#### **DEGREES WHEN DUE: CASE STUDY**





Credits: Peter Griggs, Shasta College

# SHASTA COLLEGE

"It's Just the Right Thing to Do for Students:" Aiding the Community by Serving Individuals with Some College, but No Degree

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Located in one of the northernmost counties of California, Shasta College, in Redding, has become an example of why serving students with "some college, but no degree" (SCND) is critical to support the local community. A member of the first Degrees When Due (DWD) cohort, the Shasta College case offers insights into how an institution can serve its community through supporting students with SCND.

Leaders at Shasta, the sole public postsecondary institution in a rural, three-county area, were sobered to learn that one in three adults in the region had SCND, which far exceeds the national average of one in five. In a region where the vast majority of residents live in the immediate area and serve the community through local businesses, hospitals, schools, and government agencies (city, county, and federal positions), improving degree attainment was critical for the prosperity of Shasta and the surrounding region.

This case study offers insights into how a higher education institution can better support its students and the surrounding community by identifying institutionally driven barriers to completion and supporting the successful return of formerly enrolled students.

Degrees When Due (DWD) is a completion and equity initiative led by the Institute for Higher Education Policy to help states and colleges increase degree attainment among the "some college, but no degree" population. Launched in 2018, nearly 200 institutions in 23 states have joined the first three cohorts of DWD to build expertise, capacity, and infrastructure on campuses to get students back on track and across the completion finish line.

### **ABOUT SHASTA COLLEGE**



Source: Authors' calculations using Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2017-2019, Completions. Accessed on 9/13/2021.

COMMUNITY INSTITUTION TYPE

DEGREES CONFERRED ANNUALLY



Credits: Shawn Spence Photography, Lumina Foundation Focus Magazine

IN A REGION WHERE THE VAST MAJORITY OF RESIDENTS LIVE IN THE IMMEDIATE AREA AND SERVE THE COMMUNITY THROUGH LOCAL BUSINESSES, HOSPITALS, SCHOOLS, AND GOVERNMENT AGENCIES (CITY, COUNTY, AND FEDERAL POSITIONS), IMPROVING DEGREE ATTAINMENT WAS CRITICAL FOR THE PROSPERITY OF SHASTA AND THE SURROUNDING REGION.

### WHAT MOTIVATED PARTICIPATION IN DWD?

Shasta College decided to join DWD based on three related factors: an institutional awareness of the need to serve the SCND population to address the local community's social and economic conditions; strong institutional leadership support for DWD strategies; and momentum from existing programs.



Credits: Shasta College

## DWD PROVIDED A PLAN TO ADDRESS THE LOCAL COMMUNITY'S SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

As one Shasta leader explained, "there isn't a college-going culture" in the area. The local economy has focused heavily on resource extraction jobs such as mining and logging, and people who live there could find economic security with no postsecondary education. Shasta leaders acknowledged this economic context and noted that education beyond high school was never a priority for local residents. Leading up to their DWD participation, college leaders expected the recruitment and reenrollment of former students with credit to be a difficult task.

Despite this context, Shasta leaders knew that DWD efforts were critical to improve social and economic conditions in the region. As outlined by one Shasta leader, the region is "often in the top five, or at least the top 10, in all sorts of public health statistics such as highest rates of smoking, highest rates of obesity, highest rates of domestic abuse, highest rates of diabetes, and highest rates of adverse childhood experiences." This person explained that "our public health department would argue that our regional collective work began by linking all of these public health issues with educational level—or the lack of educational attainment—and that our lower educational attainment is dramatically affecting our health." Consequently, Shasta leaders viewed the decision to join DWD and support the SCND population as a first step to shift this educational culture, which could lead to more positive community economic and health outcomes.

## INSTITUTIONAL LEADERSHIP STRONGLY SUPPORTED SHASTA'S PARTICIPATION IN DWD

A second factor that prompted Shasta's participation in DWD was the vocal support of institutional leadership and the acknowledgment of the initiative's value by other stakeholders. One Shasta leader stated that

# "Two key people—particularly, our college president and our VP of instruction—were really champions behind this effort . . . and then the rest of our leadership team really has embraced it wholeheartedly and our deans are on board."

Top institutional leadership understood the value of DWD because degree reclamation policies are student-friendly policies. Indeed, the president often communicated in meetings with staff that Shasta joined DWD not because of potential financial incentives for conferring more degrees, but because "it's just the right thing to do for students."

In fact, Shasta College's leadership is so supportive of improving opportunities for the SCND population that it has written degree reclamation into the institutional strategic plan. Specifically, under Goal One, which focuses on using "innovative best practices" to increase the rate that students complete their degrees and transfer requirements, Shasta College's 2018–21 strategic plan says that the institution will: "Implement best practices to proactively confer degrees and certificates to students for the work that has been completed including degree audits, "degree reclamation" and "opt-out" degree conferral."<sup>1</sup>

One prominent member of Shasta College's leadership team often mentioned the influence of Dr. Kate Mahar, Dean of Innovation and Strategic Initiatives (and DWD team member), on the institution's decision to join DWD. Another Shasta leader noted that Dean Mahar was always "pushing for these sorts of ideas . . . and she was involved in the strategic planning process with our college council and our leadership." Leaders said that Mahar was the first to approach the college regarding DWD. One leader recalled that Mahar told them, "We have an opportunity to participate in this pilot project' . . . [and] after she explained the concept and asked if we were interested, I said, 'why wouldn't we be?"

Shasta leaders recognized the importance of serving the SCND population and the institution committed to implementing DWD strategies that recognize the unique barriers this population faces and the potential changes needed to best serve it.

#### **DEFINITION OF DEGREE RECLAMATION**

Degree reclamation is an equity-focused and evidence-based approach to boost degree attainment among potential completers and "some college, but no degree" populations.

Institutions and systems deploy degree reclamation strategies to help potential completers—students who have accumulated roughly two or more academic years' worth of credit and have stopped out of an institution or transferred from a two-year to a four-year institution before receiving a degree—attain degrees that are meaningful to their education and career goals.

Through degree reclamation, institutions also reengage the "some college, but no degree" population, and provide these students with targeted supports toward completion of associate's degrees, and award degrees when sufficient credits are earned.

In short, degree reclamation ensures that earned but unawarded degrees aren't left on the table and that students who are just a few credits shy of a degree are supported all the way across the finish line.

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<sup>1.</sup> Activity E under Institutional Objective 1.2, Shasta College 2018 - 2021 Strategic Plan. Retrieved from https://scmainweb.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/files/resources/2018-2021-strategic-planv2web.pdf

#### MOMENTUM FROM EXISTING PROGRAMS ALIGNED WITH DWD GOALS

A third factor that led to Shasta's involvement and success in DWD was the institution's ability to align it with existing efforts and opportunities to support the SCND population, including work with the Lumina Foundation-funded and Institute for Higher Education Policy-led (IHEP) Talent Hub. Through this Talent Hub work, Shasta College became acquainted with the high proportion of SCND individuals in its region which, in turn, convinced it to join the DWD initiative.

Shasta leaders recognized that the average age of residents in the region was older than the rest of the state, suggesting that degree reclamation efforts would be key to boosting degree attainment, given the limited number of traditionally aged college students in the region. As one Shasta official explained, "we really got excited about how many people [DWD] could help in our region and what that could look like." With support from leadership, Shasta's DWD team accounted for existing programs and initiatives currently underway when considering how the new initiative could align with other programs and the broader goals of the institution.

If students identified through DWD needed additional coursework, Shasta leveraged its accelerated degree program known as ACE (Accelerated College Education), an adult completion program (see sidebar). ACE and its director, Buffy Tanner, have gained national attention for early success in serving adult learners, leading Shasta leaders to agree that ACE would be an ideal avenue to help SCND students complete their final credits to attain a degree. One leader said:

Our ACE program is so strong and to be able to reach out and say, "did you know how close you were? Come on back." And we have this great place to bring them back to thanks to [Buffy Tanner].... One of the things that I have always said is, you can't invite adults back to the program they left in the first place; [in] targeting them [it's important to note that] "it's different, you're different, come on back."

Many adult students are working and/or have family care responsibilities, and ACE provides an avenue for them to complete their degrees on an expedited timeline and with a format conducive to their scheduling needs.

#### WHAT IS THE ACE PROGRAM?

The ACE program is designed for people who want to continue working, attend college full-time, need predictable schedules, and are ready to take college-level coursework by the time the program begins. The program features compressed classes that are hybrid (in-person plus online instruction) as well as fully online. The structure allows a student to complete their certificate or degree within four to 24 months.

Credits: Peter Griggs, Shasta College



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## ENGAGEMENT AND EXPERIENCE WITH DEGREES WHEN DUE

After joining DWD's first cohort in October 2018, Shasta College organized its DWD work into four primary categories that are described in detail below: establishing a DWD team and DWD leadership; identifying award-eligible students and auditing degrees; engaging students; and sustaining degree reclamation strategies.

#### ESTABLISHING A DWD TEAM AND DWD LEADERSHIP

Before beginning DWD work, Shasta College secured additional funding to devote to the initiative and, using Lumina funds, hired a coordinator for DWD who worked three to five hours a week. The college developed a cross-functional team based on the guidance included in the DWD learning management system (LMS). The team included the associate vice president of student services, dean of educational technology and research, counseling staff, associate dean of financial aid and admissions, transfer evaluator, ACE director, academic deans, a faculty member, and marketing and information technology staff. The goal of creating the team was to convene the diverse expertise needed to locate and contact stopped-out students and ensure returning students would have a transition back to postsecondary education with the fewest barriers.

The coordinator served as Shasta's DWD team lead. Shasta's leaders attributed the momentum of the team's work to the coordinator. One of Shasta's leaders reflected on how the project progressed and highlighted her critical role:

She herds the cats—looking at who we want to target and then completing the data analysis; she really helps with that logistic support. She's also the primary person that interacts with the DWD learning management system portal and then we work together on areas where we're stumped.

Several team members said that having a campus lead whose primary role was to support the DWD initiative was critical to ensuring progress. It was the DWD team lead who most often participated in official activities, disseminated takeaways to the team, and helped ensure the tasks were complete and the initiative was progressing at an appropriate pace.

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One team member said:

I think our DWD team relied on the campus lead to serve as a coordinator. We relied on her being that linchpin between the project's bigger processes and . . . what the group needs to do. Each member could then go complete the piece they need to complete and come back together and feed that all through our team lead.

Given the many responsibilities of community college administrators, Shasta's decision to identify a clear team lead to coordinate DWD activities was critical. This single individual in charge of triaging DWD work to the appropriate area allowed the institution to remain organized and on-task. And although the DWD team lead coordinated the initiative's day-to-day operations, it was the diverse expertise of the cross-functional team that allowed Shasta to move its work forward.



## IDENTIFYING AWARD-ELIGIBLE STUDENTS AND AUDITING DEGREES

To implement DWD, Shasta College first established how it would identify its stopped-out population, including the time of last enrollment, the degrees against which transcripts would be audited for eligibility, and other institutional policies that might limit the completion of a degree in a timely fashion (e.g., credit residency requirements or credit expiration). Shasta College decided to identify students enrolled between fall 2013 and spring 2018, who had at least 45 credits, and who had a GPA of at least 2.0. Although Shasta does not have a credit expiration policy, it does require at least 12 credits to be completed at the institution to fulfill the credit residency requirement.

Based on these factors, the IT department generated a list of over 4,500 students. However, Shasta College did not have the capacity to conduct batch degree audits on student transcripts, so team members would need to manually compare former students' coursework with existing academic programs to determine degree eligibility. Because this process is time-consuming, the DWD team needed to limit the initial group of transcripts to review.

The team decided to focus on a subset of 575 students. As explained by a Shasta leader, this population "had 60 units or more when they left with no degree or certificate, and . . . they took the courses that would have tended to transfer" via the California State University General Education Breadth requirements. More specifically, Shasta focused on the subset of students who had already completed transfer-level math, English, and communications courses, as well as a critical thinking class. As one DWD team member remarked, "if students have gone through the trouble of completing those particular four classes, especially the math course . . . this is the low hanging fruit group" that would be most likely to be eligible for a degree or willing to return to complete remaining credits.

Even with this more limited group of students to review, a staff member could only review the transcripts of 25 to 50 former students per week, because all audits were conducted manually. But even though the degree auditing process was cumbersome, the team saw early successes that supported continued work. One DWD team member noted that "out of the first 175 student transcripts that were analyzed, about a third already had a degree that was never awarded."

#### NEARLY HALF OF TARGETED STUDENTS HAD ALREADY COMPLETED A DEGREE

Shasta identified 575 former students who had stopped out but had accumulated 60 or more credits,<sup>2</sup> and almost half—252—of these students had completed all the academic requirements for a degree. After contacting students, Shasta awarded degrees to 250 of them.

 Students in this group accumulated an average of 79.63 credits, with a minimum of 51 credits accumulated and maximum of 206. Three students in this group fell below 60 credits accumulated (51, 54, 57).

Figure 1. Targeted Former Students and Subsequent Outcomes



Note: Targeted students had stopped out but had accumulated 60 or more credits.

#### ENGAGING STUDENTS

The early results of student degree eligibility work supported Shasta's position that the SCND population was a critical group to reengage. However, staff needed to make well-planned decisions regarding communicating with students about degree eligibility as well as mechanisms to help near-completers complete their degree.

Clear and responsive communication was key. Shasta leaders decided it was essential to establish a centralized communication point with a dedicated phone line, email, and website to which all students in this population could be directed. As one DWD team member explained, "we're going to get one shot at this, and if we put them through any hoop, if they sit on the phone, or if we don't return their message, they're gone."

In order to streamline communication, the college adopted an opt-out consent approach for students who already met the degree requirements for a credential. A Shasta leader explained the communication script: "one states, 'Hey, we took another look at your records and you did earn a degree. We've posted it to your transcripts. Reach out and let us know what address you want your diploma to be sent to. If you don't want your degree, please call us and let us know." Shasta communicated to students that it planned to post the degree to their transcripts and recommended that students update their resumes. Shasta also invited students to graduation if they wanted to walk at graduation and celebrate their success.

For near-completer students who still needed to finish credits, Shasta leaders focused on communicating the new opportunities available through the ACE program. Shasta would explain the number and type of courses that students were missing and advise them to consider the ACE program. ACE offers year-round classes including an eight-week summer session and two eight-week sessions in both the fall and spring semesters. ACE schedules classes based on the specific courses that adult students need to complete their degrees, so there was natural alignment between DWD and ACE.

Shasta's team also mentioned the possibility of creating an ACE cohort drawn from its DWD list and establishing a rotating schedule of courses to support students reenrolling and completing their degrees. As described by a DWD team member, near-completers may "only need three or four classes but, because of prerequisites or scheduling, if they took them in a normal semester format, it would take them a couple semesters. But the ACE format allows students to potentially complete everything in one semester."

#### MULTIPLE CONTACT ATTEMPTS AND CONTACT METHODS ARE NECESSARY TO REACH THE SCND POPULATION

Shasta reached out to the SCND population three times, on each attempt connecting with additional students. For instance, after sending an email to 542 students, only 38 responded. Shasta then called 332 students and received responses from an additional 86 students who either had an invalid email or did not respond to the first email communication. One additional phone call resulted in another 32 students responding.

#### Figure 2. Response Level Across Contact Attempts



#### SUSTAINING DEGREE RECLAMATION STRATEGIES

The fourth and final component to Shasta's engagement with DWD centered on adopting the lessons from its year in the initiative into the overall practices of the institution. One Shasta official explained that "some of the things that we were doing for the Degrees When Due population are actually now getting adopted by the whole campus. So, having support for adult students [who] aren't familiar with online courses, having a case manager and student facilitator [who's] following up with students, and having courses in the eightweek accessible format. Those are things that we're talking to the rest of the campus about because they could really become best practices."

While the DWD team underscored that its DWD experience helped Shasta expand its successes (re)engaging the SCND population, it also highlighted the beginnings of a broader review of practices conducted by the school. "We have a group now looking at early indicators of people [who] might stop out with the idea of how do we bring them back. We're also talking about credit for prior learning and competencybased education," said one institutional leader. Although DWD was part of a broader group of initiatives in which Shasta was participating, as this leader explained, "we've reached a tipping point with the [campus] culture, that I think a lot more is going to be sustained."

In addition to examining barriers to completion for the SCND population, Shasta leaders noted other policy changes as the result of the DWD initiative. "The whole program has really helped us rethink how we are doing things, such as when people claim degrees. The practice previously was students apply for their degree if they know they're supposed to, and then if students don't have the requirements for the degree, they receive information saying, 'sorry, you're short.' But now these messages explain 'well, no [you can't get the degree you applied for], but you can have this [other] degree." In order to make this policy change, which is more focused on student completion, Shasta needed to make broader changes to graduation requirements and the degree audit process:

We moved up when [the registrar] does the degree audit for students graduating, so that if somebody doesn't have what they need, the registrar can catch it. We changed the policy for students identified through DWD from opting-out [of degrees] to opting-in, respecting that some students may have barriers related to immigration status or education goals that do not require a degree, but we are making this process much easier for the student.



Ultimately, as one DWD team member explained, "I think [DWD] changed the whole way awarding degrees" is happening.

Credits: George Milton, Pexels

## SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

As Shasta leadership and its DWD campus team reflected on their experience as part of the initiative, a few successes and challenges emerged.

## SUCCESS #1: IDENTIFYING BARRIERS TO COMPLETION AND REASONS STOPPED-OUT STUDENTS RETURN

Shasta College scored its first success early on as officials gained a clearer understanding of the barriers that prevent students from completing their degree. For example, after completing degree audits for individuals identified as part of the SCND population, one of the most common barriers to degree completion was a computer literacy requirement. An academic leader explained that the faculty "wanted to make sure [students] have computer literacy and they're convinced that the only way to do it is through one of the options that they've proposed, which is primarily to take this computer literacy class or another class." This graduation requirement was degree specific, attached to technical and career-focused programs, but it was the only missing course for over a third of the SCND population.

Although it took several presentations and votes among the members of the academic senate, the computer literacy requirement was ultimately removed and a similar computer literacy course was added as an option to fulfill a general education requirement. A Shasta leader said that a key factor that convinced faculty to consider the removal of this graduation requirement was the DWD data that highlighted this requirement as a significant barrier to the degree for many students.

The DWD initiative also revealed several reasons that students decided to reengage in their postsecondary education. One leader described learning about these reasons:

We thought students would be interested in reenrolling primarily for career purposes. Either they want to switch their career or they are getting blocked from promotions because they don't have a degree. While we definitely see that, just as many students are returning for emotional and personal reasons. Postsecondary education was something that they started when they were younger and then life derailed their path, or they started it when they were younger and they've been in and out of school when they could. I know we had one guy who's a financial planner; financially, he was doing just fine, but he really wanted to complete his associate degree. Another woman, who was a manager of four chain restaurants in the area, was also doing fine financially and liked her job but had started her degree years before and was like, "I just want to finish it." It's been hanging over [their] heads for years.

By better understanding barriers to completion and reasons why formerly stopped-out students were interested in returning, Shasta has been able to implement policies and practices to remove barriers prior to stop-out and improve communication strategies to help interested students return.

#### NEAR -COMPLETERS WERE WITHIN A FEW CLASSES OF DEGREE COMPLETION, BUT MISSING COMMON ACADEMIC REQUIREMENTS

In the first degree audit of 324 nearcompleters who had accumulated 60 or more credits, students had about two classes remaining to complete a degree.<sup>3</sup> The most common classes that students were missing included: the computer literacy requirement (65%), general education requirements (51%), major requirements (39%), and math (12%).

3. Students in this group had an average of 6.79 credits remaining to complete a degree. The median was 6, or about two classes.

#### Figure 3. Missing Academic Requirements



#### CHALLENGE #1: ADDRESSING LIMITS TO CAPACITY AND RESOURCES

A main challenge identified by Shasta's DWD team is the significant amount of work necessary to start and implement programs focused on supporting stopped-out students, including project coordination, degree audits, academic counseling, and communication. As underscored by the diverse and cross-functional team recommended by DWD and implemented by Shasta, many administrative offices are involved in the development and execution of strategies like adult reengagement and reverse transfer. Given the significant day-to-day work that Shasta's DWD team members were already responsible for, developing and implementing new policies and programs is challenging. However, by shifting funding from related projects, Shasta College was able to hire a part-time staff member to serve as the campus lead for DWD and pay for overtime hours for staff members contributing to the DWD project.

Shasta's primary need for staff overtime was the result of inadequate technological capacity to automate transcript reviews. During DWD, only two individuals were fully trained on degree audits and they could complete only 25 to 50 transcript evaluations per week. Because the degree audit process is one of the most time-consuming components of the degree reclamation process, a lack of technology and automation required Shasta to find alternative ways to complete the work. Through its work with the DWD initiative and recognition of the importance of reengaging stopped-out students, Shasta has been actively exploring a technological solution to automate degree audits and expedite the process further.

## SUCCESS #2: ADOPTING DEGREE RECLAMATION AS A PERMANENT INSTITUTIONAL GOAL

Although Shasta College had already acknowledged the importance of degree reclamation strategies to reach its strategic planning goals, engagement in DWD helped integrate recruiting and supporting stoppedout students into its permanent institutional goals. In part, this decision is a result of acknowledging the higher-than-average representation of individuals with SCND in Shasta's immediate region and recognizing the key role Shasta College plays in supporting the community and improving opportunities for its residents.





IHEP's Degree Mining Tool is a free online system to help institutions efficiently use existing technology

and resources to identify students who are eligible for credentials they have earned but have not yet been awarded. Shasta College played an integral role in IHEP's Degree Mining Working Group and influenced development of the Degree Mining Tool.

## CHALLENGE #2: ACKNOWLEDGING THAT REVERSE TRANSFER IS DIFFICULT IN A RURAL AREA

Shasta College recognized the need to support all students who left the institution without a credential in hand, and committed to establish both adult reengagement policies to support students who stop out prior to completion and reverse transfer policies to ensure students continuing to a four-year institution will receive the associate's degree they already started. Nonetheless, after Shasta began developing a reverse transfer implementation plan, it ran into several issues. First, due to limited technological capacity, Shasta's student information system did not have data on which students successfully transferred to a four-year institution and whether they earned enough credits at that four-year institution to transfer credits back to complete their associate's degree.

However, the larger issue was Shasta College's rural location. Shasta lacks a single four-year institutional partner to which students transfer. In fact, one of its largest transfer partners is Southern Oregon University—across the border. These multi-state transfer patterns create bureaucratic and data sharing challenges.

## SUCCESS #3: AWARDING STUDENTS THE DEGREES THEY EARNED

Shasta College's leaders and DWD team reflected on the most important outcome from their participation in DWD, and they said that the biggest success was the ability to award students a degree that was previously deemed unattainable. As one DWD team member exclaimed,

"These students get a degree! I mean, they didn't know they had [earned one] and . . . we make it hard [to know]." But, this person said, "letting [students] know that they got it is awesome, and it's going to open doors for them in the future."



#### REENGAGEMENT EFFORTS LED TO INCREASED REENROLLMENT AND DEGREE CONFERRALS

Intentionally reengaging former students leads to increased reenrollment and degrees awarded. Of the 324 near-completers identified in the first degree audit with Degrees When Due that Shasta reengaged to return, 43 students (13%) reenrolled between Spring 2020 or Spring 2021, and 16 of those students went on to complete a degree (5%).

When compared to the average number of associate's degrees conferred annually by Shasta College,<sup>4</sup> DWD boosted degree conferrals by 35%.

 Authors' calculations using Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2017-2019, Completions. Accessed on 9/13/2021. Associate's degrees conferred are averaged over a 3-year period of 2017-2019.

#### Figure 4. Reengagement Efforts Led to Increased Reenrollment and Degree Conferrals



**Complete Degree** 



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#### FOR MORE INFORMATION, VISIT: WWW.IHEP.ORG/INITIATIVE/DEGREES-WHEN-DUE