



Press Release: Online U Selection Tips, 11/9/09

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News Brief - 11/9/09

Western Governors University Offers Tips for Selecting an Online University

WGU, an online university, provides guidelines to help prospective students avoid "diploma mills"

Salt Lake City — For a growing number of degree-seekers, the idea of earning a college degree from an online university is becoming increasingly attractive.

Non-profit Western Governors University, www.wgu.edu, an innovator in online higher education, has developed a list of questions to help online degree seekers make informed, wise choices:

1. Does the school offer the degree program you need to advance your education and career?

If you're considering a teaching degree, will it prepare you to be licensed as a teacher? Is there a master's degree program that will help you progress in your profession?

2. Are the programs challenging and rigorous enough to be worth your time and expense?

Going to college requires a significant investment of time and money, so be sure to find out all you can about the coursework, quality of learning resources, and degree requirements.

3. Is the school accredited?

Online universities should have regional accreditation, which is the same accreditation given to campus-based schools like Harvard and Stanford. A good online school may also have national accreditation from the Distance Education and Training Council (DETC), and individual degree programs in subjects like Education and Nursing should also be accredited by bodies such as the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and by the Commission for Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE).

If the school you're considering is not accredited, your online college degree may not be respected by employers and graduate schools, so if it's not accredited, it's not for you.

4. Are employers willing to hire graduates of this online university?

Ask the enrollment staff at the university you're considering to share feedback (surveys, placement statistics, etc.) from employers who've hired their grads. If they can't provide this information, this could be a red flag.

5. How does the degree program work? Will you attend classes via webinar, study independently, be required to visit a physical campus?

Be sure you understand how you'll be expected to study, learn, and complete tests and assignments. Online universities use several different academic models:

- Traditional college courses, led by instructors, are delivered online, requiring students to attend at prescribed times and sometimes requiring group projects. School terms are generally divided into traditional semesters or quarters, and students may only start work on their degrees at the beginning of these terms. Students earn credit for time spent in class and completion of assignments, projects, and tests.
Competency-based programs, like those offered by Western Governors University, provide students with learning resources in degree subject matter, allowing students to study and learn on their own schedules, advancing in their degrees as they demonstrate mastery of the content through tests and other assessments rather than simply spending time in class.
Combined online/traditional programs, which require students to attend class both online and in person, are also available.

Be sure to consider your lifestyle, motivation, independent learning ability, and time available as you consider which academic model is best for you.

6. How much will it cost?

Unfortunately, some online universities, particularly the for-profits, have tuition that's twice as much as that of a state institution. While almost all offer financial aid in the form of student loans, make sure to choose wisely to avoid incurring unnecessary debt. And, students who wish to accelerate their degree programs should look for schools with programs that allow acceleration—this can help save overall costs. And, be sure to ask if the university offers scholarships.

7. What type of help and support does the school offer its students?

Because the student won't be on campus, it is important to make sure that the school provides the support and advising he or she needs to be successful and feel connected. Is each student assigned an advisor or mentor?

How often will the student be able to communicate with an advisor, and who will be available to provide extra help and support if needed?

Is there an online student community?

Are there learning communities for specific degree programs?

Are online study groups available?

"An online university can be the ideal solution for career-minded adults who want to get a bachelor's or master's degree, and there are some excellent schools who offer rigorous, challenging, and respected degree programs," said WGU Marketing and Enrollment Vice President Patrick Partridge. "Before you choose a school, make sure to do some good research to ensure you find a reputable university that offers the program you need and fits your personal learning style. By investing the time before you start, you help ensure that you can be successful and that the degree you earn will help you advance in your profession."

