

Teacher-Prep Rankings Put Spotlight on Online Degree Program

By [Ellen Wexler](#) on June 25, 2014 11:52 AM

The Western Governors University Teachers College has no grades, credit requirements, or formal instructors. It costs \$6,000 a year, and *U.S. News and World Report* just ranked it the best secondary-education program for teachers in the country.

An exclusively online university based in Salt Lake City, Utah, Western Governors [ranked first in secondary education](#) out of a pool of 2,500 teacher-education programs, according to a report released Tuesday. Titled *Teacher Prep Review*, the annual report is a collaboration between *U.S. News and World Report* and the National Council on Teacher Quality.

This is the report's second year, and it's been controversial from the start. When the first edition of the report came out a year ago, [over 1,000 news stories](#) were published within 48 hours. Critics [complained](#) that NCTQ's evaluation methodology lacked transparency and validation and didn't include all relevant factors. NCTQ originally used a rating system instead of a ranking system, and it gave out low ratings to almost all of the institutions it evaluated. Only four of the 2,500 programs earned four stars.

Western Governors got three stars under last year's system. This year, [according to NCTQ](#), the university "had nearly perfect scores across the board." NCTQ [based the score](#) on four "key standards" (student selection criteria, middle school content knowledge, high school content knowledge, and student teaching) and three "booster standards" (classroom management, secondary methods, and outcomes). The only standard Western Governors didn't score perfectly in was outcomes, which has to do with gathering information from program graduates and their employers.

The 11,000 students at Western Governors don't take traditional classes, and there is no required amount of time they need to spend on their work. How, then, does the university decide that a student has spent enough time in the program, and when is she ready to graduate?

Their answer: Whenever the student knows the material, however long (or not so long) that takes.

Western Governors is a competency-based university, which means that it measures progress based on what students know, not how long they've spent on their studies. The university [lists time estimates for each academic program](#), but says that the length of the program really depends on the students—how many transfer credits they have, how motivated they are, how much time they can spend on the program each week, and how much they already know coming in.

Most undergraduate students spend between two and five years in the education program, but there can be outliers. Last year, for example, a student at a similar competency-based program [finished an](#)

[associate's degree in less than 100 days.](#)

That student was 21, but [most students at Western Governors are older](#). On average, they are around 36 years old, and 70 to 80 percent of them come from low-income or minority backgrounds, or are the first in their families to attend college.

After enrolling in the school, [each student is paired with a student mentor](#). The mentors work one-on-one with students, helping them plan out their schedule and showing them how to use the university's resources. Students use textbooks, online tutorials, simulations, and online classes to learn the material. They are never required to spend time relearning material they already know—but they are required to prove that they know it.

Since classroom time isn't measured, students [are required to pass a series of assessments](#) in order to graduate. Some of the assessments are multiple-choice tests, but depending on the program, some require students to write research papers, respond to case studies, or design sample lesson plans. And every education-school program [requires 12-20 weeks of student teaching](#).

"For each degree, we define what we expect a graduate to know and be able to do," university President Bob Mendenhall [told NPR](#). "We develop the assessments to measure that. When they've demonstrated they've mastered all the competencies, they graduate."

If they're ready, students can take the assessments without spending any time studying the material. In a competency-based program, a student who graduates in 100 days masters the same skills as a student who graduates in two years. It doesn't matter that they prepared for the assessments differently, as long as they both passed.

And when students are able to graduate faster, the cost of their education goes down. Students pay a fixed tuition (which hasn't increased since 2008) for each semester they are enrolled in the program. They can complete as much work as they'd like during that time.

The NCTQ report praised Western Governors as being "accessible to any aspiring teacher in the nation." And according to Western Governors dean Phillip Schmidt, education leaders who hadn't taken online learning seriously in the past are changing their minds.

"I don't mean it to sound smug," Schmidt [told Vox](#), "but I think people have come to believe that by and large what we do is good for the profession."