

# Western Governors University Is on Course for Acceptance and Accreditation

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As original and continuing members of the Western Governors University (WGU) Board of Trustees we want to provide an accurate account of the impetus, goals, growth, focus, and progress of WGU over the past 3 years, and to report on the current status of WGU. It seems especially timely because WGU has now been granted "Candidate for Accreditation" status by the Interregional Accrediting Committee and is the only online, competency-based university to achieve this accreditation status.

Accreditation is a critical process for a degree-granting university in that the candidacy stage opens the door for many corporate reimbursement opportunities for employees enrolling in degree programs, is recognized by several branches of the military, and increases the range of articulation opportunities with other institutions of higher education. (Even before accreditation, WGU degrees have been accepted by many employers and a number of colleges and universities.)

To keep ahead of the demands of the electronic-based economy, we believe it is essential America develops an imaginative, talented and educated workforce. Silicon Valley and other centers of innovation reinvent the future every day, yet the pace of change is

exceeding that of our educational systems. In this increasingly knowledge-based economy, the high-tech community is faced with a tremendous shortage of highly skilled workers.

WGU was formed to be responsive to the needs of the new economy. Recognizing the challenge, the Governors of 19 western states, in collaboration with business leaders in the new economy, established WGU as an institution representing a new model for higher education. WGU uses the Internet as a broad-based access mechanism to achieve greater reach and more attractive economies of scale than traditional infrastructures. WGU delivers competency-based degree programs utilizing online resources from multiple universities, colleges and commercial providers.

Online education enables anytime, anywhere learning, needed by working adults to stay current in their knowledge and skills. These individuals have gained competencies either through a combination of some formal education, corporate training, work experience, and/or personal initiative. They usually have full-time jobs and families, and find it difficult to pursue a traditional degree.

While society and our needs have changed dramatically over the centuries, institutions of higher learning have flexed only moderately. The educational demands of America at the start of the

21st century are vastly different from only a few years ago. The problem in conventional education lies with the two constants of traditional universities: place and time. The student is expected to come to a place called a campus and remain there for a set number of years before being qualified to receive an academic degree. The constraints of time and place have been broken by industry, but still bind higher education.

Once learning is no longer tied to time and place, the challenge for institutions is to be able to measure and credential learning that may have been done elsewhere. WGU's competency-based degrees are awarded on a student's demonstration of knowledge and skills rather than accumulation of credit hours. Companies like 3Com increasingly need to know what an employee can do, in order to match specific skills to a specific project or to identify specific retraining an employee requires. A generic education doesn't meet our requirements like competency-based education.

WGU works to develop its degrees with a wide range of authorities in a particular field of study, including potential employers, to define the knowledge and skills that are expected of a graduate in a particular field at a certain degree level. Assessment experts then develop a series of measurements to ensure that the graduate has the necessary knowledge and skills to earn a degree.

The cost for tuition is commensurate with many state-supported institutions, or even less because students are not taking courses in areas where they are already proficient.

WGU is not well understood by some because it represents a major change in higher education. It is the nature of innovation that it is not accepted by the majority of people, especially those who have a vested interest in the existing system. Consider the following statements, made years ago by experts in their fields:

■ "This 'telephone' has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication. The device is inherently of no value to us."—Western Union Internal Memo, in 1876

■ "[Television] won't be able to hold on to any market it captures after the first six months. People will soon get tired of staring at a plywood box every night."—Darryl F. Zanuck, Head of 20th Century-Fox, in 1946

Many of the comments we hear about WGU fall into this same category. Being a proponent for a new model has brought resistance from some quarters, including those in traditional academic circles. But, just like the telephone and television, WGU will clearly demonstrate its success.

Where is WGU today? Because of its unique combination of political support at both the state and federal level,

corporate and foundation support, and educational partnerships, WGU has been a leading innovator and thought leader in higher education. At the same time, it has had reasonable growth in both programs and students and we have every expectation that it will continue to grow; the university is financially viable, and in fact, is exceeding its financial plan.

WGU has been formally offering degree programs for over a year and held its first commencement exercises last December in conjunction with the Western Governors' Association Conference in San Diego.

WGU has been very much like a "start-up" company, but after 3 years is now a fully functional university. A number of significant foundations and corporations such as AT&T, 3Com, IBM, Microsoft, Novell, and Sun Microsystems have invested in the institution, as we believe we are helping to create much needed change in higher education. We see our investments as seed money to grow a new model university, which will not only be relevant, but a leader in the 21st century. Even more important, we believe we are helping create the kind of higher education system that is required in the global society and economy in which we live.

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