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In 1997, in an unprecedented effort to resolve a cluster of practical problems that each of them faced, the governors of 19 western states formally launched the university that bears their name. By doing so they also threw down a gauntlet before the prevailing orthodoxies of American higher education. Not since Ernest Boyer, then-chancellor of the State University of New York, established Empire State College in 1971 has a new institution so challenged higher education's traditional practices.

Douglas Johnstone joined Western Governors University as provost and academic vice president in 1999 after a long history of involvement with nontraditional higher education—most notably at Goddard College in Vermont and at Empire State College in New York. He led WGU through accreditation with the Distance Education and Training Council in 2001 and then through multi-regional accreditation in 2003. The author retains the copyright for this article.

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COMPETENCY ALTERNATIVE

Western Governors University

BY DOUGLAS JOHNSTONE

Chief among the governors' concerns were these:

- That the rising cost of higher education combined with population growth in their states would outrun the money supply for more brick-and-mortar campuses;
- 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 the learning technologies that they believed could expand access by delivering quality instruction "any place, any time" were not being used systematically across the western region; and
- That their state systems of higher education were unresponsive to their concerns about these matters.

The governors intended their new university to be student-centered but market-oriented; independent but serving needs across the western region through the use of distance-learning technologies; networked—using the

teaching resources of other western institutions rather than developing and teaching its own courses—but separately accredited and degree-granting. Most important, it would be competency-based.

Course grades would not count. Neither would credit hours. The governors regarded the traditional credit-hour system as an inadequate means of measuring student learning, based as it is on units of time spent in class. Instead of awarding credits and grades, they wanted the new institution to define and validate competencies for every aspect of every degree, and they wanted students to be able to graduate only by passing the assessments associated with those competencies.

Today, eight years after its formal incorporation, Western Governors University (WGU) is delivering on its founders' vision. It received national accreditation from the Distance Education and Training Council in 2001 and unprecedented regional accreditation by

four of the nation's regional associations in 2003. These included the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Schools and Colleges, the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, and the Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges. No other institution in the history of American higher education has received multi-regional accreditation, and, given the complexities of the undertaking, WGU achieved that milestone in a remarkably short time.

At this writing, the University enrolls nearly 4,000 students and is currently adding about 2,000 students a year. It offers 38 degree and certificate programs leading to associate's, bachelor's, and master's degrees in the areas of business, information technology, and education. More than half of its current

enrollments are in programs related to the preparation and advancement of K-12 teachers, the result in part of nearly \$14 million in grants from the U.S. Department of Education to develop national, online, competency-based teacher-certification programs.

Admission is open to any high school graduate, with no minimum required GPA or test score requirements. But WGU's competency-based approach is not designed for students who lack the experience and self-discipline to succeed in its environment, and the university places major emphasis on informed self-selection.

Each applicant must have an in-depth discussion—and often several—with an enrollment counselor before being admitted, in order to ensure that candidates fully understand the WGU model and the time commitment it will require to succeed in it. All applicants take a required assessment of their language and math skills, and graduate applicants submit complete undergraduate transcripts before they can be admitted.

The average age of WGU students is 39. Two-thirds of them are women.

More than 70 percent of the students work full-time, 25 percent are persons of color, and they come from all 50 states and several foreign countries. Although the university has not been enrolling students long enough to track a full six-year cohort, one-year retention rates are currently averaging just over 73 percent. To date, more than 250 students have graduated from WGU, and nearly 90 percent indicate that they were satisfied or very satisfied with their university experience.

THE MODEL

WGU operates year-round, enrolling new students on the first of every month in six-month semesters. Students are expected to devote 15-to-20 hours a week to their studies, but they progress only by passing the series of competency assessments associated with their degrees. These take a variety of forms, but they always include a mixture of

testing centers, where they show picture identification. In addition, bachelor's and master's students complete a final capstone study (with an oral defense conducted by phone with a faculty committee) that demonstrates their overall integration of degree competencies.

In preparing for their assessments students use a variety of learning resources, selected in close consultation with their faculty mentors based on their learning needs, backgrounds, and current strengths and weaknesses. These may include distance courses available from other colleges and universities, commercially available modules and learning objects, and independent study. WGU contracts with the University of New Mexico for complete library services, and students use this online resource throughout their studies.

Students receive neither credits nor grades for the courses they take, nor for their WGU assessments, although

ASSESSMENT TYPES

- **Performance Assessments** contain multiple tasks such as scored assignments, projects, essays, and research papers. Performance Assessments contain detailed instructions and rubrics for completing each assigned task and are usually submitted via TaskStream, an online project-management and grading tool.
- **Objective Examinations** are designed to evaluate knowledge and skills in a subject area. Most objective exams include multiple-choice items, multiple-selection items, matching, short-answer, drag-and-drop, and point-and-click item types, as well as case studies and video-based items.
- **Essay Exams** are used to measure students' ability to integrate and apply concepts. Essays are scored by outside graders against competency-based rubrics established by the faculty.
- **Observations** are used to measure teacher certification candidates' abilities to perform the skills acquired during their WGU studies. These classroom observations occur during the demonstration teaching experience and are conducted and evaluated by a trained local clinical supervisor. ☺

objective examinations, essays, and performance tasks (see "Assessment Types" box).

Objective examinations are computer scored; others are evaluated by external graders using rubrics established by the university. Students are required to take their assessments at secure

all degrees are comparable in scope and depth to similar degrees at other institutions. The standard for passing assessments is performance equivalent to a grade of B or better in traditional systems, meaning that "*the student has been fully engaged with the learning materials and activities necessary to master the competencies, has demonstrated the skills needed to utilize the competencies, and has produced work that indicates command of the competencies*" (quoted from the Western Governors University official transcript).

WGU's administrative headquarters are located in Salt Lake City, Utah, and while some faculty work out of the local offices there, most are scattered across the country, from New Hampshire to Hawaii. Their backgrounds are in most ways typical of academics: most have doctorates earned at traditional institutions, some are in advanced stages of doctoral study, and a few have master's degrees and exceptional experience. Two things distinguish the faculty from their peers at traditional institutions: they are powerfully attracted to competency-based education, and they welcome the chance to guide students' development from the beginning to the end of their degree programs.

WGU faculty serve primarily as *mentors* for their students, and nearly all of them work for the university full time. Specially trained adjunct faculty, usually graduates of WGU's master's programs, introduce students to the competency model and serve as seminar facilitators for the introductory (and only required) course, "Education With-

out Boundaries" (EWOB). Thereafter the mentor faculty members take over and guide the students through the rest of their programs.

EWOB is the only course taught by WGU personnel. After that introductory experience, when students need courses to prepare for their assessments they take them from WGU's partnering institutions, the cost of which is included in their regular tuition. Nearly 80 percent of a mentor's work involves direct student advisement; for those new to the university it is virtually 100 percent.

More experienced mentors help to develop degree competencies and assessments, identify learning resources

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for students to use and align them to degree competencies, and participate in periodic quality and effectiveness reviews of their programs. All personnel, both faculty and staff, work on an "at-will" basis. The university offers

neither tenure nor long-term contracts.

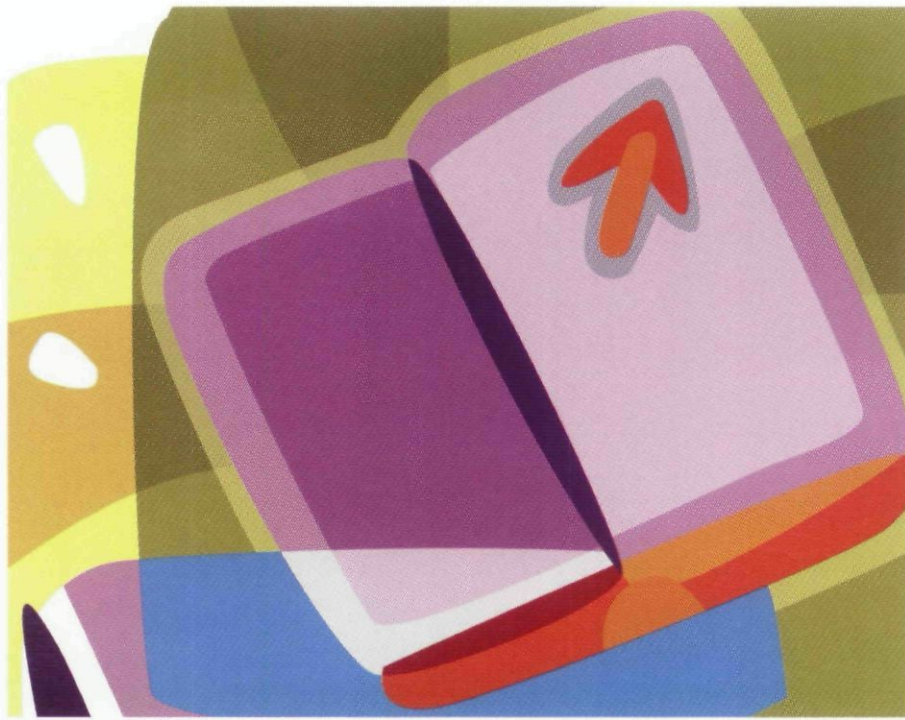
One of the most important quality-control features of the university's design is its use of oversight councils. Each degree area—business, information technology, and education—has a presiding program council made up of WGU senior faculty, faculty from other institutions, and outside professional practitioners.

Councils typically number six to nine members and represent a broad range of views on the fields for which they are responsible. The program councils design the overall structure of their degrees, establish the specific competencies required of all students for graduation, and maintain the current-

cy and quality of those competencies by overseeing the required bi-annual evaluations of their programs.

The WGU Assessment Council works in concert with the program councils to ensure academic quality by exercising separate but parallel oversight. Consisting of eight of the nation's most prominent experts in learning measurement and evaluation, the council establishes the assessments that will be used to measure the competencies required for each degree, and it participates with the program councils in their biannual program evaluations.

This system of checks and balances—triangulating on quality assurance from the perspectives of program faculty, program councils, and the assessment council—ensures broad consensus on decisions about the currency and relevance of degree requirements. It helps to prevent the ideological fixations that can too easily take control of programs designed by a single department. Finally, it helps to ensure both the credibility and the accountability of WGU's programs by bringing outside experts into the process of academic decisionmaking.



WGU continues to address other concerns of its founders as well. It has, for instance, controlled costs. It focuses exclusively on distance learning, thereby avoiding the capital expenditures of a residential campus. It contracts with other institutions and corporations to obtain the courses and other learning resources it needs, thereby avoiding the costs of course development and maintenance. And its faculty focus exclusively on student advisement, thereby enabling a faculty:student ratio as high as 1:80. As a result, tuition (currently \$2,590 per semester) remains exceptionally low for a private, independent institution.

It is evident that WGU, like its sponsoring governors, mistrusts grades, credits, and credit hours. The university is, for instance, notably conservative in awarding lower-division transfer credits and will not transfer upper-division credits at all. It recognizes *learning*, however, wherever and however it may have happened. The system recognizes that students may learn what they need to know in a variety of ways, formal and informal, over a long period of time—it just asks them to prove it.

Accordingly, they may sit for their assessments at any time, and they can progress toward their degrees as rapidly as they prove their mastery. The coherence of the degree is ensured by the close guidance of their faculty mentors and through the comprehensive nature of the degree competencies. These are not the

result of a single faculty member's point of view, nor are they derived from course equivalencies. They are designed as complete structures—the body of knowledge, skills, and abilities that a broad cross-section of experts judge necessary for a student at a given degree level to possess.

The university's use of external experts on its councils, its use of criterion-referenced scoring and external graders for its assessments, and its definition of competency as the equivalent of B or better all aim to address the deleterious effects of narrowly conceived degree designs, idiosyncratic grading practices, and grade inflation.

THE STUDENT

Let us follow a hypothetical student through his career at WGU. "John Marston" came to WGU after being out of school for nearly 30 years. After high school he served several years in the military and followed that with a 20-year career as a police officer in a small city in northern Nevada. While in the military, he served in a recruiting and public relations unit. On the police force he rose to detective, received training in forensics, and ultimately served as a deputy in a county crime lab.

At 46 John was somewhat older than the average WGU student but plenty young enough to establish a second—or perhaps it should be considered a third—career. He wanted to become an elementary school teacher and enrolled at

WGU to complete the Bachelor of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies with a pre-kindergarten to eighth grade teacher certification. Like a lot of WGU students, in some academic areas his expertise had outrun his formal education. In others, he had to fill in the blanks.

Like all new students, John enrolled first in "Education Without Boundaries," which introduced him to the WGU system and gave him his first experience with learning assessments, principally by means of the pre-assessments he took to establish his initial competency profile. His course facilitator, herself a graduate of one of WGU's master's programs, guided John and his cohort of about 20 students through the course.

In addition to the pre-assessments that he took, he received training in the use of WGU's online bookstore, library, and other university electronic systems. He did some reading in adult learning philosophy, discussed with other students in his online learning community the special challenges and techniques of distance learning, and practiced conducting online academic research and APA-style documentation.

EWOB can take anywhere from two to four weeks to complete, depending on the student's initial competency and how rapidly she or he demonstrates the required proficiencies on the various performance assessments that are administered throughout the course. John took the full month, because he had never been to college and high school was a very long time ago.

As soon as John became active with his EWOB seminar group—his online learning community—he was also assigned his mentor and began formal degree planning. WGU is registered with the U.S. Department of Education as a "non-standard term" institution for financial-aid purposes. In order to retain their eligibility for federal financial aid, undergraduates must register for 12 competency units each term and successfully complete nine of those units, while graduate students must register for eight competency units and complete at least six. A competency unit is the equivalent of a semester hour of *learning*—it is not a measure of time-in-class and homework but of competency achievement.

Given these requirements, it was important for John to get traction on his academic progress as soon as possible.

The six-month term is designed to accommodate the inevitable interruptions that adults experience in their schedules, but it can also encourage procrastination, especially in students who have not been in school for some time and are unaccustomed to the special demands of distance

learning. To help prevent that possibility, his mentor had extended phone and e-mail communications with John at least every two weeks throughout his program.

His mentor's first task, however, was to set up a phone conference with John in order to begin finalizing his Academic

Action Plan (AAP)—the roadmap to his degree. On the phone together and simultaneously connected to WGU's Web site, John and his mentor began by looking at the standard AAP for the Bachelor of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies (BAIS). It displayed all the assessments that John had

TABLE I. DEFAULT ACADEMIC ACTION PLAN (AAP) FOR THE BACHELOR OF ARTS IN INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES (BAIS)

| Code | Course | Competency Units | Term |
|------|--|------------------|--------|
| EWOB | Education Without Boundaries | 1 | Term 1 |
| LCO1 | Foundations of Language & Communication | 3 | |
| LCE1 | Rhetorical & Critical Writing | 3 | |
| LCTA | Research, Writing, & Oral Presentation | 3 | |
| IVA4 | Visual and Performing Arts Part I | 2 | |
| IVC4 | Visual and Performing Arts Part II | 1 | |
| IOA4 | Social Science Part I | 3 | Term 2 |
| IOC4 | Social Science Part II | 3 | |
| IEA4 | Economics & World Civilization Part I | 2 | |
| IEC4 | Economics & World Civilization Part II | 1 | |
| IHC4 | Health and Nutrition | 3 | Term 3 |
| RPTA | Reasoning & Problem Solving in the Context of the Humanities | 9 | |
| ISA4 | Natural Science Part I | 4 | |
| ISC4 | Natural Science Part II | 4 | Term 4 |
| IMA4 | Mathematics Part I | 5 | |
| IMC4 | Mathematics Part II | 4 | |
| CLHU | Humanities | 6 | Term 5 |
| FSA4 | Schools & Society | 3 | |
| FHA4 | Human Development & Learning | 3 | |
| FDA4 | Diversity & Inclusion | 3 | Term 6 |
| FCA4 | Classroom Management | 3 | |
| FTA4 | Testing | 3 | |
| FTC4 | Foundations of Teaching Practice Integration | 6 | |
| EIA4 | Instructional Planning & Strategies | 3 | Term 7 |
| ETA4 | Instructional Presentation & Follow-Up | 3 | |
| EIC4 | Instructional Planning, Strategies, & Presentation Integration | 6 | |
| ELA4 | Specific Teaching Practices: Reading, Writing, & Spelling | 3 | Term 8 |
| EFA4 | Specific Teaching Practices: Math & Science | 3 | |
| EHA4 | Specific Teaching Practices: Health, VPA, & Social Studies | 3 | |
| ELC4 | Specific Teaching Practices: Elementary Ed Integration | 6 | |
| DCS4 | Cohort Seminar | 3 | Term 9 |
| DCV4 | Demonstration Teaching (Practicum) | 12 | |
| DCL4 | Classroom Reflection & Observations | 3 | |
| DPP4 | Professional Portfolio | 3 | |

Source: Western Governors University

to pass, the order and term in which they would ordinarily be taken, and the competency unit value for each assessment needed to complete the course of study.

The initial layout (see Table 1 on p. 29) is the *default* AAP, which John and his mentor modified in light of his pre-assessment results, level of self-confidence in tackling different subject areas, and even his personal schedule over the coming term. If he were to follow this template, John's program would take nine terms to complete.

As shown in the table, the path lists the assessments and their associated competency units by term, but that is only half the story. The AAP also includes more detail about the nature of the assessments and the learning resources that go with them. For instance, John and his mentor looked at the assessments required for language and communication skills and the humanities (see box) and decided after reviewing John's pre-assessment

WGU'S REQUIRED COMPETENCY ASSESSMENTS

Language and Communication Skills

Focuses on collegiate reading skills, argumentative and critical writing skills, presentation-related skills, expository writing skills, and basic information-retrieval skills. You are required to pass the following assessments:

- *Foundations of Language and Communication (LCO1)*: Proctored, computer-based objective exam.
- *Rhetorical and Critical Writing (LCE1)*: Proctored, computer-based essay exam.
- *Research, Writing, and Oral Presentation (LCTA)*: Performance Assessment that consists of a 5-to-8 page research paper and short oral presentation.

Humanities and the Visual and Performing Arts

Focuses on the procedures and criteria for analysis, methods of study, theories, and interpretation of texts, artifacts, ideas, and discourse in the disciplines of the humanities, as well as in those of the visual and performing arts. You are required to pass the following assessments:

- Visual and Performing Arts Part I (IVA4): Performance Assessment that consists of four tasks.
- Visual and Performing Arts Part II (IVC4): Proctored, computer-based objective exam.
- Humanities (CLHU): Proctored, computer-based objective exam.

Social Sciences

BACHELOR OF ARTS IN INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES (BAIS)

- The graduate discusses the major themes, events, eras, developments, and influencing factors in U.S. history.
- The graduate has critical geography knowledge and skills, including the relationship between physical geography, culture, and the environment; the influence of physical geography on local politics, world economies, and cultural development; and the modern impacts of demographic trends.
- The graduate explains the roles of major institutions in American government and the contents and importance of historical documents, understands the major principles in the Constitution of the United States, and understands the ways that American citizens participate in government. ☺

scores that he was already prepared to sit for the language and communication skills assessments. He had developed those skills both in his recruiting and public relations work in the military and on the witness stand in his forensics work as a police officer, and it showed in his pre-assessment scores.

One of the routine tasks John had completed in EWOB was the identification of three possible sites near his home where he could take the WGU assessments online in a secure setting. One

was a local community college, a second was a Prometric test center, and the third was at his city library. With these sites identified, his mentor referred John to the assessment scheduling center, which made the appointment for him to take the assessments at his local community college on two consecutive days three weeks later.

John was less prepared for the visual and performing arts assessment proposed for his first term and knew he needed to study before sitting for it. But he felt confident that he could prepare for it independently by using the WGU study guide and the textbook his mentor had recommended, especially if he could interact with other students preparing for the same assessment by joining the online learning community focused on that topic. It would give him a chance to ask questions, share resources with other students, and get and give encouragement.

There were two other assessment areas that John felt already prepared to tackle in his first term—even though they would ordinarily be scheduled in terms two, three, or four. After he and his mentor again reviewed his pre-assessment scores and looked at the social science competencies he would need to demonstrate (see box on p. 32), they decided that his military and police experience had given him ample preparation for the Social Sciences Parts I and II exams and possibly also for the Economics and World Civilization Parts I and II exams. They also decided that his work in police forensics was probably enough preparation for him to pass the science examinations.

Since WGU allows two attempts at each assessment before charging students additional tuition, there was no harm in trying, and success would

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accelerate John's progress. Accordingly, his mentor scheduled him for the social science

assessments two months into his first term and for the science assessments four months into the term. That gave him enough time for some review in each area, using independent study materials recommended by his mentor.

As it turned out, John passed all the Language and Communications Skills assessments, the Social Science Parts I and II assessments, the Natural Science Parts I and II assessments and (late in his first term) the Visual and Performing Arts Parts I and II assessments. Thus, including EWOB, he successfully completed 27 competency units in his first six-month term, more than double the required rate of academic progress for

an undergraduate student. And while he did not pass the Economics and World Civilization Parts I and II assessments on the first attempt, he came close. He analyzed with his mentor the gaps in his knowledge, undertook further study, re-took the assessments in his second term, and passed.

Two general points stand out in this history. First, the initial competencies that John Marston brought to his WGU program were his own, but the pattern is typical. Although the standard AAP detailed above for the BAIS degree indicates that it takes nine terms to complete, virtually no students take that long.

Some bring completed associate's degrees into their programs and are able to begin as upper-division students. Others may have some lower-division assessments waived if they have had sufficient college coursework elsewhere and do

well on pre-assessments. Most are like John Marston—they have little or no transferable college work but bring competencies into their programs that enable them to sit immediately for some of their assessments.

The second point follows: most students' finalized AAP will not look anything like the default AAP that John and his mentor began discussing. Depending on each student's academic background, the depth of learning he or she may have gained through work experience, and learning style (a desire for structured courses versus a capacity for independent study, for instance), the AAP may be rearranged substantially. Some lower-division assessments may

be waived through evaluation of official college transcripts. Others may be taken immediately because of demonstrated readiness on pre-assessments. And all of them may be rearranged as a result of mentor-student discussions.

John himself continued to progress through his program. Somewhere in his third term he had a family crisis that prevented him from completing the required 70 percent of the competency units he attempted, and he consequently landed on financial-aid probation. He did not lose his aid—WGU's status as a "non-standard term" institution enabled him to continue receiving assistance—

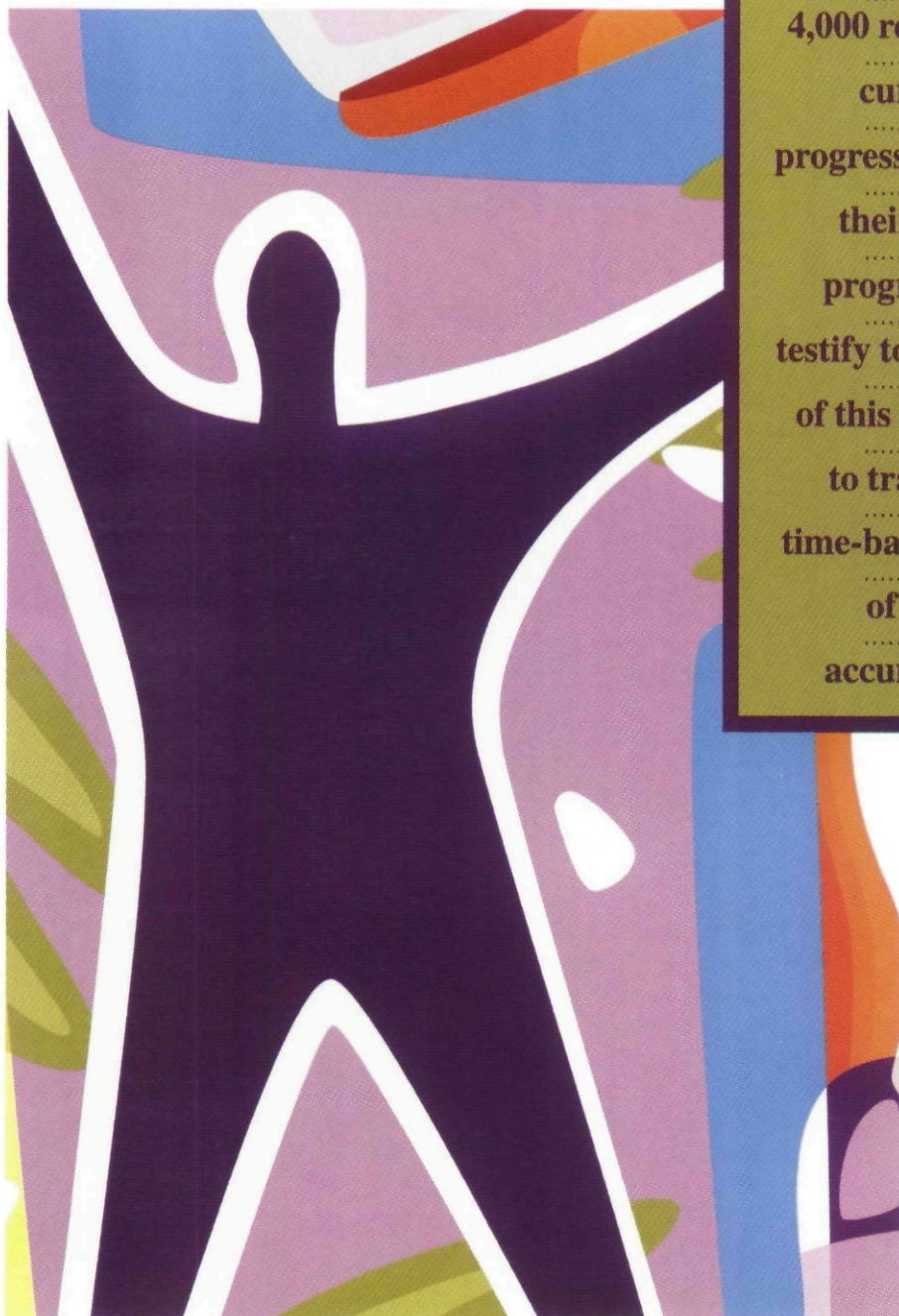
and with his mentor's help he recovered his stride in his next term and did not fall behind again.

Along the way he continued to use a mixture of independent study materials recommended by his mentor—including textbooks, online learning modules produced by such organizations as Abromitis Online Learning, Teachscape, and Canter & Associates—as well as formal courses from such institutions as Chemeketa Community College in Oregon and Brigham Young University in Utah.

When he had passed the lower-division and interdisciplinary studies assessments for his degree, which he did by the end of his second term, John began preparing for teacher certification. Before he could do so, however, he had to pass the Praxis I examination. Because Nevada, where he hoped to teach, had not established its own passing score, he had to meet WGU's default standard—178 on the reading and mathematics sections and 176 on the writing section. These scores, required by Virginia and Maryland, are

the highest required passing scores in the nation for Praxis I. John exceeded them by considerable margins. When he then began the professional-studies components of his degree, he had to master competencies in three large domains and their related fields of knowledge and skill—foundations of teaching, effective teaching practices, and demonstration teaching. Each of these required a mix of performance, essay, and objective assessments.

As he began to work on the competencies required in effective teaching practices, some six months before he expected to put into classroom practice the knowledge and skills he had been



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developing throughout his program, his mentor submitted to the WGU Teachers College central office in Salt Lake City a formal Mentor Recommendation to Enter Demonstration Teaching. It signaled his belief that John would have the requisite knowledge, skills, and personal qualities to become an effective teacher.

During this term John also took and passed the required Praxis II examination, which measured his mastery of the interdisciplinary subject matter required of elementary teachers. His success was not exceptional: to date, the average WGU Teachers College graduate has scored 15 percent above the established state-required score on these examinations.

The Recommendation to Enter Demonstration Teaching triggered the start of arrangements to locate a school near John's home where he could complete 12 weeks of supervised, full-time practice teaching. WGU's Coordinator of Field Experiences contacted an appropriate school and, with the principal's help, located a host teacher. Her next task was to locate, this time with the district superintendent's help, a master teacher in the area who agreed to go



THE WGU TEACHERS COLLEGE PROFESSIONAL PORTFOLIO

The Professional Portfolio is a written document containing a comprehensive Teacher Work Sample that provides direct evidence of the teacher candidate's ability to design and implement a multi-week, standards-based unit of instruction, assess student learning, and then reflect on the learning process. The WGU Teacher Work Sample requires students to plan and teach a four-week standards-based instructional unit consisting of seven components: 1) contextual factors, 2) learning goals, 3) assessment, 4) design for instruction, 5) instructional decisionmaking, 6) analysis of student learning, and 7) self-evaluation and reflection.

through WGU's training program for clinical supervisors and then to evaluate John's performance as a practice teacher over the required twelve weeks of his demonstration teaching practicum.

The clinical supervisor observed John for one to two hours on eight separate occasions and submitted reports on each observation using WGU's evaluation rubrics. In conjunction with his practice-teaching assignment, John also had to participate in an online cohort seminar with other WGU students from around the country who were likewise

engaged in their teaching practicum, and he had to complete a professional portfolio required of all certification candidates (see box above).

"John Marston" completed all requirements for the BAIS degree in December 2004 and was hired as a full-time fifth grade teacher by the school in which he had done his practice teaching. Although assembled from the details of many other actual WGU students, his imagined history is in fact quite representative. He, the nearly 4,000 real students currently progressing through their

degree programs, and the 300 current WGU graduates all testify to the success of this alternative to traditional time-based systems of credit accumulation.

WGU's competency model is not the only one in operation today, nor is it perhaps the best that will emerge in future. But the technologies that have given rise to any-time, any-place learning, the demand for lifelong learning in every contemporary profession, and the acknowledged failure of traditional grading systems to reflect the learning that actually takes place in American classrooms all conspire to make the emergence of a new system of measurement inevitable. And although today's methods of learning assessment may well look primitive a decade hence, where Western Governors University has led, others will follow, learn from its experience, and improve. That is the nature of paradigm shifts. ☐

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