Plenary Session III:
What’s Up at WICHE?
Mental Health First Aid
and the State Scholars Initiative

Monday, May 18, 2009
2.00 - 3.15 pm
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Plenary Session III: What’s Up at WICHE?
Mental Health First Aid and New Data from the State Scholars Initiative

This session will focus on the Mental Health Program’s mental health first aid training course; and the State Scholars Initiative and its data-gathering efforts.

The Mental Health Program is offering a 12-hour mental health first aid training course in Western states, designed to give members of the public key skills to help someone who is developing a mental health problem or experiencing a mental health crisis. Growing evidence demonstrates that such training helps the public identify, understand, and respond to signs of mental illness. Mental health first aiders learn to assess risk; respectfully listen to and support individuals in crisis; identify and contact appropriate professional help; and work in a variety of situations, such as helping someone through a panic attack or with an acute stress reaction, engaging with someone who may be suicidal, supporting a person experiencing psychosis, and helping an individual who has overdosed. Trainees are also introduced to the risk factors and warning signs of specific illnesses, such as anxiety, depression, psychosis, and addiction; engage in experiential activities that build understanding of the impact of illness; and learn information about evidence-supported treatment programs.

In fall 2005 WICHE was chosen to direct the U.S. Department of Education–funded State Scholars Initiative (SSI). SSI is a national program that uses business leaders to motivate students to complete a rigorous course of study in high school, one that will give them a boost in college and their careers. The grant to WICHE currently totals $6.6 million. Most of the funds are disbursed to states so they can conduct Scholars programs. The fourth and final year of the State Scholars Initiative was successful in terms of gathering student course enrollment and perception data. Early course enrollment results are encouraging. When challenged to do so, students take more rigorous courses such as algebra I, geometry, biology, chemistry, physics, and languages other than English. Results from perception surveys show that the State Scholars Initiative effectively communicates the message regarding the importance of taking a rigorous high school course of study to students and adult stakeholders.

Speakers: Mimi McFaul and Nicole Speer from WICHE’s Mental Health Program, introduced by Dennis Mohatt, program director; and Terese Rainwater, SSI program director.

Biographical Information on the Speakers
Mimi McFaul is associate director of the WICHE Mental Health Program. She has extensive experience in developing, implementing,
and evaluating mental health trainings in rural communities and is routinely involved with designing and implementing evaluation research for state mental health departments.

**Dennis Mohatt** is vice president for behavioral health for WICHE and directs its Mental Health Program. Founded in 1955 the Mental Health Program is a collaborative venture with 15 Western states. Its mission is twofold: to assist the states in the improvement of systems of care for persons with mental illness and their families; and to advance the preparation of a qualified mental health workforce in the West. Mohatt served as deputy director for the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services from 1996 to 1999; he was designated the state’s commissioner of mental health and provided leadership in the areas of public assistance, rural health, primary care, disabilities, and child welfare. He also was responsible for the administration of Nebraska’s public managed care initiatives in Medicaid for both physical and behavioral health. He has over a decade of experience in community mental health and provided executive leadership to a very successful community mental health center in Michigan’s rural Upper Peninsula and to the successful integration of community mental health services with primary care in two rural family medicine practices. He served on the National Rural Health Advisory Committee, to the United States Secretary of Health and Human Services, from 1994 to 1998. Recently, he served as the chief consultant to the Rural Issues Subcommittee of the President’s New Freedom Commission on Mental Health and lead author of the subcommittee report to the commission. He received his undergraduate training at the University of Oregon and a National Institute of Mental Health training fellowship in rural mental health while at Mansfield University in Pennsylvania, where he received his master of arts degree in rural community-clinical psychology.

**Nicole Speer** is a research and technical assistance associate in the WICHE Mental Health Program. She is an expert in learning and memory assessment, as well as in behavioral research methods and statistics involving large data sets.

**Terese Rainwater** is the program director of the State Scholars Initiative, a federally funded program operating in states across the country which utilizes business leaders to motivate students to complete a rigorous course of study in high school and which is administered by WICHE. Prior to joining WICHE, she worked at the Education Commission of the States and served as the project manager of The National Collaborative for Postsecondary Education Policy. Rainwater was the managing editor for *Child Development Abstracts & Bibliography* and a research fellow at the Kansas State Legislature. She received her master’s degree and Ph.D. in postsecondary education administration and the foundations of education from the University of Kansas and a bachelor’s degree in government from the College of Saint Benedict.