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Reverse Transfer: What is the best route to take?

Lexi Anderson

As states have begun to fully implement reverse transfer policies, their reported student-level outcomes data varies widely. Given the infancy of most reverse transfer policy, it is premature to pinpoint any single state action that has served to accelerate or hinder successful degree conferrals. However, taking a deeper look at exemplar state practices can provide guidance for states looking to implement reverse transfer policies in the future.

The third in a series on reverse transfer policy, this brief presents early outcomes data for the 10 states that have implemented statewide reverse transfer policies and offers recommendations informed by prior state actions for states that have yet to enact or implement a statewide reverse transfer policy.

The first brief, *Reverse Transfer: The path less traveled*, defines reverse transfer and explores how states might utilize the policy as an approach to support increasing educational attainment. The second brief, *Reverse Transfer: Paving the pathway*, focuses on the distinct approaches states are taking to implement reverse transfer policies.

Reverse transfer policies and programs are designed to ensure that students receive degrees that appropriately reflect the credits they have earned.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Early outcomes data suggest that reverse transfer policies are helping states to confer additional associate degrees to students who have earned them.

States have taken differing approaches to implement reverse transfer legislation, providing several models for other states to follow as they consider action in this area.

To increase the reach of reverse transfer policies, states should begin to target students with some credit but no degree.

As a reminder, Education Commission of the States is defining *reverse transfer* as “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 Informed by the notion that 65 percent of jobs will require a postsecondary credential by the year 2020,² states have begun implementing policies that create robust and statewide reverse transfer initiatives as one strategy to meet workforce needs. Reverse transfer policies and programs are designed to ensure that students receive degrees that appropriately reflect the credits they have earned.

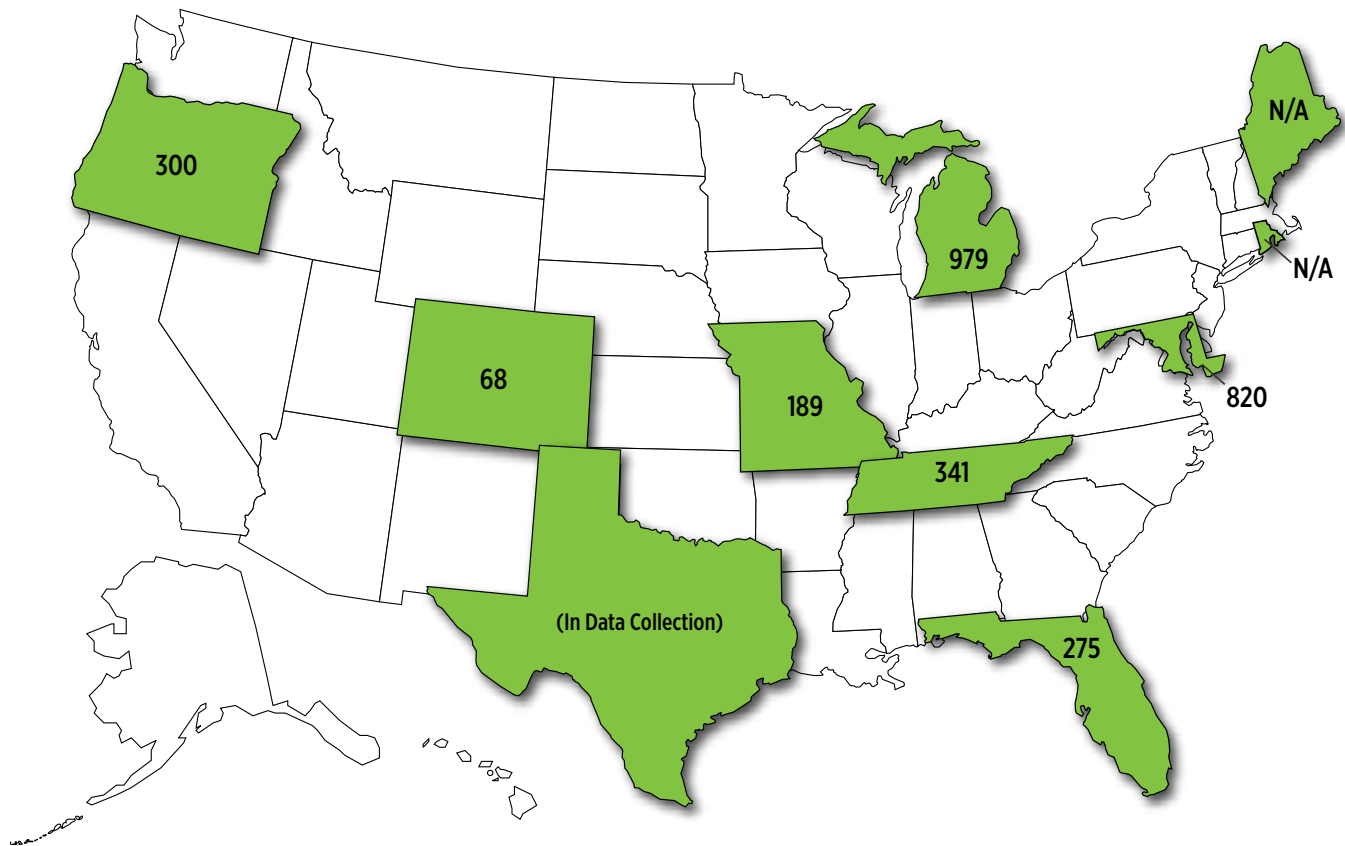
Implementation components and outcomes data

Chart 1 reviews reverse transfer policy implementation strategies employed by states and discussed in previous briefs in this series. Information presented covers all 10 examples of statewide reverse transfer policy legislation and illustrates the strategic approach each state has taken on several dimensions of implementation.

Chart 1: Implementation strategies

State	Oversight	Technology	Funding	Student Identification	Degrees Conferred
Colorado	Colorado Department of Higher Education	Parchment	Credit When It's Due (CWID)	Opt-In	68
Florida	Florida College System	Florida Automated System for Transferring Educational Records (FASTER)	CWID	Opt-In	275
Maine	Maine Community College System	Varies/No uniform technology used	N/A (possibly individual institutions)	Opt-In	In pilot phase
Maryland	Maryland Higher Education Commission	Varies/No uniform technology used	CWID	Opt-In	820
Michigan	Michigan Center for Student Success and Presidents Council, State Universities of Michigan	Varies/No uniform technology used	CWID	Opt-In	979
Missouri	Coordinating Board for Higher Education	National Student Clearinghouse (NSC)	CWID	Opt-In	189
Oregon	Universities/Institutions	Electronic Data Interchange	CWID	Opt-In	300
Rhode Island	Not decided as policy is not fully implemented	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Tennessee	Task force of representatives from the three systems of higher education and the Tennessee Higher Education Commission	AcademyOne	CWID	Opt-In	341
Texas	Lone Star College and University of Texas at Austin	NSC	CWID	Opt-In	In data collection phase

Number of degrees conferred under reverse transfer policy as of May 2015



Degree conferral information was provided by the Office of Community College Research and Leadership (OCCRL). Although incomplete and not comprehensive, early outcomes data suggest that states are finding ways to confer additional associate degrees to students who have earned them. These are students who, absent reverse transfer policy, may have forgone holding a market-recognized credential that reflects their academic accomplishment. As states continue with implementation, and new state policy adoptions occur, it will be useful for the policy research community to consider the differing approaches states have taken toward implementation, and for scholarship to assess drivers and impediments to policy impact.

Recommendations and exemplar practices

With states choosing different routes to reverse transfer policy implementation, some key strategies appear in each case including policy oversight, technology, funding and student identification. To understand their effects on successful outcomes, decisions states made within these strategies in the implementation process were examined. In summation of the information provided in this series on reverse transfer, Education Commission of the States put forth recommendations and exemplar practices for states to contemplate when implementing reverse transfer policies. These recommendations are not all encompassing nor are they one-size-fits-all. However, they provide a starting point for successful implementation for states that enact reverse transfer legislation.

Policy oversight

Once a reverse transfer policy has been enacted, an entity should be identified to provide oversight for implementation and compliance. The entity chosen can vary greatly depending on how policy implementation is rolled out (i.e., decentralized or centralized process). Responsibilities of the entity could include implementation timeline, funding allocations, technology use, student identification methods and marketing campaign.

Some important factors to contemplate before choosing an oversight entity include:

- ◆ If in a centralized system, choose a state department or university system well connected to the institutions required to follow the policy.
- ◆ If in a decentralized system, decide how individual agreements are tracked for implementation and compliance.
- ◆ Consider creating committees for decisionmaking including student communications, funding and technology use.

State exemplar:

- ◆ **Missouri** created a central steering committee and four workgroups for reverse transfer implementation. The four workgroups included policy, IT/operations/implementation, communication and data/assessment/evaluation.³ The separation of workgroups allowed each group to focus on a specific area of reverse transfer policy implementation, which in turn enabled all four workgroups to collaborate and create a reverse transfer implementation handbook.

Technology

As mentioned in the previous brief, technology can have a large impact on successful implementation of a reverse transfer policy. It can also impact degree conferral as this process is largely dependent on state, system and institution technology infrastructures.⁴ With such a dependency on technology, reverse transfer policies rely on systems to work together and in conjunction with successful degree audits. With the introduction of the National Student Clearinghouse's Reverse Transfer project and multiple outside vendors offering processes for sharing individual student data, the desire to use a single source to transfer transcript data can be strong.

However, in reviewing the degrees conferred from states with reverse transfer legislation, some of the largest numbers of degrees are coming from states that do not use a “one-stop shop” transcript exchange source. For example, **Michigan** has conferred 979 degrees as of May 2015. Michigan uses a decentralized system in which institutions have individual reverse transfer agreements and transfer data through the technology means of each four-year and two-year institution. In these situations it may be that states that give the institutions control over how transcript data is transferred may have greater success than those that use a single source. This also highlights that implementation from state to state can differ as a one-size-fits-all model might not work in every state.

Technology use in the implementation process of reverse transfer policies can be critical in successful outcomes data and degree conferral. Some important factors in technology include:

- ◆ Ensure institutions have clear communication about what technology is used for their transcript data and how multiple technologies can be integrated.
- ◆ Have clear degree competencies in place for ease of transfer, and preferably within the system housing transcripts.
- ◆ Use a single-source transcript exchange to ease administrative lift and technology integration between institutions.
- ◆ If technology does not play a large role in a state, create clear pathways for transcript exchange between institutions, either through individual agreements or a statewide protocol.

State exemplar:

- ◆ **Tennessee** uses a semi-automated degree audit process called the Reverse Transfer System (RTS).⁵ This system allows the four-year institutions to upload course inventories, course equivalencies and program requirements to then send to the two-year institution for review. The RTS runs simulated degree audits twice a year for students who are eligible for reverse transfer and opted into the policy.⁶

Funding

As with most policy implementation processes, securing funding can be an integral part of producing successful outcomes. The Credit When It's Due (CWID) initiative helped bring attention to reverse transfer and provide a funding stream for states to implement their enacted policies. The initiative provided sizable grants and allowed states to choose how they used the funds in their implementation processes.⁷ States chose to invest funds in multiple ways, including technology development, transcript exchange programming, personnel hiring, student communication outreach and marketing campaigns. Not one of the 10 legislative reverse transfer policies provides state funding to implement or sustain these policies. As funding from the CWID initiative is ending, states need to evaluate their current financial needs for these policies.

When looking to enact reverse transfer legislation, states should take the following financial factors into account:

- ◆ Evaluate the number of students who could be affected by the policy to better understand total financial need.
- ◆ Encourage the legislature to include funding in the legislation to ensure financial resources exist before implementation.
- ◆ Explore low-cost implementation strategies if funding is scarce or not allocated in legislation.
- ◆ Invest any funding provided in areas of need for the state regarding reverse transfer policies (e.g., technology, communication, transcript infrastructure).
- ◆ Utilize free resources such as the Clearinghouse Reverse Transfer project for transfer exchange.

State exemplar:

- ◆ The **Texas** Reverse Transfer Initiative (TRTI) invested much of the CWID funding into reverse transfer managers and creating a pilot program to implement reverse transfer on a smaller scale to start.⁸ The managers were able to coordinate the project through the grant period to create a seamless implementation. The TRTI uses the Clearinghouse as a resource for degree audits and awarding degrees. This helps the initiative keep human resource costs low as the Clearinghouse platform is free for states.

Communications strategies and student identification

Due to Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) regulations, states must receive consent from students in order to share transcript data between institutions.⁹ Because of this regulation, states and institutions have developed multiple ways of communicating the option of receiving an associate degree through reverse transfer. Many states identify their students by the four-year institutions running queries for their transfer students.¹⁰ This allows the institutions to target the population eligible for reverse transfer and track their progress since transfer from the two-year institution. In addition to identifying students, states must decide how they disseminate information about reverse transfer so students are aware of the opportunity before they are notified of eligibility. Multiple states with reverse transfer legislation incorporated a marketing plan into their implementation process to shed light on the topic and make it clear what reverse transfer offers students.¹¹

Understanding how many students a state policy will likely impact is important to identify early in the implementation process. Knowing the population of students a state is seeking to identify and the capacity state institutions have to serve these students is critical. Important factors in student identification include:

- ◆ Clear communication between two- and four-year institutions in the state.
- ◆ Eligibility requirements allowing ease of identifying students.
- ◆ Complete and accessible records of student transfers within the state from two- to four-year institutions.
- ◆ Highly visible marketing campaign to explain reverse transfer and eligibility requirements to students.

State exemplar:

- ◆ **Michigan** created a statewide work group to develop common messaging and communications information for students on the reverse transfer policy and process.¹² The group used data gathered from Michigan State University to determine messaging to motivate students to participate in reverse transfer.¹³

Reverse transfer implementation considerations

In addition to policy oversight, technology, funding and student identification, there are other factors to take into consideration in reverse transfer policy implementation practices. These include:

- ◆ States need to evaluate the value of an associate degree in the workforce. Do the areas of workforce need in the state require or value an associate degree? How will a reverse transfer policy increase the employability of the students/graduates in the current workforce needs of the state? These are considerations to discuss in the legislative process.
- ◆ If passing reverse transfer legislation is not a priority, the state can explore alternate ways to incorporate these policies into institutions. Many states have reverse transfer policies through board policy or individual institution agreements. Reverse transfer can be successful without legislative action. A few examples include **Nebraska**,¹⁴ **Kansas**¹⁵ and West **Virginia**.¹⁶

- ♦ To increase the reach of reverse transfer policies, states should begin to target students with some credit but no degree. In the past 20 years, more than 31 million students have enrolled in college and dropped out before earning a degree.¹⁷ Not all of these students are eligible for reverse transfer, however many of them could meet eligibility requirements and benefit from being awarded an associate degree.

Final thought

In this three-brief series, Education Commission of the States sheds light on reverse transfer policies set in legislation and the implementation pathways used by states. The series uncovered multiple implementation strategies and exemplar practices states looking to enact legislation can use in the future. As this topic is still in its infancy, further research will provide insight into how sustainable these policies are and how increasing associate degree completion can enhance the workforce and future bachelor's degree completion rates. Education Commission of the States will continue to track reverse transfer policy progress and research this growing trend.

ENDNOTES

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- 7 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>.
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