ESCALATING ENGAGEMENT:
STATE POLICIES TO PROTECT ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

*Escalating Engagement: State Policy to Protect Access to Higher Education* is a three-year project of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) supported by a grant from the Ford Foundation. Initiated in July 2005, *Escalating Engagement* builds on WICHE’s work in the Western states to increase access to higher education for all students, but most particularly those from low-income families and underrepresented groups, reinforce accountability related to access, and expand our workforce initiatives. The project focuses on two issue areas to strengthen state policy making in higher education:

**First dollar for access.** As economies recover, it is essential that we invest new monies in protecting financial access for underrepresented and low-income students. WICHE’s report *Knocking at the College Door: Projections of High School Graduates by State, Income, and Race/Ethnicity* indicates that the need for strong, well-supported state financial aid programs will be critical in protecting access. Nationally and in the West, one-half of our public high school graduates come from families that earn less than $50,000 a year, and that percentage will only grow in our region. Absent a concerted, intense effort to dedicate new dollars, access to higher education for the neediest students could subtly erode over the next decade of challenging growth in demand but limited public resources.

**Preparing our own talent.** The “jobless recovery” and disconnect between skills desired by states and skills being developed, particularly given the limited resources, create a quite different policy environment than states have faced in the past. Not only must states now assess in quite different ways how to attract and retain the high-skill/high-wage jobs they need to sustain a high quality of life for their citizens, now the states must also find a way in which their citizens, particularly those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds can be educated well so that they can secure these high-skill high-wage jobs. Low-skill occupations are disappearing, and economic viability in the future will require bringing a much greater share of the population into greater successful participation in the high-skill sectors of employment. In collaboration with the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS), the Council on Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), and other groups, *Escalating Engagement* will work closely with selected states to examine the nexus between higher education and the state’s needs for the right kind of individuals to support workforce and economic development goals.

The project’s major activities will include:

- **Regional and sub-regional forums** to bring together policymakers from different sectors of the policy community with experts for in-depth discussions of critical issues facing higher education.
- **Roundtables** involving key high-level players needed to make progress on transformation in higher education policy in the West.
- **Technical assistance** to support an assessment of a state’s existing capacity to capitalize on its postsecondary education sector to support its current economic development and workforce development needs and discussion of new strategies to more closely link postsecondary education to future near-term state economic development and workforce development goals.
- **Commissioned papers** to support state and regional discussions on our major issue areas and to inform policymaking.
- **Ford/WICHE Fellows** to conduct research and develop papers on the project’s topics.
- **Annual meetings of WICHE’s Legislative Advisory Committee** to engage members in the project’s activities and discussion of its core issues.

**WICHE Contact:** Dr. Cheryl D. Blanco, Project Director and Director of Policy Analysis & Research, Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, PO Box 9752, Boulder, CO 80301; phone 303.541.0221; cblanco@wiche.edu.