

Data on 'reverse transfers' can inform completion policies

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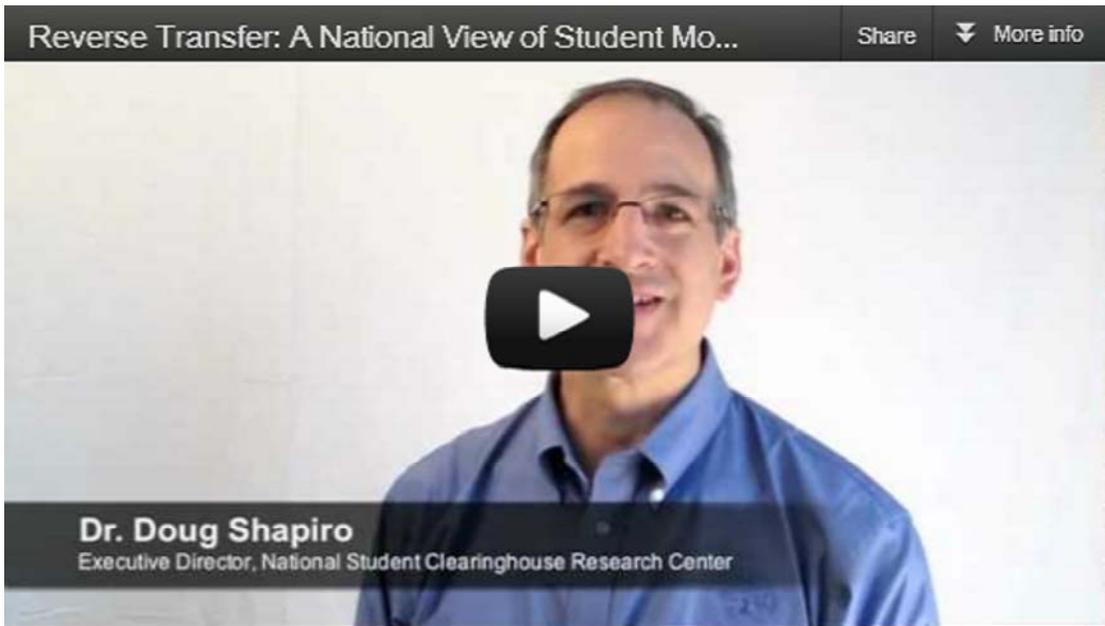
The pathway through higher education is often less like a straight highway than a winding path with stops along the route.

A recent report from the [National Student Clearinghouse Research Center](#) (NSCRC) on "reverse transfer" provides data on college students who start at a four-year institution and transfer to a community college.

That data can give community college leaders a more informed perspective on college completion—as large numbers of students counted as dropouts do actually earn credentials—and, ultimately, develop better completion strategies.

The study, supported by [Lumina Foundation](#), examined the prevalence of reverse transfers among first-time-in-college students who entered four-year colleges and universities in fall 2005 and follows their college attendance through summer 2011.

(Below, Doug Shapiro of the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center highlights the key findings in the center's new report on transfer students.)



Not going back

[Reverse Transfer: A National View of Student Mobility from Four-Year to Two-Year Institutions](#) is the third in NSCRC's series aimed at shedding light on mobility among college students.

Major findings of the latest report include the following:

- Within the six-year period studied, 14 percent of students who had enrolled in a four-year college in fall 2005 subsequently enrolled in a two-year institution outside of the summer months.
- The majority of those reverse transfer students, 71 percent, stayed in community colleges for more than one term. The longer students stayed at a community college, the less likely they were to return to their four-year college.
- Only 17 percent of reverse transfer students returned to their original four-year college, while 28 percent subsequently enrolled in a different four-year college.
- By the end of the six-year study period, only one in 10 reverse-transfer students had completed a degree or was still

enrolled in the original four-year college. Only about a third of them had a credential or were enrolled at any four-year college.

- More than two-thirds, 78 percent, of students who started at a four-year college and enrolled in a two-year college for the summer, and then returned to their four-year college, successfully completed a degree. In contrast, 58 percent of students at four-year colleges who did not transfer to a community college for a summer, completed a degree at their original college.

Students transfer to two-year colleges for a variety of reasons: to save money, a need to be closer to home, their educational goals changed or because they did not perform well academically, for example.

Better measures of student success

Colleges can use these findings “to craft policies that help them reach enrollment goals,” said Doug Shapiro, executive research director at the NSCRC and a co-author of the study. “Students will be able to make decisions about their educational pathways. Both institutions and public policymakers will have more comprehensive measures of student success and better indicators for institutional accountability.”

There hadn’t been much research on reverse transfers before for several reasons, the report notes. For one thing, transfer to community colleges is not seen as a measure of success at four-year colleges, even if students complete a degree. And while there are structures in place to support students who transfer from two-year to four-year colleges—such as 2+2 curricular structures and articulation agreements—there isn’t much to support reverse transfers.

The findings in *Reverse Transfers* provide “a more complete understanding of the role community colleges play in the national college completion agenda.”

“Two-year institutions have an important role in advancing reverse-transfer students’ postsecondary careers by retaining and graduating them, as well as supporting them through persistence at other institutions or vertical transfer,” the report says.

The enrollment trends documented in the study can “contribute to a more informed understanding and substantive discussions surrounding student educational pathways and college completion,” said NSCRC President and CEO Rick Torres. “Without tracking students beyond their institution of origin provided in our studies, policymakers risk missing key information in an often uncounted segment of students.”