

# The Columbus Dispatch

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Opinion

## **Rebecca L. Watts: Working adults need more higher-education options**

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All across Ohio, employers are having trouble filling positions essential to our economy. While Ohio is second among the states in job creation, more than 150,000 good jobs have gone unfilled because too few people in the state have the necessary knowledge and skills for those careers. To address this challenge, Ohio has set a goal that 65 percent of Ohioans age 25 to 64 will have a postsecondary degree, certificate or other credential by 2025.

While Ohio's widely respected colleges and universities are meeting the higher-education needs of millions of Ohioans, this goal cannot be reached by focusing on traditional-age high-school graduates alone. We must expand our thinking to view education as a continuum over time, which requires a broad array of opportunities for a diverse citizenry with diverse educational needs.

Both our current and future needs point to the importance of higher education that can prepare Ohioans for entry into the workforce as well as continued advancement in their careers.

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Yet, for many adults who may have some college or an associate's degree, completing a bachelor's or master's is nearly impossible. These individuals often hold one or more jobs and are raising families. They have passed traditional college age and, while they may have started careers, they can't advance or make a change without more education.

In 1997, 19 state governors recognized the power that technology could have to expand access to high-quality, affordable higher education and created Western Governors University. Their vision was to establish more than an online,

nonprofit university; WGU would pioneer competency-based education, a model that measures learning rather than time spent in class. All programs and courses would be developed in collaboration with employers, ensuring close alignment with workforce needs.

WGU Ohio is the university's eighth state affiliate. WGU Ohio will complement the higher-education opportunities offered through Ohio's existing excellent colleges and universities by providing an additional option for motivated students who want to advance in their careers. Our programs help address Ohio's workforce needs in health and nursing, business, teaching and IT.

Prior to its late-June launch, WGU already had more than 2,700 Ohio students, 77 percent of whom work full time and 71 percent of whom come from underserved populations. Forty-six percent — almost half of our Ohio students — are first-generation college students. Establishing WGU Ohio signals our endorsement by the state and our commitment to Ohio — both of which are important to students and employers.

As WGU Ohio's first chancellor, I have a personal interest in the success of our mission and our collaborations with other education entities, including our already established relationship with Ohio community colleges. I was a first-generation college graduate and began my studies at the community-college level. I was a working adult as I pursued my bachelor's, master's and doctorate degrees. And I remember how difficult it was to overcome the nonacademic barriers along the way.

Helping individuals achieve their goals while moving Ohio's economy forward requires us to remove obstacles that can get in the way. It requires us to provide a robust array of educational options, including alternative rigorous, meaningful pathways to success that meet the needs of Ohioans at every point in their lives.

And it requires us to work together, preparing Ohioans for a changing world, helping them realize their dreams for themselves and their families and strengthening Ohio's economic future by building and sustaining the knowledgeable, highly skilled workforce Ohio needs and deserves.

*Rebecca L. Watts is chancellor of WGU Ohio and was previously associate vice chancellor for P-16 Initiatives at the Ohio Department of Higher Education.*