

Western Governors University: Getting the word out about [online education](#) alternative  
Indiana has more than 1,000 students in school designed for adults  
By Mike Leonard 331-4368 | [mleonard@heraldt.com](mailto:mleonard@heraldt.com)  
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Allison Barber, Indiana chancellor of Western Governors University. Jeremy Hogan | Herald-Times

For some people, just getting a child or children off to school in the morning is a task that requires a breather afterwards.

For Melissa Tincher, it's the start of a grueling day of nonstop reading, writing and scholastic exercises before daughter Olivia gets home in the afternoon.

"I'm spending roughly six hours a day on my course [work](#), to the exclusion of everything else," she said recently. "Sometimes, especially with math, I feel like my brain's running out my ears. It's really intense."

The Brown County woman is not a typical Western Governors University student, in terms of the profile most often seen, but she is a good example of how the [online university](#) is helping nontraditional students get a higher education degree and work toward their career goals.

"We're a new option for the adult learner who needs a flexible and affordable model," WGU Indiana Chancellor Allison Barber said during a recent visit to Bloomington. "Not everyone has

the ability to attend a brick-and-mortar institution. So for them, no matter what their work schedule or family schedule is like, we can work with them.”

About 70 percent of WGU’s students are employed full-time and typically work on their [online classes](#) at night. Their instructors, all carefully screened, also work into the night and make themselves available to take emails and instant messages.

WGU was founded in 1997 by a group of governors including the late Frank O’Bannon of Indiana. The Hoosier state remains the eastern-most outpost of the original 19 states to establish WGU. But the reach of the online university now includes more than 20,000 students in all 50 states.

Indiana was the first state to establish its own subsidiary of the nonprofit university in 2010. It currently has more than 1,000 Hoosiers enrolled from 88 of the state’s 92 counties.

The WGU model brands itself as competency-based. “One of the things that is frustrating as heck for an adult learner is having to go back and take classes just for the sake of taking them,” Barber said. “We don’t teach you what you already know.”

Barber said that doesn’t mean students get credit for life experience. They have to pass tests to demonstrate their knowledge.

“I like to use the example of the person who has worked for 10 years as a bank teller and wants to move up in the organization,” she said. “There’s a good chance you’ll have computing skills so when you start out we include that in the assessment as we put together your customized (education) plan.”

Barber said it’s clear that there’s a large underserved population in Indiana. “There are roughly 730,000 people in this state with some college and no degree,” she said. “If you ask anyone in business or industry, completion is extremely important.”

The WGU chancellor said one study she’s seen shows that by 2018, 50 percent of the jobs in Indiana will require a bachelor’s degree. “That’s why we’re so urgent,” she said.

Brown County’s Tincher said she and her husband agreed she’d be a stay-at-home mom while their daughter was a pre-schooler and that unlike a lot of WGU students, she’s starting college for the first time. She’d previously worked as an insurance agent and passed all of the certifications necessary for work in that field, but said after time away from the business she realized she didn’t want to drive to Indianapolis to work in a corporate office but also didn’t want to go back to being an insurance agent.

“I’m in my mid-30s and I just now figured out what I want to do with my life when I grow up,” she said with a laugh. “When I realized my heart was in elementary education, I knew I wanted to get started right away and get moving on a fast track.”

She said she chose WGU after doing quite a bit of research on online education. “I didn’t want to buy a degree, as they say, and some online institutions are accused of that. One of the reasons I went with WGU is that they are the only online institution which is (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education) accredited,” Tincher said.

The Brown County student said she’s been impressed by rigor required to pass classes, the feedback from instructors and the mentoring WGU provides. Every student gets an academic mentor, which is another key selling point that distinguishes WGU from other schools. “I talk to my WGU mentor every week and she not only keeps track of what I’m doing but where I’m going,” Tincher said. “I’ve been very pleased with the one-on-one aspect of it.”

Tincher, like Barber (an Indiana University graduate), is eager to get the word out on WGU. “Hopefully, in the near future, I can say I go to WGU and not get the eye-roll from people who don’t fully respect the value you can get from an online institution.”

She means value in a qualitative sense. But at \$6,000 a year for a full-time classload, WGU also is among the least expensive higher education options available.

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