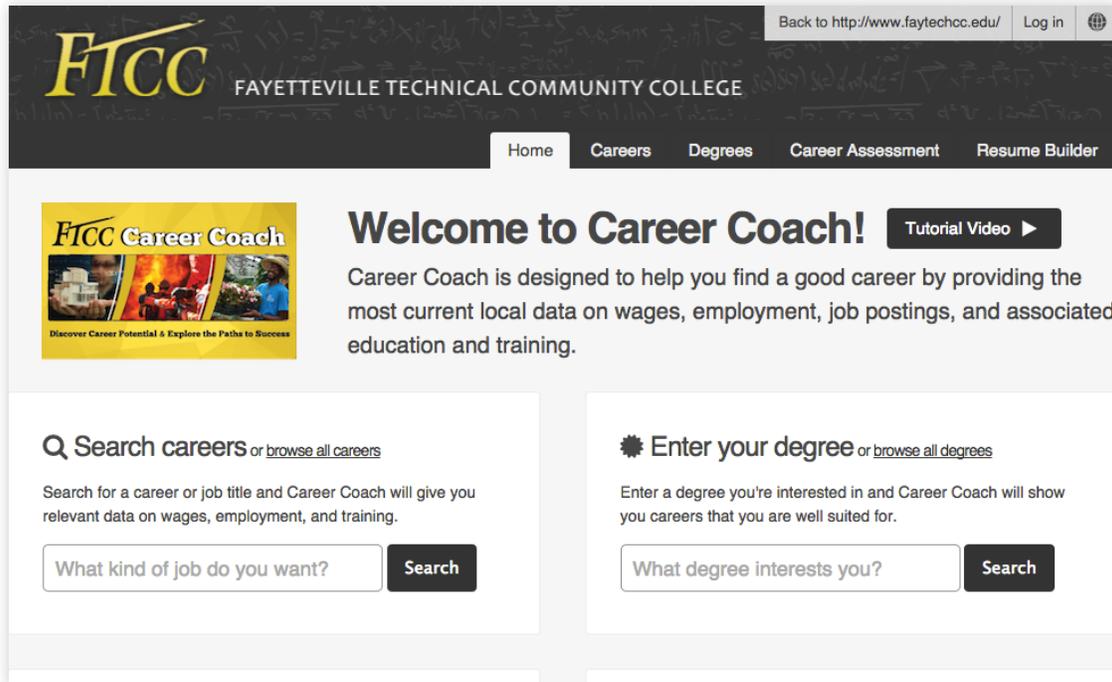
## ***Using Career Coach To Show Data To Everyone***

With the Economic Impact Study helping FTCC demonstrate its value to local government officials, the college needed a way to show its value to individual students and to the community at large. And so the school began using Career Coach.

Originally, FTCC subscribed to Career Coach as part of a group of institutions that received a grant for a data tools application that included the tool, but Keen quickly recognized the potential that Career Coach offered. “I learned more about it and saw what it could do. And I immediately started querying our people, asking, ‘How are we using it? How can this help us more? Are you using the real-time data to inform your recommendations or decisions?’”

Career Coach let the college demonstrate to both current and potential students—in a credible way—the value of a degree in the real world. “We needed a better way to communicate the availability of the education and career opportunities to the local public and our students,” Keen said.

**“It’s one thing for us to talk about it and to use whatever promotional materials we have to tell the story. But at the end of the day, we needed something more convincing and more accurate from an independent source.”**



FTCC highlights Career Coach by placing a link to the tool right on the website’s homepage, and promotes it throughout the admissions process. Bill Griffin, FTCC’s associate vice president of curriculum programs, said: “In my welcome letter, I encourage new students to take a look at it, so they have an idea of what they want to do before they start interacting with admissions counselors or faculty advisors. Hopefully, they’ll have a better idea of where they want to go, how to get there, and the need to remain focused as they participate in their programs of study.” The tool has become a vital step in helping new students. “When students first come to the school, a lot of them don’t know what they want to do, they just know they want to come back to school, so we use it as part of our intake process,” said Associate Vice President of Student Services Dr. Rosemary Kelly. “When they meet with their counselor, they’re actually able to talk with the student and bring up 10-year projections, and the whole concept of what salary the student is likely to make, how many job openings there are, or the projected job openings in this area. So we are actually able to give them concrete data—real things as opposed to pie in the sky.”



Perhaps even more exciting is that Career Coach has found a wide range of uses beyond student recruitment. As FTCC's vice president of human resources/workforce development and institutional effectiveness, Carl Mitchell, explained it: "We've moved Career Coach into the decision-making processes throughout the college. It's regularly used by people in student services, academics, workforce development, marketing, public relations, human resources, and by faculty and staff working at our various campuses. It's not isolated and available in just one area."

## ***Using Analyst for Program Review and More***

Just as the EIS led to Career Coach, the success of Career Coach soon triggered a desire for even more data. Keen explained: "We started saying, 'Okay, if Career Coach is good for what it does, the question is are we doing the right things? Is there more we could do if we had additional data? Are we choosing the best programs to serve our community?' That led to learning more about the different products that EMSI had to offer."

Asking those questions led Dr. Keen, along with members of his staff, faculty, and administrative team, to consider how EMSI's other products could help. Armed with funds from a multi-college grant, FTCC acquired Analyst and discovered that it filled a need the college had felt for some time: the need for complete, reliable data. Using the tool to gather data on relationships between the college's programs and local occupations, the college's planning council "created a useful data table that reported which occupations, which jobs, and which college training programs correlated directly to those jobs," said Carl Mitchell. "The data showed significant potential for increased job opportunities in the local area. More importantly, the data showed which jobs were going to remain stable and which ones showed likelihood of declining. That data was powerful for strategic planning purposes."

The college's previous means of gathering data were frustrating and often inefficient. "Program reviews were too brief, didn't go into enough detail, and programs had to dig through paper files and records to get to data," Mitchell reported. But with Analyst, access to quick and reliable data became possible.

Senior Vice President Dr. Dave Brand recognized that good, thorough data was key to making program review decisions, and so he charged the Institutional Effectiveness Office to produce the data electronically and include it in the program reviews prior to releasing the template to faculty and department advisors.

“Programs have to analyze the data and project growth and their equipment needs,” he said. “They can see what the growth projection is for up to 10 years in the future. They can compare those projections for job growth against how many graduates their programs are producing to meet that expected demand.”

“EMSI was a good part of us being able to respond to Dr. Brand’s request,” Mitchell said. “Now when the program review template is released, several years of historical data for each program are already included in the plan when they receive it. The faculty and staff greatly appreciate the data being preloaded in their program reviews.”



## ***Being Proactive With the Gap Analysis Report***

In addition to the extensive data they get from Analyst, FTCC is now also using EMSI’s Gap Analysis Report to make better program management decisions. “We began using the Gap Analysis Report for each program,” Keen said. “Program supervisors get a document that speaks specifically to their program. It really helps them with the planning process, knowing what they’re talking about for future job projections and what changes are needed to match graduations from their programs to meet that demand.”

FTCC has discovered that making program decisions demands quality data, data that has enough credibility to support large-scale strategies. This data also supports decisions about where FTCC should expand, as well as the areas not likely to grow in the future. As Brand pointed out:

***“It’s hard to start a program or expand a program when you don’t know for sure if there is a need for it. The fact that those numbers [from the Gap Analysis Report] are there adds a level of credibility for us.”***

The Gap Analysis Report contributes several other crucial data points to the department-level conversations. For one thing, it allows the college to see how many of the completers for any program in the region are from FTCC. Seeing the importance of its own programs for filling regional demand is helpful for each program’s worth. But that same data also helps the college to measure what their competition is up to. “When a need is being met by other schools,” Brand pointed out, “it’s hard to justify adding a program in that area.” At the same time, the data identifies areas in which other schools may be overburdened, and where FTCC may be able to take some of the load.

Data has proved useful for day-to-day decisions at FTCC, serving as a foundation for well-informed action. Keen said that moving from anecdotal reasoning to relying on facts has been a major improvement. “Data goes into making day-to-day decisions about resources. I used to go in and ask questions, and people used to tell me what they thought. Now I go in and there’s information that says what we should or shouldn’t be doing, and here are the reasons why.”

Data also helps Keen evaluate claims from outside the college. “If we’re hearing something from another source, some report from some guru somewhere, I’ll ask how that compares to what we know. And we’ll pull up a report from Analyst with a point-by-point comparison to what’s being said. We can make more informed decisions and people have embraced it to the point where they’re starting to do data collection and analysis on their own, which I think is important.”

With that goal in mind—individual mastery of Analyst—FTCC has trained 21 members of the staff, faculty, and administrators in EMSI’s Certification program, ensuring that they are familiar with the data, where it comes from, and what it can (and can’t) do. The college brought Certification leaders from EMSI to the college to lead the training process in person, and found the process enormously helpful. “We wanted to have faculty, staff, and administrators with an earned certification located strategically across the entire college,” said Brand, “so that if somebody needed quick information out of Analyst that is more detailed than what they could get out of Career Coach, there would be somebody close by they could get to—and quickly.”

## ***Finding Direction For Finding Grants***

The data in Analyst has also proved crucial in competing for grants. Before FTCC applied Analyst data to grant writing, the college’s process for finding grants and determining how to apply for them was haphazard at best. “When I first got here, we’d sit down at this table and ask, ‘What should we do a grant on?’ ” explained Jim Lott, workforce director at FTCC. “We’d say, ‘Oh yeah, here’s a good grant opportunity, \$2 million, \$5 million; what can we, or should we, do it on?’ And I’d go get some state data, but that was usually a year old and would be for too large of a region, like 25 counties or the whole state, so it was almost a complete guess.”

That guesswork-based approach has become a thing of the past. “Now we use data to find the need, and then we look for grants to fill it,” Lott said. “All of a sudden the data was sharp and pointed to a need matched to a grant. I now feel confident.”

For one example, Brand pointed to the college’s recent application to the TAACCCT grant program. “We put in a grant for \$2.3 million for a program that we just started, and without a doubt, the EMSI data and analysis of that data added great depth to the proposal forwarded for approval consideration.”

Using Analyst data enables the FTCC staff to attack grant writing with purpose and direction. Now they are able to prioritize programs that need grant funding and track down appropriate funding opportunities. In Lott's words: "We're going to the table each time, saying: 'We know that we need to fill this gap. Now let's look for a grant that would help us fill it,' instead of saying, 'Oh, here's a grant; what should we write to try to apply for it?'" In Brand's words: "We can actually identify the need at our college and use those numbers from Analyst to find funding resources for a well-documented need."

## ***Reaching Out: FTCC and Workforce & Economic Development***

The extent to which data is feeding into FTCC's operations has begun to attract attention from others in the region. In fact, it's part of the reason why FTCC is now the program and fiscal agent for its county's workforce development board, providing the board with labor market data as the board works to retrain laid-off workers and find gainful employment for jobseekers.

Three years ago, the county commissioners approached President Keen about transferring the workforce board function from the county government to FTCC. "They were trying to figure out how to make it better and they came to us to ask if we'd take it on. I agreed, after we'd discussed what it would and wouldn't be. We made the transition and performance went through the roof. Our team did a great job of serving the needs of our community and our county."

It wasn't a small transition. All of the county's employees that were involved in the workforce development function became college employees, so that while all the same people were involved in the day-to-day workforce functions, the delivery agent directly responsible for them was now the college. But the new approach has helped with increased board-member engagement, both within FTCC and across the community. And according to Keen, that success has come because the college has been able to provide board members with EMSI data as they work on each employment situation. "We've used EMSI data to help us make our decisions about where to put our priorities. It's worked out extremely well."

The data that FTCC has used to demonstrate its claims has also been well received by the business leaders and public agency leaders on the workforce board. Carl Mitchell told EMSI how two FTCC staffers had provided a demonstration of Analyst and Career Coach to members of the workforce board, who were so impressed with what they saw that they immediately asked FTCC to generate additional Analyst report—and to send them the data as soon as possible.

***"They are, I think, sold on it; not only on how it is affecting the data decisions at the college and in the Workforce Development decisions, but on how such decisions are going to affect businesses and job-seekers across the county,"*** said Mitchell.

The advantage that EMSI data offers to FTCC's role with the workforce board is similar to what it adds to the college's grant application process: access to specific knowledge about the economy's needs and strengths, and insight into the resources available to meet those needs. It's also proven helpful that both the workforce board and the college itself work with the same data tools and see the same picture of the regional economy. As Mitchell stated: "Our workforce board is getting their data from the same source FTCC is getting their data, the same source our grant staff are getting *their* data. It really makes for some good conversations when everyone is talking from the same data source."

Of course, the standards to which workforce boards are held evolve constantly, but as the college and its workforce department adapt to the new standards, labor market data will remain essential. Keen praised the way Analyst and Career Coach enable the college to react to shifts judiciously. "The new WIA Act will force us to make more changes, and obtaining data to inform all those decisions will be our continued data research because it gives us better information. At one time, so much of the employment information was hidden and you weren't sure you had the real information from the communities you were serving for judgments related to program offerings or jobs. Now we don't suffer from that. We have a clear picture of where we are and where we are going and we don't have to go ask anybody for it."

## **Moving Forward: FTCC's Next Steps With Data**

FTCC continues to integrate labor market data into its work, which includes training more faculty and staff in Analyst and Career Coach. "FTCC has realized that being comfortable with the data software is just as important as analyzing data output from the various EMSI products," Mitchell said. He even mentioned an occasion when one staff member, participating in a remote meeting, needed to answer a job specific question quickly. "He didn't have the password to get into Analyst from that meeting site, but realized he could still get to the data by pulling out his laptop and accessing the same data in Career Coach. He was able to get the data on the spot, allowing decision-makers to have the data in just a few minutes. The other people attending the meeting



were surprised at how easy it was to obtain the needed data and that such data was always open to the public."

Speaking of Career Coach and its public availability, another of FTCC's ongoing projects is the development of a new job assistance center to help students, graduates, and potential students discover the jobs and programs available. The key tool behind this center? Career Coach. "We're opening up a new job assistance center where Career Coach will be loaded on each and every one of the computers," said Dr. Rosemary Kelly.

“We’ll have work-study students in the Center to assist other students, as well as a job placement assistant that will help with job postings, looking at résumé writing and résumé reviews.”

The college is also opening a new facility for an advanced auto-collision-and-repair program, funded by grant money won through an application undergirded by EMSI data. The program is designed to train auto collision mechanics to work with the many new technologies in car design that have created a real shortage in repair technicians. “We’re making a system that will bring all of the certifications together, and we’ll offer nine different certifications that can serve people over multiple industry sectors and that, as a result, will get students into gainful employment opportunities that start at about \$45K a year,” said Keen.

The data FTCC drew from Analyst was central to obtaining funding for the new building to support this new program. “This is a world-class facility, one that the industry is proud to call their own, in concert with us, reflecting a partnership of the highest order,” said Keen. “And of course EMSI was involved, giving us good data on that as well. The Economic Impact Study, Career Coach, and Analyst have helped us make need-based arguments and provide rationale for us and the county to make the investment in the program. The county made an investment in us, and we’re going to pay that money back over five years, but without our ability to tell our story using reliable industry data, we would never have gotten to where we are now.”

That’s the common thread throughout FTCC’s many triumphs—the prime role that access to good data has played. Keen summed it up like this:

***“EMSI has put another arrow in our quiver that allowed us to go out and do a better job of what we do. We’ll continue to do things that’ll take us to a higher level. EMSI has allowed us to use data to make informed decisions. As a result of that, people have an even higher degree of respect for what we do than ever before.”***

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## ABOUT EMSI

*Economic Modeling Specialists Intl., a CareerBuilder company, turns labor market data into useful information that helps organizations understand the connection between economies, people, and work. Using sound economic principles and good data, we build user-friendly services that help educational institutions, workforce planners, and regional developers (such as WIBs, EDOs, chambers, utilities) build a better workforce and improve the economic conditions in their regions.*

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