Democracy's College

Episode 9: The potential of reverse transfer initiatives to address inequity in higher education

Welcome to the Democracy's College podcast series. This podcast focuses on educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students in P-20 educational pathways. This podcast is a product of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership, or OCCRL, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Learn more about OCCRL at occrl.illinois.edu.

In this episode, Marci Rockey, from OCCRL talks to Leslie Daugherty, Transfer Coordinator at Southern Illinois University – Edwardsville, about the potential reverse transfer initiatives to address inequity in higher education.

Marci Rockey: Welcome Leslie.

Leslie Daugherty: Thank you for having me.

Marci Rockey: As we know, reverse transfer is the process by which students are awarded a credential from a two-year institution through any combination of credits earned at two- and four-year institutions. How can implementing reverse transfer affect equity for students in higher education?

Leslie Daugherty: I believe reverse transfer is actually one of the easiest ways we can work toward achieving some equity in higher education. At its core, reverse transfer is a process that can insure that students who have earned a credential are awarded that credential. Overall, there needs to be more emphasis on credential pathways in education. A high school degree leads to an associate degree, which can lead to a bachelor's degree. Implementing reverse transfer policies and agreements allows students some flexibility on their way to completion, even if this means that they intentionally leave or are advised to leave the community college before earning that associate degree. But if they leave, they need to understand what that means and also have a plan, with emphasis on the word plan, to complete the requirements at the four-year transfer institution. In Illinois we have a general education core curriculum package that was approved through the Illinois Articulation Initiative. We call this the IAIGECC. I believe that the IAIGECC was created specifically to insure that there was in fact some equity in Illinois' general education core. Students who complete the package of courses and transfer to a participating institution have that institution's lower-level general education courses waived. However, at most Illinois community colleges, students have to request an audit for the package. It's not done automatically, and most students are unaware that this even exists. It also does not count for completion numbers at the two-year, which has an impact on funding at the community college level. In my study, I am going to focus on an institution which automatically awards, when met, this completion on the student's transcript. [This is] for all students. They don't have to request an audit. When we talk about equity in reverse transfer, specifically in Illinois where my research is, I feel that institutions that automatically award this package put their students at an advantage both for completion of the degree and for reverse transfer. Students who transfer from institutions without this automatic awarding and don't ask or know to ask about the audit, they are just not awarded the waiver, even if they have earned it, and they may have additional courses to complete after transfer. I also think that reverse transfer initiatives help to identify some barriers to completion, barriers that institutions don't even realize exist. One of the barriers I'm really interested in is looking at the additional courses required beyond the

general education package at Illinois community colleges. The more research we can do to address these barriers the more potential completers we can reach.

Marci Rockey: So as it relates to equity and improving economic outcomes for students, what can be problematic about focusing reverse transfer initiatives solely on currently enrolled students?

Leslie Daugherty: Well, most of the research on reverse transfer has focused on students who are currently enrolled, which makes sense. We know who and where these students are, [and] they are easier to contact than those who have left either the two- or the four-year institution. However, what the research has shown us is that institutions that are "opt-in," meaning that students are asked if they are interested in reverse transfer after they are determined to be eligible, this eligibility has usually been predetermined between the two institutions or sometimes at the state level. What the research has shown us is that students are consistently not interested in reverse transfer. The research has hypothesized that these students believe they are on track to complete the bachelor's, so they don't see the importance of completing the associate degree. The idea of not completing or having to stop out is something that these students can't even fathom. However, when you look at the numbers from the National Clearinghouse statistics, specifically they did a study between 1993 and 2013, 31 million students left higher education without a degree, and of those students 4 million left with at least 60 credit hours, which in most cases is the requirement for an associate degree. If you combine that data with the information from the Georgetown Institute, they indicate that as of 2009 students with an associate degree have lifetime earning that [is] one-third more than those who earn a high school degree. It is imperative to reach out to this population. By focusing on currently enrolled students we are helping those that may at some point stop out. I do think that it would be great if we could get to a point where reverse transfer is automatic. At this point we are not doing a lot to help those students that are currently in the workforce that may be eligible for jobs if only they had that credential that they may have already technically earned.

Marci Rockey: When you think about students that do find themselves having this stop out, would you describe some of the barriers that you have found to exist that impact those students trying to re-enter higher education after stopping out?

Leslie Daugherty: There can be a lot of barriers for students who are trying to come back after leaving either at the two- or the four-year [institution]. A lot of it depends on what has happened to the student during that stop out period. Many of these students left their institutions as traditional students, as we call them, and are now coming back as sort of nontraditional learners, so they have different needs, needs that a lot of times they are not even sure of. They don't really understand these needs. This is where truth in advising is really important. Advisers can help students think about what it actually means to come back and help them anticipate what sort of help they may need, personally, academically, socially, and financially, and just really get the student started out right. Then institutions need to able and ready to meet these needs, whether it includes scholarships for part-time students; course availability at nontraditional times, looking at evenings, online, weekends; and also looking at varied course format, so looking at the 8-week, 6-week or 4-week courses. The ability to begin at different times [is important]. A lot of students call and say that they are ready to go back in September, and so we are very excited for them, but they can;'t start until January. Looking at different entry points [is important] as well. It's not just offering the courses at different times, but making sure the student services are open and available to students during these nontraditional times. Is there a place for them

to eat, to study together, an online chat that's available after traditional work hours? I had worked in both admission and advising before accepting my current role. It is always heartbreaking to talk to a student who is ready to come back mentally but automatically hit these barriers when it came to enrollment or financial aid. Then there are some other barriers that are academic. Students only have so many years to complete most degrees before they have to move on to another academic catalog. Students also may have to redo coursework or complete new courses that were implemented after they had stopped out. I don't necessarily think this is a bad thing, but when we talk about barriers to completion this is definitely one of them. What the research has really consistently told us is that the sooner the student can be contacted after stop out, the better for completion, especially in regard to reverse transfer.

Marci Rockey: Are there reverse transfer initiatives that you are aware of that are successful at re-engaging or awarding credentials to students who have effectively stopped out?

Leslie Daugherty: This is a pretty big gap in the research. The National Student Clearinghouse has started a process to help students through reverse transfer. It is student lead. The Lumina Foundation recently completed a project called Win-Win, which had some success in awarding credentials, but it ran into a lot of the barriers similar to what we discussed earlier. They looked at students that they considered to be eligible for a degree audit. They were chosen based on the number of credit hours they earned, where they had previously earned their credits, and on average those selected for the degree audit had about 81 earned hours. Out of that number only about 16% were eligible for the degree, and then a smaller number of those actually wanted the degree. The report also found that there were about 20,000 students from the initial group that were close to completion, and the institutions that participated in this study were trying to re-engage those students, and only about 2,000 students from this number have returned or indicated that they want to return. There is not a lot of data from the student perspective on that and especially [from] those that wanted to go back, the potential completers. There is not a lot of data on whether or not they ended up completing. This is really the only large research project we see with stop out populations. There are some states that are looking at some initiatives. There is really not a lot of published information that I have found on whether or not they are successful.

Marci Rockey: Given that this topic is an emerging area for scholarship and research, what do you hope to contribute to the field through your own research?

Leslie Daugherty: Right now I'm pretty early in the process, so I feel like the research could go a few different ways. I'm hoping that my research can help identify the barriers to reverse transfer, specifically for the students who have stopped out. The population that I'm looking at is what I would consider to be the low-hanging fruit of stop out reverse transfer. These are students who have already met the IAIGECC and so academically they just need to transfer credits back to the two-year [institution]. However, the two-year institution I have chosen does have an additional requirement for graduation beyond the transferrable course credit and the IAI. I am really interested to see if these additional requirements are causing a barrier, and if so maybe this information can help the two-year institutions look at their requirements or perhaps influence some sort of policy change at the state level. I'm also really interested in to get student perspective on reverse transfer. This is another big gap in the research: What do students think of the process? How hard is it from their perspective? Do they think it is worth the effort? Are they even interested in completion? Again, [there is] not a lot of research from the

student perspective and even less from the students who have stopped out and are not currently enrolled at any institution.

Marci Rockey: What call to action would you like to issue for practitioners at those institutions that are not currently engaged in any reverse transfer initiatives or partnerships?

Leslie Daugherty: I believe that reverse transfer is a win for students, but it also takes a lot of work and dedication by both the two- and the four-year institutions. My call to action would be to start identifying potential barriers to completion for all students, but then specifically for those students who might qualify for reverse transfer. Are we still requiring some old graduation requirements that could be amended? I think it is important, especially in Illinois, to look at what each community college is requiring above and beyond the general education package and the minimum 60-hour requirement. Are we, in Illinois, creating our own barriers to reverse transfer? If so, let's talk about what it would take to update these requirements and make it easier for all students, not those who simply live in the right community college district or, I guess at least, a community college district [whose] degree and graduation requirements are better suited for the reverse transfer. I also think we must educate advisors on reverser transfer and equip them with the right tools to help students. Let's just make reverse transfer a part of the transfer process and not just an afterthought.

Marci Rockey: Great. Thank you very much.

For more information about the potential of reverse transfer initiatives to address inequity in higher education, we recommend that you visit the National Student Clearinghouse Reverse Transfer Project, Transferology, Reverse Transfer Illinois, and Credit When Its Due webpages. For more podcasts, links to today's recommended resources, or to share your comments and suggestions, visit occrl.illinois.edu/democracy or send them via Twitter @occrl. Tune in next month, when Edmund Graham from OCCRL talks with Dr. Demetra Jackson an associate professor for Higher Education at Texas Tech University about diversity in STEM. Background music for this podcast is provided by DubLab. Thank you for listening and for your contributions to educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students.