

The State Authorization Reciprocity Agreement: SARA

Higher Education has needed a better way for states to oversee the delivery of postsecondary distance education.

The process in place prior to SARA has been too varied among the states to assure consistent consumer protection, too cumbersome and expensive for institutions that seek to provide education across state borders, and too fragmented to support our country's architecture for quality assurance in higher education — the quality assurance "triad" of accrediting agencies, the federal government, and the states.

A new, voluntary process of state oversight of distance education has been created to redress these problems. The State Authorization Reciprocity Agreement (SARA) is a voluntary agreement among its member states and U.S. territories that establishes comparable national standards for interstate offering of postsecondary distance-education. SARA makes it easier for students to take online courses offered by postsecondary institutions based in another state and improves consumer protection.



Problems

- States and territories regulate higher education within their borders, with varying requirements for out-of-state institutions that want to do business in the state.
- Interstate online education offered by colleges and universities is expanding dramatically.
- Before SARA there was no alternative to each institution separately pursuing any needed approvals (state authorization) in each state and territory where it enrolled students.
- Consequently, thousands of institutions were required to contact and work through as many as 54 states and territories, and sometimes with multiple regulatory agencies in those states.
- That process has been inefficient, costly, and not effective in supporting access to high quality distance education throughout the country.

Solution

The State Authorization Reciprocity Agreement (SARA) establishes a state-level reciprocity process that will support the nation in its efforts to increase the educational attainment of its people by making state authorization:

- more efficient, effective, and uniform in regard to necessary and reasonable standards of practice that spans states;
- more effective in dealing with quality and integrity issues that have arisen in some online/distance education offerings; and
- less costly for states and institutions and, thereby, the students they serve.

Key Points

- SARA is voluntary for states and institutions.
- Administered by the four regional higher education compacts (Midwestern Higher Education Compact, New England Board of Higher Education, Southern Regional Education Board, and the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education).
- Once states are approved by their compacts, they can begin to enroll eligible institutions.
- Membership is open to degree-granting postsecondary institutions from all sectors (public colleges and universities; independent institutions, both non-profit and for-profit) accredited by an agency recognized by the U.S. Secretary of Education.

See www.nc-sara.org

Benefits to Students

- Expands access to educational offerings.
- Participating institutions meet SARA requirements and agree to meet specific quality standards.
- Provides better resolution of complaints from students in SARA states.
- Reduces a rapidly growing institutional cost that can be passed along to students.
- Enhances overall quality of distance education.

Benefits to States

- Expands educational offerings to state residents.
- Allows SARA states to focus on their home-state institutions, rather than on institutions from many other states.
- Maintains state regulation of on-the-ground instruction offered by out-of-state institutions.
- Other SARA states will help resolve complaints. (SARA states commit to resolving complaints from distance education offered by their institutions.)
- Reduces costs for institutions, lessening this particular need to raise fees and thereby supporting affordability.
- States pay no fees to join.

Benefits to Institutions

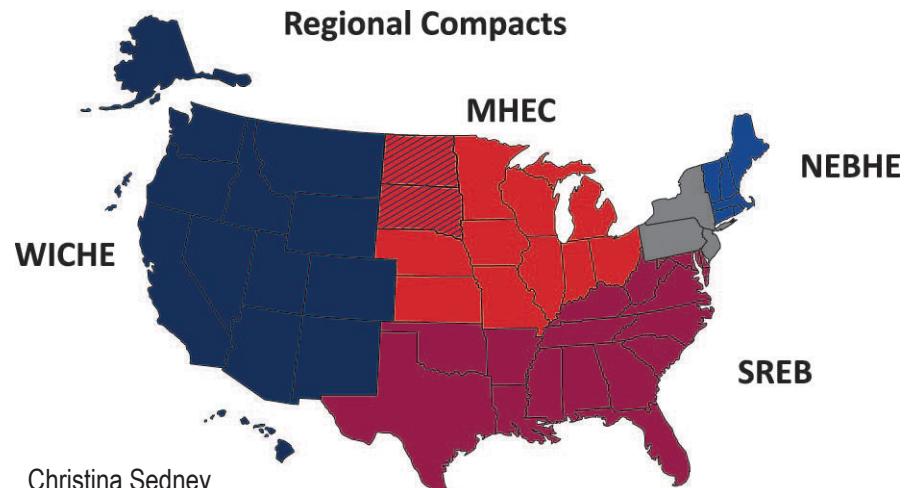
- Enables more efficient provision of distance education to a broader market.
- Reduces number of other-state regulations to continually monitor and track.
- Reduces number of applications and individual state requirements.
- Reduces costs.
 - » Applications, surety bonds, agent licenses, etc.
 - » Staff (payroll and time).
 - » Reduced costs = potentially lower fees for students.

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National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements

A voluntary, regional approach to state oversight of distance education