

RESEARCH AND EVIDENCE: COORDINATION, COLLABORATION, AND STRUCTURES

Kate Baca | February 2026

About the Project

This research summary pairs with a [series of policy briefs](#) that highlight various postsecondary completion strategies across the WICHE region. These reviews provide a brief overview of the research on the various policies and initiatives identified in the landscape analysis of state strategic plans. Each research summary serves as the research context partner to the accompanying policy brief. Further details on the findings of this analysis, including the policy briefs on student success, workforce alignment, academic success, and coordinated collaboration strategies, and an interactive online resource displaying state-level strategies, are available at wiche.edu/policy-research/completion. This work was generously funded by ECMC Foundation.

Through WICHE's landscape analysis of completion strategies in the West, it became clear that states were not only investing in the academic, social, and workforce strategies that support student completion. They were also prioritizing the adaptation and adjustment of systems and structures to develop a more coordinated and collaborative system of higher education that supports student success.¹ In many instances, states identified this strand of work as supporting broader efforts to maximize resources and identify efficiencies. As states face a range of challenges, including a projected decline in the number of high school graduates, these strategies support a state's ability to mitigate the projected decline in the number of college-age students by increasing student success.²

Below is a summary of research on the key strategies that states across the region are using to develop a more coordinated and collaborative system of higher education. This includes research on course sharing, modality structures and offerings, funding structures, and coordination and collaboration. While many of these fields are difficult to measure in terms of effectiveness, this summary provides an overview of the existing research and its

intersections with prior research. Many of these strategies are under-researched, particularly at the state level, suggesting that as states prioritize collaboration and coordination, structures are needed to support the evaluation of these efforts and the continuous improvement of student success at the state level.

Course Sharing

Course sharing is the practice of making courses at other institutions available to students to expand their access to course offerings and requirements.³ While the practice has occurred in some state-level systems, such as the Montana University System and the University of Hawai'i, it is not widespread. Course sharing may address a persistent barrier for students: the ability to access the classes and credits needed to complete a degree in a timely manner by enrolling in a course offered at an alternative institution. While research on the effectiveness of course sharing is limited, existing studies highlight coordination and collaboration as factors that better support its development. Course sharing requires significant collaboration to ensure a single online course exchange platform and often requires common course numbering to facilitate translation between degree programs and articulation agreements between the institution where a student is primarily enrolled and the sharing institution.⁴ The technological infrastructure for course sharing is essential to enabling cross-institutional course sharing; state policies, such as common course numbering and articulation agreements, play a central role in achieving greater impact. This is echoed in research beyond course sharing, in fields such as articulation agreements for dual enrollment, where statewide agreements enabled a greater number of transferred courses and improved timely completion when those core courses were transferred.⁵

There is considerable interaction between course sharing and other policy areas, such as credit mobility and data sharing. It is important for states and systems to approach course sharing with a holistic view of how the technological infrastructure works in coordination with these policies to support a state's broader completion agenda.

Coordination and Collaboration

Collaboration across state agencies and state-level policies plays a key role in creating more aligned and effective practices for student degree completion. The landscape analysis identified ways that state higher education agencies facilitate coordination across key policy areas, such as credit mobility and prior learning assessment, and improving collaboration through strategies like course sharing. Although it is difficult to measure the relationship between state-level resources and knowledge sharing and degree outcomes, research in other areas highlights the potential benefits.

Research from a previous WICHE project focused on supporting adult learner student success found that shared metrics, agendas, coordinated communication, and collaboration with diverse stakeholders are all critical for effective state-level coordination.⁶ State higher education agencies play a critical role in creating conditions that enable effective coordination by leveraging data and resources toward a common goal, such as completion, and by leading engagement and relationships with key stakeholders, including industry partners and students.⁷ Further, a recent report published by the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO) demonstrates how a robust partnership between state- and institution-level academic officers aligned shared goals and policy implementation practices.⁸

State higher education agencies play a critical role in developing and implementing state policies and serve as key coordinators for leveraging resources and knowledge-sharing across institutions to better support student success. With respect to college completion, a handful of studies suggest that coordinated efforts among these agencies, intermediary organizations, and researchers could strengthen completion.⁹ As states prioritize more coordination and collaboration, state higher education agencies will continue to play a key role in building relationships, leveraging data capacity and resources, and guiding a shared agenda to better support student success.

Course Modality and Learning Structures

Across the region, states are prioritizing access and opportunity for student success by adapting course offerings, including modality and learning programs. The most common example of this strategy across the region was states prioritizing the expansion of online course offerings and adjusting course scheduling to better accommodate working adult students. This strategy was particularly prevalent in the territories and freely associated states of the Pacific region. Despite challenges posed by the region's remote nature, expanded online learning has been shown to engage students who otherwise face barriers to degree completion.¹⁰ While those barriers, such as family, work, and other pressing commitments, do not go away with the modality, they were shown to offer students greater flexibility in their degree completion. Similar research was conducted in Australia, given its population of rural and remote students, and showed that it reduced or mitigated barriers and competing commitments to higher education.¹¹

While research on the effects of online course modalities and degree completion exists, these effects are typically context-dependent on the number of courses taken online, the institution type, and the student's background.¹² This means that it is critical that states, systems, and institutions do not treat online learning as a one-size-fits-all solution for students, and that they invest in evaluating its effectiveness to better support student success.

Performance Funding and Funding Structures

Performance-based funding is an approach to higher education funding in which state appropriations are allocated based on student outcomes, such as degree completion, retention rates, credit accumulation, and student performance, rather than solely on the number of students enrolled.¹³ Typically, this is a small share of funding for higher education institutions, between 3% and 10%; however, some states allocate a larger share of funding through performance-based mechanisms, though they are outside the WICHE region.¹⁴

Research on performance-based funding suggests there is no strong evidence that it has led to improved student outcomes, and the policy may reinforce structures that continue to give high-resource institutions greater financial resources than lower-resource institutions.¹⁵ While research on performance-based funding has shown little impact on completion outcomes, there is some evidence that it increases short-term credentials.¹⁶ There has also been research suggesting that it has positive effects on STEM degree attainment, indicating that, when focused on particular outcomes, performance-based funding may influence degree attainment.¹⁷

Despite mixed research on its impact on student outcomes, performance-based funding is a key policy area across the region, as evidenced by the [landscape analysis of completion strategies in the West](#). Some research exploring the alignment of performance-based funding with a broader state completion agenda found limited impact on academic or completion outcomes.¹⁸ As states adjust and adapt performance-based funding formulas to better align with state priorities, it is critical to engage stakeholders, as research has found that responsive stakeholder engagement leads to better implementation.¹⁹

Performance-based funding is used widely across the region and the nation, though evidence of its effectiveness and impact is mixed, creating opportunities for future research on how to leverage it to support a broader completion agenda at the state level. It is also critical for states to ensure that performance-based funding formulas and measures are aligned with state priorities. For example, as states prioritize collaboration through resource-sharing mechanisms, such as course sharing, it is important that they ensure funding formulas do not reinforce competition among institutions.

Conclusion

State-level policymaking plays a critical role in developing and implementing systems and structures that advance student success and remove persistent barriers. At this time, the relationship between more coordinated and collaborative systems and postsecondary outcomes remains under-researched, creating significant opportunities for future research to better understand how adapting structures and systems can increase student success. This

need will continue as most states face a future with fewer traditional-age college students, and the need for effective systems that drive student success is expected to be even more critical to advancing postsecondary outcomes and state goals.²⁰

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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