



CHARTER

FURNITURE

Building Talent, Driving Results: How Charter Furniture Turned Internships into Impact

For more than a century, **Charter Furniture** has been a cornerstone of North Carolina's manufacturing industry, producing custom upholstered seating for leading hospitality brands worldwide. But like many manufacturers, the company continues to evolve—navigating market disruptions, workforce challenges, and the need for continuous operational improvement.

That's where a connection with NC State University Industry Extension Services (IES) made a measurable difference.

Anna Mangum, Regional Manager at IES, connected Charter Furniture to the NC State University Rural Works Internship Program, opening the door to new talent, fresh perspectives, and unexpected innovation.

A Strategic Investment in Talent

"At the time, we were looking for ways to grow—both as a company and in how we develop people," said Lori Imhoff, HR Manager at Charter Furniture. "When Anna introduced us to Rural Works, we saw an opportunity to not only support students, but to bring new ideas into our operation."

The company jumped in, hiring Carol Cottrell, an NC State University Industrial Systems Engineering student, in

the summer of 2024 and two more engineering student interns, Brayden Kauffman and Jeremy Luz, in the summer of 2025. While the experience came with a learning curve, it quickly proved its value.

"We thought we had it all planned out," said Cynthia Given, Engineering Manager, who leads the internship program at Charter. "But what we learned is that when you give students the freedom to explore, they bring forward ideas you never would have thought of."

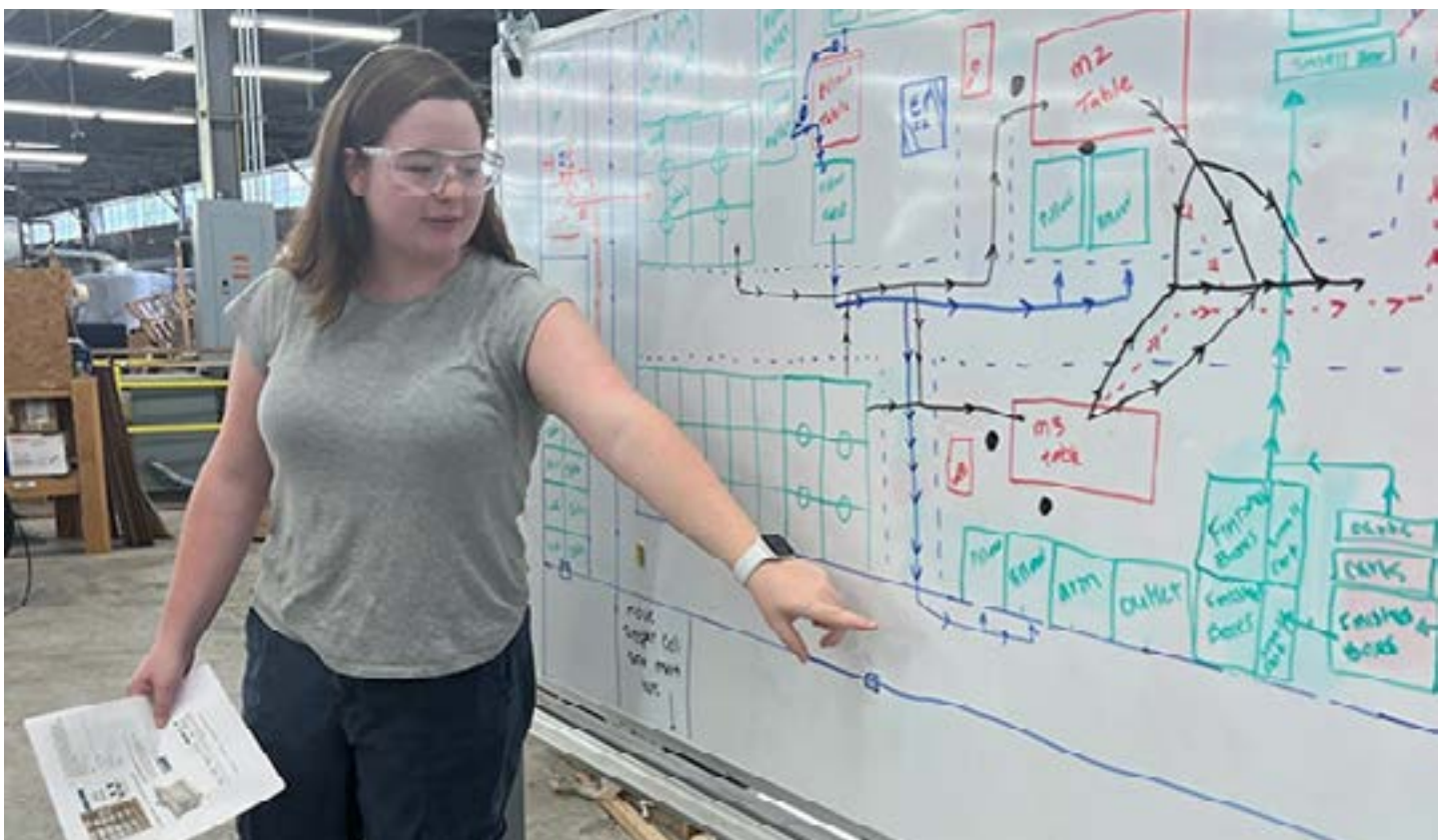
From Learning Experience to Measurable Impact

Even in its first year, the program delivered results. One intern-led project—focused on analyzing and redesigning a production line—generated an estimated **\$48,000 in annual savings** through improved workflow, labor efficiency, and material movement.

But it was in year two that Charter Furniture fully unlocked the program's potential.

Applying lessons learned, the team shifted its approach—giving interns more ownership, integrating them into cross-functional initiatives, and encouraging them to identify and solve real operational challenges.

The results were transformative.



Interns led a major inventory improvement project, working across engineering, finance, and materials teams to identify the root causes of recurring material shortages. Their work resulted in:

- › Elimination of frequent missing inventory issues
- › Improved material flow and space utilization
- › Multiple process improvements across the facility

In total, intern-driven projects generated an estimated **\$350,000 in cost savings and operational improvements.**

“They didn’t just complete assignments—they changed how we operate,” Given said. “They found problems, solved them, and implemented solutions that are still in place today.”

Innovation on the Shop Floor

Beyond large-scale projects, interns contributed dozens of smaller innovations that delivered real value.

From redesigning material carts and improving ergonomics to developing protective coverings that prevent product damage during manufacturing, their ideas were practical, cost-effective, and immediately impactful.

In one case, a simple observation during a facility tour led to a new airflow strategy—reducing heat on the production floor, improving employee comfort, and lowering energy costs.

“These students come in with fresh eyes,” Imhoff said. “They ask ‘why’—and that leads to better ways of doing things.”

Building the Next Generation Workforce

The Rural Works program has also become a key part of Charter Furniture’s talent pipeline strategy.

Through participation in NC State career fairs and hands-on engagement with students, the company has built strong relationships with emerging engineering talent—many of whom are eager to explore careers in manufacturing.

“It’s not just about what they do for us—it’s about what we can offer them,” said Imhoff. “Exposure to real-world manufacturing, problem-solving, and teamwork. It’s a win-win.”

A Scalable Model for Success

Now entering its third year in the program, Charter Furniture is expanding its efforts—bringing on three interns and planning even more complex, high-impact projects, including facility layout redesign using AutoCAD and continued process optimization initiatives.

The company has also refined its internal approach, implementing better documentation, structured project tracking, and mentorship practices to maximize both student learning and business outcomes.

The Power of Partnership

For Charter Furniture, the Rural Works program's success underscores the value of collaboration with NC State IES.

"This all started with a conversation," shared Imhoff.

"That connection opened the door to resources, talent, and ideas that have had a lasting impact on our business."

From workforce development to operational improvement, the partnership continues to deliver measurable results—demonstrating how North Carolina manufacturers can leverage university connections to grow stronger, more innovative, and more competitive.

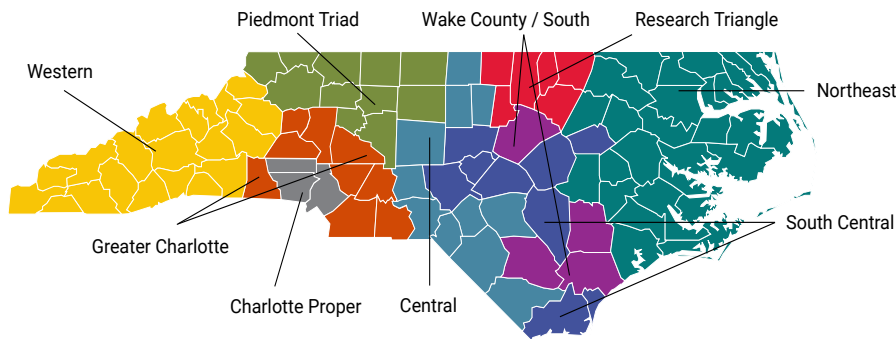
And for Charter Furniture, it's clear the investment is paying off.



"We've had nothing but extraordinary outcomes," Given stated. "If you're considering the program—do it. Just be ready to learn alongside the students. Because they'll surprise you."



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