

An affordable degree? You're not dreaming

08/09/13 08:15 AM – UPDATED 02/20/14 02:28 PM

By Michele Richinick

Forget the four years of semester-long classes and 120 credit hours. Students and administrators at online universities are arguing that the courses allow students to advance at their own pace by successfully completing assessments that measure competencies.

“A lot of times students are disheartened with school because they are sitting there learning something that has nothing to do with the real world,” Erica Martin-Cole, who graduated from Western Governors University, an online school, earlier this year with a bachelor’s degree in information technology, told msnbc.

WGU, a nonprofit online university, created an educational model that allows students to move quickly through curriculum they already understand to focus on their weak knowledge areas. Objective and performance tests measure a student’s level for advancement.

“This really turned that upside down and said, ‘Let’s define what we expect graduates to know and are able to do,’ ” WGU President Robert Mendenhall told msnbc about the nontraditional model of education.

Nineteen U.S. governors founded the university in 1997 with hopes of adding affordable capacities to educational systems that don’t require state money. The university aims to make higher education more accessible, affordable, and accountable for working professionals. Tuition costs \$6,000 a year, a price the university has maintained for the past five years.

WGU students, who range in age from 16 to 83 and usually work full-time jobs, can take graduation assessment tests when they feel ready. The university works with employers to define the level of competency a graduate should have in a certain field. A WGU student graduates – on average – in three years, compared with the national average of five.

“I was getting so much more out of it versus if I went to another school, a name-brand school,” said Martin-Cole, 38, of Bushkill, Pa. She received 14 certifications in May along with her degree.



Employees make and distribute online courses for a consortium of universities on March 13, 2013 in New York, N.Y. **Melanie Stetson Freeman/The Christian Science Monitor/Getty**

The university, whose headquarters are in Utah, offers about 50 bachelor's and master's degree programs in business, information technology, teacher education, or healthcare including nursing. Since classes are online, students typically don't meet their peers and the faculty unless they choose to attend commencement. But most students develop close relationships with faculty and a mentor, who they are in contact with each week, Mendenhall said.

"I don't think they suffer at all. I think it reflects the realities of today's life," he said. "They're talking on the phone, they're web-conferencing, they're Skyping, they're Instant messaging....they're very engaged and connected, just virtually."

There are currently about 40,000 students enrolled at WGU in all 50 states across the country and around the world in the U.S. military, Mendenhall said. About 25,000 students have graduated since the university's establishment.

Other colleges, including the Sawyer Business School at Suffolk University, University of Phoenix, and Kaplan University also offer convenient online degree programs for working professionals. But they continue to use the traditional model of higher education.

"[WGU] was created by the governors to meet the needs of these working adults with some college and no degree," Mendenhall said. "I think our goals are really to get better and better at meeting the needs of these kinds of students, to continue to use technology, to continue the way we deliver education."

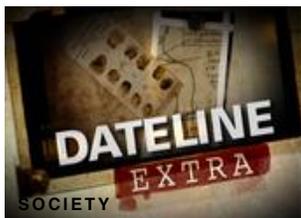
Be sure to read other stories about innovation and watch web-exclusive interviews right here in the [Afternoon MoJoe](#) section of the website.

Explore: Afternoon MoJoe, Education and Society

[Early-learning app counters low test scores](#)

['Thinking Outside the Box' in reform](#)

More Like This



[Dateline Extra with Tamron Hall on MSNBC](#)



[National Day of Action for gun reform](#)



[Terror strikes Turkey](#)



[Trump suddenly weakens stance on Muslim ban](#)