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Excelsior College Receives \$300,000 Grant from Lumina Foundation for Education to Work with Council of State Governments

Effort will explore voluntary interstate agreement to broaden availability of accredited online degree programs, ensure strong consumer protection, and reduce barriers to student success

Albany, N.Y. (Dec. 9, 2010) – In an effort to broaden the availability of accredited degree programs while ensuring strong consumer safeguards, Lumina Foundation for Education has funded a Presidents' Forum initiative designed to address regulatory barriers faced by online, postsecondary institutions offering instruction across state borders. A goal of the initiative is exploration of the potential for an interstate compact that will better align individual state regulatory requirements and increase reciprocal program approval among states.

Excelsior College, a founding member and convener of the Presidents' Forum, and the Council of State Governments will work together under the \$300,000, two-year grant.

Often designed prior to the widespread acceptance of online degree programs, state regulatory and policy requirements for higher education vary significantly and typically focus on traditional post-secondary institutions operating within their respective state borders. With many of today's colleges and universities offering online learning – more than 5 million students annually take at least one online course – these regulations and policies have not kept up with the possibilities for serving more students through growing use of online technology.

Previous nonpartisan research by the Forum indicates that states are increasingly exercising their authority to regulate out-of-state online providers that serve their residents. In turn, providers are faced with duplicative, costly, time-consuming and inconsistently applied regulations. This inconsistency also contributes to reducing, and sometimes preventing, reciprocity between states and can deny students access to high-quality education.

"According to a 2010 report from the Sloan Foundation, three-quarters of all colleges and universities report that the economic downturn has increased demand for online courses and programs," Excelsior President John F. Ebersole said. "The 21 percent growth rate in online enrollments eclipses the 2 percent growth in the overall higher education student population. Current regulatory practices, however, present barriers that inhibit many opportunities for study and innovation."

The Presidents' Forum is a nonprofit collaborative of more than 150 distance education institutions, associations and stakeholder policy bodies covering all sectors of higher learning. It serves as a venue for developing strategies that drive innovation and best practices in online and distance learning.

Building upon the existing research, the Forum, state regulators and representatives from the Council of State Governments will determine the scope and nature of information that states require to validate credibility of online, out-of-state post-secondary programs.

Based upon this determination, the Forum anticipates collaborating with the Council of State Governments to develop a model interstate compact that provides a basis for more rational and efficient state approval of online programs, protects consumers and addresses barriers to student success. A common set of rigorous standards also would support the national agenda calling for increased degree completion among adults. An informational program to educate policymakers and stakeholders on the benefits of a multi-state compact will be developed.

The Presidents' Forum, (<http://presidentsforum.excelsior.edu>) established in 2004, is a collaboration of accredited, national, adult-serving institutions and programs which have embraced the power and potential of online education. The Mission of the Presidents' Forum is to advance the recognition of innovative practice and excellence in online learning. This is accomplished by providing a venue for leaders in higher education and stakeholders to share their knowledge and learn from others' best practices.

The Council of State Governments (<http://www.csg.org>) is our nation's only organization serving all three branches of state government. CSG is a region-based forum that fosters the exchange of insights and ideas to help state officials shape public policy. This offers unparalleled regional, national and international opportunities to network, develop leaders, collaborate and create problem-solving partnerships.

Lumina Foundation for Education, an Indianapolis-based private foundation, is committed to enrolling and graduating more students from college—especially 21st century students: low-income students, students of color, first-generation students and adult learners. Lumina's goal is to increase the percentage of Americans who hold high-quality degrees and credentials to 60 percent by 2025. Lumina pursues this goal in three ways: by identifying and supporting effective practice, through public policy advocacy, and by using our communications and convening power to build public will for change. For more information, logon to www.luminafoundation.org.

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