

# STATE SCHOLARS INITIATIVE PERFORMANCE DATA



## Business-Education Partnerships: Highlights from the Annual State Scholars Initiative Report

### Introduction

The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Vocational and Adult Education funds the State Scholars Initiative (SSI), which is administered by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE). SSI uses business-education partnerships at the state and community levels to encourage students in middle and high school to pursue a more rigorous course of study in high school than they might otherwise have taken. WICHE is responsible for providing technical assistance, monitoring, oversight, and cost reimbursement to SSI state partnerships. This summary highlights an evaluation of how these business-education partnerships influenced high school student course-taking.<sup>1</sup>

This evaluation focuses primarily on the 10 SSI states that were operating federally funded SSI projects from October 1, 2006, through September 30, 2007: Louisiana, Massachusetts, Missouri, Nebraska, New Hampshire, South Dakota, Utah, Virginia, West Virginia, and Wyoming.<sup>2</sup> A variety of information was used to formulate the findings and program and policy recommendations, including performance reports, correspondence, and program documents, as well as data from interviews with state directors and surveys of SSI business partners. This evaluation was conducted by the Center for Governmental Studies at Northern Illinois University. A second SSI evaluation, conducted by the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, addresses SSI student outcome and perception data.

### Findings on the Employer Role in SSI

- ★ The personal connection with students was perceived by employers and SSI state program directors alike to be the most effective business role in influencing students to take more rigorous courses.

- ★ SSI activities in which most private-sector employers engaged included: delivering the classroom presentation on the importance of a rigorous program of study; sharing their workforce needs with school personnel; and conveying the message of rigor and relevance to the broader community.
- ★ Almost 90 percent of the employers participating in SSI and involved at the local level indicated their intentions to continue their involvement.
- ★ Employers participating in SSI believe that academic rigor is connected to career and technical education; partnerships with community colleges; and the study of science, technology, engineering, and math.

### Findings on SSI and Education Reform

- ★ All of the reporting state partnerships are connecting with other state and national education reform initiatives. Links to default curriculum efforts are the predominant state-level connection, although SSI is also tied to career and technical education as well as to economic and workforce development policy in some states.
- ★ When asked if the business community, in general, agreed on a definition of "educational rigor," about a third of employers said no or said they didn't know. In addition, there was considerable variation among state directors in how they defined "educational rigor."
- ★ Increasing awareness of the importance of rigorous academic preparation and school improvement was among the foremost SSI program benefits identified by state directors.

## Findings on SSI Program Implementation

- ★ SSI state-level partnerships vary widely in their governance and administrative structures, although all use some combination of K-12, postsecondary, business, and business-education organizations. Five SSI states use a consistent structure in forming their local business-education partnerships, while the other states allow considerable local autonomy.
  - ★ SSI partnerships also vary in terms of their emphases, which depend on available local resources and educational priorities.
  - ★ A number of SSI states are unable to provide accurate information about the employers involved in their local school districts. Reasons for this include a climate of local control and inadequate school-level reporting resources.
  - ★ In addition to basic SSI program activities, which have been implemented in similar ways across the network, a variety of promising student recruitment, retention, and recognition activities are occurring.
  - ★ The aspect of program implementation considered most challenging by state directors was the expectation that their program would be financially self-sustaining after two years of federal funding. Most state directors have not had enough time to pursue long-term sustainability resources, due to the many competing and time-sensitive implementation priorities.
- ★ Allowing more flexibility in customizing SSI at the local level while maintaining academic rigor.
  - ★ Clarifying the specific benefits associated with aligning SSI with other education reform efforts and identifying promising practices for achieving such alignment.
  - ★ Creating significant, unique national financial incentives associated with SSI, such as scholarships.
3. The level of support (monetary as well as community and political) provided to SSI state directors by their state-level business-education partnerships varies greatly. These partnerships should consider regularly assessing and improving their own performance in this regard.
  4. Three additional national resources have substantial potential to enhance the productivity of SSI state directors: volunteer management software; a national employer recruitment or marketing strategy; and a database of promising and effective program implementation practices.
  5. Given that a minimum of four years is needed to generate program outcome data for one cohort of SSI students, two years of federal funding appear inadequate to collect necessary data and establish a successful statewide SSI program.
  6. Many SSI states have not structured their local business-education partnerships to maximize local ownership. Building a statewide network of local champions appears to create a promising foundation for long-term sustainability.

## Policy and Program Implications

1. The definition of educational rigor varies among state directors and likely among members of the business community and other stakeholders. A consensus definition of rigor at the local, state, and/or national level is needed to measure the extent to which a truly rigorous course of study is being implemented.
2. While SSI is connected to other state and national education reform initiatives, differentiating SSI from these other efforts is a challenge. Possible strategies to support differentiation include:

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The complete evaluation may be accessed at <[www.wiche.edu/statescholars](http://www.wiche.edu/statescholars)>.

<sup>2</sup> Five other SSI states had completed their SSI projects but actively participated in this evaluation: Arizona, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, and Tennessee. Secondary program information on another six active SSI states – Arkansas, Connecticut, Indiana, Michigan, Oklahoma, Rhode Island – and one former state, New Jersey, was also included.



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