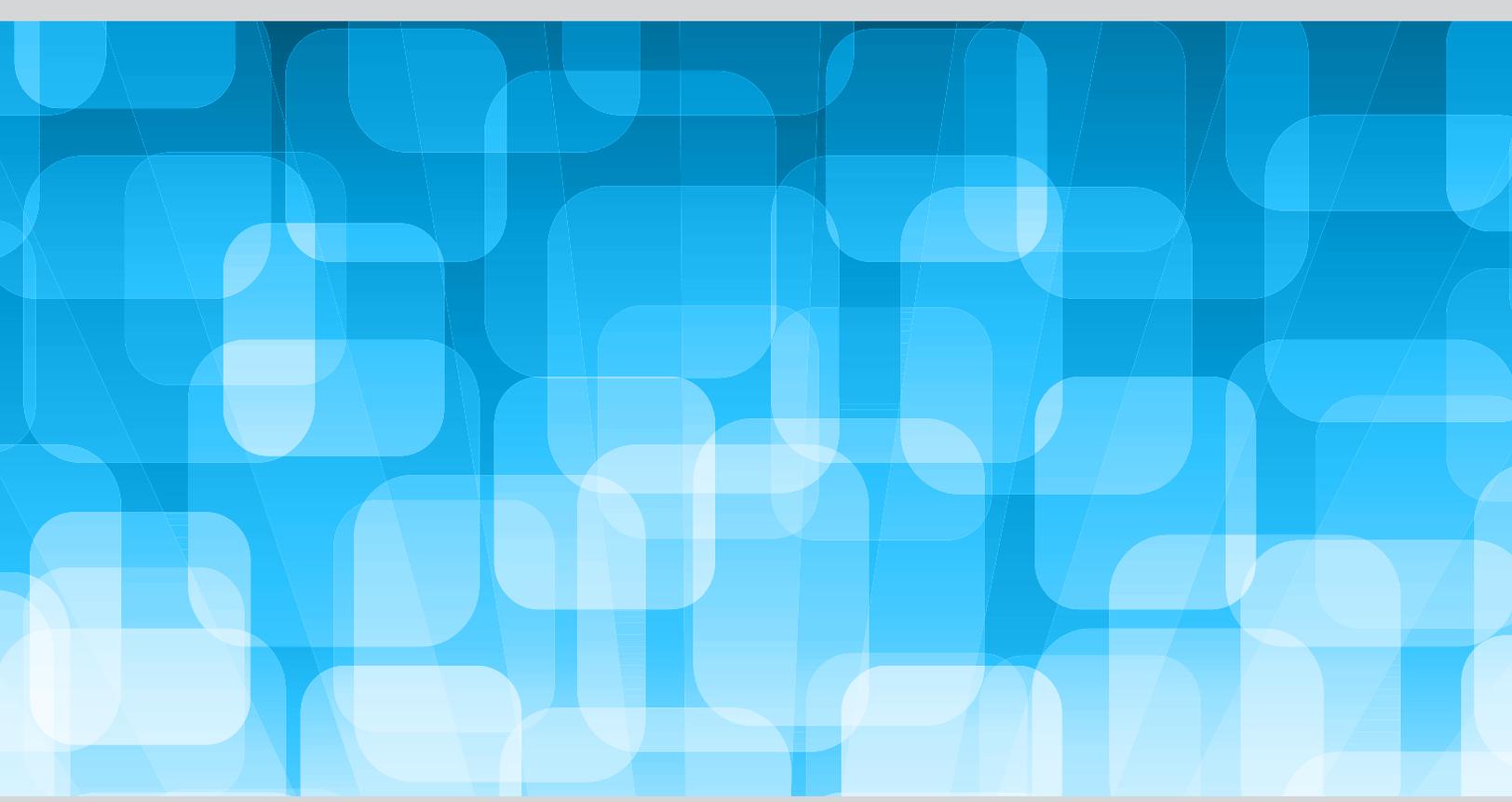# WICHE INSIGHTS
Completion Strategies in the West
## Academic Success

Christina Sedney | February 2026

Strategies to Support Academic Success and Increase Completion

States have long played a central role in aligning and coordinating inter-institutional academic policy.[1] WICHE's landscape analysis of completion strategies in the West, which included a review of state strategic plans and stakeholder focus groups, demonstrated that this continues to be an important area of focus for states and systems. In recent years, as many states have prioritized goals such as reducing time-to-credential and providing more fluid entry and exit points for higher education, there has been an increased policy emphasis on credit mobility, credit for prior learning, and dual or concurrent enrollment.

States have also moved to support academic initiatives such as corequisite remediation, the use of open educational resources, and dedicated first-year student supports to encourage student retention and completion.

Key Academic Success Strategies Across the West

- Credit Mobility
- Credit for Prior Learning
- Dual and Concurrent Enrollment
- Open Educational Resources
- First-year Success

In discussing these academic initiatives, it is important to recognize that there is significant variation in states' authority to set academic policies for institutions, depending upon the nature of their postsecondary governance structure. Across the region, states often take on a role that prioritizes cross-institutional coordination, seeking opportunities to build consensus on statewide approaches while respecting academic freedom.
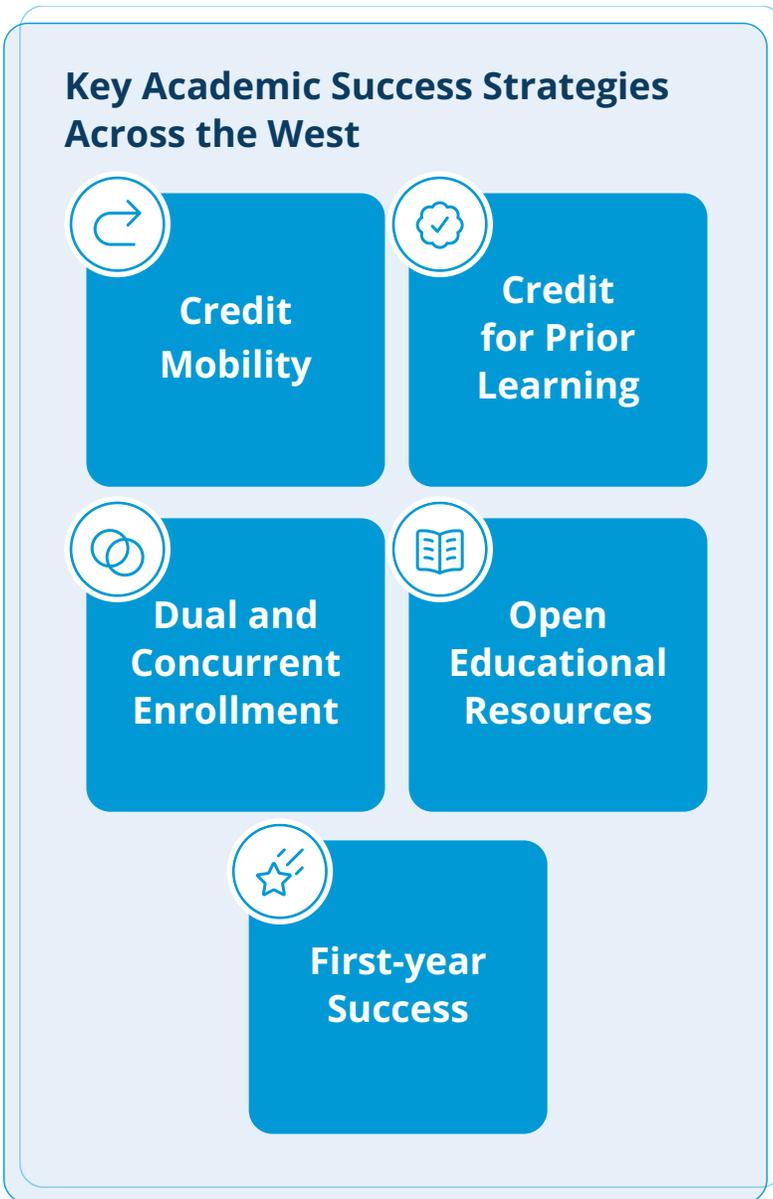
⤳ Credit Mobility

States have long held some level of responsibility for ensuring credit transfer among their institutions, whether through academic policy setting, public-facing resources, or the convening of inter-institutional faculty groups. Amid heightened attention to the return on investment delivered by higher education, it has become increasingly important to ensure that students are not losing credits as they move between institutions, which can negatively impact the value proposition of postsecondary education. To ensure the soundness of students' investment in their education, states are exploring new ways to support credit mobility, from technology solutions to systemwide policies, even as they continue ongoing efforts such as common course numbering, aligned general education requirements, and enhanced articulation agreements.

▶ As a state with strong local control at the community college level, Arizona relies on AZTransfer to support coordinated transfer between the state's public institutions. The AZTransfer Steering Committee guides work, including faculty-led Articulation Task Forces, the development of an Arizona General Education Curriculum, and course equivalencies. The initiative also includes a student-facing database and tracks and analyzes transfer data.[2]

▶ North Dakota's University System instituted common course numbering as well as a General Education Requirement

About the Landscape Analysis

As states across the region explore how to enhance the value proposition of higher education, it has become clear that credential completion is a critical component of delivering a valuable postsecondary experience. This *WICHE Insights* is part of a series of policy briefs that highlight various postsecondary completion strategies across the WICHE region. These briefs present findings from a landscape analysis of completion approaches in the West, which involved reviewing strategic plans and conducting focus groups with stakeholders across the region. The briefs include selected examples that demonstrate the variation in state approaches to implementing these strategies.

WICHE has developed a web resource that features further details on the findings of this analysis, including briefs on the region's four overarching approaches to improving completion outcomes, and an interactive online resource displaying state-level strategies. This work was generously funded by ECMC Foundation.

⟋ **Visit wiche.edu/completion for more information.**

[Transfer Agreement](), an approved set of general education courses transferable between North Dakota University System institutions, North Dakota's five tribal colleges, and one North Dakota private university.[3]

▶ South Dakota has established a set of [transferable general education courses]() between its technical and four-year public colleges, established through a memorandum of understanding between the two systems. The system has also invested in a student-facing [transfer explorer]() tool.[4]

▶ As part of its statewide completion strategy, Washington is pursuing a [Universal Transfer Explorer]() tool to better facilitate transfer without credit loss. Currently in its pilot phase, the state's student-facing tool will show students how their credits transfer across participating institutions.[5]

▶ In Wyoming, another state with locally governed community colleges, the Community College Commission created a resource for the state's students to [explore transfer options]() among the state's institutions. The state is also implementing an initiative to award reverse transfer associate degrees to eligible students.[6]

The policy levers available to states in the realm of credit mobility vary greatly depending upon their level of oversight over institutional academic policy. Centrally governed systems can implement policy mandating credit transfer, while states with more decentralized postsecondary governance rely on strategies such as the facilitation of cross-institutional collaboration through convening and technology solutions. Advances in technological capability offer promise for more streamlined credit transfer. However, a foundation of cross-institutional collaboration and trust is necessary to underpin any credit mobility effort, regardless of a state's governance structure. To build this foundation, states must remain appropriately engaged in this critical area for student success.

Credit for Prior Learning

As learners enter and exit the postsecondary system with increasing frequency, often returning with substantial experience outside the classroom, postsecondary education has struggled to ensure that all types of learning are appropriately recognized and validated. States and systems play a critical role in establishing common approaches to credit for prior learning (CPL), helping to ensure consistency across institutions. While decisions regarding the award of credit typically rest with faculty, states have made strides in the establishment of standards for both the credit awarded for certain common exams, and for the processes around CPL. States have also developed policies to incentivize the use of CPL and are assessing progress via data collection and reporting.

- As part of their strategic plan, the Nevada System of Higher Education prioritizes the expansion of CPL beyond credit-by-exam, offering faculty support to develop new forms of CPL and creating systemwide CPL inventories.[7]
- The North Dakota University System is working to develop common practices around CPL and to better understand how institutions are granting credit. They track CPL credits awarded by institutions on a public dashboard as part of this process.[8]
- The Utah System of Higher Education plays a key role in coordinating efforts across the system related to implementing CPL assessment policies and practices.[9] The system coordinates faculty committees to develop system-level assessment tools related to prior learning assessment as well as standardized minimum scores for credit for common exams such as the College Level Examination Program and Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support Subject Standardized Tests.[10]
- The state legislature directed the Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission to increase and improve the use of CPL at the state's institutions. As part of this ongoing work, the commission convenes a CPL Advisory Committee that develops CPL standards for the state and annually collects and reports data on CPL use to the legislature.[11]

Dual and Concurrent Enrollment

States across the West have made significant investments in providing high school students with the opportunity to earn college credit to streamline pathways between K-12 and higher education and to accelerate credential completion. However, each state has a unique funding and policy structure for their dual and concurrent enrollment programs, and makes different choices around the magnitude of their investments and the details of their policies.

- Colorado notes growing dual and concurrent enrollment as a strategy for achieving the state's strategic plan goal of improving learning pathways that link to a career. The plan specifically highlights the strategy's impact on reducing time-to-credential which reduces the overall cost of attendance, resulting in increased overall value for students.[12]
- The state of Idaho has made a significant investment in dual credit through their Advanced Opportunities program, which in 2025 offers all students in grades seven through 12 $4,625 to use towards eligible expenses, including dual credit. The state's strategic plan for K-20 education includes a goal to increase participation, monitored through a public dashboard.[13]
- Nevada highlights dual credit in their strategic plan, noting a policy change to discount their systemwide course fee for concurrent enrollment courses. This led to an uptick in enrollment and a goal to develop more robust dual credit policies at the system level through the "Align and Shine Nevada" working group, which brings together representatives of K-12 and higher education.[14]

Open Educational Resources

Open Educational Resources (OER) are openly licensed and freely accessible materials used for teaching, learning, and research. In addition to OER's implications for reducing cost of attendance, a growing body of research also demonstrates the positive impact of access to, and use of, these materials on student completion. This has led several states to launch initiatives aimed at scaling OER adoption as a student success strategy.[15]

▶ Colorado's strategic plan highlights OER as a promising practice. The state promotes the adoption of OER through a state grant program administered by the Colorado Department of Higher Education in conjunction with professional development opportunities and an annual conference.[16]

▶ Idaho's State Board of Education maintains a policy on instructional material access and affordability, which requires institutions to develop a plan to increase students' access to affordable instructional materials, including professional development opportunities and incentives for the development and use of OER.[17]

▶ Through Open Oregon Educational Resources, Oregon offers a variety of state-supported resources to its two- and four-year institutions, including professional development, grants, faculty incentives, and assistance with developing appropriate policies and assessments for OER use. The initiative also tracks the impact of these investments and shares the open course materials used by Oregon institutions.[18]

▶ North Dakota curates repositories of OER used by North Dakota institutions, and offers professional development opportunities. The state also tracks the number of courses offered using OER across their institutions as part of their strategic plan goal of maximizing the strength of a unified system.[19]

First-year Success

As completion has become a central goal for states, many have chosen to focus on students' success in their first year to ensure they are well-placed on a path to completion. These efforts span a range of approaches, including developmental education reform, courses dedicated to first-year success, tutoring, and peer support.

▶ California enacted legislation requiring that the state's community colleges "maximize the probability that a student will enter and complete transfer-level coursework in English and math within a one-year timeframe." In support of this mandate, the state's community colleges have implemented a number of initiatives. These include widespread adoption of a multiple measures placement framework (using high school performance instead of high-stakes placement tests), redesigned math pathways, and corequisite remediation. The

system tracks outcomes over time and has seen a dramatic increase in students passing these transfer-level courses.[20]

▶ In Guam, both Guam Community College and the University of Guam center first-year student success. Guam Community College prioritizes students' initial access to technology and tutoring support, while the University of Guam is working to implement high-impact educational practices such as undergraduate research, learning communities, and capstone opportunities.[21]

▶ The Montana University System convenes a Developmental Education Steering Committee, which works to ensure successful completion of students' initial college-level math and writing courses through corequisite support models and revisions to their placement policy.[22] In addition, Montana's signature student success intervention, Montana 10, includes academic supports such as tutoring and a full-time course load requirement.[23]

▶ Northern Marianas College, the territory's sole public institution of higher education, is working to enhance first-year retention through peer advisors and reimagined developmental course offerings, in line with their strategic priority to empower students to succeed through targeted student support services.[24]

▶ The strategic plan of the College of the Marshall Islands, the republic's only provider of public higher education, includes investment in professional development for advising as well as the creation of a peer advising program. The college has also invested in developing a first-year success course for entering students.[25]

Conclusion

Though academic policy largely rests with institutions, states have a critical role to play in ensuring these policies effectively operate across institutions and that students within a state have a consistent experience. Moreover, states can catalyze the adoption and scale of evidence-based approaches such as OER and developmental education reform through incentives, policy, and shared resources. The examples highlighted in this brief demonstrate how states are working in partnership with their institutions to ensure an aligned approach to policies, practices, and funding decisions related to academic pathways.

ENDNOTES

1   WICHE is a regional higher education interstate compact that includes 15 states and the U.S. Pacific Territories and Freely Associated States. The use of the term state reflects all states, territories, and freely associated states in the WICHE region. The WICHE region includes Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, Wyoming, and the following U.S. Pacific Territories and Freely Associated States: American Samoa, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Guam, Republic of the Marshall Islands, and Republic of Palau. Throughout this brief, the term "state" is understood to include states, territories, and freely associated states.
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