Since 1952 Montana 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 six-plus decades since Montana joined the commission, the state has benefitted in a number of essential ways.

- Tens of thousands of students from Montana 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, Montana students have saved $96.8 million since 1988, when the program was founded. (See “Doing the Math,” below, for Montana’s return on investment.)

- Montana has received funding to be part of numerous WICHE policy initiatives, including those focused on financing and financial aid, workforce policy, and other areas.

- Montana has participated in WICHE initiatives related to distance education, workforce development, and behavioral health.

WICHE and Montana 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.

Montana 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 Montana’s students and families saved some $7.8 million. Montana saved money, too, through not having to establish and maintain costly programs in a number of areas, including some in healthcare.

**Western Undergraduate Exchange.** Montana students have enrolled in undergraduate programs beyond Montana’s borders through the Western Undergraduate Exchange (WUE) since 1988. In 2013-14, 1,211 students from Montana are enrolled in out-of-state programs at reduced rates (150 percent of resident tuition), saving $5.1 million in tuition and fees – the average student savings amounted to $4,228. In the last 10 years, students have saved $27.7 million.

Montana benefits from WUE in another way: by receiving students from out of state. Montana’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

**Doing the Math: Montana’s Return on Investment**

In 2013-14 Montana, its institutions, and its students saved or brought in some $7.8 million through WICHE and spent $131,000 for membership in the commission, yielding an **59-fold return on investment**.

In the last 5 years, Montana students’ savings from WUE alone have added up to $27.7 million, yielding a **44-fold return on the state’s investment in WICHE.**
underenrolled programs. There’s a workforce benefit for the state, too, as students often stay in Montana after graduating. In 2013-14 Montana received 2,310 students through WUE.

**Professional Student Exchange Program.** Montana has sent some 1,517 students to professional programs through the Professional Student Exchange Program (PSEP), with students studying in a host of critical fields, including dentistry, medicine, occupational therapy, optometry, osteopathic medicine, podiatry, and veterinary medicine. Historically, 60 percent of PSEP students return to Montana to pursue their professional careers.

**Western Regional Graduate Program.** Montana’s students also enroll in graduate and certificate programs through the Western Regional Graduate Program (WRGP), which offers access to over 314 high-quality, distinctive programs (“distinctive” meaning that 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 are particular strengths, as are innovative interdisciplinary programs. In 2013-14 Montana sent 44 students to out-of-state institutions, while receiving 32.

**Internet Course Exchange (ICE).** Montana State University (MSU), Bozeman and the Montana University System are members 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. Flathead Valley Community College and Great Falls College are CHEO partner institutions. A new NANSLO lab is under development at Great Falls College.

**WICHE’s Added Value**

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

**Policy & Workforce Development.** Montana has participated in projects supporting better-informed decision making at the state level. WICHE initiatives have been sponsored by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Ford Foundation, Lumina Foundation, the U.S. Department of Education, and others. In addition, WICHE policy experts often visit the state to present or consult on a number of vital issues, including workforce needs, balancing the financial aid portfolio, educational policy and practice, and demographic change. Staff has also consulted with the Montana University System’s director of transferability initiatives to identify next steps and possible funding opportunities concerning a multistate effort to create a way of transferring a set of core general education courses as a block to institutions in the involved states.

Montana participated in a Gates-funded meeting that brought together the stewards of the data systems in 14 of the WICHE states for discussions around linking data internally and with other states. A central topic of conversation was how to address the challenges to data sharing presented by Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act. The state also participated in a 2009 meeting organized by WICHE and the Sullivan Alliance aimed at improving the production of graduates in high-demand health-related fields, especially among those from underrepresented backgrounds.

Another major meeting was the **Western Summit on Workforce Certification and Higher Education,** held in response to the national demand for more highly skilled workers in a host of fields, from healthcare to

---

**Figure 1. Montana Savings and Revenues through WICHE Programs in 2013**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Savings</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WUE</td>
<td>$5,120,333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSEP</td>
<td>$1,989,307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WRGP</td>
<td>$616,176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Student Savings</strong></td>
<td><strong>$7,725,816</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revenue to AZ Institutions (PSEP)</td>
<td>$42,689</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>$7,768,505</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

“WUE has helped me achieve my academic goals by making it easier to attend Idaho State University. I am from Montana and none of the colleges had the program I was looking for. Idaho State University did, but without WUE, the financial burden would have been heavy and that alone would have made it difficult for me to complete my education. WUE has helped me get one step closer to my professional goal of becoming a speech pathologist.”

– Paige, Montana resident, Class of 2016, Idaho State University, Speech Pathology
high tech. Participants explored how states might use a workforce certification system – which would allow business and higher education to communicate with a common language about workforce demand and supply – to better prepare individuals for productive careers and strengthen their economies.

WICHE’s Lumina-funded project Getting What You Pay For: Understanding Higher Education Appropriations, Tuition, and Financial Aid promoted informed decision making and the alignment of higher education appropriations, tuition, and financial aid policy by state legislators, to improve student access and success. WICHE sent copies of the project’s eight policy briefs to all members of the Montana Legislature.

Montana also participated in another Lumina project, Best Practices in Statewide Articulation and Transfer Systems, which seeks to develop a deeper understanding of how states coordinate their articulation and transfer programs for students who move from two-year to four-year institutions, focusing on strategies that increase access to and success in higher education.

Additionally, the Montana University System, MSU Bozeman, MSU Northern, and the University of Montana are members of the Western Academic Leadership Forum, whose members address regional higher education issues and engage in resource sharing. Another WICHE initiative, the Western Alliance for Community College Academic Leaders, will bring 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 and information, share resources and expertise, and collaborate on regional initiatives. The Montana University System, Missoula College, City College at Montana State University, Highlands College of Montana Tech, Flathead Valley Community College, and Great Falls College Montana State are members.

Technology. Several Montana colleges and universities are active participants in the WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies (WCET), a national membership cooperative that accelerates the adoption of effective practices and policies to advance excellence in technology-enhanced teaching and learning in higher education. University of Montana and Montana State University administrators have held leadership positions within WCET, contributing ideas and direction to the organization’s services and programs ensuring their relevance and value to their own institutions and the higher education community at large.

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. A nucleus for researching mental health policy and a provider of technical assistance in such areas as service innovation, system reform, workforce development, program evaluation, and other areas, WICHE’s Mental Health Program is another well-used resource. The program did a report for Montana on the prevalence of serious mental illness, helping to gauge the need for services so the state can develop a solid behavioral health system. It’s currently working on planning a community-based training for health and behavioral health providers to enhance their ability to identify and serve the needs of returning service members and their families.

Other Initiatives. The Master Property Program (MPP), helps institutions in the West reduce their insurance premiums and improve their coverage. Created by the Midwestern Higher Education Compact in 1994 and expanded to the WICHE region in 2004, 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.

“I am currently a student at Oregon State University and gratefully enrolled as a WICHE PSEP student. I grew up in Montana wondering how I was going to be able to accomplish my goal of becoming a veterinarian. I started work with the U.S. Forest Service as a firefighter right out of high school, to try and save enough money to pay out-of-state veterinary tuition. Had it not been for WICHE I would still be fighting fires! Thank you Montana for this amazing opportunity. I look forward to returning to my home state of Montana to share my skills with our residents and provide care for their companion animals and livestock. ”

– Heather, Montana resident, Class of 2015, Oregon State University, Veterinary Medicine
Montana & WICHE’s Leadership

The WICHE Commission, with three commissioners from each member state, molds the organization’s mission and sets its priorities. Montana’s commissioners are: Dick Anderson, chief executive officer, Dick Anderson Construction, Helena; Clayton Christian, commissioner of higher education, Helena; and Franke Wilmer, state representative, Bozeman.

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. The LAC members from Montana are Representative Kris Hansen and Representative Franke Wilmer. The LAC 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.

Montana resident, Class of 2014,
Eastern Washington University,
Speech-Language Pathology

“Growing up in Montana, I always knew I wanted to get out and explore the diverse experiences available in a bigger city and state. WRGP made it possible for me to attend graduate school in Washington where I am already gaining valuable opportunities that will shape my career as a speech-language pathologist. Without the support of WRGP, my goal of going out of state to obtain my master’s wouldn’t have been possible. When I graduate, my debt load will be much lighter and that will allow me to provide services in the areas of early intervention and the public school system. I am blessed to call Montana home and plan on returning in the future to work with children with communication disorders.”

– Kelly, Montana resident, Class of 2014,
Eastern Washington University,
Speech-Language Pathology

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-director, WCET
  Jere Mock, vice president, Programs and Services
  Dennis Mohatt, vice president, behavioral health
  Russell Poulin, interim co-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.

February 2014