

Online university offers students great flexibility

*Formed in 1999,
the program has
students of all ages*

Jason Brimhall received his college degree while working full-time and took few classes. That's because the Salt Lake City-area database administrator graduated from Western Governors University, America's only online, competency-based university. As a WGU student, Brimhall earned his degree by passing a series of assessments required by WGU, not by accumulating credits.

"Nearly everything that was required by the degree I already had some competence," said Brimhall, who recently earned his Associate of Applied Science in Information Technology with a CNE emphasis.

For nearly all WGU students, attending a campus-based program is out of the question. Most WGU students work full-time,

have a family to care for, and find it inconvenient or impossible to commute to a college campus.

Students who are already prepared in one or more subject areas due to life or work experience or prior education may move directly to the required assessments as soon as they feel ready.

Students interact with their mentor, course professors, and other students via a number of online and offline methods.

"We were in constant communication by phone, e-mail or IM (instant messaging)," Brimhall said of working with his mentor. "It made planning the course of action much easier."

Most students read, study and participate in online discussion groups while at home in the evenings, late at night and on weekends.

"It was easiest to do my studies and papers and so forth while on lunch or other breaks while at work," said Brimhall, who will be continuing on at WGU to get

his bachelor's degree in computer information systems. "Whenever I had time I did it."

At WGU, students work one-on-one with a personal faculty mentor to customize a degree program based on the knowledge the student brings to the program. The student's mentor helps the student prepare for assessments, which typically include tests, projects and a portfolio.

WGU students are not required to attend classes in a physical classroom. Instead, they gain knowledge to pass their assessments by taking online or distance education classes, or through self-study activities and other alternative methods recommended by their mentor.

The university has almost 2,500 students enrolled in courses and degree programs from 46 states and nine countries, up 500 percent from last year. Although the average age of a student is 40, students range in age from 17 to 64.

WGU is best suited to working

adults and other non-traditional students who are concerned with the availability of educational opportunities in a traditional setting.

degree."

WGU offers degrees and certificates in business, information technology, human resource management, general education,

(www.wgu.edu), which includes an online application, library and bookstore, and lists more than 1,000 high-quality distance education courses from 45 colleges, universities and commercial providers.

New students may enroll anytime and begin their program on the first of each month. Federal financial aid is available, and many employers and state governments accept WGU in their tuition reimbursement policy.

WGU is a private, non-profit university founded and supported by 19 states and governors including Utah Gov. Michael Leavitt. It also has more than 20 corporate partners, including America Online, Cisco Systems, Hewlett Packard, IBM, Microsoft, Sun Microsystems and 3Com. WGU began enrolling students in 1999 and is already accredited by the Distance Education and Training Council and has candidacy for accreditation status with four regional associations.

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"I didn't have to worry about class size, or the availability of a class, or that I have to take this class this semester," he said. "It was my schedule and my

and learning technology. Additional teacher education and certification programs are scheduled for 2003.

WGU's campus is its Web site,