Introduction

As our previous research has shown (Taylor et al., 2013), a significant portion of transfer students do not earn an associate’s degree prior to transfer and stop-out of 4-year institutions before earning a bachelor’s degree. Many of these students have a substantial number of college credits, yet no credential to recognize their postsecondary progress. Reverse transfer programs are designed to provide associate’s degrees to transfer students once they complete the required courses at the 4-year institution, thereby reducing the number of students with “some college, no degree.”

Unfortunately, only a sizeable proportion of transfer students potentially eligible for reverse transfer actually receive the degree. Figure 1 provides an example of this phenomenon using data from the first year of CWID in Michigan. Nearly 14,000 transfer students in the sample were potentially eligible for reverse transfer, but only 607 received the degree. One important factor contributing to this issue is the difficulty in obtaining consent from students, and we have previously written about ways to maximize student consent (Taylor & Bragg, 2015). However, equally important is the fact that only 42% of students who received a degree audit also received an associate’s degree through reverse transfer. If students met the 2-year residency requirement, earned enough cumulative college credits, and consented to participate in reverse transfer, what is preventing them from receiving the degree? The purpose of this Data Note is to explore the reasons why potentially eligible reverse transfer students do not receive the associate’s degree.

Method

This brief addresses the following research question:
Why don’t potentially eligible reverse transfer students receive the associate’s degree?

The data used for this analysis comes from Minnesota, which collected particularly detailed data on why students did or did not meet degree requirements. The sample includes students who transferred from a CWID-participating 2-year institution to a CWID-participating 4-year institution between 2008 and 2012, met the residency requirement for CWID eligibility, and transferred without an associate’s degree (n = 8,076).

Minnesota’s reverse transfer process was somewhat unique for two reasons. First, both 2-year and 4-year institutions in the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU) system, which implemented CWID in Minnesota, are authorized to award associate’s degrees. Second, Minnesota used a two-stage degree audit process. Student transcripts were first audited centrally by officials at the MnSCU system. If the MnSCU audit determined that students were eligible or potentially eligible for an associate’s degree, MnSCU officials sent the student’s transcript to the institution (either 2-year or 4-year) where the student was most likely to meet the requirements of an associate’s degree.

For both stages in the degree audit process, detailed data was collected on why students did or did not receive the associate’s degree. This Data Note focuses on that data.

Figure 1. This figure used data from Michigan to show the number of students associated with different phases of the reverse transfer process.
As shown in Figure 2, more than two-thirds (5,577) of the 8,076 transfer students in the cohort were not eligible for reverse transfer after the MnSCU audit. Interestingly, whereas only 11% of students completed their bachelor’s degree, 6% had some type of suspension, and a handful of students were not eligible due to financial holds, low GPA, or other reasons. However, the majority of students (63%) that did not pass the MnSCU audit were missing some type of degree requirements.

As mentioned previously, if students met the requirements of the initial MnSCU audit, their transcripts were shared with the 2-year or 4-year institution that MnSCU determined would be most likely to be able to award the student an associate’s degree. That institution then conducted a secondary degree audit to determine if the student met the requirements of an associate’s degree offered by that institution. Out of the 2,498 students that were potentially eligible based on the MnSCU audit, 1,422 students (57%) met the requirements of a degree during the institutional audit whereas 1,076 students (43%) did not. Similar to the previous analyses, Figure 4 displays the reasons why students did not meet the institutional audit. Once again, the primary reason was that students were missing degree requirements.

The author gratefully acknowledge Debra Bragg and Jason Taylor for their insights and feedback on an earlier draft of this publication, Cari Bishop and Jason Taylor for their assistance in creating the datasets which were utilized in this research, and researchers at the MnSCU system who collaborated to provide data for the CWID grant. This publication was prepared pursuant to a contract awarded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in October 2012 to OCCRL, College of Education, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Preliminary research associated with this project was funded by Lumina Foundation in July-September 2012.

Suggested Citation
Giani, M. S. (2016). CWID DATA NOTE: Why don’t potentially eligible reverse transfer students receive the degree? Exploring the outcomes of reverse transfer degree audits. Champaign, IL: Office of Community College Research and Leadership, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

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