



Interstate Passport Initiative: The Role of Faculty October 2011

A major trend, if not a tidal wave, over the last several years has been the “swirling” of students engaged in post-secondary education. Whether a particular student “swirls” due to the need to remediate their academic proficiency or to seek the lowest cost post-secondary education, the student’s academic progress suffers if a receiving institution requires him/her to take courses already completed at one or more previous institutions.

When students “swirl” across state lines, the transfer process often becomes even more difficult. Higher education faculty and staff spend endless hours each year evaluating, often on an ad hoc basis, the courses taken by students who want to transfer into their institutions. It is a time-consuming and tedious process that can leave students confused and cost them precious time and money, often delaying or stifling their graduation plans.

Can the process of interstate transfer be improved? We think it can.

The Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education has undertaken a pilot project with five states¹ to develop an agreement that will make it possible for students to transfer as a block their lower division general education core from institutions in one state to those in another. This interstate block transfer will be based on evidence of student competencies rather than on articulation of specific courses and credit hours. The two-year pilot program is funded by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

The WICHE project envisions a “passport” that would enable a transfer student from any of the cooperating states to complete the receiving institution’s lower division general education core without having to repeat or take additional core courses. The defining features of the WICHE Passport will be:

- Limited to lower division academic work. A receiving institution may require a Passport student to complete additional upper division General Education requirements.
- Limited to general education **core**. The Passport is not intended to cover all of the academic prerequisites a student may need to enter or complete a specific major or minor at a receiving institution.

¹ The states participating in the WICHE Interstate Passport project are California, Hawaii, North Dakota, Oregon, and Utah.

- Based on achieved **student learning outcomes**. Each participating institution or system will establish its own courses and/or credits that students must complete in order to attain the Passport competencies.

Why We Need Faculty Help

A project that links interstate transfer to student learning outcomes must begin by identifying what competencies should be acquired as part of the general education core. What are the learning outcomes we should expect from general education? How can we articulate these learning outcomes with sufficient clarity so that all the parties to a Passport agreement – students as well as institutions – can understand what is being transferred?

Answering these questions seems like a daunting task, but several existing initiatives relating to intra-state transfer and student learning outcomes suggest some models for moving forward on the WICHE Interstate Passport initiative. Two states in the pilot program, Oregon and Utah, have existing intra-state transfer arrangements in place. Oregon, responding to a 2005 legislative mandate to facilitate transfer of general education, established a “crosswalk” of general education learning outcomes for all the state’s institutions. In Utah all public institutions have adopted common learning outcomes, course numbers, titles, and credits for general education and lower-division elective courses.

In the Oregon and Utah models, the key to success was the faculty. Only faculty have the experience and expertise to determine what learning outcomes should result from general education. By gathering faculty together for conversations about student learning, we find much common ground about objectives and outcomes across disciplines and between institutions. Faculty engagement is crucial to the development of an Interstate Passport program and we are asking for your help and expertise.

Interstate Passport Design Process

In order to design an Interstate Passport agreement, the pilot project has set out a process with four steps. WICHE has identified staff to help facilitate this process in each of the pilot states.

Step 1. Determine intrastate essential learning outcomes for the lower division general education core within each of the five pilot states.

Many institutions and even some state systems have established essential learning outcomes for general education. The first step toward creating an Interstate Passport is to compile these outcomes. For those states and institutions that have only begun a process of developing learning outcomes, our hope is that the WICHE pilot project may provide incentive to further the discussion.

Each state may use whatever mechanism it already has in place for faculty input on general education curriculum issues, or some states may wish to convene a special faculty forum to address the WICHE initiative. Utah, for example, has a statewide general education task force that convenes annual meetings of faculty in all disciplines. Some states are accustomed to having faculty from two-year and four-year institutions engaged in conversations about curriculum. Other states may need to find new avenues to facilitate such conversations.

Step 2. Map intrastate lower division general education learning outcomes to a common set of outcomes.

The Oregon “crosswalk” process (see attached) may serve as a useful model for reconciling the five sets of intrastate essential learning outcomes into a basis for an interstate transfer Passport. The Passport project “crosswalk” approach asks faculty representatives from the five states in the pilot project to “map” the intrastate outcomes to a common set of outcomes for the Passport. The project will give consideration to the American Association of Colleges and Universities LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes as a model.

WICHE will sponsor a series of online meetings among faculty designated by each state to participate.

Step 3. Draft an Interstate Transfer Passport agreement.

Once faculty have determined the learning outcomes, it is time for system administrators, working with their admissions officers and registrars, to begin the process of negotiating an agreement. Because the Passport is based on student competencies, it will not be necessary to achieve agreement on a standardized set of courses or credits that every institution in the pilot states must use to ensure that students have mastered this set of learning objectives. Each institution or system will establish the courses and credits required for their students to accomplish the common Learning Objectives of the Passport.

Step 4. Start transferring students and collect data needed to assess success.

Did we articulate general education core learning outcomes correctly? Do transfer students actually have the competencies needed to do well at the schools they enter through the WICHE Passport? The only way to answer these questions is to track students who use the program to transfer. WICHE understands that institutions participating in the Interstate Passport agreement need to be confident that the transfer students they accept are prepared to accomplish what is required for a degree with that institution’s name on it. We believe that confidence will be rooted in the faculty-driven process behind the agreement and the evidence that students who transfer under the terms of the agreement succeed in attaining their degrees.

All of us who labor in the classroom share a common commitment to seeing our students succeed in completing their degrees and in minimizing obstacles to student success. By focusing on student learning and utilizing faculty expertise, the Passport can help clear the pathway for interstate transfer students.