Boulder, Colorado — South Dakota 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 South Dakota’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. South Dakota is one of only two states invited to participate in the project (Hawaii is the other).

The goals of the WICHE project are consistent with Governor Mike Rounds’ 2010 Education Initiative (www.2010education.com) and will assist in advancing the governor’s program, says Robert “Tad” Perry, executive director of the South Dakota Board of Regents. “The initiative includes increasing the number of Ph.D. programs and graduates in order to expand the role of research in the state’s economy. The research sector of the state’s economy will require well-educated employees and entrepreneurs to staff research labs and businesses.”

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.

South Dakota, 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.”

South Dakota 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.

WICHE

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.

1/25/2006

Contact

Paul Gough
Director of Policy and Planning
South Dakota Board of Regents
(605) 773-3455, paulg@ris.sdbor.edu

Cheryl Blanco
Director of Policy Analysis and Research
303.541.0221, cblanco@wiche.edu