WICHE INSIGHTS
Completion Strategies in the West
Key Findings

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Landscape Analysis of Completion Strategies Across the WICHE Region

The WICHE region comprises 15 states and the U.S. Pacific Territories and Freely Associated States, each with its own context that shapes how it invests in and supports postsecondary student success. Although contexts vary across the region, there is a common thread: states are working to improve student completion through thoughtful, evidence-based approaches.[1] In an effort to better understand both how state context influences policymaking and identify common approaches to student success, WICHE launched a year-long landscape analysis of state higher education strategic plans. This initiative highlights the various ways states prioritize, develop, and implement completion strategies. Through the landscape analysis, WICHE identified **four overarching approaches across the West:**

Student Success

Academic Success

Workforce Alignment

Coordination, Collaboration, and Structures

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.

Each of these strategies is discussed in more detail in a series of accompanying briefs, which highlight the ways in which states are developing and implementing completion approaches differently. In addition to the variety of completion strategies across the region, WICHE identified several other key themes related to the process and operationalization of strategic plans. This brief provides a meta-analysis of WICHE's document review and focus groups, with a specific emphasis on how state context and capacity influence planning and implementation.

Process and Analysis

The initial phase of the landscape analysis involved reviewing higher education strategic plans. Since the goal was to identify state-level strategies across the region, the review included state-level plans and, in some cases, system-level plans (see the Appendix for the list of plans reviewed). WICHE staff examined 26 publicly available plans and other materials, such as dashboards, supplementary reports, and documents, to identify the strategies in place across the region. This document review included plans released through October 2025.

The second phase of the landscape analysis focused on stakeholder engagement. In June and July 2025, WICHE staff hosted a series of five focus groups on the categories of completion strategies identified in the document analysis. The purpose of these focus groups was to hear from stakeholders across the region about how strategies identified in the document analysis are developed, implemented, and measured.

WICHE compiled the findings from both the document analysis and focus groups into a series of four briefs demonstrating key completion strategies across the region. In some cases, either through additional document analysis or the focus groups, WICHE staff identified additional strategies used in states that are not otherwise included in state-level strategic plans. WICHE also incorporated some additional contextual knowledge of state efforts in completion strategies and included these strategies in the briefs when relevant. In addition to the briefs, an interactive online dashboard allows users to view strategies for specific states. Finally, WICHE will release a series of research summaries to underscore the evidence-based research supporting the strategies implemented throughout the region.

Key Themes Across the Region

The document analysis and focus groups brought to light several key themes about how states prioritize, develop, implement, and measure completion strategies. These themes reveal the variation in plans and priorities across the region, as well as show recent priorities around workforce alignment and coordination across higher education institutions.

📋 STRATEGIC PLAN STRUCTURE VARIES SIGNIFICANTLY

One of the main themes that emerged from the document analysis was a lack of consistent structure for state strategic plans. This was evident in the timing, structure, and content of the plans. For example, the Washington Student Achievement Council updates its action plan every year.[2] The core principles of the plan remain largely the same each year; however, it is adjusted to reflect the current educational environment in the state. Conversely, most strategic plans in the region span multiple years.

In terms of plan structure, most plans were available as published reports or documents, ranging from one page to well over 30 pages. Additionally, states use a variety of methods for organizing concepts and priorities. For the most part, states structure strategic plans around an overarching goal. Some examples include:

▶ "The University of Hawai'i (UH) offers opportunity and hope for every resident of Hawai'i. As the sole provider of higher public education in the state, the UH can drive a more vibrant, sustainable, resilient, just and kind future across our islands. And our scholarship must address the opportunities and challenges of Hawai'i, the Pacific and our planet. We want the university to be grounded in traditional Hawaiian values, in aloha, to create a strong sense of place, while also serving as a forward-looking economic engine driving hubs of innovation and research. As the UH begins its 116th year of service, we must remain vigilant, anticipate what is coming and act with agility and compassion to maintain a vital role in shaping the future of our island home. It must be Hawai'i's university for today and tomorrow." - *Hawai'i's University for Today and Tomorrow*, The University of Hawai'i[3]

▶ "Ensure system coordination, accountability, and transparency." – *Success by Design*, Nevada System of Higher Education[4]

▶ The Utah System of Higher Education's (USHE) strategic plan supports USHE's efforts to enhance the quality of higher education in the state. It is developed in alignment with the Utah Board of Higher Education's mission and vision, and "aligns with the Board's vision to become a global leader in higher education and research. It also emphasizes the importance of collaboration between higher education institutions, industry partners, and state agencies. By fostering these partnerships, the Board aims to ensure that Utah's higher education system is not only responsive to the current needs of students and the workforce but also proactive in addressing future challenges." – *Utah System of Higher Education Strategic Plan*, Utah System of Higher Education[5]

These guiding principles and goals are further elaborated in the plans themselves. Plans typically include various goals or priorities, with the most common being around access, completion or success, affordability, and workforce and economic development. Lastly, plans often outline the strategies to achieve these goals and priorities, with wide variation in the specific strategies identified across the West.

Strategies Across the West

Through the document analysis, WICHE identified four core categories of state-level completion efforts – student success, academic success, workforce alignment, and coordinated collaboration, with a range of specific strategies implemented across the region. States are uniquely positioned to drive institutional change, resulting in improved student outcomes across each of these strategy types.

Student Success: States enable the piloting and scale of evidence-based student success strategies, such as basic needs supports, behavioral health supports, financial aid, and holistic advising across institutions, ensuring innovations benefit a greater proportion of students. Read the *WICHE Insights Completion Strategies in the West: Student Success* to learn more about how states are implementing student success strategies.

Academic Success: States support inter-institutional academic policies such as dual credit, credit for prior learning, and transfer in a manner that streamlines access and time to completion for students. Read the *WICHE Insights Completion Strategies in the West: Academic Success* to learn more about how states are implementing academic success strategies.

Workforce Alignment: Coordinated, state-level approaches to workforce alignment allow institutions to develop programming in line with state economic goals, leading to credentials with labor market relevance for students. Read the *WICHE Insights Completion Strategies in the West: Workforce Alignment* to learn more about how states are implementing workforce alignment strategies.

Coordination, Collaboration, and Structures: States' ability to collect, analyze, and share data with policymakers and educational leaders is critical in supporting institutions to develop and grow effective programs, as well as to identify cross-institutional efficiencies that improve students' ability to access and persist across a system of higher education. Read the *WICHE Insights Completion Strategies in the West: Coordination, Collaboration, and Structures* to learn more about how states are implementing coordinated collaboration strategies.

Although these categories of completion strategies were identified for the landscape analysis and these policy briefs, it is important to recognize that they often overlap across different areas. For example, Montana 10 is a collection of 10 completion strategies that include academic, financial, and purpose-and-belonging supports. As a result, this strategy is discussed in both the student and academic success briefs. There is also significant variation in the terminology used in plans for goals, priorities, values, outcomes, and strategies. Whenever possible, WICHE has used a state's own language to describe these elements, which may result in WICHE referring to similar concepts with different language throughout the briefs.

GOVERNANCE AND CONTEXT ARE CRITICAL IN PLAN DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

Both the document analysis and focus groups demonstrate that state priorities for increasing postsecondary completion and success are influenced by factors specific to each state's context. This is evident in the differences among plans across various governance structures in the region. For example, the strategic plans of two governing boards, the Nevada System of Higher Education and the South Dakota Board of Regents, explicitly link systemwide effectiveness and efficiency to supporting student success.[6] On the other hand, two coordinating agencies in the region, the Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission and the Wyoming Community College Commission, emphasize the facilitation of coordination among decentralized institutions to support student success.[7]

Differences in governance structure also play an important role in the mechanisms available to states to shape institutional behavior. States with centralized governance structures, such as North Dakota, can establish robust transfer agreements across institutions through policy, while states with more decentralized approaches, such as Arizona, rely on bringing together relevant stakeholders to agree upon course equivalencies.[8]

Cultural Knowledge in the Pacific Region
The WICHE region comprises a diverse group of states, territories, and freely associated states. In the Pacific region, strategic plans identified cultural awareness and cultural knowledge as key strategies for supporting student success. In each case, the connection to cultural knowledge is rooted in the islands' indigenous populations and cultures, as well as in the role of higher education in enhancing cultural awareness and understanding. In many ways, these strategies support student belonging in postsecondary education, a key driver of student success.

▶ The American Samoa Community College's strategic plan includes a strategy to "promote the awareness of the Samoan Culture and the Pacific," which consists of a range of strategies focused on language and cultural preservation.[9]

- The [Northern Mariana College's strategic plan](#) includes an objective to "promote cultural enrichment that protects our islands' indigenous legacy," which emphasizes strategies to preserve Chamorro and Carolinian languages and elevate Chamorro and Carolinian studies in academia.[10]
- As mentioned above, a primary goal of the [University of Hawaiʻi System's strategic plan](#) is "to be grounded in traditional Hawaiian values." This is further detailed in the plan's first imperative, to "fulfill kuleana to Native Hawaiians and Hawaiʻi." The word 'kuleana' means responsibility or privilege, and this goal is rooted in the UH system's goal to be an indigenous-centered institution that values traditional Hawaiian values and advancing Native Hawaiians as a people and Hawaiʻi as a place. This imperative is put into action through strategies that create opportunities for students and faculty to learn about the Hawaiian language, culture, and knowledge.[11]

Focus group participants also noted that leadership at various levels plays a crucial role in developing and implementing state strategic plans. One participant noted that, as system leadership changed over the past year, the priorities of the current strategic plan shifted accordingly. Another example underscored the influence of other state leaders, such as governors and legislators, on shaping state policy and priorities. For instance, in 2025, Governor Jared Polis issued Executive Order D 2025 006, *Reimagining the Future of the Postsecondary Talent Development System in Colorado*, which led to a Governor-led initiative to establish a unified Colorado Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development.[12] These examples emphasize the importance of viewing strategic plans as flexible guides for policy and practice, capable of adaptation as other state factors evolve.

⊙ EVOLUTION OF ATTAINMENT GOALS TO COMPLETION, VALUE, AND RETURN ON INVESTMENT

A decade ago, almost every state in the WICHE region had a documented, measurable postsecondary attainment goal. These goals were crucial in shaping state higher education plans and policies. Through WICHE's analysis of state strategic plans, staff identified a shift from broad, aspirational goals to targets focused on implementing policies and strategies that meet workforce needs, generate valuable credentials, and lead to degrees that offer a positive return on investment.

Although many states no longer prominently feature their postsecondary attainment goals in their strategic plans, there remains a crucial need to increase the number of students who access and succeed in postsecondary education. For example, Colorado's former attainment goal of "66% by 2025" has shifted to "increase the number of Coloradans benefiting from valuable career skills, gained in high school or through postsecondary education, that — at a minimum — result in additional lifetime earnings exceeding the cost of attendance."[13] Some states whose strategic plans no longer include education attainment goals instead emphasize

a variety of objectives aimed at expanding access to and attainment of education to support broader state efforts in workforce and economic development. A handful of other states still specify an attainment goal in their strategic plans, including the Washington Student Achievement Council and the Wyoming Community College Commission.

The shift of focus from postsecondary attainment goals, such as reaching a specific percentage of adults with degrees or certificates, to building a higher education system that offers value to students does not lessen the importance of those attainment goals. Instead, it shows how the higher education landscape is evolving. Over the past 10 to 15 years, higher education has transformed amid the COVID-19 pandemic, uncertainty about its value, the rise of distance learning and short-term credential programs, and changing demographics. These shifts have prompted a national discussion not just about increasing the number of degree earners but also about ensuring that higher education provides valuable credentials and prepares students for relevant, sustainable careers. Consequently, state goals have shifted to focus on valuable credentials, workforce development, and economic growth, emphasizing the need for states to lead this effort with relevant goals and strategies that meet both immediate and future needs.

The shift from measuring a specific postsecondary attainment rate to a broader measure of the value of a degree or credential also enables states to develop a portfolio of evaluation metrics to better articulate the impact of postsecondary education and student outcomes. The expansion of learning opportunities, such as short-term credentials, means states will need to look beyond the number of adults with a degree and build data systems that adequately demonstrate the education-to-career pathways they are investing in for their students.

MEASURING AND UNDERSTANDING SUCCESS

Through the landscape analysis, WICHE reviewed publicly available data related to strategic plans and found that most states have also developed public-facing dashboards to track progress in key areas, such as retention and completion. As with strategic plans, there is variation in the content and format of public dashboards. Some of the examples of this variation include:

▶ The Montana University System (MUS) shares various metrics related to its strategic plan through publicly accessible dashboards. These metrics cover data and outcomes concerning retention and persistence, including a dashboard dedicated to American Indian student success in the system.[14] In tandem with these dashboards, MUS has partnered with external evaluators from MDRC to examine outcomes specific to MUS's comprehensive completion program, Montana 10.[15] This experimental evaluation is critical

for understanding the impact of the state's investment in the program and how that investment drives student success across the state.

▶ The North Dakota University System's (NDUS) strategic plan links each objective to a specific measure on the publicly available dashboard.[16] The dashboards provide a historical view of how the system is progressing across the full spectrum of objectives and goals outlined in the system's strategic plan.

▶ The Utah System of Higher Education includes a range of dashboards connected to the priorities included in its strategic plan, including data on completions and workforce outcomes.[17] Additionally, the system's reporting contains a dashboard showing the number of priorities on track to be met.[18]

In focus groups, staff from across the region observed that, although state data systems have greatly improved over the past decade, there are still gaps in data collection and reporting. Participants specifically noted the difficulty in isolating data to show the impacts of specific strategies. As states face potential budget constraints, there may be a greater need to use data effectively to support evidence-based decision-making and demonstrate the return on investment of strategies such as wraparound services and behavioral health counseling.

STATE-TO-STATE KNOWLEDGE SHARING IS CRITICAL

Throughout the focus groups, participants from the state and system offices emphasized the importance of peer-to-peer learning. This type of learning was described as states learning from one another, while developing and implementing completion strategies. Participants noted that they often learn from, adapt, and emulate strategies from their peers. Additionally, they highlighted the benefits of learning alongside peers when implementing programs, to both gain knowledge and reflect on the process. More specifically, stakeholders stressed the significance of collaborative learning networks during challenging and uncertain times. Participants also emphasized that state agencies face capacity challenges, both fiscal and human, which impact their ability to operationalize strategic plans and key priorities effectively. These capacity challenges underscore the importance of peer-to-peer learning and resource sharing, where appropriate, across states, as these opportunities can help address capacity challenges within state and system offices.

Conclusion

The landscape analysis of completion strategies in the West shows that while states are involved in similar activities to support postsecondary completion, the specific state context is vital in shaping plans and implementing policies and strategies. Additionally, the analysis reveals an emerging area of focus among state efforts: developing accessible learning opportunities that lead to valuable credentials and leveraging collaboration across

institutions to better support these initiatives. That said, focus group participants identified two challenges that complicate the operationalization and measurement of strategic plans and other high-priority initiatives: limited capacity and the difficulty of isolating the impact of individual policy initiatives. The series of accompanying briefs demonstrates the range of state approaches to student-centered success, workforce alignment, and coordinated collaboration strategies, further illustrating how state context shapes priorities.

APPENDIX

Strategic plans included in the landscape analysis

State	Agency, System, or Institution	Link to Plan
Alaska	University of Alaska System	Roadmap to Empower Alaska
American Samoa	American Samoa Community College	American Samoa Community College 2021-2026 Strategic Plan
Arizona	Arizona Board of Regents	AZ Opportunity: Advancing Arizona's Future *We analyzed this annual report in the same manner as we analyzed strategic plans, as it provided similar detail and data.
California	University of California	UC 2030
	California State University	CSU Forward
	California Community Colleges	Vision 2030 A Roadmap for California Community Colleges
Colorado	Colorado Commission on Higher Education/Colorado Department of Higher Education	Colorado's Strategic Plan for Higher Education: Building Skills for An Evolving Economy
	Colorado Community College System	2025-2030 Strategic Plan: Transforming Futures Together, We Will.
Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands	Northern Marianas College	Strategic Master Plan
Federated States of Micronesia	College of Micronesia – FSM	Integrated Educational Master Plan 2024-2034
Guam	Guam Community College	Guam Community College Institutional Strategic Master Plan 2020-2026
	University of Guam	Para Hulo' Strategic Plan
Hawai'i	University of Hawai'i	Hawai'i's University for Today and Tomorrow

State	Agency, System, or Institution	Link to Plan
Idaho	Idaho State Board of Education	FY 2025 – FY 2029 Idaho K-20 Public Education – Strategic Plan
Montana	Montana University System	MUS Strategic Plan
New Mexico	New Mexico Higher Education Department	Strategic Planning Resources *The New Mexico Higher Education Department is currently undergoing a strategic planning process. Other documents, including relevant policy and legislation, were included in the analysis.
Nevada	Nevada System of Higher Education	Success by Design
North Dakota	North Dakota State Board of Higher Education/North Dakota University System	2021-2026 Strategic Plan
Oregon	Higher Education Coordinating Commission	State of Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission Strategic Plan 2024-2029
Republic of the Marshall Islands	College of the Marshall Islands	College of the Marshall Islands Bujen Kōllejar
Republic of Palau	Palau Community College	15 Year Institutional Master Plan
South Dakota	South Dakota Board of Regents	Strategic Plan 2022-2027
Utah	Utah Board of Higher Education/ Utah System of Higher Education	Utah Board of Higher Education Strategic Plan
Washington	Washington Student Achievement Council	2026 Strategic Action Plan
	Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges	2020-2030 Strategic Plan Update
Wyoming	Wyoming Community College Commission	Wyoming Statewide Community College Strategic Plan, 2025-2027

ENDNOTES

1 WICHE is a regional 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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3 University of Hawai'i. (2023). *UH strategic plan 2023–2029 Hawai'i's university for today and tomorrow*. https://www.hawaii.edu/strategic-plan/.

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5 Utah System of Higher Education. (n.d.). *Utah Board of Higher Education strategic plan*. https://ushe.edu/wp-content/uploads/pdf/strategic_plan/2024-27_Strategic_Plan.pdf.

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7 Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission. (2024). *HECC strategic plan 4.0: Transformation, excellence and impact.* https://www.oregon.gov/highered/strategy-research/Documents/Strategic-Plan/HECC-Strategic-Plan-4.0-Booklet-FINAL.pdf; Wyoming Community College Commission. (2025). *Wyoming statewide community college strategic plan 2025-2027*. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1fkc6vdNC9_bhrKxwFOZPa94ONomow5SE/view.

8 North Dakota University System. (n.d.). *GERTA (General Education Requirements Transfer Agreement)*. https://ndus.edu/students/academic-life/transfer-to-a-different-campus/gerta; AZTransfer. (n.d.). *Make every credit count*. https://aztransfer.com/.

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11 University of Hawai'i. (2023).

12 Polis, J. (2025). *Reimagining The Future Of The Postsecondary Talent Development System In Colorado* (Executive Order D 2025 006). Office of the Governor. https://www.colorado.gov/governor/2025-executive-orders; Colorado Governor Jared Polis. *Reimagining the Future of the Postsecondary Talent Development System in Colorado*. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1LBUvX17GlvA2gUmYPguF4CvEDrA_OwuG/view

13 Colorado Commission on Higher Education. (2017). *Colorado rises: Advancing education and talent development: Colorado Commission on Higher Education master plan*. https://cdhe.colorado.gov/sites/highered/files/Colorado%20Rises%20CCHE%20Strategic%20Plan%202017.pdf.; Colorado Department of Higher Education. (2023). *Building skills in an evolving economy: CDHE strategic plan 2023*. https://highered.colorado.gov/Publications/Reports/StrategicPlan/cdhe-strategic-plan-2023.pdf.

14 Montana University System. (n.d.). *Student data dashboards*. https://www.mus.edu/data/dashboards/student-dashboards.html.

15 Ratledge, A., & Toyoda, M. (2025). *The Montana 10 student support program: Early findings from an experimental evaluation*. MDRC. https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/Montana_10_SS_Program.pdf.

16 North Dakota University System. (n.d.). *Strategic plan*. https://ndus.edu/strategic-plan/.

17 Utah System of Higher Education. (n.d.). *Data home*. https://ushe.edu/data-home/.

18 Utah System of Higher Education. (n.d.). *Strategic plan dashboard*. https://ushe.edu/strategic-plan-progress-report/.