



Budget supports Western Governor's University

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By Mark Binker

RALEIGH, N.C. — It's not a campus, no matter what the state budget says.

[North Carolina's recently enacted \\$21.7 billion spending plan sets aside a \\$2 million challenge grant](#) for Western Governor's University to "to establish a North Carolina campus." That money will be turned over if the institution raises \$5 million, but don't think ivy-covered brick buildings, a quad and a dining hall.

"We are not doing this to establish a campus," said Joan Mitchell, vice president of public relations for the university.

Mitchell said that Gov. Pat McCrory and lawmakers wanted WGU to have "a larger presence" in North Carolina. A McCrory spokesman confirms the governor had conversations with WGU officials and urged them to expand in North Carolina.

To that end, the \$2 million in state funding and \$5 million in private funding will establish an office, chancellor and other state-based assets for WGU, but students won't come to that building to learn every day. Rather, like the 1,300 North Carolina students who already take WGU courses, they will deliver presentations via video, learn from downloaded materials and take tests via video-monitored sessions from their laptops.

WGU North Carolina will join five other state-branded WGU branches in Indiana, Washington, Texas, Missouri and Tennessee, all of which have more formal ties with the university. If all goes as planned, WGU North Carolina will launch in the first part of 2016.

Founded in 1997, Western Governor's University is the brainchild of a bipartisan group of chief executives. At one time considered controversial, the university's competency-based education has grown more widely accepted. Students don't take a course based on a calendar cycle. Rather, they study the material until they know it well enough to take a final exam. That allows students with some experience to test out of lower-level subjects and tackle more challenging work more quickly.

Typically, Mitchell said, students are between 28 and 40 years old and either returning to finish an incomplete bachelor's degree or work on a master's degree. Although there are a handful of younger students, Mitchell said that WGU typically doesn't accept students right out of high school. Rather, she said, WGU hopes to serve students like the 750,000 North Carolinians who report they have "some college" but have not finished their degrees.

"Most of them work full time. Most of them have families," she said.

WGU offers 55 degree programs in four general areas, including nursing, teaching, business and information technology. State leaders have decried the lack of nursing and teaching talent in the state, and Mitchell said WGU hopes to help address those needs.

Sen. Chad Barefoot, R-Wake, who authored the WGU provision, said that he was particularly interested in the university's ability to train teachers. Asked why, if WGU was already teaching students from North Carolina, the state was investing in the university, Barefoot said the money would help forge relationships with schools and hospitals to allow students to do practical learning and internships.

"It's for the clinical partnerships," he said.

Earlier in the year, WGU had sought a provision that would have allowed its students to use state-based financial aid. That provision was dropped from the final budget bill.

"We obviously would like that for them (students), and we might pursue that in the future," Mitchell said.

While establishing a heavier North Carolina presence won't change how students learn, it will provide more chances for interaction with faculty and administrators. The funding from the state will be an official nod that the state approves of the institution, she said.

"This is a great way for both students and graduates, as well as employers, to know the university is a rigorous institution," she said.

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