



# LIGHTING THE PATH

*to Remove Systemic Barriers in Higher Education  
and Award Earned Postsecondary Credentials  
Through IHEP's Degrees When Due Initiative*

A report by Institute for Higher Education Policy and Degrees  
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APRIL 2022



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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report is the product of hard work and thoughtful contributions from many individuals and organizations. We thank the IHEP staff who were essential to this effort, including Mamie Voight, president and CEO; Piper Hendricks, vice president of communications and external affairs; Lacey Leegwater, vice president of planning and operations; Kim Dancy, associate director of research and policy; and Kathryn Gimborns, senior government affairs associate.

We thank former IHEP staff who contributed to Degrees When Due (DWD) and this report, including Jennifer Pocai, former research and programs manager; Emily Sellers, former program manager; and Konrad Mugglestone, former assistant director of research and policy. We offer special thanks to former IHEP leadership who spearheaded, informed, and supported DWD, including Julie Ajinkya, former vice president of applied research; Michelle Asha Cooper, former president and CEO; Alexandra Shankster, former director of Student Success & Mobility; and the late Clifford Adelman, former senior associate.

We thank the graduate research assistants who supported the work of the Degrees When Due Research Team: Heather Hoppe, Coastal Carolina University; Taylor Kevern, University of Utah; and Karen Stovall, University of Utah.

We also thank Julie Johnson for research support, Sabrina Detlef for copyediting, and openbox9 for creative design and layout.

Over three years, more than 40 state liaisons and close to 200 institutions participated in DWD. Without their participation, this initiative and the resources and research it has produced would not have been possible. Most of these institutions participated during the COVID-19 pandemic. We thank institutions that persisted implementing DWD throughout this challenging time and the DWD state liaisons who offered resources, support, and encouragement. We are also grateful to the DWD coaches who assisted participants with initiative implementation and reporting, troubleshooting challenges, and resource navigation.

Finally, we would like to express thanks to the funders whose support of meaningful completion practices and research on issues of access and success for postsecondary students has made this work possible: Ascendium, ECMC Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, and Lumina Foundation.



# INTRODUCTION

## THE DEGREES WHEN DUE INITIATIVE

Higher education can be a path to a better living and a better life for all students, regardless of race, background, or circumstance. Degrees When Due (DWD) was a national degree attainment initiative involving teams across 23 states at more than 200 colleges and universities dedicated to reconnecting students with some college but no degree (SCND) to that better living and better life. From 2018 through 2021—through a global health pandemic and the economic downturn it caused—DWD deployed student-focused, evidence-based, and equity-centered degree reclamation strategies to help students complete credentials that realized education goals, opened opportunities to new careers, and transformed lives.

Many jobs in today's economy require a college degree, and degree holders typically earn higher wages than individuals whose highest credential is a high school diploma. In other words, college graduates and their families benefit from the increased earnings and social and economic mobility that a degree affords. These benefits translate into stronger local, regional, and national economies as well. Research from the [Postsecondary Value Commission](#) found that increasing the postsecondary attainment rate of adults of color and adults from low-income backgrounds generates measurable returns for individuals, communities, and society writ large. Students benefit from the opportunity to build wealth and

Photo: Bowling Green State University





from improvements to their individual well-being; communities benefit as degrees significantly increase tax revenue and GDP, and reduce expenses related to public health, criminal justice, and public support programs; and we all benefit from increased civic engagement and empowerment.<sup>1</sup>

Each year, millions of Americans decide to pursue a college education to broaden their skill sets, boost their earning potential, and transform their life circumstances. The vast majority do not set out intending not to finish. Yet, almost one in five students leaves college empty-handed<sup>2</sup> after investing precious time and valuable resources, and many completed substantial coursework before stopping out. In fact, among the 36 million SCND students in the U.S., about 10 percent, or more than 3 million, are “near completers,” having completed at least two years of coursework.<sup>3</sup> This group of students is not homogenous. It consists of students across age groups, racial and ethnic backgrounds, gender, and economic status. Near-completers’ higher education journeys are as varied as their backgrounds, with the population including students at institutions granting associates degrees and those that grant bachelor’s degrees. Some students begin their journey at a community college, earn enough credits for an associates degree, and transfer without the degree being conferred. Other students leave higher education altogether before completing their degree; many of them, often unknowingly, having earned enough credits for some type of credential.

## RETURNING ADULT STUDENTS

While the vast majority of students in higher education are 18 years old or older, we use the term “returning adult” to recognize students who come back to higher education after time away from formal education beyond high school.

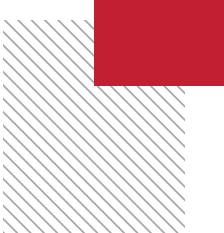
We avoid the term “non-traditional students,” recognizing that the notion of a “traditional” student is outdated. Today, college students include recent high school graduates and adults returning many years after starting, students transferring from other institutions and veterans starting after years of military service, and people studying while they are parenting, studying while they are incarcerated, studying while they are working to support their family...the list goes on.

Sometimes words alone cannot capture the diversity of today’s students, but we nevertheless endeavor to be inclusive, accurate, and respectful in our terminology.

### WHY NEAR-COMPLETERS STEP OFF THE POSTSECONDARY PATH

Returning adult students often balance many competing demands and obligations that impact their educational progress. When life circumstances change and they are forced to reprioritize family, work, and school, their education may be the least urgent priority. Factors that play a role in stopping out just a few credits prior to degree completion include personal circumstances, institutional policies, and policies at the state and federal levels. Financial challenges, family obligations, child care needs, lack of transportation, health challenges, work demands, new professional opportunities, or any combination of these can make continuing with higher education seem impossible.

In many cases, students intend to return to higher education when circumstances allow. No matter what comes next in the lives of these near-completers, the one thing they have in common if they are to return is the need for a clear and accessible path back. Institutional policies can help mitigate these challenges and provide that path back to higher education, but only if the policies are designed to support students and, as the DWD initiative underscores, are assessed to understand their impact.



For far too long, postsecondary leaders and enrollment managers focused only on the high school graduate pipeline and retaining students who are enrolled, and they made little to no effort to reengage students who had stopped out. Leaders in higher education treated students no longer in the pipeline as if they were beyond reach. DWD changed that approach at institutions across the country. Through DWD, these institutions helped thousands of students who were eligible for an associate's or bachelor's degree, or who were "near-completers" just a few credits shy of one, complete and attain their degree.

The DWD initiative became even more urgent as economic uncertainty deepened and the COVID-19 pandemic exposed and worsened inequities nationwide. Now two years into the global pandemic, workers are increasingly changing jobs, and many adults continue to upskill or reskill and are seeking ways to better support their families. Employers are seeking skilled workers but are not always able to find them. Postsecondary institutions are striving to quickly adapt to the needs of adult learners and regional economies and better prepare students to succeed.

This three-year initiative demonstrated that reengaging stopped-out students is a smart and impactful investment of human, financial, and technological capacity. DWD demonstrates how focusing resources on students who have stopped out from higher education can put them back on the path to the transformational benefits that higher education can provide. The resulting increase in attainment is a win for these stopped-out students and their families, for institutions, for communities, for the workforce, and for society as a whole.





## CHAPTER 2

# DEGREES WHEN DUE

## THE PATH TO A DEGREE VIA DEGREE RECLAMATION



Degree reclamation is a combination of evidence-based and equity-focused strategies designed to build institutional capacity to support and reengage the SCND population. These strategies address the challenges that cause students to stop out from higher education by equipping campus staff with the skills to document, evaluate, and adjust institutional policy and practice to improve procedural efficiencies, increase completion, and identify and close equity gaps. By employing these strategies, institutions can reengage stopped-out students, provide targeted supports to aid in degree completion, and award degrees when sufficient credits are earned.


Through Degrees When Due, participating institutions sought to realize four goals: increase postsecondary attainment; promote equity in higher education; build institutional capacity to support students; and establish sustainable policies and practices to continue to serve students after the conclusion of the DWD initiative.

### ATTAINMENT

Engaging more SCND adults to return and finish their degrees is good for individuals, institutions, and states. The degree makes individuals eligible for higher earnings, new job opportunities, and social and economic mobility. Research from the University of Texas system demonstrates that students who complete a degree achieve greater economic

Photo: Anoka-Ramsey Community College





**The missing piece in degree completion strategies may often be the process improvement tactics. Degrees When Due's process made the difference for many colleges.**

– CALISTA SMITH, DWD COACH

mobility and earnings than those who do not.<sup>4</sup> Institutions benefit from the boost to their completion statistics and increased tuition revenue, and states also benefit with every gain toward their attainment goals. Increased degree attainment also strengthens local, regional, and state economies.

## **EQUITY**

The challenges that cause students to stop out of college disproportionately impact first-generation college-goers, older students, students from low-income backgrounds, and students of color. Black, Latinx and/or Hispanic, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students<sup>5</sup> are 30 percent more likely than White students to need to stop out before completing a degree.<sup>6</sup> Students who attend college part time are twice as likely to stop out than students who attend full-time.<sup>7</sup>

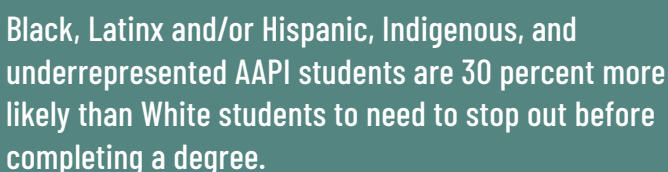
Addressing inequities in degree attainment requires changing the systems that privilege certain populations and students over others. Degree reclamation is a key step toward closing equity gaps by addressing the needs of these disproportionately impacted students. To close the gaps in attainment along racial and socioeconomic lines, institutions must go beyond providing clearer paths, higher levels of wrap-around support and advising, increased affordability, and a streamlined plan; they must also center equity in their degree reclamation efforts by examining disaggregated data to assess the impact of policies and practice and then prioritizing support of specific populations.

## **INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY**

As institutions and states strive to adapt to the needs of today's students and better serve all learners, capacity constraints can hamper administrative support, stakeholder engagement, technological capabilities, and sustainability efforts, especially amidst the disruption caused by COVID-19. DWD sought to build capacity even with limited human, technological, and financial resources. State and federal policymakers also should direct efforts towards enhancing the capacity of institutions to engage in equity-minded, evidence-driven completion efforts.

## **SUSTAINABILITY**

When undertaken correctly, degree reclamation efforts ultimately build long-term capacity, including for institutions with limited resources. DWD provided tools and coaching support to help institutions change systems, policies, and procedures in order to bolster completion efforts for many generations of students.



**Black, Latinx and/or Hispanic, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students are 30 percent more likely than White students to need to stop out before completing a degree.**

## IHEP'S INCLUSIVITY:

### Racial, Ethnic, and Cultural Identities

In all of our work at IHEP, particularly as it relates to people, we endeavor to be inclusive, accurate, and respectful. We recognize the meaning and importance of racial, ethnic, and cultural identities by capitalizing them. We use the terms *Black*, *African American*, *Latinx*, *Hispanic*, *Asian American*, *Pacific Islander*, *Native American*, *Native Hawaiian*, *Indigenous*, and *White* as more than a simple description of people; these are identities, not adjectives, and our capitalization recognizes that many of these terms reflect a shared culture and history. Capitalization of these terms also gives appropriate weight to the ways that socially constructed concepts of race and ethnicity have created and sustained inequities in our society.

Furthermore, just as we advocate the use of disaggregated data in higher education policy, we ourselves strive to be accurate – and thus specific – when referring to racial and ethnic identities. As just a few examples, we recognize that the experiences of people from Chinese and Vietnamese, Mexican and Peruvian, and Liberian and Nigerian backgrounds may vary greatly. We also recognize that aggregate racial groups – like Asian American, Latinx and/or Hispanic, and Black, or “of color” – can disguise differences in experiences and nuances in outcomes so only use those terms when referring to an aggregate group.

Unfortunately, the country's postsecondary data system still utilizes aggregate race/ethnicity groups and terminology that does not always reflect how people identify themselves. As researchers, we aim, where possible and appropriate, to use language that is consistent across data sets and in research conversations. Where necessary to ensure that our research is accurate and replicable, we reflect those aggregate groups in our writing while, as part of our commitment to racial equity, continuing to push for greater disaggregation of race/ethnicity in federal and state postsecondary data collections.

This includes use of the terms “Latinx” and “Hispanic.” Throughout this publication, we use the term “Latinx” as a gender-inclusive term to center people with ties to or origins in Latin America beyond Spanish-speaking communities and/or with Hispanic cultural or racial identities. Latinx encompasses Latinos and Latinas and also individuals with non-binary or gender-expansive identities. This term also encompasses the federal definition of “Hispanic,” which is used in U.S. census data. We recognize that some people identify as “Hispanic” while others feel it centers colonialist ties to Spain. We use the term “Hispanic” interchangeably when discussing federal data and/or source materials that use this terminology.



Photo: Bowling Green State University



# ENVISIONING THE PATH

## THE ORIGINS OF DEGREE RECLAMATION

Two multi-state degree reclamation initiatives paved the way for Degrees When Due: Project Win-Win and Credit When It's Due. The two were separate and distinct efforts, with IHEP leading the former and the Office of Community College Research and Leadership at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign leading the latter. While each initiative took a slightly different approach to degree reclamation, both offered key lessons and, when brought together, formed the base of what would become DWD.

### PROJECT WIN-WIN

In 2009, IHEP launched Project Win-Win (PWW) to identify former students from associates degree-granting institutions who had earned 60 or more credits but were no longer enrolled and had not been conferred a degree. Led by IHEP Senior Associate Cliff Adelman, PWW introduced the concept of degree reclamation and included over 60 schools, from small to multi-campus institutions and from rural to suburban and urban campuses across nine states: Florida, Louisiana, Michigan, Missouri, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Virginia, and Wisconsin.<sup>8</sup>

Participating institutions sought to re-engage near-completers who were no more than 9 to 12 credits short of an associates degree and awarded degrees to students who fulfilled all degree requirements. PWW worked with colleges to identify students who had already met the requirements for a degree or who could be categorized as a near-completer. IHEP guided participating institutions through implementing data mining and degree audit processes, as well as conducting outreach campaigns. IHEP assessed and identified data system and service inefficiencies for locating former students.



The four years of PWW, from 2009 through 2013, led to the awarding of over 4,500 associate's degrees and the reenrollment of over 1,700 near-completer students to attain their degrees. The initiative helped design new data mining methods that drew on National Student Clearinghouse and state longitudinal information to match and locate students who transferred or completed degrees at other institutions. PWW also helped develop new institutional degree awarding policies to remove barriers to completion.<sup>9</sup>

## CREDIT WHEN IT'S DUE

As PWW was in its final stretch, a related initiative was getting underway. Launched in 2012, Credit When It's Due (CWID) sought to increase degree completion through reverse transfer, a practice by which institutions ensure that students are awarded degrees they began at another institution. When a student transfers from a two- to a four-year institution and earns the remaining credits required for an associate's degree, the two institutions employ "reverse transfer" to apply credits from the four-year institution back to the two-year institution for the purpose of awarding the associate's degree.

CWID ran for five years, until 2017, and supported 15 states in implementing reverse transfer: Arkansas, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Tennessee, and Texas. Six of these states also participated in PWW.<sup>10</sup> Like PWW, CWID helped institutions to identify eligible students, conduct degree audits, and launch marketing campaigns to communicate the value of this effort. In addition, CWID facilitated partnerships between two- and four-year institutions.

CWID engaged more than 500 institutions and awarded more than 16,000 associate's degrees.<sup>11</sup> The initiative led to the development of consistent reverse credit transfer policies, procedures, and protocols for system-wide adoption. During CWID, some states incentivized institutions to participate in reverse credit transfer through state performance-funding mechanisms. States saw gains in degrees awarded, based in part on competencies and learning outcomes, not just credits and courses. CWID helped eliminate graduation fees and forms that were barriers to degree completion at participating campuses. The initiative integrated new metrics into state and institutional data systems and enhanced technology infrastructure and automation capacity for transcript exchange, course equivalencies, degree audits, and the process for obtaining student consent.

## CONTRIBUTIONS OF PWW AND CWID

Together, these two initiatives led to substantive changes in policy and practice at many hundreds of institutions as well as at the state level and resulted in more than 20,000 new associate's degrees. The lessons and best practices emerging from the initiatives included:

- **DATA MINING:** Examining an institution's data to create a list of potential completers.
- **DEGREE AUDITING:** Reviewing student credit and considering reverse credit, articulation agreements, prior learning credit, competency-based credit, or other ways to meet degree requirements.
- **STUDENT ENGAGEMENT:** Advising and providing other supports related to degree attainment, including informing students about options to consent to sharing records, receive a degree, or remain in contact regarding credit accumulation.
- **DEGREE AWARDING:** Eliminating procedural barriers to graduation, such as fees, applications, and unnecessary holds.

**The work of PWW and CWID formed the foundation for the next iteration of degree reclamation: Degrees When Due.**



## CHAPTER 4

# BUILDING THE PATH

## LAUNCHING DEGREES WHEN DUE

IHEP launched Degrees When Due in 2018 to apply the evidence-based and equity-minded strategies from PWV and CWID. Between 2018 and 2021, DWD supported three cohorts and included almost 200 institutions across 23 states, 117 two-year institutions and 82 four-year institutions.

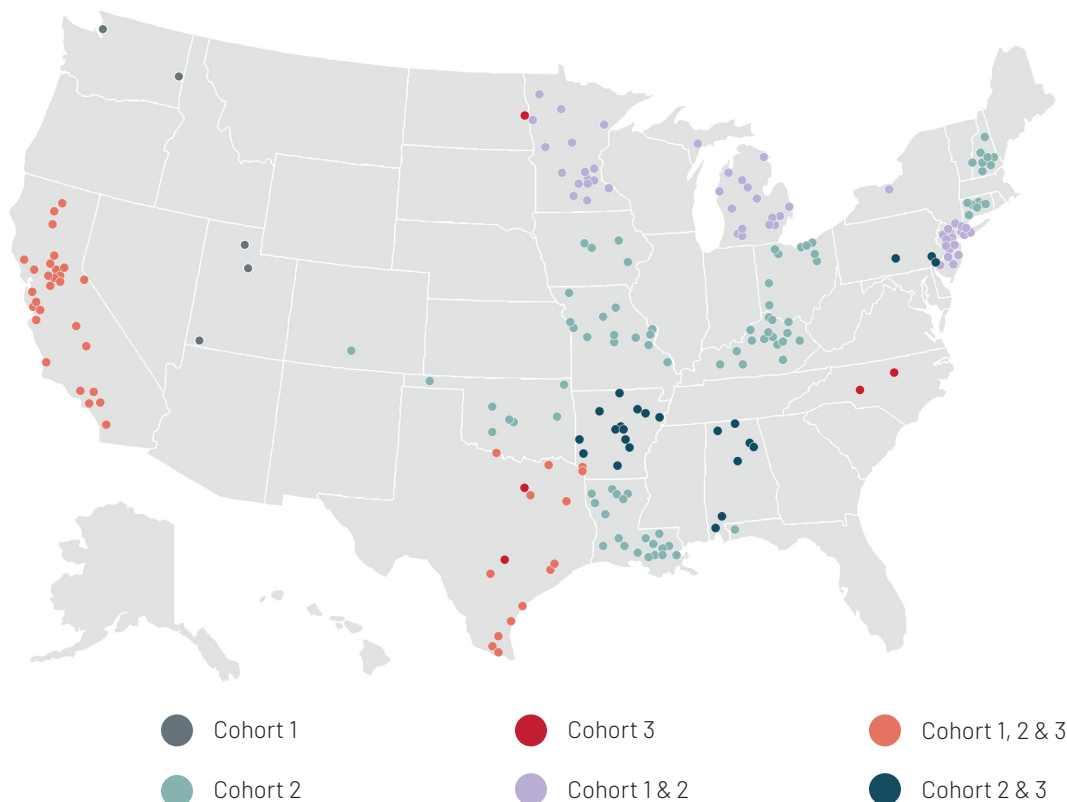
Because many students of color and students from low-income backgrounds begin their higher education journey at community colleges, IHEP and DWD state liaisons actively recruited those institutions in order to support these historically excluded populations. DWD participants joined the initiative through their system or at the individual institutional level. IHEP selected state participants based on their completion and equity agendas and the potential to expand DWD efforts across the state or system.

The following sections outline DWD's approach, framework, ecosystem, and engagement.

Photo: Shasta College



## DEGREES WHEN DUE PARTICIPATING CAMPUSES AND STATE LIAISONS



## THE DWD APPROACH: STUDENT- FOCUSED, DATA-INFORMED, AND EQUITY-CENTERED

Drawing on momentum from PWW and CWID, DWD established degree reclamation as a standard practice by clearly articulating program goals, setting an explicit focus on racial and socioeconomic equity, and focusing on two proven core strategies:

- **ADULT REENGAGEMENT:** Adult reengagement strategies help institutions identify, locate, and communicate with students who accumulated a significant number of credits and who stopped out of college without completing a degree. This approach involves both identifying ways to reengage and reenroll students who are near completion and retroactively awarding degrees to students who have already met requirements but were not conferred a degree.
- **REVERSE TRANSFER:** Reverse transfer, also called “reverse credit transfer,” is a practice through which institutions ensure that students are awarded the degrees they earn. When students transfer from a two-year institution to a four-year institution and earn the credit required for an associate’s degree, the two institutions employ reverse transfer to apply credits from the four-year institution back to the two-year institution for the purpose of awarding the earned degree.



DWD's comprehensive model anchored its work around four key goals:

- **INCREASE ATTAINMENT:** DWD sought to increase postsecondary attainment by helping participating institutions and states implement and expand degree reclamation strategies to help SCND students to complete and attain a degree.
- **APPLY AN EQUITY LENS:** DWD institutions examined real-time data to promote degree completion, particularly for Black, Latinx and/or Hispanic, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds, in order to support equity.
- **CATALYZE INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE:** DWD institutions aimed to fundamentally rethink their campus completion culture and, using their data as evidence to support change efforts, tackle institutional policies to reduce the number of students who stop-out before completing.
- **ENSURE SUSTAINABILITY:** DWD sought to increase capacity, infrastructure, and technology use to facilitate degree reclamation beyond the initiative and help move the proven strategies into official processes and positions to ensure ongoing progress.

At the heart of DWD was its unwavering commitment to closing attainment gaps for Black, Latinx and/or Hispanic, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students. DWD focused on shifting mindsets and providing institutions concrete ways to better serve key populations, recognizing that without such careful attunement, completion gaps would not be closed. This commitment required asking difficult questions, confronting challenging or even distressing realities, and figuring out how to change policies and processes that stemmed from long-standing unjust and racist systems.

This commitment to equity separated DWD from prior degree reclamation efforts. At each stage of the process, DWD encouraged institutions to center equity in their work and provided tools, tips, process requirements, and other resources to facilitate this work. For instance, during the early stage of degree mining, participants considered the equity impacts of changing various parameters around the group of near-completers who were eligible for reengagement consideration; beyond adjusting year ranges or credit thresholds, DWD guided institutions to consider who would be excluded by certain parameters.

While institutions conducted their degree audits, they were required to analyze their data disaggregated by sub-populations such as age, race/ethnicity, and income. As institutions focused on how to re-engage students, DWD provided an equity decision tree tool to get to the root of which systems, policies, and practices imposed barriers for some student populations. This tool spanned all parts of the degree reclamation process but was particularly useful to understand how to better engage and re-engage Black, Latinx and/or Hispanic, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students.



## A USER-FRIENDLY GUIDE TO ADULT REENGAGEMENT AND REVERSE TRANSFER

IHEP's [Degree Reclamation Playbook](#) makes the best practices of degree reclamation available to any institution across the country. The playbook distills more than a decade's worth of insights into a practical guide to support campus degree reclamation efforts. In addition to walking step-by-step through implementation, this user-friendly guide includes a strategic assessment and an appendix of carefully crafted worksheets and checklists.



# THE DWD FRAMEWORK: ITERATING AND INNOVATING THROUGH IMPLEMENTATION

The DWD implementation framework drew best practices from PWW and CWID to create a roadmap that guided participating institutions and systems through each step of the degree reclamation process and facilitated the identification and awarding of credentials. While the framework did prescribe specific steps to implement degree reclamation, it was designed with flexibility to promote innovation.

As participating institutions applied the framework, challenges sometimes arose in specific contexts. In response, DWD made innovative adjustments in order to enable institutions to move through key parts of the degree reclamation framework more effectively. For example:

## DATA MINING AND AUDITS

- **CHALLENGE:** After identifying a “universe of interest” (i.e., those students who met credit thresholds, had not received a degree, and were not enrolled elsewhere), institutions evaluated student records. While this evaluation process should be a routine practice and had been developed in prior degree reclamation efforts, it became clear through DWD that many institutions were managing this process manually or with inadequate technology, making for an arduous experience with sub-optimal results.
- **SOLUTION:** DWD institutions needed a new tool, but as their experience and challenges varied, the tool had to be adaptable. DWD leadership convened a team of stakeholders to respond to this challenge and created a new tool to optimize institutions' available technology in the degree auditing process. Learn more about the Degree Mining Tool on page 18.



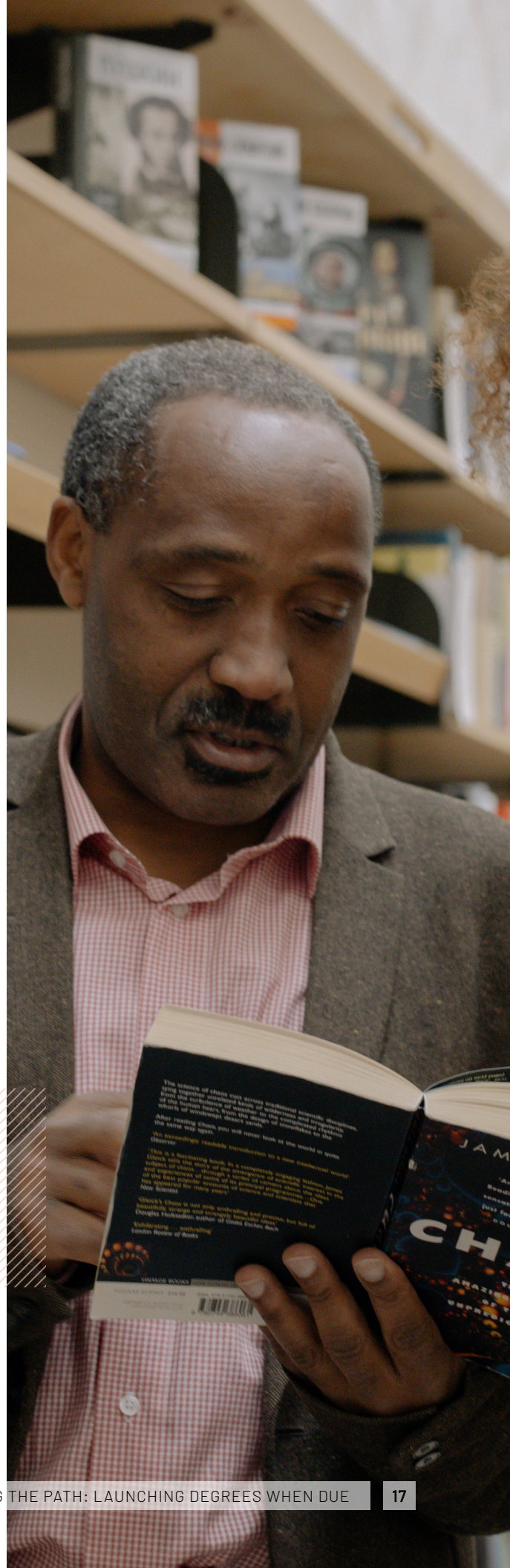


## ENGAGING STUDENTS

- **CHALLENGE:** Institutions working on the reverse credit transfer strategy faced an unexpected issue: not all students wanted to have a two-year degree on their transcript. Campus teams had to determine how to balance the desire to personalize their approach to meet the needs of individual students with the need to automate and streamline in order to reach and serve as many students as possible.
- **SOLUTION:** Including a student consent process could achieve the balance institutions needed. DWD shared best practices and highlighted institutional examples of opt-in and opt-out processes. Some institutions choose to employ an opt-out option, so that students were notified they would be awarded the degree and, unless they asked the institution to halt the effort, the degree would be awarded. Other institutions selected an opt-in option and contacted students to inform them of their degree eligibility. Students who did want the degree needed to contact the institution with their approval for the process to proceed.

## TRANSCRIPT SHARING

- **CHALLENGE:** Institutions that worked on the reverse credit transfer strategy needed to share student records across institutions. While DWD best practices recommended that institutions form a consortium (described in the Ecosystem section below), issues remained as two-year and four-year institutions strove to coordinate across different systems. Sharing transcripts was especially challenging.
- **SOLUTION:** DWD helped institutions through two key steps. First, DWD recommended processes to streamline transcript sharing practices across institutions, as described in detail in the [Degree Reclamation Playbook](#). Secondly, DWD leadership engaged other stakeholders within the DWD network, namely coaches and state liaisons, to foster strong lines of communication within consortium teams and across the institutions more broadly.





# IHEP'S DEGREE MINING TOOL:

Degree Reclamation Requires Technological Capacity

Many institutions who joined DWD struggled with inequitable and inefficient degree auditing processes. At least 30 percent of two-year institutions were performing manual audits due to the age of their software, lack of resources for additional training, or use of legacy systems.

Technology exists to automate the degree auditing process, but such options were out of the price range of many institutions. Some systems had the technology they needed, but not all participating institutions were using it, resulting in fewer earned credentials awarded. Other institutions were using technology to automate the process but were constrained by limitations such as inconsistent data management practices, batch auditing challenges, and the age of the software being used. Under-resourced institutions were particularly impacted by the many barriers related to this work.

Institutions were eager for a tool to supplement existing technology, rather than purchasing new technology, yet no single technology solution would meet the needs of all institutions because of the variety and use of student information systems. To solve this problem, DWD created the Degree Mining Tool. With support from a working group of 12 institutional representatives and learning technology experts across the country who understood the importance of streamlined degree audits and the need for institutions to develop their own solutions, DWD created a free online tool to help campus teams leverage existing technology for more efficient degree mining.



## The Degree Mining Tool equipped teams to:

- **Adopt and adapt** innovative degree mining strategies from other institutions
- **Map current degree mining processes** and optimize current approaches
- **Organize targeted campaigns** to identify and award earned credentials

VISIT [IHEP.ORG](https://www.ihep.org) TO ACCESS THE DEGREE MINING TOOL.



Photo: Anoka-Ramsey Community College

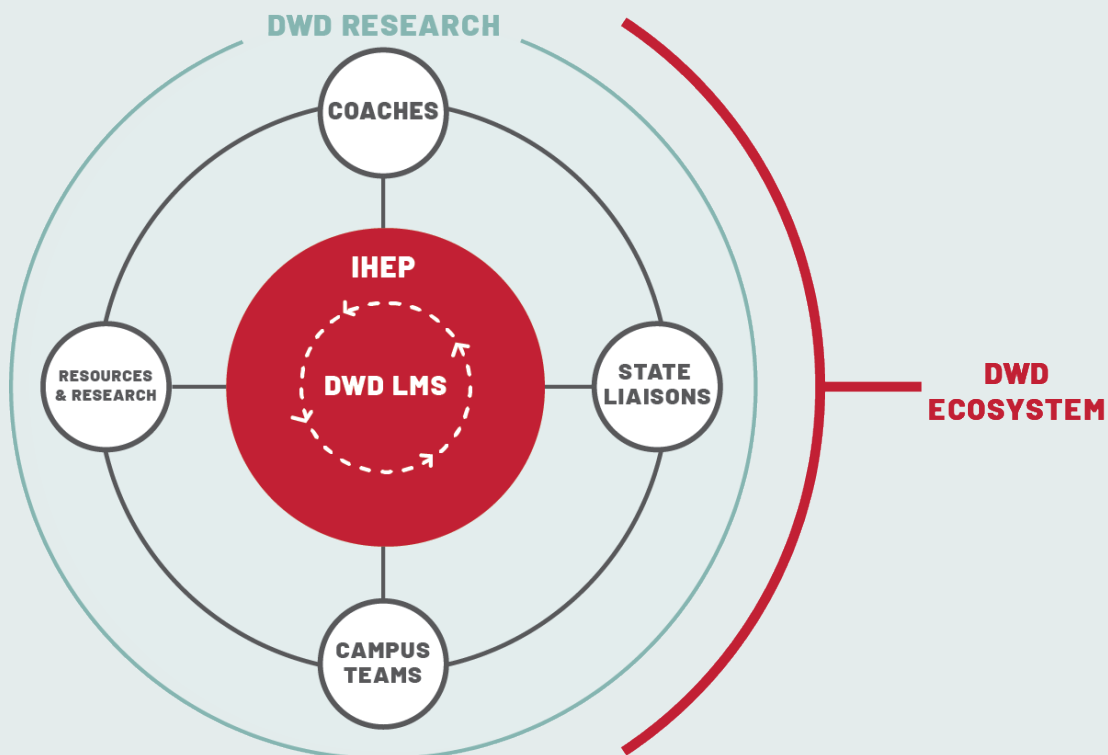
*"I am thankful for the Institute of Higher Education Policy (IHEP) and the team for providing essential supports that enabled Alabama Possible to build capacity in our efforts in bringing awareness and action to re-engaging adult learners in Alabama..."*

– CHANDRA SCOTT, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF ALABAMA POSSIBLE, DWD ALABAMA STATE LIAISON

# THE DWD ECOSYSTEM: ROBUST SUPPORT FOR IMPLEMENTATION

DWD's approach included an ecosystem of support for participating institutions, consisting of campus teams, coaches, state liaisons, and resources and research, along with an online, interactive Learning Management System (LMS).

**FIGURE 1.**  
DEGREES WHEN  
DUE ECOSYSTEM





## CAMPUS TEAMS

Each DWD institution was encouraged to organize a campus team consisting of the key administrators and staff who would implement DWD. These teams enabled decision-makers to work together to create and implement a plan, tackle challenges, and collaborate across broad areas.

Campus teams were responsible for implementing degree reclamation, coordinating across the institution, addressing policies and systems that needed to change, leading technology adaptations, communicating progress and outcomes, and working with community partners on student outreach, advising, and reengagement.

Institutions implementing reverse transfer also formed a consortium, made up of each institution's campus team lead and a state or regional data analyst, when applicable. The consortium team coordinated on the cross-institutional policy, procedural, and communication efforts needed to implement reverse transfer. These teams were essential because the reverse transfer process required close coordination between partner institutions who had their own policies, processes, and systems. Beyond the detailed planning required to work across systems, relationships were essential to this effort and having the consortium team in place enabled participants to get to know each other, to build trust and rapport, and ultimately be well-positioned to collaborate and jointly problem-solve.

## COACHES

Each campus team was partnered with a DWD coach to support planning and implementation of degree reclamation strategies. Coaches provided strategic guidance, helped address implementation roadblocks, and provided just-in-time support.

Coaches, who were selected based on their leadership in prior degree reclamation efforts, worked with two to three states, with support from a master coach. Campus teams viewed coaches as the most direct resource and the greatest source of support. On DWD's final participant survey, 88 percent of respondents indicated that their DWD coach was extremely, very, or moderately useful. Many teams consistently contacted and relied on their DWD coach to help them navigate through the process.

**Our DWD Coach, Kate Mahar, was amazing throughout our implementation process. She is learner-centric, super knowledgeable, collaborative, patient, and an all-around wonderful coach and person to work with. I am convinced that we would not have been as successful as we were in this work were it not for Kate.**

– BRIAN BEDFORD, ASSOCIATE DEAN OF STRATEGIC INITIATIVES,  
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY – SACRAMENTO

## STATE LIAISONS

Since institutions in each state were likely to encounter similar issues based on specific state policy and economic context, state liaisons were essential in helping to lead and coordinate DWD implementation. Liaisons often came from the State Higher Education Executive Officer's (SHEEO) office, a system office, or a regional postsecondary association. A liaison's role included convening institutions, coordinating outreach, facilitating meetings with DWD campus leads, and supporting research and reporting efforts.

State liaisons also led efforts to align DWD implementation with state and system priorities and policy, as highlighted in Table 1 below and discussed in the sidebar about state liaisons.

**TABLE 1: DWD Alignment with State Postsecondary Priorities**

State Postsecondary Priority	DWD Alignment and Integration Efforts
Guided Pathways Implementation	Program maps for returning students and reverse transfer pathways
Free college pathways or financial assistance initiatives	Financial incentives for returning adults and associate degree incentives
Social supports or public benefits	Campus supports, community partnerships, and assistance accessing public benefits

## STATE LIAISONS: A KEY SOURCE OF ASSISTANCE

State liaisons provided leadership, coordination, and engagement among the participating institutions. They were situated in a variety of organizational settings including state agencies, community college associations, and student success centers. While most of the state liaisons had a statewide footprint, a few of the organizations functioning in this role were regional non-profits whose mission includes college access and success. (See appx for a list of the DWD state organizations.)

The role of the liaison and how they engaged with their institutions varied by state, but most of them actively recruited colleges to get involved in DWD and engaged a "coalition of the willing" from colleges and universities. After helping to recruit institutions, many liaisons also partnered with IHEP to bring participants from their states on board.

After orientation, the primary function of the liaison was to support and coordinate the work of the DWD institutions in their state or region. Liaisons relied on monthly group meetings and individual calls with institutions to advance the work of DWD. The engagement approach varied depending on how many colleges were involved in the state or region. Liaisons also supported participating institutions' accountability, with nudges to meet reporting deadlines.

## WHAT'S NEXT?

After positioning DWD degree reclamation work in the context of other state strategic goals, several of the state liaisons are now working to embed DWD in other efforts, including rebranding DWD to blend with state endeavors and couple ongoing degree reclamation work more closely with existing structures and expectations.

Many of the state liaisons plan to extend degree reclamation efforts to other institutions and deepen the work at those that participated in DWD, albeit without the coaching and technical assistance structures that IHEP provided through the initiative. Several state liaisons are considering providing funding and incentives for degree reclamation efforts to create more buy-in and greater leverage.

State liaisons also are advocating for or implementing state policies that would sustain DWD momentum. Key state policies under consideration include changes to debt forgiveness policies; promotion of prior learning assessment to account for experience returning students may possess; and supports to help students address issues like food or housing insecurity, lack of transportation, and the need for child care. Several DWD states are leveraging emerging scholarship programs that focus on returning adults.



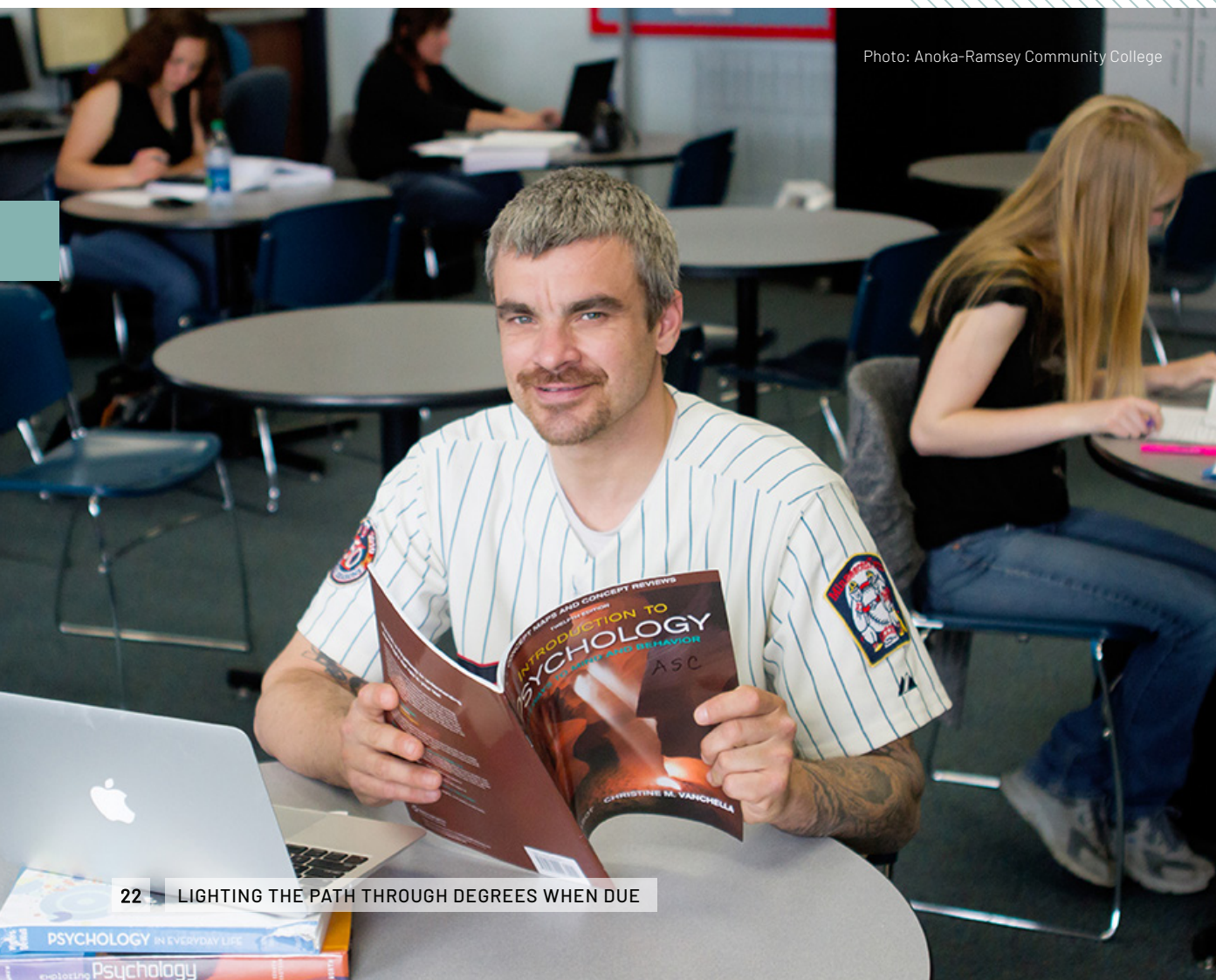
## RESOURCES

IHEP worked with instructional designers from the University of Central Oklahoma to build a learning management system (LMS) that housed the DWD implementation framework and tools needed for each step in the process. The LMS, which served as a central hub for all DWD resources, was accessible to all participants. In January 2022, IHEP released the Degree Reclamation Playbook, making the framework and tools available to the public.

## RESEARCH

A robust research agenda undergirded DWD's work. The DWD Research Team, led by Jason Taylor, associate professor of education leadership and policy at the University of Utah, sought to learn more about SCND students and measure institutional capacity for change. Real-time information and feedback yielded insights throughout the initiative to inform campus teams of where to pivot, lean in, and rethink efforts. DWD provided campus teams guidance in using their research outcomes to raise campus and community awareness, and to tell a compelling story about their outcomes.

Photo: Anoka-Ramsey Community College





# ENGAGEMENT: EXPANSION AND ADAPTATION

DWD spanned three years, with a new set of institutions, systems, and states joining each year. The experience of each cohort differed, as changes along the way, both planned and unplanned, significantly shaped the approach to degree reclamation each year. DWD was structured to incorporate lessons learned and pivot accordingly to ensure that the work stayed centered on students and how best to serve them. (See the appendix for a full list of participating states and institutions.)

## YEAR 1: RAMPING UP INSTITUTIONS

The first DWD cohort began in 2018 with 44 institutions across eight states—California, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, Texas, Utah, and Washington. The first year sought to ramp up the initiative, with an initial focus on associate’s degree completion.

Participants were eager to engage in DWD, as degree reclamation was closely aligned with many states’ work on adult learner initiatives and completion goals. The implementation timeline of one year felt achievable to participating institutions and many were able to complete the work. However, some institutions faced unexpected challenges—from external factors, such as state priority changes or legislative and funding delays, to internal factors, such as insufficient technology or limited staff and resources—that prevented them from completing, or in some cases from even starting, the original timeline. Insights from these and other experiences informed a change of structure and approach in year two.

## YEAR 2: ACTIVATING STATES

It became clear that state commitment was critical to institutional success with DWD. In year 2, to solidify state support on the front end, IHEP issued a formal RFP (request for proposal) that required states or systems to submit the application on behalf of institutions, indicating their commitment and readiness to work with institutions on this effort. Over 130 institutions across nearly 20 systems and states joined, along with their state liaisons.

More institutions learned about DWD for year 2 thanks to the support of several partner organizations, including the National Governors Association, Jobs for the Future, Lumina Foundation’s Talent Hubs, The Graduate! Network, and the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities. Each organization increased awareness of DWD across its network and showed how degree reclamation related to other completion and adult learner initiatives. Institutions joining the initiative in year 2 included 45 minority-serving institutions (MSIs), up from just 11 in year 1, thanks to this outreach.



## YEAR 3: PIVOTING AMIDST A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

Year 3 began in fall and winter 2020, several months into the COVID-19 pandemic. The 24 institutions that joined DWD that year were driven by a deep sense of urgency to better serve adult students, particularly those most impacted by the pandemic, who would benefit from degree completion. Racial reckoning across the country also magnified inequities within postsecondary education, causing participants to think about how to use DWD to address these.

While institutions were striving to serve their students in new ways (e.g., with increased access to broadband and technology, additional counseling and student supports, and food pantries), they were also feeling the pinch of other constraints. Budget declines due to a loss of students on campus and decreased postsecondary enrollment forced many institutions to make difficult choices about where to invest resources.

Recognizing the need to adapt to meet the demands of the moment, the DWD Research Team developed guidance to help institutions include students who had stopped out within the most recent semester. As the U.S. Department of Education (ED) released Higher Education Emergency Relief Funding (HEERF), IHEP shared information with the DWD network about ED's guidance, including the fact that forgiving institutional student debt incurred as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic was an allowable use of the funds.<sup>12</sup> Institutions immediately began using DWD data to identify students with financial holds on their accounts who would be eligible for forgiveness with these new funds.

## RESPONSE TO COVID-19

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States in earnest in March 2020 and the shift to remote learning required the full attention of campus teams, DWD paused implementation efforts. During this five-month hiatus, DWD leadership held listening sessions with participants and others about how best to adapt, including by developing new strategies to support and re-engage students who faced stopping-out due to the pandemic.

Listening sessions led to the creation of a DWD community of practice webinar series on how to address issues that arose during the pandemic. Participants joined webinars to learn about models for supporting and re-engaging students, such as student one-stop shops that were virtual, temporary debt forgiveness programs, and new forms of student outreach. Participants also received newsletters with additional strategies and links to efforts from other member institutions, such as food pantries, basic needs ambassadors, emergency grants, technology supports, and planning for the future. DWD leadership also used this period to develop a tool to support degree mining, which would become an essential part of the initiative. (See the Degree Mining Tool highlight on page 18.)

Despite the significant impact of COVID, the majority of DWD institutions (85 percent) either maintained or increased their goals related to degree reclamation. Even with this commitment, however, half of the institutions reported that their capacity and resources to implement degree reclamation decreased.

# REVERSE TRANSFER SPOTLIGHT: NORTH CAROLINA'S OPTING IN TO AN "OPT-OUT" PROCESS

**Eric Fotheringham** Director of Community College Partnerships & Adult Learner Initiatives, University of North Carolina System

**Patrick Holyfield** Dean of Enrollment Management & Academic Support Services, Stanly Community College

**James "JW" Kelley** Associate Vice President of Student Services, North Carolina Community College System

## WHY WAS YOUR TEAM INTERESTED IN ANALYZING YOUR SYSTEMS' REVERSE TRANSFER POLICIES AND PRACTICES?

North Carolina first started implementing reverse transfer in 2012, beginning with Credit When It's Due (CWID), but the process hasn't changed much since. While other states have conducted research over the years to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of reverse transfer programs, a large-scale evaluation hasn't happened in North Carolina. We recognize that by not applying evidence in our decision-making, we have been leaving success up to chance. We knew that participating in DWD would help us identify ways to measure our reverse transfer outcomes and identify areas with the potential for improvement. Joining DWD gave us an opportunity to question our theory of reverse transfer in North Carolina and take steps toward gathering the data we needed.

## WHAT DID YOUR TEAM LEARN BY ANALYZING YOUR SYSTEMS' REVERSE TRANSFER POLICIES AND PRACTICES THROUGH DWD?

Out of more than 100,000 students who transferred to North Carolina public universities prior to an associate's degree award between 2015 and 2021, only 41 percent opted into participating in the reverse transfer program, with transcript review beginning once the student accumulates 60 credit hours.

With an opt-in reverse transfer policy and, knowing that our communication will never reach all students coupled with fallible older workflows and operations, we knew we were likely missing some reverse transfer eligible students. When we actually looked at our data through DWD, we learned we were losing roughly half of all potentially eligible students through the opt-in process. That led us to believe we might be able to double the number of North Carolina reverse transfer degrees awarded by moving to an opt-out process.

## REVERSE TRANSFER STUDENT CONSENT POLICIES

There are two policy options for obtaining student consent for transcript sharing, which is part of the reverse transfer process:

- **Opt-in:** requires that students affirmatively express their desire to have transcripts and related data shared between a two-year and four-year institution.
- **Opt-out:** allows institutions to share transcripts and related data unless a student explicitly denies the request to share within a reasonable time frame following confirmed receipt of the request communication.

We also engaged staff at institutions in our analysis and are actively talking with them about how to improve our communication with students, in particular the explanation of reverse transfer to students and among colleagues. For instance, one staff member said they have begun using the term “reverse credit transfer,” as opposed to “reverse transfer,” because some students misunderstood and thought they were being sent back to their community college. It’s those sorts of details that we haven’t holistically reflected on in years that can make a big difference. There are many possibilities to turn reverse transfer into an actual program marketed to improve student outcomes, as opposed to just a procedure.

### **WHAT STEPS IN THE DWD ANALYSIS PROCESS DID YOUR TEAM FIND MOST VALUABLE?**

It was valuable to hear from other states that have implemented reverse transfer, such as what worked and what their biggest challenges were. While we could have called a couple of states ourselves, that probably wasn’t going to happen without somebody convening us. We also felt more motivated to read the resources IHEP provided in a timely manner, knowing we would be speaking with colleagues in other states about their reverse transfer work. IHEP’s convening power and network are what drove the train.

Reading the research IHEP provided was another way to learn what other states were doing and gain valuable insights. Evidence we acquired, like the fact that receiving an associate’s degree through reverse transfer may actually increase the likelihood of a student completing their bachelor’s degree, proved to be helpful talking points for gaining buy-in from various stakeholders. Research that included reverse transfer data analyses and how the results were interpreted provided examples to consider for our own research in North Carolina.

### **BASED ON WHAT YOU LEARNED, WHAT STEPS ARE YOUR TEAM PLANNING MOVING FORWARD?**

Before moving to an opt-out policy, we need to address reverse transfer degree auditing. Right now, degree auditing is one of the hardest pieces of the reverse transfer process; you manually sift through all these student records for little return—that’s what it feels like at an institution-level.

**“That led us to believe we might be able to double the number of North Carolina reverse transfer degrees awarded by moving to an opt-out process.”**

### **FINISH FIRST NC (FFNC)**

Finish First NC (FFNC) is a powerful data tool that identifies students who have fulfilled requirements to complete credentials that have not yet been awarded and indicates which students are close to the completion finish line. FFNC leverages technology to identify these students in a matter of minutes, giving North Carolina colleges the ability to award earned credentials and advise students on the closest path to completion. The tool was developed in 2015 by a dedicated team at Wake Technical Community College and has since been expanded to all 58 North Carolina community colleges.

*“Community colleges in North Carolina have shared with us how Finish First NC’s data analytics technology has successfully helped them award tens of thousands of additional credentials to students who’ve worked hard to complete them,” said Bryan Ryan, Wake Tech’s Senior Vice President of Effectiveness and Innovation. “We’re eager to explore the possibilities for automating the reverse transfer process to award even more credentials to students.”*

### **Wake Technical Community College Team**

**Bryan Ryan**, Senior Vice President of Effectiveness and Innovation

**Laila Shahid-El**, Project Director for Finish First NC

**Kai Wang**, Senior Dean of Strategic Innovations



Luckily, we have an invaluable team at Wake Tech Community College working on a reverse transfer component to the Finish First NC (FFNC) degree auditing tool they previously developed. Once modified, this tool will be able to perform in a matter of minutes a reverse transfer degree auditing process that normally takes staff two or three days to complete. We would not be able to even entertain the idea of moving to an opt-out policy without the FFNC tool.

Changing the policy is the easy part—changing operations related to policy change is the challenge.

### **WHAT LESSONS LEARNED WOULD YOUR TEAM SHARE WITH OTHER SYSTEMS AND STATES THAT PLAN TO ANALYZE THEIR REVERSE TRANSFER POLICIES AND PRACTICES?**

Take a people-centric approach. If an approach is institution-centric, every decision is based on how it supports the institution or how it can work within the institutional structure. In contrast, a people-centric approach considers how staff, faculty, and students are impacted. A servant leadership philosophy is people-centered; it means working toward accomplishing the mission while serving the faculty, staff, and students of that institution. As soon as that gets out of balance, that's when somebody gets hurt, including the institution.

If an approach benefits students, it's going to benefit the institution. It's usually not the other way around; if an approach benefits the institution, it does not necessarily benefit the students.

**“Changing the policy is the easy part—changing operations related to policy change is the challenge ”**

– JAMES “JW” KELLEY





# PAVING THE PATH

## LESSONS LEARNED

The measurable impact of DWD leaves no doubt that degree reclamation supports student attainment, can address equity gaps, and is a smart investment of human, technological, and financial capacity. While external factors—from the pandemic to enrollment dips and budget declines—shifted participants’ approaches and processes, the goal of supporting more students to complete degrees remained steadfast. In many cases, new opportunities emerged that would not have been possible without these challenges.

### ATTAINMENT: DEGREE RECLAMATION IS BOTH COMPLEX AND EFFECTIVE

One of DWD’s primary objectives was to increase degree attainment quickly, which the initiative accomplished by identifying over 170,000 students as potentially eligible for a degree. Of that number, approximately 10,700 have now attained a credential and nearly 3,000 more are on track to do so.<sup>13</sup> Over the course of three years, including two in a global pandemic, it became clear that while institutions can implement the strategies of DWD in just one year, moving the needle on attainment outcomes requires more time. While efforts to support even more students across the finish line are ongoing, DWD data already show that nearly one in ten near-completers contacted by their institution reenrolled. In other words, contacting and reengaging near-completers can lead to immediate enrollment impacts.

Photo: Anoka-Ramsey Community College



*"Middlesex College's participation in the Degrees When Due initiative provided the college with an opportunity to develop a strategic and intentional approach to re-engaging adult learners. Our strategy included the creation of cross-functional student success teams, data mining, intensive outreach and follow up with our adult-learner population, and the implementation of a successful marketing campaign under the tagline: 'New Year, New You! Graduation Is in Sight!' Through our efforts, Middlesex College re-engaged 977 adult learners! To date, over 100 of these students have now completed their associate's degree at Middlesex College. Thank you, DWD network and IHEP team, for supporting our work!"*

– MICHELLE CAMPBELL, VICE PRESIDENT FOR INSTITUTIONAL ADVANCEMENT, MIDDLESEX COUNTY COLLEGE (NJ)

The outcome of degree audits showed that many near-completers are within just a few courses of completing a degree. Among the population of near-completers identified through DWD, one in four students is within six credits of completing an associate's or bachelor's degree, and 42 percent are within 15 credits. In other words, nearly half of near-completers would be able to cross the finish line after just one or two semesters of coursework.

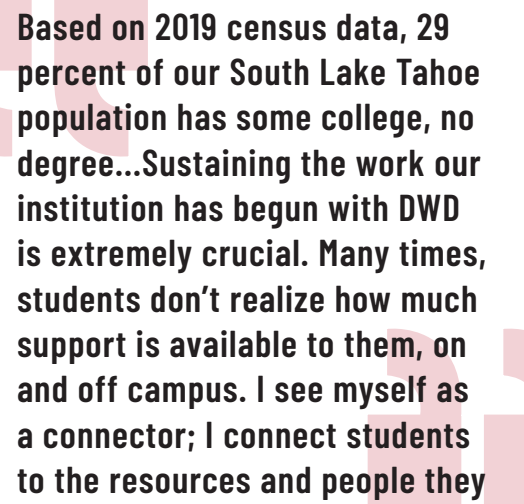
The following sections outline lessons learned about the complexities of returning to complete a degree, the challenges that prevent students from completing their degrees, and the promise of degree reclamation.

## THE COMPLEXITY OF REENGAGEMENT

While many SCND adults had an interest in returning, it became clear early on that the work of DWD would be far more complex than simply identifying students and reconnecting them to a path to degree completion or helping eligible transfer students complete their associate's degrees. In the same way that challenging circumstances may cause students to stop out (see sidebars on page 31 for more on these reasons), returning to complete a degree is also complicated, particularly when many of the same institutional and personal barriers remain in place. Aside from life circumstances, adults often cited bureaucracy and a lack of feeling of belonging as barriers to reenrollment.

To successfully reenroll students, institutions must address the challenges that lead students to stop out in the first place. Institutional reforms must meet the needs of SCND students, whether it be providing financial aid, ensuring consistency in course schedules, offering childcare, or building a campus environment that is supportive and welcoming. Institutions need to recognize that students left for one—or many—reasons, and it is up to the institution to demonstrate how it has changed in order to regain students' trust. In short, the work of degree reclamation includes reforming how an institution operates, in order to better serve all returning adult students.

This reform requires recognizing that the SCND population is not "low-hanging fruit" for increasing attainment. Rather, degree reclamation requires institutional attention across multiple areas, with plans for both short-term responses and longer-term policy and system change. Participating DWD institutions have also recognized that challenges students face are often unique to specific populations of an institution or state, so solutions must be tailored to address those challenges.



**Based on 2019 census data, 29 percent of our South Lake Tahoe population has some college, no degree...Sustaining the work our institution has begun with DWD is extremely crucial. Many times, students don't realize how much support is available to them, on and off campus. I see myself as a connector; I connect students to the resources and people they need to successfully reengage and complete their degrees.**

– ANTONIO BENITEZ, DIRECTOR, LAKE TAHOE COLLEGE  
PROMISE, LAKE TAHOE COMMUNITY COLLEGE (CA)



Photo: Bowling Green State University

*"When looking at our data, we saw that we have a wellness requirement that was the only thing that kept a large group of students from graduating. This issue has been openly discussed on campus, but we never had the real data to document it. DWD's process allowed us to show the actual number of students that the requirement was preventing from graduating. The college knew that wellness is really important, but the requirement needed to be reworked. The department has agreed that they will clarify and most likely minimize the requirement."*

— NORA MORRIS, DEAN OF RESEARCH AND EVALUATION,  
ANOKA-RAMSEY COMMUNITY COLLEGE (MN)

### FOCUS GROUP DATA: REASONS STUDENTS LEAVE, MOTIVATIONS TO RETURN, AND BARRIERS TO RETURNING

Through student focus groups at DWD research sites, IHEP learned more about why students stop out, what inspires them to return, and ways to address barriers to returning.

#### Students cited three main reasons for leaving:

1. Needing to find employment to meet their basic needs
2. Raising and supporting children and a family
3. Reprioritizing work, family, and school

#### Students had two primary motivations for returning:

1. Wanting to serve as a role model for their family, particularly since some of them had initially left college due to their children
2. Needing a degree for a job promotion or a job they desired

Students faced both administrative and social barriers to returning. Many students said they were frustrated with the complex and burdensome systems for reapplying to and paying for college. They were easily frustrated with confusing admission and financial aid processes and often could not access the information they needed in a timely manner.

Returning adult students were also concerned that they would not fit into a college environment with so many young students. These older students also expressed concerns about their ability to keep up with their academics, given how long they had been away from school.

#### Three key takeaways emerged regarding what returning students need to be successful:

1. Flexible course offerings, such as evening and online options
2. The option of earning credit based on skills they have already learned, such as through credit for prior learning (CPL)
3. Assistance from academic advisors or counselors who understand and can support their particular needs



## BARRIERS TO ATTAINMENT

As part of DWD, institutions conducted degree audits and found two categories of requirements that students who had not been awarded a degree were missing: academic, such as missing credits and courses; and non-academic, such as financial holds or incomplete paperwork.

For students with earned, unawarded credentials, the most common barriers to receiving those credentials were incomplete paperwork, lack of consent or response, and financial holds. About 62 percent of students in this group were ready to graduate, but had not completed a graduation application, an institutional hurdle that can be easily changed by implementing auto-graduation policies. Some colleges had policies that required opt-in consent and the data show that about 21 percent of students did not opt in to have a degree conferred. Approximately 14 percent of students had financial holds that prevented them from receiving a degree they had earned. Lastly, 10 percent of students had incorrect contact information, which prevented the institutions from contacting them to confer a degree.

Near-completers experienced similar non-academic barriers. Nearly 14 percent of students had financial holds on their accounts and 2 percent had registration or advising holds.

The most common academic barriers to completion that near-completers faced included major-specific courses, general education course requirements, and unique institutional requirements. Overall, 33 percent of near-completers were missing major-specific courses, but this was more common at four-year institutions (56 percent) than two-year institutions (18 percent), likely because many students at two-year institutions are pursuing general or transfer-oriented associate's degrees that do not have major requirements. Over a quarter (29 percent) of students were missing general education courses, and 14 percent of students were missing a math requirement. Academic hurdles such as remaining course requirements, math, and unique institutional requirements disproportionately affect Black and Pell-eligible students.

Eliminating challenges and helping smooth the way for the return and completion of stopped-out students requires a significant commitment and investment from institutional leaders, administrators, and staff. This work first requires data analysis, and then facing difficult realities about systems and policies that led to inequitable outcomes in the first place and then effecting change that dismantles those systems. This change requires developing the tools, technology, and expertise to facilitate the process and honing outreach, marketing, and coordination to bring students back. Supporting these students over the degree finish line requires building the pathways and levels of support to ensure that once these students return, they have a clear route to follow to completion.

## UNIQUE INSTITUTIONAL REQUIREMENTS THAT CAN PREVENT COMPLETION

Several DWD institutions have graduation requirements that are particular to their institution, which often reflect longstanding policies and practices. Substantial proportions of near-completers at these institutions were missing such requirements. For example, at one institution, 83 percent of these students were missing a community college service-learning requirement and over 50 percent were missing a university writing proficiency requirement.

*"Digging into our data, we learned that a computer literacy certificate that was a local requirement for graduation was a significant barrier to completion. An astonishing number of students got to the end of their journey and didn't realize that they had this outstanding requirement preventing their success. We then brought this information to our academic senate. We recognized that the requirement was put in place because we wanted to support students' technology skills, but some of those students didn't need it—they were taking classes online or coming out of a high school where they learned those competencies already. So, we worked as a school to remove that requirement. We now allow students to demonstrate multiple measures and opt-out of that requirement – making a huge difference for our students."*

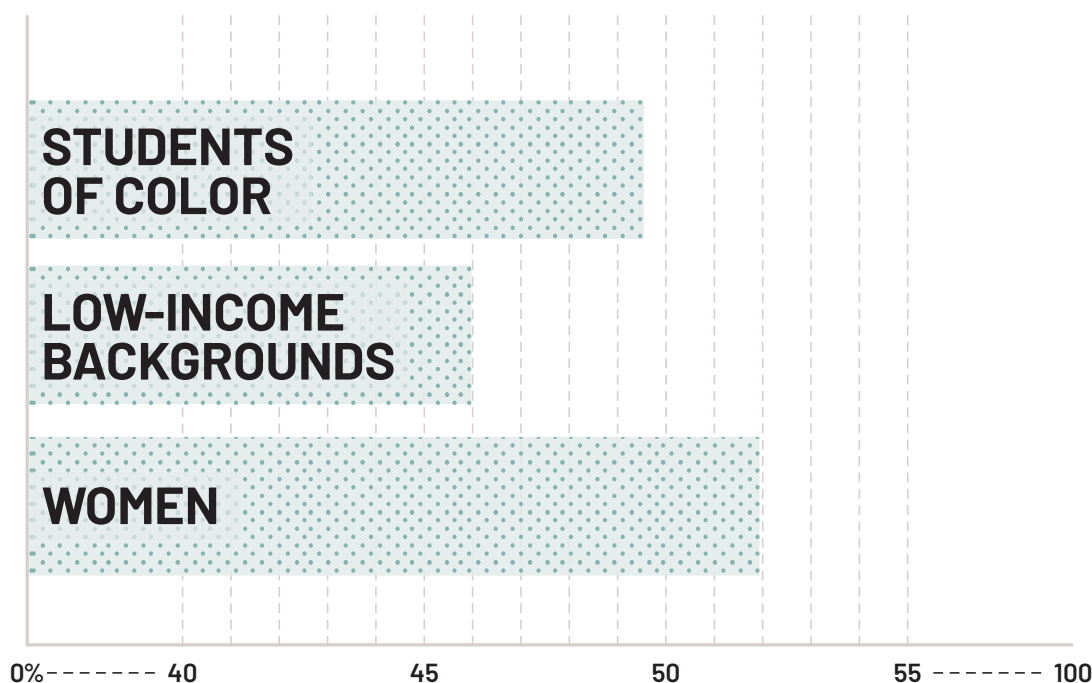
– KATE MAHAR, DEAN OF INNOVATION AND STRATEGIC INITIATIVES, SHASTA COLLEGE (CA)

# EQUITY: EQUITABLE APPROACHES AND OUTCOMES MUST BE PRIORITIZED EVERY STEP OF THE WAY

By applying an equity lens at each stage of this initiative, institutions made strides toward closing gaps in attainment along racial and socioeconomic lines for SCND adults. DWD supported important equity gains during an unprecedented period that required all institutions and systems to pivot in response to a pandemic and its resulting economic, fiscal, and enrollment impacts. These data reveal great potential for degree reclamation efforts going forward.

## INSTITUTIONS HAVE BEGUN TO ADDRESS INEQUITIES BY REENGAGING STOPPED-OUT STUDENTS

Demographic data on the SCND students identified by DWD institutions show that large proportions of this population are students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. Indeed, data from DWD years 2 and 3 made clear that DWD helped colleges confer credentials to students with a mix of races and backgrounds. **Among the students who were awarded associate's and bachelor's degrees through degree reclamation, almost half were students of color, 46 percent were students from low-income backgrounds, and 52 percent were women.**



Many DWD institutions have only begun their reengagement efforts, and a small proportion of students reenrolled and/or received a degree during the initiative. The demographics of the large SCND population of former students suggest that DWD institutions could reach many more students from historically excluded populations if they sustain and expand their reengagement strategies. The fact that 90 percent of DWD institutions intend to continue degree reclamation efforts bodes well for the commitment needed to address inequities in degree attainment.

## **AWARDING EARNED CREDENTIALS MAY HELP CLOSE EQUITY GAPS IN COMPLETION**

Through robust degree auditing practices, DWD institutions learned that about 10 percent of students had an earned, unawarded degree (i.e., these students already met the requirements for a credential that was never awarded). Examining the disaggregated data for this group revealed that Latinx and/or Hispanic, American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiians, and other Pacific Islander students were more likely to be in this 10 percent, suggesting that auditing transcripts and awarding degrees to students who earned them can help increase attainment for these student groups that have historically lower college attainment rates.

## **EXAMINING DISAGGREGATED DATA CAN REVEAL BARRIERS THAT DISPROPORTIONATELY AFFECT SPECIFIC POPULATIONS**

DWD's equity focus highlighted policy and practice barriers that might have gone overlooked without this emphasis. DWD's work made clear that specific population groups were more likely to face certain academic barriers than other population groups. For instance, remaining course requirements, math requirements, and unique institutional graduation requirements appear to disproportionately impact Black near-completers and those from low-income backgrounds.

Non-academic barriers to completion also appear to disproportionately affect particular student groups. Latinx and/or Hispanic near-completer students were more likely to experience financial holds, registration or advising holds, and have accumulated excess credit hours, which is not an efficient use of time and money. Similarly, a larger proportion of Black near-completer students have a financial hold on their accounts. Students from low-income backgrounds were overrepresented in nearly every category of non-academic barrier, including financial holds, registration and advising holds, academic standing (such as academic probation or suspension), accumulation of excess credit hours, credit recency issues, and maintenance of satisfactory academic progress.

Investing the time to examine disaggregated data and interrogate why certain student groups on campus may be overrepresented as near-completers or with earned, unawarded credentials can support policy and practice change to better serve those groups, and can start to close equity gaps in completion. However, in order to make progress toward equitable outcomes, practitioners must both understand which student populations are impacted and remain steadfast in the commitment to implement lasting policy change.



# INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY: THE LASTING IMPACT OF DEGREE RECLAMATION

Systemic institutional change is the longest-lasting impact of DWD because it not only supports stopped-out students, but also paves the way toward degree completion for future students. Building institutional capacity to implement and expand degree reclamation was an important part of DWD and essential for institutional and systemwide success. Achieving this goal meant investing in core areas to make degree reclamation possible, and institutionalizing the work will ensure it can continue beyond the term of DWD.

Over the course of the initiative, institutional capacity grew across six areas: leadership; technology and automation; policy and practice; human capital; advising and student support; and financial support for returning students. The institutions with the greatest ability to effect change through DWD were those that had strong leadership, technological capacity, and permission to be innovative with strategies to reengage and reenroll students.

## LEADERSHIP

Institutional leadership that prioritized DWD efforts was essential to implementation. Institutions and systems who led DWD efforts from the top and who shared their vision in a way that garnered a high level of buy-in across the institution or system were more effective in the initiative. Leaders who formalized the work of DWD by adding it into goals and strategic plans signaled its importance to the rest of the community and their commitment to prioritize it in a sustained way. Shasta College in northern California, for example, added degree reclamation into its 2018–2021 strategic plan: “Implement best practices to proactively confer degrees and certificates to students for the work that has been completed including degree audits, ‘degree reclamation’ and ‘opt-out’ degree conferral.”<sup>14</sup> Effective leaders also strove to connect DWD to other state, regional, and institutional initiatives.

Leadership at the operational level was also critical to implementation. Team leads, or dedicated DWD staff who served as champions of the initiative, filled an important role in fostering high engagement and commitment across the DWD team and other stakeholders. Such champions can lead teams in a way that produces stronger outcomes, learning, and changes in how the institution or system serves adult students.

**Support from campus leadership was vital to UHD’s degree reclamation work. The campus leaders are many, but we recognize in particular Dr. Michelle Moosally, Associate Vice President of Planning and Curriculum, and Dr. Scott Marzilli, Dean of University College. Dr. Marzilli...invited the exploration of our initiatives to develop internal processes and partnerships to serve the [SCND] student population. Dr. Moosally...secured UHD’s financial commitment...making upwards of \$900K available to former students.**

– MELISSA HOVSEPIAN, PROGRAM DIRECTOR, INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON-DOWNTOWN



## TECHNOLOGY AND AUTOMATION

Technology played a major role in DWD implementation. Institutions that had software with degree auditing capability were better positioned than those that did not. However, such software was often prohibitively expensive, particularly for smaller institutions. Slightly fewer than half (45 percent) of DWD institutions reported their degree auditing processes were completely or mostly automated, and this percentage was substantially higher at four-year institutions (57 percent) than two-year institutions (34 percent). Fourteen percent of two-year institutions reported using a completely manual process to track student progress and audit for degrees.

While degree auditing could be completed in a manual fashion, doing so added complexity and expense to the process, as it necessitated either an investment in human capital to complete the work, or limits on the number of degree audits performed, thereby leaving many students on the sidelines. Institutions and systems who increased their technological capacity did so by better aligning software or platforms that did not work well together, finding ways to automate manual processes, or obtain new software or platforms to expedite the work and improve overall quality and efficiency.

Photo: Bowling Green State University



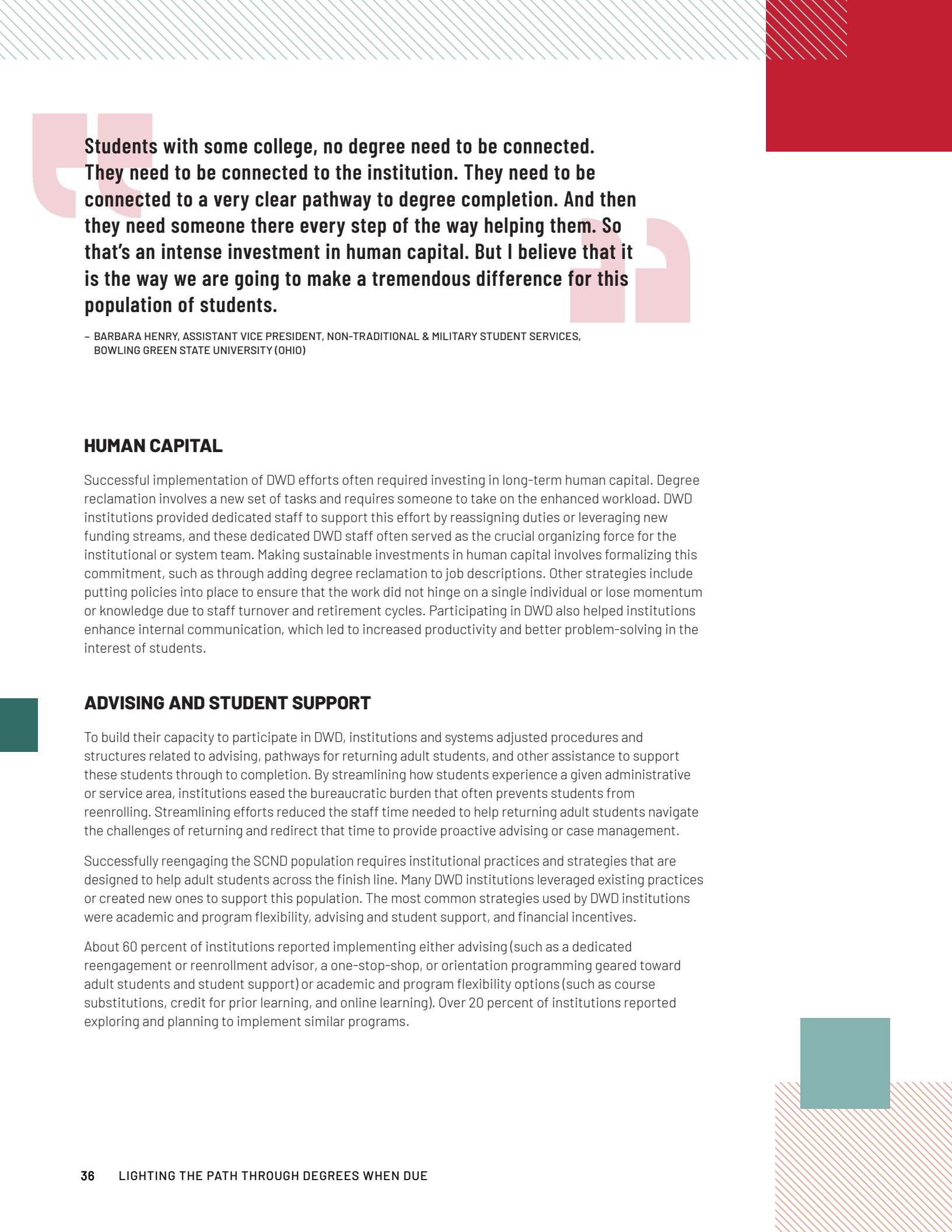
*“There is no shortage of asks, and the complexities which go with them, of faculty, registrars, institutional researchers, and admissions and enrollment staff. Automating degree auditing and other processes has reduced manual burdens on staff and faculty and expanded our capacity to not only meet college needs; it has also allowed us the mental ‘breathing space’ to innovate.”*

– STEVE POPPLE, DIRECTOR OF INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS, GATEWAY COMMUNITY AND TECHNICAL COLLEGE (KY)

## INSTITUTIONALIZING POLICY AND PRACTICE

By the end of the DWD initiative, most institutions reported implementing or planning to implement key policies and practices for sustaining or expanding degree reclamation efforts. Half of the participating institutions are implementing equity-focused goals and 40 percent integrated degree reclamation into staff job responsibilities. An additional 35 percent of institutions report exploring and planning to implement equity-focused goals, and 27 percent report exploring and planning to integrate degree reclamation into staff job responsibilities and job descriptions. As discussed in interviews with key staff members at DWD research site institutions, institutionalizing policy and practice change takes time, especially while navigating the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. But these institutions are on the right track for lasting institutional changes that will fundamentally change support for their students.

This process also included identifying policies and practices that hindered students’ ability to complete. For example, some institutions discovered through the DWD initiative that certain requirements for graduation posed unnecessary hurdles, such as a computer literacy course, or policies related to required paperwork, such as applications to graduate. The institutions that examined their data to understand which students were impacted and used that data as evidence for policy change saw high returns in the numbers of students eligible to graduate. Furthermore, they were better positioned to demonstrate to their stopped-out students that the institution had made substantive changes that made returning worthwhile.



**Students with some college, no degree need to be connected. They need to be connected to the institution. They need to be connected to a very clear pathway to degree completion. And then they need someone there every step of the way helping them. So that's an intense investment in human capital. But I believe that it is the way we are going to make a tremendous difference for this population of students.**

– BARBARA HENRY, ASSISTANT VICE PRESIDENT, NON-TRADITIONAL & MILITARY STUDENT SERVICES,  
BOWLING GREEN STATE UNIVERSITY (OHIO)

## **HUMAN CAPITAL**

Successful implementation of DWD efforts often required investing in long-term human capital. Degree reclamation involves a new set of tasks and requires someone to take on the enhanced workload. DWD institutions provided dedicated staff to support this effort by reassigning duties or leveraging new funding streams, and these dedicated DWD staff often served as the crucial organizing force for the institutional or system team. Making sustainable investments in human capital involves formalizing this commitment, such as through adding degree reclamation to job descriptions. Other strategies include putting policies into place to ensure that the work did not hinge on a single individual or lose momentum or knowledge due to staff turnover and retirement cycles. Participating in DWD also helped institutions enhance internal communication, which led to increased productivity and better problem-solving in the interest of students.

## **ADVISING AND STUDENT SUPPORT**

To build their capacity to participate in DWD, institutions and systems adjusted procedures and structures related to advising, pathways for returning adult students, and other assistance to support these students through to completion. By streamlining how students experience a given administrative or service area, institutions eased the bureaucratic burden that often prevents students from reenrolling. Streamlining efforts reduced the staff time needed to help returning adult students navigate the challenges of returning and redirect that time to provide proactive advising or case management.

Successfully reengaging the SCND population requires institutional practices and strategies that are designed to help adult students across the finish line. Many DWD institutions leveraged existing practices or created new ones to support this population. The most common strategies used by DWD institutions were academic and program flexibility, advising and student support, and financial incentives.

About 60 percent of institutions reported implementing either advising (such as a dedicated reengagement or reenrollment advisor, a one-stop-shop, or orientation programming geared toward adult students and student support) or academic and program flexibility options (such as course substitutions, credit for prior learning, and online learning). Over 20 percent of institutions reported exploring and planning to implement similar programs.

## FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR RETURNING STUDENTS

Financial barriers posed a major challenge as institutions attempted to reengage students. About 14 percent of students had financial holds on their accounts. These were often due to small amounts of debt that may have compounded over time, such as library or parking fines. In response, 47 percent of institutions offered financial incentives, such as reduced tuition, free classes, institutional debt forgiveness, or forgiveness of specific fees and fines. An additional 21 percent of institutions are exploring or planning to implement financing incentives.

# SUSTAINABILITY: SERVING TODAY'S STUDENTS AND FUTURE GENERATIONS

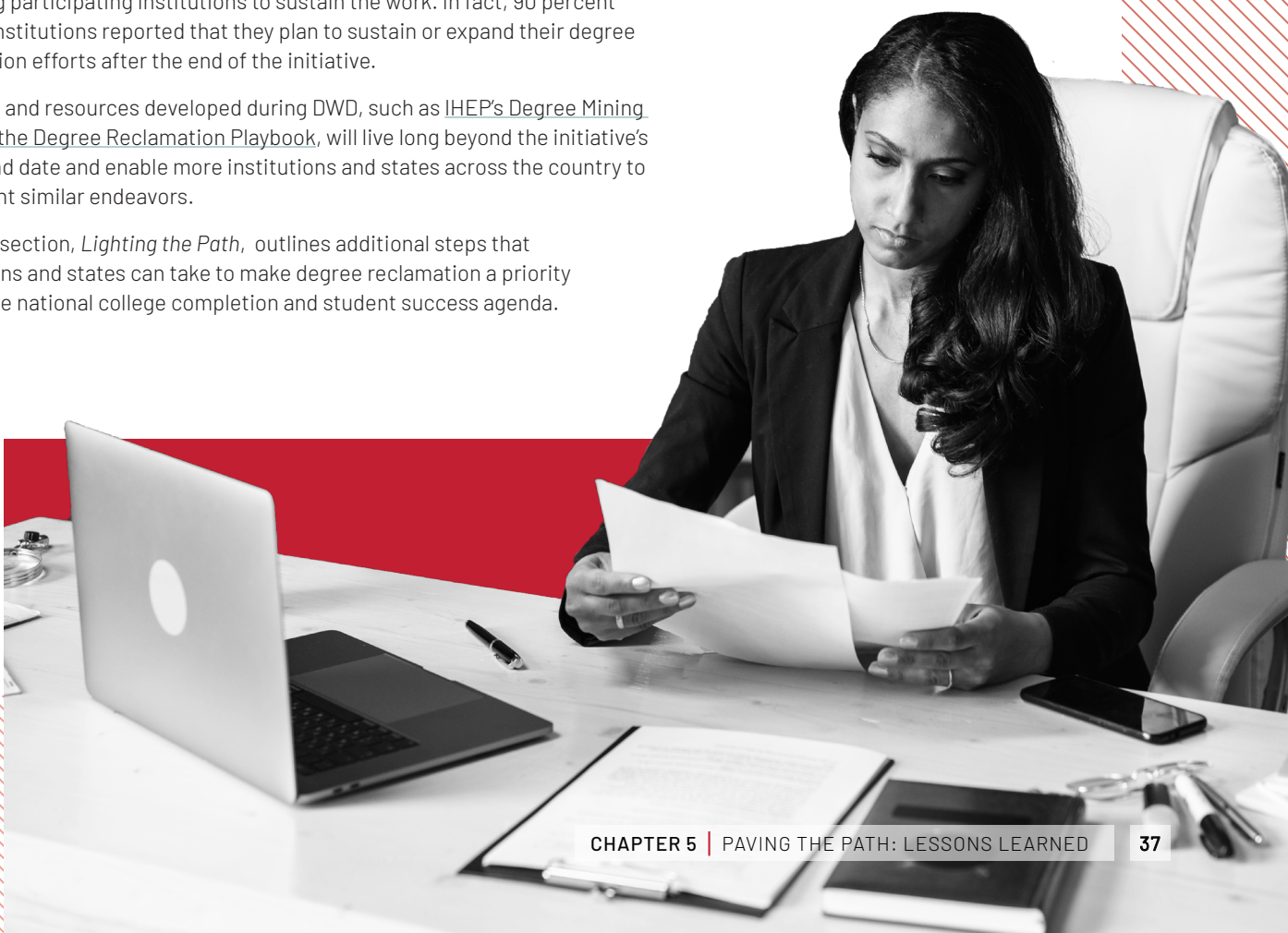
IHEP built sustainability into DWD from the start of the initiative. By working with teams at almost 200 institutions across 23 states and systems, DWD sought to infuse an understanding of, commitment to, and experience with degree reclamation across the postsecondary sector. Each of these institutions, systems, and states are well-positioned to continue this work, to formalize it into standard practice and official policy, and to expand their efforts. DWD's focus on building institutional capacity, providing reliable research and resources, and focusing on policy change were all aimed at preparing participating institutions to sustain the work. In fact, 90 percent of DWD institutions reported that they plan to sustain or expand their degree reclamation efforts after the end of the initiative.

The tools and resources developed during DWD, such as IHEP's [Degree Mining Tool](#) and [the Degree Reclamation Playbook](#), will live long beyond the initiative's formal end date and enable more institutions and states across the country to implement similar endeavors.

The next section, *Lighting the Path*, outlines additional steps that institutions and states can take to make degree reclamation a priority across the national college completion and student success agenda.

## THE REENGAGEMENT INVESTMENT CALCULATOR

IHEP developed a [free online calculator](#) to equip institutions with the cost/revenue information needed to make the case for using institutional debt forgiveness as a strategy to reenroll adult learners who stopped out. While the tool relies on best-case-scenario assumptions regarding reenrollment and sustained progress, the calculations can set a baseline to inform conversations about initiating a debt-forgiveness program.





# ADULT REENGAGEMENT SPOTLIGHT: LOUISIANA—DRIPS, DATA, AND DEGREES

**Katie Dawson**, Assistant Vice President for Academic Innovation and Learning, University of Louisiana System

**Jeannine Kahn**, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs, University of Louisiana System

**Claire Norris**, Vice President for Advancement, University of Louisiana System

## WHY DID THE UNIVERSITY OF LOUISIANA SYSTEM DECIDE TO PARTICIPATE IN DEGREES WHEN DUE?

We recognized a relationship between the work of DWD and the goals of Complete LA—the University of Louisiana System's program designed to reengage Louisianans with some college experience but no bachelor's degree. Throughout the design and implementation of Compete LA, we looked for opportunities to learn from other states and organizations that were also reengaging adults with previous college experience but no degree. We knew that as we reengaged stopped-out students from our nine member institutions, some of them would likely have earned enough credit to meet graduation requirements. So, we wanted to learn as much as we could about degree reclamation, and we knew that institutions and systems participating in DWD were navigating this same process.

## WHAT DID YOU LEARN ABOUT YOUR STOPPED-OUT STUDENTS AND HOW TO REENGAGE THEM THROUGH DWD?

Initially, we believed we would mostly attract students who had earned a significant number of credits and had relatively high GPAs. We thought Compete LA would be most attractive to students who could complete their degrees in as little as a semester or two. However, we learned that those students are actually not as quick to reengage. Just as they were successful in making progress toward their degrees, they seem to be equally as successful in their professional lives. We noticed that students who were most enthusiastic about the program were those who had struggled during their first college experience. Academic struggles weren't necessarily related to learning challenges, but more so to other parts of life taking priority and students' academics taking a back-seat.

We also learned that "drip communication" and understanding go a long way when it comes to cultivating student reengagement. If a student stopped-out once, they are more likely to stop out again. Knowing that, we built campaigns to specifically nurture communication with potential returning students who signed-up for Complete LA but quickly disengaged. Through those "drip messages" we found students will reengage when they are ready, even if that's more than a year after they enter the program. Our team communicates that we understand pursuing a degree is a big decision and significant commitment and that "when you're ready, we're ready to help."

### DRIP CAMPAIGNS

"Drip campaigns" send several prewritten automated messages to students over a significant period of time, or in "drips."

*"Knowing that the decision to make degree completion a priority can be a challenge for adult learners, it is of utmost importance that we provide support and encouragement from the point of reengagement to diploma in hand."*

– JEANNINE KAHN

**SINCE ITS INCEPTION IN 2019, THE  
COMPLETE LA PROGRAM HAS REENROLLED  
OVER 650 STOPPED-OUT STUDENTS AND  
124 STUDENTS  
HAVE GRADUATED.**

Photo: Shasta College



### **WHICH DEGREES WHEN DUE RESOURCES OR SUPPORTS DID YOUR TEAM FIND MOST VALUABLE?**

The most valuable resource has been the ability to meet and network with others who are doing similar work. Degree reclamation comes with many questions about process and policy and having a sounding board as we've mulled over change has been the best part of our partnership. We value the opportunity to network with colleagues from across the country that are just as passionate about this work. We also greatly appreciated the opportunities to share our work and gain feedback from others.

*"Sharing our challenges and successes with like-minded colleagues and partners creates a better product/process/policy for our students; learning and evolving together to improve educational attainment is the heart of higher education." — Katie Dawson*

### **BASED ON WHAT YOU LEARNED, WHAT STEPS ARE YOUR TEAM PLANNING MOVING FORWARD?**

After three years of building a sustainable program, our next step is to bring Compete LA to scale. With over 653,000 individuals in Louisiana with some college and no degree, we have an opportunity to move the educational attainment needle in our state. We are pursuing partnerships with businesses that are looking for avenues to help employees with educational attainment and researching the types of resources potential students will need to successfully matriculate. We are also exploring the role the digital divide plays in our quest to recruit students. Once we have a better understanding of what technology our students can access, we will be better able to pursue resources to help them meet their educational goals.

*"To really be able to provide equitable and inclusive policies and systems for returning adults, robust data structures that highlight equity gaps must be at the center of all adult learner initiatives." — Claire Norris*

## LOUISIANA—DRIPS, DATA, AND DEGREES (CONT'D)

### WHAT LESSONS LEARNED WOULD YOUR TEAM SHARE WITH OTHER SYSTEMS THAT PLAN TO REENGAGE THEIR STOPPED-OUT STUDENTS?

**Collaboration is vital.** Our success is a shared success with all nine institutions within our system. The Compete LA leadership team is composed of staff from within the UL System office, but we also have a campus leadership team with representation from each institution helping to steer the direction of the program. Each Campus lead has their own campus implementation team that act as “boots on the ground” to help Compete LA students once they are referred to their institution of choice. Each student who comes through the Complete LA program is assigned to a Compete LA coach. Our coaches have regular interactions with the campus teams to help determine the best path forward for each student. Without the constant communication and problem-solving that happens through these simultaneous collaborations, Compete LA wouldn't work.

**A robust data system is necessary.** It is paramount to invest in a Customer Relationship Manager System (CRM) to manage student records and caseloads. Data integration between the campus and the system-wide CRM is incredibly important. Real-time data is necessary to optimize automated communications and support and will give the most accurate picture of where a student is in the readmission/reenrollment process.

**Ask questions and make changes** when processes or policies present barriers to adult learners. Institutions of higher education were largely designed to accommodate the 18–24-year-old student. Often, institutional policies and procedures ignore adult learners with competing life priorities. So, we must initiate transformation in the form of a robust review of admission policies, scholarship offerings, academic program deliveries, student support resources, and pathways to degree.

**Sustaining degree reclamation work is important to create additional opportunities and make an impact for our some college, no credential students. Increasing our college completion goals drives growth and a greater economy in the state of Texas. Our stopped-out students deserve to finish with a degree or credential of value for upward mobility in the workforce.**

– WAYLON METOYER, PROGRAM SPECIALIST, COLLEGE COMPLETION, TEXAS HIGHER EDUCATION COORDINATING BOARD AND DWD TEXAS STATE LIAISON



Photo: Shasta College



# LIGHTING THE PATH

## EXPANDING DEGREE RECLAMATION

The work of degree reclamation is only beginning. The lessons learned from DWD underscore both the value of institutions, states, and systems engaging in degree reclamation and the need for more to commit to supporting stopped-out adult students, particularly those from populations that historically have been excluded from higher education.

The work of degree reclamation is simply the right thing to do.

SCND students deserve recognition of their educational investments and achievements. Earned credentials should be awarded, including those earned after transfer to a different institution, and former students who were close to completing should have a clear and supported path across the degree finish line.

The work of degree reclamation requires a firm commitment to sustain the efforts over time and to increase institutional capacity, including staff and leadership time. Degree reclamation may require investments in technology and systems to create efficiencies. The work also may necessitate updating policies and practices based on insights gleaned from data.

Photo: Shasta College





The work begins with a desire to serve students and ends with credentials that benefit the students who earned them, as well as their families and entire communities.

**THE WORK IS CRITICAL.**

**THE WORK IS TRANSFORMATIONAL.**

**THE WORK IS WORTH THE EFFORT.**



## CONTINUING THE MOMENTUM

In the same way that almost 200 institutions across 23 states worked together over the course of DWD, other institutions, systems, and states can apply these efforts and collaborate in support of today's students. Like the 90 percent of DWD institutions that have indicated an intent to continue degree reclamation efforts, institutions and states with interest in newly engaging or reigniting degree reclamation efforts can take the following steps:

### 1. Commit to furthering equity and attainment.

Set goals with the end in mind and be clear about the “why” and “what” of your efforts. Consider the goals of DWD (see page 8) and use or adapt them as needed for the institution or state.

### 2. Follow the *Degree Reclamation Playbook*.

The “how” is straightforward. Follow the steps of the playbook to start as an individual, institution, or system—or ideally, in partnership with your state.

### 3. Use IHEP's Degree Mining Tool.

The free tool simplifies and streamlines degree reclamation.

### 4. Seek out partners.

Work with others to accelerate initial efforts. Identify those best positioned to help, whether it be other institutions, intermediaries, or organizations.

### 5. Build for sustainability.

Keep an eye on potential changes in systems and policies throughout degree reclamation efforts that could ensure the work is long-lasting and far-reaching.

# INSTITUTIONS: LIGHT THE PATH

DWD made clear that the following institutional policy and practice changes expedite degree reclamation efforts:

## 1. Invest in data

Examine high-quality, disaggregated data to help identify barriers to student success and opportunities for change.

## 2. Review graduation requirements

Identify and remove outdated or unnecessary institutional requirements that prevent students from completing their degrees.

## 3. Switch to an opt-out policy

Anecdotal evidence suggests that an opt-out policy for awarding degrees will result in larger award rates among students who have earned unawarded credentials.<sup>15</sup>

## 4. Eliminate unnecessary paperwork

DWD data show that additional paperwork, such as a graduation application, sometimes stands between students and the credentials they have earned.

## 5. Address financial holds

Financial holds prevent students from accessing their academic records and reenrolling in postsecondary education. Among students on DWD campuses with earned but unawarded credentials and near-completers, about 14 percent had financial holds on their accounts. These holds disproportionately impacted Black and Latinx and/or Hispanic students and students from low-income backgrounds.

## 6. Implement routine degree audits

A consistent process of evaluating student transcripts can help ensure that current students stay on track to complete degrees and are awarded credentials they have earned.

## 7. Build in clear communication

Ensure students know how close they are to completing and advise students how to efficiently fulfill required coursework.

## 8. Be student-centered

Help returning adults complete their credentials with: flexible course offerings, including at night or on weekends; consistent scheduling options so students can plan school around work, child care, and other responsibilities; and credit for prior learning (CPL). Further, students need a sense of belonging, which institutions should develop by providing advisors who understand the particular needs and concerns of returning adult students.

# STATES: LEAD THE WAY

States are well positioned to support institutions as they increase attainment through degree reclamation. States should take the following steps:

## 1. Facilitate implementation

Coordinate and facilitate efforts across institutions, including by building degree reclamation priorities into state attainment goals and strategic plans. Provide forums for institutions to learn from each other, share what works, discuss common challenges, and brainstorm new ways forward. Bring in intermediaries and other technical assistance providers to help institutions implement and accelerate efforts. Connect degree reclamation efforts to other state priorities, and collect data and report on progress and outcomes.

## 2. Increase awareness

Help communicate opportunities for near-completers to return and finish their degrees through, for example, broad communication campaigns. Infuse degree reclamation messages into efforts that already target adult learners.

## 3. Fund degree reclamation

Support institutions as they change their systems to better serve adult students. Invest in increasing capacity—human, financial, and technological—for institutions to do this work. Incentivize and support adult students in returning to complete their degrees through scholarship and grant programs.

## 4. Inform pathway development

Create opportunities for near-completers to return and complete as part of prioritized pathways as local, regional, and state economies change. Ensure that near-completers can access talent development programs led by industry or postsecondary institutions as new pathways are developed for high-demand jobs and sectors.

## 5. Change policy

Draw from institutions' experience and respond through policy and other legislative levers to support degree reclamation. Key state policies to consider include transfer policies to promote smooth reverse transfer coordination, institutional debt forgiveness to address financial barriers, and prior learning assessments to account for returning students' experiences, as appropriate. Help address food or housing insecurity, lack of transportation, and the need for child care. Several DWD states are leveraging emerging scholarship programs that focus on returning adult students, for example.

Photo: Shasta College



# FEDERAL GOVERNMENT: PROMOTE AND EMPOWER

The federal government can make college completion a national priority by supporting institution-, system-, and state-level efforts to reengage students and promote degree completion.

## 1. Remove barriers.

Eliminate regulatory hurdles that limit institutions' ability to identify, contact, and award earned degrees to students. Proposals like the [Reverse Transfer Efficiency Act](#) and the [Correctly Recognizing Educational Achievements To Empower \(CREATE\) Graduates Act](#), for example, include provisions to facilitate more seamless sharing of credit information and educational records between institutions for the purpose of awarding recognized postsecondary degrees and credentials through reverse transfer, while still requiring students' consent before degrees and credentials are conferred.

## 2. Promote degree auditing.

Provide funding to states, systems, and institutions to routinize degree audits and promote efforts to analyze student data to identify near-completers and students who are eligible for earned degrees through reverse transfer. Federal support can go a long way to ensuring that all institutions, especially those serving students of color and students from low-income backgrounds, have the capacity—human, financial, and technological—to implement degree reclamation strategies. These investments were proposed in the CREATE Graduates Act.

## 3. Invest in college completion.

Make college completion a key funding priority. Authorize new grants to states, systems, and institutions to support evidence-based, equity-driven solutions to promote degree completion; reengage students who have stopped out from higher education; and eliminate academic and non-academic barriers to student success. Proposals like the [College Completion Fund Act](#) offer broad support for the development of new completion initiatives, including investments in data systems and analysis of student data; enhanced academic support services; expanded student support services, such as emergency financial assistance; and stronger transfer pathways.







# CONCLUSION & APPENDICES

## THE DEGREES WHEN DUE INITIATIVE

Gone are the days when a majority of students entered and completed a degree program at one institution in one single experience. Today, students need multiple on-ramps into higher education programs, which must account for changes in life circumstances by including options to easily return and complete a degree. To fulfill the mission of higher education, institutions, systems, and states must better serve returning adult students and eliminate barriers to completion.

Meeting the needs of today's students will also meet the needs of today's workforce. Helping more people earn the credentials they need to be eligible for jobs in today's economy means seeking out those who started but have not yet been awarded a degree. These are prime candidates to help fill such roles and strengthen the economy.

Many of the barriers that caused near-completers to stop out were due to inefficient or ineffective institutional systems and supports. These barriers disproportionately impact Black, Latinx and/or Hispanic, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds. Whether through action or inaction, failure to support today's students limits their social and economic mobility and disadvantages us all.



As the DWD initiative has made clear, degree reclamation puts more people back on the path to a better living and a better life that higher education can provide. A sustained commitment to student-focused, evidence-based, and equity-centered degree reclamation strategies is critical to realizing the full potential of higher education for individuals, families, communities, and society.

**WE CALL ON EVERY INSTITUTION,  
SYSTEM, AND STATE, AS WELL AS  
POLICYMAKERS AT THE FEDERAL  
LEVEL THE HELP ENSURE THAT  
ALL STUDENTS ACHIEVE THEIR  
HIGHER EDUCATION GOALS.**

**VISIT OUR WEBSITE:  
[IHEP.ORG/DEGREES-WHEN-DUE](https://ihip.org/degrees-when-due)  
TO TAKE ACTION**



# APPENDIX

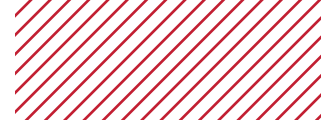
## DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Three data collection methods were used to track the progress and outcomes of the DWD initiative. Each is described below.

**Implementation Metrics:** The DWD initiative used a common reporting framework for adult reengagement and reverse transfer. The reporting framework was developed to align with degree reclamation implementation steps, from identifying the SCND population to reengaging former students. Institutions were instructed to identify the SCND population as (1) students with 45 or more credits (for two-year institutions) or 90 or more credits (for four-year institutions); and (2) students who have not earned a degree. The reporting framework prompted institutions to report on the outcomes of these SCND students, including (1) the number that had the correct type of credits to receive a degree but never received one; (2) the number that received a degree after reengagement; (3) the number of near-completers that reenrolled after reengagement; and (4) the type of academic and non-academic barriers that near-completers experienced. The reporting framework included demographic data for race/ethnicity, age, sex, GPA, and Pell grant status.

**Institutional Surveys:** DWD institutions completed a policy and practice survey at the end of their participation. The surveys documented (1) participation and experience in DWD; (2) policies and practices used to implement degree reclamation strategies; (3) capacity and capacity changes during DWD; and (4) policy priorities related to degree reclamation.

**Interviews at Case Study Sites:** Three institutions were selected to conduct in-depth case studies : [Shasta College](#); [Anoka-Ramsey Community College](#); and [Bowling Green State University](#). At each site, researchers conducted multiple rounds of interviews with DWD team leaders during the institution's participation in the initiative. Researchers also conducted one in-person or virtual site visit at each case study where they interviewed several members of the DWD teams, institutional leadership, and relevant campus stakeholders. At a few research sites, researchers also conducted interviews with adult students.



## STATE LIAISONS

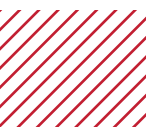
State	DWD State Liaison Organization
Alabama	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Alabama Possible</li> </ul>
Arkansas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Arkansas Department of Higher Education (ADHE)</li> </ul>
California	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>California State University, Sacramento</li> <li>Fresno City College</li> </ul>
Connecticut	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Connecticut State Colleges and Universities</li> <li>Charter Oak State College</li> </ul>
Florida	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>University of West Florida (Complete Florida Program)</li> </ul>
Iowa	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Board of Regents, State of Iowa</li> </ul>
Kentucky	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Council on Postsecondary Education</li> <li>Kentucky Community and Technical College System</li> </ul>
Louisiana	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Louisiana Board of Regents</li> <li>One Acadiana</li> <li>University of Louisiana System</li> <li>Louisiana's Community and Technical College System</li> </ul>

State	DWD State Liaison Organization
Michigan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Michigan Center for Student Success</li> </ul>
Minnesota	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Minnesota State Colleges and Universities</li> </ul>
Missouri	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Missouri Department of Higher Education</li> </ul>
New Hampshire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Community College System of New Hampshire</li> </ul>
New Jersey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Office of the Secretary of Higher Education</li> <li>New Jersey Council of County Colleges</li> </ul>
New York	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The City University of New York, Office of Academic Affairs</li> </ul>
Ohio	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>College Now Greater Cleveland</li> </ul>
Oklahoma	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education</li> </ul>
Pennsylvania	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Graduate! Philadelphia</li> </ul>
Texas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Communities Foundation of Texas (CFT)</li> <li>Citizens for Educational Excellence (CEE)</li> <li>Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board</li> </ul>

## PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS

State	Institution
AL	Bishop State Community College
AL	Coastal Alabama Community College
AL	Gadsden State Community College
AL	Jacksonville State University
AL	University of North Alabama
AR	Arkansas State University – Mid South
AR	Arkansas State University – Mountain Home
AR	East Arkansas Community College
AR	North Arkansas College
AR	Southeast Arkansas College
AR	Southern Arkansas University Tech
AR	University of Arkansas Community College Batesville
AR	University of Arkansas Community College Rich Mountain
AR	University of Arkansas Cossatot

State	Institution
AR	University of Arkansas Little Rock
AR	University of Arkansas Pine Bluff
AR	University of Central Arkansas
CA	Cabrillo College
CA	California State University, Chico
CA	California State University, Fullerton
CA	California State University, Long Beach
CA	California State University, Monterey Bay
CA	California State University, Northridge
CA	California State University, Sacramento
CA	California State University, San Bernardino
CA	College of the Siskiyous
CA	Fresno City College
CA	Golden West College
CA	Hartnell College
CA	Lake Tahoe Community College





State	Institution
CA	Los Rios Community College District - American River College
CA	Los Rios Community College District - Cosumnes River College
CA	Los Rios Community College District - Folsom Lake College
CA	Los Rios Community College District - Sacramento City College
CA	Monterey Peninsula College
CA	Napa Valley College
CA	Palomar Community College District
CA	Reedley College
CA	San Francisco State University
CA	Shasta College
CA	Sierra College
CA	Sonoma State University
CA	University of California Santa Cruz
CA	Yuba Community College District - Woodland Community College
CA	Yuba Community College District - Yuba College
CO	Adams State University
CT	Capital Community College
CT	Charter Oak State College
CT	Manchester Community College
CT	Middlesex Community College
CT	Northwestern Connecticut Community College
CT	Southern Connecticut State University
CT	Three Rivers Community College
IA	Iowa State University
IA	University of Iowa
IA	University of Northern Iowa
KY	Big Sandy Community & Technical College
KY	Bluegrass Community and Technical College
KY	Eastern Kentucky University
KY	Gateway Community and Technical College
KY	Hazard Community and Technical College
KY	Hopkinsville Community College
KY	Kentucky State University
KY	Madisonville Community College

State	Institution
KY	Maysville Community and Technical College
KY	Morehead State University
KY	Northern Kentucky University
KY	Southcentral Kentucky Community and Technical College
KY	University of Kentucky
KY	University of Louisville
KY	Western Kentucky University
LA	Baton Rouge Community College
LA	Fletcher Technical Community College
LA	Grambling State University
LA	Louisiana Delta Community College
LA	Louisiana State University - Eunice
LA	Louisiana Tech University
LA	McNeese State University
LA	Nicholls State University
LA	Northwest Louisiana Technical College
LA	Northwestern State University
LA	South Louisiana Community College
LA	Southeastern Louisiana University
LA	Southern University A&M College
LA	Southern University at New Orleans
LA	University of Louisiana at Lafayette
LA	University of Louisiana at Monroe
LA	University of New Orleans
MI	Alpena Community College
MI	Bay de Noc Community College
MI	Delta College
MI	Glen Oaks Community College
MI	Grand Rapids Community College
MI	Henry Ford College
MI	Kalamazoo Valley Community College
MI	Kellogg Community College
MI	Macomb Community College
MI	Mid Michigan College
MI	Northwestern Michigan College
MI	Oakland Community College
MI	Schoolcraft College

State	Institution
MI	St. Clair Community College
MI	West Shore Community College
MN	Anoka-Ramsey Community College
MN	Central Lakes Community College
MN	Century College
MN	Inver Hills Community College
MN	Lake Superior College
MN	Minneapolis Community and Technical College
MN	Minnesota State - Southeast Technical
MN	Minnesota State Community and Technical College
MN	Minnesota State University Moorhead
MN	Northland Community & Technical College
MN	Ridgewater College
MN	Riverland College
MN	Saint Paul College
MN	South Central College
MN	St. Cloud Community & Technical College
MO	Avila University
MO	Central Methodist University
MO	Crowder College
MO	East Central College
MO	Harris-Stowe State University
MO	Jefferson College
MO	Lincoln University
MO	Missouri Southern State University
MO	Moberly Area Community College
MO	Northwest Missouri State University
MO	Southeast Missouri State University
MO	State Fair Community College
MO	University of Central Missouri
MO	University of Missouri-Kansas City
MO	University of Missouri-St. Louis
ND	North Dakota State University
NH	Great Bay Community College
NH	Lakes Region Community College
NH	Manchester Community College
NH	Nashua Community College

State	Institution
NH	NHTI - Concord's Community College
NH	River Valley Community College
NH	White Mountains Community College
NJ	Atlantic Cape Community College
NJ	Bergen Community College
NJ	Camden County College
NJ	County College of Morris
NJ	Essex County College
NJ	Georgian Court University
NJ	Hudson County Community College
NJ	Mercer County Community College
NJ	Middlesex County College
NJ	Ocean County Community College
NJ	Passaic County Community College
NJ	Raritan Valley Community College
NJ	Rowan College at Burlington County
NJ	Salem Community College
NJ	Union County College
NY	CUNY College of Professional Studies
NY	Kingsborough Community College
NY	Medgar Evers College
NY	New York City College of Technology
NY	Queensborough Community College
NY	Rochester Institute of Technology
OH	Bowling Green State University
OH	Cleveland State University
OH	Lorain County Community College
OH	Sinclair Community College
OH	Stark State Technical College
OH	University of Akron
OH	University of Cincinnati, Blue Ash
OH	University of Toledo
OK	Connors State College
OK	Murray State College
OK	Northeastern Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College
OK	Northeastern State University
OK	Oklahoma City Community College

State	Institution
OK	Oklahoma Panhandle State University
OK	Redlands Community College
OK	University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma
PA	Chestnut Hill College
PA	Shippensburg University
TX	Del Mar College
TX	Midwestern State University
TX	Paris Junior College
TX	South Texas College
TX	Texarkana College
TX	Texas A&M University - Corpus Christi
TX	Texas A&M University Texarkana

State	Institution
TX	Texas Southern University
TX	Texas Southmost College
TX	University of Houston-Downtown
TX	University of Texas at Arlington
TX	University of Texas at Tyler
TX	University of Texas Rio Grande Valley
UT	Dixie State University
UT	University of Utah
UT	Utah State University
UT	Utah Valley University
WA	Lake Washington Institute of Technology
WA	Washington State University

## ENDNOTES

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