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Out-of-state online college favored by legislature halts NC enrollment while waiting for approval

By **Sarah Ovaska-Few** - 11/18/2015 - in Featured Articles, Policy Watch Investigates  Print This Article



An online college granted money in the last state budget is facing snags enrolling North Carolina students.

Western Governors University stopped accepting students from North Carolina this fall because it hasn't yet gotten the required approval from the state university system.

The online college had been enrolling students previously, despite warnings from the UNC system in 2014 to stop until the state system had vetted the online college's offerings.

Caught in limbo were nearly 700 teaching and nursing students, who needed to spend time observing classrooms or in clinical

medical settings before being able to go out into the workforce.

Joan Mitchell, a WGU spokeswoman, said the online-based college stopped enrolling new students for its nursing and teaching programs in September, and all other paths of studies in October. Students who had started taking classes beforehand, including nursing and teaching students, are being allowed to finish, she said.

“We have a lot of students who are waiting to enroll,” Mitchell said. “We don’t expect it to take a terribly long time.”

A note on the college’s website now lets prospective applicants know that “we are not currently accepting applications from residents of North Carolina.”

State law requires out-of-state colleges to seek a license from the UNC Board of Governors before enrolling students, a process that typically takes about a year and a half. Staffs for the UNC system conduct thorough reviews of the out-of-state programs, often including site visits, before bringing their recommendations about licensing to the full 32-member board of the UNC Board of Governors.

There’s no clear date of when the 37 programs WGU hopes to offer in North Carolina will be vetted, according to UNC system spokeswoman Joni Worthington.

The Utah-based Western Governors University, which tends to compete with for-profit colleges like the University of Phoenix and Strayer University, is a non-profit that was founded in 1995 by a bipartisan group of governors from the western part of the country.

Republican Gov. Pat McCrory has been a big proponent of the school, which follows a “competency” model that allows students to get credit for classes by passing tests designed to show knowledge of a subject. The Republican-led state legislature opted to give the school \$2 million to establish a campus in North Carolina, if a \$5 million private match could be raised.

WGU prides itself on offering a low-cost educational option to older adults (a six-month term costs \$3,000 and the average age of its students is 37) where students can take as many courses as wanted in that six-month period of time. Students also get credit for knowledge they already possess by taking assessment exams.

The school has six-year completion or graduation rates of 38 percent, a number that WGU hopes to raise to over 60 percent in coming years.

That’s a drop from the University of North Carolina system, where 41.2 percent of students who start as freshman in 2010 earned their degrees within four years. The six-year graduation rate in the UNC system is 63.1 percent.

Critics of the school say it doesn’t offer as thorough an education as more traditional colleges can offer.

Johann Neem, a professor at Western Washington University has been critical of WGU’s focus on low-income and working-class students. He fears that students with financial pressures at home will increasingly be steered to the WGU’s online model of learning and miss out on more robust offerings in traditional public universities.

“Well-off students will attend universities where they have access to professors and the liberal arts and sciences,” Neem told N.C. Policy Watch in May. “Others will receive vocational training and at schools like WGU that have no faculty. If liberal education and

access to real professors becomes a luxury for the rich, this has significant race and class implications.”

North Carolina’s public university system officials informed WGU that the school needed to be vetted before it could enroll students from the state.

The head of Western Governors University asked that the review process be sped up, in light of the state legislature’s decision to allocate \$2 million in the budget for the Utah-based online college to target North Carolina students.

“[W]e are hoping the Board of Governors will exercise their authority to authorize WGU without a lengthy authorization process with no timeframe attached,” Western Governors University President Bob Mendenhall wrote in near-identical emails in September to two board members, Marty Kotis and former chair John Fennebresque.

N.C. Policy Watch obtained copies of the correspondence through a public records request.

Thomas Shanahan, the attorney for the UNC Board of Governors, responded to Mendenhall, reiterating that the online school needed to go through the same process as other out-of-state colleges seeking to do business in North Carolina.

“As I hope you understand, WGU has essentially asked UNC to set aside the authorization process that is applied to similarly situated institutions, and grant authorizations without full review, for WGU to over its programs in North Carolina,” Shanahan wrote. “UNC is not in a position to grant this request, because to do so would favor WGU over other institutions.”

While WGU waits for its approval from the UNC system, there are potential students who are putting their plans on hold.

Kristen Massey, an Army wife who received a bachelor’s degree in accounting from WGU when her husband was stationed in Washington state, said WGU’s flexibility allowed her to obtain a degree while still caring for her children during her husband’s deployments.

The family now lives in Carthage, where her husband is stationed at nearby Fort Bragg.

Massey said she was assigned a mentor that checked in with her weekly, to make sure she was engaged in the classes she was taking and getting the help she needed. Massey liked the funding model that permitted her to take as many classes as she could take in a six-month period.

“I knew the sooner I got it done, the sooner I could stop paying for it and the sooner I could start looking for a job,” Massey said.

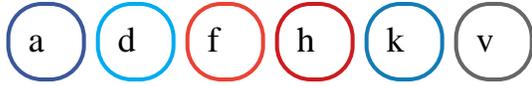
Though unaware of the current restriction on North Carolina enrollment, Massey said she hopes to re-enroll in WGU this year and seek a master’s degree in international relations or finance.

She hasn’t looked at programs within the UNC system, largely because she says she doesn’t have the flexibility between work and family obligations to carve out time for in-person classes.

“I don’t have time to get off work and go someplace and sit in a class,” Massey said. “I need to be able to do it in my own time.”

Questions? Comments? Reporter Sarah Ovaska-Few can be reached at (919) 861-1463 or sarah@ncpolicywatch.com.

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Sarah Ovaska-Few, former *Investigative Reporter* for N.C. Policy Watch for five years, conducted investigations and watchdog reports into issues of statewide importance. Ovaska-Few was also staff writer and reporter for six years with *the News & Observer* in Raleigh, where she reported on governmental, legal, political and criminal justice issues.

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