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Reverse Transfer: Paving the pathway

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States are taking several distinct approaches to implement reverse transfer policies. Although contextualized by state-specific factors, approaches to policy implementation commonly include determination of a group or regulatory body responsible for policy oversight, technology, funding and identification of students eligible to participate in reverse transfer programs.

This analysis is the second in a series of three briefs discussing reverse transfer policies, their implementation and outcomes data from the states. As defined in the first issue brief, reverse transfer is “the process of retroactively granting associate degrees to students who have not completed the requirements of an associate degree before they transferred from a two- to a four-year institution.”¹

Policy implementation is an oftentimes complex and unique process. Despite the differing ways in which states seek to implement postsecondary policies, there are common decision points for states as they seek to successfully implement reverse transfer policies.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Implementation of reverse transfer policies involves multiple factors, including policy oversight, funding, technology and student identification.

Use of technology can positively and negatively impact the success of implementation of a policy, hence it can be a key component to reverse transfer policy implementation and degree conferral.

The lack of long-term funding for technology and staffing poses a potential constraint on the impact of a reverse transfer policy.

Ten states currently have statewide policies in place requiring public institutions to retroactively award associate degrees to eligible students. States with comprehensive reverse transfer policies include Colorado, Florida, Maine, Maryland, Michigan, Missouri, Oregon, Rhode Island, Tennessee and Texas. Multiple other states offer reverse transfer through board policy and institutional agreements. The reverse transfer agreements between Northern Illinois University (NIU) and multiple community colleges in Illinois are examples of institutional reverse transfer agreements. NIU annually reviews the transcripts of its community college transfer students and contacts the community college to review the transcripts and possibly award an associate degree. Multiple community colleges in Illinois also provide reverse transfer transcript request forms to start this process.²

Policy implementation is an oftentimes complex and unique process. Despite the differing ways states seek to implement postsecondary policies, there are common decision points as they strive to successfully implement reverse transfer policy. This brief provides an overview of how several states have approached implementation of reverse transfer policies, including decision-making on who has oversight of the implementation process, what technology tools are utilized to support implementation, funding streams for reverse transfer programs and processes for identifying students eligible for program participation. The five states highlighted in the first brief (Colorado, Michigan, Missouri, Oregon and Texas) are again presented to illustrate the variety of approaches to implementation states are taking.

Implementation strategies

As policy language on reverse transfer differs, so do approaches to implementation. Many times, specific guidance on implementation is not laid out in statute and is left to interpretation once legislation is enacted. In regard to reverse transfer policies, four key areas to consider in implementation include who has policy oversight, what technology will be used, how the policies will be funded and how a state identifies students who qualify for an associate degree via the reverse transfer pathway.

Policy oversight

States with reverse transfer legislation have taken different routes to policy and implementation oversight. The following chart illustrates the multiple ways states provide policy oversight for reverse transfer.

State	Oversight	Type
Colorado	Colorado Department of Higher Education	Department/Board/Commission
Florida	Florida College System	University/College System
Maine	Maine Community College System	University/College System
Maryland	Maryland Higher Education Commission	Department/Board/Commission
Michigan	Michigan Center for Student Success and Presidents Council, State Universities of Michigan	Collaborative Team Oversight
Missouri	Coordinating Board for Higher Education	Department/Board/Commission
Oregon	Universities/Institutions	Local control
Rhode Island	Not decided as policy is not fully implemented.	N/A
Tennessee	Task force of representatives from the three systems of higher education and the Tennessee Higher Education Commission.	Collaborative Team Oversight
Texas	Lone Star College and University of Texas at Austin	Collaborative Team Oversight

Technology

States are increasingly using technology to track student data, including the use of digital transcripts and student database systems. However, institutions within the same state are not necessarily utilizing the same technology and some are not using technology at all. This becomes a roadblock in any type of student transfer, including reverse transfer. Some states, including Colorado and Tennessee, contract with an outside vendor for automated transcript exchange. Others utilize services such as the National Student Clearinghouse's (NSC) Reverse Transfer Project, which provides a system to share individual student data between institutions. NSC announced there are no fees for this service so states can use the system for free.³ Other states with reverse transfer legislation are allowing the institutions to coordinate the sharing of transcripts. Technology can play an important role in the successful awarding of degrees, which will be further discussed in the final brief in this series.

Funding

The majority of the states with reverse transfer legislation were initially funded through the Credit When It's Due (CWID) initiative. This initiative aims to help states create and implement reverse transfer policies (regardless of legislation).⁴ The foundations that created this initiative include Lumina Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, Helios Education Foundation, USA Funds and Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.⁵ States applied for foundation grant dollars specifying what the grants would be used to accomplish per their reverse transfer goals.⁶ The grant amounts range between \$434,000 and \$500,000. These grants have been helpful for states to get their reverse transfer programs up and running, however the question remains how these programs will continue when their grant funding ends. Many of these grants have ended or will end in the near future. With no current plan to extend or create new grants, funding for these policies has or will cease to exist. States will need to decide if reverse transfer is a priority and if it is able to be added to appropriations provided to the institutions and entities providing oversight for these programs.

Student identification

Identifying students eligible for reverse transfer is one of the most important, and possibly the most difficult, part of the implementation process. Due to FERPA regulations, institutions need student consent to exchange transcript data and award associate degrees.⁷ According to the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admission Officers (AACRAO), reverse transfer does not meet any of the requirements to allow waiver of consent to transfer transcripts from the four-year institution back to the two-year institution.⁸ Transferring this information back to the two-year institution is technically disclosing information about a student's course completion at the four-year institution.⁹ With these regulations in place, states need to find effective means of communicating reverse transfer as an opportunity for students to gain an associate degree on their path to a bachelor's degree in order to easily obtain student consent. The ability to identify students who should be contacted can only be as effective as a state's data system. If a state has a decentralized data system, it can be difficult to coordinate multiple institutions to identify students who transferred from a two- to a four-year institution. The issue of identifying students will be further explored in the third brief in this series to identify some best practices and student populations states may want to target.

State policy examples

In order to provide a broad landscape of reverse transfer policy implementation, five states are reviewed below. These states were highlighted in the first brief in this series to show how states approach this policy in different ways through legislation. The examples below review how these states implemented reverse transfer, including policy oversight, funding, technology and student identification.

Colorado

Colorado enacted C.R.S. §23-1-131, which required community colleges and universities to collaborate with the Colorado Commission on Higher Education (CCHE) to develop a reverse transfer process. The state named this policy program Degree Within Reach and it is managed by the Colorado Department of Higher Education (CDHE). Subcommittees were established around data advisory, communications and stop-out students.¹⁰ A task force was also created consisting of several university representatives, the Colorado Community College System (CCCS) and CDHE. The implementation plan included developing capacity for implementation, piloting the program at one institution and its partner community colleges and targeting transfer stop-outs.¹¹ The CCCS utilizes Parchment as a vendor to automate transcript exchange between institutions. Colorado was mostly funded by the CWID initiative, and the state helped institutions that did not receive funding to increase their reverse transfer efforts. The state contacts students via email for them to opt in to receive an associate degree through reverse transfer.

Michigan

In 2012, Michigan enacted Public Act 201, which required community colleges to collaborate with public universities to establish reverse transfer agreements by January 2013. Institutions needed to implement the agreements in order to receive performance funding.¹² The process has been left up to the individual institutions to create the agreements. The Michigan Center for Student Success (MCSS) and the Presidents Council State Universities of Michigan (PCSUM) conducted surveys in 2013 and 2014 to understand student eligibility and degree requirements, communications between institutions and students about the process and elements of the multiple agreements.¹³ MCSS and PCSUM also provided meetings and webinars for institutions to learn from one another. Initial efforts in reverse transfer are funded by the CWID initiative as well as state performance funding. Each institution partnership utilizes the technology currently used on their campuses for transcript exchange. Students are identified and provided the opportunity to opt in to the reverse transfer process by the four-year institution they attend. Michigan is currently working to create common principles all institutions can use, including messaging to students on the opportunity to receive their associate degree after transfer.

Missouri

Missouri updated Mo. Rev. Stat. §173.005 in 2012 to include a requirement for all public institutions to participate in reverse transfer. The development and implementation was then handed over to a central steering committee and four workgroups. The workgroups include policy, IT/operations/implementation, communication and data/assessment/evaluation.¹⁴ The Coordinating Board for Higher Education has oversight of the policy and institution program approval. The policy group created a universal policy for institutions to follow and required all public institutions to enter into memoranda of understanding. The Department of Higher Education and the participating institutions launched the Missouri Reverse Transfer (MRT) Initiative. MRT has a steering committee consisting of representatives from higher education institutions who oversee implementation of the policy.¹⁵ In conjunction, the workgroups created a reverse transfer handbook for institutions to use when implementing this policy on their campus. Since institutions in Missouri use different student information systems, the state decided to register with the National Student Clearinghouse's system to facilitate individual student data sharing between institutions. The state is funded by the CWID initiative for all public institutions and any private institutions that voluntarily implement reverse transfer. The universities contact the students to receive consent for awarding an associate degree after transfer.

Oregon

In 2011, Oregon enacted O.R.S. §341.430, requiring reverse transfer to be implemented at all public institutions and community colleges in the state. Currently all public institutions and 10 of the 17 community colleges are participating in what is called the Project Oregon Reverse Transfer (PORT). Oregon used a regional implementation plan leaving the policy decision-making at the local level.¹⁶ The regional implementation includes universities and community colleges developing these policies between them regionally. Each university has partner community colleges it works with to implement reverse transfer policies. Most of the parameters of the regional policies are made through memorandums of understanding between institutions. During implementation, Oregon used a marketing campaign that included a website for reverse transfer, a poster and informational video, a logo brand and social media rollouts on Twitter and Facebook. As the Oregon University System and the Oregon State Board of Higher Education have been dismantled, the Oregon Community Colleges and Workforce Development Office maintains the webpage. Reverse transfer efforts are funded by the CWID initiative. Generally, universities contact the students regarding consent to award the associate degree. Some partnerships have created co-admit applications that would obtain the consent for reverse transfer.

Texas

Texas enacted Tex. Educ. Code Section 61.833 in 2011, which required reverse transfer policies be created at higher education institutions. Lone Star College and the University of Texas at Austin took on leadership for what is known as the Texas Reverse Transfer Initiative (TRTI).¹⁷ The CWID initiative funded Texas to hire reverse transfer project managers to coordinate reverse transfer in the state for the period of the grant. An advisory group was created that included funders, institutional leadership and partners who provide decision-making authority for reverse transfer. Texas has provided webinars and meetings for the advisory group to track progress, gain input and continue to improve the processes in place. TRTI coordinates with NSC regarding technology use in transcript exchanges. The initiative uses the SPEEDE network allowing institutions to exchange data electronically and uses the course/grade data exchange. Texas incorporated consent for reverse transfer into its common application. Students must uncheck that box if they want to opt-out. Universities identify transfer students who are eligible and opted-in and notify the two-year institutions.

These state examples showcase the many ways a policy can be implemented. Each of these states started with legislation requiring implementation of a reverse transfer policy, however the specifics of how to complete that implementation process were left vague and up for interpretation. The examples highlight that each state is different and there is not a “one-size-fits-all” approach to implementing a reverse transfer policy. States can, however, learn from one another on what processes worked best and what successes/downfalls came along with their process.

Considerations for states implementing reverse transfer

When implementing reverse transfer policies, states need to consider multiple factors to make the process successful. These factors include policy oversight, technology, funding and student identification. Some questions states should consider after reverse transfer legislation has passed include:

- ◆ What governing body will have oversight of this policy and will ultimately be in charge of implementing on college campuses?
- ◆ Do the public institutions and community colleges use electronic transcripts? If so do they use the same technology platform or will new systems be required?
- ◆ If the institutions and community colleges do not have electronic transcripts, what technology will the state use for data exchange?
- ◆ What funding is available for any administration or technology needed? If outside funding is not available, will the implementation of this policy be added to the state budget or require the shifting of existing resources?
- ◆ How many students initially are affected by this policy? How many students does the state expect would qualify for degree conferral on an annual basis?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Reverse Transfer: The path less traveled

<http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/18/77/11877.pdf>

Recent State Action on Transfer and Articulation (2011-2014)

<http://strategylabs.luminafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/ECS-Transfer.pdf>

Blueprint for College Readiness

<http://www.ecs.org/docs/ECSblueprint.pdf>

ENDNOTES

- 1 Laura Hannermann and Matthew Hazenbush, *On the Move: Supporting Student Transfer* (Boston, MA: New England Board of Higher Education, 2014), 6.
- 2 Northern Illinois University, Registration and Records, Division of Academic Affairs, <http://www.reg.niu.edu/regrec/reversetransfer/index.shtml>.
- 3 National Student Clearinghouse, *First National Reverse Transfer Solution Now Available*, July 28, 2015, <http://nscnews.org/first-national-reverse-transfer-solution-now-available>.
- 4 Jason L. Taylor, et. al, *Credit When It's Due: Results from the Baseline Study* (Illinois: Office of Community College Research and Leadership, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2013), 1.
- 5 Lumina Foundation, *Credit When It's Due: Recognizing the Value of Quality Associate Degrees* (Indianapolis, IN: Lumina Foundation, 2013), <http://www.luminafoundation.org/credit-when-its-due>.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA): U.S. Department of Education, <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa/index.html>.
- 8 American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admission Officers, FERPA Compliance and the Reverse Transfer Process, <http://www.aacrao.org/resources/resources-detail-view/ferpa-compliance-and-the-reverse-transfer-process>.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Office of Community College Research and Leadership (OCCRL): University of Illinois College of Education: <http://occrl.illinois.edu/projects/cwid>.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Missouri Department of Higher Education: Reverse Transfer, <http://dhe.mo.gov/ReverseTransfer.php>.
- 16 Ibid, OCCRL.
- 17 Ibid, OCCRL.

AUTHOR

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