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Attention college students: You may have earned a degree without knowing it

By **Jeff Guo** February 10 at 4:59 PM

If you're cash-strapped, here's a well-trodden path toward a bachelor's degree: Start at community college, which is cheaper and more flexible; get a bunch of credits there; then transfer to a four-year college to finish.

It's estimated that [about a quarter](#) of community college students make this leap within five years. Most — about [64 percent](#) — transfer before getting an associate's degree first.

Within six years, about 60 percent of students who transfer from community college get a bachelor's degree, according to a [report](#) from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. But in that same timeframe, 26 percent drop out. What happens to them? Many end up with nothing, no degree at all.

It's a bureaucracy thing. Students who took a shot at a BA and missed might not even know that they at least have enough credits to get an AA. Higher education systems aren't really set up to help students in that limbo between community college and a bachelor's degree. There's not that much communication between schools.

If this seems inefficient, a bunch of nonprofits, including the Gates Foundation, agree. For the past couple of years, they have been funding efforts to identify former community

college students who've done the work for an associate's degree but never got one because they left community college to pursue a bachelor's.

Recently, one of the largest community college districts in the nation [signed on](#) to the experiment. Arizona's Maricopa community colleges, which enroll more than 265,000 students a year, have received a half-million-dollar grant to track students who've moved on, and to automatically give them an associate's degree if they've completed enough coursework.

"We want to ensure that students who have earned an associate's degree get credit for that even if they move on to a four-year college," said Braulio Colón, who oversees this grant work for the Helios Education Foundation. "We view this as something that's essential for college completion."

The campaign is called "Credit When It's Due," and a dozen other states have participated since 2012. Deborah Bragg, a professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, [runs a lab](#) that studies these projects. Her research suggests that in each of those states, a couple thousand transfer students every year could get an AA if they wanted to.

Both students and colleges are supposed to benefit. Students get the value of the credential. They've already done all the learning, of course, but the piece of paper itself can make a difference. An associate's degree looks better on a resume than a pile of college credits. (This is related to the signaling theory of education, which argues that the reputation boost conferred by a college degree can be just as valuable as what you actually learn in school.)

Community colleges, in turn, get credit for giving degrees to students. These institutions sometimes get a bad reputation for their low graduation rates: Federal data indicate that only about 22 percent of students who start school in the fall get a degree within three years. But remember, an additional 25 percent of students transfer. Transfer students

aren't counted in the statistics, which makes community colleges look less effective than they actually are.

As states take a keener look at how their colleges are performing, these kinds of statistics will become important.

Traditionally, public colleges have been funded according to the number of students enrolled. In recent years, many states have been exploring ways to penalize or reward colleges for student outcomes. They might tie funding to the number of degrees awarded, or the number of credit hours taken in science and math.

Take Massachusetts, which measures its community colleges in part by their graduation rates, with a keen interest in minorities and those receiving Pell Grants. These and other statistics influence half of the money a college gets from the state. Tennessee has been another aggressive proponent of this practice. About 64 percent of state money for colleges is tied to data on degree progress, according to [an analysis](#) by the Lumina Foundation, a nonprofit that promotes performance funding. (Lumina is also involved in Credit Where It's Due.)

So far, it is not clear how effective these systems of payment will be, though the [evidence](#) has been mixed. A [recent report](#) from Washington state suggests that the policy didn't make much of a difference there.

Regardless, the pressure to improve graduation rates has inspired many initiatives that use data creatively. Maryland, for instance, has begun giving colleges money to [hunt down](#) people who dropped out just short of finishing their degrees. Keeping track of transfer students eligible for associate's degrees is another idea in this vein.

In Arizona, the state's three public universities will work together with Maricopa to find these students and reach out to them. "We want to acknowledge our students' successes,"

said Rose Rojas, who directs Maricopa’s transfer office. “They should get the credit for the work. They’ve earned it.”

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