

ATTAINMENT FOR ALL: POSTSECONDARY PATHWAYS

Reverse Transfers

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INTRODUCTION

As state leaders across the country seek strategies that will drive progress toward their postsecondary attainment goals, many have used data to analyze the current attainment levels of different segments of the state’s residents. The ambition that is reflected in all statewide goals compels states to take an all-inclusive approach to increasing attainment. Simply strengthening the existing pipeline of high school graduates who immediately enroll in higher education will not be enough; state leaders must think creatively about how to reengage varied audiences of their state’s population and help them attain a credential or degree.

One group in particular stands out when states conduct this analysis: working-age adults who have spent some amount of time enrolled in an institution of higher education (IHE) but have not attained any type of degree or credential. This population is commonly referred to as “some college, no degree.”

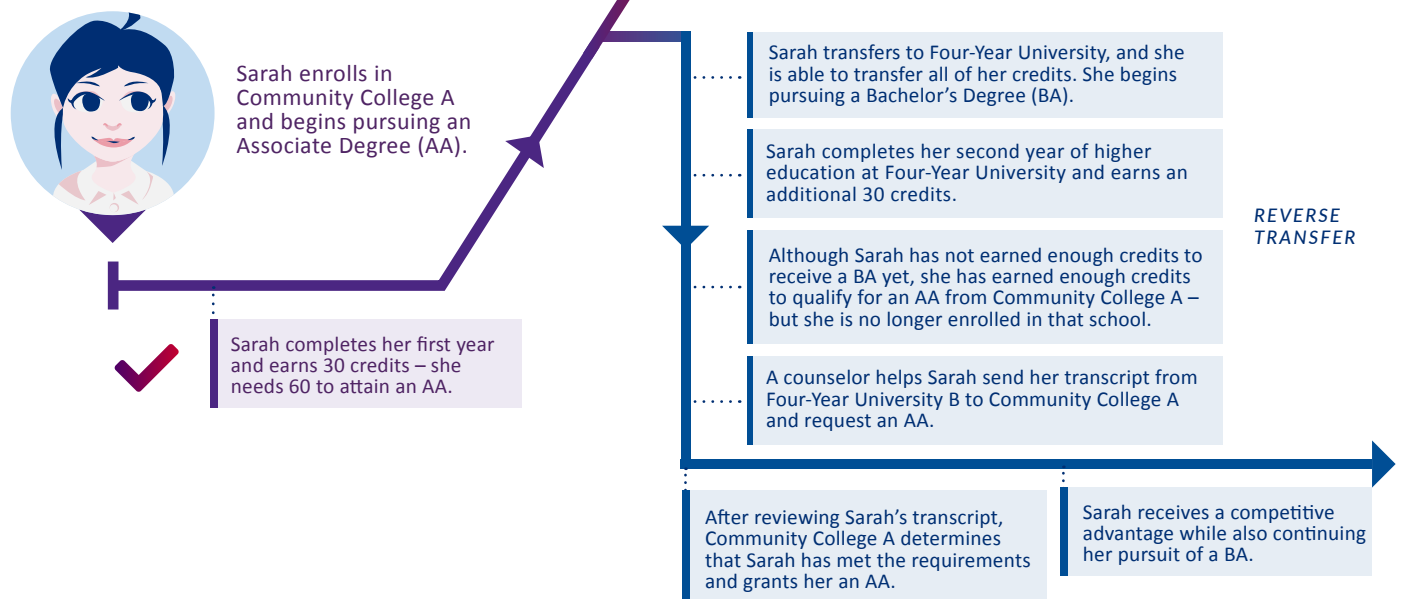
People who fall into this category have been left behind by today’s higher education system. In many cases, they have learned valuable knowledge and skills during their time at multiple IHEs but don’t have the credential or degree that serves as proof of their learning. Attaining some sort of postsecondary degree would give these learners a competitive boost in the job market and could also have the potential to inspire further higher education learning. If members of the “some college, no degree” population were able to leverage their prior learning experience, they would have a shorter and easier path to degree attainment.

Reverse Transfer, sometimes referred to as degree reclamation, is a policy strategy that can be used to aggregate the learning experiences that postsecondary students have had across different IHEs to determine whether they may already be eligible for a certificate or degree – or to determine the remaining steps necessary for completion.

HOW DOES REVERSE TRANSFER WORK?

Here is how a reverse transfer pathway is different from a traditional transfer pathway.

Please note that this is an ideal version of reverse transfer – later in this issue brief we will explore an example of potential leakage points along a reverse transfer pathway.





HISTORY OF NATIONWIDE REVERSE TRANSFER POLICY INITIATIVES

PROJECT WIN-WIN¹

(2009 - 2013)

Initiative Partners:

- ▶ *The Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP)*
- ▶ *State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO)*
- ▶ *Lumina Foundation*
- ▶ *The Kresge Foundation*

Participants:

61 IHEs (10 four-year schools and 51 community colleges) from **nine** states.

Based on research conducted by Cliff Adelman, formerly a senior research analyst for the U.S. Department of Education, on the “some college, no degree” population, Project Win-Win was an initiative that targeted students who were no longer enrolled at an IHE but had earned a significant amount of credit. State higher education governing bodies and systems of IHEs took responsibility for recruiting specific schools to participate in Project Win-Win. The IHE leaders participating in Project Win-Win did some initial thinking on questions such as how to identify a universe of potentially eligible students, how to conduct degree audits to determine eligibility, and how to conduct outreach to eligible students. Altogether, Project Win-Win resulted in 4,550 retroactively awarded Associate Degrees and 1,668 near-completers returning to school.

CREDIT WHEN IT'S DUE (CWID)²

(2012 - 2015)

Initiative Partners:

- ▶ *The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation*
- ▶ *Lumina Foundation*
- ▶ *The Kresge Foundation*
- ▶ *USA Funds*
- ▶ *Helios*
- ▶ *The Great Texas Foundation*

Participants:

495 IHEs across **15** states.

The CWID Initiative expanded on the work and lessons learned from Project Win-Win but targeted a different population: students who were currently enrolled at a four-year IHE and pursuing a Bachelor's Degree after having transferred from a two-year IHE. CWID worked with a larger number of IHEs in more states and produced significant results, although there was a good deal of variation among participating states. In a study that looked at the reverse transfer AAs that were awarded in the 12 states from the first CWID cohort, Hawai'i increased their overall number of annual degrees conferred by 17 percent. However, New York did not award any degrees through reverse transfer over the study period.³

THE REVERSE TRANSFER PROJECT (RTP)⁴

(2015 - Present)

Initiative Partners:

- ▶ *The National Student Clearinghouse*

Participants:

There are **384** IHEs in **40** states.

The National Student Clearinghouse (NSC), a nonprofit organization that analyzes higher education data, originally started RTP as a pilot program to help the sharing of student academic data for the purpose of reverse transfer. RTP has since expanded to a free service that is available to any IHE in the country. RTP is designed to be a flexible system that can support student data sharing based on the particular parameters of different state or IHE policy structures – the service can assist an IHE with both currently enrolled and no longer enrolled students. By creating a platform that is relatively standardized across IHEs and states, RTP allows state and IHE leaders to track higher education students who cross state lines or earn higher education credits through IHEs that offer online learning.

DEGREES WHEN DUE (DWD)⁵

(2018 - Present)

Initiative Partners:

- ▶ *IHEP*

Participants:

DWD has accepted two cohorts of campuses for a total of over **150** IHEs in **20** states.

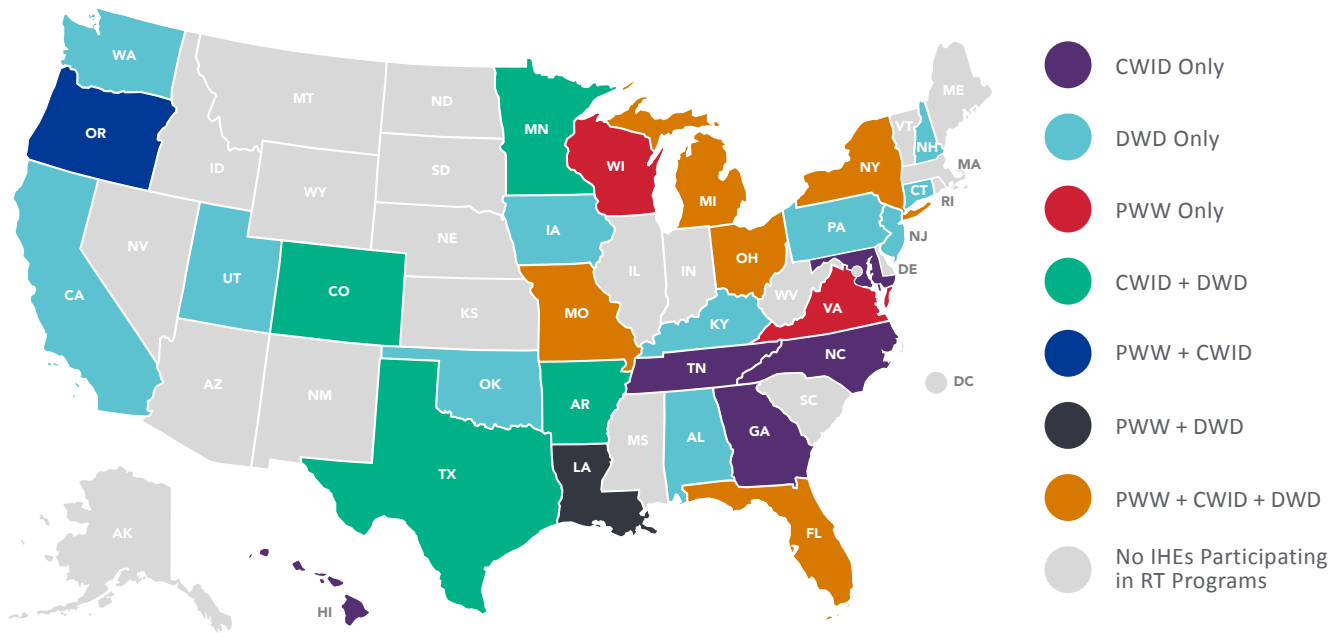
In 2018, IHEP announced a new initiative that uses a learning management system to move the needle on reverse transfer policy progress in IHEs across the country. DWD is a combination of Project Win-Win and CWID in terms of target population, since IHEs that participate in DWD focus on both currently enrolled BA transfer students as well as adult learners with credit who are no longer enrolled. Another feature of DWD is an intentional focus on equity – DWD participants are encouraged to use an equity framework when making every decision about how to implement reverse transfer options. Because of these distinctions, some states and IHEs that had previously participated in Project Win-Win or CWID are also participating in DWD – but with an expanded target population and a stronger focus on equity.



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IHE Reverse Transfer Initiative Participation by State



POTENTIAL BARRIERS TO SUCCESS IN REVERSE TRANSFER

The idea behind Reverse Transfer policies is intuitive – if a student has met the requirements for a degree, regardless of where they earned the credits, they should have the option to receive that degree and obtain the competitive advantage that degrees confer. Especially in states that have robust articulation agreements, it seems like it should be an easy lift to add up the learning experiences that transfer students have accumulated and determine eligibility for degrees. But in practice, a number of factors have complicated the ability of Reverse Transfer policies to make a significant impact on postsecondary attainment.

ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

One of the biggest complicating factors is the question of who is eligible to participate in Reverse Transfer policies. In many states, Reverse Transfer is only an option for students who are currently enrolled in an IHE – students who have dropped out before receiving a degree are not eligible. These eligibility restrictions significantly limit the potential impact of Reverse Transfer policies. A look at the national statistics shows the magnitude of this missed opportunity:

36 million the number of “some college, no degree” adults in the United States who are *no longer enrolled at an IHE*.

3.6 million the number of “some college, no degree” adults who are *no longer enrolled at an IHE* and already have at least two years’ worth of postsecondary credits⁶

FEDERAL DATA PRIVACY RULES

When it comes to implementing Reverse Transfer policies on a large scale, many state and IHE leaders have run into the issue of compliance with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), a federal law that governs the sharing of student information. FERPA, a law that was enacted in 1974 and has only received minor updates since then, says that a student (or their parent/guardian) must consent to any sharing of their education record except under certain allowable circumstances.⁷ One of those allowable circumstances is that when a student transfers from school A to school B, FERPA allows school A to send the student’s education record to school B without obtaining consent. However, that allowance is only one-way: once the student has transferred, school B is not able to send anything about the student back to school A.⁸



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A FEDERAL FIX

The Reverse Transfer Efficiency Act was introduced in the House of Representatives in 2017 by Representatives Luke Messer (R-IN), Jared Polis (D-CO), and Drew Ferguson (R-GA). The bill would amend FERPA to allow IHEs to share student records for the purposes of determining eligibility for Reverse Transfer degrees without individual consent. The bill would still require an IHE to obtain a student's consent before actually awarding any degrees.⁹ The legislation was reintroduced in both the House and the Senate in 2019 but has not received any significant action.¹⁰

If FERPA were amended to allow for automatic reverse transfer data sharing, state and IHE leaders could take a more systemic approach to determining who would be eligible to receive a degree through Reverse Transfer. This would allow IHEs to reach out to students with concrete information about their situation – whether they are eligible to receive a degree already, or whether they might be a small number of courses away from becoming eligible – which would make a significant difference in getting students to participate.

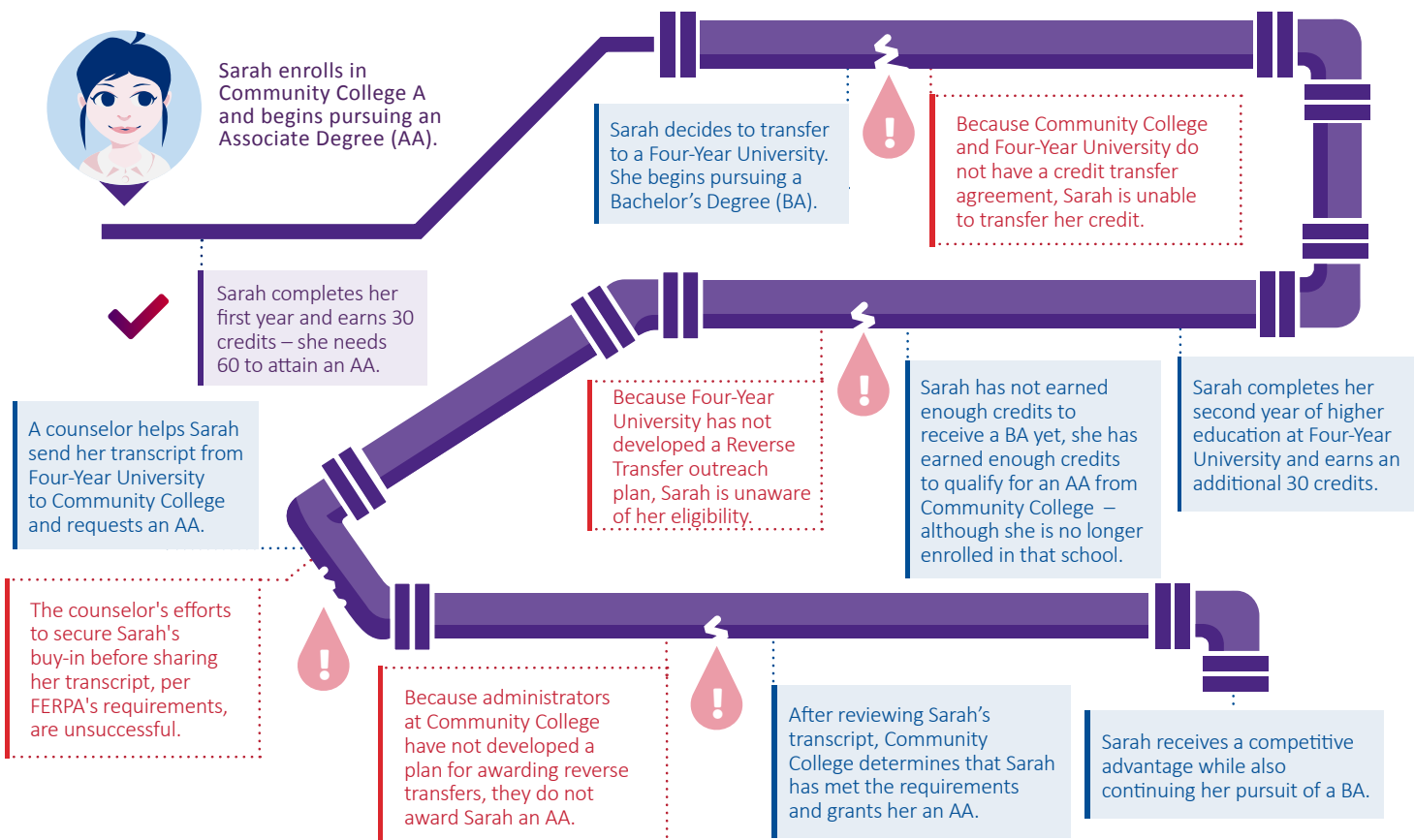
OUTREACH EFFORTS TO STUDENTS

Another major challenge with Reverse Transfer policies involves conducting outreach to students who could potentially benefit from such programs. This complication is directly related to the data privacy challenge described above: state and IHE leaders are required to solicit buy-in and consent from students *before* they are able to determine whether they could receive a degree through Reverse Transfer. Many students, especially those who may feel disillusioned with a higher education system that has not given them many tangible benefits, may not be convinced to participate without more definitive information about how Reverse Transfer would affect their lives.



HOW CAN SUCH BARRIERS AFFECT REVERSE TRANSFER PATHWAYS?

Given the potential barriers described above, here are examples of “leakage points” where obstacles could prevent a student from completing a successful reverse transfer.





STATES LEADING IN REVERSE TRANSFER POLICY

Policymakers and IHE leaders in Mississippi and Indiana have thought creatively and worked hard to overcome the barriers described above and implement robust, high-quality Reverse Transfer programs in their states.

MISSISSIPPI

Mississippi has made significant strides in establishing a robust Reverse Transfer structure, especially in the state's efforts to conduct outreach about the policy. Here are some key components of Mississippi's Reverse Transfer framework:¹¹

- ▶ The Mississippi Community College Board established a **statewide policy requirement** that all community colleges and public universities must enter into an agreement that governs the processing of Reverse Transfers.
- ▶ In order to implement the requirement, the Community College Board joined with the Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning (the governing body of the state's public four-year IHEs) to enact the [Compete to Complete \(C2C\) program](#), a statewide **implementation and marketing initiative** that:
 - » Specifically targets **"some college, no degree" residents** who are not currently enrolled in an IHE;
 - » Is **accessible on multiple platforms**, including mobile, through the C2C Pathfinder application;
 - » Connects each applicant to a **higher education counselor**, called a C2C Coach, who guides them through the process of requesting their transcripts and determining their options; and
 - » Helps program participants who do not yet have enough credits for a degree chart their **quickest path to degree completion**.
- ▶ State and IHE officials, including Governor Phil Bryant, have **promoted the C2C program in the press and at public events**.

INDIANA

Although Indiana does not have a statewide policy requirement in place regarding Reverse Transfers, IHE leaders in the state have established data sharing agreements that have created a structure for successful Reverse Transfers. Here are some key components of Indiana's framework:

- ▶ Indiana's Reverse Transfer programs benefit from having the **buy-in of leadership at all public IHEs that grant Associate Degrees** in the state – in Indiana's case this means two IHEs: Ivy Tech Community College and Vincennes University. This is especially important because these IHEs have the largest responsibilities in determining degree eligibility and conferring awards.
- ▶ Ivy Tech and Vincennes have established Reverse Transfer **data sharing agreements** with 22 public four-year IHEs in Indiana and created a **simple, online form** that students can use to opt-in to the program.
- ▶ Many four-year IHEs in the state, such as Indiana University, have developed systems for **identifying and contacting all currently enrolled transfer students** who could potentially be eligible for Reverse Transfer.



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GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

For policymakers who are interested in raising postsecondary attainment rates and reengaging the “some college, no degree” population in their state, the Reverse Transfer model is an attractive policy strategy. The following guiding questions will help policymakers identify potential barriers to successful Reverse Transfer policy implementation in their state and develop an action plan for making progress.

ARTICULATION AGREEMENTS

- ▶ Do public IHEs in your state have articulation agreements, and do such agreements govern or incentivize reverse transfers?
 - » Have private IHEs in your state engaged on the issue of articulation agreements?
- ▶ Has there been any effort to standardize the learning goals associated with certain IHE coursework, or to establish a common course numbering system?
- ▶ In the event of a sudden school closure, does your state require the establishment of teach-out agreements that allow students to complete degrees at another IHE?

COMMUNICATION WITH IHE STUDENTS

- ▶ How does your state promote certain higher education opportunities to students and families?
- ▶ How do public IHEs in your state communicate with their students to make them aware of opportunities such as reverse transfer?
- ▶ Are there any trusted intermediaries that work with students on a regular basis?
 - » Can they be partners in the effort to promote Reverse Transfer policies?



CITATIONS

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