



CWID DATA NOTE

Cumulative College Credits and Reverse Transfer Eligibility Policies

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CWID DATA NOTE Series Introduction

This CWID Data Note is the first in a series that will draw upon student-level data collected by the Office of Community College Research and Leadership (OCCRL) to answer key questions of interest to the CWID community related to reverse transfer and transfer more broadly. The purpose of the Data Note Series is to report emerging results from the CWID initiative and to inform ongoing policy development and implementation for states adopting reverse transfer policies. The Data Note series will begin by answering policy-relevant questions using the CWID Baseline Study Dataset, which utilizes data from a single cohort of students who transferred to a university in a CWID state in Fall 2008 and tracks the university persistence and degree completion outcomes for these students through Spring 2012. The dataset includes data from 12 states and includes the records of over 50,000 students. We encourage readers to review the CWID Baseline Report released in October 2013 for a full description of the purpose of the Baseline Study and aggregate results across the 12 states.¹ Subsequent Data Note will draw from the CWID Impact Study Dataset, which tracks the enrollment and reverse transfer outcomes for students who enrolled in CWID-participating universities during the time period in which reverse transfer was implemented.

Background

In a recent paper on optimizing reverse transfer in order to maximize the number of students who benefit, Taylor and Bragg (2015) discussed two different approaches states and institutions have taken to identify students that are potentially eligible for reverse transfer based on students' cumulative college credits. The first approach adopted by most institutions is a "credit right now" philosophy, targeting students that have approximately 60 cumulative college credits. The rationale is that the number of credits needed for an associate's degree is approximately 60. The second strategy is a more developmental approach and can be called "credit when ready," in which institutions identify all incoming transfer students as potentially eligible for reverse transfer, regularly monitor their curricular progress, and even advise them on the courses they need to complete in order to meet the requirements of an associate's degree.

This second strategy may be particularly effective for students that exit their university before receiving a bachelor's degree and having earned fewer than 60 credits; informing them of the possibility of earning an associate's through reverse transfer and the additional courses needed to complete the degree may even encourage them to complete the curricular requirements of an associate's before stopping-out. However, given the limited research in this area, the proportion of students potentially eligible for reverse transfer which fall into this category, and thus the degree to which a "credit when ready" approach can increase the pool of students who potentially receive an associate's degrees through reverse transfer, is unknown. The purpose of this Data Note is to explore the implications of different cumulative college credit eligibility policies on the proportion of students that may benefit from reverse transfer.

Method

This brief addresses the following research question:

How do different cumulative college credit requirements influence the proportion of students that are potentially impacted by reverse transfer?

The data used for this analysis are based on 10 states that submitted relevant baseline data at the student-level to OCCRL out of the 12 initial states which received CWID funding (Minnesota and Missouri excluded from this analysis). The sample includes students who transferred to a CWID-participating 4-year institution from a CWID-participating community college, met the residency requirement for CWID eligibility (this number varies by state and/or institution and generally ranges from 12-45 credits), transferred without an associate's degree, and for which we had data on credits completed. The resulting sample includes $n = 19,330$ students from one of 10 CWID states: Arkansas, Colorado, Florida, Hawaii, Maryland, Michigan, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, and Oregon.

An important limitation of the analysis is that we do not have data on subsequent transfer and out-of-state enrollment for the sample. In other words, students who exit their university but subsequently enroll in another institution, either in-state or out-of-state, are treated as having exited higher education altogether. Data from sources such as the National Student Clearinghouse would be beneficial for expanding our analyses in this regard.

Results

Out of the 19,330 transfer students in the sample, slightly more than half (51.6%) earned a bachelor's degree four years after

¹ Taylor, J. L., Bishop, C., Makela, J. P., Bragg, D. D., & Ruud, C. M. (2013, October). *Credit When It's Due: Results from the baseline study*. Champaign, IL: OCCRL, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

ⁱⁱ We are using college credits as synonymous with "credit hours" and "semester credit hours" but will use the term college credits through this and subsequent DATA NOTES.

transfer, and the remaining 9,355 students (48.4%) had not earned a bachelor's degree. We first analyzed how many credits these non-completers had accumulated four years after transfer, the results of which are found in Table 1. The first column indicates the credit range, the second and third identify the number and percentage of students, respectively, in each range out of the 9,355 students in the sample, and the final column is the cumulative percentage. As evidenced by these results, the overwhelming majority of students earned at least 60 credits (82.7%), and more than half earned 90 credits or more by spring 2012. These results underscore the potential benefit of reverse transfer, given that a sizeable percentage of transfer students that do not earn a bachelor's degree have accumulated the college credits which possibly qualify them for an associate's degree. However, more than one in six students (17.3%) did not earn the 60 cumulative college credit eligibility criterion and thus would never have been contacted for reverse transfer efforts in most states and institutions.

Table 1: Distribution of Cumulative College Credits for all Non-Completers

Credits	n	%	Cumul. %
0-14	32	0.3	0.3
15-29	138	1.5	1.8
30-44	506	5.4	7.2
45-59	941	10.1	17.3
60-74	1,184	12.7	29.9
75-89	1,248	13.3	43.3
90+	5,306	56.7	100.0
Total	9,355	100.0	100.0

Although the previous analysis implies that approximately 17% of students potentially eligible for reverse transfer would not have been targeted given their cumulative college credits, many of the students in this analysis were still enrolled at their 4-year institution and may have continued to earn college credits. We therefore further explored the effects of cumulative college credit policies by restricting the sample to students that had exited the university by the spring 2012 semester. Out of the 9,355 students that had not earned a bachelor's degree by the spring 2012, 2,738 (29.3%) were still enrolled while the remaining 6,617 (70.7%) had exited their 4-year institution.ⁱⁱⁱ Table 2 displays the cumulative college credits earned by the subgroup of exiters. In this instance,

ⁱⁱⁱ These students may have enrolled in another postsecondary institution, but the data used for this study did not contain this information.

nearly one out of four students earned less than 60 credits before exiting the university, compared to one out of six in the previous analysis. Thus, about one-fourth of students potentially eligible for reverse transfer would never be contacted regarding their options for earning an associate's under a 60 cumulative college credit eligibility policy.

Table 2: Distribution of Cumulative College Credits for Students No Longer Enrolled

Credits	n	%	Cumul. %
0-14	31	0.5	0.5
15-29	133	2.0	2.5
30-44	481	7.3	9.7
45-59	874	13.2	23.0
60-74	1,091	16.5	39.4
75-89	1,111	16.8	56.2
90+	2,896	43.8	100.0
Total	6,617	100.0	100.0

What this Means

States and institutions involved with the CWID initiative are often confronted with the realities of managing scarce resources in order to target students that are most likely to benefit from reverse transfer. This has led many to adopt the "credit when ready" approach, in which students are identified and contacted regarding reverse transfer once they are at or near the number of cumulative college credits typically required of an associate's degree. However, our analyses show that a significant proportion of transfer students that are potentially eligible for reverse transfer exit the university without a bachelor's degree before 60 college credits. Institutions that take a developmental "credit when ready" approach, target all transfer students regardless of their number of college credits, and regularly track their progress may be able to advise more students to complete the coursework needed for an associate's degree.

References

Taylor, J. L., & Bragg, D. D. (2015, January). *Optimizing reverse transfer policies and processes: Lessons from twelve CWID states*. Champaign, IL: Office of Community College Research and Leadership, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

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