The Interstate Passport:  
A New Framework for Transfer

The Interstate Passport, based at the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), has launched a learning-outcomes-based framework for student transfer with the goal of improving graduation rates, shortening time to degree, and saving students’ money. The new framework focuses on lower-division general education, the common denominator among institutions—concentrating on it as a whole, not on individual courses—and allows for a cross-border “match” of outcomes-integrated general education for block transfer.

The idea and design for this grass-roots initiative was conceived in 2010 by chief academic leaders in the West as a solution for transfer students, who too often lose credits, have to repeat courses, and spend additional money to complete their degrees. With approximately 33 percent of today’s students transferring—and nearly 27 percent of them crossing state lines according to a study by the National Student Clearinghouse—the Passport promises a new way to streamline transfer students’ pathways to graduation.

**Passport Learning Outcomes and Proficiency Criteria**

The Passport framework consists of the Passport Learning Outcomes (PLOs) – what a student should know and/or be able to do – and attendant Proficiency Criteria (PC) – how a student demonstrates proficiency in the learning outcome – in nine knowledge of content and skill areas. The academic areas of the Passport are derived from the Liberal Education and America's Promise Essential Learning Outcomes (LEAP ELOs) developed by the Association of American Colleges and Universities and widely adopted by institutions across the country.

The Passport interstate faculty teams – one for each content area and comprised of two-year and four-year faculty members with expertise in the designated area – reviewed, compared, and contrasted sets of learning outcomes submitted by each state and then negotiated to arrive at an agreed-upon set of learning outcomes – the Passport Learning Outcomes. This same negotiation process was used to develop the proficiency criteria, which are examples of current classroom assignments used by faculty. Institutions that sign the Passport Agreement acknowledge that their lower-division general education learning outcomes map to and are congruent with the Passport Learning Outcomes.

During the pilot phase of the project (Phase I, 2011-2014), faculty members from participating institutions worked collaboratively to develop PLOs and PC in three foundational skill areas – oral communication, written communication, and quantitative literacy. The framework was completed in Phase II (2014-2016) with the development of the six remaining areas: knowledge of concepts in natural sciences, human cultures, human society and the individual, and creative expression; and crosscutting skills in critical thinking, and teamwork and value systems.
**Faculty Agreement and Tracking**

The Passport is based on the concepts of faculty agreement and tracking. Faculty members at a Passport institution agree with their colleagues at other Passport institutions to: (1) provide their respective students with appropriate learning opportunities addressing the PLOs; (2) assess these students’ proficiency in achieving the PLOs; and (3) award the Passport to students who have earned it. Each institution also agrees to submit data on the academic performance of Passport and non-Passport students who transfer into their institution for two terms after they transfer. Registrars and institutional research representatives from institutions participating in project development devised the processes for recording the Passport on student records, and for tracking and reporting on Passport students. See *Handbook for Registrars and Institutional Researchers* for more information.

In the early phases of the project, data collection and analysis were conducted by the Passport Central Data Repository (CDR), located at Utah State University. These functions are being transferred to the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC), which will allow institutions to compile data more easily through their student information systems and to submit data to NSC electronically and securely. The Clearinghouse will offer Passport institutions two new services. The first is Passport Verify, similar to the Degree Verify service currently offered to all NSC participating institutions. Passport institutions will be able to query the Clearinghouse to find out if an incoming transfer student has earned the Passport and if so, where and when.

Through the second new service – Academic Progress Tracking – NSC will calculate aggregate academic progress data for each of three populations reported by receiving institutions (Passport students, non-Passport transfers, and native students), and then sort it by Passport sending institutions. The Clearinghouse will produce and deliver reports to the sending institutions annually about the performance of their former students, and deliver a composite report of de-identified student data to Passport Review Board, the project’s policy-making entity.

**Participating in the Passport Framework’s Development**

Faculty, registrars, institutional researchers, academic advisors, and campus marketing specialists from two-year and four-year institutions in 16 states are involved in the development and testing of the Passport Framework. Some have been involved since the first phase kicked off in 2011 while others are now coming aboard to evaluate the process of applying for Passport status or to pilot the process of mapping critical assignments to the PLOs. States involved to date include: Arkansas, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Indiana, Kentucky, Montana, North Dakota, New Mexico, Ohio, Oregon, South Dakota, Virginia, Utah, and Wyoming.

**Becoming Part of the Passport Network**

In spring 2016, regionally accredited public and private not-for-profit institutions can apply to become members of the Passport Network. To be approved by the Passport Review Board, an institution’s faculty must agree that its learning outcomes are congruent with and not in conflict with the PLOs, and are acceptable as a basis of block transfer. They must also construct the institution’s Passport Block. The registrar must put in place processes to award the Passport to students who achieve it and to recognize incoming transfer students with a Passport as having fulfilled the lower-division general education requirements as well as supply data
annually on the number of Passport’s awarded and the academic progress data described above. Institutions sign a Memorandum of Agreement for a five-year renewable term and may pay an annual membership fee.

**Funding for the Interstate Passport**
The Interstate Passport is being developed and rolled out in phases with funding from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Lumina Foundation, and a First in the World grant from the U.S. Department of Education.

The Interstate Passport is managed by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), one of four regional compacts established by the U.S. Congress in the 1950s to facilitate the sharing of information and expertise in the higher education community.

**More Information**
More information is available at [www.wiche.edu/passport](http://www.wiche.edu/passport) or contact Cathy Walker, project manager, at [cwalker@wiche.edu](mailto:cwalker@wiche.edu)