

Western Governors University and Competency-Based Education

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INTRODUCTION

Western Governors University (WGU) was formally established in 1996 by the governors of 19 western states. From its inception it was committed to delivering all of its programs through distance technologies and to graduating its students only on the basis of their demonstrated competency. It is today the only regionally accredited university in the United States to award its degrees exclusively on this basis.

Developing the university and proving its viability, however, have not been easy. The enthusiasm surrounding its launching in 1996 rapidly gave way to the hard realities of establishing a new educational paradigm. Within five years, after accreditation seemed slow in coming and enrollments in the new university even slower, many in the higher education establishment wrote WGU off as a failed experiment. Some even breathed a sigh of relief that the claims of competency-based education could be written off. But eight years after its formal incorporation, WGU is very much alive. It has received national accreditation from the Distance Education and Training Council (2001) and unprecedented regional accreditation by four of the nation's regional accrediting associations.¹ No other institution in the history of American higher education has received multi-regional accreditation, and given the complexities of such reviews, WGU achieved that milestone in a remarkably short time. By January 2005 the university had an enrollment just over 3,200 students and was growing by more than 200 students a month.

WHY A NEW UNIVERSITY

The concerns that motivated 19 governors to sponsor a new university along radically different lines were national issues, not local ones. They were concerns

about broad public policy then, and if anything they have become more urgent since. Chief among the governor's concerns were these:

- That the rising cost of higher education combined with population growth in their states would out-run the money supply for more brick-and-mortar campus solutions.
- That their states' colleges and universities were producing graduates whose skills were uneven, unreliable, and insufficient to meet their future needs for a highly skilled workforce.
- That their states' higher education officials were unresponsive to their concerns about these matters.

In launching WGU, the governors saw distance delivery not only as a means of combating costs, but of expanding access. Indeed, issues of access intersected with all of their concerns. It was often prohibitively costly for remote students in the west to travel regularly to a campus, let alone to live there. Those students, often older and "nontraditional," were not well-served by traditional campus expectations and services. And poor and prohibitively costly service that locked out these students meant that their state economies could not benefit from their developed potential. In response to similar concerns about access from states, employers, and citizens across the country, distance learning has since seen explosive growth.

For the founding governors, distance learning was not merely the lifeline for students living in remote locations. They understood that it reflected a sea-change in Americans' fundamental attitudes toward and participation in higher education. Both remote students and those living on or near campuses who simply want to dissociate themselves from classrooms are redefining the higher education experience. Not since GIs returning to college after World War II have the demographics of American higher education been so transformed.

Already by the turn of this century, nearly 75% of all undergraduates were in some way nontraditional. More than 50% were financially independent and nearly 50% attended college part-time, while nearly 40% were over 25 years of age and worked full time, and more than a quarter had dependents (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2004). And finally, by the time these students earn their bachelor's degrees, at least 60% of them will have attended more than one institution (Business-Higher Education Forum, 2004). The western governors foresaw these trends and sought to design a university that would help to lead them.

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

American demographics can only accelerate the importance of distance learning in the future of our higher education system. For instance, when Social Security was established in the early 1930s, life expectancy was 61, and there were 16 workers for every retiree. By 2004 life expectancy had reached the upper seventies, there were only three workers for every retiree, and the U.S. economy was heading toward two workers per retiree. The consequences for higher education are significant. As the Business-Higher Education Forum (2004) observes:

The production of skilled workers from higher education is not adequate to meet the needs of the future. By 2020 the U.S. economy will require 12 million to 14 million more skilled workers than are being produced today. (p. 10)

There are only four ways to meet this need: import skilled workers from other nations; attract more Americans into the higher education system and train them more effectively than we have done historically; keep the Baby Boom generation working longer; and make younger people more productive in the workforce sooner. All four of these potential solutions will require distance learning in order to be successful, especially given the rapidity with which skills must be upgraded in a technological society. Only anytime, anyplace learning delivered in rich, multi-sensory formats on demand can have a chance to meet this need, because neither these students nor their employers will have the time, money, or patience to have them sit in classrooms while the clock ticks. Employers will instead

create educational enticements for young people to join their firms and older workers to remain with them, much like the military now offers. Workers at every level will engage in continuous learning, some of it degree related, some of it not. And the demands of time on all students at every age will make them want four things from their education providers, as Arthur Levine (2002) observes: "convenience, service, high quality, and low cost" (p. 4).

The weakness in this vision is the weakness of the current American educational system itself, and by extension its distance learning derivatives. It is precisely this weakness that the western governors sought to address by designing WGU as a competency-based institution, and the reasons it will address them are embedded in symptoms such as these:

- Comparisons with other developed nations consistently show that American secondary schools prepare students less well than those of other developed nations in at least three areas critical to our national future: mathematics, reading, and science. The most recent comparisons of 15-year-olds' performance rank the United States 19th in mathematics, 15th in reading, and 14th in science (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2001).
- When these students enter college, many of them are still unprepared to succeed. The California State University system reports, for instance, that more than half its incoming freshmen need remediation in English, mathematics, or both before being able to undertake college-level studies.
- Ironically, among continuing college students, the National Survey of Student Engagement reports that they can earn grades of B or better by spending only 10-15 hours a week on homework.
- And if the work is light, grade inflation rewards them anyway. It has become so ubiquitous on campuses across the country that the metrics of student performance are at risk of losing all credibility. Princeton University recently became one of the first institutions in the country (perhaps the first) to limit the proportion of As that can be given in courses. Dartmouth College recently acknowledged the problem, but has yet taken no steps to resolve it: The average GPA at Dartmouth in 1969 was 2.7; today it is 3.32. In 1987-1988, 37% of undergraduate grades were A or A+; by

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