

EDUCATION

A-B Tech Journal

SPRING 2026

A-B Tech Celebrates Class of 2026

Voices and Visions Bonds
Students and Seniors

Student Experiment Headed for
Outer Space

ABTech
Community College

EDUCATION Journal

A-B Tech
SPRING 2026

3:
A Message from the President

4:
A-B Tech Physics Student Sends Science Experiment to International Space Station

5:
A-B Tech and RiverLink Partner to Create Wetland Area to Reduce Environmental Impacts on Surrounding Community

6-8:
A-B Tech Celebrates the Class of 2026

9:
Commencement Profiles

10-11:
Voices & Visions Intergenerational Project Culminates With Art Students and Seniors Creating Handmade Quilt

12:
A-B Tech's Heather Pack Named Statewide Staff Member of the Year

13:
Pratt & Whitney Named Business Partner of the Year by NC Community College System

14:
Trailblazer Success Profile, Kavik Carter Recognized for Leadership Skills

14:
A-B Tech's Jay Lively Receives Starfish Award for Exemplary Work in Prison Education

15:
A-B Tech Awarded \$1.04 Million to Build Future Workforce in Asheville, Buncombe and Madison Counties

16:
News Briefs

17-18:
Campus Events

18:
Calendar of Events

19:
Get Help with Fall Enrollment

A-B Tech Education Journal is published by the Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College Office of Community Relations & Marketing.

Publisher

President John Gossett

Managing Editor

Kerri Glover

Writers

Kristin D'Agostino
Kerri Glover

Graphic Designer

Don Perkins

Photography

Don Perkins
Josh Weaver
Kristin D'Agostino

Board of Trustees

Chair

Joe Barwick, Ph. D.

Vice Chair

Judy Lewis

Michael Garrison
Himanshu Karvir
Matt Kern
Libby Kyles
Roger Metcalf, Ed. D.
Anthony Penland
Frances Ramsey
Roger Reid
Ben Teague
Glenda Weinert, DBA
Drew West

Student Government Association President

Robert Uhren

Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges to award associate degrees, diplomas and certificates. Contact the Commission on Colleges at 1866 Southern Lane, Decatur, Georgia 30033-4097 or call 404-679-4500 for questions about the accreditation of Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College.

Equal Opportunity Educational Institution

All rights reserved. No parts of the material printed may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage retrieval system without the permission of the publisher.

153,000 copies printed at a cost of .22 cents each.

ABTech
Community College



A-B TECH EXPERIMENT IN SPACE P. 4



A-B TECH 2026 COMMENCEMENT P. 6



VOICES AND VISIONS P. 10

A Message from the President



Dr. John Gossett

A-B Tech's 2026 Commencement was held Saturday, May 16. Following are President John Gossett's remarks (edited for space and format).

Graduates, in this auditorium are the people who supported you through your journey at A-B Tech. They might have washed your clothes, brought over supper, babysat, paid a bill or two, rejoiced with your victories and comforted you when you needed that, too. Do not be embarrassed when you walk across the stage in a few moments because they are rejoicing in your accomplishment. They love you. They are proud of you. Allow them to show you in front of all these witnesses.



First Generation College Graduates, please stand. You have changed the trajectory of your family! You have set a new standard for the generations that follow. Someday your grandchildren will tell the story of you being the first in the family to go to college

and they will ask themselves where the family would be if not for you and the people here today who supported you on this journey. You are truly our TRAILBLAZERS! Congratulations!

Faculty, Staff and Administrators, thank you for your work with these graduates. Inside and outside the classroom, supporting our students, managing the day-to-day business of the college and raising money for student scholarships and emergency funds. Our students' celebration is your celebration as well.

I began my career as a Business Administration instructor in 1987, so I have been to dozens of graduations, pinning ceremonies, and completion celebrations of all kinds. They never get old. I wish you could see the students' faces up close as they walk across the stage. Some are embarrassed when their families scream and shout, some have cried at

the joy of their achievement, all are proud of their accomplishments. I am blessed with one heck of a view! This moment is why we do what we do.

So graduates, what is your "why?" Why did you choose your major, your time, your school? We do what we do because humans are meaning makers. From the moment we ask our first question, we are trying to understand our place in the world and leave it better than we found it. Purpose drives us forward – not just for survival, but for significance. We study, we build, we love, and we struggle because each action is our way of answering a quiet question inside us: Why am I here? That question pushes us to turn curiosity into knowledge, effort into progress, and dreams into realities. Even our failures matter, because they teach us what we value and who we are becoming.

We also do what we do because we are not meant to do it alone. Humans are wired for connection, and much of our motivation comes from the impact we have on one another. We act out of love, responsibility, hope, and sometimes fear – but always with the awareness that our choices ripple outward. We help because we were helped.

We lead because others are counting on us. In the end, "why" is less about individual success and more about shared growth – using our talents to serve something larger than ourselves, and discovering that purpose is strongest when it is rooted in compassion and contribution.

Therefore, I encourage you to know your "why" and embrace it. Because only then will you truly be happy. Earning a college degree is a tremendous achievement, and we thank you for choosing A-B Tech. As you move forward with your life journey, we assure you that A-B Tech will always be a welcoming home to you.

Sincerely,

John Gossett
President

A-B Tech Physics Student Sends Science Experiment to International Space Station

A-B Tech is one of 20 schools and colleges nationwide selected to send a science experiment into outer space as part of the Student Spaceflight Experiments Program (SSEP).

The experiment, which examines how lubricating oils respond to microgravity, will be tested at the International Space Station (ISS) in coming months. It was developed by a group of three physics students led by Diesel and Heavy Equipment Technology student Curtis Epley, who is



Curtis Epley

training to be a truck mechanic and diesel engine specialist. Physics instructor Shannon Bonomi, who is leading the project, says the experiment's aim is to give astronauts more options for lubricating spaceship mechanisms, including engines, pipes, and other moving parts.

"Curtis is applying his (automotive) knowledge to building in space," Bonomi said. "(Otherwise) he never would have applied that knowledge to something so esoteric or abstract. He stumbled upon novel research. This experiment has never been done before (by SSEP)."

Student teams across the United States and Canada designed experiments in diverse fields, including seed germination, crystal growth, and cell biology. A-B Tech's experiment was selected in December and is currently being developed further in preparation for launch to the ISS.

Bonomi said her three physics classes range from beginning to more advanced students and include transfer students who intend to study science or medicine at a university, as well as students from other programs who are fulfilling a basic pre-requisite.

"My classes are not typically full of university transfer students," Bonomi said. "They are mostly tradespeople, mechanics, pilots. It was cool to see a bunch of people who are into their cars apply that knowledge to spacecraft."

For the final step after submitting their experiments, students from across the nation will gather at the Kennedy Space Center to watch their experiments launch into space on a SpaceX rocket. After four to six weeks on the International Space Station, the experiment will be returned to Earth for harvesting and analysis. Dubbed

"Mission 21", this is the 23rd flight of the SSEP, which began in 2010 and has included student experiments by countries including Brazil, Portugal, Canada, and Ukraine.

In conjunction with the project, A-B Tech celebrated its first Space Fest this March. The event showcased the experiment, a walk-in mobile planetarium, and a collection of more than 100 space badges designed by local middle school, high school, and college students who were invited to compete to design a badge that will accompany A-B Tech's experiment into space. Artist Paige Wiggins was awarded a cash prize for her winning badge.

Bonomi said the SSEP experience has been great for her students. The ones pursuing further science studies have gained valuable experience writing proposals that justify their research, while students from other programs were inspired to see science not just as a required course, but in a real-life context. Aviation students were especially intrigued with the logistics connected to space flight, she said.

"They never considered what it means to be an astronaut," she said. "They started thinking about what it would be like to fly through space, and a whole bunch started saying 'space is cool'. It took a new set of skills when they walked into that classroom. They worked hard and did a great job."



Paige Wiggins



Shannon Bonomi



A-B Tech and RiverLink Partner to Create Wetland Area to Reduce Environmental Impacts on Surrounding Community

A-B Tech and the nonprofit RiverLink partnered to create a campus wetland area that is reducing stormwater runoff, improving water quality in Haith Branch and the French Broad River, and serving as an outdoor classroom.

An asphalt parking lot on A-B Tech's main campus has been transformed into a wetland that collects and cleans stormwater runoff from 16 acres of hard surfaces across the campus. Instead of flowing into storm drains, rainwater now spreads out and soaks into the ground, allowing native plants and soils to naturally filter out pollutants.

The project was conceived by A-B Tech's former CFO/COO Dirk Wilmoth, who was committed to addressing the negative impacts of stormwater runoff from A-B Tech's campus on surrounding neighborhoods and waterways.

The project was identified in 2021 by a Blue Earth Engineering study that explored water quality issues impacting the French Broad River and smaller tributary streams that flow through the Central Asheville Watershed, according to RiverLink Programs Director Renee Fortner. She said it took four years from project conception to securing grant funding to completing construction. A groundbreaking ceremony had been planned for only four days after Hurricane Helene struck the region. The storm delayed construction, but the project was completed in September 2025.

"Dirk also connected our staff and the design team to the college's Sustainability Committee, which allowed us to form collaborative relationships with other A-B Tech staff, faculty and students," Fortner said. Among them were Survey/Geomatics instructor Christopher Milan, whose students conducted a topographic survey of the

gravel parking lot where the pond now exists.

"Haith Branch was previously inundated with large sediment loads caused by erosion from the volume of stormwater entering from campus parking lots," said A-B Tech Biology Instructor Helen Burrell. "For years, I have taken students to sample macroinvertebrates and chemical parameters in Haith Branch. We sampled areas above and below where the sediment entered the stream.

We have seen differences in the numbers and kinds of animals present in the two areas. I am excited to sample again in these same areas now that the wetland is in place and see how the numbers and kinds of animals may change over time."

Burrell said the second phase of the project includes purchasing equipment for students to conduct chemical and macroinvertebrate sampling of the wetland and for visualization of organisms living in the wetland, as well as other uses.

"Biology students will be sampling for aquatic macroinvertebrates and performing chemical testing and microbiology students will be testing for bacteria," she said. "Chemistry and physics classes are also looking to use the wetland for some labs. Construction management students are currently building a storage pod for the outdoor classroom area. The art department is planning to reuse leftover clay to make tiles that can decorate the concrete area where water enters the wetland."

Since Hurricane Helene, Burrell said more people are aware of stormwater impacts. "We hope that this project at A-B Tech can provide an example of what can be done to reduce the flow of stormwater entering streams, especially during large rain events."



A-B Tech Celebrates the Class of 2026

A-B Tech held its 2026 Commencement on Saturday, May 16 at Harrah's Cherokee Center in downtown Asheville. President John Gossett presided over the ceremony and Sharon Decker delivered the commencement address.

The College awarded 871 degrees and diplomas for the 2025-26 academic year, and approximately 400 graduates took part in the ceremony. The arena was

filled with families, friends, faculty and college staff who celebrated the Class of 2026.

"This is the day we celebrate the hard-earned success of our students," Gossett said. "I have been to dozens of graduations, pinning ceremonies, and completion celebrations of all kinds, and they never get old. This moment is why we do what we do."





Sharon Decker speaks at Commencement



Gossett and Vice President for Instruction Beth Stewart recognized first-generation college graduates in their remarks. "You have changed the trajectory of your life and your families' lives," Gossett said. Stewart highlighted "First Generation Graduate" pins that were distributed for the first time this year to first-generation graduates, recognizing herself among them.





Decker, who has had a distinguished career serving North Carolina in the public, private and non-profit sectors, currently is senior advisor to Governor Josh Stein for long-term recovery in Western North Carolina and previously was NC Secretary of Commerce. She also leads a non-profit called Tapestry Collaborative that unites for-profit, non-profit and public organizations committed to restoring Western North Carolina's economy and spirit.

"Community college education is important to North Carolina's success because they train our workforce," Decker said. "We're the number one state in business right now and a lot of that is because ... community colleges are North Carolina's secret weapon."

Decker urged graduates to remain in Western North Carolina to help the region continue to recover from Hurricane Helene and prosper in coming years. She also offered advice to help them navigate life's inevitable cycles and challenges, citing four things she's learned:

1. Remain open to the possibilities ... growth has no expiration date.
2. Find more time to be still and quiet. Our world is filled with noise ... we can't hear ourselves think through all the noise. Make quiet space to think.
3. Live a life of thankfulness and gratitude. Look for the progress, thank God for today. Choose to not be regretful, be thankful.
4. Think about this journey as a dance . I do believe you can have it all, but not all at the same time. You will have to say no to some things ... but you can go back to them later in life. There are periods of fast-moving rhythms and periods of pause ... but there is a journey here to be enjoyed almost endlessly.

Highlights for the Class of 2026 include:

University transfer degrees awarded to students who intend to pursue four-year degrees: 191 Associate in Arts, 73 Associate in Science, 18 Associate in Fine Arts, 3 Associate in Engineering, and 9 Associate in Arts: Teacher Preparation

- Associate in Applied Sciences (AAS) degrees awarded to 446 students who intend to pursue careers in a range of fields spanning aviation to welding.
- High school students who earned associate degrees from A-B Tech. Included are 61 students from Buncombe County and Madison County high schools, as well as home-schooled students, who take college courses for free through the NC Career & College Promise high school dual enrollment program.
- Five graduates from the Western Correctional Center for Women who will earned Social and Human Services Technology AAS degrees with honors.
- First graduate earning an Artificial Intelligence (AI) AAS degree. The AI program began two years ago.

Learn more about A-B Tech's 2026 outstanding graduates at abtech.edu/news.





Freedom and a Life Outdoors Geomatics Technology Graduate Adam Garrison Found His Dream Career

Geomatics Technology graduate Adam Garrison, 24, was on track to become a physician's assistant when Covid threw a wrench into his plans. The Mars Hill native witnessed doctors and nurses pushed to the limit as local clinics and hospitals became inundated with patients.

Craving a new career, Garrison took three months off from Western Carolina University to work on a Colorado ranch and get his bearings. Until then, his work experience was limited to a high school grocery store job and work at Mission Hospital as a certified nursing aide. He wasn't sure what path to take next when a relative invited him to job shadow at his surveying company, and Garrison discovered he liked the idea of working outdoors and on his own.

Surveyors and geomatics technicians measure points on, above and below the earth's surface. They may be part of a crew that includes engineers, landscape architects, and urban planners.

Garrison was offered a job at Banks Creek Surveying in Weaverville and presently works there full-time as a Party Chief, overseeing a field crew. After a few years, he decided to complete A-B Tech's Geomatics Technology degree, which will allow him to advance in the field. He graduated in May and also received an Academic Achievement Award for excelling in academics, interpersonal skills and leadership abilities.

"During his time in the Geomatics Technology program, Adam has excelled in the classroom," said Computer Technologies and Geomatics Chair Pete Kennedy. "He has consistently sharpened his skills throughout."

Garrison is on track to take a state exam and two national exams to become certified as a Professional Land Surveyor (PLS), a role that oversees employee training, field work and research. "Geomatics better suits (me) because I enjoy being outdoors and being in a new place working on jobs," he said.

To learn more about A-B Tech's Geomatics Technology Program, visit abtech.edu/geomatics.



High School and A-B Tech Graduate Ana Sanchez-Grande Aims to Serve Bilingual Families as a Nurse

Ana Sanchez-Grande, 19, recently graduated from Buncombe County Early College with her high school diploma and from A-B Tech with an Associate in Arts transfer degree.

Her A-B Tech degree was earned through the Career & College Promise high school dual enrollment program, which offers free tuition to high school students. She also received an academic achievement award given to one Associate in Arts student for excelling in her classes and exhibiting outstanding leadership and interpersonal skills.

"Ana holds herself to a high standard and her professionalism shines through both in lab and lecture," said Biology Department Chair Nga Pace. "(She) has an eagerness to learn and excels with her understanding of the course material."

Sanchez-Grande, who plans to attend UNC Greensboro for a four-year nursing degree, said A-B Tech gave her a head start through her transfer degree, as well as a CNA course and many high-level STEM courses. If you would've told 14-year-old Sanchez-Grande that she would be on a steady career path at 19, she wouldn't have believed you. It's taken years of slow, steady work and patience to get where she is today. As she acclimated to college classes, she became more outgoing and confident. She also credits A-B Tech's small class sizes, getting to know her teachers and peers, as well as support from Locke Library and the Academic Achievement Center.

Sanchez-Grande began thinking of nursing after spending time with her Mexican-born mother at medical appointments where she helped translate important details. Though she initially found translating to be draining, she realized the importance of the role. Taking a CNA course clinched the deal. After spending time with patients, she began to more fully understand what nursing entailed and felt she was up to the task.

Learn more about A-B Tech's high school dual enrollment program at abtech.edu/CCP.

Voices & Visions Intergenerational Project Culminates With Art Students and Seniors Creating Handmade Quilt

A-B Tech students and faculty gathered in May to celebrate the grand finale of Voices & Visions, a year-long intergenerational oral history project that culminated with art students and Carolina Village retirement community residents collaborating on a quilt inspired by the seniors' colorful life stories.

Nearly 20 Carolina Village residents participated in Voices & Visions during the academic year, sharing their stories with 60 communication, fine arts, and videography students. The quilt was the final phase of the project, with art students' designs converted into a quilt by six talented Carolina Village residents.

Designing quilt squares had been part of A-B Tech art instructor Ani Volkan's 2 D Design class since 2022. When Communication & Fine Arts Chair Rebekah Handy first approached her last fall hoping to collaborate on the new oral history project, Volkan jumped on board, happy to have a tangible way to bring the assignment to life. Coincidentally, Carolina Village also had a group of residents that met regularly to quilt together, so a quilt seemed the perfect way to tie the project together.

In the past, Volkan's students drew inspiration from contemporary fiber artists for their projects. For the first time this year, they were inspired by real people and their stories. Volkan said the assignment really seemed to click



for the first time. "I feel like it also made them more invested in the project," she said. "(It was) about people now as opposed to just words. They had a lot of fun getting to meet the residents and hearing their stories."

Last fall, Volkan's students interviewed a group of Carolina Village residents to glean inspiration for their squares' colors and patterns. Each interview was then condensed to several adjectives that guided designs meant to represent the seniors' lives.

For example, student Teresa Rodriguez-Acosta interviewed Diane North, a former museum curator, whom she described as "lively", and "caring". These words to her represented the colors orange, yellow and blue. "I thought of bright sunny days," she said. "A newly sprouted forest in the spring ... and the beach. I chose the colors to achieve a warm color palette while adding the light blue for contrast."

Rodriguez-Acosta chose both a "Rose of Sharon" design and a "Basket" design to represent Diane. "Both of them remind me of her strength and resilience," she said. "The basket with its geometric lines represents strength and resilience, while the softer Rose of Sharon represents her caring and lively side."

The Final Phase

Carolina Village Wellness Coordinator Aleen Dailey, who also happens to be Volkan's twin sister, helped coordinate the last phase of the project: transforming the students' paper designs into fabric quilting squares. The fabric squares were stitched by a group of several women as winter turned to spring. In April, Dailey and the women gathered in Carolina Village's art room, a space complete with several sewing machines. The space hummed with





activity as the quilters spread the squares out on a large table like puzzle pieces to determine the best visual fit.

In the following weeks, the residents stitched the fabric squares into a quilt and sent it off to Beginnings Quilt Shop for the final touches on a long arm machine, adding the embroidered names of students around the edges. The six residents who played a role in creating the quilt were Evelyn Uhrlass, Jane Gorey, Connie Stanfield, Trish Hendershot, Marilyn Hoffman and Janet Thatcher.

Gorey, 80, and Hoffman, 87, discussed the experience. An avid quilter, Hoffman grew up in Philadelphia in a creative home. Her parents were in the furniture business, and Hoffman taught herself to sew at age five. She now quilts for fun and to maintain mental dexterity. "I love matching the fabrics and doing the mathematics," she said. "I go into a fabric store like men go into a hardware store."

Gorey, a New York native, was tasked with sewing all the squares together. She began sewing as a teenager when her mom got her lessons "to keep me out of trouble." Later, as a mother, she often made clothing for her children. At first, Gorey was nervous at the idea of getting all the squares to align at the top of the quilt. In the end, she was relieved to get help from the other five women involved. "It turned into a real bonding project," she said.

The finished quilt was unveiled at A-B Tech's Mission Health Conference Center on May 1. The seniors, students and faculty gathered to admire the brightly colored patterns and designs and pose for photos. It was a treat for everyone who participated in the project, preserved for years to come.

The quilt will be on display, along with artifacts, at A-B Tech's Locke Library from May 26-August 3. Learn more about the Voices & Visions project at abtech.edu/voices-and-visions.



A-B Tech's Heather Pack Named Statewide Staff Member of the Year

Student Support Services Director Guides Students to Finish Line



In the 11 years Student Services Director Heather Pack has worked with A-B Tech students, she has seen the community grapple with many challenges, including the pandemic, the opioid crisis, and Hurricane Helene. Through it all, Pack has been a guiding light for both students and staff. In recognition of her contributions, the 46-year-old Hudson native was honored by the NC Community College System with a statewide award for 2026 Staff Member of the Year.

"We are beyond proud of Heather Pack," said A-B Tech President John Gossett. "I have never worked with a person who cares more about our students and employees – she is an outstanding example of who we are and what we do."

From her early twenties, Pack knew she wanted to work with young adults as a youth minister. After graduating Appalachian State University, she worked for a few years as at churches in Wisconsin and Florida. Though she enjoyed her work, she began encountering challenges she'd never anticipated. "I had one student who was cutting (herself) and her mom wasn't around," Pack said. "I was brand new, and I didn't know what I was doing ... I realized I needed to get more training."

Pack moved back to Hudson and applied to graduate school at Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary in Charlotte for Christian Counseling. In the meantime, she landed a job as an employment skills instructor at Caldwell Community College and Technical Institute, where her father worked as network administrator. She quickly fell in love with working for a community college. After completing her counseling degree, Pack stayed for nine years as a counselor and advisor.

Pack joined A-B Tech as a student advisor in 2014 after moving to Asheville with her husband and two children. Within two years, she moved into a counseling position and was promoted to director of the Student Support Services Department in 2017. Little did she know that within just a few months in that role, she would be faced with a series of crises in the college community.

When drug overdoses in North Carolina reached a historic high and fentanyl, a new synthetic opioid, flooded the state in 2017-18, A-B Tech had three students overdose on campus, including Information Technology student Stuart Moseley who died as a result.

Pack and her team made it a priority to find ways they could better support students who were struggling with addiction. She had gone to a conference on mental health and heard about "reset rooms", where people with mental health struggles could find support. A-B Tech's Reset Room, the first of the kind in the area, was born with support from Stuart Moseley's mother, Anne Seaman, who donated funds to furnish the room with couches, computers and a small kitchen setup.

Nearly a decade later, the space is established in the Elm Building as a safe haven available to all students. Whether doing homework, chatting with a classmate, or receiving support from a volunteer, the Reset Room has been a great success, with its highest annual numbers reaching over 200.

Pack said students are grappling with many other issues. Some are seeking help finding a career path or questioning their academic abilities. Others struggle with anxiety and depression. "Over the last 20 years, people have been becoming more digitally connected," she said. "That doesn't take the place of human connection. They might have people they talk to on TikTok, but that's not the same as me going for a coffee or a walk."

Pack's favorite part of her job is helping students identify and work toward long-term goals. "Often people come in and say, 'I should already be at this point in my life.' Says who? Every misstep helps you become who you are today and directs you to who you want to become. You're not off the path. You're on your own path."

Pack credits her colleagues Whitney Husz and Sherron Bristol for their fellowship and support. The three women regularly check in with each other and step in if someone needs a break after a difficult counseling session. She also makes sure to laugh. "An inappropriate sense of humor", she said, is a necessary requirement for the job.

On a particularly stressful day, you might find Pack in A-B Tech's food pantry organizing the canned goods, which she said is particularly therapeutic. "I like to see an end product," she said. "It gives me a sense of control in a chaotic world."

Pratt & Whitney Named Business Partner of the Year by NC Community College System, Employee Trained by A-B Tech Tapped as First “Made in Asheville” Success Story

A-B Tech was part of a Buncombe County team that helped recruit aerospace manufacturer Pratt & Whitney to Asheville and has been training its employees since 2021 through the Advanced Manufacturing Center's customized training program, now called NCEdge.

The partnership has been so successful that the NC Community College System recently named Pratt & Whitney statewide Large Business Partner of the Year. A-B Tech has now trained hundreds of Pratt & Whitney hires, including Brian Swahn, who was recently featured as the Advanced Manufacturing Center's first Made in Asheville success story.

Swahn, 43, had ruled out college after a couple of semesters and spent 12 years teaching himself software development and video game design. A longtime Dungeons and Dragons fan, he decided to try his hand at creating a video game that would capture what he loved best about the fantasy genre. His first role-playing video game, *The Great Gaias*, was a surprise success. But when Swahn released a second game in 2023, it didn't sell as well, and the father of two was forced to reconsider his life plans. He and his wife had recently sold their Long Island home to move to Bent Creek, where they purchased land to be near family. Soon after the move, Swahn began to search job listings.

Swahn's sister told him about a short-term manufacturing course at A-B Tech that came with the promise of a job at Pratt & Whitney after training. The course fee would be covered by the state as part of NCEdge.

"I knew nothing about manufacturing," Swahn said. "It was a word I'd hear politicians talk about. I had no idea what the job would entail, but my wife said, 'take it and keep your mind open'. I told myself I'd give it a year and if I don't like it, I'll leave."

The Pratt & Whitney new hire course focused on safety and CNC machining, and to Swahn's surprise, he had a natural knack for G-code, the type of programming the machines used. "Coming from a software background, I had taught myself how to code JavaScript and Python. I thought it's another programming language I can learn; that's interesting!"

After landing a job at Pratt & Whitney, Swahn felt a similar sense of excitement walking into his new place of employment for the first time. He compares the sensation to the first time he attended a gaming convention in Boston in his late twenties. "The wide open spaces and futuristic machines gave me the same feeling," Swahn said. "I fed on that. I said, 'there's something special going on here, and it's happening now, and I want to be a part of it.'"

Swahn initially worked as a machine operator creating parts



for jet engines. The work on a line involved drilling holes into small, stationary rings that guide air through the engines. He found he had a natural curiosity about engineering and how the parts worked, which helped make the job interesting.

In January 2024, he was promoted to Team Lead, where he works to support machine operators and make sure the line is moving smoothly. The job is extroverted and changes day to day, offering lots of opportunities to solve problems.

Swahn, who loves to learn, hopes to move up to a more challenging position as Quality Engineer, where he'd inspect parts to ensure they're working properly. Along with working full-time, he's also pursuing an associate's degree in business administration from A-B Tech, which his employer is funding. Pratt & Whitney, he said, covers three hours of paid time off each week for education as part of a scholarship program. Swahn devotes the first three hours of his Thursday shift to studying.

Swahn is excited about his future. Despite his move to manufacturing, he still stays connected to his video gaming passion. *The Great Gaias* is still selling well online these days, and he enjoys interacting with customers.

"I stuck with one thing I was passionate about, and I created something I'm incredibly proud of; it didn't work out, but it led me to where I am now," he said. "Life is weird ... but good things can and will happen if you keep your mind open and look for good opportunities."



Trailblazer Success Profile, Kavik Carter Recognized for Leadership Skills



For A-B Tech Information Technology (IT) student Kavik Carter, being a good leader is about giving back to those around you. Carter, 29, currently does this in his role as president of A-B Tech's Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA) chapter by mentoring and encouraging his fellow

students. While also juggling academics with running his own automotive detailing business, Carter has won multiple awards this spring for his leadership skills.

He received the annual Leadership Award from the Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce's PROpel AVL program for young professionals ages 21-40. The award recognizes organizational leadership skills and dedication to the community.

Carter also was recognized at the FBLA's 2026 State Leadership Conference in Charlotte with a 2nd Place award in Organizational Behavior & Leadership and a 4th Place award in Foundations of Technology. He will go on to compete at the National Leadership Conference June 6-8 in Las Vegas, along with fellow FBLA award winner Aurora Perez-Martin. The two will represent North Carolina against top competitors from across the country.

Lastly, he was A-B Tech's nominee this spring for the NC Community College System's Robert W. Scott Leadership Award, a statewide recognition that recognizes student leadership.

Business Administration Chair and FBLA faculty advisor Brad Scott attributes Carter's success in large part to his openness, collaborative spirit, and caring nature. "He makes a deliberate effort to meet students exactly where they are, whether they are deeply involved on campus or participating (remotely)," he said.

Carter juggles his FBLA leadership duties along with being a full-time student in A-B Tech's Information Technology program, where he's focused on building skills in Artificial Intelligence (AI). He also manages his own automotive detailing business, Kavik Customs, which is based in Old Fort.

Carter enrolled at A-B Tech last spring and soon stepped up to rebuild its FBLA chapter, which had been dormant for several years. The group grew from seven members at the beginning of the year to 20 by the end of the spring semester. Carter said the opportunity to lead the FBLA was a chance to open doors for students who may not have had access otherwise to professional development and a supportive, like-minded community.

After graduating, Carter hopes to own multiple businesses that "sit at the intersection of technology, AI, and real human impact." He is currently working on developing technology that would help manage care for dementia patients. "My goal is to build ventures that aren't just profitable, but meaningful," he said. "(I want to lead) companies that push the IT and AI space forward in ways that actually improve people's lives."

A-B Tech's Jay Lively Receives Starfish Award for Exemplary Work in Prison Education

Pathways to Freedom Coordinator Jay Lively was recognized for his work by the NC Department of Adult Education with a Starfish Award last fall for helping A-B Tech students in correctional facilities to stay on track in the wake of Hurricane Helene.

According to Brooke Wheeler, Senior Director of Education and Programs Services at the NC Department of Adult Correction, the Starfish Award recognizes staff in prison education who go above and beyond through mentorship, innovation, compassion, or service.

Lively managed A-B Tech's prison programming after Helene caused mass power outages and water shortages in local prisons. Within days, A-B Tech students at the Western Correctional Center for Women and Craggy Correctional Center for Men were evacuated to other facilities across the state. Many of the students were expecting to graduate in May, and the hurricane put their plans in jeopardy.

"My goal was to keep them on track," Lively said. "I knew right away if we weren't able to salvage that semester's courses,

there was a high likelihood they wouldn't have graduated before release."

To ensure class continuity, Lively worked to deliver supplies, including notebooks, books, and class materials. He worked with wardens and staff at the prisons to keep communication flowing. And he teamed up with A-B Tech instructors to bring class materials to students to ensure they could stay on track, despite the stress of adjusting to a new living environment. Thanks to his and the other instructors' efforts, 14 students graduated from A-B Tech last May, the majority of them with honors.

For Lively, the award is a sign that his hard work is paying off. "It meant a lot for the Department of Adult Corrections to see the work that A-B Tech is doing, that I'm doing, and to recognize it." He said.

Learn more about Lively's story and A-B Tech's Prison Education program at abtech.edu/prison-education.



A-B Tech Awarded \$1.04 Million to Build Future Workforce in Asheville, Buncombe and Madison Counties

A-B Tech received more than \$1.04 million in grant support this spring for a new regional work-based learning ecosystem that will prepare high school students for good, high-paying jobs in Western North Carolina.

The college was granted \$750,000 from the North Carolina GSK Foundation and \$299,338 from the Dogwood Health Trust to fund the creation of Asheville-Buncombe-Madison (ABM) Works. The program will connect high school students in Asheville and Buncombe and Madison counties with internships, pre-apprenticeships, and career-focused training in high-demand industries.

"North Carolina's workforce needs are evolving, and we must be bold and innovative in how we prepare our students for success," said Dr. John Gossett, President of A-B Tech. "ABM Works will connect our young people with opportunities right here in Buncombe and Madison counties – helping them earn while they learn, while giving our local employers the skilled talent they need to thrive. We are deeply grateful to the NC GSK Foundation and Dogwood Health Trust for their generous investment in the future of our communities."

Debbie Cromwell, A-B Tech's Director of Work-Based Learning, said ABM Works is based on the highly successful Surry-Yadkin Works, North Carolina's first multi-county work-based learning program.

Cromwell said. "With the economic destruction of Hurricane Helene shortly after the tragedy of COVID, many jobs were lost, and many businesses remain short-staffed. A-B Tech is committed to helping make a difference, and this is one of the best ways we can help."

ABM Works initially will focus on the healthcare, early childhood education, advanced manufacturing, and skilled trades sectors. In preparation, Cromwell is hiring more staff to assist high schools and meeting with a number of partners, including school systems, local governments, the Mountain Area Workforce Development Board, P-20 Council, My FutureNC, Chambers of Commerce, and MAHEC.

"Through ABM Works, A-B Tech will partner with our local school systems, employers, and community organizations to give students hands-on learning experiences, mentorship, and direct access to in-demand career pathways," Cromwell said. "The goal is to build an inclusive, employer-informed talent pipeline that keeps skilled graduates in the region and supports long-term economic growth."

ABM Works will prioritize equitable access to career opportunities, especially for students from low-income, rural, or underrepresented backgrounds. By bridging the gap between education and employment, the program will help reduce the number of young people ages 16 to 24 who are not in school or employed.

The grants from the NC GSK Foundation and Dogwood Health Trust will help fund the program's launch, student stipends, industry certifications, and staff coordination among schools, employers, and community partners.

For more information, contact Debbie Cromwell at (828) 398-7603. Learn more about A-B Tech's Work-Based Learning programs at abtech.edu/wbl.



"It is a unified 'grow your own' approach to meeting local workforce needs in collaboration with local employers and others to increase economic stability in our region,"

News Briefs

A-B Tech Honors 2026 Employees of the Year

Six employees were honored as A-B Tech's Employees of the Year during the college's spring picnic on May 13. They were nominated by peers and students earlier in the year, and final selections were made by the college's Faculty Senate, Staff Association, and Continuing Education Division.

All winners receive a certificate and cash prize from A-B Tech. The Faculty Member of the Year and Staff Member of the Year also will be entered into a statewide contest sponsored by the NC Community College System this fall.

President John Gossett presented awards to the following employees:

Faculty Member of the Year:

Rebekah Handy, Chair of Communication and Fine Arts

Staff Member of the Year:

Sharon Smith, Director of the Academic Achievement Center

Adjunct Faculty Member of the Year:

Dave Shimek, English Language Acquisition Instructor

Continuing Education Instructor of the Year:

Greg Meadows, Plumbing Instructor (and founder of the program)

Advisor of the Year:

Molly Hart, Coordinator of Compliance, Advising and Educational Partnerships

Part-Time Staff Member of the Year:

Nancy Kool, Information Center Coordinator

Congratulations to our award-winning colleagues who exemplify RISE and the mission, vision and values of A-B Tech!



A-B Tech's Culinary Team to Compete in American Culinary Federation's National Finals in June (Again)

A-B Tech won first place in the Student Team of the Year category at the American Culinary Federation's (ACF) Southeast Regional competition in Winston-Salem in March and now advances to represent the Southeast in the ACF National Finals this summer. It marks a record-setting 16th regional win and national competition for A-B Tech, which won in 2007 and 2024.

Team members are Rowan Armstrong, Kat Douvres, Kiah Jackson, Martin Deyman (captain) and Joshua Jimison. Their coaches are chef instructors Michelle Bailey and Stephen Hertz, CEC.

Culinary Arts alumnus and 2025 team captain Ezrah Hansen, who is currently working and pursuing a baking certificate at A-B Tech, also won a gold medal in the Student Chef category, earning the third highest score in the country.

The team and Hansen will compete in the ACF National Finals in Grand Rapids June 28-July 2.

Small Business Center Employees Recognized

Jill Sparks, Executive Director of A-B Tech's Small Business Center, was honored with the US Small Business Administration's Award of Recognition for her outstanding leadership and collaborative efforts in supporting the community's recovery from Hurricane Helene. The award was presented at the SBCN/SBTDC's Annual Professional Development Joint Conference in Asheville by Mike Arriola, the SBA's NC District Director.

Daphne Carson won the NC Small Business Center Network's (SBCN) Service Excellence Award at the SBCN/SBTDC's Annual Professional Development Joint Conference in Asheville.



Campus Events

Earth Day Festival



Basic Law Enforcement Training Graduation



Academic Achievement Awards



Campus **Events**

WNC Leadership Academy Graduation



Calendar of Events

June 4 **High School Equivalency Graduation**

June 11 **Aviation Open House**

June 15 **Fall Registration Opens**

June 15 **K. Ray Bailey Golf Tournament**

June 18 **BLET Graduation**

July 14 **Craft Beverage Institute of the Southeast Orientation**

July 14 **Skilled Trades Open House**

August 24 **Fall Semester Begins**



Get Help with Fall Enrollment

Registration is now open for 2026 Fall Semester classes that begin August 24. Following is information to help prospective students explore programs and classes, apply for financial aid and scholarships, schedule a campus tour or watch a video tour, and more. We also invite you to call our Information Center at 828.398.7900.

Explore programs and register:

abtech.edu/welcome

Admissions:

admissions@abtech.edu

or 828.398.7886

- Application
- Residency
- Program placement and testing
- High school transcripts

Outreach and Recruiting:

abtech.edu/campus-tours

or 828.398.7692

- Campus tours
- Open houses

Advising:

advising@abtech.edu

or 828.398.7900

- Selecting a program
- International students

Financial Aid:

FinancialAidOffice@abtech.edu

or 828.398.7920

- FAFSA
- Financial Aid
- Scholarships
- NextNC Scholarship (apply at abtech.edu/NextNC)

Registrar:

registrar@abtech.edu

or 828.398.7900

- College transcripts



Asheville-Buncombe
Technical Community College
340 Victoria Road
Asheville, NC 28801

NONPROFIT ORG
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
ASHEVILLE, NC
PERMIT NO. 440
ECRWSS

Residential Customer

Register Now!
for Fall classes
that begin
August 24!

For more information, visit us online
at **abtech.edu/welcome**.



**YOUR DREAMS.
OUR MISSION.**

ASHEVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA • (828) 398-7900