

News Releases

Haslam Launches WGU Tennessee, 7/9/13

Memorandum of Understanding establishes online, competency-based university

NASHVILLE — Tennessee Gov. Bill Haslam today launched WGU Tennessee — <http://tennessee.wgu.edu/> — an online, competency-based university aimed at expanding access to higher education for Tennesseans.

He was joined by Western Governors University President Robert W. Mendenhall to sign the memorandum of understanding that officially establishes the university in Tennessee.

“WGU Tennessee will give adult students with some college credits the opportunity to earn a degree,” [Haslam said](#). "Today in Tennessee, only 32 percent of our citizens have a two-year degree or higher, and our goal is to raise that number to 55 percent by 2025. We're calling it the 'Drive to 55,' and WGU Tennessee will play an important role in our success.”

The event was held at HealthStream, a leading provider of workforce development and education solutions for the healthcare industry based in Nashville. The governor and Mendenhall were joined by the Gates Foundation's Director of Postsecondary Success Dan Greenstein and HealthStream CEO Robert A. Frist, Jr.

WGU Tennessee was established to meet the needs of working adults who are looking to complete a bachelor’s or master’s degree to advance their careers. WGU Tennessee offers accredited bachelor’s and master’s degree programs in business, K-12 teacher education, information technology, and health professions, including nursing. WGU Tennessee was created through a partnership between the state of Tennessee and nationally recognized Western Governors University.

Dr. Kimberly Estep will serve as WGU Tennessee’s first chancellor. Dr. Estep joins the university after serving as vice president for academic affairs and student services at Nashville State Community College. A graduate of Auburn University, Dr. Estep has more than 25 years' experience in higher education as both a professor and an administrator. She will be based in WGU Tennessee’s main office in Nashville but will work with higher education, community, and business leaders throughout the state to increase awareness and establish partnerships.

In addition, the governor is in the process of appointing senior business, community, and higher education leaders from across the state to the WGU Tennessee Advisory Board, including:

- John Ingram (Chair), Chairman, Ingram Industries, Nashville
- Jerry Askew, Senior VP, Government Relations, Tennova, Knoxville
- Shannon Brown, Senior VP/Chief Human Resources and Diversity Officer, FedEx Express, Memphis
- David A. Golden, Senior Vice President, Chief Legal Officer, and Corporate Secretary, Eastman, Kingsport
- Thom Mason, Director, Oak Ridge National Laboratory, Oak Ridge
- Jim McIntyre, Superintendent, Knoxville County Schools, Knoxville
- Ralph Schulz, President & CEO, Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce, Nashville
- John Steele, Senior VP, Human Resources, HCA, Nashville
- Blair Taylor, CEO, Memphis Tomorrow, Memphis
- Karen Ward, Senior VP/Chief Human Resources Officer, BlueCross BlueShield of Tennessee, Chattanooga

WGU Tennessee uses an innovative learning model called competency-based education. Rather than earning degrees based on credit hours or time spent in class, students are required to demonstrate competency in degree subject matter. They advance by writing papers, completing assignments, and passing exams that demonstrate their knowledge of required subject matter.

Learning is individualized and guided by the one-on-one support of a faculty mentor. Degree programs are rigorous and challenging but designed to allow students to schedule their studies to accommodate work and family obligations. Tuition is approximately \$6,000 per year for most degree programs, regardless of how many courses a student completes.

WGU Tennessee is being established with a one-time appropriation from the state of Tennessee of \$5 million and a \$750,000 grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. After initial startup, WGU Tennessee will be self-sustaining on tuition with no ongoing funding from the state.

[Legislation](#) was passed this year to create WGU Tennessee. Sponsors of the bill included Senate Majority Leader Mark Norris (R-Collierville), House Majority Leader Gerald McCormick (R-Chattanooga), and Rep. Susan Lynn (R-Mt. Juliet).

Currently, there are 700 WGU students in Tennessee who will now become part of WGU Tennessee. Creation of WGU Tennessee will provide the chancellor and other faculty and staff members in Tennessee to expand student outreach and support throughout the state.

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