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[Confessions of a Community College Dean](#)

In which a veteran of cultural studies seminars in the 1990s moves into academic administration and finds himself a married suburban father of two. Foucault, plus lawn care.

Reverse Transfers
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[Dean Dad](#)

Did you know that community colleges don't just send transfer students; they also receive them?

[It's true.](#) But the entire policy world doesn't seem to know that.

Just this week, I had a discussion with someone from a local, somewhat selective four-year college about an agreement by which they would send us the applicants who didn't quite make the cut there, with a clearly defined path to get there from here. Technically, these students wouldn't be reverse transfers – they'd be cc students with a dual admission agreement – but the idea is the same.

We also get a surprising number of lateral transfers – one community college to another – as well as more true reverse transfers – from four year to two year – than people seem to think.

Given the assumptions most people bring to the American higher education system, reverse transfers are hard to explain. Most of our systems, and certainly the political culture, assume that the pipeline only flows in one direction. It doesn't.

Some reverse transfers are the stereotypical kids who got caught up in the temptations of dorm life, neglected their studies, and flunked out of the four-year school. These students are often led to the cc by their parents, usually with some sort of agreement that if they get their GPA's back up, they can return from whence they came. Some have financial or familial issues that made "going away" to college untenable. Some got homesick. In some states, some were chased out by capacity issues at the four year school. (I'm looking at you, California...) Some are "visiting" from their four-year schools, just looking to pick up some credits on the cheap. (We get a lot of those in the January and summer sessions.) And some just decided that the local community college offered something closer to what they actually wanted. It happens.

Nobody really markets to reverse transfers, or even brags about receiving them. Openly pursuing them would probably be perceived as poaching. And I can't even imagine the advertising...

That's why I was heartened to see that some people are finally starting to study reverse transfers in a serious way.

Reverse transfers are largely invisible, despite being relatively common, because they aren't where we think to look. Federal data (graduation rates, most notably) tend to look at first-time, full-time, degree-seeking students; by definition, reverse transfers are not first-time. Articulation agreements -- treaties between colleges that outline which credits will count for what -- are almost always based on the assumption that the two-year school is the feeder. Even "remediation" is based on remediating high school, not on remediating college. My college is often asked where it sends the most transfers; it's never asked from

where it receives the most.

Despite the assumptions of policymakers, though, students go where it makes sense for them. We can read that as institutional failure, but I think it's more productive to read it as student resilience and institutional flexibility. A system that only works when everyone moves in lockstep is bound to shatter when things get messy; a more porous system, while harder to describe, offers more chances to start over and regroup. That matters.

More basically, acknowledging the prevalence of reverse transfers shifts the focus of discussion, rightly, from colleges to students. If students keep going outside the lines, why? What aren't they finding where they thought they would?

I tip my cap to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. The discussion is still just starting, but it's a good discussion to have. Maybe soon those of us on the ground will be able to stop treating reverse transfers as an open secret, and start trying more openly to meet their needs.