

media release

Major Grant Awarded to WICHE & Partners to Create Interstate Reciprocity in Postsecondary Distance Education

Boulder, Colorado — The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) and its partners have been awarded a \$2.3 million grant from Lumina Foundation for a national initiative that will make distance education courses more accessible to students across state lines, as well as making it easier for states to regulate and institutions to participate in interstate distance education. WICHE and its regional partners – the Midwestern Higher Education Compact (MHEC), the New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE), and the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) – along with the Presidents’ Forum, the Council of State Governments (CSG), and the Commission on Regulation of Postsecondary Distance Education, created by the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) and the Association of Public Land-grant Universities (APLU), worked together to forge a national initiative, the State Authorization Reciprocity Agreement (SARA), that will create interstate reciprocity in the regulation of postsecondary distance education.

In the recent past, institutions were place-bound so having each state authorize all institutions operating within its borders made sense. However, students now can take online courses from institutions based all over the country – and according to a study published this year by the Babson Survey Research Group, some 6.7 million students have done just that. In fact, it’s become virtually impossible for any state to vet every postsecondary provider educating its citizens. SARA offers a solution.

“SARA is an idea whose time has come,” says WICHE President David Longanecker. “Today, online learning is a major part of higher education, and it requires a quality assurance process that’s unbound by state lines. SARA is designed to achieve multiple goals: to effectively protect consumers; to reduce the cost of often-redundant regulatory compliance (in terms of both dollars and time); and to increase the quality, comparability, and effectiveness of regulatory oversight and of the distance courses we offer our students, too.”

That’s critical today. For institutions, meeting the patchwork of regulatory demands from 50 states and U.S. territories and seeking authorization from each one in which they operate is not just difficult, it’s also costly and time-consuming and eats up resources that could better be spent meeting our national goal of helping students learn and graduate. What’s more, students searching for good online options need clarity about out-of-state programs’ educational quality to make informed choices.

“Universities are going through a period of extraordinary change, in which they must adapt to the demand and need for increased online learning,” said Peter McPherson, APLU’s president. “They need a clear and practical regulatory path forward to grow their distance education programs and meet the evolving needs of students.”

SARA provides that path: a straightforward framework for authorization that institutions and states can trust.

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“This agreement provides a timely and voluntary means by which state authorizers and postsecondary institutions nationwide can collaborate to address key challenges, including the ongoing profusion of online learning, the misalignment of state policy requirements, and the need to expand online access and program quality,” says Michael K. Thomas, NEBHE’s president and CEO.

Here, briefly, is how SARA will roll out. Beginning this summer, WICHE, MHEC, NEBHE, and SREB will formally establish SARA entities to serve their states (that work’s already in progress). In addition, they’ll work with the Presidents’ Forum, CSG, and the Commission on Regulation of Postsecondary Distance Education to establish the board of the National Council on State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (NCSARA). NCSARA, which will be housed at WICHE, will oversee regional efforts to ensure that all SARA entities meet the standards that have been established for reciprocity and will also establish standard operating procedures.

Next, the state approval process will begin. States that wish to participate in SARA will have to demonstrate to their regional SARA entity that they have an effective process for authorizing institutions. That process must include, at a minimum: acceptance of national or regional accreditation as evidence of academic quality for approving institutions to participate in reciprocity; acceptance of an adequate federal financial responsibility score (1.5, or 1.0 with justification, at a minimum) for such participation; and an effective state process for consumer protection (including addressing consumer complaints) and ongoing oversight. States will also need to have the authority to enter into the reciprocity agreement, which in many, if not most states, will probably require modest changes in current state legislation. In the West a number of states – including Colorado, Hawai’i, Nevada, North Dakota, and Washington – have already secured legislative authority to proceed. Lastly, states and territories that don’t belong to a regional compact but want to participate in SARA may either become full members of a compact or join, at reduced dues, solely to be part of SARA.

As the last step in SARA’s ramping-up process, accredited degree-granting institutions offering distance education courses will seek authorization from their home states. Once they’re authorized, they’ll be able to operate in other participating SARA states without seeking independent authorization there. This process is entirely optional (as is the process for states). Institutions are in no way required to participate.

Some states with very rigorous authorization processes may be concerned about participating in SARA. How can they trust that other states are doing due diligence when it comes to authorization? This is where WICHE and the other regionals will play a critical role, ensuring that all approved states use adequate standards and reasonable oversight with their institutions.

“Significant efforts have been made by MHEC and its counterparts to achieve the State Authorization Reciprocity Agreement,” says Larry A. Isaak, MHEC’s president. “The Midwest-SARA structure has the ability to strengthen consistent quality assurance improvements across states and to improve postsecondary opportunity and success for Midwestern citizens.”

“States, institutions and especially students will find SARA to be of great value,” says David Spence, SREB’s president. “For many students, online classes are key to finishing their coursework and graduating, both of which are critical to SREB’s work in helping states increase college completion rates and have a better educated workforce.”

In a decade when our country is striving to reach Goal 2025 – to increase the proportion of Americans with high-quality degrees, certificates, or other credentials to 60 percent by the year 2025 – SARA seeks to be part of the solution by improving access to higher education options for students while guaranteeing quality and saving states and institutions time and money. “The SARA reciprocity design emerged from thoughtful discussions involving the entire higher education community,” says SHEEO President Paul Lingenfelter. “So it’s not surprising that it reflects the best of the American system – unified principles, shared responsibility and accountability, efficiency, and authority distributed among the states and the professional higher education self-regulatory bodies. Our system is at its best when we work together on important public priorities.”

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About WICHE, MHEC, NEBHE, SREB, APLU, CSG, Presidents' Forum, SHEEO & Lumina Foundation

The **Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education** (www.wiche.edu) and its 16 members work collaboratively to expand educational access and excellence for all citizens of the West. By promoting innovation, cooperation, resource sharing, and sound public policy among states and institutions, WICHE strengthens higher education's contributions to the region's social, economic, and civic life. Our programs—Student Exchange, the WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies, Policy Analysis and Research, and Mental Health—are working to find answers to some of the most critical questions facing higher education today. WICHE's 16 members include Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, Wyoming, and the U.S. Pacific territories and freely associated states (the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands is the first of the group to participate).

The **Midwestern Higher Education Compact** (mhec.org) is a nonprofit regional organization assisting Midwestern states in advancing higher education through interstate cooperation and resource sharing. MHEC seeks to fill its interstate mission through programs that expand postsecondary opportunity and success; promote innovative approaches to improving institutional and system productivity; improve affordability to students and states; and enhance connectivity between higher education and the workplace. Member states are: Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin.

The **New England Board of Higher Education** (www.nebhe.org) promotes greater educational opportunities and services for the residents of New England. It works across the six New England states to engage and assist leaders in the assessment, development, and implementation of sound education practices and policies of regional significance; promote policies, programs, and best practices to assist the states in implementing important regional higher education policies; promote regional cooperation and programs that encourage the efficient use and sharing of educational resources; and provide leadership to strengthen the relationship between higher education and the economic well-being of New England.

The **Southern Regional Education Board** (www.sreb.org) works with 16 member states to improve public education at every level, from pre-K through Ph.D. SREB is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization headquartered in Atlanta. Member states are Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and West Virginia.

The **Association of Public and Land-grant Universities** (www.aplu.org) is a research and advocacy organization of public research universities, land-grant institutions, and state university systems with member campuses in all 50 states, U.S. territories, and the District of Columbia. APLU is dedicated to advancing learning, discovery, and engagement. The association provides a forum for the discussion and development of policies and programs affecting higher education and the public interest.

The **Council of State Governments** (www.csg.org) is our nation's only organization serving all three branches of state government. CSG is a region-based forum that fosters the exchange of ideas to help state officials shape public policy, offering regional, national, and international opportunities to network, develop leaders, collaborate, and create problem-solving partnerships.

The **Presidents' Forum** (<http://presidentsforum.excelsior.edu>), hosted by Excelsior College, provides both traditional and nontraditional institutions with the opportunity to exchange knowledge and perceptions of current models and tools for successful operation in an online environment. It works to assist institutions in enhancing their available resources through new partnerships, collaborations, and learning networks that support desired change in the structure of higher education.

The **State Higher Education Executive Officers** association (www.sheeo.org) is the national association of state higher education leaders who serve statewide coordinating and governing boards and other state policy agencies for higher education. SHEEO is an advocate for state policy leadership, a liaison between states and the federal government, a vehicle for learning from and collaborating with peers, and a source of information and analysis on educational and public policy issues. SHEEO seeks to advance public policies and educational practices to achieve more widespread access and successful participation in higher education, more new discoveries through research, and more applications of knowledge that improve the quality of human lives.

Lumina Foundation (www.luminafoundation.org) is an independent, private foundation committed to increasing the proportion of Americans with high-quality degrees, certificates and other credentials to 60 percent by 2025. Lumina's outcomes-based approach focuses on helping to design and build an accessible, responsive, and accountable higher education system while fostering a national sense of urgency for action to achieve Goal 2025.

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