

Education Department's Inspector General probes Western Governors University

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The Education Department's Office of Inspector General is auditing whether a leading institution in competency-based education complied with federal financial aid and other regulations.

Catherine Grant at OIG said her office is investigating whether Western Governors University "complied with Title IV and selected regulations governing institutional eligibility, program eligibility, disbursements and return of Title IV aid."

WGU President Robert Mendenhall said OIG has requested information several times over the last few years, initially with a focus on the Education Department and then on the university.

The biggest theme, he said, seems to be "regular and substantive interaction," a federal rule that says students in competency-based programs must have a certain amount of contact with instructors.

According to a December 2014 Dear Colleague letter, "any CBE program, including a direct assessment program, that does not include regular and substantive interaction between students and instructors would be considered to be a correspondence program with the significant limitations and restrictions on Title IV eligibility that apply to such programs."

This is the latest in a string of indications that OIG is digging into innovative education models. In September, the office issued a report saying a major regional accreditor, the Higher Learning Commission, "could improve its evaluation of competency-based education programs to help the department ensure the programs are properly classified for Title IV purposes."

Another audit of the department's Federal Student Aid office said officials failed to document student and faculty interviews testing for regular and substantive interaction in distance education programs.

Leaders in competency-based education, such as Southern New Hampshire University President Paul LeBlanc, have been working to expand federal language and definitions to account for these new models, which department officials believe show promise for improving college access and affordability.

While working in a temporary position with Education Under Secretary Ted Mitchell this year, LeBlanc helped recommend ways to rethink regular and substantive interaction. Some of that work was reflected - "quite purposefully," LeBlanc said - in CBE guidance sent to accreditors in June.

A few months later, the Inspector General released the report critical of HLC's oversight of competency-based education programs.

Mendenhall - who said his transition to a new role at WGU is "absolutely not" related to the OIG review - said the disagreement over whether quality computer-based instruction, guidance and assessment can be just as effective as traditional education will be sorted out when Congress reauthorizes the Higher Education Act.

"The OIG has been, I guess, aggressive in questioning anything and everything that isn't traditional classroom-based education," Mendenhall said. "I suppose they'll probably write a report that says WGU's competency-based education model doesn't meet their idea of what education ought to be."

He continued, "The OIG doesn't have an enforcement capability - they just make recommendations to the department. And so far, the department has said, 'Well, we don't really agree.'"

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