

Applying Automation to Reverse Transfer Process Can Advance Student Completion

According to the National Center for Education, about 42 percent of the students who attend a community college will transfer to a four-year institution, and many of them will leave just a few credits shy of earning their associate's degree. Although this development is not new, there is increasing pressure today on community colleges to track the academic progress of their former students at the four-year institution and alert them when they have earned the proper credits for completion of an associate's degree, a process known as reverse transfer.

There are several factors driving this heightened agenda. One, the originating community college often gains additional funding when a student completes an associate degree. In fact some states, like Texas, are considering tying even more funding to completion. Two, having a student earn his or her degree supports a college's mission to help students be successful. And lastly, earning an associate degree can give a student an important psychological boost to continue with their studies.

"Many students are not aware of the opportunity to transfer back their credits," said Dennis Crowson, vice president of student services at Blinn College and a long-time promoter of applying automation to the reverse transfer process. "Even if the associate degree is not their ultimate goal, it is an accomplishment that can give a student added motivation to continue with their education. And sometimes students are not able to complete their bachelor's degree, so the associate degree becomes even more important to their employment potential."

BLINN COLLEGE CREATES ELECTRONIC PIPELINE

Unfortunately, tracking and synching students' credits in order to enable reverse transfer and completion of a degree is largely a

time-consuming and manual process. The first, and most significant undertaking, is for both institutions to work together on degree requirements and transfer equivalencies. The labor-intensive work in creating this foundation is unavoidable. However, the addition of software can automate the final degree audit process.

Blinn College has one of the highest academic transfer rates in Texas. At any given time, about 1,500 students from Blinn are attending Sam Houston State University. The institutions have worked closely to establish course articulation agreements and both use Ellucian™ Degree Works™ software. The use of a common language and scribing rules makes it easier for the institutions to share information and communicate.

Sam Houston periodically executes a population selection of their students to identify those who previously attended Blinn and then sends that list to the college. Blinn then removes the names of students who don't have a minimum of 24 credit hours and those who have already received a degree. This smaller updated list is sent back to Sam Houston, and the university in turn sends Blinn transcripts via the SPEEDE server for those students. At this point, Blinn uses Ellucian Degree Works software to run degree audits and determine which students qualify for their associate's degree.



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"Advisors and other staff members still need to verify and document the credits," said Crowson. "But having both schools using the same degree audit tool cuts out a lot of uncertainties and it eliminates much of the manual work on our end."

Students who qualify are sent an email telling them of their accomplishment and outlining the steps for them to apply for their degrees at Blinn at no charge.

"We receive a lot of positive responses from students saying things like, 'thank you for checking on me,' or 'I didn't know this was possible,'" said Crowson.

Crowson is advocating for a broader solution that would automate more of the manual tasks involved at the front end. Also, he would like a software solution that would automatically and proactively display to students and advisors at the four-year institution the courses that a student could take there to earn their associate's degree from the originating community college; without requiring a staff member to run a degree audit.

SUNY PUSHING THE TECH ENVELOPE

The State University of New York (SUNY) system is already pushing the technology envelope.

With 64 campuses, SUNY is the nation's largest and most comprehensive state university system. Nearly 10,000 students traditionally transfer from SUNY community colleges to four-year institutions within the system each year. Of them, about 59 percent transfer before receiving an associate degree. Also, approximately 11,000 students transfer each year to community colleges from other SUNY community colleges or 4-year institutions, 96 percent of whom transfer without the associate degree.

Each SUNY institution is in the process of implementing Ellucian Degree Works. Once the system has articulation agreements and transfer pathways in place, it will have a solid

foundation to automate more parts of the transactions related to reverse transfer and to provide valuable information to campus personnel. For example, using existing SUNY and Ellucian Degree Works data, an automated process could be designed to identify students who are matriculated at four-year SUNY colleges and who transferred from a SUNY community college without first obtaining an associate degree. This would generate a list of students who appear to have completed the graduation requirements for the associate degree at the four-year college. Each community college would be provided with a list of students, and then a staff member would determine if the student has met all the campus graduation requirements for the associate's degree. If the student has met the requirements, the campus can choose to award the student the degree. If they have not, campuses will have the option of contacting the student to outline the additional steps necessary to obtain the degree. The automation would lessen the manual work involved and identify more students with the potential to complete; however, the control and final assessment would remain with human decision makers at the campus level.

SUNY also is exploring ways to use Ellucian Degree Works to automate other transfer pathways, from a four-year institution

Ellucian is working closely with SUNY to enhance Ellucian Degree Works to facilitate an easier transfer methodology among schools within the system.

to a two-year, for example, or from one four-year institution to another. SUNY envisions a future state where a student can initiate a process through Ellucian Degree Works and view the courses he or she needs to take for degree completion as well as a full list of possible campuses offering appropriate courses. Students could include parameters that are important to them, such as the quickest path to completion and/or campus location. Ellucian Degree Works could run the audit at multiple

schools and give the student an approximation of potential paths. Of course, to get an actual evaluation, the student will still need to work with an individual at the institution to help navigate the complicated degree audit process. But the initial self check would be a valuable starting point for a student. These innovations in automation and enhanced communication would help advance the national completion agenda, as well as SUNY's own strategic goals for student completion and success.

These initiatives are in the early stages; however, SUNY is committed to making the transfer path easier and to helping students make well-informed decisions for advancing their studies. Ellucian is working closely with SUNY to enhance Ellucian Degree Works to facilitate an easier transfer methodology among schools within the system.

In addition, Ellucian can apply the technology being developed with SUNY for the benefit of all its customers so that they can bring more automation to the reverse transfer process with any trading partner, within or outside of a system. A more automated, student-centric model would ease the administrative burden of institutions that are struggling with ways to help students achieve the often-overlooked associate degree milestone and contribute to increased completion rates. ▲

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