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Perry launches online university offering low-cost degrees

Perry launches online Texas university

Offering low-cost degrees, it will be part of a nonprofit founded by 19 governors

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SAN ANTONIO - Texas will have its own subsidiary of a national online university that offers low-cost degrees targeted at working adults, Gov. Rick Perry announced Wednesday.

Perry signed an executive order launching **Western Governors University Texas**, a subsidiary of the nonprofit Western Governors University. Founded in 1997 by 19 governors including former Texas Gov. **George W. Bush**, WGU is self-sustaining through tuition.

"WGU Texas provides another flexible, affordable way for Texans to fulfill their potential and contribute their talents for years and decades to come, without any need for state funding, Perry said.

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Unlike traditional universities that are based on accumulating credit hours, WGU students work at their own pace and move on when they have proven mastery of the subject matter. The average time to a bachelor's degree is 2½ years, and the average cost is \$15,000.

The university enrolls 25,000 students nationwide, including 1,800 from Texas.

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State Sen. **Judith Zaffirini**, D-Laredo, and State Rep. **Dan Branch**, R-Dallas, cheered the announcement, as did Texas Commissioner of Higher Education **Raymund Paredes**. **Rey Garcia**, president of the **Texas Association of Community Colleges**, said he would work with WGU to help students transfer seamlessly from community colleges to WGU.

In 2010, Indiana adopted WGU as part of its state higher education system. Becoming part of the Texas system will do wonders for promotion, said **Bob Mendenhall**, president of WGU.

"It certainly adds legitimacy. It says, 'This is something the state is behind, this has been vetted by people who know something about education,' " Mendenhall said.

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Nationwide, about 75 percent of WGU students are low-income, minority, first-generation or rural students. Tuition is a flat fee of \$5,780 per 12-month year, and students can take as many classes as they want.

Advancement is based on tests and assignments that prove mastery of the material, and students either pass or fail, they do not receive grades. Many of the degrees, such as nursing and education, require practicum in the classroom or a clinical setting.

At WGU, technology does the teaching through videos and interactive lessons. Faculty members are available via email for discussion and questions, and assignments are marked by an anonymous grading pool.

Most interaction with a "real human" is a mentor assigned to each student who acts as a personal coach.

To bring down cost and time to degree, WGU fundamentally changed the business model of higher education, Mendenhall said. Traditional universities, with their residence halls, football teams, laboratories and theaters, would have difficulty following in WGU's footsteps.

"You are not going to get a model at half the cost or a third of the cost unless you change everything," he said.

But as far as Perry is concerned, traditional universities are not off the hook for creating a \$10,000 bachelor's degree, said Catherine Frazier, a Perry spokeswoman.

"It should be an encouragement to them to show that more affordable degrees can be created," Frazier said.

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