The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) is a 16-member commission working to boost access to higher education for students in the West and, as importantly, to ensure their success. Montana has been a member of WICHE since 1952.

Benefits to Montana

- Tens of thousands of students from Montana have attended undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs in other Western states through WICHE’s Student Exchange Program, saving millions of dollars, thanks to reduced tuition rates. In just one of the programs, the Western Undergraduate Exchange, Montana students and their families have saved more than $112.5 million since 1988, when the program was founded.
- Montana has received funding to be part of numerous WICHE policy initiatives, including those focused on financing and financial aid, workforce policy, and other areas.
- Montana has participated in WICHE initiatives related to distance education, workforce development, and behavioral health.

Doing the Math: Montana’s Return on Investment

- In 2016-17 Montana, its institutions, and its students saved or brought in over $8.2 million through WICHE and spent $145,000 for membership in the commission, yielding a 57-fold return on investment.
- In the last five years, Montana students’ savings from WUE alone have added up to $26.2 million, yielding a 38-fold return on the state’s investment in WICHE.

WICHE’s Student Exchange & Related Programs

Montana is active in all three WICHE Student Exchange Programs: the Western Undergraduate Exchange, the Professional Student Exchange Program, and the Western Regional Graduate Program. In 2016-17 Montana’s students and families saved more than $8.2 million. Montana saved money, too, through not having to establish and maintain costly programs in a number of areas, including some in healthcare.

Western Undergraduate Exchange. Montana students have enrolled in undergraduate programs beyond Montana’s borders through the Western Undergraduate Exchange (WUE) since 1988. In 2016-17, 931 students from Montana were enrolled in out-of-state programs at reduced rates (150 percent of resident tuition), saving $5.5 million in tuition and fees – the average student savings amounted to $5,910. In the last 10 years, students have saved $54.3 million.

Montana benefits from WUE in another way: by receiving students from out of state. Montana’s institutions can choose how many out-of-state slots to offer and in which areas, allowing them to make the best use of their resources by accepting students in underenrolled programs. There’s a workforce benefit for the state, too, as students often stay in Montana after graduating. In 2016-17 Montana received 2,760 students through WUE.

Professional Student Exchange Program. Montana has sent 1,579 students to professional programs through the Professional Student Exchange Program (PSEP), with students studying in a host of critical fields, including dentistry, medicine, occupational therapy, optometry, osteopathic medicine, podiatry, and veterinary medicine. Historically, 60 percent of PSEP students return to Montana to pursue their professional careers. In addition, in 2016-17, the state received six students and $80,575 in support fees from other Western states.

Western Regional Graduate Program. Montana’s students also enroll in graduate and certificate programs through the Western Regional Graduate Program (WRGP), which offers access to some 450 high-quality, distinctive programs at 61 institutions in all WICHE states. WRGP programs run the gamut, but emerging social, environmental, and resource-management fields are particular strengths, as are innovative interdisciplinary programs. In 2016-17 Montana sent 51 students to out-of-state institutions, while receiving 54.
Montana is projected to produce 10,000 high school graduates per year, on average, between school years 2012 and 2032. The number of high school graduates in Montana will increase 11% between 2012 and 2026.

WICHE’s Added Value
Montana gains added value from WICHE’s programs in policy, workforce development, technology, mental health, and other areas.

One of WICHE’s most widely known publications is the \textit{Knocking at the College Door: Projections of High School Graduates} series, which for almost 40 years has provided strategic data about how high school graduates are likely to change in the years ahead. The 9th edition of \textit{Knocking at the College Door}, released in December 2016, describes how the nation has entered a decade of stabilization in the number of high school graduates, with substantial contraction in the number of White high school graduates and rapid increases of non-White populations. After about 2025, the nation and most states will produce fewer high school graduates than in recent years, due to a recent “baby bust”. The WICHE region will generally track the national trend, but it will be less impacted by the contraction of White youth and more influenced by a projected 20 percent increase of Hispanic high school graduates through 2024 and then decrease by about the same amount between 2025 and 2032.

There is an abundance of information on \url{knocking.wiche.edu}, including the publication and other reports, projections data, interactive data dashboards, recorded webinars and presentations, and Montana’s state profile, which indicates that:

- Montana is projected to produce 10,000 high school graduates per year, on average, between school years 2012 and 2032. The number of high school graduates in Montana will increase 11% between 2012 and 2026.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|l|c|}
\hline
\textbf{Student Savings} & \textbf{Revenue to MT}  \\
\hline
WUE & $5,502,066  \\
PSEP & $1,855,087  \\
WRGP & $802,980  \\
Total Student Savings & $8,160,133  \\
\hline
\textbf{Institutions (PSEP)} & \textbf{TOTAL}  \\
$80,575 & $8,240,708  \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Montana Savings and Revenues through WICHE Programs in 2016}
\end{figure}

Policy & Workforce Development. Montana has participated in projects supporting better-informed decision making at the state level. WICHE initiatives have been sponsored by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Ford Foundation, Lumina Foundation, the U.S. Department of Education, and others. In addition, WICHE policy experts often visit the state to present or consult on a number of vital issues, including workforce needs, balancing the financial aid portfolio, educational policy and practice, and demographic change.

The Adult College Completion (ACC) Network, funded by Lumina Foundation, was an 800-member learning network that united organizations and agencies working to increase college completion by adults with prior college credits but no degree. Activities included an annual workshop, a webinar series, publications, a listserv, and other resources. The ACC Network and WICHE became national leaders in the area of adult learners and continue to be an important resource to those who strive to better serve non-traditional students.

The State Higher Education Policy Database (SHEPD) is WICHE’s online searchable database. It provides state and national policymakers, education leaders, practitioners, and education consumers with an inventory of state-level policies and resources in key issue areas related to access and success in higher education. It contains a blog and an electronic SHEPD alert distribution list to keep subscribers current on important updates. A related resource is the Policy Publications Clearinghouse, a depository of publications, reports, and briefs related to higher education.

Montana participated in a Gates-funded meeting that brought together the stewards of the data systems in 14 of the WICHE states for discussions around linking data internally and with other states. A central topic of conversation was how to
address the challenges to data sharing presented by the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act.

Additionally, the Montana University System and its 16 universities and colleges are members of the Western Academic Leadership Forum (the Forum) or the Western Alliance for Community College Academic Leaders (the Alliance). The Forum’s members, who are the chief academic leaders of the four-year institutions and their related system and state agencies, address regional higher education issues and engage in resource sharing. The Alliance brings academic leaders of community colleges and technical schools and systems together with state governing and coordinating boards associated with two-year institutions to exchange ideas and information, share resources and expertise, and collaborate on regional initiatives. Montana hosted a joint annual meeting of the Forum and the Alliance in Missoula in 2016.

Technology. Several Montana colleges and universities are active participants in the WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies (WCET), the leader in the practice, policy, and advocacy of technology-enhanced learning in higher education. WCET is widely recognized as one of the most informative, reliable, and forward-thinking organizations regarding the role of technology and innovation in higher education. Our growing membership includes more than 350 institutions, state and system-wide higher education agencies, nonprofit organizations, government agencies, and corporations in nearly all U.S. states and many Canadian provinces. WCET members have access to trusted information on emerging trends, policies, and exemplars of successful learning technology innovation in practice. Key WCET activities include an annual meeting, leadership summits, national webcasts, and email list-based discussions among members. Major topics of interest to the WCET membership include student success, managing e-learning, faculty success, emerging technologies, and evolving policy issues.

Mental Health. For the past several years, WICHE has worked with Mental Health America-Montana to explore ways for Native American systems of care to offer a fuller range of services that can be reimbursed by Medicaid, Medicare, and other insurers.

State Authorization Reciprocity Agreement (SARA). SARA is a voluntary, nationwide initiative of states that will make distance education courses more accessible to students across state lines and make it easier for states to regulate and institutions to participate in interstate distance education. The effort initially was funded by $3.2 million in grants from Lumina Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and is now supported by fees paid by institutions. The initiative is administered by the country’s four regional higher education compacts – the Midwestern Higher Education Compact (MHEC), the New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE), the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), and the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) – and overseen by the National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (NC-SARA). States and institutions that choose to participate agree to operate under common standards and procedures, providing a more uniform and less costly regulatory environment for institutions, more focused oversight responsibilities for states, and better resolution of student complaints. Montana was among the first WICHE states to become a member of W-SARA in this reciprocal relationship.

Other Initiatives. The Master Property Program (MPP) helps institutions in the West reduce their insurance premiums and improve their coverage. Created by the Midwestern Higher Education Compact in 1994 and expanded to the WICHE region in 2004, the MPP includes more than 160 campuses with total insured values of over $106 million. WICHE is also partnering with MHEC to offer MHECare, a health program providing vetted, competitively priced medical benefits for students. Underwritten by UnitedHealthcare StudentResources,

“The WRGP resident tuition rate allowed me to earn a valuable education without forcing me to go into large amounts of debt. This financial benefit and affordable education has provided me the opportunity to pay for additional trainings, books, and educational endeavors. These “bonus” avenues of training and education are giving me the skills to help people from all walks of life overcome various mental health difficulties. I am thankful for the opportunity to serve others in the future as a psychologist, and may not have had the opportunity to do so without the benefit of the WRGP tuition rate.”

– Julio, Montana resident, Class of 2018, University of North Dakota, Counseling Psychology PhD program
MHECare offers a variety of plans. In a third collaboration with MHEC, WICHE extends the benefits of MHECTech to colleges and universities in the West, enabling them to purchase off competitively bid purchasing agreements to reduce costs on a range of hardware and software products and services.

Montana & WICHE’s Leadership
The WICHE Commission, with three commissioners from each member state, molds the organization’s mission and set its priorities. Montana’s commissioners are: Clayton Christian, commissioner of higher education, Montana University System, Helena; Pat Williams, former U.S. congressman, Missoula; and Franke Wilmer, professor, Montana State University, Bozeman.

WICHE also seeks assistance and advice from policymakers, educators, administrators and legislators. WICHE’s Legislative Advisory Committee (LAC), composed of legislator-members from each state – including Rep. Nate McConnell and Sen. JP Pomnichowski – has been crucial in this regard. The LAC works to keep the commission’s Executive Committee and staff current on significant legislative issues related to higher education, provides input on WICHE initiatives, and advises staff on a host of issues. WICHE staff also serves the LAC, by informing its members about emerging policy issues in the West.

WICHE Commission & Staff
The WICHE Commission’s 16 members include representatives from 15 Western states – Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawai’i, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, the U.S. Pacific territories and freely associated states (the various entities can decide to participate), Utah, Washington, and Wyoming. Members work collaboratively to provide educational access and excellence for all citizens.

WICHE and its staff are headquartered in Boulder, CO, and operate out of the State Higher Education Policy Center, which WICHE owns with the State Higher Education Executive Officers association and the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems.

Staff leadership includes:

- **Joseph A. Garcia**, president
- **Michael Abbiatti**, vice president for educational technologies and executive director, WCET
- **John Lopez**, special assistant to the president and chief administrative officer, and director, W-SARA
- **Demarée Michelau**, vice president, policy analysis and research
- **Jere Mock**, vice president, programs and services
- **Dennis Mohatt**, vice president, behavioral health
- **Jeremy Simon**, director of strategic communications

How can I find out more about WICHE?
Visit our website at www.wiche.edu or contact President Joseph A. Garcia at 303.541.0201.

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"I’m a non-traditional student with many family responsibilities: aging parents, high school and college-age children, and I live on a farm in Montana. I never would have been able to afford out-of-state tuition for a graduate nursing program. But by taking part-time classes, I’ve been able to keep up with my responsibilities at home and pay for my classes as I go. I’m in my last semester of classes and was recently hired for a nursing informatics position at a local hospital. None of this would have been possible without WRGP."

– Sandi, Montana resident, Class of 2016, University of Colorado Denver, Nursing Informatics Master’s Program (online)