

# PATHWAYS TO RESULTS

## IMPLEMENTATION PARTNERSHIPS STRATEGY BRIEF

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### Improving CTE Student Retention and Transfer at Rend Lake College with Degree Audit and Reengagement Strategies

by Marci Rockey

Rend Lake College (RLC) has participated in several Pathways to Results (PTR) projects over the last five years. The PTR model has been an essential tool to drive evidence-based changes throughout the College. In 2015, RLC used the PTR Model to evaluate institutional processes related to the Perkins Career and Technical Education (CTE) Student Retention and Transfer (or “3P1”) measure, which had been falling short of state performance goals.

#### Identifying the Problem at RLC

The team initially analyzed disaggregated data on a cohort of high school students who had taken CTE dual credit courses to identify potential barriers for those students who enroll and do not persist to completion. The strategy detailed below was eventually implemented and scaled from this initial analysis to include the entire institution. RLC’s data indicated that nearly 6% of students who did not persist or transfer actually completed at least a certificate but never received it. An even higher percentage of students were within one semester of completing a degree or certificate within their CTE pathways. Those numbers combined to represent a total of 20% of students being one graduation application or one semester away from completion. The team disaggregated these data across issues of race, income, and special populations early in their process and found these rates to be consistent, with a slightly higher rate of non-completion among low-income students.

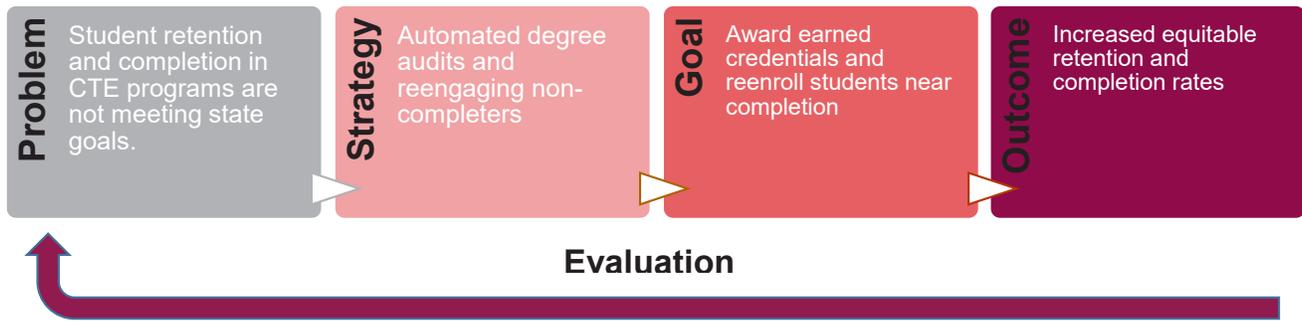
RLC’s outreach to gather qualitative data from students revealed a variety of obstacles experienced on the road to completion. While student experiences varied, a common theme was that many non-completing students left RLC with an outstanding balance on their student account. A large portion of these students had received a reduction in their financial aid distribution due to non-attendance. The resulting fees acted as a barrier to reenrollment after students had overcome whatever issue resulted in their need to stop out.

#### RLC’s Improvement

As a result of their findings, RLC focused their efforts on a credit and credential attainment strategy. Identifying students who may have completed a certificate or degree but had not applied for graduation, as well as those who had stopped out near completion was key to this strategy. Once the students were identified, college staff members conducted outreach. From there, RLC began to systematically audit transcripts and contact students who were eligible for a certificate or degree but had not yet applied for graduation nor returned to school. As of the end of the Spring 2016 semester, their efforts resulted in the identification and awarding of 350 certificates that had been earned but never applied for by students no longer attending the institution. Removal of the graduation fee associated with completion and professional development for faculty and staff on the importance of completion have further strengthened their efforts. As a result of this work, an automated degree audit reporting system, as well as a more proactive, timely early alert process, have emerged as institutional priorities.

#### About Pathways to Results: Implementation Partnerships

PTR is an outcomes-focused, equity-guided process to improve student transition to and through postsecondary education and into employment. The process engages community college practitioners and their partners to identify and understand the problematic aspects of systemic design--whether processes, practices, policies, or pedagogies--and to find sustainable solutions that will support equitable student outcomes. In 2016, a second project year was added to the Pathways to Results model, titled PTR: Implementation Partnerships. Teams who participated in an Implementation Partnership, or “Year Two,” project work to implement, evaluate, and scale their work in a network of other colleges striving to improve equitable student outcomes in innovative ways.



**Rend Lake College's Intervention Logic Model**

## What We Know from the Field

The initial degree audit conclusion was reached independently, but the notions of expanding this beyond the five initial programs and considering a reengagement strategy were inspired by the broad and scaled work of Project Win-Win (PWW). The results of PWW serve as the leading resource in designing strategies to increase credit attainment and reengage students close to completion. PWW included 61 associate's-degree-granting institutions across nine states. Results from this project note the importance of and challenges associated with accurate data tracking, setting parameters, and the need to move quickly in reaching out to students. Institutions participating in PWW embraced a sequence of five steps integral to the success of their efforts, with each college taking approximately two years to complete them all. These steps included: "1) identify the universe of interest; 2) remove students receiving degrees or reenrolling elsewhere from the universe of interest; 3) perform degree audits to identify 'eligibles' and 'potentials'; 4) award degrees to the eligible; and 5) locate, contact, and reenroll potentials" (Adelman, 2013, p. 14).

The experiences of PWW institutions suggest the incorporation of a minimum cumulative GPA of 2.0 and a minimum of 18 months since the student's last enrollment term at the college to assist in identifying the universe of interest. These two parameters were found to be associated with both a reduction in the numbers of students sent to degree audit and an increased likelihood of finding eligible and potential completers who return to school. As is the case at RLC, PWW advises institutions to improve degree audit systems so they become standard practice. Institutions are encouraged to apply these audits to students at key points in their educational careers, including at entry, when transferring credit, at successful completion of 45 credit hours, and near the point of meeting program requirements (Adelman, 2013).

## Notes on Scaling

As institutional experiences with PWW illustrated, implementing credit attainment strategies not only increases completion numbers but also provides significant insight into policies and practices that were not serving students well across all institutional types and contexts (Adelman, 2013). As such, RLC's choice to pursue a credit attain-

ment strategy was an appealing case study for scaling in Illinois given the general awareness but low rate of institutional implementation of such strategies across the state (McCambly, Bragg, Durham & Cullen, 2016). RLC's experiences in terms of the credit attainment, strategy development, and roll out can offer lessons to colleges looking for similar improvements, as can the extensive learning and change that took place along the way.

The RLC team, which began small but intentionally grew with time, took steps to learn and reflect at multiple points in their change process. They conducted student surveys, analyzed of students' financial aid standing at the point of stop out, critically analyzed the success of processes in place meant to *prevent* students from stopping out, and strove to decrease the number of barriers to returning to RLC after stop out. In this way, RLC leadership was able to broaden their scope of work beyond their initial strategy by empowering a group of partners to carry out multiple interconnected strategies rather than putting too great a burden on one department or one project team. They also reacted quickly to discoveries, making immediate changes wherever possible—e.g., introducing and passing an immediate removal of the graduation fee for all students and introducing an auto drop process to catch a swath of students incurring debt for courses they never attended. These quick wins did not replace their long-range goal of a sustainable degree audit and reengagement strategy to improve retention, but it did spin off to encompass multiple areas of need including auto drop policies, mentorship needs, a new student success center space, and more.

## References

- Adelman, C. (2013). *Searching for our lost associate's degrees: Project Win-Win at the finish line*. Washington, DC: Institute for Higher Education Policy.
- McCambly, H. N., Bragg, D. D., Durham, B., & Cullen, D. P. (2016). *Finish up Illinois: Strategic plan and guiding principles for next steps*. Champaign, IL: Office of Community College Research and Leadership, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.