Operation Degree Completion:
Two Steps to the Cap and Gown
As a nonprofit corporation, TG offers resources to help students and families plan and prepare for college, learn the basics of money management, and repay their federal student loans. TG’s philanthropy program, established in 2004, seeks to improve higher education access and completion, particularly for students from low/moderate-income families. To date, TG has awarded more than $48 million in competitive grant funding to support direct services to students and families, organizational capacity building, and educational research. Information about TG is available at www.TG.org/philanthropy.

In 2012, TG awarded a grant to the University of Central Oklahoma (UCO) for “Operation Degree Completion” (ODC). This two-step program was designed to help students and former students become alumni. The first step involved tracking down students who had disappeared from campus even after completing almost all requirements to graduate. The second step was very simple and reflected the quickly growing trend of reverse transfers. Program staff reviewed student records to see who had potentially completed their associate’s degrees if they were to transfer their credits back to their original community college. The processing was minimal, and the outcomes were tremendous. Partnering with UCO to make ODC a reality were Oklahoma City Community College, Oklahoma State University—Oklahoma City, Rose State College and the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education. For more information about this program, please visit www.uco.edu/degreecompletion.
Abstract

Students are “college hopping” more than at any other time in history. This phenomenon has left a growing number of students with many credits but no degree. Operation Degree Completion is a unique and transformative program designed to close that gap and has been noted as a “best practice” by multiple national organizations. With more than 2,000 graduates over the past three years, Operation Degree Completion is moving Oklahoma City forward in the Complete College America (CCA) effort. This effort to return the United States to “First in the World” in higher education degree attainment is a specific focus in our state. Oklahoma’s goal in relation to CCA is to increase the number of degrees and certificates earned in Oklahoma by an average of 1,700 per year through 2023, a 67 percent increase.
A February 21, 2013 article in *Forbes* magazine entitled, “The U.S. Cities that Lag (and Excel) in Degree Attainment” acknowledged that an estimated 44 million adults in the U.S. have some college experience and no degree. The article continued to highlight (or lowlight) the cities with the best and worst percentages of completers. Occupying the ninth position on the list of cities with the highest percentages of non-completers was Oklahoma City. According to the economic data referenced, approximately 26% of adults over twenty-five years of age in the metropolitan Oklahoma City area (almost 216,000 people) had some college experience and no degree (Wright, 2013).

Approximately two years earlier, the Governor of Oklahoma, Mary Fallin, stood on the campus of the University of Central Oklahoma and announced her intent to change this trend. Her statements included the following: “My top priority as governor is to create a business environment in Oklahoma that fosters economic growth and job creation. Ensuring we have a highly skilled, college educated workforce is essential to attracting and retaining good jobs and investment to our state.” Unfortunately, Oklahoma has joined Louisiana, Arkansas, and Nevada as one of the four worst states in the United States in the percentage of 25- to 34-year-olds with an associate’s degree.

Governor Fallin’s priority became the priority of the Oklahoma system of higher education. The directive was clear. Thanks to the tremendous support of a public benefit grant from TG, a public nonprofit corporation based in Round Rock, Texas, a successful partnership was cemented between the University of Central Oklahoma and its partners, Oklahoma City Community College, Rose State College, Oklahoma State University—Oklahoma City, and the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education. The University of Central Oklahoma was proud to lead this coalition with a “best practice” program known as Operation Degree Completion.

As the *Forbes* article illustrates, Oklahoma City, like many other major cities, has a problem. Fortunately, we also have a degree completion solution. James Brown once said, “The one thing that can solve most of our problems is dancing.” In Oklahoma, we are known for country music superstars like Garth Brooks, Carrie Underwood, Blake Shelton, Toby Keith and Reba McEntire, so it is only appropriate that this higher education superstar program, Operation Degree Completion, also connects to the two-step. This dance, though, is a bit different. It is a trot around the dance floor to help students and former students become alumni.

The first step involves tracking down students who have disappeared from campus even after completing almost all requirements to graduate. It is overwhelming how many of them there are on each campus. Perhaps you work at a community college where your degree programs require sixty hours to graduate. Run a list of everyone in your database with 57 hours or more who is not currently enrolled. If you work at a university that requires 120 hours to graduate, use the number of 117 hours or more. As you become more comfortable with the process, you can expand your pool by reducing the minimum credit hours in your list pull. You may be surprised at the large numbers of “almost grads”! A recent data analysis at a single local community college found over 29,000 students within one semester of graduating in their database alone.
To amplify the effect, think about dedicating an academic advisor or other institutional representative to tracking these students down and guiding them to their degrees. In many cases, that guidance is fairly straightforward:

- Students may need to change majors to a more general type of degree you offer;
- Students may need just one more class that they could take online or from a school in close proximity to their home; or
- Students just need to apply for graduation.

These three scenarios cover the majority of issues for near-completers; but whatever the situation, empower that professional to make it happen. This person should be knowledgeable about readmissions, be familiar with financial aid, and possess a lot of patience and persistence. Thinking about taking an advisor off-line when student-to-advisor ratios are abysmal may sound overwhelming, but this is worth it! During five years at the University of Central Oklahoma alone, this step produced 1,346 bachelor’s degrees and brought in over 7,000 credit hours. Recently, the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) coordinated a similar program, known as Project Win-Win (Adelman, 2013), involving 64 schools across nine states. Their awarding of 4,550 degrees proved the program’s replication ability.

The first step of this two-step is almost complete! Utilize this quick reference guide to keep you on your toes:

- Universities should run a list of everyone in their student data system with over 117 hours but no degree and no current enrollment. Community colleges should run the same list using 57 hours as the reference number. Compare this list with your state student data system (SDS) or the National Student Clearinghouse to prioritize students who have not transferred to a different institution or received a degree.
- Prioritize by starting with the students who are already over your degree minimum and run degree checks for them. Many may be within a class or two of graduating. Try to track them down and make sure they know what steps are left to graduate. You will also want to review any holds that they have prior to contacting them. Conduct holds and academic suspensions may not need to be a priority. You can continue to broaden your search to students with more hours left to graduate, if time is available.
- Be cognizant of outstanding balances owed to your school. You do not want to tell students about this amazing opportunity and then remind them they must pay a significant outstanding balance to be able to take part in it. However, the student’s earning potential will increase with the degree, so you may want to know what balance exceptions can be made to allow for final enrollment or if the institution can provide tuition waivers to assist with balance abatement.
- When you have students on the phone, make sure they know you are their best contact at the school. Be prepared to help them with readmission, graduation applications, enrollment, and whatever else is necessary to close the deal. Be their resource! The one-stop shop approach also will help with tracking. Follow up your calls with confirmation emails.
- Some students will have taken courses at other schools that will fulfill degree requirements. Some will need an online course or other alternative enrollment options. Help them find the options that will best close the gap. Just be sure you know they are all set before you hang up.
- Keep good records! You definitely will want to track all of these students! If a student needs three hours and you enroll them in those three, list that in your database. Your administration will definitely want to know how many new credit hours are attributable to your efforts.
- Obviously, you will want to keep track of new degrees issued due to your work.
- Be persistent! Many of these students have been out of school for a while. You may have bad contact information and need to do some sleuthing. Consider pursuing an Open Records Request for new addresses through the Department of Transportation, hiring a group of students
to search the Web and social media, or consider purchasing a license to an online people search program (though we did not find the people search programs to be very successful).

- Be patient! You may have to guide students through one course per semester for several semesters. You will also want to be creative, as many of these degree candidates may not live near your school any longer. You may have to guide them through major changes and facilitate everything.
- Share your mission with your colleagues. You will be surprised how often other staff and faculty are approached by friends saying they came close to finishing but never did. Hopefully, they will refer all of those people to you! You will become the personal institution guide for many students. This program takes handholding skills!
- Start the process again next semester!

Congratulations: You are halfway through learning to two-step!

“We should consider every day lost on which we have not danced at least once.”
Friedrich Nietzsche

Friedrich Nietzsche said, “We should consider every day lost on which we have not danced at least once.” During step two of this dance, you will find graduating students is so easy you will be practicing your steps every day. In fact, you may want to replace that cowboy hat with a mortarboard, as graduates will be dancing all around due to step two of this process. The second step of ODC is very simple and reflects the quickly growing trend of reverse transfers. A reverse transfer simply involves transferring back college credits from one school to a previous school to complete a degree. This is especially popular when a student at a community college transfers to a university prior to completing an associate’s degree. Unfortunately, many of the national trends related to reverse transfers push the compliance envelope with the US Department of Education’s Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) interpretations. This is primarily due to the student needing to give permission for their records to be sent back to their previous school. Since the reverse transfer trend is fairly new, it is easy to create FERPA-compliant opt-in systems in the application for admission. However, it is the thousands of potentially eligible students in the historical records who prove complicated. Efforts from Operation Degree Completion have not only managed to remain FERPA-compliant, but they serve as a “best practice” nationally for completing reverse transfers appropriately.

Here’s how it works at the University of Central Oklahoma. Staff members review records to see who has potentially completed an associate degree if we were to transfer their credit back to their original community college. The list is generated by looking for any transfer students with at least fifteen hours from a partner community college and sixty or more hours overall (those who are potentially eligible for an associate’s degree). We then work with an individual at the community college whom we designate as an “official volunteer.” This volunteer actually becomes a volunteer employee with the university and knows all work on the project will be done on behalf of the university to secure permission for the reverse transfer. This person has the authority to review transcripts and do initial degree audits for the various applicable associate degrees to see which may be the best fit for quick completion. When the volunteer notices degree requirements are completed, it is time to contact the student about completing their degree. The call is made on behalf of the university, but once the student gives permission for the reverse transfer to occur, the volunteer can return to being a community college employee and walk the student through the graduation process. In the event of a transcript hold at either institution, the degree can be posted, but the diploma is held up until holds are removed. Over the first three years of the Operation Degree Completion program, 1,530 degrees were awarded at the three original partner schools. One of our newest partners, Northern Oklahoma College, added 527 degrees
through this process over four semesters. Thousands of students have earned the credit; they just do not know how to begin the “dance” to receive their degrees.

Upon review of the graduates, we realized that almost 88% of those degrees were for the community colleges’ more generic degrees, like diversified or general studies. Because of this, it is easy to program the community college degree plans into the university’s degree audit system. At UCO, Degree Works® is used for degree audits. You can currently run a “What-If” analysis on students who could possibly receive a reverse transfer associate’s degree at six Oklahoma community colleges. The process is so much quicker once we know that this person may not only be eligible but also ready for a degree. Advisors can also utilize this resource to recommend future courses transfer students can take to become eligible for the reverse transfer.

One of the goals of Operation Degree Completion is assisting other universities to create similar graduation outreach programs. One of Central’s new partners is Southeastern Oklahoma State University. They partnered with Murray State College, one of their top feeder institutions. Their Associate Dean of Academic Services wrote, “When I called my first student, she actually thought it was a joke. It took a couple of minutes for me to convince her that the only thing she needed to do to have an associate’s degree was to complete the application for graduation. After she understood what we were doing for her, she was very appreciative. Her next question was ‘why are you all being so nice to me?’ I thought about explaining the statewide goals and the big picture, but the only response that really made sense was, ‘Because you are one of us.’ She understood that response.”

The Dean added, “This program is more than just creating more degrees to meet statewide goals. The program is about making sure students receive the recognition they deserve for the work they have completed.”

To make this part of the two-step really work, it is vital to have an interested university “dance” partner. There is no question of the benefit to community colleges, but sometimes it is more difficult to show the value to the university. One of the greatest benefits is the increased graduation rate of students who have an associate’s degree versus those who do not. National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2012) data shows the rate of bachelor’s degree completion is up to 11% higher for transfer students with an associate’s degree versus those without one. Additionally, our partnerships with community colleges have led to highly productive conversations about assisting students in transferring to the university. Most importantly, it is the right thing to do! Finally, according to the “Pathways to Prosperity” study by the Harvard Graduate School of Education (2011), only 29% of those who start two-year degrees finish them within three years. Imagine the impact on community college graduation rates if successful students who transition to universities prior to completion could now close the gap, receive the degree from the reverse transfer, and simultaneously continue progressing toward the baccalaureate degree. In fact, the effort is so vital the National Student Clearinghouse has initiated a significant reverse transfer automation effort. Their process may make the entire effort much easier and should be monitored for progress.

The reference guide for step two of Operation Degree Completion comes in two formats: one for the community college and one for the university.

Step two: Reverse transfers for the university:

- Establish an opt-in system for incoming transfer students to declare their permission to participate in a reverse transfer program. A sample statement could read:
Do you consent to allow your transcript to be shared with any community college(s) you previously attended for considering eligibility for and awarding of an Associate's degree?
- Yes
- No
- I already have an Associate's Degree

- Run a list of all students in your database with sixty hours or more and at least fifteen transfer hours. Base those numbers on your top feeder community college’s residency requirements. If your student data system is able to be more specific about which numbers come from which specific institutions, it will save you and your partners a lot of time! If it cannot, you will want to print transcripts for your partners that show all coursework, not just coursework completed at your institution. If you use Banner®, the “advisor” copy works well. Be sure also to include the “Yes” indicator marked on the opt-in question above. You will want to repeat this exact process after grades are posted every semester. Just add it to the normal end-of-semester grade review.
- If you have the community colleges’ degrees posted in your degree audit system, you can then run reviews of those students who have already given permission on the application for admission. Establish a working agreement with a specific designee at each community college to serve as your primary contact. It also helps to have a single name to give to students from that community college who are interested but may not currently qualify.
- If students have enough hours for an associate’s degree after the reverse transfer, the community college representative should contact them and verify they are okay with granting the degree. You should also let the community college know if some of the students have holds.
- If a student has a hold with your school, you can ask for the community college not to release the official records. The community college can still post the degree but not release the diploma if this is the process you choose.
- Keep good records!
  We have found several cases where students already had an associate’s degree, but it was not in the university system. This process can also help clean up some of your records. Keep track of these students if this is applicable.
  Keep track of all of your students in this program. Some items worth tracking include:
  - How many transcripts the community college started with
  - How many new degrees they have due to this program
  - Any process change recommendations
  - Qualitative stories about the impact the associate’s degree has had on the new recipients
- Be willing to share contact information with the community college, since you received the student’s permission. Likely, their records are not as up to date as yours, since the student was more recently enrolled with you.
- Prepare for a few phone calls saying, “Someone from my old community college is trying to get me to get an associate’s degree, but I think it’s a scam.”
- Educate your current advisement staff on what to look for on a transcript. They can be tremendous advocates.
- Start the process again next semester!
Step two: Reverse transfers for the community college:

- Your relationship with the university is vital to this effort. Be sure to establish a great rapport!
- Talk to your students as they prepare to transfer to the four-year college. Likely, you can even track who is going where by noting who is requesting their transcripts to be sent to specific universities. Take that opportunity to suggest a reverse transfer if the student is leaving prior to completing the associate’s degree at your school.
- Each semester, when you receive your list, process it as soon as possible. Start with the students over 60 hours if that is your minimum requirement for a degree. You may want to do degree checks in a couple different areas to see if students have completed a degree. Start with the major each student originally had while at your school. If that doesn’t work, try your more generic/degree completion degree.
- If the university staff member has done a degree check for you through the university’s audit system, review this information. Your institution is awarding the degree. However, the more you can work with the university on accuracy in its system, the quicker you can build confidence in its audit.
- If you discover the student is eligible for a degree, and you already have permission, award the degree. This may also be a good time to review your graduation processes. Are there any additional obstacles for completing an associate’s degree at your school: a graduation fee, a lengthy graduation application process, or anything else that may make graduating more complicated?
- Be aware that students may think it is a scam, as it sounds like something for nothing even though they did earn their degrees. Work to ensure they don’t have to do any follow-up. If you can fill out their graduation application or readmission application while you have them on the phone, do it. Congratulations them on their associate’s degree and be sure they get a new official copy of their community college transcript showing their degree has been awarded to provide to the university.
- If students are missing one course and you have time to contact them, let them know which course they can take at the university they attend to complete their associate’s degree. Remind them an AA or an AS may help them toward their baccalaureate degree. In some states, a completed AA or AS degree automatically waives the general education requirements for the baccalaureate degree. Often, they may have already left the university, so this may be their only degree, and taking one more course will be worth it to them.
- For the integrity of the system, please verify the student does not have holds at the university prior to releasing the diploma. Support the university’s holds just as it supports yours. You can post the degree without releasing it if the student still has holds (usually balances) at the university, if they ask you to honor that hold.
- Keep good records!

> “Someone from my old community college is trying to get me to get an associate’s degree, but I think it’s a scam.”

Community colleges should report to the partner university students who may already have an associate’s degree that is not in the university’s records for some reason. Keep track of all of your students in this program, but report the following back to the university:

- How many transcripts you started with
- How many new degrees you have due to this program

TWO STEPS TO THE CAP AND GOWN

OPERATION DEGREE COMPLETION
- How many students are within one course of graduating, and whether you were able to tell them about it. Hopefully, they will move to your graduate numbers next semester.
- Any process change recommendations

Celebrate it! Treat students like regular graduates even though they most likely will not attend commencement.

Start the process again next semester!

Referring back to the February 2013 *Forbes* article, it’s no wonder ramping up completions has become a major agenda item for politicians and education leaders. Just 56-61% of first-time, full-time students at four-year schools complete their education within six years. As of 2012, an estimated 44 million adults in the U.S. fall in the “some college, no degree” category. These 44 million adults with "some college, no degree" are our target audience. If 56% of those students who left could now get a degree, that would be almost 25 million additional graduates donning the cap and gown. Are you ready to dance?
Conclusion

Today’s college attendees are more mobile than at any time in history. They have so many choices, and college hopping has become an expected practice. Many students have academic achievements on their transcripts at multiple institutions of higher education. Additionally, there is a common tendency for students to change majors and/or leave school without notifying their college. Unfortunately, this has led to situations where students have completed their requirements or are very close to doing so without receiving a degree. When this happens and students don’t stay in school through graduation, there is a large gap of “almost grads” that needs to be closed. Operation Degree Completion, a program originating at the University of Central Oklahoma and funded by a grant through TG, is a unique “best practice” program designed to close that gap. Working with three community colleges around metropolitan Oklahoma City, this program has assisted more than 2,000 students in attaining degrees over the past three years. Program replication around the state will multiply that number rapidly. In two steps, this fantastic metropolitan partnership can be replicated to other metropolitan areas and beyond.
References


For more information about the University of Central Oklahoma and Operation Degree Completion, visit www.uco.edu/degreecompletion.