Established in 1997 and located in Washington, D.C., the Postsecondary Electronic Standards Council (PESC) is a non-profit, community-based, umbrella association of colleges and universities; professional and commercial organizations; data, software and service providers; and state and federal government agencies.

PESC's mission is to lead the establishment and adoption of data exchange standards in education.

The goals of the mission are to enable the improvement of institutional performance and foster collaboration across educational communities in order to lower costs, improve service, and attain system interoperability.

The following information is an excerpt from an interview conducted for the September 2006 edition of The Standard, PESC's monthly electronic newsletter.

Ken Sauer, Ph.D.

is the Associate Commissioner for Research and Academic Affairs for the Indiana Commission for Higher Education.

Dr. Sauer currently functions as the academic officer for the Commission where he has been for 21 years.

To access the full interview, please visit www.PESC.org.

The Value of Standards in Indiana

and the Midwest Higher Education Compact

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PESC: Tell us a little about the Indiana Commission for Higher Education.

Dr. Sauer: The Indiana Commission for Higher Education, created by statute in 1971, is the state coordinating agency for Indiana colleges and universities. The agency has a small staff, which is located in Indianapolis, and works with a large number of individuals in leadership positions in colleges and universities, the business community, the media, and the executive and legislative branches of state government.

Included among its principal functions are the following:

- forging a consensus among state leaders regarding long-range plans and policies to guide the development of higher education in the state
- approving new degree programs for public institutions
- making a biennial budget recommendation for higher education to the Governor and General Assembly
- working with the Indiana Department of Education to enhance the K-12 preparation of students
- contributing to state economic development initiatives.

The agency does not have direct jurisdiction over the state's private institutions; however, there are overlapping interests. For example, the Commission includes the needs of private postsecondary institutions in the budget recommendation for state student aid programs. Indiana has one of the most generous state student assistance programs in the country for students attending private colleges and universities.

PESC: What is your IT strategy…what are you trying to achieve?

Dr. Sauer: We are trying to use technology to leverage resources so that we can accomplish state educational goals quickly, effectively, and efficiently.

The Indiana e-Transcript Initiative — which allows high school students to request their transcripts be sent to colleges electronically, and which allows high schools to send transcripts electronically to other high schools and colleges to other colleges — is a good example of this.

PESC: What barriers do you encounter?

Dr. Sauer: When it comes to the e-Transcript program the biggest barriers have more to do with human issues than technological ones. In large part, it takes the voluntary participation of an awful lot of people in both k–12 and post-secondary education to make a state-level initiatives work, and so much time and effort is spent reaching the right people and convincing them that they need to place a high priority on the project.

Funding is also a barrier, although in Indiana's case, the generosity of ISM Educational Loans, Inc. (the Indiana secondary market for student loans) underwrote the implementation of the project, which is good news for students and schools, since there is no charge for any transcript sent within Indiana.

PESC: Please explain the e-Transcript Initiative?

Dr. Sauer: The e-Transcript allows kindergarten through college institutions to electronically send transcripts among Indiana schools, between schools and colleges, and soon from college to college. Students register online for the service. Once they are signed on, they simply indicate to which schools they would like a copy of their transcript sent. That information is then accessed either on a batch or individual basis by the high school counselor, who then electronically approves the request. The transcripts are sent in electronic form to the requested school(s) and the school(s) can then download the information in PDF or raw data XML format. The student is notified by email when the transcript is sent by the high school guidance counselor and again notified when the receiving school downloads the transcript.

The process also works for schools outside of Indiana. If the school is in one of the eleven mid-western states that comprise The Midwest Higher Education Compact (MHEC), the process will soon mirror that of the Indiana process. If the student requests transcripts be sent to any non-participating school, however, Docufide, our contracting company, prints and sends the transcripts for the student. Even with this process, the student is able to do all requests electronically and the high school guidance counselor is able to approve the sending of all transcripts electronically.

The e-Transcript initiative both for Indiana and MHEC are based on PESC's XML High School Transcript Standard.

PESC: Can you quantify savings gained by using standards?

Dr. Sauer: While I could work out a dollar figure saved based on the cost of paper, envelope, printers, toner and stamps needed to send paper transcripts, the real savings with the e-Transcript is in human terms.

Students no longer need to make appointments to meet with counselors just to make a request for transcripts, nor do they need to follow-up by phone with high school counselors or college admissions offices to see if the transcripts were received. This may seem trivial, but often times the college needs transcripts at three different intervals within the students' senior year. There's a significant amount of time spent by parties at all levels, not to mention the stress it puts on the student wondering if the document is lost in the mail, or just sitting on a desk unopened.

High School counselors can now spend their time providing guidance instead of licking envelopes and filling out transcript forms. College admission offices can spend less time fielding calls from distraught high school seniors about transcript receipt and more time working to ensure a smooth admissions process.

PESC: Quantify process efficiencies gained by using standards…

Dr. Sauer: There are the obvious efficiencies of time and effort, but I'm more excited about the derivative capabilities. As previously mentioned, the transcript data can be downloaded in PDF or as XML data to be incorporated into a college's database. Once we are able to collect the information in a database, it allows for advanced analyzation.

For example, we can now look at how students who took algebra and trigonometry in high school do in college calculus. We can then break that information down by geographic location, school district or gender if we choose. We have the ability to do advanced analysis of what is working and what isn't working from high school to college.

Another derivative is a program we are currently working to implement. We call it the Diploma Audit System. The e-Transcript sets up our ability to monitor students' progress throughout their education and notify them each step of the way about their progress.

To receive a state standard diploma in Indiana a student must complete what is called the Core 40 — forty units of high school credit. The credits are aligned with what is needed to be successful in college. At the end of each semester, the software can analyze a student's progress and notify him or her of what classes, what grades and whether or not he or she is on track for graduation. The notification not only helps the student, but can be used to notify high school faculty, parents, etc., if additional help is needed or if the student is progressing as needed.

PESC: Do you require standards in RFP language?

Dr. Sauer: When the Commission issued the RFP to invite vendors to submit proposals to implement our e-Transcript Initiative, we specified that the transcripts had to be transported using PESC XML standards.

PESC: How many trading partners do you have?

Dr. Sauer: Since the Indiana e-Transcript Initiative was launched in October 2005, we have 90 percent of our nearly 400 public and non-public high schools participating in the Initiative. Fifty percent are able to transmit transcripts electronically right now and the other 40 percent are in various stages of implementing this capability. All public four-year and two-year colleges, and 75 percent of our 31 private colleges, are able to receive transcripts electronically from high schools. Including initial, mid-year, and final transcripts, we project a total of more than 200,000 high school transcripts to be sent electronically during the current academic year.

We expect the project to get much bigger over the next year or so. The Midwest Higher Education Compact (MHEC), consisting of the 11 Midwestern states, has just launched an e-Transcript Initiative that intends to replicate the Indiana experience on a regional basis. The same company that Indiana contracted with to implement our e-Transcript Initiative has been selected to provide these services for the other Midwestern states.

PESC: What should we all be paying more attention to?

Dr. Sauer: One of the biggest hurdles is trying to integrate what are now separate databases into a seamless "k–16" system. It's very difficult to transmit information from the k–12 sector to the postsecondary sector, and in many cases it's just as much of a challenge to transmit information among the various databases within each sector. The challenge is not just the funding of one giant database, but how to address the duplicative information among the databases since the same data is handled differently, with different input and output codes. The e-Transcript is a good example of an initiative that makes the k-16 system a reality, and work needs to be done across multiple databases throughout the nation's k–16 system.