GAME CHANGERS

EDUCATION and INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES

Edited by **DIANA G. OBLINGER**

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Game Changers: Education and Information Technologies

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FROM THE EDITOR

I would like to thank the many people who made this book possible, particularly Gregory Dobbin for managing the project and Karen Mateer for her research.

—Diana G. Oblinger

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Western Governors University

Robert W. Mendenhall

Background

THE INITIAL CONCEPT for Western Governors University (WGU) was developed at a Western Governors Association meeting in 1995. At that time, the governors knew that higher education was at a tipping point and that a nonprofit, flexible, and scalable solution was required to meet the needs of the states. The governors recognized that many college graduates had skills that were unreliable and insufficient to meet the future needs for a highly skilled workforce. Traditionally, underserved students who are minority, rural, low income, or the first generation in their family to attend college struggle to navigate complex higher education and financial aid systems. Access, retention, and graduation rates are a concern for students from these populations, as the traditional higher education system tends to overlook their unique needs.

The governors also felt that the credit hour was not sufficiently measuring what graduates know and can do, and that their new university would have to be competency-based to measure those skills. WGU would also need to increase access for students by being accessible regardless of geographic location and by providing more value at a lower cost than public universities.

- The governors particularly had in mind students in the rural West who were not within driving distance of a college or university and working adults whose schedules did not fit in with classes offered at traditional institutions.
- The lower cost would not only benefit students but also states, as universities rely heavily upon state appropriations to fund higher education.

- The university would also take advantage of the Internet and new technologies to serve large numbers of students from a distance and at a low cost.

The concept for WGU was championed by Republican Utah governor Michael Leavitt and Democratic Colorado governor Roy Romer—a collaboration that reached across party lines. It officially launched in 1997 and was founded by the nineteen governors whose respective states contributed $100,000 each to fund the start-up university. WGU was a public-private partnership; in addition to state contributions, the federal government and corporate partners supported its creation. The result was that for the cost of one new building on a single campus, the states now shared a new university accessible to students across the nation.

The founding governors created WGU as a resource for the states, and as such, the university offers bachelors' and masters' degrees in such key workforce areas as teacher education, information technology, business, and the health professions (including nursing). The university fills an important niche in higher education today by serving a nontraditional student population. The average age of its students is thirty-six, most work full time, and approximately 75 percent fall within an underserved demographic (e.g., low income, minority status, first generation in family to attend college, and students from rural areas). Over 90 percent of students enter with transfer credits—many come to WGU having not been successful at another institution yet still wanting to pursue their dream of a college degree.

Since receiving regional accreditation in early 2003, the university has grown from 500 students to over 30,000, and continues to grow at 30 percent annually. WGU is the only regionally and nationally accredited nonprofit university in the country granting online, competency-based degrees to students in all fifty states. The university is particularly attractive to working adults who already have some competencies, either from prior education or work experience, and who don't have the time to attend class at traditional times in a brick-and-mortar institution.

Although created by governors, WGU does not receive state funding but operates as a private nonprofit university that sustains itself on per-student tuition of approximately $6,000 for a twelve-month year. Its tuition last increased in 2008 by $100 per six-month term, which is especially remarkable considering public state institutions have increased tuition by an average of 5.6 percent per year from 2000 through 2010. The average time to graduate for a student is thirty months for a bachelor's degree, compared to a sixty-month average for other institutions. This time-to-graduate result is not achieved by compromising

education standards—students must receive the equivalent of a B grade in each assessment in order to graduate (rather than by achieving an average measure).

A University Designed with Technology in Mind

Western Governors University was designed using technology to provide education that is accessible, flexible, and affordable without compromising quality. The founding governors knew that technology must take a transformational role in education in order to change the way we measure learning, expand the notion of how learning happens, and make possible learning that can take place anytime, anywhere.

Technology has changed the productivity of every industry except education. In fact, in education today technology is most often an add-on cost and not used to change or improve teaching and learning. Even with the improvements in online-learning platforms and resources, the majority of online education is classroom education delivered over a wire at a distance. There is still a professor who teaches a class of 20–30 students and uses a syllabus and textbooks to deliver information, and every course requires a certain number of hours for a predetermined length of time (a term or semester). In this model, technology is not being used to improve the student experience or to innovate beyond the traditional model of classroom education. A recent aggregate Department of Education study of online learning vs. classroom learning found that online was just as "good" as classroom education—because in most cases, they are still the same thing.[1] Whereas technology has improved every other industry, in education it has been used to make things "just as good as" education prior to technological advancements.

WGU utilizes technology to transform the way we educate—to improve the quality of education, drive the cost down, and allow for asynchronous learning. With past technologies, there were not efficient ways to increase productivity while effectively delivering education and measuring learning outcomes. With its creation, the governors saw an opportunity to utilize new technologies to bring this new education model to life—and they recognized that the only way to individualize instruction is through the use of technology so that content is available when students need it and they are able to make progress independent of a set time and place, thus truly enabling competency-based learning. The result is that the university is cost efficient (costing about $6,000 per 12-month-year in tuition, at no cost to the states) and, since the university is competency-based, productivity is increased as a result of technology enabling the measurement of learning rather than time.

Technology at WGU is used to teach students in an independent learning environment, using third-party courseware and learning materials. Technology allows the university to shift the use of labor by having the technology deliver instruction, changing the faculty role to that of a mentor who guides the student rather than delivering content. Faculty use technology to support learning communities, facilitate discussions, work with students one-on-one, and determine where time is best spent in group chats and outreach. The shift provides each student with individualized help and support.

The university does not develop or teach any of its own courses; instead, faculty identify the best existing resources, and WGU acquires the right to use them with its students. These courses include self-diagnostic tools to determine areas of competency, readings, videos, guided tutorials, interactive exercises, and other optional learning tools. Self-diagnostic tools, or "preassessments," are used at the beginning of each course for students to measure their knowledge. The preassessment then identifies areas of strength and weakness for the student, and from there an individualized study plan is developed for the student to fulfill all competencies before taking the assessment.

Online learning resources that can be accessed anytime and anywhere aid students in learning new material. They can engage specific coursework as needed based upon competency, then take the assessment when they have gained the required knowledge and skills for the course. Following completion of self-paced learning modules, students demonstrate mastery of the material by taking assessments. These may be computer-based objective exams, essays, portfolios, or other projects that measure learning outcomes. Tests are administered at a distance through monitored online exams.

Technology further improves internal productivity by automating processes where possible and speeding up the response time on everything from e-mail communication to grading assessments. Technology enables WGU to produce a report every month on every student that monitors progress through each course, measuring satisfactory academic progress and whether or not the student is on track to graduate on time. Student mentors and course mentors use these reports to evaluate student progress and guide their coaching for the student. Course mentors are also able to see where students are commonly struggling with a concept in a course. Faculty can measure the engagement and effectiveness of learning tools and materials, constantly responding to student needs. Technology also helps the university's Office of Institutional Research to track and evaluate its programs, faculty, courses, and new initiatives on an ongoing basis. WGU uses Business Intelligence software to run analytics to determine what is working well within the model and what practices need to be adjusted to better serve students.

Technology brings new ways to measure and credential learning and shifts the emphasis to learner-centric education over the previous faculty-centric model. Learning now happens in a variety of different ways, with information at our fingertips. The objectives for educators now become facilitating learning, creating a supportive environment for the learner, and credentialing what has been learned. WGU uses assessments to measure progress and student knowledge required for each competency.

A New Model for Higher Education

Competency-Based Education

See NBC Nightly News Video:
http://www.wgu.edu/wgu/nbc_news

Traditional higher education bases student learning on how many hours have been spent in the classroom (reinforced by federal financial aid regulations), not necessarily on how much a student has learned. Students can pass some classes with a D or a C in a subject, hardly indicative of mastery. It doesn't matter whether or not a student already knows the material; he or she must still sit through class with everyone else. Additionally, the model doesn't account for the struggling student who can't keep up with the rest of the class and who may need more time to learn and master specific concepts. Moreover, the variability of each course within the same department at the same institution means that two graduates from the same program will not have equal levels of knowledge or competence. An employer hiring the two graduates may find that the level of competency is significantly different due to the different experiences of the students.

Competency-based education is a relatively new approach to higher education and challenges the notion that time spent in a classroom equates to learning. Competency-based education is predicated on two things known about adult learners:

- Students come to higher education knowing different things as a result of their different backgrounds and life experiences.
- They learn at different rates—in fact, each individual learns different subjects at different rates.

At WGU, students demonstrate that they have all of the competencies required for their degree by passing a series of assessments that have been carefully developed to measure competency in each area. The university does

not award grades but rather a "Pass" on each assessment once competency has been shown. A "Pass" score is equivalent to or better than a B grade. Additionally, students can take their assessments at any time they are confident they can demonstrate the level of knowledge and skills required. With this model, students advance by demonstrating mastery of competencies instead of earning credit hours, which allows them to move quickly through material they already know and focus on new learning—ideal for adult learners with competencies, as many have family and work responsibilities (seventy percent of WGU students work full time). If a student doesn't have prior knowledge, he or she is provided with learning resources, mentors, and learning communities to support learning new material. Learning communities are a virtual community wherein students can interact with course mentors and peers to discuss content and post questions.

The competencies at WGU are defined by a council in each college that is made up of industry professionals and leaders in the field. Councils define competencies based upon what graduates are expected to know in the workplace and as professionals in the chosen career. This ensures that students are receiving degrees that are relevant to workforce needs and industry requirements. In addition to degree-specific competencies, students are expected to demonstrate competency in the liberal arts, including critical thinking, writing and communications, and basic math skills, depending on their degree programs.

Changing the Faculty Role

One of the greatest costs at traditional institutions is funding for the research conducted by university faculty. WGU is a student-centric university, not a research institution, and thus it places the focus on student learning and success. The university's model works well for the students as well as for the faculty. WGU employs full-time faculty as mentors and content experts who work with students one-on-one to offer advising, guidance, motivation, and subject-specific help. Additionally, the faculty role is disaggregated, so different people perform different roles: advising, content help (professor), grading, and course development.

Because the technology primarily delivers instruction to students, the role of the instructor at WGU is unique—faculty time is freed up to help where it is needed (e.g., office hours) instead of being used to deliver content. This model is effective and scalable to many students because of the breakout of educator responsibilities outlined in Table 1.

The disaggregation of the faculty role enables the university to serve a much larger number of students at a lower cost. For example, a writing course

Table 1. **Educator Responsibilities at WGU**

Faculty Role	Alternative Approach at WGU
Delivery of instruction	Technology delivers instruction.
Course design	WGU does not create its own courses or content but rather uses third-party curriculum.
Selecting learning materials	Specialized role where faculty search and select the best online learning resources for each assessment.
Assessment design	WGU's Assessment Department meets with councils in each college to determine competencies, then designs assessments to measure each competency.
Content help or office hours	Subject-specific mentors (called course mentors) are available for one-on-one and one-to-many sessions reviewing content with which students need more help than can be had through independent learning.
Mentoring	Student mentors communicate regularly with students to counsel, advise, coach, organize, and motivate remotely.
Grading	Part-time faculty are hired only to grade student assessments and are trained to grade based upon a specific rubric.

at a public university may cap at one hundred students, at which point another professor is hired. This professor then creates his or her own version of the course—duplicating work—and then serves his or her one hundred students. Perhaps there is the assistance of a graduate student or two to help in grading papers, but otherwise growth is limited to the capacity of what one individual can do. At WGU, the best learning resources are selected and used across the course to deliver the content, the course is designed once, assessments are designed once, and all students have a consistent experience in each assessment. Work is not duplicated in this model. Grading is done from an objective point of view and follows a rubric; passes are awarded to work that is at least a B level. One course mentor can help many students as they progress through an assessment, and all of this person's time is dedicated to personal help with students rather than administrative work or lectures.

Another advantage to disaggregating faculty roles is that each specialist is the best at what he or she does. This means that students aren't getting an instructor who is a great lecturer, average at designing tests, and never available

for office hours. Rather, the student is getting a dedicated expert in each area of faculty responsibilities. This separation of roles creates a consistent environment in which objectivity is key; grades are not influenced by student lobbying, mentors/teachers inflating grades, favoritism, or teacher evaluations. Objectivity, learning objectives, competency, consistency, and quality are central to the success of each specialized faculty role.

A unique faculty role that supports the success of its students is mentoring—student mentors and course mentors.

- Student mentors generally hold a master's degree, often in the subject area they advise, and communicate regularly with students. Student mentors help students determine the appropriate place to begin and the appropriate path on which to proceed with their learning while providing support for each student's unique learning needs, following an appropriate, individualized pace, whether fast or slow. The student mentors start with a student the day he or she begins a program and stays with him/her through graduation.
- Course mentors typically have a doctorate degree in their subject area and are available to students for content-specific help and outreach as needed. Students work with different course mentors for each subject area.

The mentoring model is very important to WGU's student-retention rates, as the university currently has a one-year retention rate of 76 percent.

This connection with the mentor can help students avoid feeling as though they are not engaged or as involved in their education as they would be at a traditional institution. As mentors and students work through challenges and celebrate successes together, deep friendships are often formed. The National Study of Student Engagement (NSSE) polls students at traditional and online universities nationwide to gauge student involvement and gather student opinions of the support provided by their institutions. WGU scores compare well to peers and all other universities for questions about support and mentor interaction (see Table 2).

Third-Party Courses

WGU does not create its own learning content and instead looks to third-party resources that utilize technology to deliver quality instruction. The learning resources are chosen by faculty based upon content, ease of use, alignment of competencies, and quality of delivery. The university's courses utilize open-education resources, materials from publishers, and materials

Table 2. **Measures of Support and Mentor Interaction**

Measure	Component	WGU	Private Nonprofit Universities	NSSE 2011
Student–Faculty Interaction	First Year	39.3%	34.4%	34.8%
	Senior	37.7%	41.8%	42.8%
Supportive Campus Environment	First Year	71.2%	63.4%	63.8%
	Senior	67.6%	60.0%+	60.1%
Quality of Academic Advising*	First Year	3.64	3.11	3.13
	Senior	3.64	2.96	2.98
Rating of Entire Educational Experience*	First Year	3.62	3.25	3.28
	Senior	3.58	3.23	3.27

*Mean scores on a four-point scale.

from other colleges and universities, which can sometimes pose a challenge, as many publishers, textbook companies, and the market in general can be behind the curve of online learning. However, recent partnerships have proven to be effective and promising. Ultimately, the goal is to have just one learning resource for each course that can be a diagnostic tool for competency and guide students through areas where they lack competency, and that is interactive, engaging, and can be used on multiple devices.

By employing the best third-party resources on the market, WGU is not using internal resources to create its own content for each course. Experts have developed excellent learning resources at other institutions, and learning providers have developed self-paced learning modules that the university utilizes. This ensures consistency for students across the course and across the university, and faculty time is consequently spent in direct contact with students. Faculty are, to an extent, managing the student experience in each course by determining the learning resources and texts to be used to gain competency.

Another recent improvement at WGU has been its decision to offer all textbooks as e-books free of charge to its students. In doing this, the university hopes to further assist students in effectively managing their time and saving money. If students can immediately access e-books for free, they are able to quickly engage with material in each course rather than waiting for financial aid funds to be disbursed and books to arrive.

Delivery and Grading of Assessments

WGU uses exams, papers, portfolios, projects, and performance assessments to determine a student's competency. A student must demonstrate mastery of all competencies through a series of assessments. Performance assessments require written work or a project and are described within a website that each student accesses to receive assessment directions and the grading rubric, and then creates, edits, and submits the work to receive grading feedback. The student officially submits the performance assessment for grading, it goes into a queue, and the next available grader picks up the assessment to evaluate based upon the rubric.

Graders have at least a master's degree and expertise in the area they are grading and also undergo rigorous training and ongoing quality-assurance checks on their work to ensure that students are being graded fairly and consistently based upon the rubrics. Grading usually takes three or four days; once the assessment has been released to students, they are able to see their scores. At that time, they can see if they have passed the assessment based upon the rubric, or if they need to revisit some areas to gain competency and then be reassessed. Students also typically meet with a course mentor at this time to discuss their weaknesses and where they need to spend more time on the material.

Objective assessments are proctored exams, which are taken after students have either passed a low-stakes preassessment to determine their level of competency or have worked their way through the learning resources to gain competency. The delivery of exams at WGU has evolved over the years. In the past, students took proctored exams at approved testing sites such as a library or nearby college-testing center, and the university covered the testing fees. With high-speed Internet accessible across the country, WGU now administers the majority of exams through web-based proctoring provided by a third-party company. Upon matriculation, students are sent a free webcam that they will use to take their exams. Exams can be taken at home, but must take place in a room where no one else is present and where there are no interruptions. Facial recognition software ensures that the correct student is taking the exam, and the proctoring service monitors the test taker and immediately stops the exam if there is a disturbance or it appears the student is not following test-taking guidelines.

Finally, WGU uses industry-specific performance assessments to ensure quality. In the Teachers College, students are required to complete observations and student teaching for a set period of time. During the student teaching experience, students are observed by a clinical supervisor, principal, and host teacher and complete a series of hands-on assessments to gain

competencies needed to teach in the classroom. WGU nursing students are required to demonstrate competency through simulations and clinical hours. Information technology students graduate not only with a bachelor's degree from WGU, but also with 6–7 industry certifications they've earned as part of their degree program.

WGU Results

Access

See WGU Overview video:
http://www.wgu.edu/wgu/achieve_more_video

WGU's model is scalable and can handle rapid growth, as has been shown by continuous growth of over 30 percent in the past several years. Additionally, its programs in high-need areas such as teaching and nursing afford opportunities to qualified candidates who may not have been able to get placed in a certain class due to enrollment caps. Technology expands access to higher education for students who otherwise would not have an option to earn a degree (rural and/or low-income students or working adults, for instance). Because the university is completely online (except for clinical hours and student teaching), students are able to access it anytime, anywhere. With technology able to deliver content whenever and wherever students need it, access is expanded to include everyone, and the focus shifts to learning rather than trying to figure out how to fit classes into everyday life.

Affordability

WGU has always had a focus on affordability and costs approximately $6,000 per year for most programs. WGU's model is affordable to the student and operates at no cost to the state. As it grows, the institution reinvests funds into updating degree programs and improving the student experience. And as it offers more services to its students, such as free counseling or e-books (both added in 2010), leadership works hard to ensure that the cost is not passed on to the students. The university also makes a point of not increasing its tuition as part of business as usual each year.

WGU's emphasis on affordability is particularly important because tuition costs have been rising steadily for the past two decades and have outpaced even the price of gas and health care in the United States. A 2008 College Board study reports that the average cost of attending a public school

increased 47 percent between 2000 and 2007. Students affected by sticker shock tend to delay, stop out, or give up college-degree aspirations, and working adult students find it difficult to dedicate time and money to their degrees in addition to personal commitments. WGU's affordable model is another option for students who have been priced out of the public system, and it also increases accessibility to low-income students who may not otherwise be able to attend college. Further, the university offers federal financial aid to eligible students; in some states, students are able to access state financial-aid funds as well.

As one WGU graduate said in his speech, "We [students] shouldn't have to mortgage our futures to pay for the educational opportunities of today." Because of rising tuition costs, the middle class today is being priced out of higher education, which is especially troubling because more jobs require postsecondary education. In fact, a 2010 report projects that 63 percent of all jobs in 2018 will require some postsecondary education, and that at the current rate of graduate output, the nation will fall 3 million workers short of this need.[2]

Productivity for the Student and University

The competency-based model of WGU enables students to be more productive with the time they have set aside for earning a degree. And, because time is money to many students, the university's competency-based model also has an advantage financially. Students are charged a one-time fee per six-month term (approximately $3,000) for all the education a student wishes to take during that time. Students aren't charged for three credits to pass an assessment; rather, they are charged for a six-month term. Whatever the student can complete beyond the full-time student load is still the same cost. It is to students' advantage to accelerate their degree program as their learning pace and level of competency allow. As a result of its flexible model, the average time to graduate with a bachelor's degree is thirty months, or about two and a half years. Some students will graduate relatively quickly, while others will take more time.

WGU uses technology not just to increase productivity for student learning, but also to automate functions within the university to make it more productive. The university has automated financial aid services, scheduling tools for assessments, and scheduling for course-mentor appointments. Every operation that can be automated allows faculty and student-support services to spend more time directly working with students. Streamlined processes allowed by technology free up students to spend more time on their studies.

Student Metrics

WGU's Office of Institutional Research tracks and evaluates student metrics throughout a student's degree program. These institutional measures of student success are used to help students graduate, as well as to get their degree in a timely manner. Key performance indicators include whether or not students are on track for on-time graduation (completing at least twelve competency units per term for undergraduates and eight competency units for graduates), student satisfaction, student retention, and graduation. These key performance indicators help the university's leadership and faculty determine what program areas need improvement, which students need more support, and where its services can be improved to better serve student needs. Each month a report is generated for every student regarding his or her progress, and student and course mentors also receive the list with information on their students. These reports are used by mentors to keep students on track, identify learning challenges, and track engagement. Additionally, learner analytics are used to monitor whether students are using the learning materials, for how long, and to check for understanding after engagement. Faculty use this information to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of the university's third-party resources, as well as alignment with its competencies.

In addition to tracking key performance indicators, WGU also tracks student pass and completion rates for assessments; student feedback on learning resources; and trends in enrollment, retention, and attrition. It also works with third-party vendors to conduct external surveys. The university is able to quickly identify areas needing improvement because of its metrics and focus on student success. It can also track the effectiveness of changes made and make decisions based upon a performance record rather than just a qualitative analysis.

Quality

A significant part of the university's mission is to increase access and success for students who may not otherwise be able to earn their college degree due to financial or time constraints or geographic location. However, access and success matter only if students are also receiving a high-quality education that has value in the marketplace. The quality of a WGU degree has been a priority since the university's inception. Its model of defining competencies, designing and administering assessments, and selecting learning resources ensures that students receive a rigorous, high-quality education with relevant marketplace skills and knowledge in their degree area.

The university's accreditation status is indicative of the quality of a WGU degree. Western Governors University is nationally accredited by the Distance Education and Training Council (DETC) and regionally accredited by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU). Additionally, the university's Teachers College is the first exclusively online university to receive accreditation for its degree programs that lead to teacher licensure from the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). The university's nursing degree programs are accredited by the Commission for Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE), and the Health Informatics program is accredited by the Commission on Accreditation for Health Informatics and Information Management Education (CAHIIM). Finally, the university's Information Security and Assurance program has been certified by the National Security Agency's Information Assurance Courseware Evaluation (IACE) program.

Of course, success is measured not only by the number of students attending WGU, earning their degree, and graduating, but by being successful in a job after graduation. To further measure the satisfaction of its graduates and employers, the university received a grant from Lumina Foundation in 2009 to conduct external surveys of graduates and employers of WGU graduates. Key findings are as follows:

Graduates

- WGU alumni across all degree areas are significantly more likely (78 percent said very or extremely likely) than other graduates (60 percent) to attend their alma mater again if given the chance. Additionally, 80 percent overall would be very likely (56 percent extremely likely) to recommend WGU to others; this compares to 62 percent and 31 percent, respectively, from the nationwide sample.
- Seventy percent of WGU graduates rated as excellent or very good their preparation for their chosen field, versus 57 percent of the other alumni.
- Sixty-six percent received a raise, promotion, new position, or new job responsibility as a result of their WGU education. Those who received pay increases reported an average increase of 63 percent, with a median increase of 25 percent.
- Ninety percent of WGU alumni provide positive responses as to how their WGU experience has impacted their success, compared to 75 percent of other alumni.
- Nearly half of WGU alumni say they were more prepared than other graduates for work and rate their alma mater higher than the other graduates do in preparing them.

- Graduates of WGU undergraduate programs are significantly more inclined to continue their education than graduates of other institutions. Nearly half of all WGU graduates are extremely or very likely to pursue education in the future.

Employers

- Most of the employers of WGU graduates interviewed say their personal positive experiences with graduates have impacted their perceptions of WGU for the better; all agreed that they are very satisfied with performance of WGU graduates.
- Two-thirds of those interviewed feel half or more of the skills employees have could be attributed to their WGU education.
- WGU graduates have the skills employers deem most important to their field; one of the most frequently mentioned skills is "communication."
- Ninety-eight percent agree that WGU graduates have equal or superior "soft skills" compared to graduates of other colleges and universities.
- Of the employers interviewed, 90 percent said they are likely or extremely likely to hire another WGU graduate, and 84 percent would be very likely to recommend another to hire a WGU grad.
- Wide majorities of employers say that WGU's preparation for students (93 percent), academic excellence (88 percent), and contribution to the workforce (88 percent) are equal to or better than that of other colleges and universities.

Creating State Models

WGU was originally created by governors to be a resource to the states. Workforce needs require more and more citizens to earn a postsecondary degree, and access and opportunities need to be expanded. The first state to partner with WGU to create a state-branded WGU was Indiana in June 2010, supported by the leadership of Governor Mitch Daniels, who was dedicated to the creation and promotion of WGU Indiana to serve Indiana citizens. The new model of chartering a separate state-branded WGU was created with the expectation that it would expand higher education access in the state beyond what WGU would do without the new subsidiary institution, and it has. WGU Indiana has been so successful that is has been held up as an example to other states of what can be accomplished by promoting WGU within the state and particularly by creating a state-branded WGU.

WGU Indiana

See WGU Indiana video:
http://indiana.wgu.edu/about_WGU_indiana/video

Indiana's comparatively low college-attainment level was the primary motivation behind Indiana policy leaders creating WGU Indiana and for WGU to create the first state-branded university in Indiana. The state of Indiana ranks 42nd in the nation in the percentage of adults 25–64 years old who hold a bachelor's degree or higher; the state has over 700,000 residents with some college but no degree. Historically, Indiana's economy was dependent on a strong industrial and manufacturing base that provided good jobs for high school graduates. As the state has transitioned from an industrial to a knowledge-based economy, increasing educational attainment is essential for the state to ensure a competitive workforce.

Creating a state-branded university offers an opportunity to increase awareness and credibility of a new model of postsecondary education that is more effective and efficient for nontraditional students. WGU Indiana was created as a wholly owned subsidiary of WGU through a partnership between WGU and the state of Indiana via an executive order by Governor Daniels and an addendum to the original *memorandum of understanding (MOU)* creating Western Governors University. WGU Indiana was also supported by funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Lumina Foundation, and the Lilly Endowment.

The state endorsement of WGU (and in Indiana's case, the governor's endorsement) lends further credibility to it in the eyes of the students. Further, the new university is not meant to compete with existing state universities because it serves a different student population not being served by the state's current higher education offerings.

The state model has already proven successful in Indiana by increasing state enrollment in WGU for Indiana-based students by 400 percent in the first year. When WGU Indiana was first launched, Indiana students made up 1 percent of WGU's total population; after the creation of WGU Indiana, Indiana students represented 10 percent of all new enrollments for WGU. After just twelve months, the 2011 WGU Indiana graduates accounted for 10 percent of the overall growth (from 2010) in new bachelor's degrees produced by public universities in Indiana. If the number of WGU Indiana graduates grows at its current rate, it will account for over half the growth in new bachelor's degrees in three years without any direct funding from the state.

WGU Indiana has had great reach across the state and now has students enrolled from ninety out of the ninety-two counties. At the August

2011 graduation ceremony, 63 percent of the WGU Indiana graduates were first-generation college students. WGU Indiana is clearly fulfilling a need in the state and providing education to those who would otherwise not have access to higher education opportunities.

WGU Washington

In early 2011, Senator Jim Kastama of Washington State introduced a bill to the legislature that would create WGU Washington. The senator recognized the success of WGU Indiana and he saw that it would fill a unique niche in the family of educational opportunities offered by Washington. Washington's state university system was already reaching capacity for community college graduates transferring to bachelor's degree programs, which often delays community college graduates from beginning their bachelor's programs. Many other community college graduates cannot attend state universities because they work full time and are unable to arrange their schedules to attend classes. The university also fits perfectly with Washington's community college system by allowing students to seamlessly transfer associate's degrees earned at a community college to a bachelor's degree program at WGU.

In April 2011, HB 1822 created WGU Washington and recognized it as part of the state system of higher education. Instead of being created by a governor's executive order as Indiana had done, WGU Washington was created by the legislature, and the bill was signed by Governor Christine Gregoire. The Higher Education Coordinating Board in Washington also played a key role in supporting the creation of WGU Washington and expressing the need for another higher education option in the state, particularly for community college transfer students. WGU Washington enrolled its first cohort of students in July 2011, and the response in the state has been positive thus far.

WGU Texas

Not long after the establishment of WGU Washington, WGU Texas was announced in August 2011 by Governor Rick Perry. WGU Texas was created through an executive order by Governor Perry and an addendum to the original MOU creating WGU Texas (which had been signed by then Governor George W. Bush). WGU Texas will offer a flexible and affordable higher education option for the citizens of Texas, particularly for low-income and minority students in the state. WGU Texas officially launched in fall 2011.

Conclusion

Western Governors University was implemented with the mission to utilize technology to develop a new competency-based model in higher education, to make higher education more affordable while improving educational quality, and to expand access to populations that are traditionally underserved by higher education. WGU's model—unique because of its competency-based model, disaggregated faculty roles, the student-centric culture that adapts quickly to emerging student and industry needs, and the fact that it does not develop its own courses—increases accessibility to students through its flexibility and affordable cost, and the mentoring model tailors academic support to each student. In this way, it serves as a valuable resource to students as well as to states in need of an educated workforce equipped with those skills deemed essential in the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. M. Shachar and Y. Neumann, "Twenty Years of Research on the Academic Performance Differences between Traditional and Distance Learning: Summative Meta-Analysis and Trend Examination," MERLOT *Journal of Online Learning and Teaching* 6, no. 2 (2010): 318–34.
2. A. P. Carnevale, N. Smith, and J. Strohl, *Help Wanted: Projections of Jobs and Education Requirements through 2018* (The Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2010), retrieved from http://cew.georgetown.edu/jobs2018/.

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