Plenary Session II:
Higher Education – Engine of Equality or Inequality?

WICHE’s mission states that our reason for being is “… to work collaboratively to expand educational access and excellence for all citizens of the West … .” This mission has been reflected in our workplan with a major focus on expanding access to success and an even more significant focus on better serving those populations that have traditionally been underrepresented in higher education in the West.

Yet, early this year an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* entitled “Engine of Inequality” raised serious questions about whether higher education has indeed been about expanding educational opportunity, as our clear intentions and rhetoric reflect, or whether its actual effect has been to increase inequality in American society. At nearly the same time that this article appeared, the Community College Research Center, with assistance from the Aspen Institute and the National Student Clearinghouse, released a research study entitled *Tracking Transfer: New Measures of Institutional and State Effectiveness in Helping Community College Students Attain Bachelor’s Degrees*, which provides evidence that the wonderful transfer and articulation efforts that almost all of our states proudly adopted may not be so wonderful after all in supporting our community college students who seek the baccalaureate.

As those of you who are scholars of American higher education can attest, this is not a new topic of conversation. In the 1960s and 1970s there was a great deal of discussion about whether our rhetoric was better than our action, and indeed there was substantial discussion about whether college was the answer for many who were then attending. The philosopher priest Ivan Illich was arguing for deschooling society because our bureaucratic approach to education was exacerbating our efforts toward societal egalitarianism. Christopher Jencks was providing many of the same findings and questions reflected in *The Chronicle’s* current articles in his co-authored book *Inequality* and was calling for a new approach to educating the masses in *The Academic Revolution*. James Coleman produced *The Coleman Report: Equality of Educational Opportunity*, which though focused primarily on elementary and secondary education demonstrated the same gaps in achievement.

For this first session, Karin Fischer, who authored *The Chronicle’s* “Engine of Inequality” article, will present what brought *The Chronicle* to examine this topic and what they have discovered in their journalistic inquiries. Subsequent articles by Fischer on these issues include “Getting Traction in Closing the Inequality Gap” and “2 Keys to Success for Underprivileged Students: When to Start College, and Where to Go.” After Fischer’s presentation, Joe Garcia, incoming president of WICHE, will moderate a discussion between commissioners and Fischer about the theme of
“Higher Education: Engine of Equality or Inequality.” These should both be informative and provocative discussions.

**Speaker:**
Karin Fischer, senior reporter, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*

**Facilitated Discussion on Higher Education – Engine of Equality or Inequality?**

**Facilitator:**
Joe Garcia, former Colorado lieutenant governor, and former executive director, Colorado Department of Higher Education; and incoming president, WICHE

**Biographical Information on the Speaker & Facilitator**

A senior reporter at *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Karin Fischer covers the business of international education and the globalization of higher education, including competition for foreign students, activities by American colleges overseas, policies and programs that affect the international activities of American colleges, and the internationalization of the college experience.

Fischer joined *The Chronicle* in 2005 to write about U.S. higher education politics and policy. She previously worked for Kiplinger Washington Editors; MediaNews Group’s Washington bureau; the *Charleston* (W.Va.) *Daily Mail*; and the *Daily Hampshire* (Mass.). Her work has also appeared in *The New York Times*, *Washington Monthly*, and *George* magazine.

In 2010, Fischer was one of 10 reporters selected for the East-West Center’s Jefferson Fellowship program for study and reporting in Asia. She also is the recipient of the Paul Miller Washington Reporting Fellowship and a National Press Foundation fellowship on the Business of Higher Education. She is part of reporting teams that have been honored with an Utne Independent Press Award for best political coverage and by the Education Writers Association for the articles “Asia Rising/America Falling” and the “Towns, Gowns, and Taxes” series. A graduate of Smith College, she also was the recipient of the Poynter Institute News Reporting and Writing Fellowship for College Graduates, which recognizes a dozen outstanding young journalists annually.

**Joseph Garcia**, former executive director of Colorado’s Department of Higher Education and former Colorado Lieutenant Governor for more than five years, will assume the presidency of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) in June 2016. Throughout his career, Garcia has demonstrated a longstanding passion for education and public service. While he was the second highest elected official in Colorado, Garcia served in the dual role as executive director of the Colorado Department of Higher Education. Earlier he was president of Colorado State University – Pueblo.
While in that role he served on WICHE’s governing body for nearly 10 years and chaired the Commission in 2012; he was co-chair of Gov. John Hickenlooper’s P-20 Education Task Force; and he was a trustee of the Higher Learning Commission for the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, the accrediting body for degree-granting postsecondary educational institutions in the north central region of the U.S. He also has served as president of Colorado’s second-largest community college, Pikes Peak Community College.

Garcia has had successful careers in both the private and public sectors. He graduated from the University of Colorado, where he earned a business degree, and served in the Navy Reserve. Subsequently, he earned a Juris Doctorate from Harvard Law School, and after graduation he joined the law firm of Holme, Roberts, and Owen, LLP, where he became its first Hispanic partner. Garcia was later appointed by former Gov. Roy Romer as the executive director of the Colorado Department of Regulatory Agencies. He also served in the Clinton administration as the Secretary’s Rocky Mountain States Representative for the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Garcia also served on the Colorado Housing and Finance Authority under former Governors Roy Romer and Bill Owens and went on to chair the Authority’s board.