

August 6, 2007

Dear State Scholars Initiative State Director:

Some State Scholars Initiative (SSI) State-level business-education partnerships (State partnerships) selected by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) in 2006 have proposed using SSI funds to support course requirements less rigorous than those of the SSI Core Course of Study. This concerns both the U. S. Department of Education (the Department) that funds the Initiative and us because, as you know, the SSI Core Course of Study is a minimum that all participating States and school districts have agreed to implement. This policy has been set forth clearly and consistently in the Department's *Federal Register* notice published in 2005, the two Requests for Proposals that WICHE published in 2006, and the contracts that State partnerships signed with WICHE.

The purpose of this letter is to clarify where flexibility exists regarding the SSI Core Course of Study and where it does not, and also to reiterate that SSI participating partnerships and school districts must maintain the SSI Core Course of Study's minimal level of rigor.

Background

In an August 5, 2005, *Federal Register* notice published under authority of the Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act of 1998 (20 U.S.C. 2324(c)(6)(A)), the Department of Education's Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE) established one "SSI Core Course of Study" by defining this term as:

- 4 years of English
- 3 years of math (algebra I, geometry, and algebra II)
- 3 years of basic lab science (biology, chemistry, and physics)
- 3.5 years of social studies (chosen from U.S. and world history, geography, economics, and government)
- 2 years of the same language other than English.

OVAE developed the SSI Core Course of Study based on research findings and recommendations discussed in the notice, including those of the National Commission on Excellence in Education. The *Federal Register* notice provided that the SSI Core Course of Study was established as a minimum for participation in SSI. Each current SSI State partnership submitted a proposal to WICHE committing to the SSI Core Course of Study in response to WICHE's February 2006 and September 2006 Requests For Proposals (RFP). Upon selection, each State partnership committed to the SSI Core Course of Study in its contract with WICHE. Under the terms of all State partnership contracts, WICHE provides SSI financial support to State partnerships that have committed to increasing the percentage of high school graduates in their States who enroll in and successfully complete the SSI Core Course of Study requirements. In its RFPs, WICHE said that States applying for participation in SSI could include additional requirements in their proposed SSI Core Courses of Study, such as requiring additional years in fine arts, additional math, science, or both, and community service hours. WICHE also said that States could choose to set a minimum grade point average (GPA) for students completing their SSI Core Course of Study, noting that any such deviations would have to increase rigor. However, WICHE's RFPs also stated that if a State's proposed SSI Core Course of Study deviated from the RFP's definition of SSI Core Course of Study, the State would be required to "justify the deviation with evidence-based research."

SSI Core Courses

Upon request from a State partnership and in coordination with the Department, WICHE has considered a number of questions concerning the minimum SSI Core Course of Study. In each case, WICHE has consulted with the Department to reach a decision. For instance, one State partnership asked if American Sign Language would be considered a "language other than English" for purposes of SSI. Another State partnership asked if a Native American language (other than English) would be considered a "language other than English" for purposes of SSI. The answer WICHE provided in both cases was yes; that both American Sign Language and Native American languages could be treated as languages "other than English" in the SSI Core Course of Study. Specifically, WICHE advised that, under SSI, *any* language other than English, which a Native American language (other than English) would be, could satisfy the language-other-than-English requirement. WICHE also said that students who are native Spanish speakers may take Spanish as a foreign language to learn the reading, writing, and literature in that language.

In addition, under SSI, we generally defer to the State education agency (SEA) or the local education agency (LEA), or both, as to how they are treating either the situation of the Native American language or the situation where a native Spanish speaker proposes to take Spanish as a foreign language. So, if an SEA or LEA accepts one or both of these, WICHE and the Department also would accept them as fulfilling the SSI language-other-than-English requirement, deferring to the SEA/LEA definition or acceptance of a particular course for fulfilling the language-other-than-English requirement.

In another inquiry, a State partnership asked whether, in a State that accepts an eighth grade course as being sufficiently rigorous (e.g., algebra I) and records it on a student's high school transcript, WICHE would accept that course as meeting one of the three higher level math course requirements for SSI. The answer WICHE provided was yes; if an SEA or LEA accepts an eighth grade algebra I course and records it on a student's high school transcript as a high school math course, WICHE and the Department would accept the algebra I course completed in eighth grade as meeting the requirement of one year of the three-year higher level math courses that are part of the SSI Core Course of Study. In a like situation, in a State that accepts an eighth grade course as being sufficiently rigorous (e.g., one year of a foreign language) and records it on a student's high school transcript, WICHE would accept that course as meeting one of the two foreign language course requirements for SSI.

Similarly, in the case of the lab science requirement, physics must be offered to participating students in participating school districts. As in similar situations, WICHE and the Department would defer on matters of curriculum to the LEA and SEA and would defer to the SEA/LEA definition or acceptance of a particular physics course as fulfilling one year of the three-year lab science requirement. The SEA or LEA must certify that the course content for the equivalent course is comparable to the course content of a physics course and submit this certification to WICHE on letterhead. However, while the SEA or LEA may determine and accept the content of a physics course within the State and local curriculum, a State partnership may not substitute another lab science course for physics and still be viewed as maintaining the minimum SSI Core Course of Study.

Required Numbers of Years

To remain eligible, an SSI Core Course of Study must meet the 15.5 course or year requirement. For instance, when a State partnership recently asked whether it could offer a total of 3 years of social studies, rather than 3.5 years of social studies and still remain eligible under SSI, WICHE responded that it could not. The SSI Core Course of Study requirement remains at 3.5 years of social studies (chosen from U.S. and world history, geography, economics, and government).

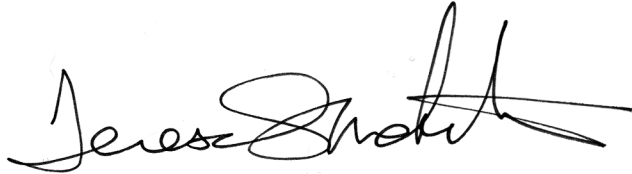
Summary

In keeping with recognition on the part of educators, policymakers, and employers that all America's youth must be better prepared academically for postsecondary education and the workplace, SSI promotes an established rigorous Core Course of Study. Participating State partners may increase the rigor of their curriculum and some flexibility exists in determinations of core course equivalency at the SEA and LEA levels. However, participation in SSI continues to depend on State partnerships adhering to established minimum SSI Core Course of Study requirements, as described in OVAE's *Federal Register* notice, WICHE's RFPs, and in the SSI contracts. Mastering a rigorous curriculum is important to our students' success. As the National Center on Education and the Economy recently reported "This is a world in which a very high level of preparation in reading, writing, speaking, mathematics, science, literature, history, and the arts will be an indispensable foundation for everything that comes after for most members

of the workforce. It is a world in which comfort with ideas and abstractions is the passport to a good job, in which creativity and innovation are the key to the good life, in which high levels of education – a very different kind of education than most of us have had – are going to be the only security there is¹.”

The State Scholars Initiative staff members at WICHE are available to provide technical assistance and to help you fully implement the SSI Core Course of Study. Please contact me with any questions on this matter or if you require further clarification.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Terese Rainwater". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "T" and "R".

Terese Rainwater, Ph.D.
Program Director
State Scholars Initiative
303.541.0225

1 Page 7, *Tough Choices or Tough Times: the Report on the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce*. Washington, DC: National Center on Education and the Economy, 2007.