



(<https://www.insidehighered.com>)

---

## Western Governors' deepening partnership with StraighterLine creates a new path to completion

Submitted by Paul Fain on January 6, 2015 - 3:00am

Like most colleges, online institutions are under pressure to improve their graduation rates. Some are getting more selective about which students they admit, turning away those who appear less likely to complete.

But rather than just shutting its virtual doors to applicants, Western Governors University has begun referring underprepared students to StraighterLine, an unaccredited online course provider that does not offer degrees.

“We can hand those students off,” said Daren Upham, vice president for enrollment at Western Governors, “to help them gain those skills at a much lower cost than we can provide.”

The university admits 94 percent of students who have completed at least two StraighterLine courses. And year-to-year retention rates for StraighterLine course completers at Western Governors top 90 percent, Upham said.

“They’re very successful once they’re here,” he said.

Other institutions, including a few large for-profits, have explored similar referral relationships with StraighterLine, said Burck Smith, the company’s CEO and founder.

StraighterLine has also bulked up its ties to more than 80 partner colleges. Those institutions agree to honor the American Council on Education’s credit recommendations for students who completing StraighterLine courses. And a group of 11 institutions <sup>[1]</sup>, which include nonprofits, for-profits and a public university, now offer scholarships for students who pass four or more of the Baltimore-based company’s courses.

In essence, StraighterLine can be a sort of low-risk, low-cost trial period for online students.

Its fee structure <sup>[2]</sup> is a subscription model of \$99 per month, which can be canceled any time. Courses are typically \$49. Two lessons of each course are free, and students can get a full refund if they do not take any assessments.

Western Governors is also relatively affordable <sup>[3]</sup>, with six-month terms in most programs ranging from \$2,890 to \$3,250 in tuition and fees, including textbooks and other course material. But a student could take five StraighterLine courses over six months for \$839 in tuition (its recommended e-textbooks are relatively affordable, too).

StraighterLine lacks federal aid eligibility, which means it can't run afoul of regulations that require staying above certain loan-default rates or meeting "gainful employment" rules. Its students don't eat into their Pell Grants at StraighterLine. And the low cost keeps them from running up substantial debt, which has largely kept the company out of the crosshairs of student and consumer advocates.

A couple of years ago the University of Phoenix and Kaplan University began offering free trial periods, costing both companies a lot of revenue but saving students money and time. Even critics such as Sen. Tom Harkin, an Iowa Democrat, praised the trial periods. (*Note: This paragraph has been changed from earlier version, which included an erroneous reference to the Phoenix trial period.*)

Western Governors' partnership with StraighterLine achieves a similar purpose by outsourcing this role. The online course provider handles some of the remediation for perspective WGU students, and also prepares them to succeed in a self-paced, competency-based environment.

The nonprofit Western Governors is fully online. All of its bachelor's and master's degrees, many of which are in business or teacher licensure disciplines, are competency-based. Students are assigned a mentor as they work through course material and take assessments. The university also employs subject-matter experts as "course mentors." Full-time faculty members design curriculums and assessments.

Competency-based education is becoming popular <sup>[4]</sup>, with more than 200 institutions creating new programs. Yet it remains a substantial departure from traditional higher education. With a similar course structure, StraighterLine is a proving ground for potential WGU students, who are 36 years old on average.

"It's a great fit for them," said Upham.

### **Path to Completion**

Western Governors remains a mostly open-access institution. But it often does not admit applicants who hold less than 12 college credits, particularly if they lack credits in writing and mathematics. Previous college experience means an adult student is more likely to thrive at the university, Upham said.

That rule isn't absolute, however. WGU's admissions metrics vary by program. And the university requires applicants to take a questionnaire that asks about their work experience and how much time they can spend working toward a degree.

"We take the whole students' background into consideration," said Upham.

The university steers students who are not admitted to StraighterLine, as well as recommending other options. Upham said one reason is WGU's confidence in the quality of the course provider's offerings.

Four years ago *Inside Higher Ed* ran a series of articles <sup>[5]</sup> that found academic problems with some of StraighterLine's courses. Smith, however, said the company's current roster of 40-plus general-education courses has passed multiple reviews by the American Council Education. Those reviews, which are conducted by academics, are the basis for council-issued credit recommendations.

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has recognized <sup>[6]</sup> StraighterLine's quality. And the Council for Aid to Education, which designs student assessments, built some of the tests StraighterLine students take.

"The course experience is good," Smith said. "It's proven."

Students who arrive at StraighterLine and say they are interested in enrolling eventually at Western Governors take courses through a “co-branded” online portal, Smith said. That way the path back to WGU is clearer. And because StraighterLine doesn’t issue degrees, the two institutions aren’t really competitors.

As a result, Western Governors is one of StraighterLine’s scholarship partners. Those discounts [7] can knock up to 38 percent, or roughly \$9,000, off the total cost of a bachelor’s degree from the university.

Roughly 15,000 students will take StraighterLine courses this year. Only half of them will complete a course.

Yet non-completers face few of the consequences that their peers do when they drop out of an accredited, degree-issuing college, particularly those who take out loans or federal grants. In some ways StraighterLine is more like a massive open online course provider -- albeit one that isn't free and also offers a path to college credits. And its completion rates generally top those of Coursera, Udacity or edX.

StraighterLine’s approach “gets to the question of what completion rates mean,” said Smith. Without taxpayer money involved, and with few risks and costs for students, he said, “the completion rate is really the wrong metric” to judge StraighterLine.

Accreditation and Student Learning [8]  
Partnerships With Nonprofit Colleges [9]

---

**Source URL:** <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/01/06/western-governors-deepening-partnership-straighterline-creates-new-path-completion?width=775&height=500&iframe=true>

**Links:**

- [1] <https://www.straighterline.com/scholarships/>
- [2] <http://www.straighterline.com/how-it-works/how-much-does-it-cost/>
- [3] [http://www.wgu.edu/tuition\\_financial\\_aid/tuition](http://www.wgu.edu/tuition_financial_aid/tuition)
- [4] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/10/28/competency-based-education-arrives-three-major-public-institutions>
- [5] [https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2010/12/16/review\\_of\\_straighterline\\_online\\_courses](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2010/12/16/review_of_straighterline_online_courses)
- [6] <http://www.prweb.com/releases/2014/10/prweb12210661.htm>
- [7] <https://www.straighterline.com/colleges/partner-colleges/western-governors-university/scholarships/>
- [8] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/news-sections/accreditation-and-student-learning>
- [9] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/news-sections/partnerships-nonprofit-colleges>

undefined  
undefined