



## About WGU

### News Brief - 6/4/08

#### Western Governors University Comes of Age

*Non-profit, Online University Founded by 19 Governors, Defies Skeptics to Grow Rapidly*

SALT LAKE CITY -- As online higher education comes of age, the innovative, non-profit online Western Governors University (WGU) has reached another milestone: 10,000 students.

Nothing comes easily, but for the 19 U.S. governors who founded WGU ([www.wgu.edu](http://www.wgu.edu)) just over 10 years ago, today's milestone is a dream come true. Back in 1997, the skeptics said Western Governors University was destined for failure. The dire predictions went something like this: As a new non-profit online school, WGU couldn't survive without state financing. It would be blown away by the deep-pocketed for-profit online universities, such as University of Phoenix. In addition, it would be difficult if not impossible to receive regional accreditation because of its competency-based approach.

Today, the online university boasts over 10,000 students and is still growing rapidly. WGU students are scattered across all 50 states, range in age from 16 to 72, live everywhere from major cities to remote rural areas, and pursue one of WGU's 42 online degrees or certificates in business, education, information technology, and health professions.

Although nothing has come easily for WGU, the institution has been undaunted by the challenges. Incorporated in 1997 by 19 U.S. governors (20 are now supporters) in true bi-partisan fashion, WGU has been a groundbreaking leader in many ways. It was the first university to build its entire academic system around a competency-based academic model that relies upon students demonstrating skills and knowledge through rigorous assessments instead of class time and grades.

WGU also creates personalized academic action plans for each student, and encourages students to proceed through their courses of study on self-directed, even rapidly accelerated paces. WGU mentors provide continuous encouragement and academic student support, something that helps these distance learners stay on track.

Despite the skeptics, regional accreditation came quickly. WGU received full regional accreditation in early 2003. In fact, WGU was reviewed and approved by four regional accrediting bodies simultaneously, the only institution in history with that distinction. It has already received its five-year renewal. In 2006, WGU's Teachers College became the first (and, to date, only) online teachers college to receive accreditation from the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). The university is also nationally accredited by the Distance Education and Training Council (DETC).

In April, the United States Distance Learning Association (USDLA) awarded WGU its 21st Century Award for Best Practices in Distance Learning for 2008 for its competency-based approach and for expanding access to higher learning online. According to Dr. John Flores, CEO of USDLA, "Western Governors University has raised the bar of excellence, and we are truly honored by WGU's contributions to the distance learning industry."

"Our success thus far is primarily because of our intense focus on the student learning experience," said Robert Mendenhall, president of WGU since 1998. "We emphasize competency because we want our graduates to be highly successful in their careers. We use a mentoring approach because we want students to succeed at WGU."

Adults with full-time jobs and families are the primary audience for WGU programs, so flexibility is important to WGU students. Approximately 73 percent of students are enrolled in online undergraduate programs, the remaining 27 percent in graduate-level programs. The average age of students is 37.

Perhaps most amazingly, WGU receives no state support yet is able to grow dramatically with one of the lowest tuitions among online universities (approximately \$5,800 per year for most undergraduate and graduate programs).

"A key part of our mission is to expand access to higher education," noted Mendenhall. "A great education doesn't have to be expensive and saddle our graduates with a heavy burden of student loans."

WGU also reaches under-served populations. About 70 percent of the WGU student body falls into one of four traditionally under-served groups: low-income, minority, first-generation college, or rural.

WGU anticipates continued strong growth while maintaining high quality service. The online Teachers College is truly national, and helps place new teachers in such high-needs areas as mathematics, science, and special education all around the country. The College of Information Technology integrates high-demand IT certifications right into the online degree programs. And the new nursing programs in the College of Health Professions are expected to grow rapidly.

"We're proud that WGU has earned high respect and is prospering," said Jim Geringer, current chairman of WGU's Board of Trustees. Geringer, the former governor of Wyoming and one of WGU's founding governors, has remained closely involved with the school for over 10 years. "The board and all the founding governors are pleased that WGU continues to help thousands of adult learners achieve their education and career goals. We didn't just create a new university. We've unlocked the future for the many students WGU serves."

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**"Competency-based..."**

"I like the idea of a competency-based program. In some areas I already had expertise and skills so I could take an independent study class and build the portfolio and take the exams. In other areas I needed more instruction."

—Gretchen Burr, WGU graduate, high school teacher

**"I am an expert..."**

"Western Governors has raised the bar for online courses. Instead of graduating from their courses and saying, "I have passed all of the requirements," they want their students to say, "I graduated from WGU and I am an expert in the field of..."

—Jeffrey Cravy, WGU graduate student

**"Competency-based..."**

"Google has pioneered the idea of access to information. The reason Google thinks WGU is such a good idea is because WGU has pioneered the concept of competency-based education whenever you want it."

—Eric Schmidt, CEO of Google Inc.

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