Boulder, Colorado — Hawaii has just been named to participate in a project that examines the nexus between higher education and the state’s workforce and economic needs. Escalating Engagement: State Policy to Protect Access to Higher Education, a project of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), will focus on how Hawaii’s colleges and universities can educate and train students in ways that promote the state’s workforce and economic development goals. The project, funded by The Ford Foundation, has two goals: to assist states in preparing a competitive workforce for the high-skill, high-wage global economy of the future; and to assure that populations that have been disenfranchised in the past have access, through education, to high-skill jobs. Hawaii is one of only two states invited to participate in the project (South Dakota is the other).

“Selection for this project comes at a fitting time for the state of Hawaii and the University of Hawaii system,” says David McClain, UH system interim president. “All ten campuses in the University of Hawaii system play a vital role in addressing Hawaii’s skilled worker shortage and the need for economic development initiatives. This support from WICHE and its partners will assist the university in better aligning our resources with state needs to maximize opportunities for all of Hawaii’s citizens.”

Today, states are facing a very different policy environment than they have in the past, thanks to the “jobless recovery” and the disconnect between the skills they want to see developed for the future and those that are in fact being developed. Not only must states now assess how to attract and retain the high-skill/high-wage jobs needed to sustain a solid quality of life for their citizens, they must also educate all their citizens well, particularly those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, so they can secure those jobs. And they must do it all with more limited resources than were previously available.

Hawaii, like many other states, is undergoing a sea change when it comes to workforce education and training issues, says David Longanecker, WICHE’s executive director. “In the past, most states assumed their low-income population only needed training for low-skill occupations, just to get basic employment. But those low-skill occupations are disappearing, and economic viability in the future will require bringing a much greater share of the population – including low-income students and students from communities of color – into high-skill sectors of employment.
For them to participate successfully, we need to do a much better job of educating them.”

Hawaii plans to use the Escalating Engagement project to develop the broader vision and political consensus that will be essential as the university system and other key agencies work to meet the state’s economic and workforce development goals. Hawaii will receive technical assistance from WICHE and its partners – the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems and the Council on Adult and Experiential Learning – which will help the state assess its capacity to capitalize on its postsecondary education sector in support of both current and projected needs. WICHE will also help state decision makers to brainstorm new strategies that more closely link postsecondary education to near-term and future economic and workforce development goals.

W I C H E

The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (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. Our programs – Student Exchange, Policy Analysis and Research, WCET (the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications), and Mental Health – are working to find answers to some of the most critical questions facing higher education today, investigating issues such as access to higher ed for low-income students, the financing of higher education and student financial aid, higher education’s role in workforce and economic development, articulation between K-12 and higher education, and distance education. 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. The organization is governed by a 45-member gubernatorially appointed body.

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