

MICHIGAN CENTER FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

An Initiative of the Michigan Community College Association



LESSONS LEARNED FROM MICHIGAN'S PROJECT WIN-WIN

Fall 2016

In Michigan, more than 1.2 million working adults have earned some college credit, but no degree. This represents nearly 25% of the adult population according to the Lumina Foundation. Michigan community colleges knew that there were some former student in this population in Michigan who had likely met the requirements to earn an associate degree, but never received the degree.

To try to reach those students, Michigan joined eight other states in 2011 (Florida, Louisiana, Missouri, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Virginia, and Wisconsin) for Project Win-Win. The goal of this project was to locate “near completers” who were no longer enrolled in higher education and were never awarded a degree. The opportunity to join Project Win-Win, coordinated by the [Institute for Higher Education Policy \(IHEP\)](#) and funded by [The Kresge Foundation](#), was a great opportunity to award degrees to near completers and understand the barriers to completion among students who earned credit for most or all of the degree requirements. Between 2009 and 2013, 60 colleges from nine states identified more than 130,000 students and awarded more than 4,500 degrees.

In Michigan, 2,157 associate degrees were awarded to students at 21 participating colleges through Project Win-Win.

In Michigan, colleges identified students who were qualified to earn an associate degree and award those degrees retroactively or identified former students who needed to complete no more than 12 credits of an associate degree and sought to re-enroll these students to complete all of the requirements to earn an associate degree. The detailed process is outlined in the [Michigan Project Win-Win Practice Guide](#). The process included identify students with a significant number of credit hours, eliminating the students who earned a degree at another institution, conducting degree audits to determine eligibility for the degree, contacting students, and following up with information about the steps required to earn the degree.

In Michigan, nine colleges participated in this first round of Project Win-Win, and an additional 12 colleges participated in a second round. Michigan identified 14,782 students, of which 2,157 students earned an associate degree across the 21 participating colleges.

Lessons Learned

Through the extraordinary effort of identifying students and awarding associate degrees to near-completers, Michigan colleges documented several lessons learned through this process. Some colleges learned that they did not have an accessible and efficient system to validate the eligibility for the associate degree while other colleges identified and corrected issues with managing and accessing data. In some cases, course requirements, graduation applications, graduate fees, or fines and holds were barriers to student completion that colleges could address through institutional policy changes or simple adjustments to institutional procedures. In the end, all participating colleges awarded degrees to students who have already earned the credential or re-enrolled students who were near completion. In many cases, colleges have incorporated the process of identifying and awarding degrees to near-completers in their regular practices.

Course Requirements

During Project Win-Win, colleges were able to pinpoint specific course requirements that students were missing. Although the missing requirements were often in mathematics and English, some unmet requirements were physical education or co-curricular requirements. This caused many colleges to re-consider physical education as a graduation requirement and waivers were grants for Project Win-Win students. As colleges reflected on the role of these courses as associate degree requirements, some institutions changed curricular requirements for all students. Project Win-Win helped colleges identify the specific requirements and courses that are barriers to completion for many students pursuing an associate degree and understanding the specific courses that were a barrier to completion was an important lesson learned through this project.

Degree Auditing

All colleges in Michigan have a process to validate eligibility for graduation and to ensure that the student has met all of the requirements for the degree. This task is typically completed by staff in the Registrar's office or by using degree auditing software. Among the institutions that use degree auditing software, students are frequently unaware of how to conduct a self-service degree audit and how the results are used to determine eligibility to earn the degree. As a result of Project Win-Win, colleges can and have improved their use of automated degree audit systems to ensure that students understand, at every step of their academic journey, how to monitor their progress toward completion and graduation. Many degree auditing software systems allow students to perform "what if" audits which allow students to determine if the courses they have completed meet requirements for various degree programs offered by the college. Communication and training are key elements of this degree auditing process. By adopting degree auditing software, faculty, staff, and students can participate more actively in monitoring progression toward a degree and identifying when and how degree requirements have been satisfied.

"Another area of change is that in our occupational programs, we find that some students may be working on an associate degree, but are stopping out. In these cases, we let the student know if they have earned the proper credits for a Certificate and then allow them to graduate with that to have a credential."

~ Gogebic Community College

Application for Graduation and Graduation Fees

Colleges often require that students complete an application for graduation which triggers the official review of their transcript and the awarding of the degree. Too often, this form is buried in a web page or is only available in limited on-campus locations. In addition, many students are unaware that an application is even necessary. As a result of Project Win-Win, colleges adopted two different strategies to overcome this obstacle. First, some colleges modified the procedures allowing students to find, complete, and submit an application for graduation resulting in many more students applying for graduation in a timely and consistent manner. Other colleges adopted an opt out release on their admissions application. These colleges ask students to authorize the college to automatically confer, without a separate application for graduation, an award for which the student has met the degree requirements.

"The college eliminated the \$20 charge for Application for Graduation which eliminated one possible barrier to students completing a degree."

~ Glen Oaks Community College

In addition to requiring an application, prior to Project Win-Win, many colleges required that students pay a graduation fee. Many colleges waived this fee for the Project Win-Win students and others adopted a new institution-wide policy that eliminated the graduation fee for all students. This policy change represented the removal of a significant barrier to student completion, especially among students for whom funding is a challenge.

Fines and Holds

Most colleges and universities prevent a student from graduating if the student has outstanding tuition, fees, or fines to the institution. While some students identified through Project Win-Win maintain significant balances, it was more typical that balances were relatively small. Some college chose to write off these balances, thus removing this barrier to completion. Financial aid staff were very helpful in identifying students who owed significant balances on their accounts and this information was shared with students during outreach communications with the goal of resolving the balance and clearing the path to award the degree. Grants and scholarship funds may also be available to help offset some of these costs especially when the outstanding balances or future tuition costs are the only barrier to completion.

Student Advising

The responsibility for providing students with current and accurate information about their eligibility for graduation resides primarily with academic advisors. However, there are many different advising models across colleges with a wide variety of staff and faculty playing key roles in this work. For example, students in applied science programs may be advised by program faculty, but also work with academic advisors to determine the transferability of courses. Students in transfer-focused degree programs may meet with a college advisor and a career counselor to plan their academic program. Colleges learned that it is essential to communicate with academic advisors, counselors, and program faculty when engaging with near completers. Advisors should learn and operate the degree auditing software and professional development should inform advisors about changes in policies and procedures. As colleges adopted new policy and procedures as a result of participating in Project Win-Win, those new policies and procedures need to be effectively communicated with advising staff across the college.

“The interaction with our Project Win-Win universe, in particular the “potential” students, provided insight that resulted in an additional challenge. These students were interested in returning to complete an associate degree, but could not because of the financial commitment and time dedication necessary. Our advising team addressed the barriers by explaining the resources available to students such as tutoring, and attempted to alleviate the financial commitment barrier by offering scholarships.”

~ Grand Rapids Community College

Project Win-Win Participating Colleges

Round One Colleges

Bay College
Henry Ford College
Lake Michigan College
Mott Community College
North Central Michigan College
Northwestern Michigan College
Oakland Community College
St. Clair County Community College
Southwestern Michigan College

Round Two Colleges

Alpena Community College
Delta College
Glen Oaks Community College
Gogebic Community College
Grand Rapids Community College
Jackson College
Kirtland Community College
Lansing Community College
Montcalm Community College
Washtenaw Community College
Wayne County Community College District
West Shore Community College

Data Management and Data Quality

Project Win-Win brought together a team of experts who have the skills and expertise to extract information from the college's student information system (SIS) and identified students who are near-completers. Through this process, some colleges encountered challenges identifying the cohort of students in the SIS. In some cases, student records were missing demographic information, the student's contact information was out of date, or transfer credit was transcribed in such a way that made determining degree eligibility problematic. Project Win-Win helped colleges identify these problems in student records and resulted in several policies changes related to how student information is gathered, entered, and stored. Project Win-Win also uncovered additional opportunities to increase the business intelligence capacity of the institution. Colleges improved their use of information systems to ensure that student data is accurate by adopting self-service modules that allow students to update their contact information. Other colleges leveraged the systems and human capacity necessary to flexibly query data in the SIS.

Leveraging External Data Sources to Identify Students

The second step of the Project Win-Win process identified students included in the initial universe who have transferred to another institution and/or earned a degree from another college or university. Colleges can use two data sources of data to identify students including the [National Student Clearinghouse \(NSC\) Student Tracker](#) and the [Center for Educational Performance Information](#) (CEPI). CEPI maintains Michigan's state longitudinal data system and provides the Student Pathways file to colleges through the secure section of the [MI School Data](#) portal. Through Project Win-Win, colleges became more experienced with using these data files and understanding how these resources could be leveraged to improve student completion and success.

Contacting former students was among the most frustrating steps of the Project Win-Win process for colleges. Since students were not enrolled for at least three semesters, changes in address, telephone, and email make it extremely difficult to locate former students. To locate students, colleges purchased files from the [AlumniFinder](#) service. This service uses the same databases as credit and collection agencies and the files include updated contact information. Some college have access to AlumniFinder or similar services through their foundation and advancement offices so it may be possible to use these services across the institution. More details can be found in the Michigan Project Win-Win Practice Guide.

Adopting Ongoing Strategies

All of the lessons presented in this publication represent significant changes to policies and practices at participating colleges. Changes to the graduation application, eliminating graduation fees, adopting a robust degree auditing system, more deliberately training for advising staff, and creating better systems for capturing student information will impact completion for all students. Still, colleges know that near completers will continue to stop out before earning the associate degree. To address this ongoing issue, many colleges who participated in Project Win-Win plan to incorporate Project Win-Win practices into their overall completion strategy. Students who stop out for a period of time will be contacted and awarded the associate degree if all requirements are met or encouraged to re-enroll in courses to finish the credential.

"Looking forward, we believe it would be beneficial to target students who have not returned in the last two years."

~ Mott Community College

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Michigan Center for Student Success

The Michigan Center for Student Success is an initiative of the Michigan Community College Association. The Center was founded in 2011 with a generous grant from The Kresge Foundation. The Michigan Center for Student Success provides state-level support to Michigan's 28 community colleges by serving as a hub connecting leadership, administrators, faculty, and staff in their emerging and ongoing efforts to improve student outcomes, emphasizing linkages between practice, research, and policy. Additional information is available at www.mcca.org.