

The Atlantic

Turning Life Experience into Sheepskin

"Competency-based" education gives students credit for what they have already learned.



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Like many adults, Wendi Thomas wanted to return to school to continue her education, but she simply couldn't find the time.

As the 47-year-old married mother of two teenagers, ages 16 and 19, she shuttled back and forth between home and work, between mothering and her career. And her job was not exactly low-key. As the nursing director for critical care and emergency services at a Northern California hospital, she often logs 60 hours of work per week. "I have kids and a full-time job," she says. "How could I incorporate school into my life?"

Then, a colleague in health care told Thomas about a not-for-profit university that allows people to earn bachelor's and master's degrees online. Even better, the program tests students on their existing knowledge, or competency, in various fields and allows them to skip a course if they can demonstrate a mastery of the subject.

So, in the fall of 2013, Thomas enrolled in Western Governors University. She has found it an ideal solution. It allowed her to work toward a master's degree while taking into account the knowledge she has accumulated in her 20 years as a nurse. The program also let her take classes at her own pace and complete lessons at night and on weekends. And, it was a bargain. She finished her B.A. (she already held an associate's degree) and in February completed her master's of science in nursing leadership, all for just \$20,000 in tuition.

"If I had had to be in a classroom every Tuesday night at 6 p.m., I never would have made it," she says. "I really felt like I needed something that would allow me the flexibility."

Western Governors University is one of nearly three dozen colleges and programs—nonprofit and for-profit alike—that are trying a fledgling model of schooling known as competency-based education. Its core idea: Students fare better if they earn degrees based on their demonstrated knowledge of a subject instead of simply on face-time or performance in a traditional classroom.

“It basically means that we will measure learning rather than time,” says Robert W. Mendenhall, president of Western Governors University. “Competency-based learning means students can learn at their own pace.”

Western Governors University was one of the pioneers. In the mid-1990s, a number of governors from Western states wanted to give residents better and cheaper access to higher education, which can be daunting in rural or less-populated areas. The governors wanted to take advantage of technology to create an institution of higher education that lets students advance based on knowledge and ability, one that uses technology to deliver this education in innovative ways. Growing numbers of residents who hold college degrees, they hoped, would attract businesses.

The university opened its electronic doors in 1999 and now teaches 60,000 students nationwide in all 50 states; another 50,000 have graduated. The rates of completion are one area in which university officials would like to improve. According to WGU, roughly 40 percent of its students complete their degree within six years. That’s only two-thirds as many as for students at four-year institutions, according to federal [Education Department data](#).

These schools face a demographic challenge: Most of the people who enroll are nontraditional students, like Thomas, who must also juggle the demands of work and family. Two-thirds of WGU students work full-time; their average age is 37. Almost all of them went to college earlier but dropped out. Many are underserved students, Mendenhall notes—from minority groups, rural areas, poor households, or families new to college—who face obstacles in earning a degree. “We keep making changes in the model and curriculum to make students more successful,” he says.

One of WGU’s tactics is to assign each student a mentor, who checks in every week or two by phone or email and advises which classes to take. Each course also offers a mentor for struggling students, in addition to the faculty members who grade papers and tests. And, students learn online through a variety of methods: webinars, multimedia presentations, video lectures, and readings, with professors

available for questions online and by email. Students take tests either in proctored testing centers or online, with some tests monitored by webcam.

WGU tries to keep costs low. Students pay roughly \$6,000 in annual tuition, which allows them to take as many classes as they like during the year; education experts liken it to a Netflix subscription, which lets you watch unlimited movies for a monthly fee. WGU can undercut the tuition at traditional colleges because it lacks a physical campus and offers degrees in only four subjects—teaching, nursing, business, and information technology. The school boasts about 2,300 faculty members; 500 of them hold a Ph.D. or an equivalent degree, while others have certifications in the subject they teach, such as accounting.

“We only do a few things at high volume—it is a lot less expensive to develop curriculum in just four areas,” Mendenhall says. “It is an entire re-thinking of the business model.”

Competency-based higher education has its pitfalls. The all-you-can-enroll-in nature of the classes makes tuition cheaper only if students move through the course load at a normal pace. If they fall behind or take just a couple of courses a year, it can cost them as much as a regular college. WGU qualifies for federal financial aid, but not all of the competency-based programs do, according to research by Robert Kelchen, an assistant professor of higher education at Seton Hall University.

For students like Thomas, however, the competency-based model gave her a pathway to continue her education without sacrificing her work or too much family time. WGU accepted credits from her associate’s degree in nursing and immediately gave her credit for four of her 25 courses, based on tests of her existing knowledge. “This allowed me to not waste my time and energy on subjects I already know,” she says. One of those was health care finance, which Thomas has learned on the job by running \$5 million-a-year budgets in the emergency room.

Best of all, a master’s from WGU will help her future. It entitles her to a higher salary as a nurse (typically, by 5 percent to 7 percent) and sets her up for more

leadership positions at her hospital. She has recommended the experience to three other nurses there.

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