



media release

National SSI Office Closes – State Efforts Still Going Strong

Boulder, Colorado On September 30th the national office of the federally funded State Scholars Initiative (SSI) – which motivates students to take a rigorous course of study in high school to prepare them for college or work and engages businesses in this endeavor – will close its doors. Since 2005 SSI has been administered by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) in Boulder, CO. While individual States will continue to develop their Scholars programs, the Boulder office will close.

In the last four years, SSI – a \$6.6 million initiative funded by the U.S. Department of Education through the Office of Vocational and Adult Education under the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act of 1998 – has logged numerous successes. Nearly half of all States participated in the program, and 18 remain active: Arizona, Arkansas, Connecticut, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Missouri, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Tennessee, Utah, Virginia, West Virginia, and Wyoming (six other States – Michigan, Nebraska, New Jersey, New Mexico, Rhode Island, and Washington – have completed their programs). Some 950 school districts have participated in the program, which encourages students to take a rigorous curriculum, patterned after the National Commission on Excellence in Education recommendations: four years of English; three years of math (algebra I, geometry, algebra II); three years of basic lab science (biology, chemistry, physics); 3.5 years of social studies (chosen from U.S. and world history, geography, economics, and government); and two years of the same language other than English.

One of the things that sets SSI apart from similar efforts is its use of businesspeople to motivate students. Over the last four years, business volunteers from over 600 companies have visited 8th grade classrooms and talked to students about the types of skills they'll need to be successful both in college and the workplace and how taking a rigorous curriculum in high school can help. SSI has also involved parents, teachers, and counselors to reinforce this message.

To increase awareness about the importance of a rigorous curriculum, SSI hosted the National Summit on Academic Rigor and Relevance in Boston in April 2008. Some 300 participants from 36 States and territories attended, hearing presentations from such experts as Leon Lederman, Nobel Prize winner in physics, and Charles Kolb, president of the Committee for Economic Development – both SSI Advisory Board members. The summit (whose proceedings are posted at www.wiche.edu/statescholars/summit/proceedings.pdf) examined the role of the business community in driving national education reform conversations and fostered discussions of policy reform to increase academic rigor and improve academic relevance in high school. Participants explored topics including the effects of globalization, the need to increase enrollments in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) courses, changing student demographics, rigorous curriculum, and competency-driven assessment, as well as data collection and analysis.

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In addition, SSI has produced a number of briefs and reports on topics related to academic rigor (including “Why Physics?” and “Why Foreign Language?”) to good practices in encouraging rigor (“Promising Practices and Lessons Learned”), to state performance data (“SSI Year Four Final Evaluation Report”), to WICHE’s performance (“Final Evaluation Report, Administration of the State Scholars Initiative by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, October 1, 2005-August 25, 2009”), and to WICHE’s performance reports (“Narrative and Financial Report, September 30, 2005-September 30, 2009, Final Report”), which are posted on the SSI Website.

Collecting and analyzing student data has been an SSI priority, essential to proving that the program really works. SSI collected data on nearly 1.5 million student enrollments from the past three years, which show that the program has in fact influenced students to take and complete rigorous classes. The real-world, bottom-line presentations that businesspeople made to 8th graders helped them make the connection between a strong education and success. And students aren’t the only ones who made that connection: in the last few years, legislators in several SSI states – including Arkansas, Connecticut, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan, Mississippi, Oklahoma, and Tennessee – have put in place rigorous “default curriculums” similar to SSI’s.

A 2006 report from the Department of Education that tracked the progress of 8th graders from 1988 through 2000 found that academic rigor in high school was more important than any other factor in getting students to go to college and earn a degree. In an era when a well-educated populace is essential to our communities, states, and nation – and when a good education is critical to individual success – SSI has motivated thousands of students to challenge themselves and made educational rigor a front-of-mind topic for thousands more parents, teachers, counselors, and legislators.

About SSI and WICHE

The **State Scholars Initiative** (www.wiche.edu/statescholars) is a national program that motivates students to complete a rigorous course of study in high school, with the goal of better preparing them for success in postsecondary education or training, as well as in their future careers. At the core of SSI – which has been funded by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Vocational and Adult Education and administered by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education – are state-level business/education partnerships that work with students in middle and high school, encouraging them to excel academically.* Currently, 18 states participate in SSI.

The **Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education** (WICHE) and its 15 member states work collaboratively to expand educational access and excellence. By promoting innovation, cooperation, resource sharing, and sound public policy, WICHE (www.wiche.edu) strengthens higher education’s contributions to social, economic, and civic life. WICHE’s programs – Student Exchange, Policy Analysis and Research, WCET, and Mental Health – are working to find answers to some of the most critical questions facing higher education today, such as access to higher education 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.

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