

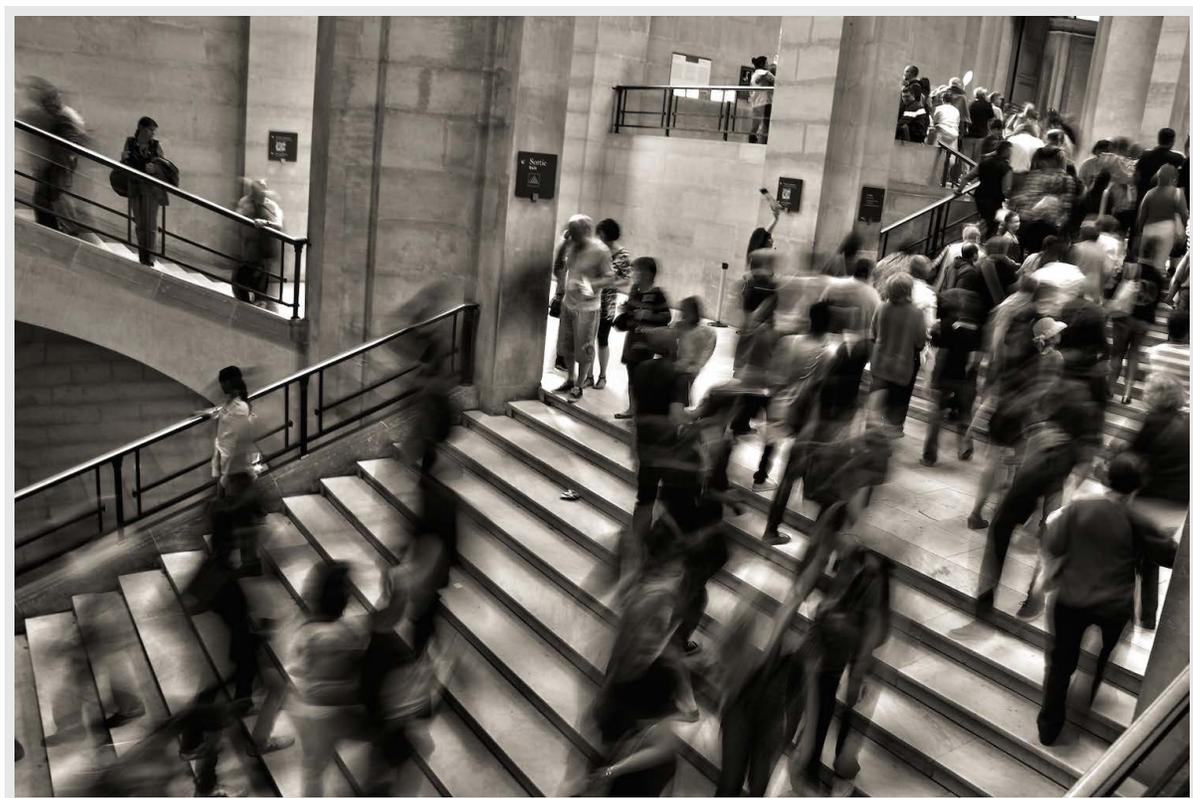
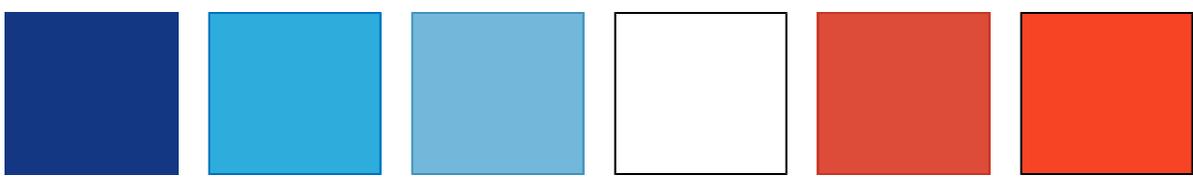


APPLIED AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

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The First in a Crowded Room: How WGU Can Continue to Stand Out in the Competency Era

Sally Johnstone | President, National Center for Higher Education Management Systems



Differentiation is not as important to leaders at Western Governors University as offering a best-in-class student experience while helping to create nationwide access to competency-based programming.

Competency-based education, once a peripheral and little-known pathway to a postsecondary credential, burst onto the higher education scene a few years ago and has not disappeared. Leaving claims of “flash-in-the-pan” in the dirt, colleges and universities across the United States have been aggressively launching competency-based programs of their own. This sudden burst in popularity has not been lost on leaders at Western Governors University (WGU), an institution that has been providing competency-based programming since 1998. In this interview, Sally Johnstone reflects on the role WGU has played in competency-based education’s explosion in popularity and shares her thoughts on how the institution can continue to stand out now that these programs are becoming commonplace.

The EvoLLLution (Evo): What were some of the unique advantages of being one of the few institutions offering competency-based pathways to credentials?

Sally Johnstone (SJ): To some extent, we were in a position of defining how things work but there are both advantages and disadvantages to this.

On the one hand, there were no roadmaps to follow. We were designing the whole framework before it really existed, we used all of the research that our team was aware of discussing what works and what’s really critical to supporting student success in some kind of online program—especially when you put the students into a position where they’re going to be able to work at their own pace.

The advantage, of course, was we got to create the roadmap. But the disadvantage was this lack of roadmap.

Evo: We’re seeing so many new competency-based programs popping up at institutions across the U.S. and across institution models as well. What are some of the aspects of those programs that have really impressed you and what are some of the aspects that need work?

SJ: Almost every new competency-based program that’s coming out has sent representatives to WGU to learn what we do. It’s all based on a WGU model and it’s really interesting to see how they adapt it.

Over the past three years I’ve been working with a collection of community colleges across the U.S. We’re helping them understand the WGU model, and what’s really impressed me is how they are taking parts of it and making it work in their own environment. There are pluses and minuses to that but it helps shed light on the evolution of a CBE-type program when you start with a very traditional program. With community colleges, they have in some cases very stringent regulations from the state or their district or their system with regard to the length of the academic term or the tuition rate.

There’s a whole host of policy, regulatory and practice issues that have to be accommodated from a traditional institution’s perspective. You can’t do it all overnight. What’s really impressing me are the stages of evolution—going from business as usual into adapting the WGU CBE model to really work for them.

Evo: How is Western Governors University adapting to differentiate itself as the competency-base label becomes more popular?

SJ: In a lot of ways, WGU isn't trying to differentiate itself. Instead, we are trying to do what we have always done better than ever. As more people become aware of competency-based education, there are others out there that are helping advocate for different ways of doing things and making it more recognizable and accepted both among the public and also among the policy makers.

We are continuing to do what we've always done but we're able to do it at a faster pace because we have more and more students coming to us, which allows us to work on really refining the quality of the learning experience for the student. As the whole concept of CBE has become more recognized and well known, we can adapt the nuances that are coming out of research on social support networks and personalized learning systems to really increase the quality of the experience for our students.

We're at least a decade ahead of everybody else out there. We're constantly innovating and all of the innovation is moving in the direction of our original charter, which was providing high quality, affordable, competency-based opportunities for postsecondary education.

Evo: What impact has the proliferation of competency-based programs had on public recognition and trust in this modality?

SJ: It hasn't moved the needle on public recognition. When you ask people out in the world who don't read the higher education literature, they don't know what you're talking about. Part of that is why most of these other programs have a flashy title like "the flex-program" or the "self-paced program" because the phrase 'competency-based' really doesn't have any impact. When WGU starts talking to students, the students don't care that it's competency-based. What they care about is that their pathway towards achieving a degree is going to be very straightforward, it will be focused on fully supporting their individual needs and they'll have really high-quality learning resources as well as support systems.

Evo: Looking to the future, how do you think the competency-based market will expand and what role do you expect WGU to play in the growing space?

SJ: On the one hand, it will expand. It's not going to take over everything but there's a big push for greater accountability from higher ed institutions. Competency-based education—or the programs within a competency-based framework that lead into the workplace—are what people are trying to focus on.

In the U.S. they're saying, "If this is a program that's supposed to lead to a real job, is it priced reasonably for the job graduates can expect to get?" In addition to that, we're conscious of whether a program's outcomes are actually aligned with what is needed in the workforce. As soon as you put this in the context of competency-based programs, you can answer all these

questions because you've clearly outlined the learning objectives. You have very explicit expectations of students and all students have to demonstrate mastery of the material before they actually graduate. That's what becomes very useful when you're talking about having the level of transparency that public policymakers are asking for right now. Another element of that is the colleges with which we've been working have all found that their students are persisting more in their CBE programs than in the face-to-face and online programs.

It's not hard to envision WGU continuing to play a leadership role because we are the leader in the field. Nobody else has 60,000 students and all the kinds of information and frameworks that we have in terms of what we've learned over the past two decades of what works and doesn't work. And we're sharing this learning. In October, we're launching a web series that will run October through May and it's about lessons learned as you're adopting CBE programs into your more traditional settings. Those will be open and available to the world because they're supported by grants from the federal government and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. In addition to that, in the first quarter of 2016, we're launching the new *Journal for Competency-Based Education*. That will be a vehicle to allow the sharing of good, solid empirical research as well as theoretical frameworks that are evolving in a way that will assist in the rational evolution of CBE.

The whole framework of creating WGU was to assist working adults who need services in ways that traditional institutions can't offer them.

Evo: Is there anything you'd like to add about the growth of the competency-based education space and how WGU is working to help other institutions not only enter but also be successful in this market?

SJ: WGU's primary mission is to help students; it's not to help other institutions. We have other sources we can use to assist other institutions, but we're trying to use those resources in ways that have the broadest impact. We're working with education researchers at some of the major universities in the U.S. and we will continue to do that as we learn things we will publish them in the Journal. It's a vehicle for the research we're doing in connection with other higher ed research organizations.

This interview has been edited for length.



Author Perspective: Administrator

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