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NC-SARA Board meets on next steps

Boulder, Colorado – Board members of the National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (NC-SARA) assembled on December 2, 2014 in Atlanta to decide on a number of items essential to the initiative’s continued development. These 21 leaders from various sectors of higher education and government help guide the activities of SARA, a nationwide initiative of states that will make distance education courses more accessible to students across state lines and make it easier for states to regulate and institutions to participate in interstate distance education. The effort is funded by a \$3 million grant from Lumina Foundation, \$200,000 from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and fees paid by institutions.

“The SARA initiative has made significant progress since opening doors for states to join in January 2014,” noted Marshall A. Hill, executive director of NC-SARA. Hill reported that 17 states (Alaska, Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Louisiana, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Virginia, Washington and West Virginia) have joined SARA. He also stated that as of December 2, 2014, SARA-enabling legislation has passed in an additional eight states and three more have determined that no legislation is needed to enable participation.

The board gave final approval to two policy issues that were first considered at the meeting on May 14, 2014: 1) policy on data to be submitted by SARA institutions, and 2) policy on reporting of complaints. Based on recommendations by SARA staff and an advisory committee, the board approved data requirements to be reported annually to NC-SARA starting in fall 2015. The data will be reported on the NC-SARA website; its collection is designed to improve national information on SARA institutions serving students who live in other states. Similarly with staff and committee advice, the board approved the quarterly reporting by SARA states of appealed complaints. Required reporting will begin in April 2015, and the gathered information will appear on the NC-SARA website to provide timely identification for students and states of any SARA institution for which complaints are appealed to their state’s SARA portal agency. The context of that reporting will include the institution’s total out-of-state distance education enrollments.

The board also approved clarification of the term “legal domicile” and the addition of the possibility of institutions being approved by their states to join the initiative on provisional status. The definition added to the NC-SARA Policies and Standards identifies the “legal domicile” of an institution for purposes of SARA eligibility as the state in which the institution’s principal campus holds its institutional accreditation and, if applicable, its federal OPEID number. By creating the possibility of provisional status for some institutions, the board addressed the concerns of some SARA states about institutions that meet current SARA eligibility requirements but have other problems/challenges of which the state is aware. This permits special attention for institutions facing academic, financial and consumer issues.

In terms of physical presence standards, the board approved modifications to the NC-SARA Policy and Standards regarding clinical placements and recruiting. Clinical placements would be removed from the “Physical Presence” subsection, recognizing they are a unique and significant aspect of SARA that will require continuing work. A detailed explanation of supervised field experiences covered by SARA, including contracts and licensing, was provisionally approved by the board, subject to review of a re-draft. And the board agreed to add recruiting to the list of activities by SARA institutions that do not trigger physical presence in SARA states. That provision is already included in the regional SARA agreements.

A progress report was given on a number of items including NC-SARA’s pursuit of 501(c)3 status. Members of the NC-SARA executive committee voted to initiate the process of obtaining 501(c)(3) federal tax-exempt status for NC-SARA based on analysis provided by EducationCounsel, LLC. The process, including preparation of the application, is estimated to take six to nine months. New FAQs on SARA’s use of federal composite scores; states’ use of those federal scores in determining institution eligibility for SARA; tutoring and physical presence; and aviation programs were also brought to the board’s attention.

Background Information about SARA

The SARA agreements are overseen by the National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (NC-SARA) and are being implemented by the four regional higher education interstate compacts: the Midwestern Higher Education Compact (MHEC), the New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE), the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) and the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE). Once a state joins SARA, accredited degree-granting institutions in the state that offer distance education courses can seek approval from their state to participate in SARA. When approved, these institutions will be able to operate in other participating SARA states without seeking independent authorization from those states. Participating in SARA is entirely voluntary for institutions, as it is for states.

The NC-SARA board is a nationwide coordinating entity that assures the four regional compacts establish uniform standards and procedures for accepting and monitoring states participating in each of their respective regional reciprocity agreements. The NC-SARA board includes the chief executive officers of the four regional compacts, four leaders from the National Commission and Presidents' Forum/Council of State Governments efforts, and additional members to assure that the perspectives of all stakeholder groups will be represented. A list of members is available at: www.nc-sara.org/about/national-council

About NC-SARA, MHEC, NEBHE, SREB, WICHE, and Lumina Foundation

The National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (NC-SARA) is a voluntary, regional approach to state oversight of postsecondary distance education. The initiative is administered by the country's four regional higher education compacts (MHEC, NEBHE, SREB and WICHE) and overseen by NC-SARA. 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 better resolution of student complaints. www.nc-sara.org

The Midwestern Higher Education Compact is a nonprofit regional organization assisting Midwestern states in advancing higher education through interstate cooperation and resource sharing. MHEC seeks to fill its interstate mission through programs that expand postsecondary opportunity and success; promote innovative approaches to improving institutional and system productivity; improve affordability to students and states; and enhance connectivity between higher education and the workplace. Member states are: Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota and Wisconsin. www.mhec.org

The New England Board of Higher Education promotes greater educational opportunities and services for the residents of New England. It works across six New England states to engage and assist leaders in the assessment, development, and implementation of sound education practices and policies of regional significance; promote policies, programs, and best practices to assist the states in implementing important regional higher education policies; promote regional cooperation and programs that encourage the efficient use and sharing of educational resources; and provide leadership to strengthen the relationship between higher education and the economic well-being of New England. www.nebhe.org

The Southern Regional Education Board works with 16 member states to improve public education at every level, from pre-K through Ph.D. SREB is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization headquartered in Atlanta. SREB states currently participate in SREB's Electronic Campus Regional Reciprocity Agreement, and SREB is working closely with SARA to expand reciprocity nationwide. Member states are Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and West Virginia. www.sreb.org

The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education and its 16 members work collaboratively to expand educational access and excellence for all citizens of the West. By promoting innovation, cooperation, resource sharing, and sound public policy among states and institutions, WICHE strengthens higher education's contributions to the region's social, economic and civic life. WICHE's members include: 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. www.wiche.edu

Lumina Foundation is an independent, private foundation committed to increasing the proportion of Americans with high-quality degrees, certificates and other credentials to 60 percent by 2025. Lumina's outcomes-based approach focuses on helping to design and build an accessible, responsive and accountable higher education system while fostering a national sense of urgency for action to achieve Goal 2025. For more information log on to www.luminafoundation.org.