



About WGU

News Brief - 10/14/08

Can Online Education Help Meet Workforce Needs?

A New Model for Higher Education at Western Governors University

An educated and skilled workforce is essential to the long-term prosperity of our country and our citizenry. Evidence indicates, however, that we cannot meet the demands of the 21st century by relying solely upon centuries-old approaches to higher education. New models are needed to expand access, improve quality, and assure accountability in higher education. This need is especially true for working adults whose busy lives don't fit easily into the strictures imposed by traditional colleges. They need greater flexibility.

When Bill Parisen decided to return to school to complete his bachelor's degree, he was concerned about how to fit education into a hectic life that already included kids, coaching, and a busy career at Hewlett Packard. "I wanted to complete my degree at an accredited university, but I needed the flexibility to study and continue my work at the same time. I just couldn't balance my life and professional commitments while attending a 'brick-and-mortar' institution," he explains. He decided to attend Western Governors University online.

In 1996 Western Governors University embarked on a mission to expand access through distance learning technologies. But for the 19 U.S. governors who founded WGU, simply translating a traditional college model to an online environment wasn't enough. They had an even broader vision.

Because employers were clamoring for better prepared college graduates, the governors insisted WGU require that students develop and demonstrate a high level of competence before they are allowed to graduate. "There is no 'getting by' at WGU. If you don't know the material, you don't pass the assessments. If you don't pass the assessments, you don't graduate. It's that simple," said Bill.

Today, over 11,000 online students are enrolled in a WGU competency-based, online degree program in business, education, information technology, or health professions. For each program high standards of learning are clearly spelled out by expert councils, and students demonstrate their competency through rigorous assessments (exams, projects, assignments, etc.).

WGU students have greater flexibility, even compared to other online schools, and may be able to accelerate their time to completion based upon their prior education, existing competencies, and determination to proceed faster.

Bill used his college credit from a previous university, professional experience and current projects at work to accelerate his degree program and finished his undergraduate degree in only 30 months—that's a four-year degree in a fraction of the time he would have spent completing his degree at a "traditional" school.

Keeping tuition affordable is also crucial. WGU has developed a new financial model that keeps tuition much lower by utilizing existing courses and independent learning resources, supporting student success through personalized mentoring, and controlling administrative overhead costs. Even though WGU is a private, not state-supported school, tuition is competitive with state schools and is much lower than typically found at other online schools.

After graduating from WGU, Bill decided to pursue his MBA at a traditional brick-and-mortar university. Not long into his degree program Bill decided to return to WGU even after six graduate classes with a 4.0 GPA at what is considered a top business school in Southern California. "At WGU, it was much easier to balance business travel, career challenges, and schoolwork," says Bill. "Comparing WGU to this top-ranked school made me realize just how excellent the quality of education and personalization is at WGU. Despite the fact that it was online, I actually felt more engaged and more motivated to learn at WGU."

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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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