Archived Information

Prepared Statement of Robert Mendenhall
President, Western Governors University
Before the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education
Third Meeting, February 2-3, 2006

Western Governors University

WGU was created by 19 governors of the western United States as a private, non-profit university with a mission "to improve quality and expand access to post-secondary educational opportunities by providing a means for individuals to learn independent of time or place and to earn competency-based degrees and other credentials that are credible to both institutions and employers". WGU was specifically created as a new model for higher education, incorporating the use of technology to expand access and reduce costs, while creating competency-based degree programs to improve accountability for learning. This paper briefly addresses how WGU's unique model addresses the issues being considered by the Commission of accountability, accessibility, affordability and quality in higher education. The WGU promise that underlies University performance is: "We help our students achieve their dreams for a degree and career success by providing a personal, flexible, and affordable education based on real-world competencies".

Accountability

Program Accountability

WGU defines the competencies (what a student must know and be able to do) for each degree, and uses a variety of assessments (objective tests, essays, projects, portfolios, and performance tasks) which each student must pass at a cut score representing competency in order to graduate. A pass score means 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. Thus WGU defines up front what all graduates will know and be able to do, and ensures that all graduates have demonstrated they have achieved these competencies at mastery level. Accountability for learning is provided by directly measuring learning rather than measuring time (credit hours) and assigning grades.

The competencies are developed/approved by an outside national Program Council of experts from both industry and academia working with WGU faculty, to ensure that the degrees meet comparable academic standards to similar degrees at traditional institutions, and meet the existing needs of employers. This approach to defining the required learning (competencies) links education to workforce needs, and allows WGU to be accountable for providing a relevant education. The Program Councils and faculty have ongoing responsibility to review the degrees on a regular basis and keep the competencies current. It should be mentioned here that competency-based education does not mean just skills training; it is now possible to define and measure higher-order competencies, such as problem-solving, critical thinking, and teamwork.

The WGU assessments are defined and approved by an external national Assessment Council of experts in measurement and evaluation, and developed by experts in test development. Most teachers who create exams are not trained in measurement and

evaluation. Where possible, existing national exams that test competency (eg. SHRM exam in Human Resources, Praxis exams in Teacher Education, industry certification exams in IT) are also utilized for added credibility and accountability. In many cases, students graduate from WGU with both a degree and one or more industry certifications, making their education even more immediately relevant. Assessments are administered and graded by an assessment department, independent of both instructors and mentors, to avoid any potential conflict of interest. The Assessment Council and internal assessment experts have ongoing responsibility to monitor all assessments for reliability and validity, and to keep the assessments current.

WGU does not develop nor teach its own courses. Instead, its faculty is responsible to find the best available online courses and other learning resources for the defined competencies, and WGU acquires the rights to use these courses for its students. Learning resources include traditional university courses, commercial courseware, training modules, learning objects, textbooks and other independent study materials. In some cases (such as NetG for IT training), commercial courses are more modular, higher quality, more current, and less expensive than traditional university courses, and are linked more closely to current workforce requirements. WGU faculty map these learning resources to the WGU competencies, and students are recommended into the learning resources that best reflect the needs of the individual student. Each student has an individual Academic Action Plan that reflects the competencies the student already has, and defines the best learning resources to enable the student to gain the additional required competencies. In this way, WGU strives to make its education relevant to the individual differences of students.

Faculty/Staff Accountability – for Student Success

Because WGU faculty do not teach courses or administer tests, the faculty, who are mostly full-time with terminal degrees in the field, serves as mentors to the students. Each student is assigned a mentor when beginning at WGU who stays with the student until graduation. WGU does not have faculty tenure, and all employment is at will. WGU mentors (faculty) are evaluated and compensated primarily on the success of their assigned students. Each mentor receives a monthly report with their own personal student retention rate, student progress rate, student satisfaction score, and student graduation rate. These are the four principal criteria on which their performance is evaluated.
WGU has a performance compensation plan in which all employees participate equally, that is also strongly based on the University's student retention rate, student progress rate, student satisfaction score, and student graduation rate. The President's compensation plan, and those of other senior administrators, also reflect these measures.

Accountability for Graduate Success

WGU seeks to measure the quality of its education based on graduate performance and success. As mentioned above, where possible national exams are used to measure

competency, allowing WGU to compare the performance of its graduating students with others on industry standards. In addition, WGU conducts an annual survey of all graduates seeking to measure graduate success and the relevance and importance of the competencies mastered at WGU. Changes to the required competencies are made in response to this feedback. The University also commissions an annual case study by external evaluators of graduate success. Finally, the University is working on ways to measure actual job performance of graduates, either directly or through employer evaluations.

Accessibility

Perhaps the most important contribution of online education is its ability to expand access to higher education, particularly to rural populations and working adults. Asynchronous online education addresses the constraints of time and place. For rural populations that don't live in close proximity to a campus, online education can be delivered wherever they may live. For working adults, with work and family responsibilities, and often travel obligations, online education may be done at any time and virtually anywhere, including late in the evening when there are not a lot of campus-based classes available. Access is further facilitated by allowing students to start at the beginning of each month, and our six month terms allow for accommodation of fluctuating work and personal commitments.

Access is also clearly a financial issue. Online education has the clear potential, although not yet fully realized, of providing high quality education at a lower cost (see Affordability below). However, while WGU is approved to offer federal financial aid, VA benefits, DOD and corporate tuition assistance, the same cannot be said for many online programs. Much more needs to be done to provide the same levels of financial aid to online students as to campus-based students. (Congress is set to address this for Title IV in the next month, but more needs to be done by DOD, VA, states and corporations.) Further, online education is often still viewed as an inferior option for learning. The truth is that there is both good and poor quality campus-based education and good and poor quality online education. The delivery mechanism does not determine quality.

Affordability

In an era of rapidly rising tuition costs, WGU as private non-profit university has tuition for a 12 month year of just under $5600. This is comparable to tuition for three semesters at many state-subsidized universities where tuition covers less than half the true cost of education. WGU tuition covers the entire cost of the WGU education. Perhaps more importantly from a student perspective, WGU's competency-based degrees allow well-qualified students to complete their education and graduate more quickly, and therefore less expensively, than traditional systems that insists on prerequisites and a certain number of credit hours regardless of the student's background.

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WGU's low costs are achieved in a number of ways. First, WGU obviously does not have the cost of buildings, residence halls, athletics and other activities that are important to traditional-age students, but are expensive extras for adult students. Second, the faculty is focused on working with students essentially fulltime. The reward structure at WGU rewards student success rather research or publications. Because the faculty aren't teaching or grading, mentors at full load handle 80 students. Third, rather than develop, deliver, teach and maintain its own courses, WGU utilizes courses developed and delivered by others who already have the sunk investment costs. WGU represents incremental income and profit to these course providers, but at substantially lower cost to WGU than developing and maintaining everything itself. At the same time, many of these courses are self-paced and computer-mediated. By letting the technology carry the majority of the instruction, rather than live instructors, the instruction is of high and consistent quality and is scalable to large numbers of students at low incremental cost. The human side of instruction is in the personal mentoring that each student receives, as well as student participation in active learning communities. Fourth, WGU outsources other functions such as financial aid processing, the online library and bookstore. Finally, the assessments are delivered in existing testing centers around the United States, the objective tests are scored by computer, and the other assessments are scored by professional graders separate from the instruction.

Quality

The quality of the WGU program rests with the quality of its required competencies, the effectiveness of the assessments in measuring these competencies, and the success of students in completing the requirements. Accreditation and other quality measures of WGU must focus on whether the competencies are the right ones, whether WGU in fact accurately measures mastery, and whether WGU is able to guide students to mastery of the required competencies. External Program Councils and the Assessment Council provide ongoing quality checks on the competencies and assessments, while WGU's own measures of student performance track student success, and later, graduate success. The content of the courses or learning resources, the qualifications of faculty, the books in the library, and other indirect "input" measures of quality are not particularly relevant, since the effectiveness of the output (learning) is measured directly. For example, the quality of the courses or learning resources utilized is constantly measured, because WGU does not accept the course grade, rather all students are still required to pass the WGU assessments demonstrating what they have learned. Courses that have not succeeded in teaching the required competencies are replaced. Similarly, the success of a mentor's students (which is independently evaluated) is a better measure of mentor effectiveness than the degrees or publication of the mentor. The quality of the program is further enhanced in that students actually learn how to learn, by accessing a variety of learning resources under the guidance of a faculty mentor.

Summary

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The WGU model works best for working adults who have competencies. Most traditional-age students probably require the structure and environment of traditional campus-based programs, but the increasing numbers of adult students require greater flexibility and can be served at lower cost by non-traditional programs. At the same time, all of higher education could benefit by being more explicit about expected learning outcomes, and measuring them directly. Access can be improved with more flexible, online, and lower cost programs. Significant cost savings can attained by focusing on the teaching function, outsourcing some functions, and sharing top quality online courses between institutions. Most of all, WGU is meant to demonstrate that thinking anew about higher education might lead us to very different models than the traditional system.