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For more information on WICHE’s Student Exchange Programs, contact Margo Schultz at 303-541-0214 or mschultz@wiche.edu or write to:

WICHE/Student Exchange 
PO Box 9752
Boulder, CO 80301-9752

Visit our website at www.wiche.edu.

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WICHE
WICHE and its 15 member states—Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming—work collaboratively to expand educational access and excellence for all 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.

Physician Assistants

Higher Education & the Workforce

In 2006, a good education is no longer just a way for an individual to get ahead. It is also, and increasingly, the best way a state can get ahead—and therefore a real economic priority. A college degree confers specific, calculable benefits on a state’s citizens: the average lifetime income of an individual with a bachelor’s degree is $2.1 million, compared to $1.2 million for those with just a high school diploma. But the benefits realized by the state are just as impressive as those that an individual sees. Not only does a state with a well-educated populace see increased tax revenues from its (better-paid) citizens, it is also able to use the education level of its citizens as a powerful lure for business and industry—a way to build its economy overall.

For that to happen, however, a state must make sure that all of its citizens have access to a college education. Businesses are no longer simply looking for a small, well-educated elite but instead need to be able to draw upon a labor pool that’s both broadly educated and diverse. In fact, a report from the Business-Higher Education Forum, a coalition that includes some of the country’s top corporate CEOs, states that an educated and diverse population is an essential competitive asset in today’s global economy.

In Alaska, the demand for well-educated employees will only increase over the next several years. In 2012, professional occupations will account for the largest share of the state’s employment and the second largest number of new jobs, according to the Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development. The increase in this sector is good news for Alaska’s citizens, since the median wage for professional jobs is 25 percent higher than for all other occupations. But entry into these jobs comes with a price tag: at least half of these new positions will require a bachelor’s degree or higher. The question for Alaska and other states is how, in a time of tight budgets, to meet the increasing demands on higher education and thereby meet the needs of an increasingly sophisticated economy.

The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) has had workforce issues at the top of its agenda since its creation in the 1950s. In fact, WICHE was launched specifically to address the shortage of workforce-training opportunities in medicine, dentistry, and other professional fields. Today, WICHE offers a slew of undergraduate, graduate, and professional options that help the West’s states educate and train their citizens, building their economies in the process.

Alaska’s Occupational Outlook

Employment in Alaska (including hourly and salaried jobs and self-employment) is projected to grow by 14 percent from 2002 to 2012, adding nearly 43,000 new jobs to the state’s economy and growing the workforce from 313,540 to 356,951. The rate of growth is lower than the increase projected for the nation as a whole (15 percent).

Growth will occur in virtually all sectors of Alaska’s economy, particularly in service occupations, Alaska’s lowest-paying sector (median wage, $12.20/hour). The “professional and related” occupational group, whose median wage is more than double that of service occupations, will see the second highest rate of growth and is expected to account for the biggest share of the state’s employment. Many of Alaska’s “top jobs” (see Table 1)

Table 1. Alaska’s Top Jobs*

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Job</th>
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<th>Median Wage</th>
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* Jobs with the strongest employment outlook (2002-2012) and with earnings in the top quartile.

Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development.
fall into this sector, which encompasses a great variety of vacations, from nursing and computer programming to law and zoology. Not only will this sector see the second fastest growth in terms of new jobs, it will also be second (again, after the service sector) in terms of replacement needs.

Many of the occupations in this sector require considerable education and training. Of the nearly 60,000 workers that composed this group in 2000, about two-thirds worked in an occupation requiring some education past high school, usually at least a bachelor’s degree. That trend continues. Of the 10 “top jobs” listed in Table 1, all require some postsecondary education, and 60% demand a B.A. or higher. And if we look at projections for all of Alaska’s top jobs – those that have above-average wages and are growing at a significant rate — over half require some form of postsecondary education and more than a third demand a bachelor’s degree.

Over the decade leading up to 2012, the need for health care professionals will continue to rise in Alaska. The demand for registered nurses will see a 33 percent increase — another 1,660-plus new positions will be created in the state. Pharmacists’ ranks will experience 49 percent growth, while physical therapists and physician assistants will see 36 percent. Alaska will also experience a strong demand for new respiratory therapists, dental hygienists, and rehabilitation counselors. One reason for the increase: the aging of the population.

The state expects to see a 40 percent increase in the 65-and-over age group in this decade.

Two other essential areas, business and education, will also be making a large number of hires in the decade leading up to 2012, due to new job creation and the need for replacement workers. Nearly 2,700 new general managers will be required to help run the state’s varied businesses. Some 1,300 primary and secondary school teachers will be needed in the state’s classrooms.

The area of mining and construction may experience a major increase in hires toward the end of this projection period if the gas pipeline project moves forward in a timely fashion. It’s anticipated that 4,000 to 5,000 workers will be needed in these fields, as well as in engineering, transportation, warehousing, and others. Tourism is also expected to grow, further feeding the service and retail sectors.

Alaska’s economy changes, so do the kinds of jobs available to Alaskans. Over the next several years, workers who have the most education and training will have the best opportunity for high-paying jobs in growing sectors. Although the projections indicate that jobs will be available for those without formal training beyond high school, prospects for high-paying jobs will, increasingly, be much better for workers who get a college education. In addition, a number of professions requiring education beyond the bachelor’s degree are expected to see moderate to strong growth (see Table 2).

Alaska Professional Employment Projections, 2002-2012

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Source: Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development.

Table 2

ALASKA & WICHE’S Student Exchange

In 2002, 47 percent of Alaska’s new high school graduates enrolled in college — and 44 percent of them went to school out of state, according to WICHE’s just-updated Policy Indicators for Higher Education (www.wiche.edu/Policy/FactBook). One of the most economical ways for them to do that: our Western Undergraduate Exchange (WUE), which allows students to enroll in out-of-state institutions at a reduced tuition level (150 percent of resident tuition). Over 1,600 Alaska students enrolled in WUE in 2003, saving more than $39.5 million and working toward degrees in fields that are essential to Alaska’s economy. Some of the most popular fields of study for Alaska students: engineering, chemistry, nursing, business administration, elementary and secondary education, and computer science.

WICHE’s Professional Student Exchange Program (PSEP) offers students opportunities to train outside of their home state in 14 highly competitive fields: architecture, dentistry, graduate library studies, medicine, nursing, occupational therapy, optometry, osteopathic medicine, pharmacy, physical therapy, physician assistant, podiatry, public health, and veterinary medicine. In Alaska, employment projections in almost all these fields are on the rise (see Table 2). Through PSEP Alaska students are studying to be dentists, physical therapists, physicians, and optometrists. In general, at least 60 percent of PSEP students return to their home state to practice.

Alaska students also participate in the Western Regional Graduate Program (WRGP), which offers them the chance to engage in graduate studies and includes 17 distinctive programs in 14 states, such as mining and earth systems engineering, nursing, and human resource management. On the horizon is a distance learning option, NEON (the Northwest Educational Outreach Network), which will provide electronically delivered degree programs in high-demand disciplines, such as a Ph.D. in nursing and a graduate certificate in supply chain management.

Six Fast-Track Fields

The Outlook for Alaska & the Nation

From 2002 to 2012, the economy in Alaska and the nation will continue generating jobs for workers at all levels of education and training. But there will be an increasing demand for employees with at least some postsecondary education, preferably a bachelor’s degree. Nationwide, during a decade that will witness large numbers of baby boomers moving into retirement, 21.4 million new jobs will be created, an increase of 15 percent. However, in some fields, the increase will be more than triple that. Across the country, competition will be especially stiff for physician assistants, who will see their ranks grow by 49 percent, as well as for physical and occupational therapists (whose fields will experience growth of 35 percent) and pharmacists (30 percent). More than 620,000 new nurses will be needed (an increase of 21 percent) and some 14,500 new veterinarians. Below is a debriefing that focuses on trends in some of Alaska’s — and the nation’s — fast-growing professions.

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