

# **The Game Changers in Online Learning Series**

The Western Governors University

Online. Accelerated. Competency-Based.  
Affordable. Accredited.

Twelve key features of the Western Governors University (WGU) system which, taken together, are game changing:

- monthly admission
- online, individualized study
- courses based on meeting specific competencies
- use of only external online materials (from publishers and OERs)
- individual, on-demand, regular, high quality mentoring
- accelerated tracks for students with existing competencies
- affordable (\$6,000 annual tuition fee)
- self-financing through tuition fees
- nation-wide accreditation (recognized in all states)
- 30-40% annual enrollment growth over the past four years
- corporate partnerships
- mainly 'underserved' students (above average proportions of first generation, low income, ethnic minority, rural students)

Established in 1997 by the governors of 19 U.S. states, [Western Governors University](#) (WGU) is a nationally accredited, not-for-profit university offering online, competency-based programs that enable students to earn degrees by demonstrating what they know and can do.

Currently, 36,000 students are enrolled in WGU, with an average growth rate of 30-40% over the last four years. The university is now self-funding from tuition fees alone, although it took 10 years to reach the scale needed for self-sufficiency.

### **Mission statement**

'The principal mission of WGU is to improve quality and expand access to post-secondary educational opportunities by providing a means for individuals to learn independent of time and place and to earn competency-based degrees and other credentials that are credible to both academic institutions and employers.'

### **Students**

In the fall of 2012, 36,000 students are enrolled in WGU, and it is accepting new students at a rate of 2,000-3,000 per month. Registration has grown 30-40% annually over the past four

years. The main barrier to growth is finding sufficient numbers of appropriate mentors and training them. Growth, however, has built up slowly since WGU was accredited in 2003, with just 10,000 students as recently as 2008.

The average age of students is 37: almost two thirds are employed full-time, and 14% are working part-time. However, all students must take a minimum load of 12 courses per year. WGU has a higher proportion (74% in 2011) of underserved students than the national average for U.S. universities, including those who are the first in their families to attend post-secondary education, and those from low income families, ethnic minorities, and rural areas. Most students have some college experience before enrollment (there are currently 37 million people in the U.S. with some college experience but no degree). Roughly one third of students are taking master's degrees. Students come from every state.

However, WGU is not an open university. All students have a phone interview with an enrollment counsellor to ensure they have the appropriate skills, attitude, and ability to study relatively independently. Students who are not accepted are advised on what preparatory programs they need to take.

WGU has awarded a total of 18,000 degrees, and expects to have awarded 50,000 degrees by 2015. Currently, approximately 35% of students graduate within four years. One year retention rates are now running at over 75%. Student satisfaction rates are above average on national student surveys.

### **The competency model**

Proposals to develop degree programs are initiated by a program area Council comprised of a mix of corporate and academic specialists within the area under discussion. For each degree, a high-level set of competencies is defined by the Council, and then a working team of contracted subject matter experts takes the ten or so high-level competencies and breaks them down into about 30 more specific competencies, around which are built online courses to develop mastery of each competency. Competencies are based upon what graduates are supposed to know in the workplace and as professionals in a chosen career. Assessments are designed specifically to assess the mastery of each competency; thus students either pass or fail following assessment.

A degree is awarded when all 30 competencies specified for a degree are successfully achieved. Although there is not a simple one-to-one match between competencies and courses, students could in theory complete a bachelor's degree in two and a half years. In essence, students pay a fixed rate per year but can take as many courses as they can manage, provided they complete at least 12 each year.

Students with associate degrees from other institutions may transfer in and receive credit for competencies covered in general education courses, and for other specific competencies that are related to their WGU program.

## **Courses and programs**

Courses are based entirely on external online materials. In-house subject matter experts select existing online curriculum from third parties and/or resources such as e-textbooks through contracts with publishers. Increasingly open educational resources are used. WGU does not use an LMS but a specially designed portal for each course. E-textbooks are offered to students without extra cost, through contracts between WGU and the publishers.

Currently degrees at both bachelor's and master's levels are offered in four areas: education, business, Information technology, and health. Courses are pre-determined for the student with no electives.

Students who already possess competencies may accelerate through their program in two ways: transferring in credits from a previous associate degree in appropriate areas (e.g. general education, writing); or by taking exams when they feel they are ready.

## **Mentoring**

WGU currently employs approximately 750 faculty who act as mentors. There are two kinds of mentors: Student Mentors and Course Mentors. Student Mentors are full-time WGU staff with qualifications within the subject domain, usually at a master's level. As the main contacts for the students, they are in at least bi-weekly telephone contact, depending on the needs of the student in working through their courses. Student Mentors, each responsible for about 85 students, are pro-active, calling students regularly to maintain contact. Students start with a Student Mentor on their first day and stay with them until graduation. Student Mentors assist students in determining and maintaining an appropriate pace of study and step in with help when students are struggling.

Course Mentors are more highly-qualified, usually with a doctorate, and deal with academic questions the student mentors cannot handle. Course Mentors are available to from 200 to 400 students at a time, depending on the subject requirement.

Students have unlimited access to both Student and Course Mentors, with mentors expected to respond to student calls within one business day. Mentors are full-time but work flexible hours, usually from home, handling a total of 250,000 calls a month. They are paid \$40,000-\$50,000 a year and receive extensive training in mentoring.

## **Assessment**

WGU uses written papers, portfolios, projects, observed student performance, and computer-marked assignments as appropriate, for assessment linked to detailed rubrics. Assessments are submitted online and, if they require human evaluation, qualified graders (subject matter experts trained by WGU in assessment) are randomly assigned to mark work on a pass/fail basis. If students fail, the graders provide feedback on the areas where

competency was not demonstrated. Students may resubmit if desired. Students will take both formative (pre-assessment) and summative (proctored) exams. WGU is increasingly using online proctoring, enabling students to take an exam at home under video supervision, using facial recognition technology to ensure that the registered student is taking the exam. In areas such as teaching and health, student performance or practice is assessed in situ by professionals (teachers, nurses).

## **Accreditation**

WGU degrees are recognized by the four regional accreditation boards that cover most of the U.S. geographically, by the departments of education in all 50 states, and by the U.S. government. WGU has permission to deliver online programs within the state from every state. It also meets the federal Department of Education's requirements for federal student aid, as it is accepted that each student is taking the equivalent of a full annual load of credit courses. As well, the degrees are also accredited by the relevant professional accrediting agencies in health, education, business, and IT.

## **The business model**

The university was launched in 1997 with a modest investment of \$100,000 from each of the 19 states, plus funding from the federal government and grants from corporations and private foundations. As a result, it grew slowly in the first years, but after roughly 10 years it became fully self-financing from student fees alone.

Students pay a fee slightly below \$6,000 per annum, in two six monthly instalments.

What follows is a summary of these developments in the form of a table which looks at three questions:

**What is a student at WGU able to do?**  
**Why is this good for students?**  
**and**  
**How does WGU make it happen?**

A WGU student is able to..	Why this is good for students	How WGU makes this happen
<p><b>Choose a job-related program</b>            Before admission, counsellors advise the student on an appropriate study track to meet pre-defined competencies required in the workforce</p>	<p>Students can build on appropriate prior knowledge/ work experience to customize a program that takes account of their specific needs.</p>	<p>Councils for each degree program specify required competencies and WGU builds 'courses' (a specified curriculum) around these competencies for students to follow.</p> <p>There are no electives.</p>
<p><b>Work at their own pace</b>            Students take a minimum of 12 courses over a 12 month period, but within that limit they can work at their individual pace, guided by a student mentor who helps keep students on the agreed schedule.</p> <p>Where students already have competencies, they can take the assessment at any time.</p>	<p>Students with competencies already developed through previous study or work experience can accelerate the speed to graduation, while demonstrating they have reached all the specified requirements for a degree.</p> <p>The requirement to complete 12 courses a year keeps the student moving at a reasonable pace.</p>	<p>Students work individually, not in groups.</p> <p>Students have a student mentor who provides guidance, support, and motivation to keep them on schedule.</p> <p>Course materials are tightly linked to pre-specified competencies, making it clear what students must study.</p>

A WGU student is able to..	Why this is good for students	How WGU makes this happen
<p><b>Access all learning materials and student services online, from home or work, at any time</b>  Recruitment, enrollment counselling, admission, mentoring, and assessment are all done either online or by telephone with calls usually initiated by mentors and paid for by WGU.</p>	<p>Enables students (and mentors) to combine work, family, and study according to their own schedules.</p> <p>On-demand access to academic and personal support.</p> <p>Mentors trained in providing student support.</p> <p>Students get exam results within three days and can start a new course at any time.</p> <p>Students can take program from anywhere in the country</p>	<p>WGU uses online search engines and 'word of mouth' from students and alumni to recruit students.</p> <p>All potential students have a phone meeting with an enrollment counsellor.</p> <p>All learning materials and student activities are available online.</p> <p>Contracts with publishers enable access to e-textbooks at no additional cost to students.</p> <p>All assignments are submitted and graded online</p> <p>Sophisticated use of technology for student services and course delivery</p>
<p><b>Afford their studies</b>  Students pay a total of \$6,000 a year tuition fees in two instalments.</p>	<p>Most students qualify for federal and state financial aid wherever they reside, which is essential for many students who have below average incomes</p> <p>No additional fees for textbooks or other study materials</p> <p>No travel or commuting costs</p>	<p>By linking competencies to courses, and requiring a minimum of 12 courses to be completed within 12 months, WGU meets federal and state requirements for full financial aid for registered students.</p> <p>WGU has worked hard to get full regional accreditation and permission to deliver programs in each state</p>

A WGU student is able to..	Why this is good for students	How WGU makes this happen
<p><b>Improve their career prospects</b></p>	<p>Two-thirds of graduates received a raise, promotion, new position, or new job responsibility as a direct result of graduating from WGU, according to an independent survey of graduates and employers in 2009</p>	<p>Close working relationship with employers who participate in defining competencies</p> <p>Formal corporate/employer partnerships that provide internships and jobs following graduation</p>

## The Seven Key Enabling Factors

In exploring with the senior leadership and key operational staff of WGU why these developments have occurred, we identified these factors:

- 1. Strong political leadership and co-operation.** The commitment of 19 state governors in the early years and the continued support of state governors while the WGU slowly grew over its initial 10 years were critical to its success and above all its sustainability.
- 2. Strong relationship with employers.** From the beginning, major U.S. corporations and employers, such as health services and state school systems, have been heavily involved through the identification of key competencies and the provision of support for students.
- 3. Economies of scale.** Although it took approximately 10 years, WGU has now reached the size where it can cover all costs through student fees.
- 4. Focus on teaching.** WGU does no academic research. The mentoring system provides highly individualized learner support. It has also reaped the benefits of choosing the 'low-hanging fruit' in terms of the limited degree programs it offers for which there is high student and employer demand.
- 5. No tenured faculty.** Although termed 'faculty', full-time academic staff (a small number of subject matter experts, and the mentors) work flexible hours. mostly from home, and do not conduct research or have other academic privileges of university tenured faculty.
- 6. Use of third party learning materials.** WGU does not have the high cost of developing learning materials from scratch
- 7. Technology.** Online learning has enabled WGU to recruit and deliver to students in every state in the U.S. The re-use of existing digital materials has reduced costs. Business intelligence tools have enabled WGU's staff to use metrics to drive decision-making. Student administrative systems are entirely digitalized. Mentors make 250,000 telephone calls a month to students. Assessment is heavily computerized.

These seven enablers have provided the base from which WGU is growing into a major national online provider of graduates with skills and competencies demanded by employers. WGU predicts that it will have more than 100,000 students and 50,000 graduates within five years.

These materials are based on the October 2012 visit to WGU's offices in Salt Lake City where extensive briefings, demonstrations, and interviews took place which included the senior leadership and key operational staff:

- Dr. Sally Johnstone, Vice-President, Academic Development
- Dr Kelli Foster, Associate Provost, Assessment
- Dr Chris Mallett, Associate Provost, Mentoring
- Dr Larry Banks, Associate Provost, Program Development
- Jan Jones-Schenk, National Director, Health Sciences
- Dr Stacey Johnson, Associate Provost, Student Services
- Darin Hobbs, Registrar
- Jason Levin, Vice-President, Institutional Research
- Lindajean Western, VP Marketing and Enrollment