

Online university gets Ohio affiliate

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COLUMBUS — The all-online, nonprofit Western Governors University is creating its eighth state affiliate through a partnership with Ohio, where officials cheered the arrangement and downplayed an unfavorable federal audit of the school that was released last fall.

WGU Ohio launched this week, opening the door for participating students to benefit from the state's need-based college grant program. It expects to start enrolling students in August.

Several thousand Ohio students already attend or graduated from Salt Lake City-based WGU, which has 98,000 students nationwide and offers bachelor's and master's degrees in four fields: business, teaching, information technology, and nursing and other health professions.

Ohio officials praised

the partnership as a step toward a more educated workforce and said WGU provides flexibility for students because it is accessed remotely, measures progress using a competency-based approach

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instead of class time, and charges flat tuition rates that aren't based on how many classes are taken. The school touts that approach to appeal to adults juggling coursework with other obligations, such as full-time jobs and caring for families.

WGU Ohio said it will be self-sustaining on tuition revenue and gets no direct state funding. Its students will be eligible for the need-based Ohio College Opportunity Grant and, like other WGU students, for federal financial aid.

The U.S. Education Department's Office of Inspector General recommended in a September report that the govern-

ment seek to recover \$700 million in federal loans and grants for which WGU had been ineligible, but the department's praise of WGU as an innovative model and the bipartisan support the school has received seemed to diminish the likelihood of any clawback effort.

WGU strongly disagreed with the inspectors, who concluded that faculty didn't have "regular and substantive" interaction with students and WGU's courses should be considered "correspondence courses."

Ohio officials are aware of the report but are "very comfortable" partnering with WGU, said Chancellor John Carey, the state's higher education chief. He noted that WGU is credentialed, and said the report seemed to result at least partly from regulation having not caught up with technology and competency-based learning.

The chancellor of WGU Ohio will be Rebecca Watts, whose previous work at the Ohio Department of Higher Education included college readiness and access efforts.

