

## **Interstate Passport: Streamlining Transfer for Increased Student Success**

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Based at the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE), Interstate Passport® is a growing national program facilitating block transfer of completed lower-division general education attainment based on student learning outcomes rather than on specific courses and credits. Students who transfer with a Passport to another member institution are recognized as having completed all lower-division general education requirements prior to transfer, regardless of course titles and number of credits.

Over 38,000 students earned Passports as of May 2019 with 32 institutions in 14 states participating in this three-year old program; many more institutions are in the pipeline to join.

**Why is Interstate Passport needed?** Thirty-eight percent of students transfer at least once, according to National Student Clearinghouse (NSC), and 27.2 percent of those cross state lines (Shapiro et al., 2018). Indeed, NSC found that for degree completers in 2013-14 in the NWCCU region, the percent of students graduating with prior enrollments in other states exceeded the national average of 14.6 percent: Alaska (27.1%), Idaho (29.9%), Montana (23.8%), Nevada (21.7%), Oregon (19.6%), Utah (22.3%) and Washington (13.2%) (Snapshot Report, 2015). These were the successful students, but what about others who may have lost a significant number of credits?

According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office in its Report to Congressional Requestors (GAO-17-574, August 2017), nationally transfer students lose about 43 per cent of their credits. Monaghan and Attewell's (2015) research concluded that among the variables having an impact on transfer students' likelihood of completing a baccalaureate degree, the most significant was how many credits they lost in the transfer process—"the greater the loss, the lower the chances of completing a BA."

Realizing the need to focus on the growing interstate transfer population, chief academic officers in the WICHE region set out to build an interstate highway featuring seamless on-ramps that would facilitate transfer by preventing the unnecessary loss of credits and repetition of learning already achieved that discourage so many students from completing. The architects of the Passport zeroed in on lower-division general education, the commonality among most

institutions and the primary focus of students during their first two years when so many are lost out of the pipeline.

**How does it work?** Interstate Passport is student focused, faculty driven, respects institutional autonomy, and has built-in quality assurance mechanisms. It builds on the learning outcomes work of individual campuses and states and their related general education reforms. It is also consistent with and integrates well with campus guided pathways work.

*Student-focused.* By making the Passport Learning Outcomes the bridge between campuses' sets of learning outcomes, the focus is on what a student knows and can do. Students who transfer to another Interstate Passport Network (Network) institution with a Passport know in advance that their lower-division general education requirements are met and they can advance in their studies. For students who remain at the awarding institution, they realize an important milestone—an early credential if you will—that can serve as a momentum point for persistence to completion. This can be especially important for low-income and first-generation students and students of color, all of whom often begin as part-time students at two-year institutions and take longer to complete. Students who must stop out will have a meaningful foundational credential that can help to make them more successful in the employer marketplace.

*Faculty-driven.* The Passport Learning Outcomes (PLOs) were developed by interstate teams of faculty members with disciplinary and general education experience from seven western states: California, Hawaii, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming. The 63 PLOs cover nine knowledge and skill areas: oral communication, written communication, quantitative literacy, natural science, human society and the individual, creative expression, human cultures, critical thinking, and teamwork and value systems. These areas were selected on the basis of the Association of American Colleges and Universities' seminal LEAP work as well as research conducted by WICHE on general education requirements in the region. Faculty at each Network institution determine if their own learning outcomes are congruent with and cover the same range of learning as the PLOs, which courses students can take to achieve them, and how students' proficiency will be assessed.

*Institutional autonomy.* Each participating institution compiles their list of courses (Passport Block) by which students can achieve the PLOs. Depending on the extent of an institution's learning outcomes work, the Passport Block may be identical to the institution's GE menu of course options or a subset, or require one or more additional courses. The institution awards a Passport to students who earn it, notes it on their transcripts, and reports the awards to the

National Student Clearinghouse (NSC). Participating institutions also report academic progress data on transfer students to NSC, which sorts the data and issues reports about their former students to each sending institution for use in continuous improvement efforts.

*Quality assurance.* As noted previously, the Passport Learning Outcomes were developed by interstate faculty teams and continue to be monitored by them. Students must earn a minimum grade of C or its equivalent in each course they take to earn the Passport. Based on data submitted by member institutions, the National Student Clearinghouse prepares an aggregate report annually for the Passport Review Board, the program's policy-making body, to use for overall evaluation of the program.

**What are the benefits to institutions?** Interstate Passport provides an early milestone of completion that may encourage persistence regardless of whether a student is staying at the initial institution or following a seamless transfer pathway. Earning a Passport introduces two-year students to transfer destinations in other states and provides four-year institutions with a pool of high-quality transfer students to target for recruitment. For those institutions involved in accountability reporting or performance-based funding, earning a Passport is expected to improve efficient and timely graduations and has the potential to be counted as a meaningful early completion point. Academic progress reports on former students provide institutions with a way to view post-transfer student performance by various demographic characteristics that may be a basis for designing intervention strategies for improvements with various future populations that could lead to closing equity gaps.

**Why now?** Many states have built better highways for transfer within their own borders by establishing 2+2 programs, adopting common course numbering, implementing reverse transfer programs, building guided pathways, and via other strategies. But our increasingly mobile population of students who move across state lines for a variety of reasons—preferred degree programs, military assignments or employment—need our help too. By connecting these intrastate efforts to the Interstate Passport highway, we may reap the greatest returns in student success for our growing population of transfer students.

**Want more information?** Watch this newsletter for an announcement about a NWCCU webinar on Interstate Passport to take place in January. Also, see the program's website at <http://interstatepassport.wiche.edu/>

#### REFERENCES:

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