Credit: Anoka-Ramsey Community College

ANOKA-RAMSEY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Implementing Degrees When Due within a Complex Institutional and Policy Context

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Minnesota colleges and universities have taken several steps toward serving the "some college, but no degree" (SCND) population, including focusing on adult learners through the MN Reconnect program and establishing statewide reverse transfer pathways within the Minnesota State System. While these initiatives predated the Degrees When Due (DWD) initiative, Anoka-Ramsey Community College (ARCC) joined the first DWD cohort to expand its ability to serve and reengage adult learners who left college before completing their degree.

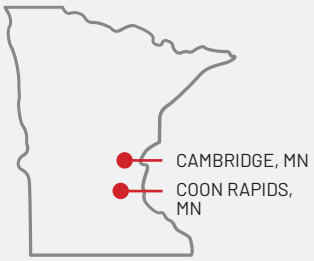
A finalist for the prestigious Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence in 2017, ARCC, with two campuses in the suburbs of the Twin Cities, fulfills many roles common to community colleges in the U.S. First and foremost, it is a postsecondary educational institution offering over 100 degree, certificate, and transfer programs across its two campuses in Cambridge and Coon Rapids. ARCC also partners with area high schools to provide an extensive program for high school students that offers opportunities to take college-level courses in their secondary schools. In fact, high school students participating in concurrent or dual enrollment programs constitute approximately 30 percent of ARCC's total population. ARCC also serves as a cultural hub for the region through various public activities, including theater and music performances, art exhibits, and lecture and readings series. ARCC has a strong reputation of supporting and providing opportunities for various constituencies in its community.

This case study offers insights into how a suburban community college develops and adopts an initiative to reach students with some college, but no degree in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Degrees When Due (DWD) is a completion and equity initiative led by the Institute for Higher Education Policy to help states and colleges increase degree attainment among the "some college, but no degree" population. Launched in 2018, nearly 200 institutions in 23 states have joined the first three cohorts of DWD to build expertise, capacity, and infrastructure on campuses to get students back on track and across the completion finish line.

ABOUT ANOKA-RAMSEY COMMUNITY COLLEGE

LOCATIONS



Note: Undergraduate enrollment and degrees conferred are averaged over a 3-year period of 2017-2019.

Source: Authors' calculations using Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2017-2019, Completions. Accessed on 9/13/2021.

GENERAL INFORMATION

PUBLIC COMMUNITY COLLEGE
INSTITUTION TYPE

8,868
UNDERGRADUATE ENROLLMENT

1,059
DEGREES CONFERRED ANNUALLY

Credit: Anoka-Ramsey Community College

ANOKA-RAMSEY COMMUNITY COLLEGE (ARCC) JOINED THE FIRST DWD COHORT TO EXPAND ITS ABILITY TO SERVE AND REENGAGE ADULT LEARNERS WHO LEFT COLLEGE BEFORE COMPLETING THEIR DEGREE.

Credit: Anoka-Ramsey Community College

WHAT MOTIVATED PARTICIPATION IN DWD?

ARCC decided to join DWD based on three factors: internal evaluation of student success and completion; alignment with state and system-wide initiatives; and pilot program alignment.

INTERNAL EVALUATION OF STUDENT SUCCESS AND COMPLETION

Being nominated as one of 10 finalists for the 2017 Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence prompted ARCC to examine how they were serving the SCND population. Through the evaluation process with Aspen, one ARCC leader noted, the college rigorously reviewed its data and considered the various outcomes of its students. As a community college with a large transfer mission in a statewide system, ARCC leaders noted that success is often defined as whether students receive an associate's degree before they leave or whether they transfer. Both are considered success measures.

As part of the Aspen evaluation process, ARCC examined its data more critically and identified many students who transferred without an associate's degree. ARCC leaders knew that students have better outcomes if they complete an associate's degree or credential prior to transferring. All of this

led ARCC to consider the students who leave their institution—whether via transfer or not—without a credential. One ARCC leader noted that "while transfer is still a big part of what we do, we do see value in helping people to complete a credential." The Aspen Prize process provided a mechanism for ARCC to evaluate its strengths and weaknesses, and gauge how it could better serve its community. Through this process, ARCC recognized that the traditional community college focus on transfer would not serve all of its students, particularly those who stopped out or planned to transfer but never completed their degree.

ALIGNMENT WITH STATE- AND SYSTEM-WIDE INITIATIVES

The second factor that led to ARCC's participation in DWD was the alignment of ARCC's focus on degree completion with state and system-wide initiatives related to reengaging former students who left college before completing their degree. For example, the Minnesota State System, which includes seven state universities and 30 state colleges, including ARCC, established over 30 metrics to determine the success of its institutions. ARCC's administrative cabinet and strategic planning committee determined that improving institutional completion rates would also help improve performance on many of the system's metrics. Further, staff noted their interest in prioritizing credential completion before students leave the institution.

The Minnesota State System was previously involved with a predecessor to DWD called Credit When It's Due (CWID), a national reverse transfer initiative, and the system was able to expand the impact of CWID by establishing a system-wide reverse transfer network. When the Minnesota State System joined DWD, one ARCC leader noted that the school viewed participation as an "opportunity to look at adult reengagement [as a tool to improve] completion, which really dovetailed with what we were trying to do at the institutional level. We also believed DWD would provide us with some resources and some guidance and ways to be more effective in doing it."

PILOT PROGRAM ALIGNMENT

The final motivating factor for joining DWD was its alignment with a pilot program at ARCC's Cambridge campus. ARCC leaders indicated that prior to DWD, the SCND population was generally not a priority in their institutional completion plan, but a recent initiative at the Cambridge campus focused exclusively on SCND students. About "two months before [the] Degrees When Due opportunity was presented," one leader explained, "a donor inquired whether we could utilize scholarship money to help students who had a certain number of credits to actually finish their degree. We started a pilot program to identify students that were within 15 credits of graduating to see if we could reengage them and provide some financial support to help them complete their degree."

DWD presented an opportunity to expand on these previous institutional, system-, and state-wide initiatives, while aligning with the broader goals of ARCC.

Credit: Anoka-Ramsey Community College

"WHILE TRANSFER IS STILL A BIG PART OF WHAT WE DO, WE DO SEE VALUE IN HELPING PEOPLE TO COMPLETE A CREDENTIAL."

ENGAGEMENT AND EXPERIENCE WITH DEGREES WHEN DUE

INITIAL DWD ENGAGEMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION: LMS ENGAGEMENT AND IDENTIFYING STUDENTS

ARCC accessed DWD's online learning management system (LMS), which provided the tools and trainings necessary to develop and implement a robust adult reengagement strategy. Early in the initiative, ARCC created a team of individuals from across campus, including representatives from institutional research, the registrar's office, post-traditional student services, academic advising, and academic affairs. To fully launch, ARCC aimed to ensure that all team members were participating fully on both the online LMS and in team meetings, which allowed them to begin to identify stopped-out students.

As one of the first implementation steps, the team identified a group of students who left ARCC without a degree (the SCND population). The Minnesota State System pulled a list of students for ARCC and other Minnesota DWD institutions that included students who left the institution over the preceding 10 years after having completed 45 or more college-level credits but with no associate's degree and no significant holds. Following guidance from the DWD LMS, ARCC learned that its SCND population was larger than the team had anticipated—approximately 1,400 students.

Given time and personnel limitations, the ARCC DWD team decided to identify a smaller, more manageable number of students, using additional criteria to narrow the target population and focus on those students it believed would face the fewest barriers when reengaged. For example, ARCC determined that some holds—academic, financial, or disciplinary—would be too difficult to circumvent or solve during DWD's implementation timeline. The team decided to include those who had only two types of holds: students with incorrect address information, and students whose financial aid time frame had expired.

An ARCC leader said that the team chose these two categories of holds because "we knew we could help people through them." The DWD team believed that these students were the most likely to reengage because the institution could more easily address these holds. Ultimately, ARCC's target population for DWD was about 650 students.

DEGREE AUDITS, DEGREE AWARDING, AND REENGAGEMENT

After the ARCC DWD team identified the SCND target group, it conducted degree audits on all 650 students and began to reengage those who had already earned a degree that had not been awarded. One ARCC leader described the initial process: "The records office ran all students through a degree audit for our generic liberal arts and sciences AA degree and we found 97 people who had earned a degree but left without one. We sent out notifications to them saying we would award them the degree unless we heard differently." In other words, about 15 percent of ARCC's target group had already completed the requirements for an associate's degree, but the degree had not been awarded.

The batch audit of students' transcripts against the liberal arts associate's degree was efficient, but ARCC's assessment of degrees did not stop there. ARCC relied on the expertise of its advising staff to conduct manual assessments of students' eligibility for other types of associate's degrees based on coursework. For example, if students had a lot of business courses, advisors might compare their transcripts to different business degrees. Although ARCC only found a handful of additional students who had already earned a degree based on this manual process, one ARCC leader indicated the process was valuable because "we did find people who were really close to completing a degree." This suggests that auditing and assessing students' transcripts against multiple degree types can help more students reach the finish line.

In early 2020, members of the advising team attempted to contact approximately 530 members of the 650 students in the target population in order to award their earned credentials or reengage them at ARCC to complete their final credits. One ARCC DWD team member said, "We emailed them all, and told them a little bit about what had changed since they were here and why they should come back and complete. We also sent all students a postcard trying to reengage them."

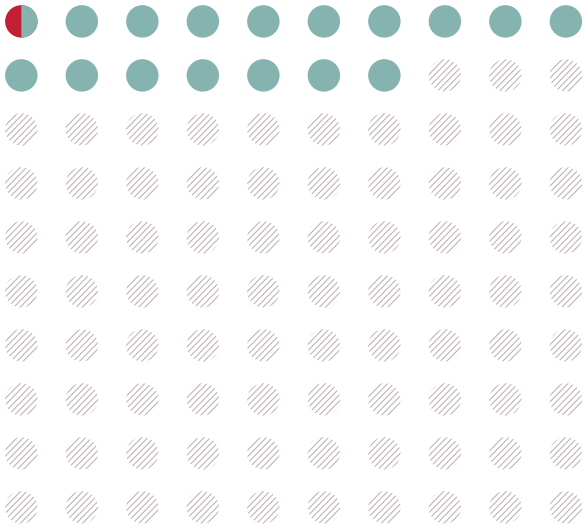
Although a few emails bounced back or were undeliverable, particularly among those students who had left ARCC many years prior, the ARCC DWD team found the response from the students who were found to have already completed a degree to be positive and reassuring. One ARCC advisor noted, "Of the students that I contacted, I got several responses back [from students who] were excited that they had a degree and didn't realize that they could have achieved one." These responses helped reinforce for the team the value of direct reengagement efforts.

Shortly after this initial communication campaign, the COVID-19 pandemic forced ARCC and the U.S. higher education sector in general to move online. Shortly thereafter, the racial justice efforts in Minnesota had a significant impact on the campus community.

16.8% OF TARGETED STUDENTS HAD ALREADY COMPLETED A DEGREE

ARCC identified 638 former students who had stopped out after accumulating 45 or more credits, and 108 of these students had completed all of the academic requirements for a degree. After contacting students, ARCC awarded degrees to 107 of them.

Figure 1.
Targeted Former Students and Subsequent Outcomes



0.16%
Students Completed all the Academic Requirements, But Not Awarded Degree

16.8%
Students Completed all the Academic Requirements, And Awarded Degree

83%
Students' Academic Requirements Incomplete

Note: Targeted students had stopped out but had accumulated 45 or more credits.

By the end of summer 2020, the DWD team explained that its reengagement efforts needed to be "shelved for a bit," given the additional pressures impacting the institution and geographic region. But ARCC remains committed to pursuing degree reclamation, even as the pandemic continues.

SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

Despite ARCC's ability to complete the DWD engagement to its fullest, ARCC's DWD team cited several successes—as well as additional challenges—that influenced their experience in the initiative.

SUCCESS #1: PRIORITIZING A PREVIOUSLY OVERLOOKED POPULATION

Early on, ARCC's DWD team recognized that while the institution had engaged with its SCND population in previous initiatives, it did not fully appreciate the extent to which these former students should be prioritized in its institutional strategy and student success efforts until it joined DWD. As one team member explained, DWD helped ARCC "recognize how many students fall through the cracks who could have earned some type of credential." In elevating the need to serve these former students, DWD helped the institution identify the procedural changes it needed to make in order to better serve all of their students.

A member of the registrar's office, for example, emphasized the need for that office to collaborate with advising. This individual explained that "we've got some of these students who didn't meet the requirements on round one. And instead of just filing the records away and not doing anything with them, or sending out a note and saying, 'hey, you're still missing this requirement,' we're now working with the advising staff to follow up with these students and find out if we can intervene before they're gone." Several of ARCC's DWD team members echoed this sentiment. One said the institution has shifted from asking "what's wrong with that student? and it's their problem" to get to graduation, to, " what can we do from our side to make it easier for students?"

The team was confident that DWD helped ARCC reprioritize the SCND population and change institutional policies and practices to better serve and support students before they stop out.

CHALLENGE #1: WORKING THROUGH DWD AND OTHER PROJECTS DURING A PANDEMIC

One of the biggest challenges the ARCC DWD team highlighted was the integration of DWD responsibilities into their office routines. Team members agreed that finding time and resources to allocate to DWD was exceedingly difficult, given the pressures that arose from other projects, which was magnified by the pandemic and the racial justice efforts of 2020. As one ARCC leader explained, "it's hard to keep [DWD] on the top of the radar, especially in [the] COVID [pandemic], because there's always so much that needs immediate attention." Balancing a relatively new initiative with a global pandemic that massively disrupted higher education was difficult, but team members emphasized their goal was to "make sure we keep the momentum [of DWD]" because serving these students was important. ARCC leaders discussed "plans on continuing this work moving forward by formally embedding it into a workplan."

SUCCESS #2: USING DATA TO EXPLORE ANECDOTAL EVIDENCE

Several team members noted that the DWD initiative offered the opportunity to explore student barriers they were aware of anecdotally but which were not yet supported by data. For example, students often noted that ARCC's health and wellness graduation requirement, which was outside of the Minnesota Transfer Curriculum (MnTC), posed a barrier to degree completion. One team member referred to it as an "open secret." But some faculty members felt strongly about keeping this requirement. As one team member explained, "ARCC values what health and wellness means for a student's overall lifelong learning and health and the value that brings. . . [and] anytime you're dealing with curriculum and something that's a requirement . . . it's going to be a passionate conversation."

INSTITUTION-SPECIFIC GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS WERE A BARRIER FOR MANY NEAR-COMPLETERS

The data showed that about 280 near-completer students—or about 54%— had not completed ARCC's wellness course requirement.

Figure 2.

Institution-Specific Graduation Requirements Were a Common Barrier

Total Near-Completers: 523

KEY

- Completed wellness course
- Did not complete wellness course

The data collected and reported for the DWD initiative confirmed that the health and wellness requirement was the only course standing between more than half of the identified near-completer students and earning an associate's degree. This evidence strengthened the argument for changing the requirement. Because of these new data, the AARC DWD team member explained that "the institution is willing to come to the table and have the conversations with our faculty and the administration. We started the initial conversations and we're going to look to try to find some solutions." The institution started a task force pre-COVID to review this requirement and is expecting to remove this barrier to degree completion by the 2021–22 academic year.

CHALLENGE #2: CONNECTING WITH STUDENTS WHO STOPPED-OUT LONG AGO

Given that this was ARCC's first methodical review of the SCND population, the ARCC DWD team faced a significant challenge in processing and connecting with former students. Even with a restricted group of students, it still encountered several reengagement obstacles. One team leader explained, "the further removed that the student was from the college, in regards to time away, the more challenging it was to try and track them down and get a hold of them and have accurate contact information for them." Although the team anticipated this challenge, it hoped it would remedy itself over time as the institution worked through the backlog of students who stopped-out long ago. One team member said,

"I think the big takeaway was that when we do continue this work that we'll be looking at those student records and conducting that outreach more immediately once they first depart from the college."

ARCC realized that it needed to reengage students more recently after students' initial departure if it was to implement effective outreach.

SUCCESS #3: SECURING INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT FOR THE GOALS OF DEGREE RECLAMATION

ARCC's DWD team underscored how significant support offered by the administration contributed to the initiative's success. A member of the ARCC advising team emphasized that the school has embraced the philosophy that "once a student, always a student," and the team knew that leadership embraced this philosophy. A senior ARCC administrator said, "Our president often shared how fantastic it was that we found over 100 people that wouldn't have had a degree without DWD. DWD helped raise awareness at all leadership levels that there's more we can do to help people graduate."

Another team member expanded that sentiment to all areas of the institution: "I found nothing but support from the top down to go find more grads. They were all about it, whatever we needed. From institutional effectiveness to advising, everybody was supportive all around and were willing to jump right in and say, 'Yep, I'm all about [helping]; let me know what I can do.'" ARCC's work with DWD shows that degree reclamation requires a concerted effort by multiple departments, and this coordinated approach helped the institution successfully reengage a percentage of its SCND population.

SUCCESS #4: INTEGRATING DEGREE RECLAMATION INTO ROUTINE PROCESSES AND POLICIES

DWD helped ARCC integrate degree reclamation procedures into routine processes to support students before they stop out, which will preemptively reduce the SCND population. Because of DWD, ARCC enhanced its degree auditing processes for current students to (1) implement an audit on a semester basis; and (2) audit transcripts against multiple degree types. ARCC has institutionalized the practice of running degree audits after each term for current students with 60 or more credits to reduce the number of students who might stop out without a degree. ARCC is also running degree audits for multiple types of associate's degrees, not just the degree for which the student is enrolled, with the intent of optimizing degree attainment.

REENGAGEMENT MAY NOT HAVE SIGNIFICANTLY IMPACTED REENROLLMENT IN THE SCND POPULATION

Although ARCC targeted 523 students who had some college but no degree, only 10 of those students (1.9%) reenrolled, and three of those reenrolled students completed a degree within a year of DWD implementation. ARCC felt that their outreach efforts were somewhat under-resourced, and they had many email addresses that bounced back, particularly among students who had been stopped-out of the college for a longer time.

GENERAL EDUCATION COURSES WERE A COMMON BARRIER

99% of the 523 near-completers were missing at least one general education course.

The most common missing courses included Human Diversity, Global Perspective, and Critical Thinking.

Figure 3.
Missing Academic Requirements

Credit: Anoka-Ramsey Community College

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report is the product of hard work and thoughtful contributions from many individuals and organizations. We would like to thank the Institute for Higher Education Policy staff who helped in this effort, including interim president Mamie Voight; director of communications & external affairs Piper Hendricks; assistant director of research & policy Konrad Mugglestone; research analyst Jennifer Pocai; and communications associate Jihad D. Dixon. We would also like to thank Sabrina Detlef for copy editing and openbox9 for creative design and layout.

Additionally, we are very grateful to the practitioners at Anoka-Ramsey Community College who lent their time and experience to interviews, focus groups, and Degrees When Due implementation on their campuses.

Finally, we would like to express thanks to the group of funders who have made this work possible – Ascendium, ECMC Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, and Lumina Foundation. Their support of meaningful completion practices and research on issues of access and success for postsecondary students is critical to Degrees When Due.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT: WWW.IHEP.ORG/INITIATIVE/DEGREES-WHEN-DUE

OCTOBER 2021