

Exploring the Implementation of Reverse Transfer in Illinois

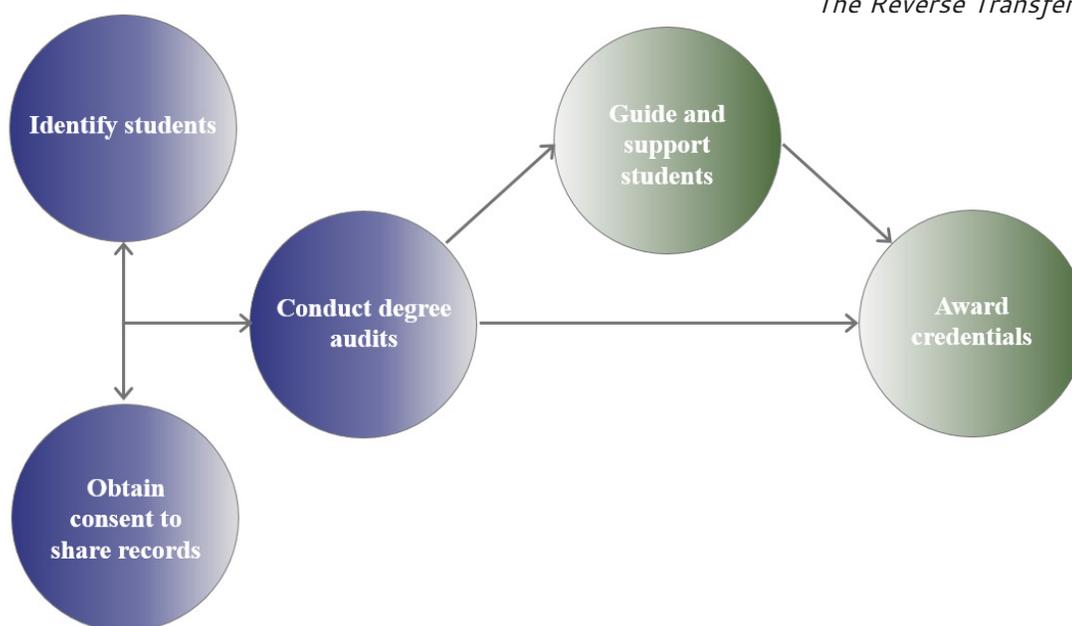
by Marci Rockey, Project Coordinator

Heather L. Fox, OCCRL Assistant Director of Operations, Communications, and Research

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher, OCCRL Director

The Reverse Transfer Illinois project was an exploratory study of the implementation of reverse transfer in the state of Illinois. This article serves as an executive summary for the study, highlighting the primary findings from the study. These findings draw on interview and survey data from 2- and 4-year postsecondary institutions engaged in reverse transfer throughout Illinois. Building on what was learned through Credit When It's Due (CWID), the Office of Community College Research and Leadership (OCCRL) investigated how and to what extent reverse transfer has been implemented in Illinois, a state that did not receive funding as part of the CWID project. The goal of this project is to bridge research and practice to improve transfer processes and promote positive outcomes for students. The study's guiding framework was informed by the results of Project Win Win (PWW) and CWID. The framework incorporates themes integrated from existing research and practice related to reverse transfer processes, including: a) engaging potential students, b) conducting audits and communicating results, c) guiding and supporting students near completion, and d) awarding credentials.

The Reverse Transfer Process



Overall, reflections on the implementation of reverse transfer from survey and interview respondents revealed the following barriers, areas of strength, and areas for improvement.

Barriers

- Non-Linear Pathways.** Institutions struggle with addressing the complexity that comes with students' non-linear educational pathways that often include attending multiple institutions concurrently, consecutively, or in a swirl pattern. This creates complexities in identifying the most important partnerships to pursue, collecting and integrating transcripts, determining who is eligible for a credential, and determining which institution should award the credential. This is especially notable in highly urban areas where students have access to multiple institutions, both within and out of state, located within a relatively small distance of each other.



- **Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), Consent, and Transcripts.** Complications and questions around FERPA regulations, methods for collecting consent, and the impact of these processes on the timely sharing of transcripts were common barriers experienced by institutions engaging in reverse transfer.
- **Localized and Inconsistent Partnerships.** Current reverse transfer processes rely on localized institutional partnerships, with each partnership requiring different processes and practices to be successful. Participants highlighted the lack of a statewide framework and guidance as a notable barrier to both implementing and scaling reverse transfer.

“Because the one challenge that I think is the biggest barrier to trying to award these degrees to eligible students is the fact that they’re not reading the communications, they’re not acknowledging the benefit that it provides to them, and therefore they’re rejecting our offers of participation.”

–Community college interview participant

Areas of Strength

- **Student-Centered.** Reverse transfer is a student-centered practice that recognizes and places value on students’ coursework, including coursework they took at other institutions.
- **Low Student Burden.** Fully implemented institutional reverse transfer practices are streamlined, with limited burden placed on the students who benefit from the process.
- **Stronger Partnerships.** Implementing reverse transfer helped to develop and maintain strong internal and external partnerships.
- **Improved Transfer.** Reverse transfer practices both benefit from and encourage improvements to transfer in general (e.g., improved course articulation processes and equivalency data).

Areas for Improvement

- **Low Levels of Student Participation.** Students’ lack of awareness, follow-through, and overall participation is a key limitation of reverse transfer processes highlighted by many institutions.
- **Staffing and Professional Development.** Reverse transfer processes require the integrated efforts of departments across different areas of the college. This creates challenges around clarity of roles, staffing, and training.
- **Developing Strong External Partnerships.** Identifying and developing relationships with potential partners is a challenge for many institutions. Respondents shared that this includes challenges in identifying potential partners, gauging the interest of potential partners, and managing inconsistencies across various reverse transfer partnerships.

Key Findings

The following outlines key findings for the themes in the study’s guiding framework.

Engaging Potential Students

- Reverse transfer initiatives in Illinois primarily focus on currently enrolled students with varying residency requirements at the state’s 2-year institutions, creating nuances for individual partnerships and individual students.
- Existing data and technologies have led institutions in Illinois to rely on an opt-in consent process for reverse transfer.
- A perceived lack of communication and understanding surrounding reverse transfer is identified as a challenge to increasing participation, as institutions in Illinois experience low response rates from current outreach.

“...most of my time is spent building transfer course equivalencies in a very proactive way. What I mean by that is that I don’t wait for a transcript to land on my desk. . . I basically build the infrastructure up every day. That is where most of my work is done.
–Community college interview participant

Conducting Audits and Communicating Results

- Determining course equivalencies is a complex and time-consuming process; however, the development of a course equivalency database necessary for reverse transfer has benefits for transfer in general.
- Trends in students attending multiple institutions necessitate practices that account for multiple institutional homes and for equating coursework across different transcript and course formats.
- New strategies are needed to communicate audit results with potential graduates. Further data is needed to understand the reason(s) that some students who are eligible for an associate degree do not pursue degree.

Guiding and Supporting Students Near Completion

- Institutional definitions of students near completion vary, ranging from 20–61 credits earned.
- 86.2% of respondents report providing students who were near to completing their degree information on how to complete their degree.
- Academic advisors within both institutional contexts are integral to efforts to guide and support students who are near completion.

Awarding Credentials

- While many colleges are investing in reverse transfer, the impact on graduation rates to date is minimal.
- Automatic awarding of credentials could help to increase completion rates.
- Collaborations built through implementation of reverse transfer are supporting institutional efforts to improve pathways, transfer, and completion for all students.

Conclusion

While the reverse transfer process employed at institutions was described as moderately effective by 40% of the survey respondents, and the number of degrees awarded through reverse transfer has been modest, most respondents highlighted the positive impact implementing the process has had on the college. There are substantial challenges and costs associated with implementing reverse transfer programs in Illinois. One of the most notable challenges has been in engaging potential students, a challenge magnified by varied interpretations of FERPA and other challenges to gaining student consent. Conducting record audits for reverse transfer and communicating the results of these audits to students posed several challenges for Illinois institutions; however, many respondents shared how engaging in the process of implementing reverse transfer processes has positively impacted their transfer processes and practices. While there is a desire to provide students who are near completion with the support necessary to complete their degree, this part of the reverse transfer process was often underdeveloped. Based on the low graduation outcomes associated with reverse transfer, questions were raised about the return on investment associated with reverse transfer and the need to have policies and resources to support this work. Facing these challenges without a state mandate or external funding has required colleges to be innovative in their approach to building reverse transfer partnerships and practices and appears to have limited the scale and scope of the implementation of reverse transfer in the state. Specifically, respondents referenced the need for systematic and statewide support for engaging in reverse transfer that would facilitate partnerships, provide guidance on best practices, facilitate networking, and encourage peer-to-peer learning across institutions.

Marci Rockey may be reached at rockey2@illinois.edu.

Heather L. Fox may be reached at h1fox2@illinois.edu.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher may be reached at ezamanig@illinois.edu.