Plenary Session I:
What’s Up in the West?
The Completion Agenda

Monday, May 16, 2011
9:00 - 10:00 am
Stanford East
To say that college completion is the focus today would be an understatement. Within the WICHE states, at least eight major initiatives are in play, and a number of Western states are actively engaged with them (or hoping to become so). In this session commissioners from three WICHE states will discuss their participation in one of these initiatives. Thomas Anderes, president of the Arizona Board of Regents, will speak to Arizona’s activities within Lumina Foundation’s Big Goal efforts; Don Bennett, executive director of the Washington Higher Education Coordinating Board, will speak to Washington’s efforts within the National Governors Association’s Complete to Compete initiative under Governor Chris Gregoire’s leadership; and Jane Nichols, vice chancellor for academic and student affairs with the Nevada System of Higher Education, will speak to Nevada’s activities as an early adopter within the Complete College America initiative. Below, we present short descriptions of these and other completion initiatives.

- **The president’s initiative.** On March 22 Vice President Biden announced a new initiative from President Obama to encourage governors to focus on increasing the number of students who receive college degrees or high-value certificates. This initiative includes a “toolkit” provided by the Education Department, a pledge of $20 million through the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, and other wrap-around components. The initiative (referred to as the higher education equivalent to last year’s Race to the Top initiative in elementary and secondary education) is not the president’s first foray into this issue, however. In February 2009 President Obama set the goal of returning the U.S. to world leadership in the share of its adult population with a college degree by 2020. And last year the president proposed the American Competitiveness Initiative (ultimately not adopted by Congress), which included a significant completion component.

- **The governors’ initiative.** While the governors no doubt appreciate the new nudge, and the funding that will accompany it, they have not been slackers on the completion agenda. Early last fall the National Governors Association announced a major initiative entitled Complete to Compete, and all but two states have committed to it. Complete to Compete established a set of standard metrics that states could use to assure that their systems of higher education were graduating more students and reducing the gaps in completion between advantaged and disadvantaged students.

- **Complete College America.** Prior to the president’s and governors’ initiatives, a number of national foundations, most notably the
Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Lumina Foundation, began to focus on the completion agenda. And following the president’s charge to the nation to move on up, a number of these foundations established an organization known as Complete College America (CCA) to work on progressing this agenda, particularly at the federal level and with the governors (in fact, the work of CCA to a large extent led to the governors’ agenda). Twenty-eight states have joined CCA. Initially, CCA’s work focused on getting the federal and state government to develop strong metrics to track whether we’re increasing the number of students completing their education successfully. Subsequently, CCA has moved more into the practice and policy aspects of completion, in addition to the metrics/accountability piece of the story. In February CCA announced a grant process that will provide $1 million to each of 10 states that have best prepared to implement aggressive plans to enhance college success. The 10 winning proposals will be awarded in July; the grant will support one year’s work toward completion of the implementation initiatives.

- **Completion by Design.** Though significantly engaged in virtually all the completion efforts in the country, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has also established a five-year, $35 million effort to increase the success of community colleges in graduating their students. Completion by Design has invited nine states to submit proposals, including three Western states – Arizona, California, and Washington – and will grant awards to as many as five of these states; awards will be announced in July 2011.

- **The College Completion Agenda.** In partnership with the National Conference of State Legislatures, the College Board, through its Advocacy and Policy Center, has established the College Completion Agenda, which has published statistics on how well each state does in graduating college students. The project is also conducting “capital campaigns” around the country to raise awareness about the importance of this initiative and provide information and strategies for moving the agenda forward.

- **The Big Goal.** Lumina Foundation’s Big Goal of having 60 percent of the U.S. population earn a college degree or high-value certificate by 2025 certainly includes a substantial component on completion. This initiative is much broader than that, though, focusing also on expanding access, increasing student success (including increasing the number of graduates and enhancing the quality of the education being received), and increasing productivity to make these goals affordable.

- **Roadmap for Assuring America’s Future.** Excellencia, a national organization focused on increasing the success of Hispanic Americans, has brought together 60 organizations throughout the U.S. (including WICHE) to link research, policy, and practice in order to inform policymakers and institutional leaders that the U.S.
cannot become a world leader or be globally competitive without a tactical plan for increasing Latino college completion.

- **National College Access Network (NCAN)/Kresge Foundation.**
  NCAN has received a $1.2 million grant from the Kresge Foundation to invest in state college access networks, which Kresge believes are key to achieving the success (completion) agenda. The P/20 Council in Arizona and Access Network in New Mexico are recipients of this award.

*Speakers:* Thomas Anderes, president, Arizona Board of Regents; Don Bennett, executive director, Higher Education Coordinating Board; Jane Nichols, vice chancellor for academic and student affairs, Nevada System of Higher Education.

**Biographical Information on the Speakers**

**Thomas Anderes** began his appointment as president of the Arizona Board of Regents in July 2010. Prior to this appointment, Anderes had served as senior vice president for administration and fiscal affairs at the University of Wisconsin System since 2008. He also served as senior vice president for finance and administration at Texas Tech University and senior vice president for administration and finance at the Oregon University System. In addition, he held various leadership and financial management positions at the Nevada System of Higher Education and the Connecticut Department of Higher Education. He received a Ph.D. in higher education administration from the University of Connecticut; his B.A. and M.P.A. are from the University of Arizona.

**Don Bennett** is the executive director of the Higher Education Coordinating Board (HECB) in Washington State. Prior to this appointment, Bennett was the executive deputy director of the HECB, responsible for the agency’s administrative and operational functions. He served as interim director of the Workforce Training and Education Coordination Board for a year prior to joining the HECB; and from 1997 to 2006, he was executive secretary of the State Personnel Board. Bennett was deployed to Iraq as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom from 2004 to 2005 with the 81st Brigade Combat Team; he currently holds the rank of colonel and serves as state judge advocate, Joint Forces headquarters, Washington Army National Guard. He has significant experience in educational policy issues, having served as director of policy and legal services for the Washington State School Directors’ Association, as leadership counsel for the Washington State Senate, and as staff counsel for the Senate Education Committee. He earned a J.D. degree from the University of Puget Sound School of Law (now Seattle University).

**Jane Nichols** is vice chancellor for academic and student affairs at the Nevada System of Higher Education. Prior to this appointment, she
served as chancellor of the Nevada system from 2000 to 2004 and as vice chancellor for academic and student affairs. Before joining the system in 1997, Nichols was an associate dean for the College of Education at the University of Nevada, Reno. From 1990 to 1995, she was coordinator for the university’s core curriculum and university assessment and was an associate professor in the Department of Social Work from 1984 to 1990. She has served on the WICHE Commission since 2001 and was its 2009 chair. She has also served on advisory boards for the National Science Foundation’s Experimental Program to Stimulate Competitive Research and the National Collaborative for Postsecondary Education Policy. Nichols earned an Ed.D. in higher education with a concentration in administration and statistics from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. She holds a master’s degree in social work with emphasis in administration and casework from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and a B.A. (with distinction) in psychology from Southwestern at Memphis (now Rhodes College).