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WGU pushes transfer students to graduate community college first

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Western Governors University is a favorite of the college completion crowd, with a competency-based approach that offers an attractive path to a degree for adult students. But now WGU is nudging its students toward graduation even before they enroll.

For example, WGU Texas is offering ^[1] a 5 percent tuition discount and other perks to students who transfer in from the state's two-year colleges, but only if they complete their associate degrees first.

"It's the idea of finishing what you started," said Mark David Milliron, WGU Texas's chancellor.

And it's not just WGU Texas. The parent university, which offers bachelor's and graduate degrees, has begun a national push to encourage students to complete their associate degree before enrolling. And it's seeing results. Two years ago, 35 percent of the university's incoming students held an associate or bachelor's degree. Now roughly half do, said Pat Partridge, Western Governor's chief marketing officer, who oversees marketing and admissions.

The nonprofit Western Governors is a relatively low-cost online ^[2] institution with self-paced academic programs. Students are tutored, not taught in formal classes, and can earn credits whenever they demonstrate competency in subject areas. The university primarily caters to nontraditional students, who are 36 years old on average.

Three states have "endorsed" Western Governors as a quasi-public institution. The Texas institution launched last year ^[3], joining existing ones in Washington and Indiana. It has enrolled 2,600 students so far.

WGU Texas this year partnered ^[3] with all of the state's community and technical colleges for its Finish to Go Further program ^[1], which waives the \$65 application fees and offers special scholarships of up to \$2,000 for transfer students who have earned their associate degree. Those students begin at the university with upper-division standing, and generally have all their lower-division credit requirements cleared.

Both WGU Indiana and Washington branch campuses have similar programs in place, including the 5 percent tuition discount, said Partridge. The university has statewide articulation agreements with community colleges in seven states, some of which include discounts and scholarships for associate degree holders, as well as "softer marketing partnerships" with 330 community colleges around the country, including large systems like Arizona's Maricopa Community College.

Western Governors has tried to limit its articulation agreements to states, mostly because of the complexity of hashing out and maintaining agreements with hundreds of individual two-year institutions, Partridge said.

The university's goal with the associate degree push is to "create smooth, credential rich, high-value pathways" for students, said Milliron, who was a high-ranking official ^[4] at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation before arriving at WGU Texas.

For Adults, Mostly

The program is not totally altruistic. It's a good lure for students. And those who take advantage of it are more likely to succeed at the university.

Milliron said a student who gets an associate degree and transfers in is twice as likely to finish a bachelor's degree at WGU Texas. "We get to be in the path of completion," he said.

While all 50 colleges in the Texas Association of Community Colleges are participants, and have articulation agreements with the university, officials at WGU Texas said they have focused on a dozen larger colleges that have expressed the strongest interest in the program. Those include Houston Community College and Austin Community College.

Community colleges like it when four-year institutions encourage associate degree completion. That's because it minimizes the downside of having students transfer, which is that they often bolt after just completing one year.

Rey Garcia, the community college association's CEO and president, said he hopes the agreement with WGU Texas can serve as a framework for similar arrangements between the two-year institutions and the state's traditional public universities.

"We have started those conversations and are hopeful that we can reach agreements that are, at the very least, similar in spirit in placing a high value and priority on community college transfer students who complete an associate degree," he said in an e-mail.

Milliron and Partridge stress that the articulation agreements do not mean that Western Governors is competing with public universities. That's because Western Governors focuses on adult students, while public universities mostly enroll 18- to 24-year-olds.

"We don't really position ourselves as the alternative to the state school," Partridge said. "Most of the four-year schools get that."

The Western Governors model is designed to attract students who need alternatives to the traditional campus approach and, for many of them, who may have gotten off track on their way to a degree.

"We know who our student population is," Milliron said in a written statement, "and we are best suited for transfer students who are accessing community colleges online with flexible models for working adults."

Honoring Transfer Credits

Part of the draw for community colleges in teaming with Western Governors is that the university generally honors all transfer credits from accredited two-year institutions.

The university is "broadly generous in our transfer and acceptance of courses," said Partridge.

That isn't always the case at public universities, which generally reject some transfer credits because courses do not align with their own – even for students hailing from in-state community colleges. This can be a source of tension for community colleges, which sometimes accuse four-year institutions of snobbery.

At the City University of New York, for example, faculty at four-year institutions have clashed with system administrators over a new core curriculum that would encourage the acceptance of more transfer credit from community colleges by four-year institutions within the system. (That power struggle is about more than transfer policies, of course.)

Western Governors is hardly the first university to encourage associate degree completion by transfer students, said Stephen G. Katsinas, director of the University of Alabama's Education Policy Center. In Kansas, for example, public institutions are required to accept at least 60 credits for associate degrees earned at other in-state institutions.

But Katsinas said financial incentives for students are becoming more common in transfer agreements. And given the deep budget cuts in many states, public universities are struggling to meet student demand. That helps open the door for Western Governors.

There are instances where Western Governors will reject a transfer course because it falls far from the subject matter of the equivalent course at the university. That's rare, though, Partridge said.

By trusting community colleges on transfer, the university has been able to "co-brand" with community college partners and get more mileage with its marketing to students. A tuition discount can be attractive. And Partridge said the university must often compete in crowded markets for students, often with high-end for-profits, like the University of Phoenix, which have much bigger advertising budgets.

Western Governors' leaders also say they want to pitch in on the national "completion agenda." And the new agreements with community colleges will benefit the university's students who don't make it to the finish line.

"It makes the pathway really simple and clear," Milliron said. But it also "gives them a backstop in case life happens."

Community Colleges ^[5]

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Links:

[1] <http://texas.wgu.edu/cc>

[2]

https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2011/05/09/western_governors_university_and_online_competency_based_learning_model_gain_traction

[3] https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2011/08/04/governor_perry_partners_with_western_governors_university

[4] https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2011/09/07/several_top_officials_leave_gates_foundation_s_higher_education_team

[5] https://www.insidehighered.com/news/focus/community_colleges

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