

## Reverse Transfer Student Voices

By: Christopher L. Hockey, Reverse Transfer Coordinator, SUNY System Administration

### Introduction

Student mobility within higher education continues to be a focal point of colleges and university. Growing numbers of students are engaging in “transfer swirl,” leaving one college before receiving any credential, and transferring to another. In an effort to assist students in receiving an Associate’s degree, many state university systems and individual institutions are enabling reverse transfer programs that assist students in receiving their Associate’s degree after transferring to a four-year institution. In order to understand how best to facilitate a reverse transfer process, interviews were conducted with students at a mid-size four-year institution within the SUNY system.

### Student Selection and Characteristics

Five prospective reverse-transfer students self-selected to be a part of the focus group out of a total cohort size of 79. All students, at the time, were enrolled full time at a SUNY four-year campus.

Student A is a junior public justice major who transferred from a SUNY four-year technical college and a SUNY community college.

Student B is a sophomore public justice major who transferred from two different SUNY community colleges.

Student C is a senior psychology major who transferred from a SUNY community college.

Student D is a junior business administration major who transferred from a SUNY community college.

Student E is a senior sociology major who transferred from a SUNY community college.

### Focus Group Protocol and Themes

Students were interviewed in two different groups, consisting of one group of three and one group of two. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. The goal of the focus group was to ascertain a better understanding of student knowledge and motivation of reverse transfer. Focus group questions were broken down into themes of (1) motivations to transfer, (2) value of degree, (3) desire to participate, (4) process, (5) choice, and (6) impact. Some of the specific questions that were asked around these themes are:

- Why did you choose to transfer before receiving an Associate’s degree?
- Have you thought about what would happen if you were unable to complete your Bachelor’s degree?
- What would motivate you to want to earn your Associate’s degree now?

- Would any kind of fees, such as graduation fees, deter you from participating in a reverse transfer process?
- Would having to personally be responsible for sending a transcript to the previous institution deter you from participating in the reverse transfer process?
- Does it matter which major is tied to your Associate's degree?
- How do you think an Associate's degree would affect your current or future plans in terms of education and employment? What impact do specific degree requirements have on your desire to participate in reverse transfer?

### **Students' Motivations to Transfer**

When asked why they chose to transfer before receiving an Associate's degree, the responses were varied. Student A started at a four-year college and spent two years there. After the enrolled major was discontinued, Student A attempted to transfer directly to Oswego and was denied admission. As a result, Student A went to a community college. Student E initially had no desire to receive the Associate's degree explaining "I just wanted to do two years there [community college] whether I got the degree or not, because I wanted to move on with my life, and once I got accepted here [Oswego] I took full advantage of it and left without a degree." Student D chose to transfer before receiving the Associate's degree mainly because of a lack of direction stating "I originally was going to go to community college for a year, I didn't plan to get my Associate's degree, and I didn't know where I wanted to go so I just went for another year. I didn't have enough credits for the Associate's but I wanted to leave anyway." Student C simply transferred because they felt the four year college would provide a better quality education and Student B transferred early because of financial considerations stating that "for some reason my financial went down, and I decided I didn't want to keep paying all this money for just a two-year school. I decided to transfer and take out loans in one place where I could be for three years instead of having to take out loans in two places."

### **Value of an Associate's Degree**

Students were also asked about whether or not they had considered the impact of not completing the Associate's degree. All the students agreed that Associate's degree holders earn more than high school graduates and less than bachelor degree recipients but they all also stated that they had not thought about the ramifications of not earning the Associate's degree, and more importantly, none of the students had thought about what would happen if they never finished the baccalaureate degree.

### **Students' Desire to Participate in Reverse Transfer Degree Award**

All students were asked about their desire to participate in a reverse transfer program. When asked if they were interested in receiving an Associate's degree at this stage in their academic career, all students expressed interest. Student's reasons for wanting to pursue their Associate's degree at this time were relatively consistent with the majority of students stating that the Associate's degree would provide an insurance policy in the event they were unable to complete the bachelor degree. The other two students expressed that their reason for pursuing the Associate's degree now was that having two degrees was better for their long-term graduate school and job prospects. All students were also aware that it was possible to transfer their

credits back to the sending institution but none were quite sure of the process that would need to be followed.

### **Students' Recommendations about Degree Conferral Process**

Focus group participants were asked about the process that SUNY was considering to move students through the reverse transfer program. When asked about their preference for an opt-in or opt-out option, the majority of students believed that the opt-out option made more sense, mostly from a practical standpoint, believing that students who have earned the credits would want to be awarded the Associate's degree. The opt-in option just seemed like an additional, unneeded step to the participants.

Participants were also asked about logistical items such as transcripts and fees. All participants felt that transcripts were a challenging obstacle to receiving the Associate's degree. Beside the cost of ordering a transcript from the currently enrolled institution, there was also a time obstacle. One participant indicated that it took a month for the transcript to be sent and then processed at the degree granting institution. In general, transcripts were more of a nuisance than a deterrent as all participants said that having to handle the transcripts themselves and paying transcript fees would not prevent them from pursuing their Associate's degree. Graduation fees were also discussed and, like the transcripts, while a nuisance, were not a deterrent.

In addition to transcript and graduation fees, students were also asked about the best way to communicate with them about their eligibility for receiving the Associate's degree. All students agreed that email was still the best way to communicate with them but, in addition, one student felt that if there was some way to provide this information via their degree audit software, that would be more convenient.

After one student mentioned the importance of courses lining up in order to receive the Associate's degree, the facilitator asked each participant about their need to take courses not in their current major in order to meet the requirements for the Associate's degree. In all cases, participants stated that there was a limit as to how many extra courses they would be willing to take outside of their major in order to meet Associate's degree requirements. The maximum number of credits that participants were willing to do was 9. Students believed that beyond 9 credits, it was not worth the financial commitment for an Associate's degree. All students felt that their best chance of receiving the Associate's degree was to "double-dip" as many courses needed for the Associate's degree with the courses currently needed for their Bachelor's degree.

### **Degree Conferral Preferences Concerning Students' Major Field of Study**

Participants were asked about the importance of the program Associate's with the degree they earn via reverse transfer matching up to the program that they were pursuing when initially enrolled in the community college. All students stated that they would like to get an Associate's degree in the same major that they were pursuing at their initial colleges. One student stated that a degree in either their original chosen major or a liberal arts degree would be acceptable. It's important to note that that student was also in the most flexible of majors, sociology, while the other participants were in more structured and career focused majors such as psychology, criminal/public justice, and business administration.

## **Potential Impact of Associate's Degree Award on Pursuit of Baccalaureate**

Participants were asked about the impact of earning the Associate's degree on their current and future plans. In all cases, students said that earning the Associate's degree would have no impact on their pursuit of the baccalaureate degree. However, students offered differing opinions on the impact of the Associate's degree. Three out of the five students indicated that they felt the completion of their Associate's degree would greatly benefit their job prospects and one student indicated that the Associate's degree would significantly increase the ability to be selected for a quality internship.

### **Summary**

In conclusion, the students interviewed had various reasons for transferring before receiving the Associate's degree, but an underlying theme behind their motivations was a lack of clear direction about their overall goals. Students had a belief that there was indeed value in earning the Associate's degree but that value must be weighed against the cost of completing additional courses to receive the degree. Focus group participants also expressed that they did not think about the impact of not receiving the Associate's degree as it related to their long term interests. Participants were now considering the completion of an Associate's degree as a way to increase internship and job prospects as well as to provide a backup plan in case of baccalaureate completion obstacles. From a process perspective, students were in agreement that an opt-out feature was most practical and that, while a nuisance, transcripts and fees were not a deterrent for reverse transfer participation. Also of importance, students believed that not only was there a limit of credits that they were willing to do outside of their current major, the alignment of baccalaureate and Associate's degree programs was a factor in deciding to participate in the reverse transfer process.

### **Implications and Discussion**

The perspectives of these students have greatly informed the reverse transfer project at SUNY. One impact of these findings is that SUNY will need to focus some energy on marketing of the Associate's degree to students at the four-year institutions to help them understand that the Associate's degree is an asset to their employment and internship opportunities and can provide a sense of security in the event of unforeseen obstacles while pursuing the baccalaureate degree. The biggest implication from these interviews is that Associate's and Bachelor's degree program alignment has the most impact on a student's decision to pursue an Associate's degree after transferring.

Mohawk Valley Community College and SUNY IT and SUNY-Morrisville were the first institutions to pilot the reverse transfer process in fall 2013, and SUNY is currently piloting reverse transfer with four new pilot partnerships. System-wide scale-up is planned for Fall 2014 after the Spring 2014 pilots and Summer 2014 degree conferral. SUNY also plans to formalize a process for students to request degree audits for reverse transfer since individual campuses respond to student requests for degree audit and conferral.

Contact: Chris Hockey, Reverse Transfer Coordinator, State University System of New York (SUNY), [chris.hockey@suny.edu](mailto:chris.hockey@suny.edu)