



MISSOURI HIGHER EDUCATION EQUITY
BRIDGES TO SUCCESS

WHITE PAPER:

**MISSOURI'S
DEGREES
WHEN DUE**



DEPARTMENT OF
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Promising Practices to Re-engage Stopped-Out Students

Reengaging the “stopped-out” student population has become a major focus of higher education leaders, and it has become even more of a priority in the post-COVID recovery.

A [U.S. Census pulse survey](#) of households with college students revealed that many students dropped out of school in the fall of 2020 because they didn’t want to take virtual classes, they were concerned about contracting COVID-19, or they were unable to attend due to income loss. Students from families with incomes under \$75,000 were twice as likely to say they canceled all plans to take classes as students from families with incomes over \$100,000.¹

According to data from the [National Student Clearinghouse](#), 35 million students in the U.S. have attended college and didn’t earn a degree – 4 million of those students completed at least two years. The report also found that only 12 percent of people who had last enrolled in a community college between 1993 and 2013 returned to any type of degree-granting higher education institution within the next five years.² In Missouri, more than 75,000 adults have been identified as having at least two years of college credit but no awarded degree.

Degree reclamation efforts seek to close equity gaps in postsecondary attainment for students of color, low-income students, military and veteran students, and justice-impacted students. One of the most recent efforts in this space is Degrees When Due.

What is Degrees When Due?

[Degrees When Due](#) is a completion and equity initiative from the Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) that helps states and colleges increase degree attainment among the “some college, no degree” population.

In 2019, IHEP selected Missouri to join 20 other states for Cohort 2 of Degrees When Due. The initiative:

- Provided access to an interactive online tool and live coaching to guide staff through implementation of degree reclamation strategies
- Built and facilitated communities of practice among campus staff and state agencies
- Researched best practices for reengaging students

Throughout the project, institutions worked with a team of researchers to learn best practices for identifying award-eligible students to reengage, maximizing degree audits, and locating and communicating with students.

Institutions also received full access to a Learning Management System (LMS) including best practices for identifying, contacting, re-enrolling, and supporting stopped out students.

¹ *Week 13 Household Pulse Survey: August 19 – August 31, 2020. United States Census Bureau. Census.gov.*

² *Shapiro, D., Ryn, M., Huie, F., & Liu, Q. (October 2019) Some College, No Degree, a 2019 Snapshot for the Nation and 50 States, Signature Report No. 17, Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.*

According to a [2019 report from the Lumina Foundation](#), today’s student is older, more diverse, working, raising families, and often struggling.

- 64% of college students work and 40% of them work full time.
- 6% of college students serve or have served in the U.S. armed forces
- 49% of college students are financially independent from their parents
- 57% of students live independently – away from their parents or campus housing
- 24% of college students have children or other dependents

The following Missouri colleges and universities were in the original Degrees When Due cohort:

- Avila University
- Central Methodist University
- Crowder College
- East Central College
- Harris-Stowe State University
- Jefferson College
- Lincoln University
- Metropolitan Community College
- Missouri Southern State University
- Missouri State University-West Plains
- Moberly Area Community College
- Northwest Missouri State University
- Southeast Missouri State University
- State Fair Community College
- Three Rivers College
- University of Central Missouri
- University of Missouri-Kansas City
- University of Missouri-St. Louis

Why Institutions Joined the Cohort

Institutions joined the Degrees When Due cohort to not only enhance the work they were already doing toward degree reclamation for adult learners through reverse transfer and partnerships with state and local economic development organizations and community groups, but also to learn best practices.

According to University of Missouri-St. Louis, “By completing degrees, low-income students raise the economic status of both themselves and their families by extension, they improve their ability to repay student loan debt, and they positively impact their communities by more actively engaging in civic life.”

Closing equity gaps was another major institutional goal. “While our population of students in our rural location is not highly diverse in terms of race, we do have a large population of first-generation college students, low-income students, single parent students, and veterans,” East Central College’s application stated.

Missouri’s two Historically Black Colleges or Universities (HBCUs), Lincoln University and Harris-Stowe State University, pointed to their historical mission.

“The open enrollment policy of the institution allows us to accept students that other institutions would not accept and provide them with a quality educational experience leading to degree attainment,” Lincoln University’s application stated.

“The reclamation efforts are directly related to HSSU’s commitment to meeting the needs of a student population that is diverse in culture, ethnicity, and experiential backgrounds,” Harris-Stowe’s application stated.

Lastly, many noted that the Degrees When Due initiative paired well with the [Fast Track Workforce Incentive Grant](#), a new financial aid program from the Missouri Department of Higher Education & Workforce Development, that addresses workforce needs by encouraging adults to pursue a certificate, degree, or industry-recognized credential in a high-demand field.

Covid Disruption and Response

IHEP paused the Degrees When Due project during spring 2020 as the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic were being assessed. This allowed institutions the opportunity to respond to the most immediate issues and time to regroup as they shifted their plans for reaching target students.

Due to the continued enrollment challenges, financial impacts, and staffing reductions spurred by the pandemic, eight institutions were not able to continue with the Degrees When Due project. These included Crowder College and Three Rivers College, which had suffered cybersecurity breaches and network outages; as well as State Fair Community College, Metropolitan Community College, Missouri Southern State University, Moberly Area Community College, Missouri State-West Plains, and Avila University, which were unable to continue due to staffing reductions.

Addressing students’ immediate needs was top priority for Degrees When Due institutions during this time. For example, institutions executed a quick shift to online learning, and made registration and other administrative processes accessible to students online. In many instances they also implemented a COVID-19 grading system. Degrees When Due campuses also provided food, shelter, laptops, and internet access, as well as virtual events to provide a sense of community and support.

Many institutions continued to make progress during the project pause. For example, Central Methodist University administrators and staff took the time to review old files to identify those who could earn an associate or bachelor’s degree, and contacted several students to surprise them with the fact that they were eligible to earn one.

IHEP gave institutions the option to expand the scope of the project to include COVID-19 stop-outs. East Central College opted in to this additional reporting and identified 343 students who stopped out due to the pandemic. To date, 22 of those students have applied for re-admission, and 19 have re-enrolled.

Early Outcomes

While it is still too early to know the full impact the Degrees When Due initiative has had, early reports show the initiative is working.

Central Methodist reported that 45 of the 55 stopped out students who were identified and engaged have earned a degree.

Central Methodist Provost Dr. Rita Gulstad shared the story of a student who was unable to complete her teaching degree because COVID-19 prevented her from meeting the student teaching requirement. “She was able to get a degree in Educational Studies, and she cried and walked at graduation,” Gulstad said.

Gulstad said that they found they could graduate many of the students without needing to take additional classes by granting Interdisciplinary Studies or Educational Studies degrees.

University of Missouri-Kansas City reported they have reengaged 59 students from its universe of interest, with 15 students re-enrolled and nine earning a degree.

UMKC’s Vice Provost for Institutional Effectiveness, Dr. Kelli Cox, said the biggest challenge has been generating student interest to return to college, most likely due to the pandemic.

Northwest Missouri State University reported that 20 stopped-out students have been conferred a degree so far, and eight students have re-enrolled.

University of Central Missouri reported that seven students have received a degree so far. The university has been able to engage 25 stopped-out students so far, and four of those have re-enrolled, with more expected to re-enroll for the fall semester.

“For the most part, previous students are very appreciative of our efforts to reach them, especially with the degree audits already completed,” said Dr. Laurel Hogue, Vice Provost for Extended Studies at UCM.

The project will conclude in October 2021. At that time, a full report, including the numbers of stopped out students who earned degrees or re-enrolled, will be released.

PROMISING PRACTICES

Communication and Outreach

East Central College launched the [Finish Your Investment \(FYI\) initiative](#) in July 2020 to re-engage and re-enroll stopped out students. The initiative included a large scale marketing and outreach plan, as well as enhanced supports for returning students, including financial aid programs, loan and debt forgiveness, and advising and success coaching.

Dr. Robyn Walter, Vice President of Academic Affairs, reported that the FYI effort targeted 742 former students. Of those students, 30 were able to “auto graduate;” 31 have applied for admission; 20 enrolled in courses; and five have earned a degree (one through reverse transfer, and four through completed credits).

“While the numbers are not super fabulous, we firmly believe for the students that have returned it is life changing,” Walter said, noting that one student who has returned was able to compete her pre-requisites and has been accepted into the nursing program.

The targeted outreach and supports offered through FYI motivated Mercedes Mangrum to finish her degree after a four-year pause. The 26-year-old administrative assistant was only 12 credit hours away from an associate degree.

In [a recent blog published by ECC](#), Mangrum said, “My decision to complete this semester was solely to give myself options for future endeavors. As an older student, I did feel more focused and ready to complete my degree.”

Northwest Missouri State University created a simplified [Degrees When Due application link](#) so stopped out students have a simple process for reengaging. The quick application allows returning and former students to indicate whether they want to declare a major or select the program that will require the fewest courses to complete a bachelor’s degree.

Jefferson College is developing a marketing campaign called Graduates Really Achieve Dreams (GRAD), with a launch tentatively planned for fall 2021.

Building a Campus Team

A key part of Degrees When Due was building a campus team charged with cross-campus collaboration strategies to retain current students and support adult reengagement.

“A major bright spot is the depth and scope of our conversation regarding student achievement which has created rich dialogue about retention, equity, student support, and completion,” said Dr. Robyn Walter, Vice President of Academic Affairs, East Central College.

Team members included the Vice President of Academic Affairs, Vice President of External Relations, Vice President of Student Development, Director of Institutional Research, Executive Director of Institutional Effectiveness, Executive Director of Learning Center & Academic Support, Registrar, Associate Registrar, Admissions Counselor, Business Analyst, Enrollment Services, Coordinator of Academic Services, Retention Coordinator, and Public Relations Officer.

Dr. Allison Hoffmann, Assistant Vice President, Admissions and Student Success, at Northwest Missouri State University, said her campus team was able to have “necessary conversations about potentially outdated policies,” consider policy and process improvements, and determine and analyze common themes with students who did not complete a degree in order to minimize future stop-outs.

Identifying the Universe of Interest

Another key to Degrees When Due is using data to identify eligible students and inform decisions. The Universe of Interest are the students whose record will be audited, and hopefully eligible to receive a degree based on coursework already completed or a Potential Completer who can be re-enrolled to complete coursework.

In addition to using this information to find and reengage stopped-out students, institutions also identified common reasons for students not completing their degrees.

Stephen Linden, Registrar at Oakland Community College in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, serves as Missouri's Degrees When Due Coach. He recommended reconsidering or waiving some financial hurdles that may prevent a student from coming back to school. These include account balances and outstanding fines (library, parking tickets, graduation fees, and so on).

"We are having discussions to see if we can improve policies and procedures, alongside our strategic initiative work, to cut down on the number that would end up on a similar list in the future," said Leslie Cuenca from Northwest Missouri State University.

"The most important change was the requirement of having signed degree plans," Rita Gulstad from Central Methodist stated. "This may seem simplistic, but it literally kept some students from graduation. Also, we now regularly check students each semester to see who could graduate, but hasn't and why."

In some cases, participating in Degrees When Due showed institutions the limitations of their current data systems.

"The processes Degrees When Due shared helped raise the college's awareness of best practices and showed we needed to improve our degree auditing system," said Dr. Allan Wamsley, Provost, Jefferson College.

Addressing Financial Barriers

Laurel Hogue from the University of Central Missouri said the Degrees When Due project helped identify the most prevalent reasons stopped-out students gave for not completing their degrees. Financial barriers, especially previous university debts, have spurred UCM to consider developing a debt forgiveness program.

Allison Hoffmann at Northwest Missouri State University, said the university has allowed variations to policies for students in the universe of interest as a pilot. The university has waived the graduation fee and essay for returning students on probation, and has added an alert within the system when a student does not graduate so the advisor and student are both notified and it is recorded in the system.

IHEP also issued guidance on using the [Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund \(HEERF\)](#) for student debt forgiveness. According to that guidance, HEERF funds can be used to forgive institutional charges that were incurred as a result of the pandemic for students who incurred institutional costs on or after March 13, 2020, and students who included an institutional cost at any time but were enrolled at some point during the national emergency.

Degrees When Due Playbook and Next Steps

With the current phase of Degrees When Due coming to a close in October, the IHEP team has started the planning for materials and artifacts that capture the impact of the degree reclamation initiative. Dr. Chris Baldwin, DWD State Liaison Coach, said the plan is to produce a DWD Playbook that states, regions, and/or institutions can utilize to go through the DWD process on their own. A final report that summarizes the experience of the three DWD cohorts will also be released.

The resources available to the DWD institutions will be publicly available online in an easy-to-follow format in late 2021 to early 2022. The LMS content and other resources created during the initiative will guide institutions through adult reengagement and/or reverse transfer implementation.