

Learn how reverse transfers affect student completions

The common notion is that a transfer student starts at a community college and completes a bachelor's degree at a four-year college or university.

But reverse transfer—movement from the four-year institution to the two-year college—is more common than many higher education administrators realize. When students transfer and how long they are away from their four-year institution can make a big difference in how likely they are to complete degrees.

Reverse Transfer: A National Review of Mobility from Four-Year to Two-Year Institutions, a recent report from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, examines the outcomes for students who first enrolled in four-year institutions in the fall of 2005. Researchers studied reverse-transfer patterns and completion rates over the next six years.

If you work at a four-year institution, consider benchmarking your students' reverse-transfer patterns against the national numbers. Knowing how enrollment patterns affect your students' outcomes could help you set effective policies. "The most important thing is that each institution should think about how these results translate into their context," said Doug Shapiro, executive research director at NSC.

Reverse transfers are common

NSC officials were surprised by the number of reverse transfers, Shapiro said. Within six years of enrolling, 14.4 percent of first-time students who started at a four-year institution enrolled at a two-year institution outside the summer months. An additional 5.4 percent enrolled at two-year institutions for summer courses only.

Part-time students were more likely to reverse transfer (16.4 percent) than were full-time students (13.1 percent).

Time of transfer impacts chance of return

Most four-year institution students who enrolled in two-year institutions for the summer only (80.7 percent) returned to their original institution.

But the picture was quite different for students who transferred outside the summer term. Only 16.6 percent of them returned to their original institution. More of them—28.3 percent—enrolled at a different four-year institution. But more than half of these students did not return to a four-year institution during the time of the study.

Duration at two-year institution matters

The likelihood that reverse-transfer students would return to their original four-year institution

decreased if they spent more than one semester at the two-year institution. Reverse-transfer students who spent only one semester at the community college returned to their original institution at a rate of 31.4 percent.

But most reverse-transfer students—71.1 percent—spent more than one semester at the two-year institution. Of those students, only 10.5 percent returned to the four-year institution. "This suggests that four-year institutions employing outreach strategies to increase the number of returning students among this population have only a small window of time in which to do so," the report states.

Outcomes poor for reverse transfers

At the end of the study period, two-thirds of reverse-transfer students had not completed a degree at a four-year institution, and they were not enrolled at one. And only one in 10 had either completed a degree at their original institution or were still enrolled there.

On the positive side, one-third of the students had either completed a degree at a two-year institution or were still enrolled at one.

Summer enrollment helps success rates

Enrolling at a two-year institution only for the summer correlated with higher completion rates at the four-year institution where the student first enrolled. Among those students, 77.5 percent graduated, compared with 58.4 percent of students who never enrolled at a two-year institution.

Download the report at www.studentclearinghouse.info/signature/3/. ■

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