

media release

WICHE & WCET Win Grant to Improve Transparency & Accountability in Adult Higher Education

Boulder, Colorado — The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) and its e-learning arm, WCET, have been awarded a \$629,000 grant by Lumina Foundation for Education to promote an ambitious initiative that will provide adult learners with greatly enhanced access to information about how online colleges and universities succeed in helping students meet specific professional goals and prepare for their careers. The initiative, called Transparency By Design, consists of a consortium of 14 adult-serving higher education institutions involved in online learning.

In an era when some 4 million students are opting to take courses online (fully 20 percent of all college students enrolled in at least one online class last year, according to the 2008 Sloan Survey of Online Learning) and when higher education costs overall are skyrocketing, transparency is essential. “Students need to know that each online program they take will truly prepare them for their careers – and that every dollar they invest in their education is well-spent,” says WICHE President David Longanecker. “Today, it’s more important than ever for students to become knowledgeable consumers of online education. Transparency By Design is a leading-edge initiative that helps students select an online program that will prepare them for their chosen profession.”

Transparency By Design was developed by The Presidents’ Forum, a collaboration of adult-serving institutions and programs that selected WCET to serve as a neutral third-party to challenge participating institutions to meet the project’s goals, audit data submitted for publication, and provide students with answers to a host of important questions related to online programs. “The members of Transparency By Design are united in the belief that students should be well-informed about their education options – what they will learn and how well other students have performed at a specific institution,” says Michael Offerman, vice chairman of external university initiatives for Capella University, an online university based in Minneapolis that has led the initiative. “To meet the education needs of adult students, we as an industry must provide them with trustworthy and transparent ways to choose among many available options and to gauge the potential of each one to further their careers and achieve their dreams.”

In 2009 WCET will create a Website that will share and interpret data from participating institutions, including student demographics, completion rates, costs, student satisfaction levels, and information on alumni experiences. Future versions of the Website will include outcomes for academic programs and program specializations, such as what students learn from their programs (using internal and third-party assessments), what they think about them (tapping student satisfaction surveys), and what alumni think about them (employing alumni surveys and information on job placement). Says Offerman, “The commitment to gathering data this specific – what students will learn at the program level, and how they are performing – is unprecedented in higher education.”

About WCET, Transparency By Design & Lumina Foundation for Education

WCET is a cooperative network of member institutions and organizations that provides a leading source of critical thinking and expertise on the evolving role of technology in higher education. Its membership includes many of the top technology innovators from colleges, universities, nonprofit organizations, and companies around the country and the world. In the realm of higher education, a cross-section of leaders, administrators, and faculty add to the diversity that distinguishes the richness of WCET's work. WCET was founded by the **Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education** (WICHE) in 1989. WICHE and its 15 member states 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. WICHE's 15 member states include Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming. For more information about WCET, visit www.wcet.info; for WICHE, go to www.wiche.edu.

Transparency By Design (TBD), a consortium of 14 adult-serving higher education institutions involved in online learning, was developed by The Presidents' Forum, a collaboration of accredited, national, adult-serving institutions and programs that have embraced the power and potential of online education. Current TBD members include: American Intercontinental University Online, American Public University System, Capella University, Charter Oak State College, Colorado Technical University, Excelsior College, Fielding Graduate University, Franklin University, Kaplan University, Regis University, Rio Salado College, Southwestern College, Union Institute & University, and Western Governors University. For more information, go to <http://presidentsforum.excelsior.edu/projects/transparency.html>.

Lumina Foundation for Education, an Indianapolis-based, private, independent foundation, strives to help people achieve their potential by expanding access and success in education beyond high school. Through grants for research, innovation, communication, and evaluation, as well as policy education and leadership development, Lumina Foundation addresses issues that affect access and educational attainment among all students, particularly underserved student groups, including adult learners. The Foundation bases its mission on the belief that postsecondary education remains one of the most beneficial investments that individuals can make in themselves and that society can make in its people. For more details on the Foundation, visit its Website at www.luminafoundation.org.

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