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Nontraditional Education Program Helps Fill the Need for Teachers

By Tamar S. Snyder

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At 39, Laurie Mendenhall couldn't imagine spending the next four years seated behind a wooden desk, notebook in hand. The mother of two from Atlanta yearned to be on the other side of the classroom, teaching elementary school pupils. But with her husband working in sales and frequently traveling, she needed to find an affordable master's degree program in education that would be flexible enough to allow her to care for her two boys, ages 9 and 11.

When Laurie discovered the Teachers College at Western Governors University (WGU), she was thrilled.

The nontraditional online program, which focuses on performance through a mix of research papers, multiple-choice exams, and weekly phone calls with a mentor, allowed her to study after tucking her boys into bed, sometimes into the wee hours of the morning. The program prides itself on its individualistic pacing; overachievers like Laurie who are willing to devote 30+ hours a week to their studies can graduate with a master's degree in as few as 18 months.

But the ease comes from flexibility, not simplified coursework. "They don't let you by easy," Laurie says. "They're really molding you into a good teacher."

No Child Left Behind and Qualified Teachers

Quality teachers are increasingly in demand. Under the No Child Left Behind Act passed in 2002, there is a strong push for qualified and credentialed teachers to fill America's public schools.

"The law has focused a lot of attention on standards for students, and therefore there's more attention focused on standards for teachers," explains Arthur Wise, president of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). "Research indicates that a teacher is of extreme importance in terms of the quality of a student's education experience."

To be "highly qualified," a teacher must hold a bachelor's degree, be certified

or licensed to teach in the state of his or her employment, and have proven knowledge of the subjects he or she teaches, according to the U.S. Dept. of Education.

Meeting a Need

Online universities, such as the nonprofit WGU, are increasingly stepping up teacher education programs to meet this need.

But until late October 2006, none of the nontraditional programs were accredited by NCATE, the largest accreditation body for professional education programs. That's when WGU's competency-based Teachers College became the first online institution to receive NCATE approval. This put the nontraditional university in the same category as 636 accredited institutions across the country, including Teachers College of Columbia University, Purdue, and Stanford.

"We have rigorous expectations for schools of education and are pleased to see more and more schools step up to the plate," says Wise, noting that NCATE changed its accreditation policies in 2001 to "recognize reality" and allow for the accreditation of nontraditional programs.

Western Governors University

Since March 2003, enrollment at Western Governors University's Teachers College has grown 40 percent annually, from 530 students to 4,500 students. Six hundred teachers will graduate this year alone from the online university, which is based in Salt Lake City, UT.

Aided by a \$10 million grant in 2001 from the U.S. Dept. of Education, the governors of 19 Western states created WGU to increase student access to affordable higher education. Roughly 85 percent of students come from underserved populations, defined as African-American and Hispanic minorities, the poor, those from rural areas, or first-generation college students.

At the Teachers College, 10 percent of students are African-American. The average age is 36, and 85 percent are employed, the majority of them full time.

"Western Governors University is founded with a national vision of improving access to education for the nontraditional teacher," says Janet Schnitz, executive director of the Teachers College, noting that many students have children and would have to travel 100 miles or more to get to college, which cuts into family time.

In addition to essays, exams, and research papers that can be completed on the Internet, students are required to fulfill a minimum of 12 weeks of demonstrative teaching. WGU boasts a good relationship with several school districts, and helps place students in 43 different states.

"We're not trying to do anything less, we're just doing it in a different way," Schnitz says. "We're providing options."

Wave of the Future

"It's the wave of the future," believes Linda Clark, referring to online master's degree programs.

Linda, an award-winning teacher with 25 years of experience, wears many hats. She's a realtor, a teacher, and an entrepreneur who designed a phonics program called "Super Phonics to the Rescue."

"Any busy professional can see the beauty in the scheduling freedom," the 50-year-old says.

Linda decided to pursue her master's degree in education at WGU, specializing in measurement and evaluation, an area that coincides well with her phonics program.

A Texas-based mentor was always readily available to help Linda as she progressed.

"Communication was always there ... I always had a lot of support," the WGU alumna says. "It was just a good fit."

Laurie Mendenhall, who is finishing up her mandatory period of demonstrative teaching at Bullard Elementary, in Cobb County, Atlanta, agrees.

"This is the future of teaching - of college," she explains. "Accreditation is going to open the door to more nontraditional schools looking to do this."



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