

## **POLICY POSITION OF THE SOUTHERN LEGISLATIVE CONFERENCE**

### **2. IN SUPPORT OF THE STATE AUTHORIZATION RECIPROCITY AGREEMENT (SARA)**

#### **BACKGROUND**

During the fall 2012 semester, more than 7.1 million students across the United States took at least one online course, representing approximately 33.5 percent of postsecondary degree-granting institutions' total enrollment. As more higher education institutions offer online education across state lines, a uniform process of regulating institutions operating on an interstate basis is becoming more important.

In response, the National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (NC-SARA) was formed to serve as a voluntary, regional approach to state oversight of postsecondary online education. States and institutions that choose to participate agree to operate under common standards and procedures, providing a more uniform and less costly regulatory environment for institutions, more focused oversight responsibilities for states and a better resolution process for student complaints.

SARA was developed as a joint effort between the Presidents' Forum, a collaboration of online educational institutions and programs; The Council of State Governments; Commission on Regulation of Postsecondary Distance Education; and the four regional higher education compacts which implement the initiative – Midwestern Higher Education Compact; New England Board of Higher Education; Southern Regional Education Board; and Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education. The effort is funded by a \$3 million grant from Lumina Foundation.

Membership in SARA offers several benefits to states without any membership fees paid by states. Most significantly, membership offers an opportunity to expand educational offerings to postsecondary students in the state and promote affordability by reducing the compliance burden and associated costs on home state institutions that seek to expand their distance education offerings. Membership benefits accrue only to the students and home state institutions.

As of June 17, 2015, Louisiana, Missouri, Virginia, and West Virginia had applied and been approved, while legislation authorizing the appropriate state education agency to enter into such an agreement had been passed in Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Texas.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Southern Legislative Conference of The Council of State Governments recognizes the State Authorization Reciprocity Agreement as an effective solution to overseeing institutional standards for online education and ensuring that the burgeoning population of students enrolling for online postsecondary coursework receives a quality education.

The Southern Legislative Conference supports SARA and encourages its member states to consider the new interstate agreement as an innovative policy solution that will increase degree attainment and reduce costs for students, states, and institutions.

The Southern Legislative Conference of The Council of State Governments requests that a copy of this policy position be forwarded to the governors, lieutenant governors, and legislative presiding officers of its member states.