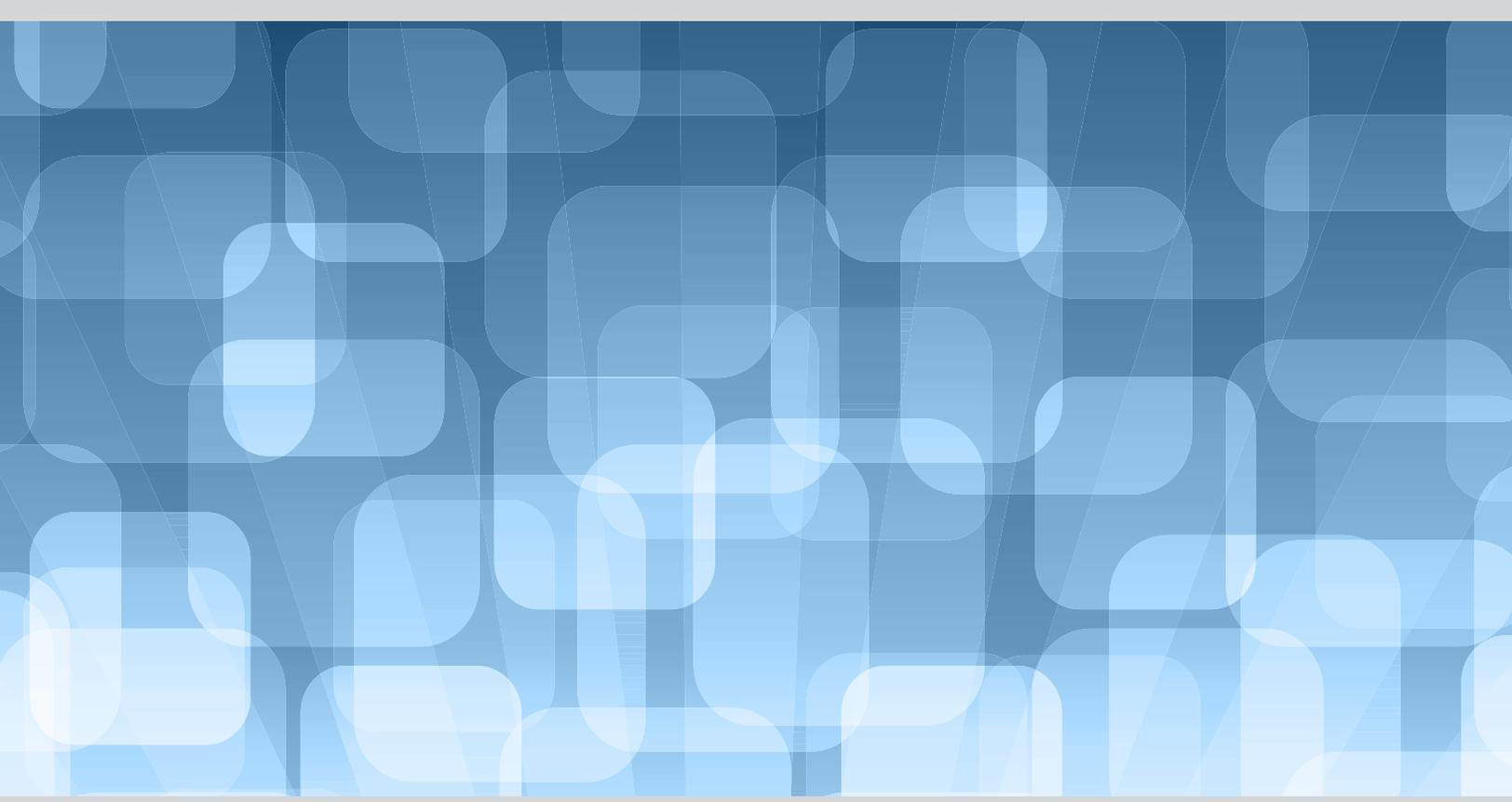


WICHE INSIGHTS

Completion Strategies in the West

Coordination, Collaboration, and Structures

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Strategies to Support Collaboration, Efficiencies, and Better-Informed Decision Making

Through WICHE's landscape analysis of completion strategies in the West, including a review of state strategic plans and stakeholder focus groups, a theme emerged: **states recognize opportunities for cross-institutional collaboration, as well as adapting and developing structures to better support student success.**¹ While these strategies are not typically classified as completion strategies in the same way as those discussed in the '[student-centered](#)' or '[academic success](#)' briefs, it became clear that states are prioritizing this coordination and are modifying structures and state-level decision-making to address barriers to student progress through higher education. Examples of these efforts include cross-institution collaboration through course sharing, supporting coordination on key policy areas, and state-level decision-making that adjusts and evolves state-level structures such as data systems and funding models to align with completion priorities. Collectively, these strategies and adaptations create opportunities for states to leverage policies and practices to build a higher education system that better supports students and equips leaders with data and evidence to make more informed decisions.





Collaboration and Coordination

According to WICHE's *Knocking at the College Door* report, the number of high school graduates in the United States is projected to decline after 2025.² Fewer high school graduates will have several implications, as institutions will face increasing competition for fewer students and states will need to prioritize efficient, effective completion strategies to mitigate projected population declines. States can meet these challenges through a number of interventions, including cross-institutional collaboration and resource sharing. In WICHE's landscape analysis, states demonstrated variety in both their identification and their approach to this work, based on the governance and structure of higher education within each state or system. For example, the California State University's new strategic plan leverages the "system-ness" of the CSU system to develop a set of system-level priorities focused on cross-institutional alignment to better support students. Alternatively, the Colorado Department of Higher Education, a statewide coordinating agency, focuses on creating structures that foster communication and coordination not only across higher education institutions and systems but also across state-level agencies.



COURSE SHARING

Course sharing enables institutions to collaborate on course offerings and allows students from one institution to take a course at another institution to receive

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 ECOM Foundation.



Visit wiche.edu/completion for more information.

academic credit. Students benefit from access to courses that may not be offered (or may be full) at their institution, so they can stay on track for graduation. Institutions benefit from the ability to enroll students from other institutions in lower-enrollment courses. Additionally, course sharing can potentially provide cost savings to institutions by leveraging faculty and course offerings at other institutions rather than offering an under-enrolled course.

- ▶ The Montana University System (MUS) operationalizes its strategic priority of increasing student retention through a set of tactics centered around the development of a Seamless System. One component of the Seamless System is a digital learning environment, including the Montana Online Course Exchange.³ Other components of the [Seamless System](#) strategy include common course numbering and an aligned learning management system across MUS institutions, which provides a foundational base for cross-institutional course sharing. Additionally, the online course exchange offers a significant opportunity for access to digital learning in one of the most rural states in the region and the nation.⁴
- ▶ In 2024, the Nevada System of Higher Education released its latest strategic plan, [Success by Design](#), which includes a focus on developing a voluntary online course exchange. The course exchange aims to increase flexibility, optimize resource use, and support student success across the system.⁵

While investing in the technological infrastructure needed for cross-institutional course sharing is vital, it is equally crucial to have policies and practices in place to support successful course sharing. For example, a policy would need to clearly explain the allocation of state funding and tuition revenue between two institutions if students are allowed to dual-enroll. Statewide coordination plays a key role in the development and implementation of course sharing, as it requires significant engagement from a range of stakeholders in various roles within an institution.



RESOURCE AND KNOWLEDGE SHARING

Beyond course sharing, state-level agencies and organizations are developing programming and strategies that foster coordinated collaboration, resource sharing and optimization, and knowledge sharing.

- ▶ Although there are no financial incentives included in the Colorado Department of Higher Education's [Social Determinants of Student Success](#) and [Workforce Determinants of Student Success](#) designations, these innovative approaches give institutions a framework for developing strategies across a decentralized higher education system.⁶ There is also an opportunity for institutional learning and resource sharing through a connected, aligned framework rather than each institution developing its own strategies.
- ▶ In 2025, the Colorado Community College System released its latest strategic plan, with a specific focus on enhancing cross-institutional resource sharing. One of the plan's key priorities is the '[Power of 13](#)' initiative, which focuses on increasing opportunities for

students through consortial models and collaboration. This includes a priority to develop a unified platform to display all course offerings across the system.⁷

- ▶ The Washington Student Achievement Council has invested over \$17 million as part of its [Regional Challenge Grants](#) to support 12 cross-sector regional partnerships to enhance postsecondary access and completion at the community level. These regional collaborations unite multiple higher education institutions with community and K-12 partners to develop community-based strategies that better align postsecondary education with regional and local needs.⁸

State-level agencies and organizations play a vital role in coordinating [student-centered](#), [academic](#), and [workforce alignment](#) strategies as well. The other three briefs in this series feature robust examples of how state agencies effectively coordinate across institutions to develop and implement policies and strategies that drive student success.

- ▶ The Utah System of Higher Education plays a key role in coordinating efforts across the system related to implementing credit for prior learning 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 College Level Examination Program and Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support Subject Standardized Tests.¹⁰
- ▶ Arizona's Board of Regents intentionally expanded its basic needs work to support student mental health and wellbeing by completing listening sessions on student mental health across state campuses, curating student wellness and mental health resources, and convening an Arizona Board of Regents' [Student Well-being Workgroup](#).¹¹
- ▶ The Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission (HECC) acts as the backbone agency for [Future Ready Oregon](#), a \$200 million state investment in innovative workforce and talent development programs across the state. This includes providing grant funding to colleges and partners, facilitating industry consortia, and coordinating efforts with other state agencies.¹²

These resource and knowledge sharing opportunities support an ecosystem of cross-institutional collaboration. As states and systems face significant challenges, including a declining youth population, budget issues, and a declining college-going rate compared to a decade prior, coordinated collaboration provides an opportunity to help students as they navigate higher education systems.



Adapting and Evolving Structures

Within state strategic plans, a recurring theme is how states adapt and leverage existing structures to better support student success. A common example is the expansion of course

modalities and even the modification of schedules to better support students. Additionally, states identified the critical role of data and evidence in making more informed decisions that better align priorities and outcomes for students. Lastly, funding is critical for institutions' ability to develop and implement strategies that best support student completion and success.



LEARNING ENVIRONMENT AND COURSE MODALITY STRUCTURES

Several states prioritize the expansion of learning opportunities for students in their strategic plans. State efforts focus on adapting learning environments to better serve students and expanding course offerings and modalities to promote student access and success. In many parts of the WICHE region, particularly in the Pacific region, where students live in remote communities, the expansion of online learning has been a key strategy for states and institutions.

- ▶ In 2025, the California State University system released its first strategic plan in a decade, which included a goal of enrolling 10% of students, or 50,000 students, in new adaptive learning programs.¹³ These programs are intended to support students seeking a more flexible, career-oriented learning environment. This work is part of the system's framework for student success, underscoring an intent to expand faculty capacity-building to develop pedagogies for adaptive technologies.¹⁴
- ▶ The Federated States of Micronesia is comprised of 271 square miles of land spread across more than 1 million square miles of ocean, which makes the use of education technology one of the [College of Micronesia-FSM's](#) key strategies for supporting students.¹⁵ Across the college's three main priorities—access, innovation, and resilience—there are integrated strategies focused on enabling student learning through technological innovations. This includes implementing flexible learning options like hybrid and online courses and building faculty capacity around emerging educational technologies to improve student learning.
- ▶ The College of the Marshall Islands is in one of the most remote parts of the world, which presents both challenges and opportunities. To better accommodate their students, the college has prioritized the expansion of learning options, including more evening and weekend courses as well as additional digital learning opportunities. In addition to course offerings, the college's [strategic plan](#) focuses on expanding student support services to evenings and weekends to better assist working adult students.¹⁶
- ▶ The South Dakota Board of Regents' [strategic plan](#) includes a planned action for the system to explore new modalities and programming to support adult and working professionals.¹⁷ Although it is unclear how this has led to the development of new modalities, it is a crucial first step in emphasizing the importance of adapting learning experiences for adult students.

Expanding access to course options and updating learning environments are essential strategies to promote student success. If students cannot complete their coursework in a way that fits their lives, they may drop out or seek other educational opportunities that better meet their needs.



FUNDING STRUCTURES

Although not a standalone completion strategy, WICHE's landscape analysis identified alignment between state strategic plans and performance-based funding models across the region. Performance-based funding is used as a lever to incentivize institutional performance across various priorities, including completion. States develop and implement these models in different ways, such as defining metrics, allocating funds, and applying specific weights in the formula.

- ▶ Montana's performance-based funding formula for the Montana University System incentivizes meeting and surpassing retention and success goals. The formula considers metrics such as retention rates, undergraduate completions, credit accumulation, and gateway course completion.¹⁸ These metrics directly support the retention and completion priorities outlined in the MUS strategic plan.¹⁹
- ▶ One of the measured outcomes of the Utah System of Higher Education's strategic plan is the number of high-yield graduates (those who complete high-wage, high-demand programs) across the system. This outcome aligns with the system's goal to meet workforce needs by increasing the number of high-yield graduates by 3% by the end of the 2026-27 academic year. This measure in the strategic plan informs the state's performance funding formula, which includes a high-yield graduate variable in the formula.²⁰

In some cases, performance-based funding formulas can incentivize institutions to align with key priorities outlined in state strategic plans or set by state legislators, and the landscape analysis indicates that states in the West are seeking to link performance-based funding formulas to strategic plan goals of participation, retention, and completion. However, the research on performance-based funding is less clear on whether performance-based funding results in an increase in student outcomes. An accompanying research summary examines in greater detail the effects of performance-based funding and its potential to reinforce competition among institutions. As states focus on collaborative strategies for student success, it is important to assess how performance-based funding supports or hinders coordination and collaboration.



DATA AND TECHNOLOGY INFRASTRUCTURE

Access to relevant data to support better-informed decision-making is critical to the continuous improvement and evolution of completion strategies. As many states face budget constraints, access to data demonstrating outcomes and return on investment for strategies such as dual enrollment and wraparound services will be critical. Several states identified enhancing data capacity as a priority to better support student success and completion. These examples include expanding data collection and technological infrastructure to better understand student outcomes and support more informed decision-making.

- ▶ In fiscal year 2025, the [Arizona Board of Regents](#) implemented several strategies to improve operational efficiencies at the board level to support the use of data to guide institutional practices. For example, the board finalized a new metrics framework that aligns with institutional priorities and systemwide goals. The board also collaborated with state partners to migrate key datasets on student transfers and workforce outcomes to enable better-informed decisions about future access and success initiatives.²¹
- ▶ The [California State University's strategic plan](#) incorporates the expansion of technology capacity to enhance strategic priorities further and allow for data-driven decision-making. This includes increasing data collection across all campuses to track student outcomes and support evidence-based decision-making. The plan also includes the establishment of the Technology Innovation Center to support faculty in integrating emerging technologies and to build systemwide capacity to evaluate the implementation of new technology tools in education.²²
- ▶ The [Nevada System of Higher Education strategic plan](#) includes a pillar focused on addressing Nevada's workforce needs. It aims to align educational programs with workforce demands through initiatives like credit for prior learning, work-based learning, and noncredit training. The plan recognizes that there is currently no systemwide data collection on these strategies and proposes actions to establish a data infrastructure that tracks credit for prior learning, work-based learning opportunities, and noncredit student progress enrollment.²³

Through engagement with stakeholders across the region, WICHE found that although state data systems have improved significantly over the past 20 years, gaps remain in the data needed to assess the effectiveness of completion strategies. For instance, while most states can access data on overall retention and graduation rates, it is more challenging to isolate the impacts of specific strategies on those rates, such as those focused on transfer or credit for prior learning.



Artificial Intelligence

The timing of the strategic plans included in the landscape analysis varies across states, but in most cases, they did not address artificial intelligence (AI). This is most likely because most plans were developed before AI emerged as a key policy and practice area for higher education. With that said, states and systems play a key role in supporting professional development and in developing policy and practice around AI in higher education.

- ▶ In 2024, the California Community Colleges established the [California Community Colleges Digital Center for Innovation, Transformation, and Equity](#) to provide a strategic approach to innovation. The center aims to harness the power of AI, facilitate public-private partnerships, and support students entering an AI-driven workforce. Its focus is on creating

partnerships that enhance students' knowledge and experience with AI, developing AI pilots for systemwide scaling, and supporting professional development around AI use and opportunities for faculty.²⁴

- ▶ In 2024, the Idaho State Board of Education developed a new fellowship initiative to foster collaboration and improve understanding of how generative AI can be applied in higher education. Two faculty members were awarded the fellowship and received funding to attend conferences, conduct research, and offer professional development. The fellowship culminated in the development of an online resource, "[A Guide to Teaching and Learning with Artificial Intelligence](#)," to be used by faculty and staff across the state.²⁵



Conclusion

From application to degree completion, students must navigate multiple micro- and macro-systems to pursue a degree or credential. Within each of these systems, numerous potential challenges and barriers affect student persistence and success. Across the West, states and systems are leveraging the strengths of partnership and collaboration to drive student success forward and remove barriers to completion. And while this work is not typically viewed as a completion strategy, addressing persistent barriers to completion is critical for increasing student success and completion.

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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