



Governor's Commission on Digital Innovation and Lifelong Learning

Western Governor's University

Website: <https://www.wgu.edu>

Summary of Innovation: WGU, a private, non-profit institution, offers online, competency-based college-level education, with learning documented through direct assessments that are based on fixed outcomes.¹ Although the assessments are connected with specific courses, a student does not need to complete a set number of hours in a course before taking an assessment and moving on. The curriculum is set up so that students progress fully at their own pace.² WGU maintains separate teaching faculty and assessment faculty. Students are assigned "program mentors" to serve as "your academic advisor, your coach, and a supporter...ensure that you stay on track, determine when you are ready for the required assessments, and help you schedule them accordingly."³

WGU offers 55 online bachelor's and master's degrees through four colleges – the College of Business, College of Information Technology, Teachers College, and College of Health Professions.⁴

WGU was established under the auspices of the Western Governors Association in 1995 and enrolled its first students in 1997.⁵

Tuition costs \$3,190 per 6-month term, regardless of number of courses taken.⁶ The average cost of a bachelor's degree is about \$15,000.⁷ Students can apply for federal financial aid for some programs (though see below).

Targeted Population of Learners: WGU strives to serve as many students as possible, including minorities, first-generation college students, learners with modest incomes, and any others whose lives or geographic locations do not allow them to attend traditional, campus-based colleges. The average age of the current student population is 37 years. Most students work full-time or part-time while taking courses. Most students pursuing a bachelor's already have some college experience.⁸

¹ <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/02/21/direct-assessment-and-feds-take-competency-based-education>.

² <https://www.agb.org/trusteeship/2014/1/competency-based-education-what-board-needs-know>.

³ <https://www.wgu.edu/student-experience/life>.

⁴ <https://www.wgu.edu/online-degree-programs.html>.

⁵ According to its website, the Western Governors' Association was established in 1984 to represent the governors of 19 western states and 3 U.S. territories in the Pacific. The association is an instrument for bipartisan policy development, information exchange and collective action on issues of critical importance to the western United States. <http://www.westgov.org>. To launch WGU, each member state contributed \$100,000 to the initial capital and development costs.

⁶ <https://m.wgu.edu/content/dam/western-governors/documents/financial-aid/TuitionComparison.pdf>.

⁷ <http://educationnext.org/competency-based-education-put-to-the-test-western-governors-university-learning-assessment/>.

⁸ https://www.wgu.edu/about_WGU/governors_industry.

Partners: Currently, 22 states are partners. Several states have affiliate schools with their postsecondary systems (Indiana, Washington, Texas, Missouri, Tennessee, Nevada, North Carolina).⁹

Bringing Innovation to Scale: As of January 2018, about 94K students are currently enrolled from all 50 states, including active duty military personnel and spouses overseas. More than 100K have graduated, with about 10K graduating each year.¹⁰ They plan to continue a 30% annual growth rate.¹¹

A 2017 audit by the Office of the Inspector General of U.S. Department of Education found that the school did not meet distance education requirements because there was not sufficient interaction between students and faculty. The audit stated that courses should have been labeled “correspondence courses” and therefore not been eligible for federal financial aid. OIG has called for WGU to pay back \$713M in federal financial aid and should no longer be eligible for federal aid.¹²

Additional links:

- <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/04/30/wgu-example-shows-chilly-policy-climate-competency-based-education>
- <https://www.usnews.com/education/online-education/articles/2016-12-08/what-employers-think-of-online-competency-based-degrees>

WGU assessment evaluation rubrics:

- <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/cbe2.1015/full>

⁹ <https://www.agb.org/trusteeship/2014/1/competency-based-education-what-board-needs-know>.

¹⁰ https://www.wgu.edu/about_WGU/students_alumni.

¹¹ <https://www.christenseninstitute.org/publications/the-engine-behind-wgu-configuration-of-a-competency-based-information-system/>.

¹² <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/09/22/education-depts-inspector-general-calls-western-governors-repay-713-million-federal>.