Credits: BGSU Marketing and Brand Strategy

BOWLING GREEN STATE UNIVERSITY

Expanding Programs and Addressing Barriers to Serve More Students with Some College, but No Degree

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Situated in the northwestern corner of Ohio, Bowling Green State University (BGSU) is an example of how, even with limited resources amidst a global pandemic, an institution of higher education can integrate a data-informed degree completion effort into existing programs and institution-wide goals in order to reengage adult students, promote equitable degree attainment, and improve students' workforce outcomes.

BGSU is a residential four-year university with a vibrant campus culture, NCAA athletics, and over 200 undergraduate and graduate programs across eight academic colleges. BGSU serves an undergraduate population that one BGSU administrator characterized as "first time, full-time, direct from high school, and going to live in the residence hall students." But even with the focus on enrolling recent high school graduates, BGSU has distinguished itself through the creation of programs and policies that serve veterans and active-duty service members as well as the surrounding community, including being named fifth in the nation and first in the Midwest as "Best for Vets" by *Military Times*.
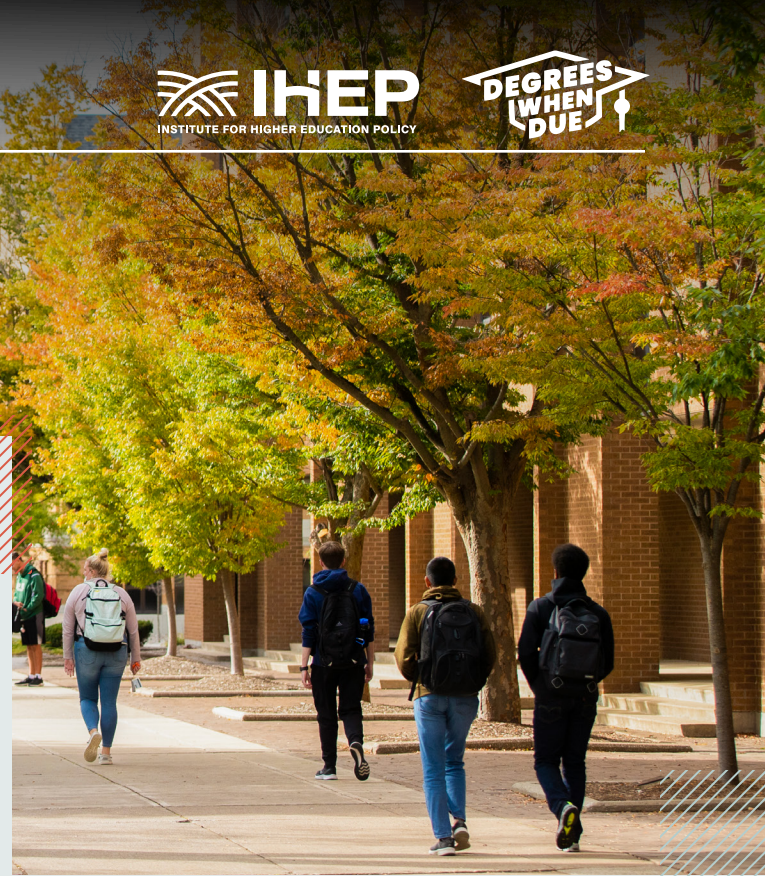
Degrees When Due (DWD) is a completion and equity initiative led by the Institute for Higher Education Policy to help states and colleges increase degree attainment among the "some college, but no degree" population. Launched in 2018, nearly 200 institutions in 23 states have joined the first three cohorts of DWD to build expertise, capacity, and infrastructure on campuses to get students back on track and across the completion finish line.

ABOUT BOWLING GREEN UNIVERSITY

LOCATION
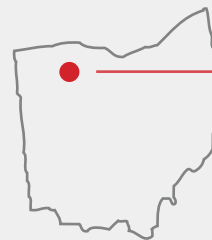
BOWLING GREEN, OH

Note: Undergraduate enrollment and degrees conferred are averaged over a three-year period, 2017-2019.

Source: Authors' calculations using Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2017-2019, Completions.

GENERAL INFORMATION

PUBLIC FOUR-YEAR
INSTITUTION TYPE

14,880
UNDERGRADUATE ENROLLMENT

2,910
DEGREES CONFERRED ANNUALLY

In May 2019, BGSU established the first partnership between a public four-year university in Ohio and the Community College of the Air Force's (CCAF) General Education Mobile (GEM) program to create pathways for GEM graduates to complete bachelor's degrees within four years.[1] This partnership was an addition to three existing, fully online degree programs at BGSU for CCAF graduates through the university's eCampus. BGSU's eCampus also enrolls non-military affiliated students and offers over 40 distance learning programs that culminate in degrees and certificates through partially and fully online modalities, creating significant flexibility for students to pursue their educational goals.

These degree completion opportunities, along with robust student services such as the Nontraditional and Military Student Services (NTMSS) unit, have helped BGSU establish itself as a leader in supporting today's students. NTMSS played a critical role during BGSU's participation in the Degrees When Due (DWD) initiative. Barbara Henry, assistant vice president for nontraditional and military student services, who leads the NTMSS office, served as the DWD campus team lead and her division's expertise was critical to BGSU's DWD work.

This case study offers insights into how a public four-year research university integrated a new initiative into existing programs and institution-wide goals to maximize outcomes for students, while dealing with depleted resources due to impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Credits: Nontraditional and Military Student Services Staff

WHAT MOTIVATED PARTICIPATION IN DWD?

BGSU joined DWD to increase educational attainment and support workforce development. BGSU's interest in joining DWD and supporting students with "some college, but no degree" (SCND) is related to broader institutional goals to serve the surrounding community by improving educational attainment and responding to changing state workforce needs.

INCREASING EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AND RESPONDING TO WORKFORCE NEEDS

One senior leader explained the local educational attainment and workforce context: "We are an exporter of talent. Ohio is historically a manufacturing state and, given that, many Ohioans don't have postsecondary degrees." BGSU leaders noted the need to educate Ohioans is increasing as the changing economy expands beyond manufacturing. In response, leaders said that "BGSU has been seeking ways to remove barriers for people with some college credits but no degree… so the institution is trying to diversify our portfolio to better serve this population." In other words, BGSU is focused on expanding its educational offerings to better serve a changing economy and citizenry.

One way BGSU expanded its offerings was by creating new online degree programs in key high-demand fields targeted toward adult and nontraditional students. For example, one BGSU leader explained that the university created "several degree programs, including one in quality systems, that are geared toward adults and fully online." BGSU also expanded online bachelor's degree program offerings, adding technology management to address local workforce needs.

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1. The average graduation time for CCAF students is 8 years because general education courses are usually taken last, although the GEM aims to reduce time to degree to less than 4 years. See https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Barnes/CCAF/Display/Article/803250/general-education-mobile-gem/

In addition to online degree programs at the main campus, the university recently launched an online bachelor's degree program in Applied Science and Technology at its branch campus. This program was originally designed for in person delivery, but has recently been approved for online delivery, which BGSU leaders noted "provides more flexibility and can broaden student access." All these new online degree programs support the broader goal of increasing community educational attainment and addressing local and state economic needs; BGSU leaders indicated that DWD offered an opportunity to build on the university's efforts to "expand access and degree completion work."

In addition to alignment with existing priorities, BGSU leaders said that DWD also aligned with existing state and national initiatives. A member of BGSU's DWD team highlighted Ohio's and BGSU's participation in the Lumina Foundation's Adult Promise program and explained that participating in DWD was "a natural fit for the work we're already doing—it was an absolute no-brainer to join." The Ohio state legislature also passed legislation to address the financial burden that many adult learners face, which is important to reengagement efforts. Ohio's Adult Promise work, called Finish for Your Future, identified financial issues as one of the top barriers to degree attainment for stopped-out students, and Ohio's Second Chance Grant Pilot Program is providing financial support to returning adults. This program will complement BGSU's future adult reengagement efforts.

This combination of extending existing adult programs and expanding on institutional goals undergirded BGSU's decision to join DWD.

ENGAGEMENT AND EXPERIENCE WITH DEGREES WHEN DUE

INITIAL DWD ENGAGEMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

When BGSU joined DWD in September 2019, the DWD campus team was a "big, totally excited group that included a point person who was interested in doing life design course development,[2] a registrar's office charged with looking at what students needed to graduate, and the enrollment management office, which would figure out who could be brought back... and then the pandemic happened." BGSU leaders said that COVID-19 led to multiple departures and retirements of key staff, shifting priorities as classes moved online, and uncertainty about student enrollment.

The abrupt changes caused by the pandemic disrupted the DWD team's initial momentum, which meant that many campus units could not commit to full engagement with DWD. Consequently, as Henry explained, "although many offices originally involved were willing to provide similar levels of support for DWD, they lacked capacity to commit to as robust of an effort as initially planned." Although this reduced the scope of BGSU's DWD efforts, Henry and her NTMSS team remained dedicated to prioritizing adult reengagement.

Although Henry was "disappointed" that BGSU's participation would not be as robust as originally expected, the pandemic-related delay resulted in a new campus partner for DWD: the online eCampus. As Henry explained, "the majority of the SCND population at BGSU will likely need an online degree completion component, so eCampus agreed to devote significant time and a couple of really good people to our efforts." In the long-run, this might result in "a better outcome" than the original plan, she said. BGSU expects eCampus staff to provide SCND students with initial degree completion plans, help process course substitutions or appeals, and assist with course enrollment and academic advising through graduation.

The significant changes in the DWD team's composition meant that it reconsidered its capacity as it progressed through the initiative. For instance, although BGSU originally identified 1,495 SCND students, the DWD team decided to focus on a pilot group of 281 students who met a specific set of criteria: students who only needed a semester or two worth of courses to complete; had not graduated or enrolled at another institution; had no academic holds, financial holds, or balances; and had no other major challenges preventing them from reenrolling, such as a standing disciplinary issue.

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2. Life design courses employ a design thinking approach to help students design their lives and careers.

The DWD team's decision to remove former students with financial holds from the pilot group was because of existing Ohio state policy, which requires public institutions to report students with institutional debt to the state and impose holds on their transcripts and class registration. As one BGSU leader explained, these financial holds "could be as little as $12," but "after 45 days the student's account automatically goes to the state Attorney General." The leader said, "this policy is a huge barrier to completion for this population," because the holds prevent institutions from supporting student reenrollment and students from accessing their transcripts.

Although the DWD team was frustrated by this state-level policy barrier, the team agreed that, given capacity realities, addressing the policy wasn't "a mountain that could be climbed right now," though "hopefully, the pilot project can give us leverage to expand and include that group in the future." This policy is currently under review as part of a statewide focus on challenges encountered by adult learners and transfer students.[3]

When BGSU initially identified its SCND population, the DWD team also identified almost 30 students who had accumulated over 90 credits and had earned an associate's degree, although they had not yet reached a bachelor's degree. BGSU deliberately included these students in its DWD population because leaders suspected these students may be close to attaining a bachelor's degree and wanted to make them aware and offer support to earn this additional credential. Although these students did not fall within the parameters of BGSU's pilot, the university included them in the pilot and intends to reengage this population to share potential options for online degree completion.

"THE MAJORITY OF THE SCND POPULATION AT BGSU WILL LIKELY NEED AN ONLINE DEGREE COMPLETION COMPONENT, SO ECAMPUS AGREED TO DEVOTE SIGNIFICANT TIME AND A COUPLE OF REALLY GOOD PEOPLE TO OUR EFFORTS."

3. Further information on Ohio law and student balances. Retrieved from https://www.ohiohighered.org/sites/default/files/uploads/students/CollegeComeback_ODHE-formal-guidance_051221.pdf

DEGREE AUDITS, DEGREE AWARDING, AND REENGAGEMENT

AUDITS AND IDENTIFYING BARRIERS TO COMPLETION

Once BGSU narrowed its pool of SCND students for the pilot, the DWD team began conducting degree audits on all 281 students, which had to be performed manually due to technological limitations. As one BGSU leader explained, "the system only keeps degree audits for approximately one year following a student stopping-out, so most of these students didn't have degree audits available. Although we can request audits, staffing issues have made this a challenge."

Given limited personnel capacity, NTMSS decided to hire a graduate assistant to manually perform degree audits and determine the proximity and barriers to completion for the pilot group. This assistant described the process: "I had to print out all degree audits, go through each one individually, and decide what a student needed [to complete their degree] … I then wrote down whatever the student needed and made additional notes about what might help each student complete, such as a different or individualized program." Although time consuming, this manual assessment generated rich and personalized information that BGSU could use to communicate with students in its reengagement efforts.

Manual and individualized degree audits yielded other important insights about barriers to completion for the SCND population. Degree audits identified which academic requirements students were missing and revealed how the culture in some academic colleges drive degree requirements and the flexibility offered to students in meeting those requirements. Some of the most common missing requirements identified were math courses. One DWD team member noted a pattern of students failing and repeating math courses multiple times: "One student had taken the same five-credit math class six times and finally received a D, but why did this student need to go through that?" This situation helped BGSU reflect on the need for alternative options for students who failed a course multiple times. One DWD team member asked, "rather than putting that person back into the same class they've already failed multiple times, is there some alternative option for the student to complete the requirement?"

Through the degree auditing process, applied experiences within students' degree fields, such as internships, practicums, and cooperative education programs, also emerged as commonly missing requirements. While BGSU leaders were not surprised by students missing math or writing requirements, they were surprised by how many students were only missing this experience-based requirement. Degree audits revealed that some students had enrolled in these experiences but never applied for credit or never received a grade for the requirement, and BGSU leaders noted that these missing requirements were common among students pursuing education and human development programs, such as exercise science, tourism, and event planning.

> "ONE STUDENT HAD TAKEN THE SAME FIVE-CREDIT MATH CLASS SIX TIMES AND FINALLY RECEIVED A 'D,' BUT WHY DID THIS STUDENT NEED TO GO THROUGH THAT?"

"BGSU LEADERS SAID THAT THE FOUR STUDENTS WHO RESPONDED WERE VERY EXCITED ABOUT THE OPPORTUNITY TO REENGAGE AND EARN THEIR DEGREES."

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A DWD team member speculated that these missing experience-based requirements could influence students' completion during their last few semesters. Some students, this person said, "usually in teacher preparation, get all the way to a methods course or student teaching… and realize they hate teaching and say, 'I'm not going to do this anymore,' so they stop-out." Learnings like these are important when considering curriculum design, such as institutional decisions about when practicums occur in a pathway.

A second issue to emerge during the degree auditing process was the nature of academic program requirements; many cases required engaging multiple academic programs with varying policies, cultures, and levels of flexibility of their curricula. One BGSU leader said, "I'm seeing that there are unique cultures and policies within each discipline that students navigate and figuring out how to help these students finish programs is equally unique." For instance, the College of Arts and Sciences requires four years of foreign language for most degree programs, a requirement that is higher than most other academic colleges at BGSU. The BGSU leader continued, "If you're in any other college [other than Arts and Sciences], you need two years of the same language in high school or two semesters here. If you're a computer science major, you also have to complete the additional requirements from the College of Arts and Sciences. The additional requirements can be a real challenge for somebody to complete." In other words, academic requirements in specific programs can have a significant, and differential, impact on returning students' ability to complete their bachelor's degree.

In addition to the challenges of degree-specific requirements, the DWD team has navigated – often successfully – varying degrees of flexibility and academic cultures across BGSU colleges. One senior BGSU leader said that the institution's eight academic colleges have diverse policies representing a "variety of perspectives," and "many colleagues are willing to support DWD goals, but some are more flexible than others. Some colleges, such as the College of Technology and the College of Education, tend to be more flexible with degree requirements, so we can work with those colleges and move students closer to completion." Using their knowledge of different college policies and cultures, the DWD team engaged colleagues with the goal of helping near-completers cross the finish line.

MANY NEAR-COMPLETERS WERE MISSING A UNIQUE INSTITUTIONAL REQUIREMENT

The data showed that 113 near-completer students — or about 40 percent — had not completed Bowling Green's international perspectives or cultural diversity in the United States requirement.

Figure 1.
Missing Academic Requirements
Unique Institutional Requirement

113	167

Total: 280

KEY

▨ Did not complete international perspectives or cultural diversity
▧ Completed international perspectives or cultural diversity

REENGAGING STUDENTS

After conducting degree audits, BGSU engaged in a multi-step effort to reengage students, but encountered challenges reaching them. NTMSS conducted initial outreach to all students via email in summer 2021 to say that BGSU was reviewing their records and wanted to discuss how the university could help them across the degree completion finish line. Student university emails were no longer active, so BGSU searched for personal email addresses from admissions files. Nearly 40 emails were undeliverable, so the DWD team decided to call students. The team received four responses from their outreach.

Despite the proportionally small number, these four responses provided the boost the team needed to continue its work. As one DWD team member said, "four of 280 is obviously not a huge number, but given how long many of these students have been stopped-out, this was still a great outcome. We're not giving up; we're still trying to get in touch with them." BGSU leaders said that the four students who responded were very excited about the opportunity to reengage and earn their degrees. As of this writing, one student had already enrolled for the second half of fall 2021 semester and had a full plan for degree completion. Another is ready to enroll for spring 2022. A third will finish their degree by submitting a portfolio to meet a missing requirement. The fourth is considering changing to a fully online program that aligns with their current career. By fall 2021, nine of the 280 near-completers had reenrolled, and although this number was lower than BGSU expected, the university has plans to sustain its efforts and reengage an even bigger group of students.

SUSTAINING ADULT REENGAGEMENT

Team members and institutional leaders all described how BGSU's progress in DWD offered an opportunity to begin a larger integration of adult reengagement efforts into the institution's work. For example, Henry indicated that she submitted a request to the provost for a new position with adult reengagement efforts written into the job description. She said, "as we build this system for adult reengagement, we will build off the data we already have. We'll probably be adding annually, we're going to reach out to students sooner after they've stopped out." She added, "our institution has also improved at gathering non-university email addresses and cell phone numbers from students, so moving forward we will build a better plan for reaching these students once their university addresses are no longer active." After securing this adult reengagement-focused position in fall 2021, BGSU expects to continue engagement and outreach to the students who were on their initial list.

As an even bigger step toward long-term sustainability, BGSU reported that it is integrating adult learners into its strategic plan. In the words of one leader, "we need to be addressing the millions of people in Ohio with some college and no degree." BGSU leaders also said that adult learners and the SCND population is a state priority, which only reinforces the university's commitment to reengagement efforts.

LIMITING PILOT STUDY IMPLEMENTATION HAS EQUITY IMPLICATIONS

When BGSU narrowed the focus of its SCND population to students with fewer credits remaining toward their degree and no significant holds, the proportion of Pell-eligible students was cut in half, from 57 percent to 28 percent.

Figure 2.

Universe of Interest

43% | 57%

Total: 1495

Sub-Universe of Interest

72% | 28%

Total: 281

KEY

▨ Pell Eligible

▨ Not-Pell Eligible

SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

BGSU's involvement in DWD was impacted directly and indirectly by the COVID-19 pandemic, including the loss of resources, time, and personnel. However, the university was able to adjust its decision-making and set the groundwork for longer-term goals. The DWD team highlighted successes and challenges that emerged during their DWD experience.

SUCCESS #1: ALIGNING NEW INITIATIVES WITH EXISTING GOALS

From the beginning of BGSU's participation in DWD, the team committed to serving today's students, including current and former military service members and adult learners, and institutional leadership embraced this commitment as well. When the DWD team presented the initiative to the provost, it explained how DWD aligned with BGSU's strategic plan, which includes a focus on access, outcomes, and todays' students. As one DWD team member noted, "from a strategic perspective, this initiative was really closely aligned with work we were already doing or intended to do." Alignment with institutional goals helped gain buy-in for the project with minimal need to convince decision-makers that a focus on the SCND population was important.

Similarly, although the DWD team had to scale back the project to a smaller pilot, they framed the pilot as an opportunity. One DWD team member said, "I'm really excited we are piloting this work because we'll be able to learn from the pilot and apply what we learn when reaching out to our larger group of students with some college credit but no degree. We will then be able to start working with students who were more recently enrolled, which means there will be a better possibility of reaching them and helping them get their degrees done!"

CHALLENGE #1: COVID-19 CHANGED INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY AND PROMPTED A PILOT IMPLEMENTATION

The COVID-19 pandemic changed how BGSU expected to participate in DWD. In the words of one DWD team member, "the pandemic caused some delay with DWD, but the related downsizing of staff and the need to constantly relearn everything really hindered our ability to move forward." In fact, several leaders said that before the pandemic, BGSU had a complete team devoted to help as many students as possible through adult reengagement, but the move to online learning redirected the institution's priorities, to retaining and serving current students in remote learning environments. This limited the capacity of key campus offices to fully support DWD. Rather than abandoning the initiative, BGSU instead focused on a pilot group of students with a specific set of completion barriers.

SUCCESS #2: SECURING AND USING DATA TO SUPPORT CREDIT FLEXIBILITY FOR STUDENTS

Although BGSU committed to serving todays' students prior to DWD, several leaders indicated that the initiative helped them identify new data, which was valuable to understanding and supporting a previously overlooked group of students. For example, a DWD team member said that the team received positive feedback on its data from top institutional leadership: "The fact that the presidential cabinet was excited by, and understood the data points we provided was one of the biggest successes. This feedback reinforced the value of our adult reengagement efforts."

Reviewing and deeply engaging with the data also raised DWD team members' awareness of the barriers to completion that many students face and prompted them to consider how to provide students with more flexible means of accruing credit. Team members were perplexed, for example, that a student could repeat a math classes six times without receiving a passing grade. Some team members expressed frustration by the fact that some students were eligible for credit-by-exam, but an institutional policy required them to enroll in credit hours to take the exam, which might present a cost barrier.

One BGSU leader suggested that establishing a more robust prior learning assessment (PLA) policy at the institution was one way to ensure more credit flexibility. This leader said that PLA "would be incredibly helpful because we have a lot of returning students with life or work experiences that could qualify them to meet some credit requirements in more flexible ways - not just through a portfolio, but also through examinations for work experience and other sorts of certifications students might have." BGSU's analysis of student barriers also prompted leaders to consider more online courses for students. And leaders engaged their eCampus to identify additional flexible options for the SCND population, since not all of these potential students have the time or ability to attend classes in person.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT: WWW.IHEP.ORG/INITIATIVE/DEGREES-WHEN-DUE