INSTITUTE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY

Evidence-Based Practices to

INCREASE POSTSECONDARY ACCESS AND SUCCESS FOR RETURNING LEARNERS

A VIEWING GUIDE TO IHEP'S "COLLEGE COMPLETION COMEBACKS" FILM SERIES

INTRODUCTION

Postsecondary education and training are key to supporting individuals and families and creating a stronger economy. Yet over 40 million people in the United States have stopped out of their higher education journeys before completing a degree.[1] When institutions do not support students through to degree completion, individuals, their families and communities miss opportunities to experience economic mobility. This is also a matter of equity for our country. Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) students are 30 percent more likely than White students to stop out before completing a degree.[2] In many cases, these students have taken on the debt of higher education expenses, but do not see the earnings increases that a degree or credential can provide.[3]

> **40 million people in the United States have stopped out of their higher education journeys before completing a degree.[1]**

This viewing guide complements the "College Completion Comebacks" film series. The series features the stories of Korey, Joe, and Bonnie, three students who returned to college after stopping out. It shows them charting their own course to degree completion and the evidence-based institutional practices that supported their journeys.

Many of these featured practices are informed by nationwide initiatives developed to help returning learners access and thrive in college, including IHEP's Degrees When Due (DWD) initiative. DWD brought together more than 200 institutions in 23 states to identify and remove barriers to success for students with some college credits but no degree.[4] The strategies identified through DWD informed IHEP's _Degree Reclamation Playbook_, a step-by-step guide to support institutions and policymakers as they design and implement strategies to engage and support returning learners.[5] Each student highlighted in the film series benefited from evidence-based and equity-focused practices aligned with _The Degree Reclamation Playbook_ and employed by their institutions and states. These strategies set and support students on the path towards completion.

Strategies for Implementing
Degree Reclamation Work on Campus

Establish Your Team(s)—Implementation requires collaboration between various departments across campus. This may include department representatives from the registrar's office, academic and student affairs, institutional research, and information technology.

Build an Equity Framework—Ground your degree reclamation work in equity, familiarize your team(s) with key equity terms and concepts, and analyze your institution's policies and practices through an equity lens.

Inventory Institutional Policies and Practices—Common policy and practice barriers to investigate include transcript fees, graduation petitions, financial holds, evaluations of coursework and degree requirements, and institutionally unique graduation requirements.

Dig into the Data—Identifying former students with some college but no degree is an essential early step to designing initiatives that support their success. _The Degree Reclamation Playbook_ provides step-by-step models for where to start.

Develop Processes for Data Collection and Sharing—Take steps to understand students' credential needs, such as whether they should receive reverse-transfer credit or reenroll in a degree program. Gather student consent to share their data and establish data sharing processes across institutional teams.

Communicate with Near-Completers—Locate and communicate with students who must reenroll or continue enrollment to complete their degree.

The evidence-based and equity-focused strategies highlighted in this viewing guide are a primer on ways institutions and states have reengaged near-completers. _The Degree Reclamation Playbook_ offers additional case studies from DWD-participating institutions.

WHY NEAR-COMPLETERS STEP OFF THE POSTSECONDARY PATH

Students often balance competing obligations that can impact their educational progress. When life circumstances change and they must reprioritize family, work, and school, their education may become less urgent and cause them to stop out. In many cases, students intend to return to higher education when circumstances allow. Focus group data on returning students showed two main motivations for returning to college: the desire to serve as a role model for their families, especially those who initially left college because of parental responsibilities, and the need for a degree to secure job promotions or pursue desired career opportunities.[6]

No matter what comes next in the lives of near-completers, each learner needs a clear and accessible path back to their studies. Institutional and state policies can help mitigate challenging circumstances and provide that path back to higher education. But the policies must be designed to support students and, as the Degrees When Due initiative underscored, they must be assessed in order to understand their impact. Closing attainment gaps requires a collective effort from institutions, states, and the federal government. Sharing data, allocating sufficient resources, and creating strong partnerships are crucial steps decision-makers can take to support student success.[7]

Factors that play a role in stopping out just before degree completion:

PERSONAL CIRCUMSTANCES
Family and community obligations, child care needs, health challenges, transportation.

NEED FOR ACADEMIC AND PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT
Inadequate academic or professional advising, unclear pathways to completion, challenges transferring credits, a missing sense of belonging.

FINANCIAL CHALLENGES
Difficulty affording tuition, fees, living expenses, or basic needs.

WORK DEMANDS
Balancing competing demands of work and school, new professional opportunities.

MEET KOREY, JOE, AND BONNIE

Korey (he/him)

AGE: 25
INSTITUTION: Camden County College, New Jersey
INSTITUTION TYPE: Public two-year community college

Korey is studying education. He began college after graduating from high school but did not connect with a program that felt true to his personal and professional goals. After stopping out at one institution, he returned to a different institution to pursue a career in education. Personalized advising, financial assistance, and clear degree pathways helped Korey gain confidence and visualize an inspiring future.

Joe (he/him)

AGE: mid-40s
INSTITUTION: Rutgers University–Newark, New Jersey
INSTITUTION TYPE: public four-year university

Joe attended several college programs before finding the right fit at Rutgers University–Newark. Staying in college while balancing work, family care, and paying off previous education debt proved challenging. After finding some professional success in news media without a credential, he realized a bachelor's degree in journalism would help advance his career. Through a state-institutional partnership, Rutgers–Newark offered affordability and flexibility in a degree program that met Joe's needs.

Bonnie (she/her)

AGE: 50
INSTITUTION: Jacksonville State University (JSU), Alabama
INSTITUTION TYPE: public four-year university

Bonnie is a health professional who was looking to level up in her career. She knew she needed a college credential to do so and was encouraged to reenroll in college by her employer and after receiving outreach from JSU, an institution she previously attended, about its college come-back programs. Bonnie took advantage of a program offering in-state tuition for online degree programs and college credits for prior work experience. This gave her flexibility to reenroll while living in a different state and allowed her to remain employed and apply her career experience towards completing a bachelor's degree.

EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES FOR SUPPORTING RETURNING LEARNERS

Each featured student's journey to degree completion is made possible through their hard work and determination, coupled with supportive state and institutional practices. Student-centered supports like proactive outreach, financial assistance, personalized onboarding and advising, and flexible programming allowed Korey, Joe, and Bonnie to access and succeed in programs aligned with their career goals. Many of these strategies are detailed below.

Financial Assistance Programs

STATE AFFORDABILITY PROGRAMS Also commonly referred to as "free college," "college promise," and "debt-free college," state affordability programs like the Garden State Guarantee, which Korey took advantage of, and the RU-N Rising Program at Rutgers University–Newark, where Joe attended, make college reengagement accessible for returning learners. To address the greatest affordability challenges, support college enrollment and completion, and reduce inequities, affordability programs should invest, first and foremost, in students from low-income backgrounds. These programs should also fund non-tuition expenses for students from low-income backgrounds, provide support through a first-dollar approach,[8] include public four-year and two-year colleges, and avoid restrictive or punitive eligibility requirements.[9]

TUITION RATES AND WAIVERS An in-state tuition guarantee for students completing online and a three-credit tuition waiver offered to returning learners reduced financial barriers to college reengagement for Bonnie. Institutions and states can offset tuition costs for students in several ways. Transfer affordability guarantees, for example, streamline and clearly map out the costs students will incur to complete a four-year degree.[10] Other evidence-based practices include avoiding narrow restrictions on student aid, by, for example, ensuring students are not disqualified for programs based on enrollment status or location.[11]

Tailored Student Supports

CREDIT FOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING Participating in a program that offered credit for prior learning accelerated Bonnie's progress towards a degree by making use of the many years she had already spent in the health field. Also called credit for experiential learning, this practice recognizes that learning happens in various contexts beyond the classroom and seeks to assess and validate those experiences by offering academic credit. Jacksonville State University, where Bonnie attended, offers an individualized course for students seeking academic credit for prior work experience.[12] There are many ways institutions do this work, including awarding credit to students through memoranda of understanding or establishing agreements that transfer credits from workforce programs to an academic major.[13]

CLEAR PATHWAYS TO SUCCESS Guided supports, such as tailored onboarding, personalized advising focused on their career goals, and wrap-around services, kept Korey, Joe, and Bonnie on a path to completion. Each enrolled in a program that prioritized their career interests and helped them envision the next steps on their professional and personal path. Other institutions have adopted whole-college reform models that help students identify interests, engage in content-related courses early on, provide ongoing academic and career support, and connect students' learning across disciplines.[14]

ONE-ON-ONE ADVISING Successfully reengaging in college, for Korey, required institutional practices and strategies designed to personalize his experience and allow him to earn credits that moved him closer to degree completion. This is true for most returning learners. Offering one-on-one advising or providing advising in a case-load structure, where students meet with the same person throughout their academic journey, can help students make connections with faculty and staff, gain confidence, and feel better informed about their academic and career choices.[15]

Building an Inclusive Culture of Access and Success

PERSONALIZED ONBOARDING Advisors and institutional leaders need to tailor the reentry process and develop customized reengagement plans for students. Advisors should be prepared to assess students' circumstances, connect students with support services, and ensure a smooth transition back to college.[16] Korey, Joe, and Bonnie connected with an advisor on campus equipped to guide them towards reenrollment and into programs they found inspiring. Establishing such systems is key for bridging access to opportunity. With these systems in place, students can feel confident that their goals are attainable, and they have a support system propelling them towards reenrollment and completion with renewed determination.

FLEXIBLE AND ADAPTIVE PROGRAMMING Providing flexible and adaptable programming can significantly aid students like Bonnie and Joe, who reenter college with a clear idea of their goals, often informed by prior work experience. One approach involves offering integrated or independent degree programs which enable students to personalize their academic journey according to their interests, career aspirations, and prior credits attained.[17] Institutions can also explore alternative scheduling and course modality options, such as evening, weekend, and online classes, to accommodate diverse student needs.[18]

COLLECTIVE EFFORT AND SHARED RESPONSIBILITY Each institution highlighted in these films demonstrates an unwavering commitment to closing attainment gaps for returning learners and students from diverse backgrounds. They have aligned and established goals among key decision-makers; provided institutional, state, and federal leaders with the resources needed to better serve students; and prioritized reflexive assessment of student-centered policies to understand their impact. This commitment necessitates asking difficult questions, confronting challenging or even distressing realities, and transforming policies and processes that have prohibited students from reengaging.[19]

FEDERAL, STATE, AND INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERSHIPS Successful reengagement in higher education, for Korey, Joe, and Bonnie, was propelled by their determination and drive. But the programs that supported them were made possible by partnerships between their institutions, states, and the federal government for services like tuition grants, credit transfer agreements, and customized outreach. These supports rely on agreements to manage and share data and financial resources; these partnerships are instrumental in developing a strong collective culture of equity and belief in student success.[20]

To watch Korey, Joe, and Bonnie's stories, learn more about IHEP's College Completion Comebacks series, and download *The Degree Reclamation Playbook*, visit www.ihep.org/collegecompletioncomebacks

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