

MCCCD colleges may award 2-year degrees retroactively



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Thousands of people in the metro Phoenix area have some college credit but no degree. But now they may be able to get an associate degree retroactively.

The Maricopa County Community College District recently was awarded a \$500,000 grant from the Helios Education Foundation to start a "reverse transfer" project.

The premise is this: Many people take a year or two of general-education credits at a community college and then transfer to a university. Their intent is the transfer, not a two-year degree.

When they move on to a university, they take classes that essentially complete an associate degree.

By 2020, about 36 percent of jobs in Arizona will require an associate degree or occupational certificate, according to a report by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.

Now, the Maricopa County colleges will reach out to find people who have completed at least 45 credits at one of the 10 colleges before transferring. If they completed at least 30 more credits at a state university, the community colleges will "reverse" that transfer and award an associate degree.

Typically, an associate degree requires about 60 credits.

Students who are still working on a bachelor's degree — or never achieve one — will benefit from having the associate degree, rather than just a bunch of credits, to show employers, according to Samuel Dosumu, associate vice chancellor of academic affairs for the district.

Data from the U.S. Census Bureau shows that 27 percent of Arizona adults have some college credit but no degree.

Adding degrees will help the community colleges, too. Currently, the six-year graduation rate — which includes students earning a degree or a certificate — across the 10 colleges is about 22 percent. But another 25 percent of students successfully transferred credits to a university.

University transfers are essentially counted as "failures" because they didn't graduate from the two-year school, even if they went on to receive a four-year degree.

"It's not an honest representation of what we do," according to Maria Harper-Marinick, the executive vice chancellor and provost of the district.

She said some people actually have all they credits they need for a degree and just never bother with the paperwork to acquire one before transferring to a university.

"Most people don't walk out of a university completing their credits without that piece of paper," she said.

By retroactively awarding degrees, the district also will boost its graduation rate.

The three-year Helios grant will be used to hire staff to coordinate with Arizona State and Northern Arizona universities and the University of Arizona to search for students who fit the criteria, Dosumu said.

"We expect to find a host of people in that set, all along their degree pathway," he said, adding that the district estimates about 1,000 to 1,800 people could be eligible for reverse-transfer degrees.

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