ED EDUCATION **DIVE**

Q&A

Why Western Governors U thinks microcredentials are the path to degrees

WGU President Scott Pulsipher discusses how his institution is fitting nondegree credentials into learners' personal goals.

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Projections that the pool of traditional students will shrink, wariness of continued tuition increases and limited growth in state support for higher education are prompting institutions to shake things up. In many cases, that means making themselves available throughout learners' lives as their education needs change.

Doing so requires strengthening connections with local employers. Already, colleges and businesses are coming together to map the skills needed on the job to those offered in a certificate or degree, and some are even developing shared credentials.

Western Governors University, which targets working adults with degrees in fields with clear connections to the job market including business, health and nursing, information technology and teaching, is known for its relationship with the workforce.

To talk more about how it is approaching nondegree credentials, unbundling degrees and other components of lifelong learning, as well as what it learned from a recent audit by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Inspector General (OIG), Education Dive

spoke with Western Governors President Scott Pulsipher at our office in Washington, D.C., last week.

This interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.

EDUCATION DIVE: You're representing higher education on President Trump's workforce advisory board. In those conversations, are you seeing any changes in how employers view the role of colleges and universities?

Scott Pulsipher | Credit: Western Governors University

SCOTT PULSIPHER: The degree is not the be-all-end-all of their hiring plans, and they recognize a shift toward skills- and competency-based education. Ensuring they can attract and recruit people who are going to be ready for success in their respective work environments is becoming a strong focus. That includes

alternative pathways such as work-based learning or apprenticeships and career and technical certifications that stack into degrees.

There's also a focus on moving from a course-based transcript to a learner record, which covers the skills and competencies someone possesses.

Are employers getting better at validating nondegree credentials?

PULSIPHER: My hope and expectation of that is higher now than ever because of the work being done to build the data and platforms necessary to ensure we can identify the learning outcomes and assess and validate those in an individual. Even a universal learner record is very much a technology conversation. What's encouraging is we now see organizations being willing to invest in bringing about that future.

Western Governors has been offering more microcredentials, including a new one in medical coding. Where do you see nondegree credentials fitting into degree offerings?

PULSIPHER: We very much believe in lifelong learning, where the stackability of credentials is almost a guarantee. But that doesn't change the value of the degree. We think the pathway to achieving the degree is through microcredentials or microcertifications. Subdegree and post-degree, you'll have a series of microcredentials that have transferability, portability and stackability such that if you acquire a credential in medical coding, you don't have to start over to pursue a medical assistant credential or go into nursing.

Microcredentials often have a shelf life of two to seven years, so adding them to degree pathways that include components of

liberal education such as critical reasoning and communication integrates them with something that has a lifetime shelf life.

How far along is Western Governors in offering microcredentials that roll into degrees?

PULSIPHER: If I were to say it's a 10,000-meter race, we're in the first 2,000 meters. In the technology domain, we have a degree that includes seven-plus microcredentials that have not yet been unbundled from the degree. Meanwhile, in health care, we have a degree but no integrated certifications, and so we are building them into it.

Is that a mix of industry and Western Governors certifications?

PULSIPHER: Almost all are industry or industry-accepted certifications. That's our preference. We don't think Western Governors is going to be in a position to start badging all of what we want to see as credentials. The workforce defines credentials' value. For as long as we've known higher education, the currency was the degree. We think that currency is expanding to include credentials and certifications, but those shouldn't be culs-de-sac. They should be stackable into a lifelong learning pursuit.

What about people who want to refresh their credentials but don't want to move into a certificate or a degree?

PULSIPHER: That's contemplated within the design of our credentials. For example, we do a lot of postgraduate endorsements in our teacher education program. That would be a model for other domains in which people need to stay current with the standards of performance and competency. We think that would be true at every level of completion. Even if you never want to go beyond this credential, you need some post-credential

learning. Unbundling doesn't require stackability, but it should allow for it where possible.

That gets into the market for these credentials, which is poised to get more competitive as more states consider online colleges for adult learners and some attempt to entrench their programs. Do you see it that way?

PULSIPHER: Not really. There are more adults to be served than there is capacity to serve them, and it's not a zero-sum game. I hope the combination of these public institutions and private nonprofits, along with the expansion of distance and competency-based programs, will increase the number of credentialed individuals in the workforce and close the gap between where we are and where we need to be.

That competition online can lead to higher student acquisition costs. Is that something you're facing?

PULSIPHER: Our acquisition costs and our cost per new matriculant or applicant have been going down for the last three to five years. That's due to growth in brand awareness and alumni volume, which is leading to an increasing referral and recommendation rate. We've gone from pretty low to pretty high awareness.

This last year, 77% of our new students first heard of Western Governors from a referral. That's up from 68% the year before.

What role do employer partnerships play?

PULSIPHER: The top three referring sources are: a friend or colleague who is an alum or a student, employers and community colleges. Among our employer partnerships, nearly all of them have employer-provided education benefits. (30% of Western Governors' students come from employer partnerships.)

When we spoke with Western Governors Chief Academic Officer Marni Baker Stein earlier this year, she mentioned some lessons learned from the process of responding to the Office of Inspector General audit. What were those?

PULSIPHER: Being an innovator means you're going to do certain things that may not have been contemplated by those who designed the process, and we accept that. That doesn't make us wrong. There were two things we had to manage.

One, you have to defend an innovation you believe absolutely works. That was not an insignificant undertaking because in our case, it meant we had to help others understand what it means to disaggregate the faculty model.

Second, we learned we were not paying attention to all the engagements that are occurring and their nature or outcomes. The policy just says you have to design for them. For us, it was more about how do we avoid having that confusion again? How do we increase the level of student-faculty engagement, and how do we activate course instructors to have greater ownership?

Can you give an example?

PULSIPHER: We implemented a dashboard that gives faculty better information about when they should engage and how. It's enabling them to be much more proactive and personalized. We can look at the frequency and duration between interactions that may be instruction related. Then, when we're evaluating a student's progress in a course, we can trigger the faculty to know what their next conversation with the student needs to be about and we can trigger the student, saying, "We haven't seen you engage on this thing recently."

The review also accelerated our plans for giving course instructors, specifically, more visibility and accountability for pacing at a course-level and increasing their engagement with students.

We could set the bar for regular and substantive interaction between faculty and students because we believe in that. The balance we're trying to strike from a policy standpoint is to advance support for innovation, but we believe in accountability.