

FACULTY

How One University Connects Students and Mentors With Surprising Success

By *Beckie Supiano* | FEBRUARY 08, 2018



WGU

Suzanne Grim (left), a student at Western Governors U., and Mitsu Frazier, the College of Business's vice president for academic operations, who says program mentors serve as the primary connection between students and the university.

Close relationships with professors or other mentors can make a big difference for students. Having a mentor in college is linked to academic success, and even predicts well-being later in life. At the most basic level, mentorship requires interaction. So small, residential colleges might imagine that their low student-to-faculty ratios and well-trafficked common areas give them an edge in fostering those important relationships.

But research from the Gallup-Purdue Index, which has conducted national polling and examined alumni outcomes for more than 100 colleges, suggests otherwise. Institution type didn't correlate with the share of recent alumni who strongly agreed they'd had a mentor.

In fact, the college that performed best on this measure was Western Governors University, which enrolls more than 67,000 undergraduates, all of them online. Sixty-nine percent of the university's recent graduates indicated they'd had a mentor in college — more than double the share of young alumni nationally, according to Gallup polling.

Proponents of mentorship take pains to distinguish it from advising. Mentorship, they say, is relational, while advising is transactional. Still, it's worth remembering that many colleges wrestle with the best way to provide even transactional support. At some colleges, advising is the work of faculty members; at others, designated professionals. Which approach works best is the subject of continued debate.

Either way, some students never meet with an adviser at all, and many others have only quick, superficial conversations about meeting their degree requirements. And while some colleges dig into student data to intervene proactively when students hit an obstacle, that has yet to become common practice.

Western Governors' success suggests that mentorship — which Gallup defines as having someone who "encouraged me to pursue my goals and dreams" — can be done at scale.

The university's success on this measure is surprising for several reasons. One is its unusual model: a nonprofit institution offering competency-based instruction — in which students move through material at their own pace — to adult learners online.

What is more, the university made headlines this past fall, when an audit from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Inspector General found it did not follow requirements that distance-education programs be designed to provide students with "regular and substantive interaction" with their instructors, and recommended that the department make it return more than \$700 million in financial aid.

That's right: The same university that boasts an "off the charts" share of alumni who report having had a mentor in college, according to Gallup's Brandon Busteed, executive director of education and work-force development, is in the government's cross hairs for failing to ensure students have enough contact with their professors.

At issue is one of the key innovations of Western Governors' approach. The university breaks the traditional work of professors into its component parts. Course instructors teach. Evaluators grade. And program mentors (previously called student mentors) guide students through their programs.

That disaggregation explains the disparity between the inspector general's opinion and the view held by Western Governors, its accreditor, and its fans. It comes down to a disagreement over who serves as the university's faculty.

The parceling out of faculty roles also helps explain Western Governors' high rates of mentorship. When alumni tell Gallup they'd had a mentor who "encouraged me to pursue my goals and dreams" in college, they don't indicate who fulfilled that role.

While it's certainly possible that some Western Governors alumni have a course instructor in mind when they say they had a mentor, it's more likely that they're thinking of a program mentor; that role is designed to give students access to just this kind of support.

How does the program-mentor model work? What might other colleges learn from it? Why aren't they copying it now? Let's take a look:

A Designated Role

Program mentors bring to their work an unusual collection of skills. They must be deeply familiar with the WGU program whose students they're supporting. They are expected to be subject-matter experts in the field, with at least a relevant master's degree as well as real-world experience. And they need to have an orientation toward helping others, says Margaret Simonis, director of program faculty in the College of Business.

Some of the model's success, then, is probably the result of having people suited to and interested in playing this specific role with students. But the way their work is structured also makes a difference.

Regular and Continuing Interaction

Program mentors serve as the primary connection between students and WGU, says Mitsu Frazier, vice president for academic operations in the College of Business. They work with 80 or 90 students at a time, talking by phone with each one weekly, from enrollment through completion.

That frequent interaction sets the model apart, Simonis says. "Typically, in college advising," she says, "a student wouldn't be talking to their adviser every week."

Each student-mentor relationship is different, and communication can happen more often and in additional formats, like texts or email, depending on each pair's preferences.

A Focus on Goals

Mentors help students make their way through WGU, Simonis says. That means breaking their ultimate goals into smaller pieces, and checking in on their progress frequently. When obstacles arise, mentors are there to remind students how a small goal fits into a larger one, and how what they're learning connects to broader academic and professional ambitions. They can also point students to other university resources, as needed.

And the model assumes that obstacles will arise for Western Governors students, who typically are balancing work and a family with their studies. "We know you have these other priorities, too," Simonis says, "and we're just one of them."

Limitations

Relationships aren't the goal of the program-mentor model — it's student success. Still, they turn out to be an important byproduct. Talking with students regularly and recognizing they have lives outside of the classroom are examples of small things that seem to make a big difference, much the way students in a large course respond to a professor who learns each of their names.

While any college could probably take something away from what WGU is doing, replicating the program-mentor system is probably a nonstarter for most. The reason? Western Governors, which was founded in the 1990s, had the advantage of creating a faculty model from scratch. Most colleges, of course, have structures and traditions that would make such an approach much harder to put in place.

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A version of this article appeared in the February 23, 2018 issue.

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