



What We've Learned, What We Still Need to Know: Insights from the Credit When It's Due (CWID) Research Meeting in Salt Lake City by CWID Research Team

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On February 18-19, 2016, representatives of 10 states participating in the Credit When It's Due (CWID) initiative attended a convening held at the University of Utah. The meeting was led by the CWID Research Team¹ and sponsored by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and The Kresge Foundation, on behalf of the CWID Funders Collaborative.² The purpose of the meeting was to provide state representatives with an opportunity to discuss the implementation of CWID initiatives in their states, to share information about student participation in reverse credit transfer and research results obtained on state CWID initiatives thus far, and to engage in a conversation about future research needs pertaining to CWID, as well as more expansive questions to guide research concerning community college and university transfer.

This brief summarizes some of the major points emerging from the meeting, both regarding CWID and concerning a broader transfer research agenda, including transfer research questions considered important to a substantial proportion of the meeting participants. Such questions represent the interests and concerns of leaders of state-level higher education agencies and boards, as well as leaders of state higher education systems and two- and four-year colleges and universities. The remainder of this brief is organized into two sections:

- Major findings and observations on CWID and reverse credit transfer, as well as other transfer developments and concerns
- Research questions that need to be addressed concerning CWID and transfer

Major Findings and Observations

- Interest in reverse credit transfer policy and practice continues to be high among the state leaders participating in CWID. To continue to sustain and advance sound policy and practice, there is strong interest in on-going communications, active networking, targeted technical assistance, and focused professional development. For example, some state representatives requested mechanisms to continue communications about policy and practice changes within their states, systems, and institutions, and some recommended cross-state communications to facilitate meaningful policy borrowing to reduce inefficiencies and grow the impact of reverse credit transfer nationally. This seems especially important for states that are adopting reverse credit transfer but that have not yet had the benefit of participating in the CWID network.
- Related to the above point, higher education is experiencing rapid policy change at the state and institutional levels, and change in leadership at all levels creates the need for ongoing professional development and technical assistance, including professional development and technical assistance to better link reverse credit transfer to broader transfer reform agendas operating at the state, system, and institutional levels. Linking research to these reforms is a strong interest for many of the states participating in CWID.
- The CWID states implemented reverse credit transfer in very different ways, adopting and adapting various aspects of the reverse credit transfer process to address their states' needs. In some states for instance, CWID resources and support were dedicated toward technological improvements to automate the reverse credit transfer process and in other states CWID resources and support were focused on training individuals to provide institutional leadership and coordinate within the system and/or with other institutions, with limited investment in technology. Still other states took a hybrid approach, investing in technology and people. As CWID research moves forward, it will be important to understand how the implementation process impacted the reverse credit transfer initiatives, which is a topic of keen interest to the CWID research team.
- Many state leaders that focused on improving their technology infrastructure to support reverse credit transfer degree audits, as well as system and institutional capacity, shared their beliefs that reverse credit transfer implementation would not have been possible without the CWID grant investment, despite their frustrations with getting the technology to an operational stage. However, some states experienced and continue to experience challenges to implementing technologies, which has delayed implementation of the CWID reverse credit transfer initiative by slowing student participation and outcomes. After three years of implementation, associate's degree conferral lags total projections.

¹Debra D. Bragg and the CWID Research Team. The CWID Research Team is also lead by co-PI Jason Taylor, University of Utah; and co-PI, Matthew Giani, University of Texas-Austin, and the research staff include Mark Combs, Cari Bishop, Heather McCambly, and Maria Salazar Soler, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and Eden Cortez and Sheena Kauppila, University of Utah.

²Members of the CWID Funders Collaborative are Lumina Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, USA Funds, The Helios Education Foundation, and Greater Texas Foundation.

- Some CWID state leaders wondered why the numbers of reverse credit transfer associate's degrees that their states had conferred remained relatively low compared to their original projections. Some shared their disappointment in the gap between expected numbers and actual numbers, and they expressed interest in understanding the reasons for this gap. Also, many leaders expressed interest in learning from their experience in CWID, to continue to improve transfer options within their states. As CWID funding comes to a close, many state leaders discussed deliberate efforts to conduct research internally, to understand implementation and impact and to connect lessons from CWID to future transfer initiatives.
- There appears to be variation in how course equivalence systems across states have been implemented and modified or enhanced to support reverse credit transfer. While several states made substantial progress in this area under CWID, some states experienced lengthier timelines to complete this work. Many factors contributed to extended timelines, including the challenges engaging campus-level faculty and staff, the lack of common administrative and/or data systems, and inconsistencies in implementation of transfer and articulation policies and processes within states.
- Some CWID states reported that institutional capacity and state-level interest in transfer reform can help or hinder reverse credit transfer efforts. According to some state leaders, some 4-year institutions show modest interest in transfer students, preferring to focus on native students or incoming freshman; others advocate for a strong transfer function and prioritize transfer students as an important group, particularly when transfer students increase the race/ethnic and income diversity make-up of the campus profile. Those who express less interest in reverse credit transfer sometimes claim that it is not worth the added time and work (particularly when manual degree audits and other time-consuming processes are required), and they see these efforts as competing for resources that are already limited for their overall transfer function.
- Several states developed various forms of technology interfaces for students so that they could consent to participate in/benefit from reverse credit transfer, including technology that enabled them to learn about transferable courses toward a reverse credit transfer associate's degree. Some focused on consent at the point of admission application and others at later points along the reverse credit transfer progression process. Many recognized the value of obtaining student consent as early in the college application process as possible, optimally at the point of initial application to college but if later, at the point of submission of the transfer application.
- Of note during this meeting, several states were beginning to conceive of transfer as part of a "pathway" or "guided pathways" approach, and associated changes with the implementation of pathways to promote student progression to college completion. In this regard, some states were putting efforts into developing "transfer pathways" that they thought would help students determine course sequences that address common stumbling block to of progression through college from the two-year to the four-year level. Enhancements to the advisement of transfer students were sometimes linked to these efforts.
- Some state leaders mentioned increased interest in applied associate's degrees as part of their transfer initiatives. Readily admitting that the initial focus of CWID was on traditional

transfer programs, several state leaders spoke about widening interest, mostly at the system level, in expanding CWID initiatives to include applied associate's degree programs of study that can offer transfer pathways to the baccalaureate level (e.g., applied baccalaureates).

- A good deal of attention was dedicated during the University of Utah meeting in sharing how states and systems are measuring transfer, including communicating definitions and noting differences in operational definitions. The state leaders acknowledged that such differences complicate and potentially invalidate cross-state comparisons. Based on the data collection of the CWID research team, there is only modest consistency in some of the most critical terminology and measures associated with transfer, including who is a transfer student and what transfer and reverse credit transfer mean.
- Related to the last point, state leaders expressed concern regarding the importance of assessing student intent to transfer so that the measurement of student outcomes makes sense. Some state leaders expressed concern about research on transfer that has not accounted for variation and even error in documenting student intent. Some argued that students check the transfer box for a number of reasons that may or may not relate to a genuine intent to transfer. For example, students without college majors (and a thorough understanding of programs of study associated with transfer) may check the transfer box but ultimately enroll in programs that do not lead to transfer. As another example, students seeking financial aid eligibility may check the transfer box despite immediate plans to enroll in short-term, non-transfer oriented programs. Both of these examples suggest student intent to transfer is inflated in data systems and therefore contributing to error in identification of the actual transfer student population for whom other measures of participation and outcomes are being applied.

Research Questions

The following research questions were generated by participants in CWID meeting. The first set pertains to issues that have arisen through the CWID initiative and focus fairly tightly on reverse credit transfer. The second set of questions focuses on more expansive research questions pertaining to the community college and university transfer function.

CWID and Reverse Credit Transfer:

- Is it a good decision for community college students to receive associate's degrees before transferring? For whom is this decision most beneficial? What courses and credits are students who do not attain associate's degrees missing?
- Where are most reverse credit transfer-eligible students in the college progression process when they transfer? What courses have they taken, and what courses do they need to take to optimize their success in associate and baccalaureate degree attainment?
- What is the most optimal point of transfer on bachelor's degree attainment and how does it vary by college major/program of study?
- How can a competency-based education (CBE) approach facilitate reverse credit transfer or transfer in general? How does course/credit attainment associated with CBE impact a students' chances of securing a baccalaureate degree?

- What are the most salient issues relative to FERPA and reverse credit transfer (and other transfer reforms such as Project Win Win), and what can states, systems and institutions do to expedite reverse credit transfer and traditional transfer in a responsible and timely way?
- Is there a “market value” for reverse credit transfer associate’s degree? How does market value vary based on the subject of the degree? Is any associate’s degree is better than none?
- What do we know about the impact of various forms of advising on reverse credit transfer?
- What is the effect of reverse credit transfer associate's degrees versus traditional transfer (with associate degree) on persistence to the baccalaureate?
- How do initiatives such as CWID contribute to state college completion numbers? How far do these initiatives go toward “doubling the numbers” of college graduates in CWID states?
- If reverse credit transfer associate’s degrees are conferred automatically (without student opting in), how is student motivation to complete the baccalaureate degree impacted (favorably or unfavorably)? Are students who receive automatic degree conferral more likely to stop out or drop out than students who do not benefit from automatic degree conferral?
- In instances when students are accumulating excessive credits in the transfer process, what accounts for these extra credits, and is it feasible for students to secure credentials with less credit? What is gained and lost?
- What is the market value of associate’s degrees compared to baccalaureate degrees?
- How are students’ degree intents documented? What are challenges to tracking students’ degree intent in existing data systems?
- Why are underrepresented students less likely to transfer than majority students (even though they may be similarly likely to earn a bachelor’s degree once they transfer)?
- What do we know about the impact of various forms of advising on transfer?
- Why do we have such persistent gaps in transfer success by race, particularly in STEM college majors/programs of study?
- How are diverse student populations performing on postsecondary outcomes (access, transfer, graduation), by institution, by race/ethnicity, and by degree type? What are the right interventions to make transfer and reverse credit transfer likely for these student populations?
- To what extent does math competency contribute to transfer success?
- What are employer perceptions of associate’s degrees? What are their perceptions of associate’s degrees compared to baccalaureate degrees?
- What do students perceive as the primary benefits of transferring? To what extent do these perceived benefits contribute to students’ decisions to transfer?
- How effective and efficient are community colleges and universities at transferring students? What is the cost-benefit of these processes?
- To what extent are state agencies and boards and state higher education systems gathering data on transfer policies and processes to understand how they are affecting student transfer patterns and mobility?

The Transfer Function:

- How do states define a “transfer student”? How do state definitions impact understanding of transfer student enrollment and degree completion?
- How is student success related to various initiatives, including dual credit/dual enrollment, CLEP,
- Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), and other reforms that relate strongly to transfer?
- To what extent does the articulation of course credits (versus credit loss) predict the success (retention, completion credentialing) of transfer students?
- How efficiently are students receiving their associate’s degrees relative to their attainment of credit? What is the average time to degree for both the associate and baccalaureate degrees for transfer students?

Reference

Taylor, J. L., Bishop, C., Makela, J. P., Bragg, D. D., & Ruud, C. M. (2013). *Credit When It's Due: Results from the baseline study*. Champaign, IL: Office of Community College Research and Leadership, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

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