

# WGU, Competency Based Education, and Substantive Interaction

tedcurran.net/2016/01/22/wgu-competency-based-education-substantive-interaction/

by Ted Curran

Many watching the world of Competency Based Education were again rattled by [the most recent news](#) that the Department of Education's Office of the Inspector General has been auditing Western Governors University for the last three years. The OIG is questioning whether WGU should be downgraded from a "distance education provider" to a "correspondence school" — a move that would diminish the innovative institution's reputation and force it to repay federal financial aid funding awarded over its 16 year history.

There is a [wealth of coverage](#) on this ongoing saga at Inside Higher Ed, none summarizing it more succinctly than [SNHU President Paul LeBlanc](#):

*"The OIG, acutely aware of the abuses in correspondence programs in the 2000s, takes a very conservative interpretation of the rule and posits **a traditional faculty instructional role**.*

*However, **many of the most innovative CBE programs unbundle that role**, using faculty members in various ways, such as subject matter experts, reviewers and for learning support, while relying on "coaches" for some of the advising and mentoring roles often associated with faculty."*

In its mission to protect students and taxpayers from funding fraudulent education institutions, the OIG is trying to evaluate today's modern online learning paradigms using outdated metrics. They bring up WGU's use of [disaggregated faculty roles](#) as an indicator that it might be better classified as a "correspondence school".

*"The audit found that the department had not adequately determined whether students in direct-assessment programs **might be receiving federal aid for "life experience."** It also said those degree tracks actually might be correspondence programs, particularly if colleges are not requiring regular and substantive interaction between students and **instructors, some of whom might better be classified as tutors, coaches or mentors.**"*

At the heart of the controversy is whether students are receiving "regular and substantive contact hours" with faculty. The OIG is questioning whether WGU's use of coaching faculty and student success mentors provide an equivalent quality of interaction to faculty at traditional institutions.

What we're witnessing is the changing role of faculty in Competency Based Education — I (and many ed. reformers) believe instructors SHOULD function more like tutors, coaches, and mentors than their roles have traditionally called for! The faculty role has been historically constructed as a "fount of knowledge", sage on a stage, the smartest person in the room — this was a historic necessity during the long era of information scarcity that we are transitioning away from. Now that information is abundant, infinitely reproducible, instantly accessible, subject matter experts need to share space with faculty who specialize in the interpersonal nuances of teaching students. In fact "regular and substantive interaction" is scarce in higher education, unless you count lecturing and note-taking as "interaction". Do you? Is this the standard that OIG is measuring WGU against?

I have been searching the coverage of this issue, and I cannot find any raw data comparing the hours of contact that

traditional students get compared with WGU students (in quantity *or* quality). It may be true that we don't have the proper metrics to measure student learning or its relationship to time spent in learning activities.

Our education system (and the rules that regulate it) have always taken time as a constant — assuming that hours spent in classrooms equals units of learning. This has always been a fiction (albeit a convenient one) for measuring how much to pay teachers and institutions per “unit of student learning”. The system of federal aid has always been measured out by the credit hour, and is having trouble evaluating systems that do not organize around the clock, but around student learning outcomes. Competency-based education's decoupling from the credit hour has exposed this convenient fiction, and is forcing our higher ed infrastructure to find new metrics for quantifying student learning.

I think we've all taken classes at brick-and-mortar universities where we had little or no direct interaction with our professors at all, unless you count sitting in lecture halls, taking notes. Sure, those classes offered optional office hours and some had Master's-level teaching assistants available to us, but that level of service doesn't come close to WGU's model of dedicated success coaches, assigned to work with students directly.

The only way this makes any sense is if the OIG is counting in-class participation time (no matter how non-INTERACTIVE it is) as “regular and substantive contact”, and is dismissing the same transmission model of teaching when it's delivered by a video or a PDF. Does the ability to consume lectures more quickly (perhaps by playing them at 1.5x speed) mean that students are getting a diminished experience? Does taking a multiple choice scantron test in a lecture hall count towards your “substantive interaction” hours? What about taking the same multiple choice test via your laptop or smartphone from home?

Is this a case of the new model being over-scrutinized while the old one gets a pass?

My hope is that this inquiry will lead to an emphasis on high-touch, high-quality interaction being seen as an indispensable component of any distance learning program. I believe that interaction is essential to student learning, but I also believe that we can improve upon the standard of interaction set by today's brick-and-mortar institutions.

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