

Pathways Unbound: Understanding the Impact of Reverse Transfer on Postsecondary Institutions

POLICY BRIEF OVERVIEW

As student completion rates have always been perceived as a major outcome of higher education, different “pathways” toward degree attainment have come under increased scrutiny from legislators as well as higher educational institutions. In 2009, the Obama Administration proposed the *National Completion Agenda*, calling on an additional five million degrees and certificates in next ten years. One of the Agenda’s recommendations aims to “increase completion rates of students earning community college credentials (certificates and associate degrees) by 50% by 2020¹.” Facing the challenge of increasing degree attainment, one important initiative has been awarding associate degrees through *Reverse Transfer*.

The 2015 National Policy Summit on *Reverse Transfer*, which was held in January 24 to 25, Orlando, Florida, gathered higher education officials from the national, state and institution levels with an interest in facilitating the reverse transfer of credits back to associate degree granting institutions to facilitate greater numbers of students attaining a higher education credential. While many states and institutions have adopted the reverse transfer policy, few studies have focused on the implementation and impact of reverse transfer on postsecondary institutions.

We provide three main perspectives to help inform educational leaders, policy makers, and students:

1. A view of the national impact of reverse transfer students.
2. A state level portrait of reverse transfer patterns and programs at postsecondary institutions.
3. A critical understanding of educational institutions’ level of engagement in addressing reverse transfer students.

We hope this policy brief provides useful information for practitioners, administrators, policy makers, and reverse transfer students to help address this pressing educational issue. Ultimately, we want to improve educational achievement and employment opportunities for our students.

Written by:

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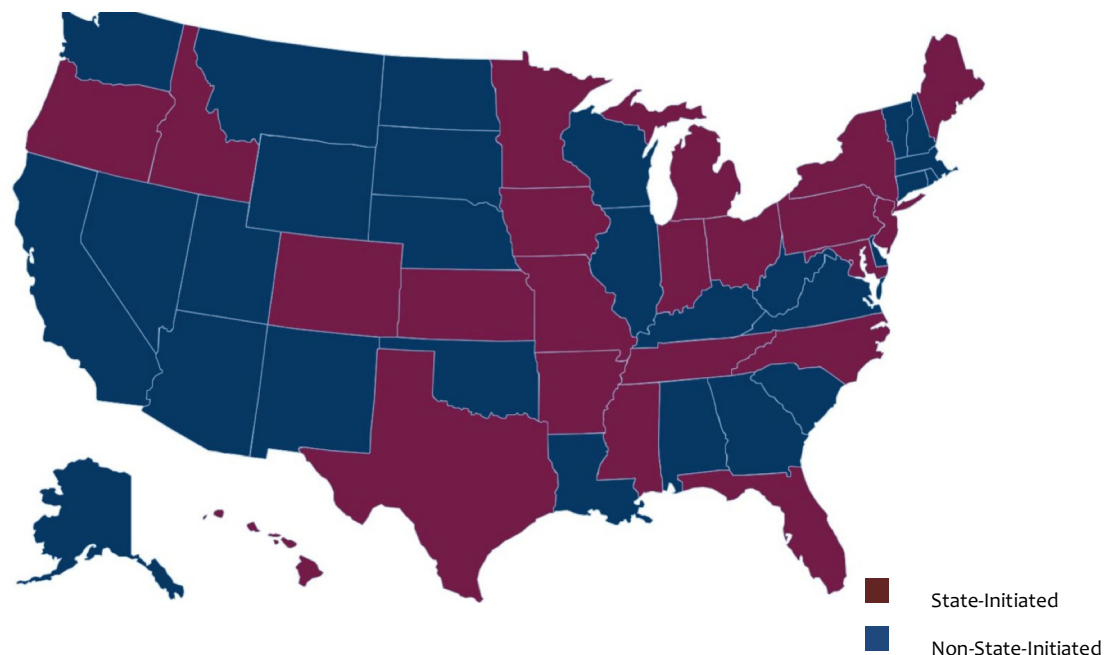
REVERSE TRANSFER: The National Landscape

As presented by the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC), since 1993, thirty-one million students who enrolled in a U.S. postsecondary institution for at least one term left without a higher education credential. These students are often referred to as “potential completers.” “Potential completers” refers to the students who had at least two full academic years’ worth of college. The number of potential completers varies across states. For example, California has the highest number of 520,048 potential completers, while Alaska has the lowest number of 5,541. Furthermore, the National Student Clearinghouse provided a portrait of the demographics of the potential completers. Almost in every state at least half of the potential completers were under age 30 as of December 2013, and in 40 states, at least 10% of the potential completers were age 40 or above.

The National Student Clearinghouse pointed out that 44% to 65% potential completers attended more than one institution, and in all but four states, at least 10% potential completers had enrollments in more than one state. In 38 states, at least one quarter of potential completers attended both two-year institutions and four-year institutions. The percentage range of attending mixed sectors is from 15% in Arkansas to 39% in Kansas.

The National Student Clearinghouse concluded that while the population of “students with some college, no degree” is diverse, the data reveals that similarities exist within this population and its subsets. Based on the demographic characteristics presented, institutions and decision-makers can focus their efforts to recruit students who have yet to complete a degree, by tailoring program and policies to the various ages and stages of life of potential returning students.

Figure 1. State-Initiated Reverse Transfer Implementation



Reverse Transfer: State Trends

In addition looking at national trends affecting reverse transfer students, the Office of Community College Research and Leadership (OCCRL) representatives Dr. Debra Bragg and Dr. Jason Taylor presented their results from the Credits When It's Due (CWID) initiative. Analyzing the reverse transfer characteristics from twelve different states, OCCRL discovered specific state trends that can create "optimization" of reverse transfer policies and program at both two-year and four-year institutions. These "optimization" trends came in five areas:

State "Optimization" Trends

Student Identification

- States vary in eligibility requirements to award associates degrees .
- Residency requirements are a key factor in determining student eligibility.

Consent

- Institutions and states utilize combined methods of gaining student consent (e.g., email, letters, transfer system integration).
- Opt-in vs. Opt-Out: While legal reasoning promotes student intentional consent (opt-in), those states utilizing an "opt-out" policy gained greater student consent.

Transcript Exchange

- States implement different versions of electronic or manual exchanges.
- Some states utilize state-developed centralized transcript exchange systems.

Degree Audit

- Various versions of automated degree audit frameworks: decentralized, centralized, and cloud.
- Key areas to address: Course equivalency, competency-based and discipline- based coursework.

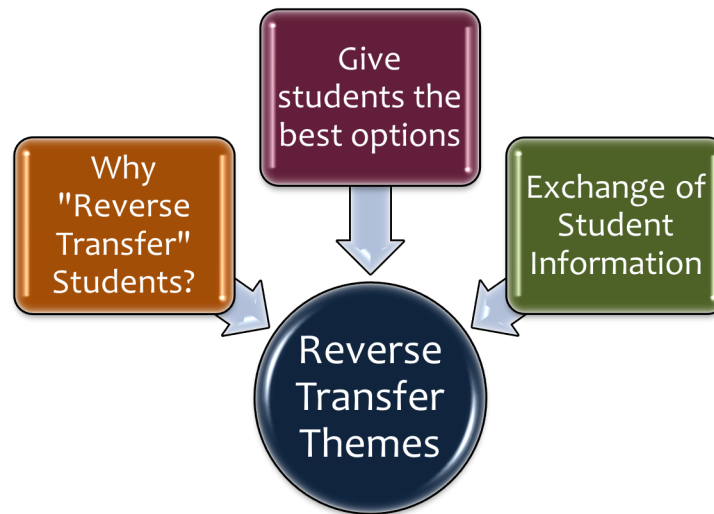
Degree Conferral & Advising

- Streamline communication to notify students of commencement, advising, and records to four-year institutions.

Reverse Transfer: State Adaptation

Several States have been actively addressing reverse transfer issues affecting their postsecondary students. In order to illustrate best practices and lessons learned in developing statewide reverse transfer policies, four state delegations (North Carolina, Missouri, Texas, and Wisconsin) presented their reverse transfer implementation lessons at the 2015 policy summit. Several themes emerged from these presentations:

Figure 2. Policy Summit Themes



“Why “Reverse Transfer” Students?”

Over the last several decades, the term “reverse transfer” has ranged from baccalaureates students who transfer to two-year institutions to gain an associate degree in a different field (Brimm & Achilles, 1976), to baccalaureate seeking students who transfer to community colleges to take specific courses (Townsend & Dever, 1999), and most currently, students at four-year institutions who originally transferred from a two year institution without achieving any higher education credential (Marling, 2012). With initiatives all focusing on the common theme of increasing student achievement through the granting of associate degree, a resounding discussion permeated in the various sessions “Are these really ‘reverse’ transfer students?” Dr. Dennis Kramer, Assistant Professor and Assistant Director of the Institute of Higher Education the University of Florida, pointed out the possible inhibiting connotations of titling these student as “reverse.” Given that these students are pursuing a pathway of upward mobility, the term “reverse” or even “new reverse” created debate as how to appropriately classify these students.

No matter the terms associated with these students, the key message throughout the policy summit was the need to understand the benefits of these students gaining a postsecondary credential. As pointed out by the state of Missouri, we understand the need to implement reverse transfer programs and the awarding of associate degrees to promote career advancement, increase income earning potential, and provide a sense of self-efficacy which may assist students in getting a baccalaureate degree. Coupled with the increased workforce benefits, getting an associate degree fosters in students a sense of self-accomplishment and motivation as evidenced by this University of North Carolina Charlotte student’s email:

*“I’m finding that the prospect of having my official associate’s degree is **helping me to push me over the “2 year-hump”** to my bachelor’s program.”*

¹Brimm, J., & Achilles, C. M. (1976). The reverse transfer student: A growing factor in higher education. *Research in Higher Education*, 4, 355-360.

²Townsend, B., & Dever, J. (1999). What do we know about reverse transfer students? Understanding the impact of reverse transfer students on community colleges. In B. K. Townsend (Ed.), *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 106 (pp. 5-14). San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.


³Marling, J. L. (2012, June 25). Making reverse transfer work [Inside Higher Ed webinar]. Retrieved from <http://blog.insidehighered.com/2012/06/25/making-reverse-transfer-work/>

“Give Students the Best Options”

In order for there to be a seamless infrastructure established to allow reverse transfer students to receive associate degrees, collaboration between four-year and two-year institutions becomes key especially in the areas of transcript exchange and degree audit. The state of Wisconsin took a strategic approach by concentrating on the top transfer institution in the state and developing a “collaborative communication approach.” Understanding the best methods of communication whether those methods are through a unified transfer policy or a common data system to access student information is foundation for scaling a reverse transfer system. In fact, Wisconsin discovered that through a collaborative communication framework they were better able to determine the best chance of gaining student consent. Given the impact that student consent has on the reverse transfer process, institution collaboration becomes vital to generate more student participation. Based upon the CWID research, the OCCRL discovered that while most states require an “opt-in” consent policy; an “opt-out” policy will generally generate “higher consent rates among eligible students”². In fact, OCCRL found that for states which implemented an “opt-in” consent procedure, these states generated about an average rate of consent between “10-25%,” however, states like Hawaii, which has utilized an “opt-out” consent policy, generated a full response rate with “no students” declining to participate in the reverse transfer process.

Not only does the form of consent impact student participation in reverse transfer, but also the wording on student communication and various procedures can impede student involvement. In the North Carolina system, they are researching the effectiveness of email wording to analyze what are the most effective methods of reaching students.

In developing consent policies and student outreach, all stakeholders focused on “giving students the best options.” During the policy summit panel discussion, President of the Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT), J. Noah Brown stated, “we need to do whatever it takes to allow the student to succeed.” Following this principle, North Carolina emphasized the reverse transfer philosophy of focusing on the “students best interest as guiding principle” when they waived both graduation applications and transfer fees. Building upon this principle, the state of Missouri focused their reverse transfer initiative on the ease of student involvement and to eliminate “state line barriers of the reverse transfer process.”

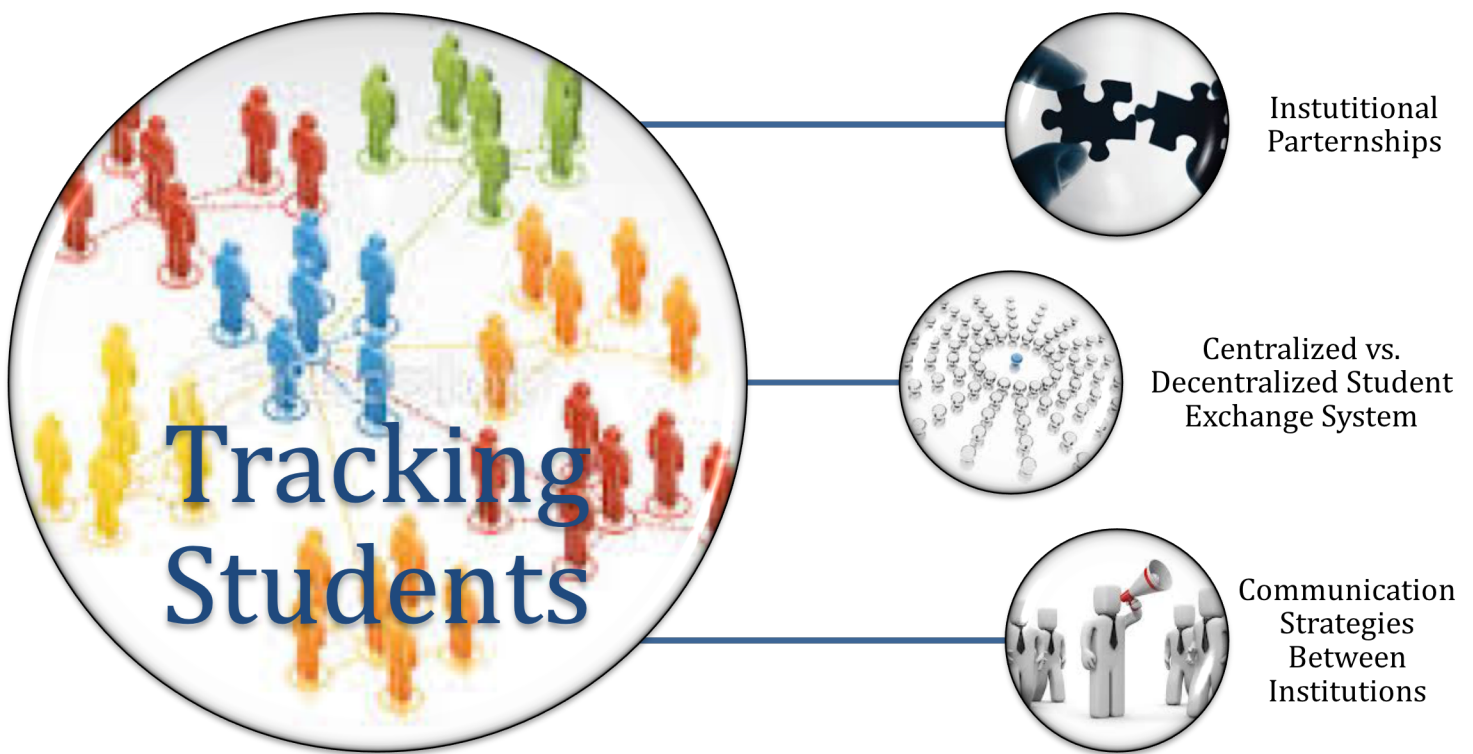


“Adult transfer students especially can get mired in the often disjointed and protracted journey toward the culmination of their efforts.”

“Exchange of Student Information”

A consistent theme throughout the state presentations was the need to provide a “streamlined” and “automated” data exchange system. Whether it was at the national, state, or institutional level, a foundation to create an efficient reverse transfer system is the ability to exchange student records easily. As stated by all state delegates, institutional collaboration was a main facet in the exchange of student data. Whether it was through state initiatives developing these reverse transfer partnerships or institutions leading the collaboration effort, a detailed understanding of exchange responsibility was vital to ensure student achievement. In the state of Missouri, they believe that personal outreach was needed to build institutional collaboration and foster an efficient exchange system. Although institution collaboration is key to award students with associate degrees, institutions still needed to investigate and implement strategies so that both institutions understood student status. While the Wisconsin delegation emphasized the need to develop an automated, streamlined data exchange to fully scale an effective reverse transfer program; a key to their success has been utilizing the systems in place to initiate the transfer process. Like other states and institutions, the need to scale reverse transfer programs will involve a “low cost, streamlined and sustainable” method to exchange student transcripts and data.

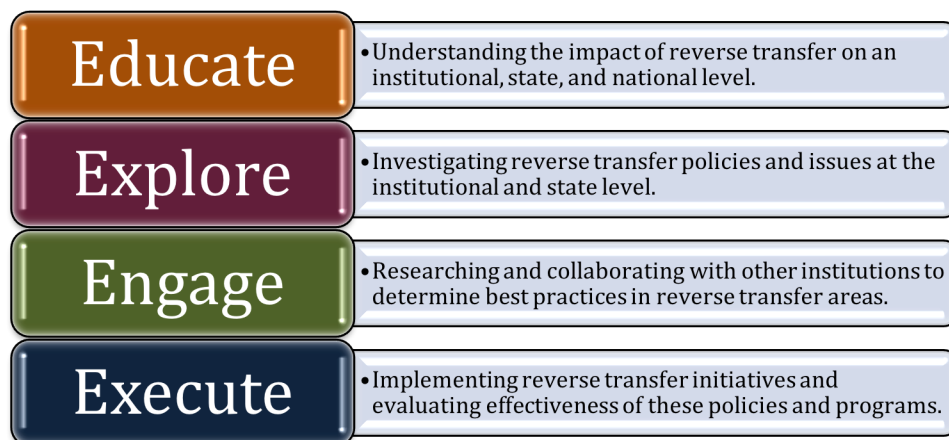
Figure 3. Student Data Exchange Reverse Transfer Themes



RESEARCH DESIGN

In order to gain insight into institutional and state perceptions of addressing reverse transfer students, the University of Florida's Institute of Higher Education and the National Student Clearinghouse conducted pre-summit and post-summit surveying. Broadly, the polling consisted of specific questions addressing institutional reverse transfer procedures and questions investigating the specific institutional needs. Guiding this research study, the following reverse transfer areas were addressed: Awareness, Program Characteristics, Marketing & Communication, Data Collection & Exchange, and Institutional Collaboration. In order to determine level of institutional adaption to the reverse transfer process, the IBM model of product implementation was utilized. The respective stages of the IBM model are the following: Educate, Explore, Engage, and Execute (see figure 4).

Figure 4. Stages of Acceptance & Implementation



REVERSE TRANSFER DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS

The demographic questions of reverse transfer were listed to understand the current policies and procedures utilized by the policy summit attendees. These areas ranged from student consent procedures to effective reverse transfer communication strategies. A majority of those polled were from two-year institutions (52%) as compared to those from four-year institutions (33%). In addition, 10 percent of attendees were from a representative national organization. In terms of regional accreditation, the largest representation came from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) (53%).



"In 38 states, at least **25%** of all potential completers attended both two-year and four-year institutions."

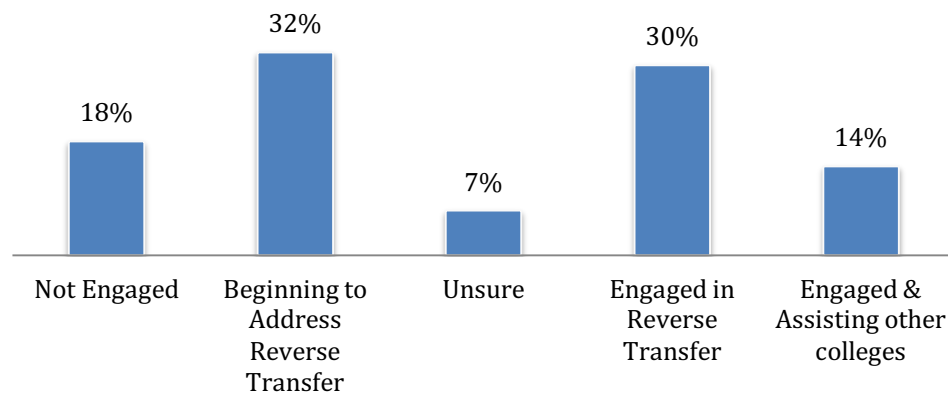
*National Student Clearinghouse, Reverse Transfer: A National View of Student Mobility from Four Year to Two-Year Institutions

REVERSE TRANSFER AREAS

Awareness

For the purpose of this analysis, Awareness is defined as understanding of the need to implement effective programs and policies that address reverse transfer students as well as the complexities in administering these programs and policies. Institutions are more likely to report that they are aware (62%) of the need to address reverse transfer students as compared to those institutions that are engaged (44%) in the process (see figure 5). Given the impact of that reverse transfer could have on degree attainment, raising the awareness of this issue at the institutional and state level continues to be a need.

Figure 5. Institutional Level of Reverse Transfer Engagement



Program Characteristics

The category of Program characteristics is defined as transfer areas that specifically affect reverse transfer students (e.g. application process, residency requirements). While in the awareness area, institutions continue to attempt to highlight the importance of reverse transfer; many of the attendees polled felt that their institutions were actively engaged in implementing effective program characteristics (25%) or executing these programs in way that they are able to work with other colleges (43%). Despite institutional engagement in reverse transfer programs, these institutions still felt they needed to continue focusing on developing a program plan (44%).

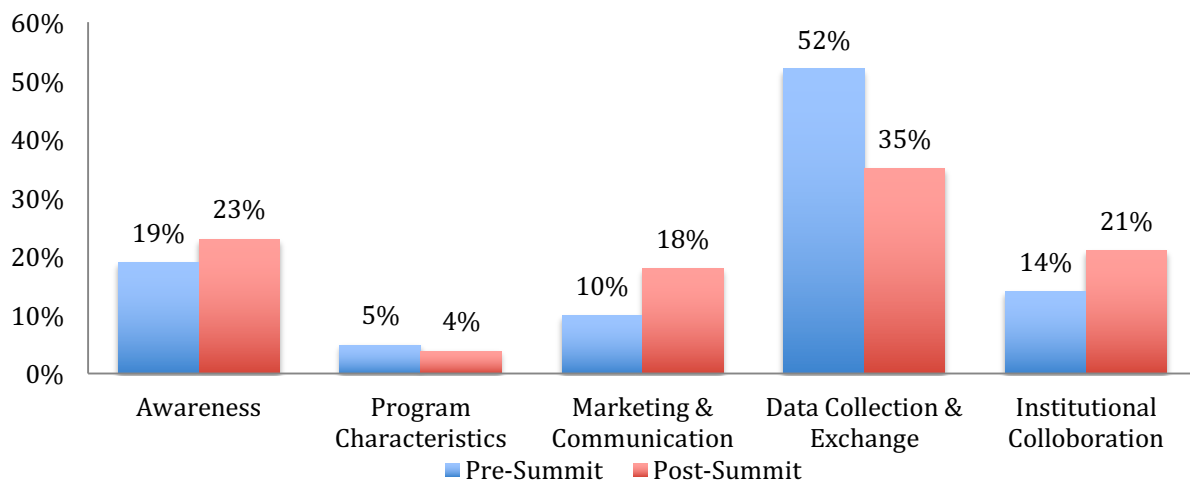
Reverse Transfer Areas



Marketing & Communication

Marketing & Communication is defined as outreach and program notification to potential and current reverse transfer students. Several key themes emerged throughout the policy summit that addressed student communication and consent. As institutions utilize various forms of communication, those polled at the summit found more of mix of strategies (42%) as the most effective. A key theme throughout the policy summit was the aspect of student consent. In fact, student consent (29%) was considered the biggest obstacle in awarding students a reverse transfer degree. Based upon the institutions polled, a majority of institutions obtain student consent through an “opt-in” policy (45%) rather than an “opt-out” (22.5%) or those unsure of their consent policy (24.5%). As compared to the pre-summit analysis which indicates that most institutions are at the educating (36%) stage and exploring stage (31%), post-summit attendees felt that their institutions need to be executing (30%) a comprehensive reverse transfer marketing and communication plan to their students (see figure 6).

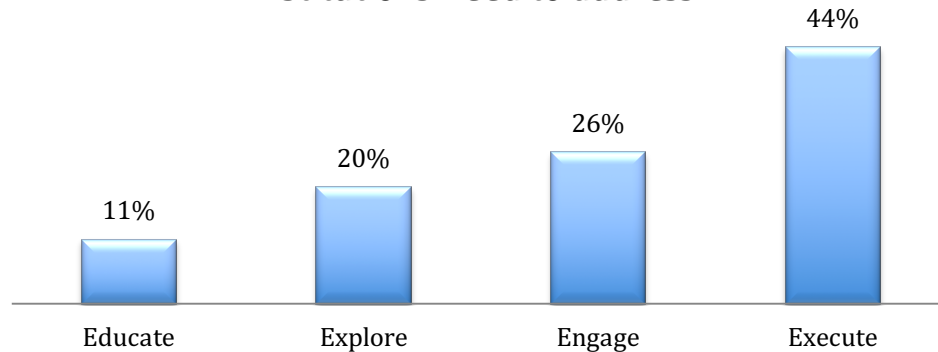
Figure 6. Pre & Post-Summit Focus on Reverse Transfer Areas



Data Collection & Exchange

This reverse transfer area is defined as data gathering and exchange for the purpose of implementing, tracking, and assessing reverse transfer programs. Throughout the policy summit, a consistent theme of student tracking and a system of institutional collaboration emerged. In terms of data collection and exchange, summit attendees indicated an increased need for attention to be emphasized on student tracking (35% pre-summit to 52% post-summit). In the stages of reverse transfer implementation, most institutional indicated that they are still exploring (28%) data collection and exchange options, and that they need to be executing a better system of data collaboration (44%) (see figure 7).

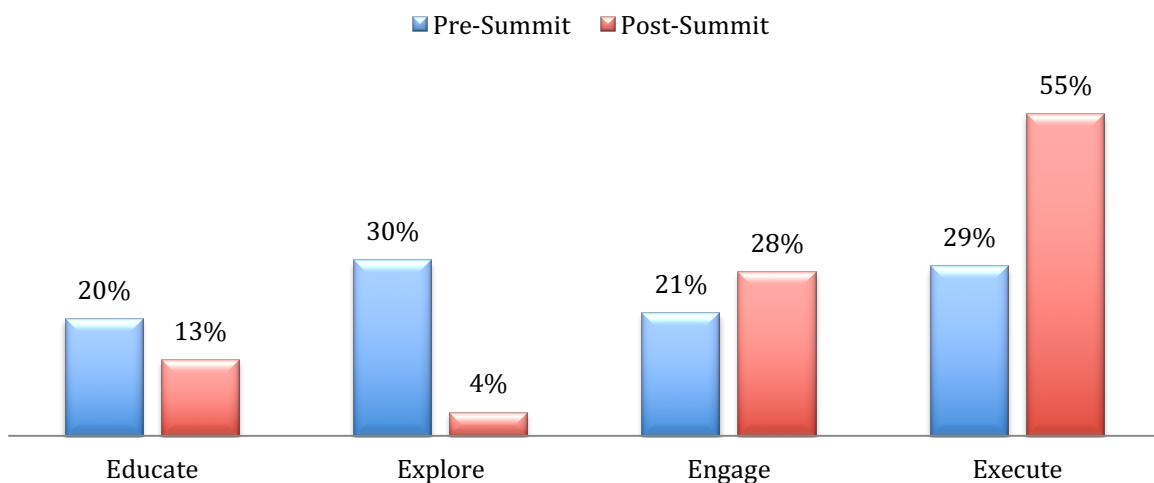
Figure 7. Data Collection & Exchange stages that institutions need to address



Institutional Collaboration

Institutional Collaboration is defined as the development of institutional partnerships to streamline reverse transfer process. Most attendees felt that an increased and effective system of institutional collaboration could especially assist in the most pressing area of student data collection and exchange (55%). In fact in terms of stages of implementation, pre-summit numbers showed that most institutions were still exploring how to develop institutional partnerships (30%) while post-summit polls indicated that more institutions needed to focus on engaging in the partnership process and executing effective reverse transfer partnerships (see figure 8).

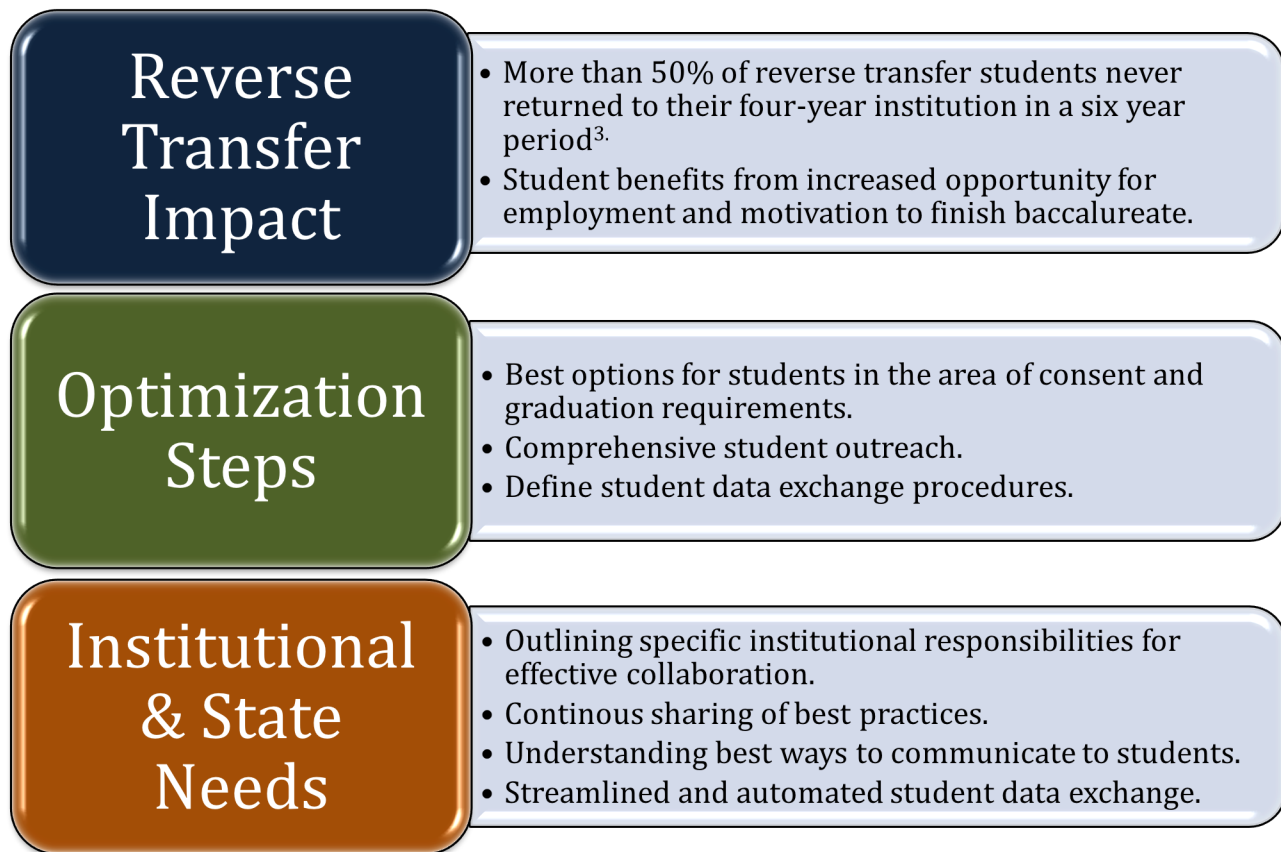
Figure 8. Pre-Summit & Post-Summit Results of Institutional Collaboration Stages



Policy Brief Summary

With potentially two million postsecondary students eligible to receive associate degrees, the issue of “reverse” transfer students is vital in increasing employment opportunities for students but also providing them the psychological motivation to continue toward their baccalaureate degree. Providing a both a national and state level portrait of the reverse transfer landscape, the 2015 Reverse Transfer Policy Summit fostered a discussion of key stakeholders from the policy to program level. From the various reverse transfer experiences, there were several important points that attendees departed with:

Figure 9. Key Policy Summit Research Findings



Pathways Unbound: Understanding the Impact of Reverse Transfer on Postsecondary Institutions

NATIONAL STUDENT CLEARINGHOUSE®

The mission of the National Student Clearinghouse is to serve the education community by facilitating the exchange and understanding of student enrollment, performance and related information.

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