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## Going Back to School Online, How to Make Sure Your Degree Counts, 8/27/12



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### News Brief - 8/27/12

#### Going Back to School Online: How to Make Sure Your Degree Counts

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#### Nonprofit online university offers guidelines for finding an online degree program

SALT LAKE CITY — For many working adults, finishing a bachelor's or master's degree can mean new opportunities—a better job, greater earning potential, or even a new career. And increasingly, adults who must balance work and family responsibilities are choosing online options because they need the flexibility that bricks-and-mortar universities seldom provide.

With many Americans thinking of going back to school this time of year, it is important to be sure they're earning degrees that will be respected by employers and other academic institutions. Nonprofit and online Western Governors University, [www.wgu.edu](http://www.wgu.edu), offers this checklist for selecting the right college:

- **Choose the right degree.** You want to make sure that the degree you earn will help you meet your career objectives. If you are already working in your chosen field, this should be easy. For example, if you're a teacher, you'll want to consider a master's degree in education, or if you are already a nurse, a master's in nursing is a logical choice. If your goal is moving into a better job or a different field, choose a degree that employers will find relevant. For example, a degree in business or information technology may be more useful than one in general studies or liberal arts.
- **Make a list of online universities.** The best way to build that list is to search online. Be sure your list focuses on the degree program you're looking for. Try searches like "online IT degree" or "online MSN programs."
- **Ask the right questions.**
  - *Is the university accredited?* The U.S. Department of Education publishes a list of nationally recognized accrediting agencies that the Department has determined to be reliable authorities. Accreditation is a **must-have** to ensure that employers and other academic institutions will respect and recognize your degree.
  - *What is the university's background? Its ownership?* Make sure you understand whether the school is part of a privately or publicly held company or a nonprofit institution. This may not be the factor that governs your choice, but it is important to know all you can about the university you select. Many for-profit institutions offer quality programs, but they may dedicate more resources to marketing and recruitment, making tuition higher.
  - *How will you learn?* Most online universities use technology to distribute traditional classroom education—classes that are led by a professor or instructor with a fixed schedule and syllabus. While the classes are usually scheduled to accommodate working adults, you'll move through the course at a set pace. You may want to consider a competency-based approach to learning, which will allow you to move at your own pace and advance when you demonstrate your mastery of subject matter.
  - *What kind of help and support will I have?* For many students, going to college online, without the interaction provided by an on-campus experience, can be a daunting prospect. Be sure to ask how you will interact with the faculty and what kind of support is available.
  - *It's online—will I connect with other students, and if so, how?* Although you are choosing to go to college online, interacting with other students can enrich your learning experience and help you feel connected. Online universities are developing a number of ways for students to connect through chat rooms, webinars, and social media—it is important to find out what the school is doing to engage and connect with students.
  - *How much will it cost?* Tuition at online universities varies widely, from approximately the same cost as a public university to more than twice as much. Higher cost does not necessarily mean higher quality at an online college, so be sure to understand all of the costs—tuition, books, and fees—before you make your decision. Another factor in your cost consideration should be the length of time you expect to take to complete your degree. The longer it takes, the more it is likely to cost.
  - *How will you pay for your degree program?* Depending on your income, you may be eligible for a government grant, particularly a Pell grant, to help pay for your education. A federal student loan may also be an option, but take care not to borrow more than you need or incur too much debt. If you expect to use financial aid, be sure to find out whether the school you're considering is eligible.
  - *Will my degree be respected by employers?* If you want your degree to count, make sure to answer this question before you choose your school. Ask for information about alumni placements, employer surveys, and graduate rankings on national test scores.

Now, take time for one more step. Spend some time on Facebook, Twitter, blogs, etc., to learn what students and graduates have to say. It will be time well spent.

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### NBC News Reports on WGU



"The dreams of 19 governors have become [WGU Grad Angie Gonzalez's] dream fulfilled."

—Tom Costello  
NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams

[Watch the video](#) >

### Featured News

Find out why Fast Company calls WGU one of the world's 50 most-innovative companies, CNN says we're "a school without boundaries," and major news outlets from NPR to Bloomberg BusinessWeek are touting WGU's "potential to transform the higher education industry."

[Read about WGU in the news](#) >

### Why We Are Different

WGU has an innovative learning model for helping working adults earn bachelor's and master's degrees. Learn more about how it can help you.

[Watch the video](#) >

### Take the Quiz

Is WGU a Good Fit For You?

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#### COLLEGE OF BUSINESS

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- Business Master's Degrees

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- WGU Missouri
- WGU Tennessee

#### COLLEGE OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

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- IT Master's Degrees

#### COLLEGE OF HEALTH PROFESSIONS

- Healthcare Bachelor's Degrees
- Healthcare Master's Degrees

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