WICHE Awarded Two Grants to Complete Interstate Passport Transfer Framework

Boulder, Colorado – The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) has been awarded grants totaling $2.8 million from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and from Lumina Foundation to complete development of the Interstate Passport – a new transfer framework that seeks to improve graduation rates, shorten time to degree, and save students money.

As a grassroots effort led by academic leaders in the WICHE region, the Interstate Passport Initiative (www.wiche.edu/passport) is reforming transfer using a regional approach. The new framework focuses on the lower-division general education core, 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 cores for block transfer. The Passport is being rolled out in phases; Phase I concluded in April 2014 and, with the support from Gates and Lumina, WICHE will launch Phase II this month.

As part of Phase I, funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, faculty members from two- and four-year institutions in five states of the WICHE region collaborated to develop the Passport Learning Outcomes (PLOs) and transfer-level proficiency criteria in three lower-division general education academic areas: oral communication, written communication and quantitative literacy. The content areas included in the Passport spring from the work of the Association of American Colleges and Universities’ Liberal Education and America’s Promise, known as LEAP, which provides a quartet of targets that a college curriculum should aim to foster in students in order to prepare them for work, life, and strong citizenship that have been widely adopted at a variety of institutions and higher education systems.

According to Patricia Shea, principal investigator of the project and director of Academic Leadership Initiatives at WICHE, “The Passport was envisioned by chief academic leaders and shaped by faculty, registrars, and institutional researchers in the WICHE region. It is a collaborative, grassroots effort to improve the transfer experience for students at an early point in their studies when they are most vulnerable to dropping or stopping out.”

Today’s student population is extremely mobile so ensuring academic success for transfer students is crucial to reaching commonly accepted degree completion goals in the United States. Data from the National Student Clearinghouse indicate 45 percent of four-year degrees go to students with previous enrollment in a two-year institution, and one quarter of all postsecondary completions happen in an institution other than the starting one. In addition, according to NCES research, four out of five incoming community college students want to transfer, but only one-fifth actually enroll in a four-year program within five years.

While many states are working to improve the effectiveness of their transfer and articulation agreements, transfer students’ time to a bachelor’s degree is still significantly longer than that of “native” students (those who’ve stayed at one institution): 5.6 years, on average, compared to 4.4 years. Today, for that extra 1.2 years of college, a student would pay over $9,000, on average, for tuition and fees alone. They’d also pay a hefty “opportunity cost”: delaying graduation and a move into the workforce means giving up months or years of salary while incurring debt. But these are the lucky ones – they eventually earn a credential. Others who cannot successfully navigate the transfer process just drop out of the academic system all together, forever disadvantaged and in debt.

“By simplifying the transfer process and focusing on learning the academy sends a strong message regarding what college is about,” says Peter Quigley, associate vice president for academic affairs, University of Hawai‘i, and co-chair of the Initiative. “It is
about acquiring skills and knowledge that can be demonstrated. By moving away from complicated formulas around courses and credits, the Passport levels the playing field, and unifies the language around success, achievement, and completion.”

Twenty-two two-year and four-year institutions from seven states (CA, HI, ND, OR, SD, UT, WY) in the WICHE region are expected to participate initially in Phase II. Faculty from these institutions will work together to define the Passport Learning Outcomes (PLOs) and transfer-level proficiency criteria for the remaining six lower-division general education content areas: creative arts; intercultural knowledge (social science); natural and physical sciences; information literacy; critical thinking; and teamwork/problem solving. Up to 12 other institutions in six new states will begin participating in year two of the project.

When Phase II is complete, it will encompass all lower-division general education content areas, simplifying the transfer process for many students, and be ripe for expansion beyond the WICHE region. Students who complete the Passport block at one Passport institution will be recognized as having met the lower-division general education requirements in these content areas when they transfer to another Passport institution, and will not be required to repeat any courses in the receiving institution’s Passport block. 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 simplify transfer students’ pathways to graduation.

To ensure that the expedited transfer of the Passport does not sacrifice academic quality, Phase I included a process for tracking academic progress of Passport students after transfer. A portion of the Gates and Lumina funding will be used to strengthen and expand that work. Additionally, staff and consultants will author a business plan and a data management plan to prepare the Passport for nationwide deployment at the conclusion of this two-year project.

WICHE President David Longanecker noted, “The Passport is an elegant and quite workable solution for students and for institutions, streamlining the transfer process and keeping students on track toward degree completion.”

About WICHE

The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education and its 16 members work collaboratively to expand educational access and excellence for all citizens of the West. By promoting innovation, cooperation, resource sharing, and sound public policy among states and institutions, WICHE strengthens higher education’s contributions to the region’s social, economic, and civic life. Our programs — Student Exchange, the WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies (WCET), Policy Analysis and Research, and Mental Health — are working to find answers to some of the most critical questions facing higher education today. WICHE’s 16 members include: Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawai’i, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, Wyoming, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, (the first of the U.S. Pacific territories and freely associated states to participate).

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