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WGU: Government's smart innovation of higher ed

Posted by Lynne K. Varner



Robert Mendenhall, president, Western Governors University; Jean Floten, chancellor of the Washington branch of WGU.

Many of us have been watching technology's dramatic impact on higher education, most notably in distance and online learning. The shift away from traditional campus-based learning is opening college up to millions who otherwise would not have had the opportunity.

An arbiter of innovation weighs in. Fast Company magazine recently included Western Governor's University on its list of the 50 most innovative companies in the world. WGU's enrollment boom and steady affordable tuition in an era of almost annual tuition hikes everywhere else were praised by the business magazine.

There will always be 19-year-olds for whom a bricks-and-mortar college experience offers the best, and most transcendent, experience. But for older students returning to complete a degree, or for professionals making a mid-career shift, virtual learning fits schedules filled with family and work responsibilities. The average age of a WGU student is 37.

The proof is in enrollment. WGU Branches in Indiana, Washington and Texas have boosted enrollment to 40,000, meanwhile tuition has held steady at \$6,000 since 2008. Compare that with public university tuition which has been rising about 5 percent a year. In Washington state, in-state tuition has increased by 77 percent at Eastern Washington University and by 107 percent at the University of Washington.

WGU is innovation at its sharpest, harnessing state governments' tremendous capacity and technology's ability to provide quality online classes and sophisticated software personalizing learning and testing. An idea by 19 U.S. governors is now the nation's leading provider of master's degrees (and the fourth largest of bachelor's) in math education. Below two school leaders capture what I think is the essence of WGU's impact on broadening access to higher ed and making it affordable.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qzdpQbEw3IE>

Photo: Staff Photographer/The Seattle Times

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