

# Enhancing Value Through Effective College Completion Strategies

## A Research-to-Practice Agenda for the West

By Christina Sedney, Caitlyn Potter Glaser, and Colleen Falkenstern

In 2025, the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) conducted a landscape analysis of state higher education strategic plans in the West, with several themes emerging, including a widespread shift in state focus from attainment goals to completion, value, and return on investment (ROI), and the critical role of state context.<sup>1</sup>

While data continue to demonstrate that degree completion yields positive returns for students and states, most measures of “value” or “return on investment” assume students complete a degree. Nationally, two-thirds of students who start at a two-year institution do not complete, and one-third of students at a four-year institution do not complete.<sup>2</sup> These data suggest that a key strategy for addressing concerns about the value of a degree is to increase postsecondary completion rates. However, another common theme from WICHE’s landscape analysis of completion strategies in the West was the difficulty of measuring the success of completion strategies.

To explore this gap between states’ desire for a clearly articulated postsecondary value proposition and limited data and evidence on state-level completion strategies, WICHE convened a working group of state data and policy experts from across the Western region. The working group focused on identifying research and practice gaps across identified completion strategies, and opportunities for

This research-to-practice agenda is informed by WICHE’s landscape analysis of completion strategies in the West. It builds on a series of *WICHE Insights* that examine the most commonly implemented postsecondary success strategies from across the region.

WICHE has developed a web resource with more details on the findings, including briefs on the region’s four overarching approaches to improving completion outcomes and an interactive online resource showing state-level strategies. This work was generously funded by ECMC Foundation.



Visit [wiche.edu/completion](https://wiche.edu/completion) for more information.

further research and evidence gathering to address these gaps. This edition of *WICHE Insights* aims to provide state higher education leaders and practitioners with practical research priorities designed to inform state-level decision-making and implementation of key completion strategies.

In partnership with the working group, WICHE identified the following core concepts:

- Effective statewide completion strategies are critical for upholding the value of higher education.
- Investment in effective completion strategies supports the long-term ROI of higher education for states and systems.
- In a constrained fiscal environment, it is critical that investments are supported by evidence-based decision-making.
- Addressing research and practice gaps requires better data and research that demonstrate the effectiveness of key completion strategies.

This research-to-practice agenda examines these concepts and identifies research and practice priorities across postsecondary completion strategies used throughout the West. Additionally, the agenda highlights the connections and the role that completion strategies play in enhancing the value of a degree or credential.

## Academic Progression

WICHE's landscape analysis of completion strategies in the West identified academic success strategies, such as credit mobility (transfer of credits), credit for prior learning, and dual or concurrent enrollment, as three key areas for supporting postsecondary completion. WICHE's [Academic Success](#) policy brief and [Research Summary](#) highlight how states are implementing these strategies and the research and evidence of these policies. These three distinct but related concepts affect how a student accumulates meaningful credits throughout their academic experience, including previously earned credits or credits earned outside the classroom, and how those credits move with the student across

institutions. These strategies encompass overall academic progression, which we define as a student's ability to complete terms and requirements for their degree or credential, either through course progression or application of previously earned credits. This comprehensive term encompasses these individual areas of emphasis which, taken together, result in successful progression and completion of credentials. Academic progression also includes non-credit strategies, such as advising, so students can use their earned credits effectively in the context of completing their degree or credential.

Among broader discussions about academic progression, the working group identified dual and concurrent enrollment as the highest-priority area for further research and evidence to guide practice and decision-making. While these terms can hold different meanings in different contexts, in this research-to-practice agenda WICHE uses the term "dual enrollment" to refer to all collaborative programs between high schools and postsecondary institutions that allow high school students to earn college credits. States have invested significant dollars to provide and expand dual enrollment options as an important lever for increasing postsecondary access and completion rates. Some prior research shows that students who earn dual enrollment credit have higher rates of postsecondary enrollment and completion nationwide, especially among students from underrepresented backgrounds.<sup>3</sup> However, questions remain on whether the emphasis on providing access to dual enrollment programs is moving the needle on college completion rates for public institutions in the West.

The working group identified several key research and practice gaps, including a lack of understanding of outcomes for students who participated in dual enrollment, questions about the quality of dual enrollment options, and the use of advising for dual enrollment students.

## Research and Practice Priorities

### **Use Data and Evidence to Ensure Dual Enrollment Credits Are Meaningful to Academic Progression and Students' Educational Goals**

Many in the working group noted that states or systems are not collecting or analyzing the necessary data to understand the impact of dual enrollment credit on students' postsecondary enrollment or completion. The consensus is that, while dual enrollment appears to expand access to postsecondary education and shorten time to degree completion, more evidence is necessary to identify these outcomes for specific state programs. Working group members noted a need for a more comprehensive understanding of both the number of credits students accumulate through dual enrollment and how access to dual credit affects college-going and college completion. This understanding would inform policies and the practice surrounding dual enrollment.

As an example, an evaluation of Idaho's dual credit program, Advanced Opportunities, used data from the state's longitudinal data system to examine how the state's investments in dual credit impacted postsecondary enrollment.<sup>4</sup> This study found that funding for Advanced Opportunities was associated with an increased number of college credits earned, more students enrolling in college after high school, increased retention in college, and overall increased student educational cost savings.

Washington conducted a similar analysis through its Dual Credit Task Force, which reported on the state's dual enrollment programs to the legislature.<sup>5</sup> The report examined student costs, enrollment, college revenue, and overall dual credit procedures and effectiveness. The task force found that while most Washington high school students

complete at least one dual enrollment course, access remains inequitable due to challenges in distributing information, providing effective advising, and managing costs. These challenges adversely impact underrepresented students and those from lower-income backgrounds.

### **Develop Assessment Practices to Ensure Quality and Credibility in Dual Enrollment Course Offerings**

The working group also had questions about the overall quality of dual enrollment offerings, and whether a dual enrollment course offers the same quality and rigor as the same course taken at a college. Similarly, working group members expressed concern that students who view these courses as equivalent to college courses are academically prepared to succeed in both these and in subsequent college courses. Working group members identified the need to balance expanding the number of available dual enrollment programs to reach more students with ensuring the quality of the offerings for transferability, degree applicability, academic preparation, and learning outcomes.

One opportunity the working group noted was to expand data to assess student outcomes by dual enrollment location. In many instances, states lack the data to assess whether student outcomes vary by the type of dual enrollment offering, such as the location of instruction (in high school or college), or mode of instruction, such as online versus in-classroom. This gap makes it difficult to assess quality and make better-informed decisions in dual credit policy and practice.

### **Understand the Role of Advising Within Dual Enrollment**

Similarly, there is limited understanding of how to offer meaningful and effective advising for dual enrollment students preparing to move on to college. Working group members questioned whether dual enrollment students

receive appropriate advising to choose courses that will apply to transfer pathways. A recent report from the Community College Research Center highlights the importance of advising for dual enrollment students and ensuring dual enrollment credits align with postsecondary and career opportunities.<sup>6</sup> Working group members noted that measuring the usage and effectiveness of advising for dual enrollment students would be difficult and would require a qualitative assessment in addition to quantitative measurements of usage and outcomes.

It is unsurprising that dual enrollment emerged as the working group's top priority when discussing academic success strategies, given the growth in dual enrollment over the past decade and the substantial state investments across the region. While further research on dual enrollment is clearly the group's top interest for informing practice concerning academic progression, similar research on credit for prior learning and transfer could also optimize student outcomes. Additionally, building the evidence base on dual enrollment could expand research and evidence in other areas of academic progression, including transfer. For example, dual enrollment credits are often transferred to degree programs, sometimes to a different institution than the one where the credits were earned. Existing transfer pathways could be expanded to include dual enrollment credits to connect high school and college coursework more seamlessly.

### **Connection to Value**

Academic progression strategies focus on supporting students' ability to accumulate the credits needed for a degree or credential efficiently. This includes credits earned through avenues such as dual enrollment and credit for prior learning, as well as the ability for these credits to transfer as students navigate across institutions. Collectively, these strategies aim to

reduce time to completion and help students navigate an often complex higher education system. When these strategies do not support meaningful credit accumulation, students' time to completion can increase, raising costs. For example, dual enrollment courses that do not contribute to a student's college degree or academic progression become a loss of tuition dollars and time. When dual enrollment credit applies to a college credential and reduces overall cost and time to completion, it provides a return on the fiscal and time investment of taking dual enrollment classes. This ensures value for both the student earning the credit and for the state investing in the opportunities.

## | **Student Success**

As outlined in WICHE's [Research Summary](#) on student success, compelling links have emerged between students' academic progress and their experiences outside the classroom. States across the West are exploring what role they can play in supporting students more holistically on their journeys to credential completion, with examples highlighted in WICHE's [Student Success](#) policy brief.

Regional discussions did not surface a single research priority in this space, but rather, a shared commitment to leveraging state resources to enhance the quality and efficacy of supports offered to students. Whether states focused on meeting students' basic needs or offering mental health resources, common challenges related to data, evaluation, sustainability, and scale emerged and informed the group's student success research priorities. Working group participants agreed that while the growing evidence base across the field of student supports is helpful, states continue to need more research specific to their own contexts.

## Research and Practice Priorities

### **Build the Evidence Base for Student Success Supports**

The multifaceted nature of the issues student supports are designed to address, such as basic needs insecurity and mental health, creates unique challenges in measuring the success of specific interventions. Common obstacles to designing meaningful program evaluations include difficulty isolating the impact of specific interventions and a lack of data linking program participation to student outcomes.

Given the challenges of identifying causal impact at scale, states are pursuing creative strategies to develop evidence-based supports, such as using pilot programs to test and refine approaches. Washington has used this approach in advance of scaling state investments. For example, their Supporting Students Experiencing Homelessness Program demonstrated strong retention outcomes in a pilot phase, leading to a large-scale expansion across the state.<sup>7</sup>

Another opportunity is to develop programs designed to address issues identified in high-quality research. For example, a recent study linking public benefit receipt to positive postsecondary completion outcomes provides compelling evidence for state efforts focused on students' access to basic needs such as food, housing, transportation, and childcare, even if student-level data linking basic-needs access to retention are not initially available.<sup>8</sup>

### **Enhance Capacity to Conduct Qualitative Research That Offers More Nuanced Insights Into Programmatic Impacts**

There was consensus across regional conversations that qualitative data plays a critical role in helping states understand better what supports are effective for students and how. However, states' capacity to collect

and use this type of time-intensive data is often limited. State agency staff welcomed opportunities to deepen their understanding of student experiences through surveys, advisory groups, and other qualitative data-collection opportunities, noting the important role this information played in designing effective support strategies.

While data and resources to implement research designs that could establish causal links between particular interventions and completion are not widely available to state agency staff, adding a qualitative review component can also add meaningful insights to descriptive data. New Mexico's Higher Education Department is evaluating institutional retention plans, many of which include student support efforts, as part of a recent legislative investment which requires the state's four-year institutions to make targeted investments in retention and report on the results.<sup>9</sup> This reporting structure allows for the state's higher education agency to develop a more nuanced understanding of institutional approaches alongside high-level data on retention rates over time, and better assess the value of the state's investment.

Looking ahead, working with state policymakers to build evaluation capacity into investments that include meaningful, ongoing engagement with the populations served could be an important tool in building more effective state approaches to completion. Additionally, partnerships between state or system offices and postsecondary institutions provide an opportunity to explore relevant research questions that should support impact at scale.

### **Consider Contextual Adaptations Needed to Effectively Scale Evidence-Based Practices**

Working group participants noted challenges in scaling initiatives across different institutional types operating in different

contexts. Institutions' ability to implement initiatives with fidelity varies widely depending upon available resources, and interventions themselves can work differently depending upon the local context. A key area of focus moving forward should be taking the time to understand which interventions work in which contexts, and what adaptations might be needed to support success.

As an example, Montana's Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education is leveraging philanthropic support to conduct a rigorous, randomized controlled trial evaluation of Montana 10, a multifaceted suite of evidence-based supports designed to support Montana students through to postsecondary credential completion. Complementing the quantitative evaluation of student outcomes is another key element of this evaluation, a qualitative approach to implementation fidelity across institutions.<sup>10</sup>

An important area for future work will include contextual considerations in scaling plans, with opportunities to adapt and adjust statewide approaches for local contexts as needed.

### **Connection to Value**

Working group members highlighted the reality that students' life experiences while pursuing postsecondary education are deeply linked to their perceptions of that education's value. If students' postsecondary education acts as a barrier to accessing basic needs such as food security and housing, or negatively affects their mental health, earning a positive ROI from the experience becomes significantly more difficult. Though a complex issue to tackle, working to ensure students' lives are enhanced by their participation in postsecondary education remains a challenging, but essential, area of focus for states in the region.

## **Affordability**

Nationwide, more adults are expressing concerns about the affordability of postsecondary education, particularly at four-year colleges and universities, even as they still want to send their children to higher education.<sup>11</sup> These concerns are also present in the West, where working group members emphasized the need to prioritize affordability in their education strategies. These surveys and the working group discussion highlighted that affordability is a key component of the perceptions of value and ROI for a college experience, while also recognizing that affordability is nuanced and difficult to measure. Because affordability is viewed as a barrier to both college access and completion, the working group identified addressing challenges in measuring and articulating affordability as key priorities.

### **Research and Practice Priorities**

#### **Identify What Affordability Means for Specific Student Contexts**

Members of the working group agreed there are many ways to interpret the "affordability" of a college education. Additionally, working group members noted that affordability is a relative term shaped by students' unique individual factors, which shape the perceived affordability of a credential. Affordability can be relative to whether a student's basic needs are met, or how many of their family members are also in college. That said, states have opportunities to understand perceptions of affordability better in their own context. For example, one working group member noted that their state uses public polling on college affordability to understand how residents view college affordability.

Other working group members noted that while they need better data to understand what affordability looks like in their state context, they have started analyzing data by income quartiles to better understand patterns and trends for students by income and to inform future decision-making. Washington maintains a data dashboard for affordability, tracking Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion rates, total aid recipients, average state aid, and other metrics.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, the Washington Student Achievement Council tracks enrollment and completion rates by family income quartile, paying particular attention to middle quartile families. These metrics, combined with metrics tracking enrollment, basic needs, and completion rates, provide public-facing indicators for student access and success.

### **Understand the Actual Cost Students Are Paying Across Different Scenarios**

To help answer questions around what “affordability” means for their state contexts, working group members recognized that there is a gap in understanding the true costs for students. While individual institutions can access the billed cost of attendance for their students, state leaders report they have no accessible reporting on net price. Net price includes charged tuition with all mandatory and non-mandatory fees, housing costs, books, and other paid expenses. Importantly, net price can differ from advertised price when institutions offer academic scholarships and other financial aid. However, this price difference often is not apparent until a student is deep in the admissions process, thereby masking the relative affordability of a program.

Comprehensive net cost data can provide an accurate picture of true affordability and aligns with the regional priority of understanding the complexity of college costs. It will also help determine whether students who earn dual

enrollment credits or follow transfer pathways have a more affordable degree than students with “traditional” four-year enrollment.

To address these concerns, Idaho has begun work to understand the actual cost of attendance. The state is mapping student-level data and reports from their fiscal team into databases to enable more effective research. One goal is to understand differences in actual student cost by student type and other characteristics.

### **Find Approaches to Reduce Complexity in Tuition, Fees, and Other Costs**

Working group members noted that the complexity of higher education pricing creates uncertainty for students and families. They noted that students may not know how much they will pay, and the total amount may change semester to semester based on course or program fees. This semester-to-semester cost uncertainty makes it difficult for students and families to plan. Unexpected price increases can impact students’ ability to remain enrolled.

Working group members emphasized the need for simplicity and clarity in tuition, fees, and financial aid, while also recognizing the need to improve student financial literacy. Students and families may not always understand how aid and loans work, how borrowing for education differs from other debts (e.g., auto loans), what the loan limits are and their potential impacts, and what loan payoff or forgiveness options are after graduation. And since actual price may differ from advertised price, students may not be aware of different financial aid options available to them.

Building on the previous priority, more robust data on student prices equips states and systems to articulate prices more clearly. For example, if states can model a student’s price across their academic experience, including transfer, they can share that information

with future students and families, increasing transparency and helping students make better-informed decisions. Additionally, improving this information can clarify how retention and success policies affect affordability.

### **Connection to Value**

Recent public polling found that while individuals value a postsecondary degree, the cost of a degree remains prohibitive for many people.<sup>13</sup> These polls suggest that the ability to afford college, or even the perception of that ability, is a critical factor in students' and families' decision-making. This also underscores the working group's priorities, which include not only a better understanding of student costs but also using that data to articulate those costs and the affordability of a degree to future students and families.

## **Completion and Value**

Members of the working group observed that current priorities in their states focus heavily on value and ROI. Although the region shows significant variation in how these ideas are defined and measured, there was commonality in that, at the state level, there is a priority around articulating the value of a degree and the ROI for students and families.

However, members also noted that these concepts often emphasize economic outcomes for students and overlook the non-economic benefits of postsecondary education, such as the development of critical thinking skills that will be essential in an artificial intelligence-impacted economy. They emphasized the need to broaden definitions of value to better align with higher education's public good mission and to recognize the non-monetary advantages for students, families, and states. The group

discussed the critical role the higher education sector plays in training the workforce in high-need areas that often produce limited economic ROI for students. They noted that those entering fields such as teaching, social work, and early childhood education are likely to earn low wages, while these professions generate significant social and economic value to states.

They also recognized that ROI for a degree or credential depends on many factors, including geography and field of study. According to a recent report by Strada Education Foundation, location significantly affects the ROI for a college degree.<sup>14</sup> A bachelor's degree is more likely to bring higher earnings compared to a high school diploma in urban areas or in areas with a large college-educated population than a bachelor's degree in rural or less populous areas. This means graduates in Colorado or California are more likely to earn more with a bachelor's degree than graduates in Wyoming or North Dakota, likely because the former states have more jobs that require college degrees.

This further reinforces the idea that the "value" of a college credential is relative. Whether a degree pays off economically for a student depends not only on their field of study but also on their demographic characteristics, location, and sector. This also ties value to the specific needs and context of the local workforce; if most jobs in an area require only a high school diploma, workers with bachelor's degrees will not see as large an ROI and may perceive their degree (and therefore their college experience) as less valuable. This variability underscores the need for individual states and regions to define affordability and value based on their own contexts.

## Conclusion

Changing demographics, uncertain fiscal conditions, and ongoing questions around the value of higher education present significant challenges for states and systems. These challenges are also shaped by state-level priorities to expand high-need, high-demand workforce sectors and increase ROI. As evidenced by both WICHE's landscape analysis of completion strategies and working group discussions, there are research and practice gaps in the understanding and measurement

of success, including a recognition that significant contributors of postsecondary ROI fall outside the direct control of institutions, systems, and state agencies. They do have a clear role in increasing retention, persistence, and ultimately degree completion. When states invest in improving postsecondary completion rates, they invest in a long-term strategy to enhance the perception, the economic, and the non-economic value of higher education.

## Acknowledgments

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### Completion Working Group Members

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- Elizabeth Switaj, Vice President for Academic and Student Affairs, College of the Marshall Islands
- Michael Vente, Deputy Chief Policy and Research Officer, Colorado Department of Higher Education

## 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” in this agenda reflects all states, territories, and freely associated states in the WICHE region, including Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawai'i, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, Wyoming, American Samoa, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Guam, Republic of the Marshall Islands, and Republic of Palau.
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## About WICHE

The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) is a regional interstate higher education compact of 15 Western states and the U.S. Pacific Territories and Freely Associated States. Since 1953, WICHE has focused on its mission of expanding educational access and excellence for all residents of the West. By promoting innovation, cooperation, resource sharing, and sound public policy, WICHE strengthens higher education's contributions to the region's social, economic, and civic life.

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