



# Western Governors University: High-quality, low-cost college for Oklahomans

BY BRANDON DUTCHER, AND FRANK KEATING • Published: January 4, 2015 12:00 AM CDT

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As Oklahoma lawmakers begin their annual wrestling match with the state budget, they have an opportunity to consider innovative and more efficient ways to deliver basic services.

One such innovation, Western Governors University, was created 17 years ago by a bipartisan group of governors in the western United States. All agreed that the focus must be on uncompromised excellence with a special focus on science, technology, English and math. And that's what was done.

Today, WGU students are pursuing online degrees in education, business, information technology and health fields.

“WGU does not receive any state government subsidy and is totally dependent on student tuition for funding,” says Vance Fried, a research fellow at the Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs. “Yet WGU’s tuition is substantially lower than in-state tuition at Oklahoma’s public regional colleges.”

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Fried, an entrepreneurship professor at Oklahoma State University, points out that WGU’s annual tuition is around \$4,000. “Compare this to the University of Central Oklahoma, for example, where in-state tuition is \$7,230 (tuition and mandatory fees for a business undergraduate taking 30 hours in a year). In addition, the state gives UCO about \$8,460 to subsidize each in-state student.

“So a student saves \$3,230 by going to WGU. Oklahoma taxpayers save \$8,460. Indeed, WGU is so much cheaper that the state could pay the

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But what about quality? This year the National Council on Teacher Quality ranked WGU's secondary-teacher-preparation program as *the best in the nation*.<sup>By</sup> way of comparison, Oklahoma's top performers were the University of Oklahoma (tied for 57th) and Northwestern Oklahoma State University (tied for 87th).

In 2013, WGU conferred more degrees in STEM education than any other institution in the nation. Unsurprisingly (given that WGU is competency-based), surveys of employers who've hired WGU graduates show that 99 percent say they meet or exceed their expectations.

For far too long, our annual state budgeting process has been one of constantly robbing one function to increase another, with the result that both often deliver poor service to the taxpayers.

We continue to plow ahead spending vast sums on service-delivery models that often date to 1907. And we continue to subsidize several institutions where fewer than a third of the students manage to graduate, even in six years.

Is this a wise use of resources? The dollars that policymakers extract each year from taxpayers are precious. Isn't it time they looked for better and more efficient ways to spend them?

For example, policymakers could simply provide vouchers to encourage students to attend WGU and similar high-quality, low-cost schools. Or, following the lead of Indiana, Texas, Washington, Tennessee, and Missouri, they could enter into partnership with WGU.

Making college tuition-free for some Oklahomans while simultaneously saving the state money seems like a win-win to us.

Dutcher is senior vice president at the Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs. Keating, a Republican, was governor of Oklahoma from 1995 to 2003.

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