

House Bill 3335 (2015): Policy Overview Report



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This [House Bill 3335](#) (HB 3335 (2015)) Policy Overview Report was prepared as an update regarding college completion initiatives pioneered in Oregon and other states. In alignment with HB 3335, this report tailors its research and discussion toward Oregonians who have attended some college, but not completed a degree.

The chief sponsor of HB 3335 expressed his interest considering new ways that universities could formally recognize students who have completed a significant block of coursework but who have not earned a degree. Consistent with HB 3335, this report takes a broader view of the subject: focusing on understanding the barriers students face to complete postsecondary credentials; tackling the limitations that accompany efforts to identify, connect and recruit, and encourage the completion and recognition of non-completers; and leveraging the best practices while incorporating the lessons learned from initiatives in Oregon and other states.

Reaching individuals with “some college, no degree” is essential to increasing overall educational attainment in Oregon and to meet the state’s 40-40-20 goals.¹ Demographic findings remain a key component of understanding the “non-completer” population and how to best assist them in the attainment of a postsecondary credential. While this report discusses the demographics, it also explores the equity and age gaps in degree attainment and provides a general framework to understand the differences among individuals with “some college, no degree.” In a further effort to understand this specific population and how best to provide recognition and encourage degree attainment, a discussion regarding the reasons for college non-completion and the benefits of degree attainment follows. A key finding is that logistical, financial, and institutional barriers, instead of academic reasons, are the primary reasons for college non-completion.

Although the potential benefits of degree completion initiatives are great, any policy intervention meant to help this population faces substantial challenges. These include student identification; outreach and recruitment; and completion and recognition. These challenges are explored prior to a discussion of potential policy responses.

This report examines policy responses in the form of regional, state, and institution-led initiatives. An incomplete list of these initiatives include Portland State University’s “Last Mile,” Southern Oregon University’s Innovation and Leadership program for working adults, Oregon State University’s “badges,” Indiana’s “Return and Complete” Initiative, and Utah’s growing emphasis on stackable credentials. These various programs form a baseline of information on best practices and lessons learned; Oregon can learn, borrow, and emulate these initiatives to bolster our own organic efforts.

The report concludes with key takeaways and next steps. As previously noted, key takeaways include the awareness of the barriers impeding “return and complete” policies and initiatives. At the same time, these limitations should not obstruct or deter a successful Oregon initiative. The current work and progress in Oregon and other states point the way toward a new policy direction that sees adults with some college as potential graduates, rather than dropouts or “non-completers.”

¹ “40-40-20” is an Oregon education goal that aims to have 40 percent of Oregonians complete a baccalaureate degree or higher, 40 percent complete an associate’s degree or certificate in a skilled occupation, and the remaining 20 percent obtain a high school diploma or equivalent by 2025 (ORS 350.014).

INTRODUCTION

The Office of University Coordination of the Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission (HECC) prepared this House Bill 3335 (HB 3335 (2015)) policy overview report. This report discusses the progress regarding the bill's legislative charge, relevant research and data regarding college completion as well as lessons learned and key takeaways. Initially, it provides a summary of HB 3335 and background information that frames the national college completion agenda. The following section explores the demographics of the “some college, no degree” population and the reasons why these individuals do not complete their postsecondary credential. In subsequent sections, this report discusses the benefits associated with degree completions, the constraints upon successful policy responses, and an overview of Oregon and out-of-state initiatives that provide relief to the “some college, no degree” population. The report concludes with key takeaways and next steps.

While the bill sponsor's interest in a “new,” innovative credential recognizing the coursework completed (beyond a student's official academic transcript) is potentially beneficial, a new credential faces significant limitations. Any new official degree must be proposed by institutions and ratified by faculty senates or other decision making bodies. A new credential proposed or pushed by the state is unlikely to gain traction on its own and may fare better as a component of a broader-based completion campaign geared toward serving the non-completer population. Building on efforts in Oregon and from other states may be the better strategy in the near term.

LEGISLATIVE BACKGROUND

HB 3335, introduced and passed in the 2015 legislative session, directs the HECC to work with public universities to develop effective solutions to address the problem of college non-completers. Specifically, the bill addresses the student who enrolls in a four-year, public university, successfully completes two or more years of coursework, and subsequently discontinues his or her education without graduating and without receiving any official recognition of their academic accomplishments beyond their college transcript.

The bill itself is brief. In the course of its passage, legislators discussed the potential benefits resulting from increased degree completion rates that advance Oregon's 40-40-20 goals. In testimony, Richard Schwarz, retired Executive Director of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) – Oregon, described his concern that the student who discontinues their education before completion is branded as a “failure.” HB 3335 seeks to provide relief for this student, either in a form of personal recognition of accomplishment or official academic recognition that translates into increased employment opportunities.

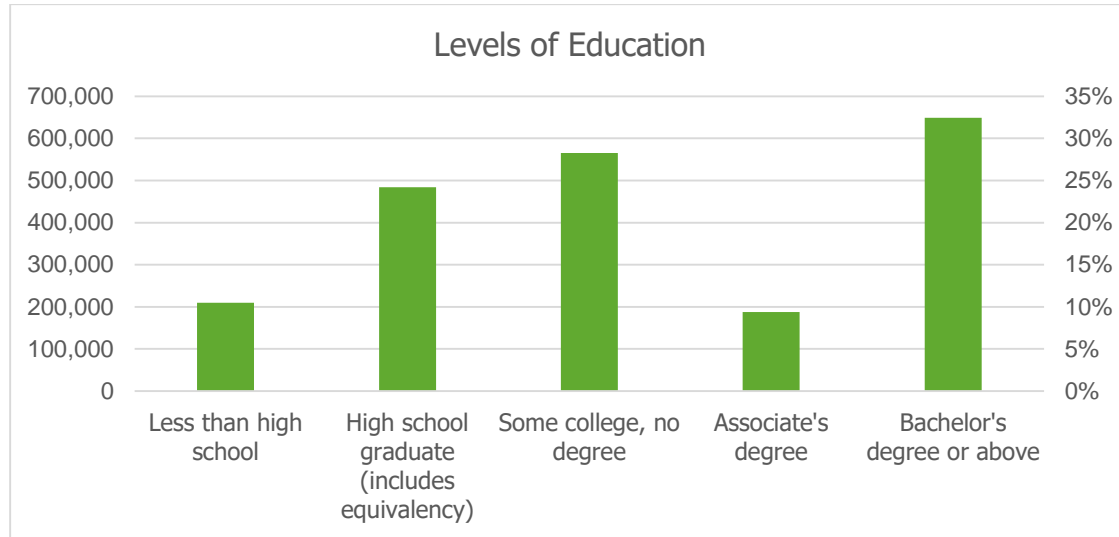
WHO ARE NON-COMPLETERS: “SOME COLLEGE, NO DEGREE”

Several questions require answers before the college completion crisis can be addressed. The “Who?” is the first important question. We must understand who are the individuals that comprise the diverse and complex “some college, no degree” demographic.

GENERAL DEMOGRAPHICS

Non-completers are individuals with “some college, no degree,” and they are the second largest education demographic in Oregon at 26.66 percent of all working age adults (Lumina Foundation 2015b). Figure 1 illustrates Oregonian education demographics by the highest level of education completed.

Figure 1: Levels of education for Oregon Residents, ages 25-64



Source: US Census Bureau (2016); 2010-2014 American Community Survey

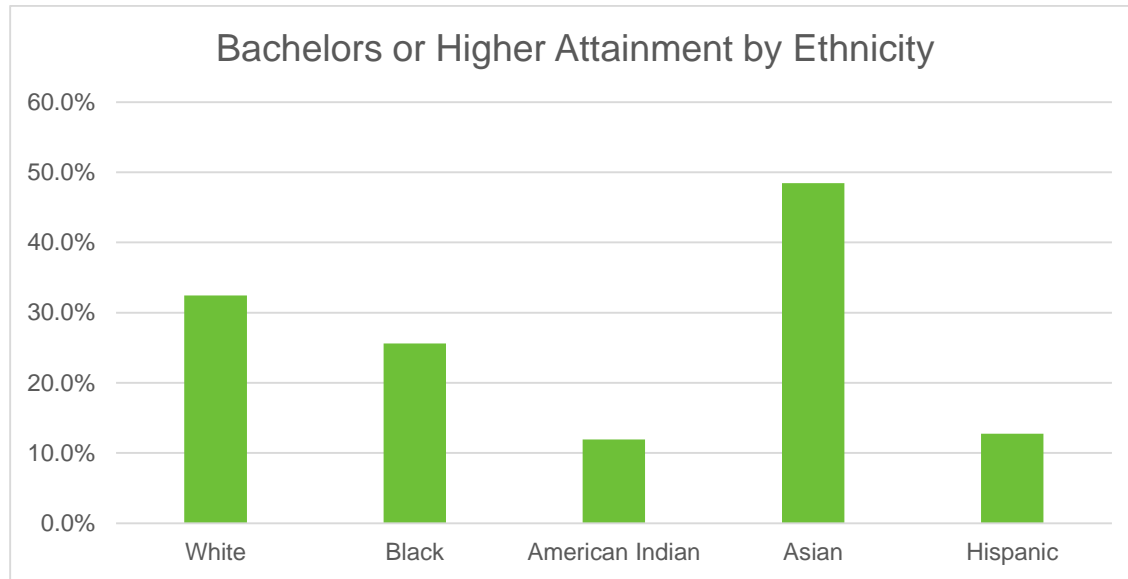
Twenty-seven percent of the population equates to over 565,000 Oregonians (US Census Bureau). Nationally, “some college, no degree” is the second largest education demographic at 21.9 percent of Americans following high school graduates at 26.5 percent (US Census Bureau).

The “some college” is potentially the largest single group that can be helped to complete a degree in the next five years. However, the picture grows in complexity after breaking down this group by ethnicity and age demographics, types of institutions attended, transfer pathways, and degree- or major-related pathways, and ultimately the likelihood of degree completion and required investment.

RACE AND ETHNICITY DEMOGRAPHICS

Students of color are disproportionately not receiving the support and opportunities to put them on a path to completion. Degree attainment among culturally and linguistically diverse students is significantly lower than whites with the exception of those identifying as Asian. The need for innovative and successful initiatives that increase degree-attainment across all student groups is even greater as non-white demographic groups increase as a larger proportion of the Oregon populace (ODE 2015). Figure 2 illustrates postsecondary degree attainment rate by ethnicity.

Figure 2: Degree-attainment rates among Oregon residents, ages 25-64 by ethnicity



Source: US Census Bureau (2016); 2010-2014 American Community Survey

AGE DEMOGRAPHICS

Similar to ethnic demographics, non-completers come from all age groups. The largest “some college, no degree” demographic nationally is the age group 30-39, representing 36 percent of the non-completer population (Erisman and Steele 2015). A full 75 percent of non-completers are age 30 or older and 21 percent are age 50 or older (Erisman and Steel 2015). The diversity of age groups emphasizes the need to tailor outreach efforts and education delivery models by learner type to incentivize the return and degree completion of former students. For example, adult learners may need a pathway to degree completion that accommodates the challenges of supporting a family and other dependents while completing their degree.

YOUTH PERSPECTIVE

Narrowing the population of interest to the younger adults, we find that 63 percent of young Oregonians in the high school class of 2006 enrolled in postsecondary education. However, nine years later when this cohort was observed at the age of 25, only 25 percent of these young Oregonians had earned a postsecondary credential. This demographic group is crucial in achieving Oregon’s 40-40-20 goals (OregonLearns 2016b).

Disparities in the degree attainment rate for the recent 2006 cohort of young Oregonians mirrors the statewide disparities in degree attainment rates between student groups displayed in Figure 2. For example, 40.7 percent of individuals who identify as Asian and Pacific Islanders and young Oregonians receive a postsecondary degree while 29.5 percent of white, 15.1 percent of African Americans, 13.7 percent of Native Americans, and 11.5 percent of Latino student receive a postsecondary degree (OregonLearns 2016b).

NON-COMPLETERS TYPOLOGY

Individuals with “some college, no degree” come from diverse educational backgrounds, including where they attended postsecondary school, what courses they took, and how many credits they earned. Many started their education at two-year institutions (56%), others at four-year institutions (27%), and some transferred between

the two (17%) (Erisman and Steele 2015). Additionally, students completed varied amounts of credits before leaving their institution. The number of credits a former student earned and whether these credits were part of a structured pathway (e.g. major-related pathway; declared major) toward a specific degree or certificate are also important considerations when constructing degree completion initiatives at the state or institution level.

Conceptually, non-completers can be categorized based on the number of credits earned and if these credits followed a structured pathway. These two factors provide a general framework to understand the time and level of investment required by the institution, the state, and the student to complete a degree. Table 1 below outlines a typology of these two factors.

Table 1: Investment in terms of time and resources, student perspective

	High Credits Earned	Low Credits Earned
Structured Pathway Completed	short time horizon; low resources	Indeterminate
Unstructured Pathway Completed	indeterminate	long time horizon; high resources

Former students who earned a high volume of credits on a structured pathway present the ideal target population under HB 3335. These students, commonly labeled “near completers,” “eligibles,” or “potential completers,” are very close to completion. As the label suggests, “eligibles” are former students who may already be deemed “eligible” for a degree that they never officially conferred due to personal, administrative, or financial reasons (IHEP 2011). Similarly, “potential completers” are usually considered to be former students with a relatively low number of remaining credits needed to complete their degree (e.g. one semester/quarter worth of credits; 75 percent degree complete) (IHEP 2011; Erisman and Steele 2015).

Institutions in Oregon and out-of-state tend to focus on the “high credit, structured pathway” population with innovative college completion initiatives. Non-completers in the three other categories in the typology require more investment and longer time horizons for degree completion. These students either earned a low number of credits, completed coursework that is unstructured, or both. They are generally considered to require relatively more investment to complete a degree on the part of the student, institution, and state. However, findings from the project “Non-Traditional No More” suggest even high credit individuals should not definitively be considered the “low-hanging fruit,” due to the low response rates to outreach efforts and relatively low retention rates once they return (Erisman and Steele 2011). The “low hanging fruit” metaphor loses some of its potency when we examine the reasons that adult students stop or drop out.

WHY STUDENTS DROP OUT: NON-COMPLETION REASONS

Answering the question, “Why do students discontinue their education before completion?” will help state- and institution-led efforts tailor policies and resources to help former students return and complete as well as prevent “drop-outs.”

Although Oregon lacks a state-specific picture of the non-completer population, several nationwide studies provide insights into the “why?” component of this policy question. These studies find that non-completers leave school for a variety of reasons; the most commonly cited include the need to work full-time, family commitments, and the cost of tuition (Johnson et al 2009; Erisman and Steele 2015; Dreckmeier and Tichman 2010). An *InsideTrack* study found the top two reasons for non-completion across all age groups were managing multiple commitments (29.7 percent) and finances (25.9 percent) (Dreckmeier and Tichman 2010). A *Public Agenda* study found similar responses with 71 percent citing the need to make money, 52 percent indicating the costs of tuition and fees, and 54 percent stating family commitments as reasons for non-completion (Johnson et al 2009).

Adding to the body of research, a study from Ivy Tech Community College in Indiana reports findings consistent with those previously mentioned. The most frequently indicated reasons for non-completion included employment, financial, and scheduling issues. Forty-six (46) percent indicated they did not complete because they needed to work full-time. Thirty-six (36) and 34 percent stated inadequate financial aid or the inability to pay, respectively, were main reasons for not completing their degree. Twenty-six (26) percent cited courses not being available at convenient times and 20 percent cited courses not being offered on convenient days. Consistent with previous research and anecdotal evidence, academic reasons rank low as reasons for college non-completion.² Adding to this complexity, a percentage of non-completers are content with their decision not to finish their degree due to alternative job opportunities before graduation, personal choice, and more (Hanford 2011a; Erisman and Steele 2015; Dreckmeier and Tichman 2010).

Current research emphasizes that logistical and financial barriers, rather than academic reasons, are the primary reasons of college non-completion. Even so, a caveat remains regarding how generalizable these survey results are to Oregon. Although anecdotal evidence and HECC exchanges with university partners suggest similar “big picture” inferences are indeed applicable to Oregon, we cannot say with certainty how applicable the details are due to the absence of a statewide survey researching state-specific and institution-specific factors influencing non-completion. Additionally, outreach, logistical, and data collection challenges constrain efforts to collect information about non-completers. These challenges are discussed in subsequent sections.

BENEFITS OF COMPLETION

Neither the challenges nor the benefits associated with solving the college completion crisis are trivial. This section explains the substantial private and social benefits associated with degree completion.

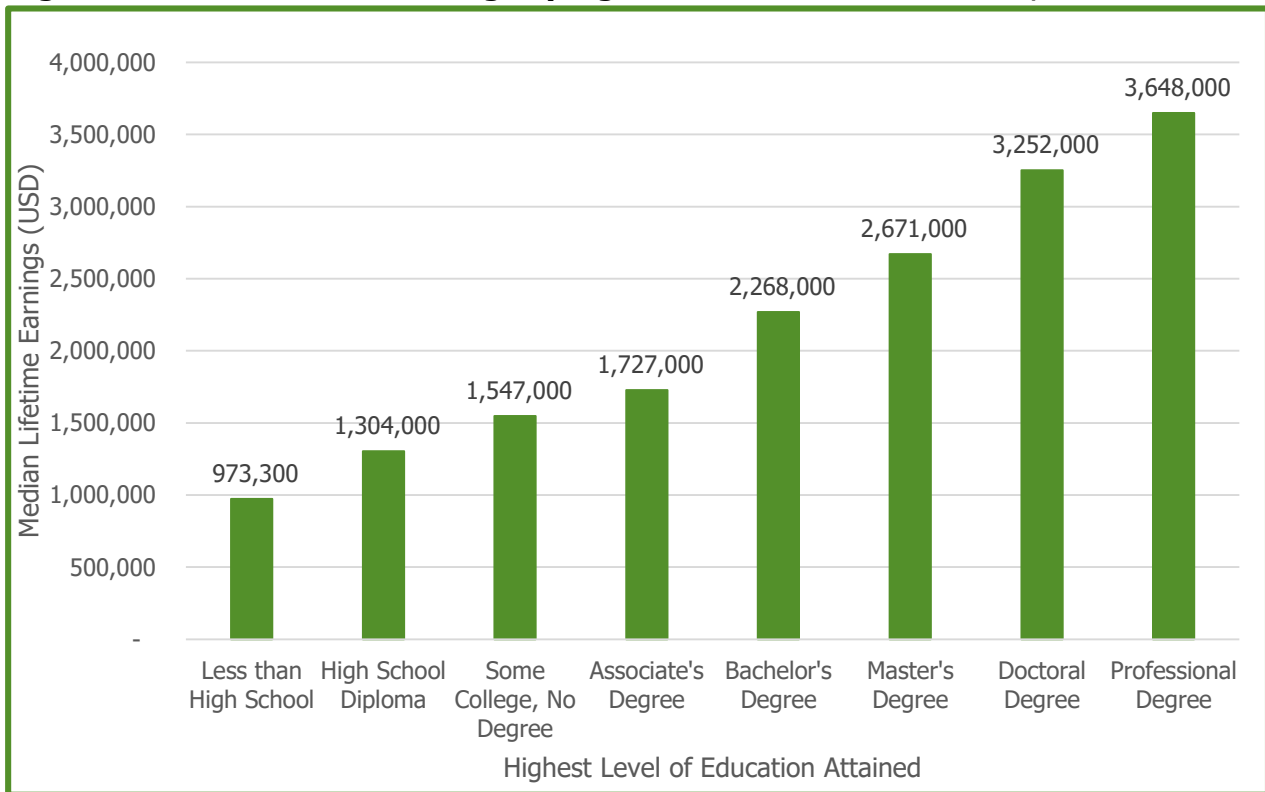
PRIVATE BENEFITS

A marginal increase of a degree credential (e.g. advancing from an associate degree to a bachelor’s degree) is associated with higher lifetime earnings (Rosembaum 2015; Day and Newburger 2002; Baum 2013; Hanford 2011b). A prominent finding in various research studies claims that “some college, no degree” has an earnings payoff less than a certificate or associate degree (Carnevale 2011; Day and Newburger 2002). The median

² Academic reasons refer to academic under-achievement and the inability to satisfactorily complete coursework, such as “some of the courses were too difficult” (Johnson et al 2009, Dreckmeier and Tichman 2010).

lifetime earnings for an individual who completes an associate’s degree is approximately equal to \$1.73 million while an individual of the “some college, no degree” population earns \$1.55 million (Carnevale 2011, 3). Another study goes further, finding there is no earnings payoff between a high school diploma and “some college, no degree” (Rosebaum 2015). Figure 4 below displays median lifetime earnings by highest educational attainment.

Figure 3: Median lifetime earnings by highest educational attainment, 2009 Dollars



Source: Carnevale (2012)

As Figure 3 illustrates, the potential benefits accrued from degree completion are immense. Furthermore, an estimated two-thirds of the “some college, no degree” population have thought about returning to complete their credential, highlighting the immense opportunity to increase lifetime earnings growth (Johnson et al. 2009). While it may be unrealistic to assume all non-completers would return to their degree program, Oregon would collectively accrue a lifetime earnings gain of over \$121 billion if 30 percent of the Oregon “some college, no degree” population returned and completed a baccalaureate degree.³ An additional lifetime earnings gain of \$30.2 billion could be realized if another 30 percent of “non-completers” returned to their education

³ Gains projected using national estimates for median lifetime earnings (Carnevale 2012) and estimates of Oregon’s non-completer demographic (Lumina Foundation 2015b).

and earned an associate's degree.⁴ These benefits depict private gains to the individual student and do not incorporate the additional benefits accrued to society.

SOCIAL BENEFITS

Along the same thread as private benefits, higher education degree attainment is also associated with increased social benefits, largely in the form of reduced poverty and thus reduced reliance on public assistance programs, increased public health, and higher levels of civic engagement.

Marginal increases in the receipt of degrees or credentials are associated with lower levels of poverty. This finding is supported when analyzed across all households, including female householders with related children under 18 and married couples with related children under 18. For example, 11 percent of individuals in households with “some college, no degree” as the highest education attainment are living in poverty, while only 8 percent of individuals in households with an associate's degree and 5 percent with a bachelor's degree or higher are living in poverty (Baum 2013, 25). The reduction in the percentage of persons participating in public assistance programs associated with higher degree attainment levels mirrors the aforementioned reductions in poverty associated with higher degree attainment levels.⁵

Additional benefits associated with higher levels of degree attainment include a spillover effect of positive health effects and heightened levels of civic engagement. Three substantial health benefits include: lower rates of smoking, lower obesity rates, and higher exercise rates.⁶ Evidence also associates higher levels of degree attainment with greater civic engagement, such as higher rates of voting and political participation as well as understanding of political issues (Baum 2013, 31).

DEGREE ATTAINMENT: CHALLENGES WE FACE

While the potential benefits of degree completion initiatives are substantial, possible policy actions associated with HB 3335 must take into account the significant challenges they would need to overcome. These challenges encompass student identification, outreach and recruitment, and completion and recognition.

CHALLENGE 1: STUDENT IDENTIFICATION

Public universities and the state are limited in their ability to accurately identify and categorize non-completers. These limitations complicate the efforts to retroactively confer credit for academic achievements or encourage former students to return and complete their degree. Solutions are no small task and require a robust data tracking system, as well as financial and human capital resources to implement (IHEP 2011). Three general steps break down the processes required to identify non-completers:

⁴ Considering national estimates for median lifetime earnings (Carnevale 2012) and estimates of Oregon's non-completer demographic (Lumina Foundation 2015b).

⁵ The College Board analyzed three public assistance programs including, Medicaid, School Lunch, and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

⁶ There is an exception, in the age group 65 and older, 25 percent of “some college, no degree” versus 24 percent of associate degree individuals engage in vigorous exercise, a one percentage point gap (Baum 2013).

First, an institution must define and identify the population of students who have discontinued their education at the respective institution. Depending on the goal of the initiative there could be variable definitions of the population of interest. (IHEP 2011; HECC; WICHE 2012)

Second, an institution must identify whether the student(s) did not complete because they “stopped out” temporarily, transferred to another institution in-state or out-of-state, or permanently discontinued their education (IHEP 2011; HECC 2016). Individuals who permanently discontinued their education are most likely the population of interest for college return and complete initiatives. Data mining for the specific population is an important step because numerous studies claim that students who appear to have “dropped-out,” have actually transferred to another institution (Erisman and Steele 2015; IHEP 2011; WICHE 2012)

Third, the institution needs to perform a credit or degree audit, which determines the number and “quality” of credits completed. Essentially, an institution must assess whether the student is a “near-completer,” an “eligible,” or other non-completer category. This process determines how close a student is to degree completion and serves as an important tool for institutions to target and customize its outreach efforts.⁷

Although conventional wisdom suggests that the “lowest-hanging fruit” to engage in college completion initiatives are students closest to the finish line, research suggests this may not be the case. Indiana Ivy Tech, a prime example, reported only 9 percent of former students with at least 45 credits (of the sixty typically required for most associate’s degrees) responded to an initial recruitment effort. The response rate jumped to 17 percent when Ivy Tech expanded the population of interest to students with at least 15 credits (Erisman and Steele 2013; WICHE 2012; IHEP 2011; HECC).

CHALLENGE 2: OUTREACH AND RECRUITMENT

An institution- or state-led college completion initiative targeting the non-completer population would need to undertake an immense outreach and recruitment effort to communicate with these former students, a step that requires substantial resources and coordinated efforts.

Many of the primary, low-cost methods (e.g. email) of contact between students and their former academic institutions are severed after the completion or discontinuation of their education. Student email addresses frequently do not remain active more than one year after the student’s departure. In the digital era, an inactive email address essentially cuts a direct communication line between the student and the university, making future communication more burdensome.

⁷ If a “new” credential recognizing credit completion is the desired outcome of HB 3335, the same data mining effort and analysis is required to identify the number and type of credits former students completed. Current state resources are not equipped to answer these questions at this time; however, through further data infrastructure developments and collaboration in the higher education sector we hope greater context of this problem will be made available to inform future discussions. Public universities vary in their ability to conduct this sort of analysis depending on their data infrastructure and resources.

While using email to communicate with former students may be difficult, former students express that it is their preferred method of communication with their former academic institution. Minnesota State Colleges and Universities and Ivy Tech Community College found students highly prefer to be contacted via email (73%) versus letters or postcards (22%) or phones (5%) (Erisman and Steele 2015). Similar preferences in a smaller sample were found in the Project Oregon Reverse Transfer (PORT) survey (Lumina Foundation and CCWD 2013). These findings emphasize the importance of obtaining a personal email address for students and coordinating an outreach effort within the first several months of “drop-out.”

Ground mail is not an ideal mechanism for outreach, as it tends to have a relatively high-cost and low response rate. While student mail addresses may be on record at the institution, relocation to another address for personal or professional reasons makes student contact difficult. For example, the Minnesota State Universities and Colleges direct mail campaign resulted in 10-15 percent of mail pieces being undeliverable (Erisman and Steele 2015)

Alternative and innovative outreach efforts include state-led branding efforts, widespread media campaigns leveraging airwaves and social media, as well as information designed for adult learner populations. All outreach efforts will come with a price tag and require additional hours to implement and fine tune. Furthermore, outreach efforts may need to be tailored specifically to the population of interest (e.g. traditional versus nontraditional). For example, GradTX, a website designed for adult learners and non-completers, serves as a repository for information and guides regarding degree completion. GradTX provides tools and information about degree completion programs at participating institutions, as well as a credit transfer equivalency tool (Erisman and Steele 2013).⁸

CHALLENGE 3: COMPLETION AND RECOGNITION

In addition to the challenges associated with reaching this population in the first place, any policy initiative would need to address the significant barriers that these former students would likely face if they decide they want to return to school to complete a degree, and the challenges that many institutions have in serving a non-traditional population (IHEP 2011).

Fortunately, we are not blind to the issues facing returning students. Although we do not have data from a statewide survey or publically available survey results from an institution, national level research is available. *Public Agenda*, among other research efforts, conducted a survey to determine the obstacles “some college, no degree” individuals face in returning to their degree. The findings include the following (Johnson et al. 2009, 8; Hanford 2011a):

- “I really need to work full-time, and I don’t think I could work and go to school at the same time,” 75 percent of respondents
- “I have family commitments,” 72 percent of respondents
- “I still would not be able to afford college,” 55 percent of respondents
- “No school near me has classes that fit my schedule,” 48 percent of respondents

⁸ A statewide transfer equivalency website is under review pursuant to HB 2525 (2015).

Public Agenda's reported findings were accompanied by a survey of policy proposals to students who did not graduate. Policies most favorably viewed are those that provide relief to the obstacles intertwined with the complexities of everyday life, including financial and time constraints, relocation efforts, and personal goals. Although, many of these may be outside the ability of the state government or respective public institution to solve, they are offered as general “food for thought,” as the discussion on degree completion among non-completers continues. Favorable policies included (Johnson et al. 2009, 20):

- Allow part-time students to qualify for financial aid, 81 percent of respondents
- Offer more courses in the evening, on weekends or in the summer so people can work while attending school, 78 percent of respondents
- Cut the cost of attending college by 25 percent, 78 percent of respondents
- Have the government offer more college loans, 76 percent of respondents
- Provide day care for students who need it, 76 percent of respondents

SOLUTIONS: POLICY RESPONSES & PROGRAMS

The policies and solutions Oregon pursues to overcome the aforementioned limitations will determine how and if Oregon is to reach its 40-40-20 goals. Oregon institutions and out-of-state institutions provide a strong foundation of best practices to solve the college completion crisis. Numerous public universities are leading initiatives to increase degree completion, prevent students from “stopping out” or “dropping out,” and to reconnect with students who did not complete their degree but are close to completion. A survey of these policies will make up the majority of this section and will provide a foundation for future policy discussions relating to non-completers and the college completion crisis.⁹

OREGON POLICY RESPONSES & INSTITUTIONAL PROGRAMS

Oregon, “Reverse Transfer”

Reverse transfer agreements are a statewide effort to allow students who started their education at a community college and transferred to a four-year institution to return to their community college to receive an associate's degree rather than discontinue their enrollment without a credential. These agreements are transfer partnerships between community colleges and four-year public universities. Reverse transfer initiatives can also help identify students who already meet the requirements for an associate's degree, resulting in minimal to no additional coursework. The community college confers the degree considering the credits the student earned while attending both institutions. (Lumina Foundation; CCWD 2013; OSU 2012; USHE 2015a)

Students usually need to meet a set of eligibility criteria to be considered for reverse transfer. For example, the University of Oregon (UO) defines “eligible” as an individual who meets all of the following: (1) admitted and current undergraduate student; (2) transferred at least 24 credits from a community college partner school; (3)

⁹ Due to space constraints, the follow policy discussion is not a comprehensive list of initiatives in Oregon that target solutions for the “some college, no degree” demographic, but rather represents a targeted sample of policies and initiatives.

not yet applied to graduate; (4) earned at least 90 combined credits from all institutions; and (5) does not yet have a two-year degree (UO 2015b). Other public institutions have similar policies.

Reverse transfer has been met with success. For example, the Office of Community Colleges and Workforce Development’s (CCWD) 2013 reverse transfer update reported 383 credentials (282 associate degrees and 101 one-year credentials) were awarded to students utilizing the reverse transfer pathway. Of the one-year credentials, 100 of the 101 awards, were the Oregon Transfer Module (OTM). The OTM is discussed as a policy response in the following section. Additionally, students view reverse transfer favorably. A student participant survey indicated that more than a majority, 57 percent (17 out of 30), believed earning an associate degree after transferring to a four-year university was beneficial.¹⁰ (Lumina Foundation and CCWD 2013)

In previous years, Oregon reverse transfer has been discussed as a potential solution for college non-completers (CCWD 2012). While this is true, reverse transfer does not provide the same relief to the student who began their higher education at a public university, never enrolled at a community college, and has never obtained a postsecondary credential. Under the present circumstances it is unlikely a community college could award this student an associate’s degree without enrollment.

Oregon Transfer Module (OTM)

The OTM is the first statewide transfer degree it is possible for a student to attain at an Oregon community college or public university. As a one-year curriculum (equivalent to 45 credits or three terms) for prospective transfer students in Oregon, the module consists largely of general education courses that students may transfer with relative ease to another public Oregon institution. In many cases the completion of an OTM is noted on a student’s transcript; however, the OTM is not deemed an official certificate or degree to the extent of an Associate’s. (UO 2015a; OSU 2015b)

A promising outlook shows that in recent years OTMs are increasingly granted to students as they complete the requirements. Table 2 illustrates total completions by academic year from 2009 to 2015. The OTM began auto-awarding in 2013 due to the advent of statewide achievement compacts.

Table 2: OTM completions by academic year

Academic Year	Total Completions
2009-10	131
2010-11	241
2011-12	851
2013-14	2,859
2014-15	3,295

Source: CCWD Data

¹⁰ Thirteen (13) percent (4 out of 30) were unsure and 30 percent (9 out of 30) did not believe it was beneficial.

The OTM serves as a potential policy solution to the requests of HB 3335. Work is currently underway in the HB 2525 (2015) workgroup, which may foster greater discussion concerning the emphasis and use of the OTM. Further discussion may consider using the OTM to advance completion goals rather than new credentials. This work may also complement degree completion efforts and the state's stride toward achieving its 40-40-20 goals. Auto-awarding of earned statewide degrees like AAOT and OTM could become a key strategy in increasing completion and recognizing the achievements of students. Recent emerging research shows that students respond to milestones and achievement markers; these can encourage students to stay motivated and continue and complete their bachelors' degree.

Portland State University (PSU), “The Last Mile”

Portland State University's initiative “The Last Mile” is geared toward helping individuals with “some college, no degree” return to school to complete their degree. Leveraging phone, e-mail, and social media, PSU reaches out to “near-completers,” those students who have discontinued their education but are within one to two terms of degree completion. PSU reports that the Last Mile committee has assisted over 500 students with curricular and financial problem solving. The initiative is advertised as a solution to students who could not complete their degree for myriad personal and financial reasons (PSU 2016¹¹).

PSU's program is an example of similar initiatives in other states. If such programs could scale statewide, or be replicated successfully, these outreach and completion efforts could answer part of the challenge posed by HB 3335.

Eastern Oregon University (EOU) and Oregon Institute of Technology (OIT), Associate Degrees

Two public four-year universities in Oregon currently offer associate degrees: EOU and OIT (EOU 2015; OIT n.d,a; OIT n.d,b). EOU's College of Business currently offers students an option to receive an Associate of Arts in Administrative Management. The program is advertised as regional in nature, skills-based, and a potential bridge to a full baccalaureate degree:

“The program is regional in nature and is intended to provide the skills and background necessary for employment in the complex and computerized world of the modern business office. If a student decides to go on to get a bachelor's degree in Business, all of the credits from the AA program will apply toward it (EOU 2015).”

EOU had two and three completions AA degree completions in academic years 2013-2014 and 2014-2015, respectively.

OIT offers an Associate Degree Dental Hygiene Program and is advertised as a unique partnership between several Oregon institutions. Students have the opportunity to learn the latest technologies, participate in off-campus clinical rotations, and stay involved through community projects. Similar to EOU's program, if students wish to pursue a bachelor's degree in dental hygiene they may go on to complete additional

¹¹ Aside from HECC research, PSU university officials informed HECC staff of this initiative throughout various communication exchanges and legislative workgroups.

coursework. It is unknown whether students enrolled in the baccalaureate program can apply these credits to earn the associate's option through their respective programs (OIT n.d,a).

Associate degree options at Oregon's four-year institutions are unique to these two institutions. WOU and SOU issued AA degrees in the past but have not done so since the academic years 2008-2009 and 1997-1998, respectively. The expansion of such programs carries various concerns regarding institutional mission and efficiency considerations (ORS 341.009). In general, universities have shown no interest in expanding their Associates offerings, and faculty still control that process. Moreover, any new degree programs would have to fulfill the normal accreditation and state approval processes. Still, these programs could serve as a future discussion topic in the broader conversation of college completion.

Southern Oregon University (SOU), B.S. in Innovation & Leadership

SOU offers a BS in Innovation and Leadership geared toward returning, working adult students at its Medford campus. This program contains many key elements for adult re-entry programs. Admitted students must have at least one year of prior college experience and at least five years of work experience outside of college. Classes are in an accelerated format, with most meeting one night per week for five weeks. Each of the sixteen required courses costs \$900.00 in tuition; there are no other required fees. Up to forty-five credits may be obtained through Credit for Prior Learning. SOU's INL program also features added supports necessary for returning adult students: a cohort model, night classes, and assigned advising all create a program that is focused on students who know they want to return to finish a degree and apply that learning in the workforce (SOU 2016).

Oregon State University (OSU), Badges

OSU is a pioneer in Oregon for the use and conferment of educational "badge" credentials, a new and growing global movement that provides recognition for the acquisition or demonstration of a concrete skill, knowledge, or ability (OSU 2014; Educause 2012). The Oregon Badge Alliance, a nonprofit organization, is working in partnership with OSU.

"Badges" are used to signal the completion of a certificate program, an intensive workgroup, or the acquisition of a certain set of skills. As an OSU news release from 2014 highlights:

"One university, for instance, provides different badges for various milestones in robotics, and another provides badges for reaching benchmarks for learning in regular, credit-bearing college courses ... Once awarded, badges can also be linked to wide range of information that would never be found on an academic transcript, such as workshops attended, awards won, projects completed, essays written or work samples (OSU 2014)."

Educause, a nonprofit association dedicated to advancing higher education, emphasizes the relative strengths and limitations of badges. Strengths include serving as a new, flexible tool for students to signal their achievements and concrete skills. Limitations concern the accuracy of badges indicating a specified skill set and their acceptance outside of the conferring institution or organization. Badges are still a relatively new phenomenon and their relative value in the job market and for student success remains an area of study that needs more exploration. Furthermore, accreditation concerns exist as well as validation questions of how to ensure online badges are awarded to the person who completed the assessment. (Educause 2012)

Badges could serve as a solution to HB 3335’s legislative charge. A stand-alone badge that provides recognition for coursework milestones could hypothetically acknowledge the accomplishments of “non-completers” without former students needing to return to their institution or complete a further credential.¹²

REGIONAL AND OUT-OF-STATE POLICY RESPONSES

Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), “Non-traditional No More”

WICHE worked with six states to address and reduce the barriers adult learners face to return to a postsecondary institution and complete their education credential. These barriers identified are applicable to the broader non-completion population. The WICHE program ran from 2008 to 2011 and its findings offer insight into the “do’s and don’ts” of tackling the college completion crisis (WICHE 2012; IHEP 2011).

The experiences of these six states resulted in broad recommendations, which are consistent with many of the findings and limitations previously presented in this report. These recommendations include, but are not limited to the following (WICHE 2012, xi-xii):

1. Data mining is a critical first step in re-engaging ready adults.
2. Strong buy-in by both state and institutional leaders is necessary to address barriers.
3. Conversations between institutions and state policymakers are key.
4. Broad outreach campaigns are necessary to reach all potential students.

The WICHE program also addressed more specific solutions to help non-completers. For example, targeted outreach, broad-based as well as internal communication campaigns, data analysis, and personalized advising initiatives can address the barrier of insufficient information available to non-completers. Another barrier is the unintended consequences of state policies that make it difficult for non-completers to return and complete. WICHE proposed a solution: generalized degrees or “parachute degrees” that,

allow students to apply credits earned in pursuit of a specialized major to a more general degree program can increase degree completion and prevent stop-outs in the first place (WICHE 2012, xiv).

Generalized degrees or “parachute degrees” may also be a beneficial topic of discussion that more acutely responds to the charge of HB 3335. At the time of publication, no such degree or initiative existed inside Oregon.

Kentucky, “Project Graduate”

The Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education’s (CPE) “Project Graduate” is another statewide effort to “recruit and graduate” “near completers” with 80 or more credit hours (which is 75% of degree completion). The initiative leverages partnerships between the state and public institutions, while emphasizing the use of a

¹² As a clarification, no “general completion” badge exists in Oregon at the time of publication.

statewide branding campaign, campus advocates, and campus-specific action plans (KY CPE 2012; IHEP 2011).

College campuses and the CPE carry out different roles and responsibilities. Campus roles and incentives include a variety of the following: action plans, campus advocates, application fee waivers, tuition assistance, academic advising, priority enrollment, quick admit, degree summaries, credit for prior learning, afterhours intake, debt repayment plans, and more. CPE maintains the “big picture” and coordinating role, focusing on the conceptualization of the model, brand development and marketing, web site operations and maintenance, quarterly convening of campus advocates, and agenda-setting with a focus on retention (KY CPE 2012). CPE promoted the project’s results and its return on investment (KY CPE 2012):

- \$60,000 investment produced 873 graduates equating to \$69 per graduate,
- 510 percent increase in graduates over three years (Fall 2008 to Fall 2011),
- \$12 million-plus in tuition revenue,
- Campuses report increase in program inquires and re-admits, and
- Goodwill creation in state.

The Kentucky approach may be a model for Oregon that produces results, leverages the assets of the state and participating institutions, and promotes joint ownership of the initiative among numerous stakeholders.

Indiana, “Return and Complete”

The Indiana Commission for Higher Education (IN-CHE) leads the “Return and Complete” initiative to increase college completion among adults with “some college, no degree.” The importance of this initiative is tied to Indiana’s education goal that 60 percent of “Hoosiers” will hold a postsecondary credential by 2025 (IN-CHE 2014; McInerney 2014). Indiana has put emphasis on current students, but will need to include 200,000 of the 737,000 Hoosiers with “some college, no degree” to meet this ambitious 60 percent goal.

Similar to other statewide initiatives, IN-CHE undertook a targeted marketing campaign and coordinated efforts among various institutions. Institutions directly communicated with former students who previously attended an Indiana college with information conveying the importance of a postsecondary credential; customized student assessments of their credits earned and projected remaining time-to-degree; “return adult” pathways options; reverse transfer pathways available; and financial resources offered.

Furthermore, Indiana has taken a set of concrete steps to implement and advance this initiative through statewide collaboration. Starting with a survey of the population of interest, IN-CHE conducted a research analysis on the best methods to message the “Return and Complete” initiative. Other steps included community engagements efforts and inter-campus agreements for “Returning Adult” customized pathways, adopting financial incentives for degree completions, and reducing the barriers adult students face in returning to school (e.g. financial concerns, childcare needs, flexible schedules) (IN-CHE 2014; IN-CHE 2015).

IN-CHE relied upon data from the National Student Clearinghouse, Student Financial Aid database, and a third-party data firm to aggregate accurate contact information for former students. This data effort then relied on institutions to supplement the Commission’s lists and send letters to former students. Similar to Kentucky,

IN-CHE was responsible for leading a collaborative statewide effort among higher education stakeholders (e.g. employers, local government, Veterans groups, etc.), and implementing the general media campaign, but institutions could tailor media campaigns to their own environment (IN-CHE 2014; IN-CHE 2015).

Indiana’s implementation of this program will prove instructive for any Oregon plan to overcome the challenges discussed earlier in this report. Additionally, Indiana’s approach could inform future work in Oregon due to the similar higher education governance structures and the need for coordinated data efforts to effectively reach out and connect with former students. Again, the Indiana initiative and many of the other state level initiatives confront the college completion crisis, but require work on the student’s behalf to return and complete their degree. IN-CHE draws attention to this population to those who are not eligible for reverse transfer and offers a solution. Similar circumstances may prove applicable to Oregon as well.

Utah, Stackable Credentials

The Utah State Higher Education System (USHE) leverages stackable credentials, “a part of a sequence of credentials that can be accumulated over time to build up an individual’s qualifications and help them to move along a career pathway or a career ladder,” in an effort to increase degree completion (USHE 2015b).

Stackable credentials can be earned in several dimensions: vertical, horizontal, and value-added. Vertical stackable credentials, the most traditional route, combine degree types to advance the student to the next degree level. An example includes advancing from an associate degree program to a baccalaureate program. A seamless student transfer pipeline supports the use of vertical stable credentials. In the other direction, horizontal stackable credentials focus on a variety of credentials in a particular field, such as a set of computer software and programming certificates. Taken as a whole these credentials provide the student with leverage in a specific job market. Value-added stackable credentials supplement existing degrees to further a student’s expertise or earn a specialization. (USHE 2015b; Austin et al. 2012)

Stackable credentials have yet to garner the same level of cultural support and attention as seen in international counterparts, specifically in the European Union, Canada, and Australia. While the focus of the discussion focuses on Utah’s community colleges, various forms of portable and stackable credentials are increasingly being discussed more broadly at the four-year level (Austin et al. 2012).¹³

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The potential benefit is immense: the size of the adult “some college” population is large and growing, and so are the incentives to return and complete a postsecondary credential. An estimated two-thirds of non-completers have thought about returning to school. This said, there is also a large demand for additional support in the form of financial aid, non-traditional delivery modes of higher education (e.g. evening, weekend, online), and day care services for students with dependents. Leveraging new and innovative policies to capture the benefits associated with degree completion is no small task, but there are successful initiatives in Oregon and other states to build upon and learn from. Moreover, “return and complete initiatives” do not just allow a realization of the benefits associated with degree completion, but also an avoidance of the costs associated

¹³ The previous discussion on “badges” is similar to a horizontal and/or value-added stackable credential.

with degree non-completion. While we focus on reducing the barriers, we must learn to see those who leave post-secondary education without a degree as potential graduates rather than just non-completers.

Oregon faces challenges to implementation, such as student identification, statewide outreach campaigns, and completion and recognition. As examples within and outside of Oregon suggest, overcoming these challenges is an essential element to solving the college completion crisis and likely require additional resources to provide meaningful statewide solutions. National data suggest tell us that potential completers (those who are close to a degree, but may have stopped out one or more times) are roughly equally divided between university and community college students, and each sector may have somewhat different needs to aid them in completion (Shapiro, et al. 2014).

According to US Census data, Oregon does better than the national average in creating access to post-secondary education, but slightly worse than average in helping students become successful graduates. No statewide in-depth study of non-completers exists, nor is there capacity to do so with current resources. That said, there are efforts (e.g. data mining, research, policy discussions) underway which may help us understand the non-completer population in Oregon, and to connect with this population in the future. Policy steps outside this framework will require more time and resources. A statewide approach for degree completion among non-completers will likely require a level of coordination, effort, and commitment found in the examples of Kentucky and Indiana.

While the bill sponsor's interest in a new, innovative credential recognizing the coursework completed is potentially beneficial, a new credential would face substantial challenges if not opposition. The creation of a new kind of credential is typically the work of faculty senates, curriculum committees, and other academic bodies rather than the role of a state agency or the legislature. Furthermore, the processes required to undertake such an innovation would likely take years and be subject to all the usual accreditation scrutiny, even if there were broad based support from faculty or universities. This idea is unlikely to gain traction on its own and may fare better as a component of a broader based completion campaign geared toward serving the non-completer population. Building on efforts in Oregon, borrowing good ideas from other states, and examining concrete results from new initiatives may prove a more beneficial strategy. If the state undertakes the challenge of helping students with some college with no degree, we should look first to current efforts to bring back former students such as those at SOU, PSU, and elsewhere. Indiana's "Return and Complete" serves as an example of how to provide a state level solution for students who are ineligible for reverse transfer but very close to completing a degree. Washington's proposed "Free to Finish College" program is a similar effort to extend state level aid to students who have been away from education for three or more years and who are fifteen credits away from a degree.¹⁴

¹⁴ Washington's situation is similar to Oregon in many respects: as many as 700,000 Washingtonians have a significant number of credit hours with no degree, and this attainment gap creates "depressed" earnings for these former students, often accompanied by debt (Washington Student Achievement Council 2015). As of this writing, the "Free to Finish" bill is still under consideration in Washington's legislature.

NEXT STEPS

- HECC will continue to discuss the barriers to student completion with public universities and remains committed to further research. If the Commission or Legislature wishes to pursue this policy option, then the size and scope of such an intervention are immediate topics of conversation.
- Data mining efforts and further data infrastructure developments underway may help tackle the previously referenced limitations in the coming months. Data and research efforts for HB 2525 (2015) and HB 2973 (2015) may show insights into HB 3335's "problem."
- Existing degree initiatives and options, such as the Oregon Transfer Module (OTM), may directly translate in HB 3335's interest in a "college completion credential." As the OTM is discussed in the HB 2525 workgroup, we will leverage these linkages between legislative initiatives.
- This report will be disseminated at the University Provost Council in the attempt to garner greater attention to this issue and find any areas of potential coordination. This report may also be beneficial to the public universities and their respective efforts to increase degree completion and reconnect with former students interested in completing their postsecondary degree.

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