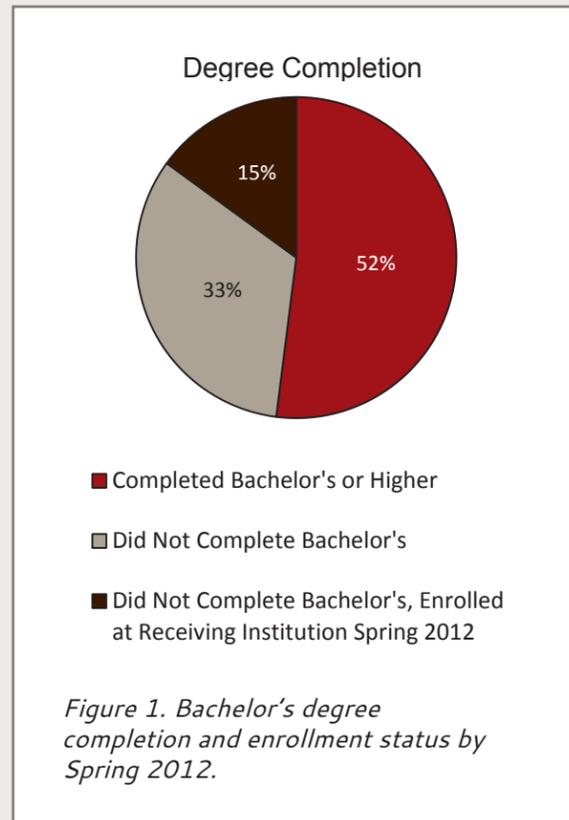


Reverse Transfer: Taking Stock and Moving Forward

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Reverse transfer (or reverse credit transfer) is an emerging policy in higher education. Reverse transfer programs are intended for students who transfer from a community college to a university without earning an associate's degree. College credits earned at the university are then transferred back to the community college where a degree audit is conducted and students are awarded an associate degree's if all degree requirements are met. Our research published in early 2015 found that all states, except Alaska, either have a statewide reverse transfer policy or at least one institutional program (Garcia, 2015). We also found that the majority of states with reverse transfer legislation enacted those policies within the past five years (Garcia, 2015). In short, reverse transfer policies are expanding and they will likely continue to proliferate as states and institutions around the country develop new reverse transfer agreements and partnerships. This momentum points to the need and opportunity to take stock of what we are learning about reverse transfer and to consider directions for moving forward. What follows is a summary of select findings from OCCRL's research on reverse transfer programs in the 15 states funded through Credit When It's Due (CWID).



Many reverse transfer-eligible transfer students do not complete a bachelor's degree within four years of transfer

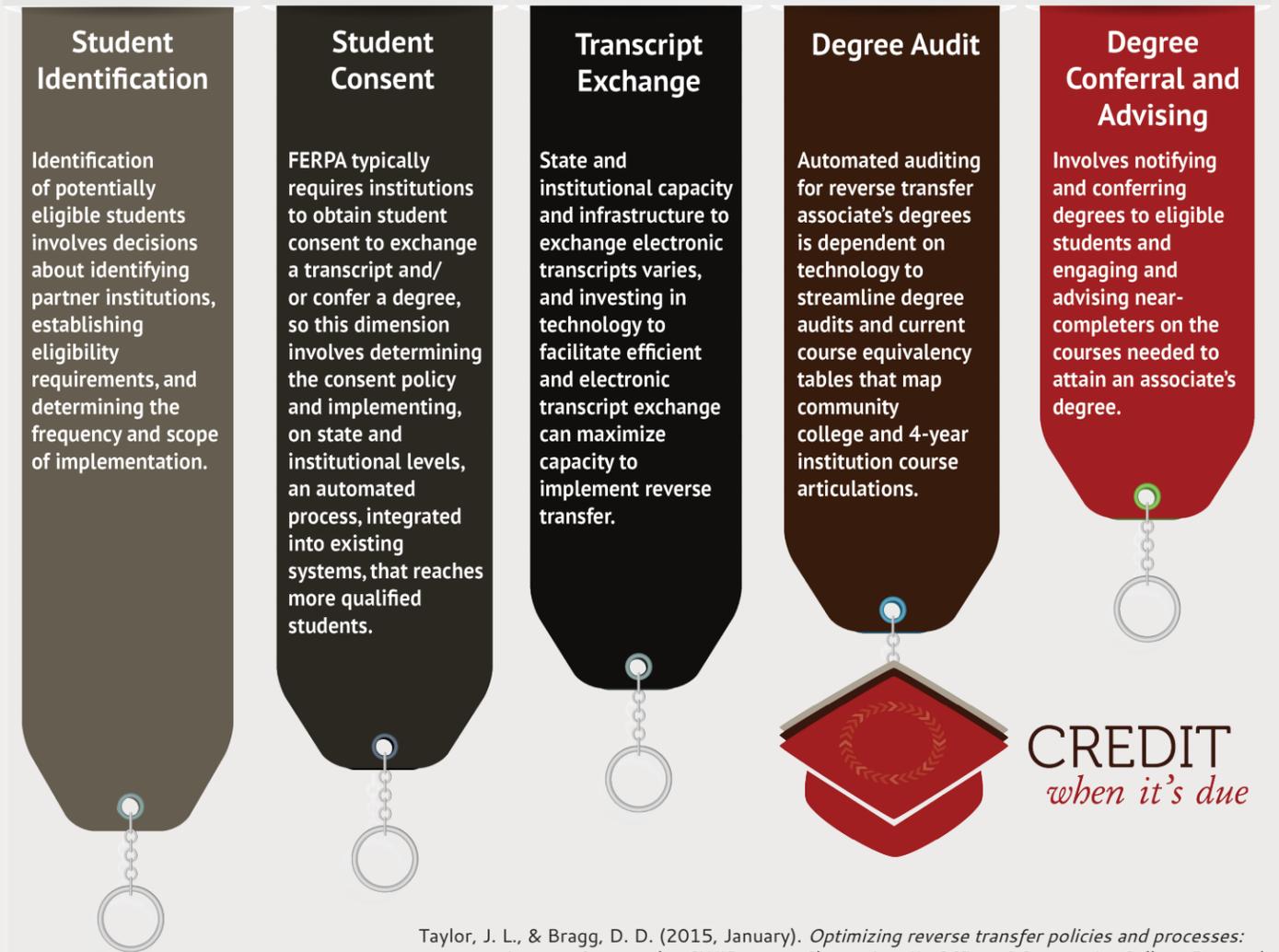
A central problem driving the development of reverse transfer policies is that many community college transfer students who transfer an associate's degree do not complete their bachelor's degree. Researchers have documented this phenomenon (Shapiro et al., 2013), and we observed this problem in the CWID states as well. Using a cohort of first-time transfer students in fall 2008, we estimated which students were potentially eligible for reverse transfer and observed their college enrollment and degree completion outcomes four years after transfer. As displayed in Figure 1, the results showed that 48% of students who were potentially eligible for reverse transfer associate's degrees did not earn a bachelor's degree within four years of transfer (Taylor, Bishop, Makela, Bragg, & Ruud, 2013). Many of these students had accumulated large numbers of credits, yet they had no degree to show for their efforts.

Reverse transfer policies and practices are evolving and there are many opportunities to optimize and scale reverse transfer in states

The CWID initiative provided states the opportunity to develop and experiment with reverse transfer, including the planning and development needed to bring reverse transfer to scale. In a paper released in early 2015, we described and defined five dimensions of reverse transfer practice and processes; Figure 2 displays and defines these five dimensions (Taylor & Bragg, 2015).

For each dimension we described ways in which states and institutions were optimizing reverse transfer to expand the number of students that may benefit without reducing the quality or integrity of the associate's degree. For example, a state might scale reverse transfer by integrating the student consent process into existing transfer admission applications or by investing in technology to automate transcript exchange and degree audit functions. Although simple in theory, these policies require investment of time and resources that should not be overlooked.

Five Dimensions of Reverse Transfer Practice and Processes



Taylor, J. L., & Bragg, D. D. (2015, January). *Optimizing reverse transfer policies and processes: Lessons from twelve CWID states*. Champaign, IL: Office of Community College Research and Leadership, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Figure 2. Definitions of the five dimensions of reverse transfer practice and process

Initial evidence on the impact of reverse transfer is mostly positive, but also suggests that reverse transfer may influence students differently

Because reverse transfer is a recent policy development, and one that requires adequate time to observe transfer students' 4-year retention and degree attainment, we are just beginning to learn the policy outcomes. For example, in a recent study using data from Hawaii and Minnesota, which was presented at the 2015 Association for the Study of Higher Education conference in Denver (Taylor & Giani, 2015), our analyses showed that students who received the reverse transfer associate's degree were more likely to earn a bachelor's degree within one year of receiving the degree, when compared to other transfer students (see Figure 3). However, in the same paper there was evidence that some reverse transfer associate's degree recipients (~10%) stopped-out of the university within one year. These results suggest that receiving the reverse transfer degree may influence students differently. These results should be interpreted with caution because more research is needed and more time is needed to monitor reverse transfer recipients' progress toward the baccalaureate degree.

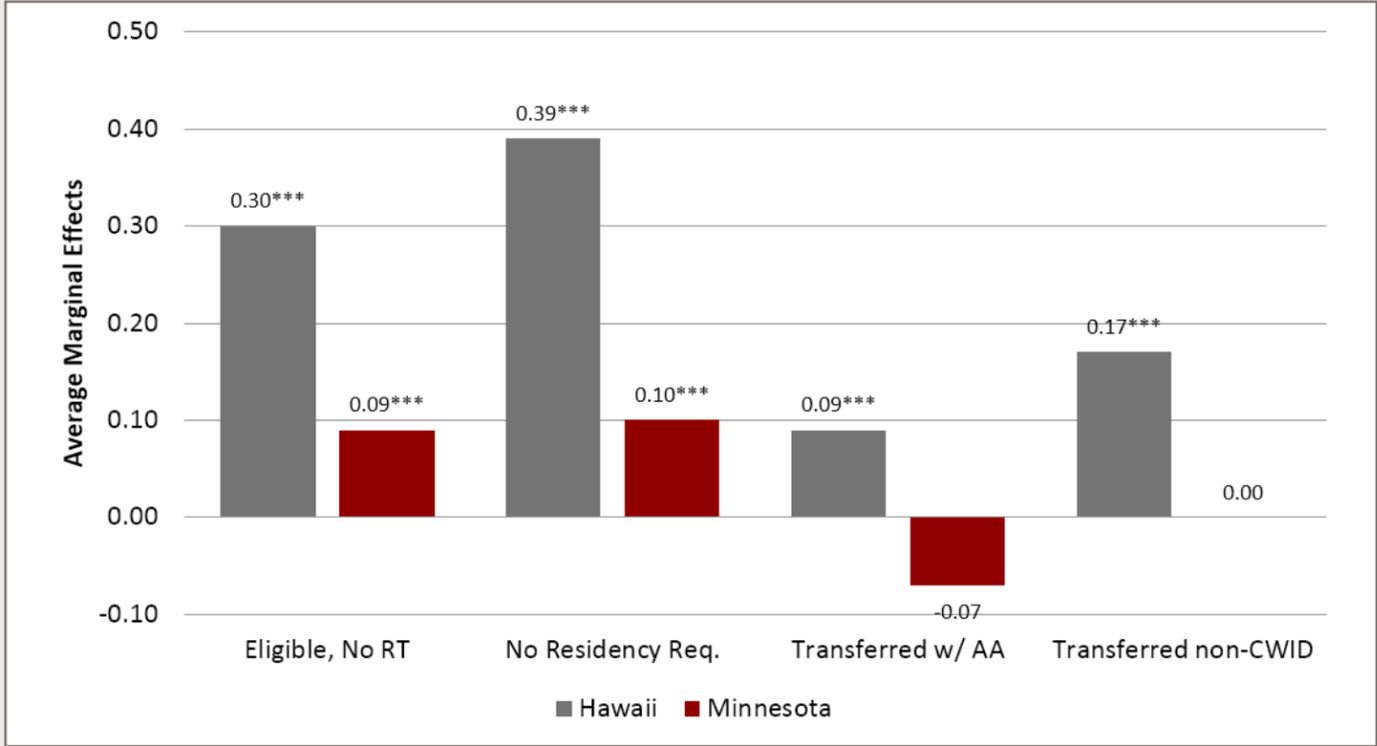


Figure 3: Average marginal effects from logistic regression analyses that estimated the impact of receiving an associate's degree through reverse transfer on baccalaureate attainment rates within one year of RT implementation. The four comparison groups were: 1) students eligible for reverse transfer but who did not receive the associate's degree; 2) students who transferred from a CWID-participating community college but did not meet the residency requirement prior to transfer; 3) students who transferred with the associate's and were thus ineligible for reverse transfer, and; 4) students who transferred from a non-CWID institution, whether 2-year or 4-year.

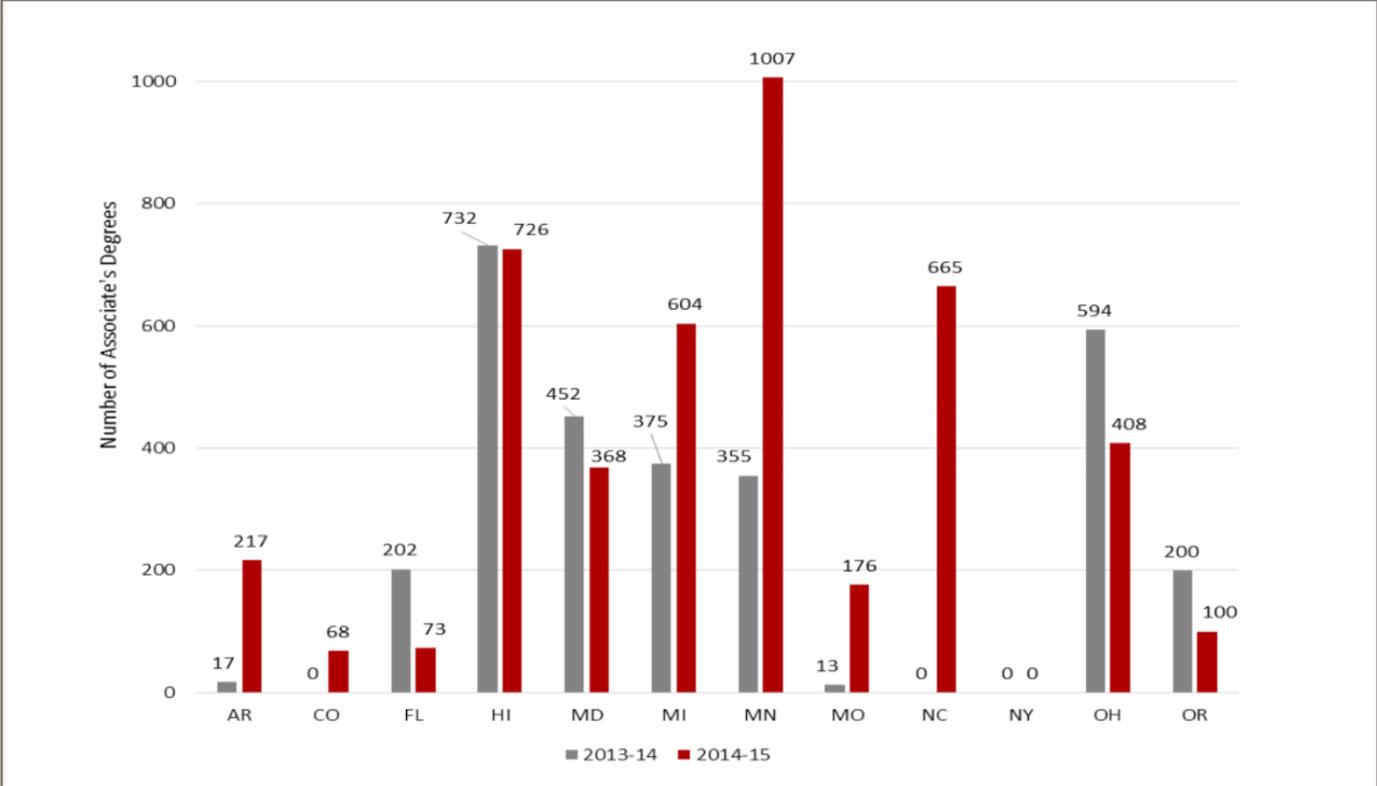


Figure 4: The number of associate's degrees conferred through reverse transfer during the 2013–2014 and 2014–2015 academic years, by state.

Reverse transfer has the potential to increase states' associate's degree attainment numbers

In general, reverse transfer has the potential to increase states' associate's degree attainment numbers, but we know little about the extent of these increases. Many states are still developing and refining their reverse transfer policies and practices in order to maximize the number of associate's degrees awarded through reverse transfer, but our research suggests that reverse transfer has the potential to help states meet their degree attainment goals (Taylor & Bragg, 2015). Figure 4 displays the number of degrees each state conferred in the 2013–2014 and 2014–2015 academic years. Importantly, the associate's degrees conferred through reverse transfer represent as much as a 17% increase in Hawaii's annual number of degrees conferred, but most states we studied increased their associate's degrees. We anticipate these figures will continue to grow as states refine their reverse transfer policies and practices and scale reverse transfer within and between states.

Moving forward with reverse transfer

Existing evidence and practices from the CWID states suggest several ways for states and institutions to proceed with reverse transfer. First, there is tentative evidence that reverse transfer can have a positive effect on the bachelor's degree attainment rates of transfer students, although additional research is needed to expand the evidence base. This preliminary evidence is critical because it shows that reverse transfer can have a positive influence on transfer students' bachelor's degree attainment. Second, although some states have scaled reverse transfer and demonstrated the potential of reverse transfer to make an important contribution to states' degree attainment goals, there remains a great, untapped potential for the expansion and refinement of reverse transfer programs. Third, a number of strategies have emerged as promising practices for the optimization of reverse transfer, including:

- The integration of consent for reverse transfer transcript exchange and degree conferral into existing applications for enrollment and/or transfer
- The investment in and integration of technology that can automate electronic transcript exchange and the degree audit process
- The incorporation of targeted advising to help students understand the benefits of the associate's degree, how to become eligible for reverse transfer, and what courses to take in order to receive the associate's degree

This article only summarizes what we have learned about reverse transfer, and more research and publications are available on the [CWID website](#).

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