Crossing the Finish Line:
A National Effort to Address Near Completion

The success of America's economy depends on a dramatic increase in the number and diversity of people who complete college with a high-quality credential. To meet this goal, the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) is leading a national effort[1] to increase support for students who left higher education without a degree but are eligible for or just shy of one.

These students represent the low-hanging fruit in our national agenda to increase the number of college graduates. Policies and practices designed to reach and support these students through completion have the potential to move the needle on our collective efforts to increase college completion for all students.

Much of the federal, state, and philanthropic effort to raise completion rates has focused on increasing the number of students who are college ready, bolstering support for students who successfully access college and equipping adults who seek new skills with pathways to quality degrees and credentials with labor market value. However, equal attention must be paid to students who have invested substantial resources in seeking a college credential, either at the associate's or bachelor's levels, but have left within striking distance of that degree. IHEP refers to this phenomenon as *near completion*.

The goal of this brief is to help elevate the concept of near completion and to highlight ways in which institutions serving these students, as well as policymakers, researchers, and employers, can reengage and graduate this population. The brief first defines near completers and, based on conversations with a range of key college completion stakeholders, offers a framework for addressing near completion. Next, the brief highlights some regional and national efforts that are targeting near completers and some of the early findings from this work. The concluding section offers strategies that higher education leaders and other interested stakeholders can use right now to move the needle on college completion for these students.

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[1] **About This Effort**
This brief is part of a broader IHEP initiative, funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, to elevate the issue of near completion nationally. It builds on a set of convenings on the topic that culminated in the National Summit on Near Completion, held Sept. 13, 2011, at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. This event included high-level federal and state policymakers as well as diverse stakeholders from higher education organizations, colleges and universities, and various business sectors working together to add to IHEP's near-completion framework. This brief comes out of the meeting and a background paper, *Near Completion: Framing the Issue*, which is available on the IHEP Web site at www.ihep.org.

WHO ARE NEAR COMPLETERS?

The near-completion population falls into two distinct groups of students:

ELIGIBLES

- Accumulated the required number of credits, completed required courses, and hold a grade point average (GPA) above the minimum required for a degree, but have not been granted a degree

- May not realize that they had crossed the degree qualification threshold within their program of study

- May qualify for a degree that is different from the one they were initially seeking

- May not have met residency requirements or non-academic testing requirements

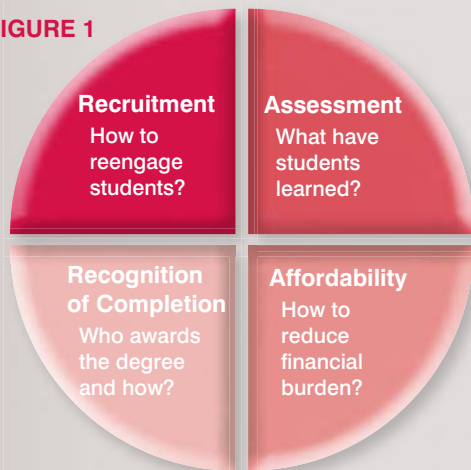- Degree may have been withheld because of financial holds or incomplete paperwork

POTENTIALS

- Need to earn a relatively low number of credits (for example, 15 or fewer) and/or need to fulfill specific course or competency requirements

- Nearly eligible for the degree they were seeking or for another, academically similar degree

- May also have non-academic requirements that must be met

Near completers have, by definition, already acquired most of the skills and knowledge represented by a college degree. But individuals who complete the degree signal to employers that they have both the academic knowledge and the personal characteristics required to stay in school and meet institutional expectations. Near completers are losing out on the significant labor market advantages associated with college credentials, while employers and society at-large are losing out by not recognizing and taking advantage of all of the skills these individuals possess. Thus, transforming near completers into college graduates would translate into a win for students, who realize long-term opportunities for economic and social benefit, as well as a win for institutions, policymakers, employers, and other stakeholders, all of which have a vital interest in recognizing the skills, talents, and abilities of the nation's citizens.

FRAMEWORK FOR ADDRESSING NEAR COMPLETION

Many near completers have personal reasons for leaving college—they have family obligations, health issues, or changes in their employment status, for example–and it is difficult to capture these reasons through policies or institutional practices. However, research suggests that a number of factors should be considered in order to reengage and graduate the near-completion population (**FIGURE 1**). These factors can serve as leverage points through which the higher education community, federal and state policymakers, institutional leaders, and private sector stakeholders can effectively address near completion as part of the larger call for increasing the number of degrees awarded in the coming decades.

FIGURE 1

Recruitment — How to reengage students?

Assessment — What have students learned?

Recognition of Completion — Who awards the degree and how?

Affordability — How to reduce financial burden?

Recruitment

In order to help former students complete a degree, states or institutions must first identify and reengage students who might be eligible for a degree or who need a few more credits to graduate. This process requires available and reliable student tracking data and consideration of the most efficient, accurate, and cost-effective student contact strategies. Some states or institutions develop branded campaigns to get the word out, while others may target former students who intended to complete a specialized degree. To guide the degree completion process for the returning near completers, institutions can provide either degree completion plans that are individualized for each returning near completer; degree completion templates to offer more generalized pathways for large numbers of students; or a combination of both. Key to recruitment strategies, though, are easily navigable reentry paths and student support services, such as a single point-of-contact or concierge services that are tailored to these returning students.

Assessment

Once the near completers are identified or recruited, institutions must determine who is eligible for a degree or needs a few more credits or degree requirements to graduate. Most use some form of degree audit system to track the various degree requirements. The process is quite complex, involving such issues as transfer credit recognition and the need for previous transcripts; the age of the prior credits and possibilities for course substitution, especially in the case of math requirements; and whether to award a specialized or general education degree. A related issue is the potential role of prior experiential learning in helping students over the degree threshold. It is important to maintain the academic integrity of the degree

given lapses in time, expansion of technology, and changes in academic and workforce requirements. Faculty leadership and buy-in are key to maintaining degree quality throughout the assessment process.

Affordability

In the context of near completion, financial issues may involve financial burdens associated with reenrollment and persistence for potential students, as well as non-academic, financial holds on the records of eligible students. Financial aid is important for many students to finish college, but they may have exhausted their eligibility for aid (or perceive that they are no longer eligible) due to lack of satisfactory academic progress, dropping too many courses, loan default, or other factors. Unfortunately, few programs or outside scholarships are available to help students in this position. Another aspect of this issue is affordability for institutions in terms of staff time, technology, and other expenses. Institutions must decide whether the benefits of graduating more students outweigh their costs for reengaging former students, as well as the potential for financial incentives or resources to mitigate those costs. Performance-based funding could be used to help increase the return on investment for institutions that do make this population a priority. And, in an era of limited resources, it might also be useful to target efforts by looking at the specific types of degree or fields where near completers would most benefit from a completed degree.

Recognition of Completion

The formal process of awarding a degree might appear to be straightforward, but in the case of near completion there can be extenuating factors. For example, decisions must be made about which institution has the authority to award the degree, especially where an obvious "home" institution may not exist and transcripts from multiple institutions may be incomplete. Another aspect of this issue is students' interest in receiving the degree award. In an "opt-in" approach, students are notified that they qualify for a degree, but must make a formal request for the award. In an "opt-out" approach students are notified that they qualify and that the degree will be awarded unless they decline the award by a certain date. Institutions might also consider modified award approaches, such as having students formally "opt-in" when they begin at an institution.

CURRENT EFFORTS

Over the past few decades, many individual institutions have attempted to identify former students and bring them back to campus. While many of these efforts have been successful, the work often has been isolated, small in scale, and targeted toward institutional goals, without informing the broader higher education community. However, in response to national calls for increased degree attainment, several statewide and multistate initiatives are now under way with the goal of bringing near-completion efforts to scale. Key projects include the following:

● **Project Win-Win—**This IHEP-managed initiative works with institutions in nine states to identify and award associate's degrees to eligible students and provide return and completion options for potentials. Institutions identify former students who are no longer enrolled in any college, but have met the degree requirements, through an analysis of institutional student unit record data, matching with state and national student data systems, and a robust degree audit process. Students who are just short of meeting degree requirements are provided degree completion templates to guide their reenrollment process. The initial stages of the project have uncovered some challenges—such as difficulty locating students, problems with state or local data systems, and lack of transcripts from other institutions—that point to possible steps states or institutions can take to resolve near-completion barriers.

● **Non-Traditional No More—**Directed by the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education (WICHE), this project works with six states to identify their "ready adult" population and build pathways to help them return and earn degrees. Many barriers to reenrolling stop-outs have been identified, particularly in the areas of data analysis, academic affairs, student services, financing/financial aid, and communications. According to WICHE, some initial approaches to address these issues have included being flexible when addressing financial holds on registration through payment plans or waivers; offering preliminary transcript evaluation; providing "concierge" or single point-of-contact programs; extending student services beyond business hours; and putting forth a rigorous prior-learning assessment program.

● **Project Graduate—**Undertaken by the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education, this project is identifying, reengaging, and graduating Kentucky residents ages 25 to 40 who have some postsecondary credit, but who still are no longer enrolled in college. Thus far, they have identified more than 230,000 target students who still reside in the state, and who may be most interested in credit for prior learning, accelerated academic programming, and financial aid. Strategies used to reengage students include adult learner advocates on each campus, reevaluation of policies on credit for college-level experiential learning, transferability of credit for prior learning, improved financial aid applications, development of flexible degree programs, and coordination of college outreach strategies to reach adults.

MOVING THE NEEDLE

Leaders and organizations that are committed to improving degree attainment have a vital role to play in meeting IHEP's challenge to elevate attention and support for near completers. These stakeholders must work together to address the factors important to a comprehensive near-completion strategy that adds value to the student, the institution, employers, and the country. Yes, this effort is about adding to the degree attainment numbers, but it is also about making good on the investment students, institutions, states, and others have already made and helping near completers take the final steps to a high-quality degree. Colleges and universities will be on the front line to move the needle on near completion. Others—state systems, regional consortiums, research and policy organizations, the private sector (employers, community-based organizations, foundations), and the federal government—play supporting, coordinating, evaluating, and disseminating roles in elevating and sustaining institutional efforts.

To tease out the role each stakeholder group can play in meeting this challenge, IHEP convened representatives from each **type of** group through a series of focus groups held across the country, a national summit, and individual interviews with those working directly on near-completion initiatives. These representatives shared their thoughts on current efforts and suggested potential policies or practices that could clear the way for students to reengage in college. Although additional policy recommendations will likely emerge as more research is conducted and the results of ongoing and new projects unfold, each stakeholder group can take some short-term steps to keep momentum going.

Institutional Leaders

To move the needle on near completion, college and universities will be on the front line to identify near completers, award degrees for "eligibles," and develop degree completion plans that successfully reengage and graduate students. On campus, many offices can play a role:

- Registrars can improve degree audit systems and create early warning mechanisms to identify near completers;

- Faculty can help streamline course substitution protocols and degree completion plans, and determine a process for awarding credit based on prior learning assessments;

- Student affairs and academic affairs staff can evaluate new support models, such as "concierge" services, that can be used to guide near completers' return; and

- Financial aid offices can identify new resources for these students or help them regain aid eligibility.

State System Leaders and Regional Consortiums

Most implications for state systems and regional consortiums relate to data systems, coordination, and policy setting:

- State leaders can make sure that accurate student data systems are available to track students—what credit they have received to date, where they've earned it, and how to reach them;

- They can find new ways to link data systems across state lines to enable better information for identifying and reengaging these students;

- States and regional consortia can set transfer and recognition of prior learning policies that ease credit recognition for the student and the receiving institution; and

- Systems can consider the issue of degree conferment for students without "home" institutions, perhaps by supporting aggregating institutions or permitting system-level authority for granting degrees.

Higher Education Research and Policy Organizations

There is still much to learn about who near completers are, why they leave, what prompts their return and degree completion, and how institutions can most effectively reach and support them. These organizations can help by:

- Documenting, evaluating, and disseminating outcomes of current program efforts;

- Analyzing existing or new data sources to examine issues like the scope of near completion, student characteristics, reasons for leaving, employment outcomes; and

- Facilitating new initiatives to scale current efforts for greater impact and learning.

Private Sector

Near completers live and work in communities across the country, providing opportunities for interaction with and encouragement from employers, community-based organizations, foundations, and local government leaders:

- Employers can work with higher education institutions to help target near completers in specialized fields and encourage employees to return to school to meet workforce development needs;

- Community-based organizations and local government leaders can serve as valuable conduits for outlining and encouraging the use of the resources available to the community members poised to quickly finish their degrees; and

- The higher education philanthropic community can add a focus on near completion to support the agenda of increased college completion. Local foundations and scholarship providers can also serve an important role in providing resources to help near completers fund their return to higher education.

Federal Policymakers

In many ways, near completion is a local and regional issue, but federal policymakers do have a role to play.

- Federal financial aid policies can be improved or clarified to ensure financial aid resources are not cut off for students seeking to return to complete their degrees;

- Better information and counseling on financial aid could help students who leave college and get into trouble with their loans; and

- Federal departments can coordinate data that can help identify and understand near completers—not just Department of Education surveys of students, but also sources like military personnel data housed at the Department of Defense and current contact data at the Internal Revenue Service.

INSTITUTE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY
1320 19th Street, NW, Suite 400
Washington, DC 20036

202 861 8223 **TELEPHONE**
202 861 9307 **FACSIMILE**
www.ihep.org **WEB**