NEWS RELEASE: ‘Reverse transfer’ initiative increasing college completion in Nebraska

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When Kelly Ward, a psychobiology major at the University of Nebraska at Kearney, received a letter informing her that her UNK credits combined with the community college coursework she’d already completed qualified her to earn an associate’s degree, her first thought was that it was too good to be true.

Ward, now 40 and a mother of four, had dropped out of community college just shy of completing her degree in order to start a family. She returned to school in 2012, enrolling at Central Community College in Grand Island before transferring to UNK the following year with hopes of someday working in the medical field.

The letter she’d received informed her that thanks to a new “reverse transfer” initiative in Nebraska, Ward could apply her UNK coursework toward an associate’s degree from Central Community College – similar to the way students can apply their community college credits toward a four-year degree. Not only that, but Ward was eligible to graduate with honors.

This May, Ward participated in CCC’s commencement ceremony – an important personal and professional accomplishment for her.
“I was so proud of myself and how much I had overcome to get to where I was the day I found out I would graduate,” she said. “When I applied for my job, I was able to list my associate’s degree on my resume. It was a big moment for me.”

Ward plans to earn her bachelor’s degree from UNK next year, and then pursue a physician assistant’s degree from the University of Nebraska Medical Center School of Allied Health Professions division opening soon on the UNK campus.

More than 200 other Nebraska students like Ward have earned associate’s degrees through reverse transfer since 2013-14, and another 80 have been identified as being eligible to receive an associate’s degree by December 2015. The initiative, a collaborative effort of the University of Nebraska, Nebraska State College System and Nebraska Community College Association, aims to meet key workforce needs in the state by increasing the number of Nebraskans with college credentials.

With the reverse transfer option, former community college students who are currently enrolled or have been enrolled at a university or state college campus may transfer the credits they’ve earned at the four-year institution back to the Nebraska community college they attended. Registrars evaluate the additional coursework and other community college requirements to determine whether students have met the requirements for an associate’s degree.

Susan Fritz, NU executive vice president and provost, said reverse transfer is an ideal option for students who transfer from a two-year to a four-year institution before they complete their degree but find the four-year institution isn’t a good fit, or students who have transferred to a four-year institution and are working toward their bachelor’s degree but need a college credential to make them more competitive in the workforce.

“Reverse transfer is about college completion,” Fritz said. “We know that a college degree is increasingly important in the 21st-century workforce. Providing students an opportunity to earn their associate’s degree when they have completed the appropriate coursework is one way that Nebraska’s public higher education institutions can work together to achieve a widely shared goal for increasing educational attainment in our state. We’re proud to be able to offer this option to help our students be more successful.”

Fritz noted that some 290,000 Nebraskans have completed some college coursework but have not earned a degree. Making sure these and other students have opportunities to stay on the path to a degree is critical for Nebraska’s economic competitiveness, she said. The university, state colleges and community colleges are committed to partnering to ensure that the approximately 5,000 students who transfer into and between Nebraska’s public higher education institutions each year have the resources they need to be successful. The new Transfer Nebraska website, a
one-stop shop for researching course transferability between Nebraska’s public higher education institutions that went live earlier in the year, is another example.

Using data that the university and state college system pulled from their joint Nebraska Student Information System, community college staff in 2013-14 began identifying students who were potentially eligible to take advantage of the reverse transfer option and receive an associate’s degree. With grant money from the Nebraska Coordinating Commission for Postsecondary Education, the community colleges led efforts to publicize reverse transfer and contact those students via mail, phone calls, text messaging and email. After submitting their transcripts, students meeting degree requirements were conferred their degrees.

Dennis Baack, executive director of the Nebraska Community College Association, said the community colleges awarded 90 associate’s degrees that year. “With the additional collaboration of the university and state colleges, associate’s degrees awarded through reverse transfer has increased significantly,” Baack said. “This is good both for the students and businesses because these credentials can be used by students in obtaining gainful employment.” Another 112 associate’s degrees were awarded in 2014-15 as a result of reverse transfer.

Nebraska State College System Chancellor Stan Carpenter said, “The state colleges have a long tradition of partnering with Nebraska’s community colleges to help transfer students complete a baccalaureate degree in an efficient and affordable manner. It only makes sense to join with Nebraska’s community colleges for the reverse transfer initiative. Increasing the number of students who earn their associate’s degree benefits the students, the state colleges and Nebraska. Adding an additional credential or degree enables students to have greater flexibility in the workforce, enhance their quality of life and add to the economic strength across the state, and especially rural Nebraska.”

Students with questions about reverse transfer should contact their local community college registrar.