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ALASKA & WICHE
Working Together
for Over a Half Century

Since 1955 Alaska has been a member of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), a 16-member commission working to boost access to higher education for students in the West and, as importantly, to ensure their success.

In the five-plus decades since Alaska joined the commission, the state has benefitted in a number of essential ways.

- Thousands of students from Alaska have attended undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs in other Western states through WICHE’s Student Exchange Program, saving millions of dollars, thanks to reduced tuition rates. In just one of the programs, the Western Undergraduate Exchange, Alaska students and their families have saved more than $178 million since 1988, when the program was founded. (See “Doing the Math,” below, for Alaska’s return on investment.)
- Alaska has received funding to be part of numerous WICHE policy initiatives, including those focused on financing and financial aid, workforce policy, and other areas.
- Alaska has participated in WICHE initiatives related to distance education, workforce development, and behavioral health.

WICHE and Alaska have shared a remarkably fruitful history. But their prospects for the future are even more exciting.

WICHE’s Student Exchange & Related Programs
State Authorization Reciprocity Agreement (SARA). A new initiative, SARA addresses the critical topic of postsecondary distance education regulation. Funded by a $2.3 million Lumina Foundation grant, SARA is a national initiative spearheaded by the National Council for SARA, the Midwestern Higher Education Compact, the New England Board of Higher Education, the Southern Regional Education Board, and WICHE. In an era when students can take online courses from institutions based all over the country, states have been faced with the challenging task of authorizing all out-of-state institutions offering online courses to their students, while institutions have often had to pay substantial fees to the many states in which they operate. SARA offers a cost-effective, efficient, straightforward framework for authorization that institutions, states, and students can trust. The National SARA Council, housed at WICHE, coordinates SARA’s work across the four regional compacts.

Alaska is active in all three WICHE Student Exchange Programs: the Western Undergraduate Exchange, the Professional Student Exchange Program, and the Western Regional Graduate Program. In 2013-14 Alaska’s students and families saved $11.7 million. Alaska saved money, too, through not having to establish and maintain costly programs in a number of areas, including some in healthcare.

Western Undergraduate Exchange. Alaska students have enrolled in undergraduate programs beyond Alaska’s borders through the Western Undergraduate Exchange (WUE) since 1988. In 2013-14, 1,355 students from Alaska are enrolled in out-of-state programs at reduced rates (150 percent of resident tuition), saving more than $11 million in tuition and fees – the average student savings amounted to $8,119. In the last 10 years, students have saved nearly $116 million.

In 2013-14 Alaska, its institutions, and its students saved $11.7 million through WICHE and spent $131,000 for membership in the commission, yielding an 89-fold return on investment.

In the last 5 years, Alaska students’ savings from WUE alone have added up to $60 million, yielding a 95-fold return on the state’s investment in WICHE.

Doing the Math: Alaska’s Return on Investment

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Alaska benefits from WUE in another way: by receiving students from out of state. Alaska’s institutions can choose how many out-of-state slots to offer and in which areas, allowing them to make the best use of
their resources by accepting students in underenrolled programs. There’s a workforce benefit for the state, too, as students often stay in Alaska after graduating. In 2013-14 Alaska received 587 students through WUE.

**Professional Student Exchange Program.** Alaska has sent 1,236 students to professional programs through the Professional Student Exchange Program (PSEP), with students studying in a host of critical fields, including dentistry, occupational therapy, optometry, pharmacy, physical therapy, physician assistant, and podiatry. Historically, some 59 percent of PSEP students return to Alaska to pursue their professional careers.

**Western Regional Graduate Program.** Alaska’s postgraduates also participate in graduate programs through the Western Regional Graduate Program (WRGP), which offers access to over 314 high-quality, distinctive programs (“distinctive” meaning they’re offered at only four or fewer institutions in the WICHE region) at 56 institutions in all WICHE states. WRGP programs run the gamut, but emerging social, environmental, and resource-management fields and innovative interdisciplinary programs are particular strengths. In 2013-14 Alaska sent 33 students to out-of-state institutions, while receiving eight.

**Internet Course Exchange (ICE).** The University of Alaska Anchorage is a founding member of WICHE ICE, an alliance of member institutions and systems with a set of policies, procedures, and support systems for sharing distance-delivered courses among two- and four-year institutions in the WICHE region.

The **Consortium for Healthcare Education Online (CHEO)**, funded (2012-2016) with a $14.2 million grant from the U.S. Department of Labor, is making use of the North American Network of Science Labs Online (NANSLO). With WICHE as its hub, NANSLO is an international network of web-based science labs using robotic software to allow students to conduct science experiments over the Internet. NANSLO opens access to STEM fields for rural and place-bound students by making it possible for them to participate in lab courses remotely. Kodiak College is a CHEO partner institution.

### Figure 1. Alaska Savings through WICHE Programs in 2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Savings (in $)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WUE</td>
<td>$11,001,038</td>
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<tr>
<td>PSEP</td>
<td>$239,727</td>
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<tr>
<td>WRGP</td>
<td>$462,132</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>$11,702,897</strong></td>
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**WICHE’s Added Value**

Alaska gains added value from WICHE’s programs in policy, workforce development, technology, mental health, and other areas.

**Policy & Workforce Development.** Alaska participates in the College Access Regional (CAR) Network and Consortium, a collaborative effort that brings together state projects focused on increasing postsecondary access and success for low-income students. The CAR Network began as the College Access Challenge Grant (CACG) Network, an effort to spur collaboration between states who were receiving the federal CACG, which aims to increase the number of low-income students who are prepared to enroll and succeed in postsecondary education. In 2013, WICHE expanded eligibility for the Network to include other large scale programs focused on similar goals. WICHE has also assisted the Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education (ACPE) with a near-peer mentoring program: since 2009 recent University of Alaska graduates have worked with over 3,000 students at high schools in the Anchorage School District and the remote Lower Kuskokwim School District in activities ranging from career exploration to postsecondary preparation and the college application process. Data indicate the program has boosted the number of students who’ve been admitted to (or plan on attending) a postsecondary institution and the number who’ve taken the ACT or SAT and filled out the FAFSA. WICHE also helped expand the program into Fairbanks, North Pole, the Kenai Peninsula, and Kodiak Island.

WICHE supported Alaska’s efforts to develop a **statewide longitudinal data system (SLDS)**, both with its own resources and through grant-supported projects and contract work. Alaska participated in a meeting that brought together the stewards of the data systems in 14 WICHE states for discussions around linking education and workforce data longitudinally. WICHE also facilitated a meeting of key state officials in Anchorage that aided in accelerating Alaska’s SLDS development efforts and prepared a report based on interviews with state agency personnel, including recommendations addressing the design and function of SLDS for Alaska. WICHE helped Alaska secure technical assistance from federal Department of Education (at no cost to the state) and facilitated a 2010 retreat at our facilities for state officials involved in SLDS development and consultants supplied by the federal government. WICHE’s work also contributed directly to the applications Alaska submitted for the SLDS federal competitions.

WICHE lent its expertise on state-funded financial aid to a debate in Alaska on the **financial aid policy** proposed by Governor Parnell for the 2010 legislative session.
WICHE prepared detailed cost projections for a version of a state need-based grant program. WICHE President David Longanecker met with the Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education to discuss strategic planning for higher education and the possibility of developing a state student aid program, as well as testifying before the Senate Education Committee on student aid.

The Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education, University of Alaska Anchorage, University of Alaska Southeast, and the University of Alaska System belong to the Western Academic Leadership Forum, whose members address regional higher education issues and engage in cooperative resource sharing. The Forum held its 2009 annual meeting at the University of Alaska Anchorage. The Western Alliance for Community College Academic Leaders brings academic leaders of community colleges and technical schools and systems together with state governing and coordinating boards associated with two-year institutions to exchange ideas, share resources, and collaborate on regional initiatives. The University of Alaska Fairbanks, University of Alaska Fairbanks–Bristol Bay, and University of Alaska Anchorage Community and Technical College are members.

Technology. Alaska has been very active in the WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies (WCET), a national membership organization that advances access and excellence in higher education through the innovative use of technology. The University of Alaska’s institutions have benefitted from WCET’s focus on federal distance education regulations, with WCET helping member institutions understand how to respond to regulations regarding issues such as student authentication, financial aid last-day-of-attendance, and state approval of distance education institutions.

WCET members have access to trusted information on emerging trends, policies, and exemplars of successful learning technology innovation in practice. Key WCET activities include an annual meeting, leadership summits, national webcasts, and listserv-based discussions among members. Major focus areas include state authorization, academic integrity and student authentication, competency-based education and alternative credentials, analytics in higher education, and emerging technologies.

Mental Health. WICHE’s Mental Health Program has worked with Alaska on a wide range of initiatives. It led the development of the pioneering Alaska Psychology Internship Consortium, a partnership between five training sites that focuses on rural and indigenous people that was just accredited by the American Psychology Association (APA). Alaska did not have an APA-accredited internship program, and this project allows University of Alaska psychology doctoral students to complete their training within the state. WICHE is also providing technical assistance to improve the application of a “person-centered” treatment planning and discharge process within a short-term, acute care inpatient framework for involuntary committed adults at the Alaska Psychiatric Institute.

Through a multiyear project with the Annapolis Coalition on the Behavioral Health Workforce that focused on improving the skills of direct care workers via the development of core competencies, WICHE helped develop the Alaskan Core Competencies, along with a standardized curriculum and tools to assess worker skills. In addition, two Alaska higher education campuses participated in a research study, funded by the National Institute for Mental Health, that focused on campus mental health and the effects of mental health first aid training for campus residence life staff.

WICHE has provided support to the Alaska Division of Behavioral Health on the use of data to inform decisions. Data sources have been developed and implemented for performance indicators on access, outcomes, and appropriateness of services. WICHE staff has also led several evaluation studies in Alaska, including systems-level and individual program evaluations utilizing multimethod approaches to provide information to funders on the viability of program structure and progress toward goals.

Other Initiatives. The Master Property Program (MPP) helps institutions reduce their insurance premiums and improve their coverage. Created by the Midwestern Higher Education Compact (MHEC) and expanded to the WICHE region, the MPP includes 58 member institutions with total insured values of $86.4 billion. WICHE is also partnering with MHEC to offer MHECare, a new health program providing vetted, competitively priced medical benefits for students. Underwritten by UnitedHealthcare StudentResources,
MHECare offers a variety of plans. The Anchorage and Fairbanks campuses of the University of Alaska participate in MHECare.

Alaska & WICHE’s Leadership

In 2005 Alaska’s Diane M. Barrans, executive director of the Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education in Juneau, chaired the WICHE Commission, whose members mold the organization’s mission and set its priorities. Barrans is one of three Alaska commissioners, along with Susan A. Anderson, president/CEO, CIRI Foundation, Anchorage, and James Johnsen, senior vice president, Alaska Communications, Anchorage.

WICHE also seeks assistance and advice from policymakers, educators, administrators and legislators. WICHE’s Legislative Advisory Committee (LAC), composed of legislator-members from each state, including Representative Paul Seaton and Senator Gary Stevens – has been crucial in this regard. It works to keep the commission’s Executive Committee and staff current on significant legislative issues related to higher education, provides input on WICHE initiatives, and advises staff on a host of issues. WICHE staff also serves the LAC, by informing its members about emerging policy issues in the West.

WICHE Commission & Staff

The WICHE Commission’s 16 members include representatives from 15 Western states – Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawai‘i, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, Wyoming, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (the first of the U.S. Pacific territories and freely associated states to participate). Members work collaboratively to provide educational access and excellence for all citizens.

WICHE and its staff are headquartered in Boulder, CO, and operate out of the State Higher Education Policy Center, which WICHE owns with the State Higher Education Executive Officers association and the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems. Staff leadership includes:

David Longanecker, president
Erin Barber, executive assistant to the president and to the commission
Mollie McGill, interim co-executive director, WCET
Jere Mock, vice president, Programs and Services
Dennis Mohatt, vice president, behavioral health
Russell Poulin, interim co-executive director, WCET

How can I find out more about WICHE?

Visit our website at www.wiche.edu or contact President David Longanecker at 303.541.0201.

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