The Rise
Of
Western Governors University, 1996-2006

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Mission

The principal mission of Western Governors University is to improve quality and expand access to post-secondary educational opportunities by providing a means for individuals to learn independent of time or place and to earn competency-based degrees and other credentials that are credible to both academic institutions and employers.
Promise

We help our students achieve their dreams for a degree and career success by providing a personal, flexible, and affordable education based on real world competencies.
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I. Foreword

This book about WGU’s opening decade is, of course, the story of how the university has implemented its founders’ vision. It is also, however, the story of an innovation, how that innovation arose and unfolded, its mistakes and failures, what it learned from them, and how ultimately it prevailed. Innovation is never easy, perhaps especially educational innovation is never easy. Nine hundred years of tradition lean against it. In countless ways the code of right practice, established by generations of bureaucracy and enforced by all the conventional structures of modern educational life—from the definition of terms and credits to financial aid regulations—line up to force compliance with accepted orthodoxy. That WGU survived at all is extraordinary. That it remained true to the heart of its mission, created a unique learning model, earned multiple accreditations, and today serves more than seven thousand enrolled students is a story worth telling. This is it.
II. Introduction

Innovation in higher education is a rare and notable thing. Universities live and breathe tradition. They are reluctant to change because change is hard and, most of the time, not many people complain about what they do. Students complain now and then, but they graduate and move on. Graduates get jobs. Alumni keep donating to the annual fund. So when change does come to higher education, especially systemic change, its energy almost always comes from outside the academy. The infrequency with which this occurs is itself remarkable. In the two hundred and thirty years of our nation’s life, there have been only three definitive shifts in the structure of the American university and the composition of its students. The rise of Western Governors University may prove to be merely an extension of the last of these shifts, or it could announce the beginning of a fourth transformation whose effects may be as profound as those of its predecessors.

The first transformation of American higher education was stimulated by the Morrill Act of 1862, which established our land grant university system by “Donating Public Lands to the several States and Territories [to] provide Colleges for the Benefit of Agriculture and the Mechanic Arts.” The need for such a system grew directly from the nation’s increasing urbanization and industrialization. The movement of Americans away from small family farms to growing population centers mechanized not only the kinds of jobs to be found there but also the production of food and its distribution to these ever more distant locations. The land grant universities made higher education accessible to countless thousands of new students who later provided the agronomists, engineers, managers, and inventors the nation needed to prepare itself for life in the twentieth century. The Morrill Act fueled our national prosperity as no educational act had ever done before.

The second tectonic shift resulted not from the creation of a new university system designed to serve the previously unprivileged, but rather from expanded access to the existing system for millions of veterans returning home at the end of World War II. The impact of the GI Bill was at least as great as that of the Morrill Act ninety years earlier because it opened the American university campus for the first time to hundreds of thousands of working adults hungry to launch civilian careers and put behind them the years lost at war. And like its predecessor, the GI Bill helped to fuel American prosperity not only for the generation of its graduates, but for
every American generation since. This second wave of innovation did not, however, change the nature of the education students received, or where they received it. Their learning still occurred on campus and had essentially the same content. The GI Bill produced not so much a transformation of the academy as a transformation in the academy's students. It was much more an innovation of access than of content or structure.

The third shift occurred in response to a different kind of turmoil, fundamentally changed both where and how learning occurred, and reshaped the American higher education landscape in ways as profound and permanent as its predecessors. The “college without walls” movement arose in the late 1960s in direct response to the civil unrest spawned by the Vietnam War. Colleges without walls aimed partly at expanding access by making campus residence unnecessary and by reducing or even eliminating classroom attendance, but they also sought to give their students more control over the content of their degree studies. Traditional curricula came under increasing attack throughout the latter half of the 1960s and on into the 1970s, as did authority in all its forms by college age—and draft age—young people. In a few cases, new colleges arose with explicitly different models of campus-based instruction, as did Massachusetts’ Hampshire College in 1970 and Washington’s Evergreen State College in 1971. These institutions sought to transform the campus experience by giving their students more voice in degree design, fostering closer relationships with faculty, and creating a more integrated, problem-centered, and relevant educational experience.

More typically, however, institutions emerged along wholly different lines, explicitly abandoning the notion of “campus” and “residence” and designing their programs instead so that students could access them “anywhere, any time.” Institutions like Walden University in Minnesota (1970), the State University of New York’s Empire State College (1971), New York State’s Regents College (1971, now Excelsior College), New Jersey’s Thomas Edison State College (1972), and Connecticut’s Charter Oak State College (1973) each designed programs accessible in various ways to distant learners. Each in its own way engaged students in the design of their own degree programs. Each in some way recognized and granted credit for the prior experiential learning its students may have acquired. Each focused on close mentoring relationships with students, and each tried to emphasize the value of personally meaningful learning rather than grades.
Distance learning, conducted through correspondence and telephone, had been alive and well in the United States for a long time before these institutions were chartered. The Distance Education and Training Council had been accrediting distance correspondence programs since 1926. But these new colleges brought distance learning into the mainstream of degree-based American higher education and by doing so made “nontraditional” learning respectable. Ironically, although some of them thought they were redesigning higher education to serve eighteen to twenty-two year olds alienated from traditional campus programs, many found themselves with a completely different student body. The average age of the first students at both Empire State College and Regents College was over thirty-five and so it has always remained. Thus the “college without walls” movement transformed American higher education in two profound ways. First, it demonstrated that respectable college degrees from regionally accredited public or private universities could be earned at a distance, without ever living on, or even setting foot on, a campus. Second, it proved that the learning in those degrees did not have to be acquired through semester-long courses. It could be acquired equally well through experience, or through independent study that focused only on the gaps in a student’s knowledge and lasted only as long as it took to fill those gaps. Nor did it have to be based on traditional disciplines. The learning students needed could be constructed in large part by the students themselves, based on their own inquisitiveness and real-world problems they wanted to understand and help solve. What mattered were outcomes, not the number of hours sitting at the feet of sages on stages, not the number of volumes in the university library, or entering SAT scores, or state-of-the-art science laboratories. The library, the laboratory, and the lectern were the world.

There are signs that we may be experiencing a fourth transformation of the American university experience, although it is too soon to assess its lasting impact. The advance of communications technologies over the past decade has far outstripped the tools previously available for the delivery of distance learning. Real-time student collaboration through online learning communities, three dimensional, interactive science simulations, and the global reach of Internet research tools and services are but three examples of the ways in which technology has revolutionized the distance learning experience for both students and faculty. Indeed, in many ways “distance learning” is more immediate, more supportive, more collaborative, and more resource-rich than actually sitting in most classrooms. The emergence of learning technologies was in part responsible for the founding of Western Governors University, and those technologies have propelled the explosive growth in distance enrollments nationally over the past ten years. The Sloan Consortium and the College Board report that more than three mil-
lion students took at least one online course in 2005, double the number who did so in 2002.¹ What is not yet clear, however, is whether the transformation now underway is merely an extension of the “college without walls” movement by means of technology, or whether it will result for our time in something uniquely meaningful and substantive. In short, will this technological transformation improve the quality of American higher education, or will it simply make it more accessible at lower cost to more of our citizens?

Many would argue that increased accessibility at lower cost is a goal in itself sufficient. The governors who founded Western Governors University argued that it is not. The governors believed that higher education had to become more accountable for the results it claimed. They believed that using technology only to expand access and reduce the cost of instruction would by itself do nothing to remedy the shortcomings they saw in the quality of American higher education, and in fact could make them worse by emphasizing cheap delivery over real gains in learning. Only by combining the use of learning technologies with substantive change in the measurement of learning could accountability for the results of university education and real achievement in students’ knowledge, skills, and abilities be assured. The governors held that all were necessary—increased access, reduced cost, and improved quality. To neglect one would undermine them all and betray the transformative potential of the learning technologies their university would use.

If the governors’ conviction about educational accountability does not take hold in the American academy and it essentially continues business as usual, then the history of higher education will view WGU as no more than an interesting but isolated innovation within the broader “college without walls” movement. If the pressure for accountability continues to grow in the public mind, however, it will produce systemic change. The rise of Western Governors University will then be seen to have marked the beginning of a fourth paradigm shift in higher education. Expressions of that shift will vary across institutions. WGU is by no means the only model that may arise, but if its principles take hold they will produce recognizably different patterns of university behavior. The first will be increased transparency—universities making clear, public, and explicit statements about the competencies students must master for their degrees,
about the methods used to verify that they have achieved those competencies, about the validity of the results obtained, and about student satisfaction with their experience (as judged by retention and graduation rates, average time to degree, job and graduate school placements, and so on). The ancient bond between credits earned and time enrolled will end. Students will be able to progress as rapidly as they can prove they have mastered the knowledge, skills, and abilities required for their degrees. The hegemony of the individual professor as course developer, instructor, and grader will give way to departmental (or even multi-institutional) development of course content and objectives, and to external evaluation of student work. Examinations and other assessments will no longer remain the prerogative of individual faculty members. They will be developed by trained assessment professionals working with departments as a whole. Finally, technology will be much more than an efficient means of instructional delivery. It will bind all of these elements together, enabling faculty teams to collaborate over time and distance and students to participate in vibrant online learning communities. It will deliver instruction, library, and other services, administer examinations, and authenticate results.

If WGU is more than an isolated phenomenon, these are the kinds of changes that will occur. And if they occur, they are likely to herald a transformation of the methods and meaning of university education in America as profound as any of those that have occurred in our history. The ten years past tell the story of this university’s founding, development, and initial impact. The next ten will reveal whether it has made any real difference.
III. Competency-Based Education for a “Next Generation University”

The essence of competency-based education is this: the university defines clearly, specifically, and in advance what all students need to know and be able to do in order to qualify for a particular degree. To graduate, students demonstrate that they have all of the competencies associated with the degree they are pursuing by passing a series of carefully developed, valid, and diverse assessments.

At Western Governors University students may enroll on the first day of any month in the year to pursue a bachelor’s or master’s degree in business, information technology, teacher education, or the health professions. The University does not award grades but records a “Pass” on a student’s transcript for every successful assessment. A passing score is equivalent to a grade of B or better in traditional grading systems. WGU requires students to take their objective assessments in secure testing centers. They take many of their essay and project assessments at home, but the University routinely sends these documents to an online authentication service to verify the originality of the student’s work. Students can take their assessments at any time and progress as rapidly as they are able to demonstrate the levels of knowledge and skill required for the credential they seek. If they are already competent in all areas of their program, they may earn that credential in as little time as it takes to schedule, complete, and grade all the assessments. If they are not already competent, the University makes available the learning resources, faculty guidance, and other support services that will enable them to succeed—on a weekly schedule that can adapt to their needs throughout a six month term, and wherever they may live.

The structure and practices of Western Governors University have turned traditional university education inside out. American universities, like their European antecedents, took their still familiar form in the middle ages and for very practical reasons. Before 1436, when Johannes Gutenberg developed the West’s first printing press, every book and every copy of every book had to be transcribed by hand. The scribes who could do this work were few, and they naturally gravitated together in ecclesiastical or quasi-ecclesiastical centers of scholarship where they could do the transcription. Because the work was so time-consuming, and the results so precious, the books these scribes produced did not move around much. Libraries
formed to house them, and the students who wanted to study those books had to come to where they were—as well as to learn other things from the scribes, scholars, and other students who gathered in these locations. In short, the university—a word deriving from Latin meaning the whole of something—arose as a place where the whole body of secular knowledge and divine speculation could be found, studied, shared, and expanded upon.

Even the breaks in the academic year that we have come to know as semesters or terms had both sacred and agrarian origins in the European medieval university calendar. Typically, the terms were arranged around holy days (what we now know as holidays), and they left the summer open so that students could plant, raise, and harvest their crops. In England, for instance, the fall term ended before Christmas; the winter term ended before Easter, and the spring term ended before the celebration of the Trinity, sometime between late May and mid-June. When college and university life came to America, these patterns came with it. Harvard University students in 1636 still lived very much as did their predecessors at Oxford University in 1100—they followed the rhythm of the Christian calendar and the seasons, with breaks at holy days and summer vacation to care for their family farms.

What is remarkable is that these vestiges of medieval, European, and Christian university life still define the basic structure of the American academy. Though we have long since ceased to be an agrarian culture, are infinitely more diverse in religious and ethnic backgrounds, and our universities do commonly offer a summer term, the academic year is still arranged in the same way. It begins in the fall with a university “convocation”—a calling together of the entire faculty and student body to energize and celebrate the beginning of the new academic year. The fall term, or semester, still ends before Christmas and the next term begins in January or early February. If on a quarter system, the winter term ends before Easter; if on a semester system there is a “spring break” which generally spans the Easter season. In any case, the last term of the academic year ends before summer—even though almost no students will return to their family farms to raise food for the next winter. And although most American colleges and universities now offer a summer term, all but a rare few institutions still consider it an “extra.”

For nine hundred years we have brought students to the university campus because that is where the professors are. That is where the classrooms are. That is where the books, the laboratories, the dormitories, the bursar’s office, and the credits are. Only in the last thirty years have some institutions begun to change that dynamic, building programs that reach beyond the
campus, enabling students to earn credit at home in their communities, recognizing learning they may have acquired outside college classrooms, and welcoming these new kinds of learners to their ranks. And only in the past ten years have learning technologies combined with the needs of our society for lifelong learning to produce an entirely new kind of university structure.

The convergence of technology and lifelong learning created a unique opportunity to re-shape the American university, but with that opportunity came also obligation. WGU’s founding governors wanted their institution to be separately accredited and degree-granting in its own right. They intended it to be independent, client-centered, market-driven, cost-effective, of high quality, and accountable for the results it produced. They wanted it to use the teaching resources of other institutions, both corporate and academic, rather than to develop and teach its own courses. Most important, they wanted it to be competency-based. Producing competent students was the key to institutional accountability. Neither course grades nor credit hours would serve. The governors regarded the traditional credit-hour system as an inadequate means of measuring student learning, based as it is on units of time spent in class. They wanted what they initially called their “Next Generation University” to be available anywhere, any time to students throughout the United States and beyond. What led them to such a radical vision were concerns that:

- The rising cost of higher education combined with population growth in their states would outrun the money supply for more brick-and-mortar campuses;
- Their states’ colleges and universities were producing graduates whose skills were uneven, unreliable, and insufficient to meet their future needs for a highly skilled workforce;
- Emerging learning technologies that could expand educational access were not being used systematically across the western region; and
- Their state systems of higher education were unwilling or unable to respond creatively to their concerns about these matters.

If they were to address these issues successfully, the governors also knew that their university would have to be at least as good in responding to each of them as other then available educational programs. Its features taken together would have to produce an institution better than anything then available. It could not be just adequate. It had to be extraordinary. It had to be superb. And it had to last.
Accordingly, they engaged a design team from the National Center for Higher Education Management systems (NCHEMS) and the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education (WICHE) to think through the structural issues the new university would have to address. The design team in turn invited faculty and assessment professionals from universities and testing organizations throughout the nation to help determine the programs WGU would offer, how those programs would be structured, their specific competencies, and how those competencies would be measured. The governors and the design team together met with the executive directors of the four regional accrediting associations responsible for the accreditation of universities in WGU’s member states to establish an Inter-Regional Accrediting Committee (IRAC) and define the cross-regional standards the new university would have to meet. As a result of this careful approach, when IRAC determined early in 2003 that Western Governors University had met those standards it became the only university in the history of American higher education to be simultaneously accredited by four regional accrediting associations.

Before looking at the history of this institution, its model, and its impact in more detail, it is worth noting what a remarkable act of vision and political leadership the founding of the University was. Groups of governors have come together before and since in American history to express common aims, to announce joint policies, to launch major projects. The Colorado River Compact, the Tennessee Valley Authority, the Great Lakes States Agreement on the St. Lawrence River, and the Radioactive Waste Agreement all come to mind as examples of interstate collaborative agreements. But never before or since have so many come together across such diverse political and geographic boundaries to create an educational institution with such far-reaching impact. The governors intended WGU to reshape the American higher education landscape, and there are signs now that it is beginning to do that. The achievement of Republican governor Mike Leavitt of Utah and Democratic governor Roy Romer of Colorado in bringing their colleagues to a common perception of a critical educational problem, obtaining their commitment to a common solution for that problem, and sustaining that commitment long enough to bring their new university to life and ensure its survival is unique in American history.

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IV. The First Ten Years: An Overview

The Planning Years: 1996-1999

By 1995, American colleges and universities were beginning to feel the first surge of new enrollments from Tidal Wave II—the children of the baby boom generation. Their arrival on the nation’s campuses, and the prospect of millions more of them over the next fifteen years, coincided with the rise of the Internet and the rapid spread of the personal computer into American homes. The convergence of these forces brought about new thinking about the structures and delivery of higher education. Instead of pouring more and more money into bricks and mortar for new schools and campuses, visionaries began to focus on “building the infrastructure of the future.”

The vision that led to the formation of Western Governors University began in early 1995 when then governor of Utah, Michael Leavitt, met with Northern Arizona University’s president, Dr. Clara Lovett. Both foresaw the potential of distance learning, and they sought ways to allow students to access each other’s networks. Shortly after taking office in 1993, Governor Leavitt had challenged his state’s higher education leaders “to make education an activity that is not bound by buildings, place, or space; to make technology-delivered education a part of every student’s educational experience; and to pick up the pace of education” by allowing students to take college-level courses through distance learning. Two years later, meeting with President Lovett, the follow-up question was obvious: Why not collaborate across state boundaries to achieve these goals? Only the barriers of bureaucracy, tradition and regulation seemed to stand in the way.

Most western states were experiencing tremendous growth in population and corresponding increases in post-secondary enrollments. With strained budgets, few governors had any inclination to pour ever larger amounts of money into the existing higher education systems in their states. Leavitt believed that regional collaboration through the Western Governors Association and the distance delivery of education were the keys to solving the problem. With vast geography and dispersed populations, many western states found distance learning ideal for providing educational opportunities to rural populations. By linking state-level networks togeth-

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2 I am indebted to Dr. Kevin Kinser for much of the background information in this discussion of WGU’s “planning years.” His dissertation, The Origin, Development and Implications of the Western Governors University (Columbia University, 1999) is a valuable resource for those interested in the founding of the University. With his permission, WGU uses selections from the dissertation in new faculty orientation.
er, expenses could be shared. Collaboration would reduce duplication and cost, and it would break down the barriers that President Lovett had described.

**Western Governors Association Explores an Idea**

The Western Governors Association (WGA), a non-partisan organization of chief executives from 18 states, two territories and one commonwealth, sought to “develop strategies for both the complex, long-term issues facing the West and for the region’s immediate needs.” During the summer of 1995, an exciting discussion of what was to become Western Governors University took place at the WGA’s meeting in Park City, Utah. As chair of the Association that year, Governor Leavitt lobbied for the revolutionary power of distance learning technologies to improve access to higher education. He foresaw technology’s capacity to assist Western states with two of their most pressing problems—rapid population growth confronted by limited public funds for educational services. He did not anticipate the firestorm his remarks would generate, or where they would lead.

His colleagues enthusiastically agreed with him, but it soon became evident that they shared more serious concerns about their states’ educational systems. Democrats and Republicans alike were frustrated by the pressures they faced, and many expressed doubts about the quality they were getting from their current educational investments. Leavitt’s open-ended suggestion to collaborate in the development of distance learning among the WGA states rapidly became a far-reaching critique of higher education in general. The governors said it made no sense just to go on building more programs of equally dubious quality. They felt uniquely positioned to provide the necessary political leadership not only to break through the barriers to collaboration but to come up with something truly different.

The governor of Colorado, Roy Romer, who had recently chaired the Education Commission of the States, wanted more focus on measuring learning and competence. He described the problem not only as improving student access to learning, but improving quality as well. Technology could solve the access problem by increasing the capacity of the existing system. Competency assessment, on the other hand, would improve quality by making higher education performance-based and accountable for its results. Competency-based education, coupled with increased access through the use of technology, would be the ideal combination for a new millennium.
The governors envisioned a virtual university designed specifically for students to succeed in the workforce. Their initiative would “raise the bar” by demonstrating a new way to define quality in higher education. Moreover, their concept supported the values of the American West—indepedence, self-reliance, and the rewards of individual effort.

Designing a New University

The energy generated in the Park City meeting led immediately to enlisting the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education (WICHE) and the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) to help bring form to the governors’ vision. The governors planned a follow-up meeting in Las Vegas five months later, and they wanted to see some options built around five core themes for their “virtual university.” It should:

- be responsive to employment and societal needs
- focus on competency
- expand access
- be cost-effective, and
- use and develop their states’ technology infrastructure.

WICHE was active in areas directly related to the governors’ new interest, specifically through its Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications (WCET). Established as a WICHE program concerned with the use of technology in distance learning, WCET is a membership-based organization primarily made up of colleges and universities involved in the use of technology in education. Its Director in 1995, Sally Johnstone, was a strong advocate for using technology to provide higher education access. She and her staff began developing design options for WGU and emphasized the use of technology-based delivery of educational content.

Dennis Jones, the President of NCHEMS, and Peter Ewell, NCHEMS Vice President and a nationally recognized expert on the measurement of learning, agreed that education reform must include competency-based assessment. They knew technology-based delivery systems already offered distance learning courses and instructional modules. But current institutionally-based indicators of quality could not adequately measure the learning acquired through these non-traditional means. On-line courses were still somewhat suspect in the public mind at that time, and students’ learning from such courses remained too often unrecognized and unrewarded.
WICHE presented a range of options at the Las Vegas meeting that would address the governors’ baseline criteria. The first envisioned the creation of a “virtual catalog” of distance courses that any student could access. It would be an expansion of a WICHE program already under development and, presumably, would be the easiest to accomplish. Courses would be offered and delivered through existing college and university networks, and participating institutions would accept each others’ credits. The second option envisioned the creation of a “virtual university” that would actually design its own degree programs to meet the needs of member states. Rather than waste time and money building its own library, developing its own courses and duplicating work already done by other institutions, it would collaborate with partnering colleges, universities, corporations, and training organizations to get the other instructional resources it needed, and it would establish a credit bank so that students could apply all of their completed courses to their “virtual” degrees.

Jones and Ewell argued, however, that these options did not go far enough. They said that if the governors were serious about moving higher education forward, any new university should incorporate four principles in addition to the baseline criteria. First, the new institution should be focused on the assessment of learning. Assessment should be based on competencies derived from specific knowledge, skills, and experiences. Assessment results should be combined and translated into generally recognizable certificates or degrees. Finally, the assessments would have to be conducted with complete integrity and be accepted by end-users. The governors were already leaning toward WICHE’s third option, but these arguments closed the loop. They endorsed the creation of an entirely new kind of university—their “Next Generation University”—that would incorporate the virtual catalog idea, design and offer degree programs to serve the participating states, and base all of its own degree programs on rigorous competency assessment.

At the close of the meeting, the eleven governors present voted unanimously to proceed with the design work for their new institution. They charged Dennis Jones of NCHEMS with drafting its vision statement and work plan for presentation during the winter meeting of the National Governors Association in Washington, DC.
Memorandum of Understanding

“From Vision to Reality: A Western Virtual University” was released at a press conference of the Western Governors Association in Washington on February 6, 1996. Expanding on the foundation principles identified earlier, it stipulated eleven criteria for the new institution. It would be:

- **market-oriented** -- focused on developing markets for certified graduates and a wide variety of instructional materials;
- **independent** -- not controlled by those who represent established interests with regard to either the delivery of education or its certification;
- **client-centered** -- focusing on needs of students and employers rather than instructional providers, e.g., flexible and responsive in instructional delivery rather than constrained by the fixed schedules and sequential structures typical of current educational delivery;
- **degree-granting** -- empowered to grant certificates recognized by employers and degrees recognized by both employers and the academic community, initially in a limited number of areas, but ultimately from associate to the graduate level across a broad spectrum of fields;
- **accredited** -- fully accredited by regional and appropriate specialized accrediting bodies for the degrees and certificates it bestows;
- **competency-based** -- grounding the certification of learning on the demonstration of competency rather than the accumulation of credits or experiences, or judgments about the quality of providers;
- **non-teaching** -- not providing instruction directly, but drawing upon needed capacity wherever it exists, both in colleges and universities, and in the private sector and among individual experts as well;
- **high quality** -- setting competency expectations for certification that will help raise levels of quality for all learners and providers;
- **cost-effective** -- sharing information technology infrastructure, seeking other economies of scale, forging partnerships, drawing on existing educational resources, and reducing time to degree to the fullest extent possible to reduce the per-student costs of delivering instruction;
- **regional** -- offering opportunities for participation to states throughout the West in a manner that is flexible and adaptive, and interconnected in ways that follow regional economic and social interest; and
- **quickly initiated** -- not requiring lengthy study and developmental work but actually functioning and delivering benefits by the summer of 1997."  

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3 Kinser, pp. 59-60
Governor Benjamin Nelson of Nebraska, a second-term Democrat, became chair of the WGA in 1996 and inherited the vision statement and general plan for the virtual university project. With his administration’s “One Nebraska” theme, he was already committing significant resources toward making “geography irrelevant” in his state through the use of telecommunications. He focused on expanding and updating the distance education network already established by the state’s postsecondary system. Distance education in Nebraska connected academic resources in the east to the outlying rural areas in the west and was already doing much to reduce the isolation that his state’s rural population had long felt.

James Geringer, Republican Governor of Wyoming, became involved in the planning of the project as a technology enthusiast. He was an engineer and computer programmer for various space programs, including the Viking Mars landing, the Global Positioning Satellite System, and the space shuttle. He felt that distance education was necessary for Wyoming’s far-flung, sparse population. It encouraged employers to relocate to the state and gave students a reason to stay after graduation from Wyoming’s colleges.

Western Governors University became the official name of the new, private, nonprofit institution when the governors endorsed the Implementation Plan at the 1996 summer meeting of the WGA in Omaha, Nebraska. During the meeting, Ray Waddoups, CEO of Motorola, spoke in favor of competency assessments and Anne-Lee Verville, an IBM executive, talked about the role of technology and telecommunications in education. The executive director of the Kellogg Commission and the chancellor of a community college both spoke in strong support of the governors’ plan, and Glenn Jones, the CEO of Jones Intercable, made the case for involving private educational providers.

On June 24, the governors officially adopted a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) committing themselves to providing “strong, visible, and effective leadership to assure cooperation among our states, educational institutions, and private industry.” The tangible evidence of their commitment was financial support in the amount of $100,000 that each signatory state would provide to WGU during the next fiscal year. Utah’s Mike Leavitt and Colorado’s Roy Romer signed the MOU first, followed by nine other governors: John Kitzhaber of Oregon, Gary Johnson of New Mexico, Jim Geringer of Wyoming, Fife Symington of Arizona, Edmond Schaef er of North Dakota, Mike Lowry of Washington, Philip Blatt of Idaho, Ben Nelson of Nebraska, and Marc Racicot of Montana. On that day, as well, Governor Geringer became the first person
to use WGU’s “SmartCatalog” by registering online for demonstration “courses” that would prepare him to “prove competency in the ‘Certified Western Governor’ skills area.” Within a year, five more states would sign the governors’ MOU and the number would ultimately climb to nineteen.

**Gaining Ground**

On January 15, 1997, the co-chairs of the Board of Trustees, Governors Mike Leavitt and Roy Romer, signed WGU’s Articles of Incorporation, and the University was officially born. Three weeks later, during a meeting of the Board on February 3, the Trustees appointed Dr. Jeffrey Livingston as Interim Chief Executive Officer and Dr. Robert Albrecht as Interim Chief Academic Officer. Livingston had an academic background in business, with a PhD in Business Administration from Arizona State University. Earlier in his career he had worked at the General Services Administration in Washington, D.C., then as a faculty member at the University of Montana and at Utah’s Weber State University. In the early 1990s he served as Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs at Weber State. In the mid-1990s he first became Associate Commissioner for Academic Affairs and Technology in the Utah System of Higher Education, then Executive Assistant to Governor Leavitt for Higher Education Technology. As Leavitt’s point man for WGU’s operations, he was a natural choice to help lead the new University from conception to reality.

Albrecht was Livingston’s counterpart and had served as Governor Romer’s academic representative throughout the early WGU discussions. He had an interdisciplinary background in economics, English, and American Studies, with a Ph.D. in American Studies from the University of Minnesota. He had been an English professor at the University of Chicago and the University of Oregon, where he later became Associate Dean, then Acting Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. He left Oregon to become Vice President for Academic Affairs at the University of Northern Colorado, then went on to Montana as Deputy Commissioner for Academic Affairs in the Montana State University System. From 1989 until 1997, when Governor Romer tapped him to help develop WGU, he was Associate Vice President for the University of Colorado.

These men brought exceptional managerial and academic leadership to the coordination of WGU’s development. While Livingston oversaw the business side of WGU’s operations, Albrecht focused on the University’s academic staff and the development of competencies and degree programs. WGU’s Vice President of Development, Max Farbman, worked tirelessly with
them to generate the University’s necessary working capital through private donations and in-kind resources. Farbman was a senior attorney in Salt Lake City who had chaired Governor Leavitt’s 1996 re-election committee, and he too was an ideal choice for his assignment. By the middle of 1997, WGU had outlined several model degrees as examples of the kinds of programs it planned to offer and had secured significant corporate funding to underwrite the launch of the University.

One of the most important challenges that Livingston and Albrecht faced that year was the establishment of the academic councils that would preside over WGU’s degree programs and assessments. With no faculty of its own at this early stage, it made sense that the University would turn to outside experts for assistance with these tasks, and the council structure remains today one of the institution’s most innovative features. Because they would bring a wide range of perspectives to their work, these panelists would ensure that WGU’s programs reflected the most current, best practices in the field. The diversity and stature of these experts would also give their programs immediate credibility. The design called for each major degree area to have its own Program Council, consisting of six members drawn from other universities as well as from professional practice. In addition, a central Assessment Council of six to nine national
experts in learning measurement would determine the assessments to be used and establish acceptable passing scores in each subject area.

By early 1998 Livingston and Albrecht had recruited, selected, and appointed the members to the Program Councils of WGU’s first planned degrees, the Associate of Arts and the Associate of Applied Science in Electronic Manufacturing Technology, as well as the members of the Assessment Council and the Education Provider Review Council, whose task it was to recruit and select WGU’s external providers of instruction and learning resources. All of these groups held their first meetings in the winter and early spring of 1998. Their first task was to define their responsibilities and operating procedures. The Councils were to meet four times a year but members were expected to commit as many as twelve additional days a year to WGU work. There were no precedents for what they set out to do. Discussions were often prolonged and intense, continuing by email long after meetings had ended. By late that summer, however, the design work of the Councils was well underway, the University had enough distance courses in its catalog to open for business and, as computer power and modem speeds continued to multiply, the country at large was poised to embrace the power of the Internet.

WGU Opens Virtual Doors

On September 2, 1998, in San Jose, California, Governor Leavitt officially opened WGU with the words, “It’s one small click for mankind, one giant leap for distance learning everywhere.” While it would be another six months before the University would enroll its first degree students, it had passed its first true milestone. Its online course catalog was open for business. For an institution seeking to capitalize on the emerging power of telecommunication technologies, it was appropriate that its opening occurred in America’s quintessential technology town. 3-Com Corporation’s CEO Eric Benhamou hosted the event as Chair of WGU’s National Advisory Board and provided technical support for the launching of the new institution. WGU’s first students used its online SmartCatalog, initially listing 194 courses from 20 education providers, to search out and register for the courses they wanted to take. Although delivered online, nearly all the courses were similar in content to those offered on campuses at colleges across the country.

The Road to Accreditation

While the University worked throughout 1997 and 1998 to develop its academic programs, it also continued to strengthen its political, corporate, and academic credibility. By early
1999, it enjoyed the bipartisan political support of eighteen governors (from seventeen states and one territory), providing unprecedented visibility in the public policy realm. The corporate world responded with enthusiasm, donating time and money to aid in WGU’s development. In addition, the four regional accrediting agencies whose jurisdictions covered WGU’s sponsoring states—the accrediting commissions of the Northwest, North Central, Western Senior, and Western Junior College associations—had agreed to collaborate in guiding the University’s progress toward regional accreditation.

The formation of the InterRegional Accrediting Committee (IRAC) in 1997 was unprecedented. Never before had two (let alone four) different regions collaborated to oversee the accreditation of a single institution. Only one of the four had ever accredited a distance institution. IRAC worked with WGU’s leadership throughout that year to establish the standards and procedures that would, if met, certify that its programs were equivalent in quality to those of other established universities in their respective territories. Regional accreditation has three stages: Eligibility for accreditation candidacy, Candidacy for accreditation, and Accreditation. For a new institution, the process normally takes at least eight years to complete.

IRAC’s Eligibility requirements (ER) and Accreditation standards had to recognize WGU’s unique features while fitting them into the common framework of regional accreditation. Thus, for instance, in order to ensure that WGU would be a degree-granting institution, not just a kind of Underwriters Laboratories certifier of competence, ER 7 stipulated that “A substantial portion of the institution’s education programs lead to degrees and a significant proportion of its students are enrolled in them.” To ensure that even in their redesigned role, WGU faculty—not faculty from its instructional providers or even from its Program Councils, but WGU core faculty—remained in charge of its academic programs, ER 12 specified that “The institution has a core of qualified faculty with primary responsibility to the institution and sufficient in size to support all of the institution’s educational programs. The institution provides a clear statement of faculty responsibilities including development and review of curriculum as well as assessment of learning.” And in explicit recognition of its outsourcing arrangements for course instruction and library services, ER 15 required assurance that WGU “owns or otherwise provides access to sufficient information and learning resources and services to support its mission and all of its educational programs.”
By the spring of 1998, the Livingston-Albrecht team had prepared WGU to take its first formal step toward the ultimate goal. They submitted voluminous documentation addressing each of IRAC’s twenty criteria for Eligibility. The University had solid financing, stable leadership, clear and detailed designs for its initial degree programs, an online catalog which would soon be open for enrollments, detailed assessment procedures, and strong corporate and political support. On May 7, 1998, after careful review and discussion of the materials Livingston and Albrecht submitted, the InterRegional Accrediting Committee voted overwhelmingly to accord WGU Eligibility for candidacy consideration. The University had met the first test on its way to achieving “legitimacy” in the broader world of higher education. There were two more difficult tests still ahead, but these too it would pass, and in far less time than its detractors predicted.
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The Formative Years: 1999-2003

"Western Governors has raised the bar for online courses. Instead of graduating from their courses and saying, "I have passed all of the requirements," they want their students to say, "I graduated from WGU and I am an expert in the field of..." --Jeffrey Cravy, WGU graduate student

Far from feeling alone, I was guided at each point in the process by my mentor. I never felt alone. In fact, as I compare my educational experience at WGU with the other schools I attended, I had never experienced such support." --Kathryn Schlendorf, WGU graduate

"I have participated in no other program, including my teaching program, that has taught me so much. I am very pleased with the education I am receiving." --Roxanne McNerney, WGU graduate student

In the critical four years between 1999 and 2003 WGU laid the foundation for its later success. They were in many ways a time of preparation. In chapters VI and VII we will examine in some detail the most critical issues the University faced in these years and how it resolved them—its development of assessments, its tuition model, use of learning resources, degree design, the role of the mentor, and others. The most obvious outcomes of those years, however, were the achievement of regional accreditation and the establishment of the Teachers College, both of which led directly to the University’s explosive growth in 2003 and beyond. But those successes would not have happened if the University had not established early in this period the cornerstones of its essential culture—constant self-scrutiny, data-driven decision-making, and a passionate commitment to high quality programming and outstanding student service. In the summer and early fall of 1999 it brought out its first degree programs and leased long-term office space in Salt Lake City at 2040 Murray-Holladay Road. Early in 2001 it completed its consolidation of facilities in Salt Lake by closing its Denver offices. In 1999-2000 the University appointed three new program councils in Information Technology, Learning and Technology, and Business, and it launched new degree programs in all three areas. In 2000 it contracted with SunGard SCT to install the University’s first integrated student information system, Banner 2000, and made arrangements to house its electronic data in a highly secure, state-of-the-art, Tier One facility in California. Throughout 2000-2002 it launched a variety of marketing initiatives, learned much about what would work in marketing its new model and what would not, and so prepared itself for the great surge in enrollments that would begin in 2003. It clarified the role of the mentor and established the basic faculty/student ratio that has been the key to its cost-effective model. By early in 2001 it had decided to launch its Teachers College
and had appointed its first dean, Dr. Marti Garlett. And early in 2003 it achieved multi-regional accreditation.

New Leadership

The force behind these and many other important developments during these years was the new leadership that began to take command of the University in the spring of 1999. Jeff Livingston retired that spring, and Bob Albrecht retired later that summer. They had done outstanding, backbreaking work in bringing the institution from abstract idea to concrete plan, but both felt it was time to move on. Accordingly, in April 1999 the University’s trustees appointed Robert Mendenhall President, and it was he more than anyone else who established the culture of self-critical analysis and relentless commitment to performance improvement. It was Mendenhall who began the practice of monthly “Operations Reviews” in which the entire management team reported on their accomplishments in the month past and set priorities and benchmarks for achievement in the month ahead. These day-long meetings, intense, critical, and often painful because they exposed each manager’s performance to group scrutiny, continued throughout these middle four years and played a major role in the University’s step by step advance through this period.

Mendenhall brought to WGU a rare combination of entrepreneurial business savvy and educational experience. Upon graduation from Brigham Young University in the mid-1970s, he had teamed up with two colleagues to found Wicat Systems, which became a world leader in technology-based education and training. Among other pioneering programs, Wicat produced a complete K-12 computer-based curriculum in math, English, and reading that was used by approximately 10% of the nation’s schools. Mendenhall served as President and Chief Executive Officer of Wicat Systems from 1987-92. When he and his partners sold the company to Jostens Learning he became Jostens’ Executive Vice President for Strategic Development. Later he went on to become General Manager of IBM’s k-12 education division, where he held worldwide responsibility for all of the corporation’s school-related programs. Finally, in the late 1990s he returned to Utah to complete his Ph.D. at Brigham Young University, and it was then that the Trustees tapped him to lead WGU’s development.

The challenges Mendenhall faced in his first six months were formidable. Many institutions were already developing their own distance learning programs, some in direct reaction to WGU’s perceived “threat,” and distance learning consortia were growing rapidly. New for-profit
competitors had entered the online educational marketplace, while better established older ones were already seeing their online enrollments begin to multiply. There was legitimate fear that the window of opportunity for WGU was beginning to close, that there had been too much talk and too little action in regard to the governors’ brave new educational model. The press had been quick to take note of WGU’s slow start, and at times seemed all too willing to delight in the University’s early underachievement. Back in September 1998 The Chronicle of Higher Education had trumpeted that “Enrollment is Slow in Western Governors University’s First Weeks” (September 17), and The Salt Lake Tribune had rather more gleefully proclaimed “Online Classes Virtually Empty” (September 16, 1998). A few months later, as Mendenhall came on board in 1999 The Tribune more harshly quipped, “Virtual U Struggles to Get Real” (April 18, 1999).

After more than two years of planning, by the spring of 1999 WGU had still to launch its first degree programs. It was enrolling a few students free of charge as “pilots” to test its systems, and some students were enrolling for individual courses through its SmartCatalog, but no degree programs were as yet open to the general public. Mendenhall made a pledge to the trustees that by September three of them would be operational—the Associate of Arts, the Associate of Applied Science in Electronic Manufacturing Technology, and the newly conceived program designed to prepare teachers to use technology in their classrooms, the Master of Arts in Learning and Technology (MLT). He delivered on that commitment and WGU as a degree-granting institution was at last on its way.

Another of President Mendenhall’s early tasks was to find a replacement for Albrecht as Chief Academic Officer. He launched a national search that summer and in September 1999 appointed Douglas Johnstone as Provost and Academic Vice President. Johnstone brought balance to the executive team because he had experience with accreditation and a strong record of leadership in the development of nontraditional academic programs for working adult students. After earning his Ph.D. in English at the University of Oregon, he had first served as a faculty member and dean of Goddard College’s Adult Degree Program, one of the earliest programs in the United States designed to serve older students through distance learning. From 1979 to 1997 he was a senior academic dean at Empire State College, the State University of New York’s experimental “college without walls,” where he was responsible for new program development, distance learning, graduate studies, and corporate-college partnerships. Immediately before joining WGU he had served as Provost at Cambridge College in Massachusetts,
another nontraditional institution, where he had led the effort to renew accreditation and develop a strategic plan for technology.

The Distance Education Demonstration Program

One of the most important developments in the University’s early history came to fruition in the summer of 1999 and gave it a powerful boost. Late the previous fall the United States Congress had passed the 1998 Amendments to the Higher Education Act of 1965 authorizing, among other changes, the establishment of the Distance Education Demonstration Program (DEDP). Due to widespread fraud and abuse in the 1980s, perpetrated largely by proprietary correspondence schools, Congress had shut off federal financial aid eligibility for those institutions and even placed severe aid restrictions on the distance programs of legitimate colleges and universities. Yet by 1998, it was obvious that the Internet was here to stay, and that distance learning would provide access for millions of students who could not otherwise attend college. The DEDP expanded “student aid eligibility for distance learners by allowing the Secretary of Education to waive specific statutory and regulatory student aid requirements for participating
institutions. Among the requirements that [could] be waived [were] those regarding measures of an academic year, minimum hours spent in the classroom, and the percentage of an institution’s students who may be served by distance education.”

For WGU the DEDP was a major milestone on the march toward legitimacy and success. Thanks to the strong advocacy of Governors Leavitt and Romer as well as the active support of several members of congress, WGU was the only institution specifically named in the legislation as an eligible participant. All other members of this ground-breaking pilot project were screened and selected by the US Department of Education. And in addition to the waivers cited above for all participants, the legislation further empowered the Secretary of Education to waive any other restrictions that might inhibit WGU’s ability to participate fully in the program. On July 15, 1999 the consequences of this momentous legislation became obvious when the Department of Education formally authorized WGU to award federal financial aid. Henceforth, students could enroll in any of the University’s degree programs and receive federal grants and loans to support their studies—just as they could at all other regionally accredited colleges and universities.

**Funding**

Developing the University’s infrastructure and degree programs required solid financial backing, and it would clearly be some time before WGU could support itself on tuition. The $100,000 contributed initially by each sponsoring governor was sufficient to launch the University but not to sustain or develop it. Fortunately, one of the most important financial developments in WGU’s history occurred early in 2000. Through the efforts of WGU’s sponsoring governors and the energetic advocacy of Bill Simmons of The Dutko Group, WGU enlisted the active support of several members of Congress to obtain nearly $2 million from the federal government as a special appropriation in the Health and Human Services bill. It was the first of four annual grants WGU received from Congress in fiscal years 2000-2003, and each of them enabled the University to build and market new degrees, recruit and appoint additional faculty, increase access to learning resources, and add other supporting services for its students. Senators Bob Bennett, Tom Daschle, Mike Enzi, Harry Reid, Conrad Burns, and Craig Thomas, as well as Representatives Chris Cannon and Barbara Cubin were chiefly responsible for these grants. Later, in fiscal years 2004 and 2005 Senator Bennett also helped the University secure a total of nearly $2 million from the Department of Defense Appropriations bill to provide educational programs for active duty and retired military personnel. Although these earmarks were
resented by some in higher education as “pork barrel spending” that reduced available funding for more established institutions, Congress acted as it did precisely because it knew that any conventional peer review process would be highly unlikely to support something as boldly new as Western Governors University. The only way to get such an enterprise off the ground was through special appropriations.

A second, equally significant development occurred in the fall of 2001. As indicated previously, WGU had decided early that year to establish a Teachers College and in January had appointed its founding dean. Over the next several months President Mendenhall and Governor Leavitt, with the assistance of Bill Simmons, WGU’s Washington lobbyist, promoted awareness of this initiative among Utah’s congressional delegation and officials at the US Department of Education. There had never been an online, competency-based, teacher preparation program with national reach, and the idea gained strong federal support. Secretary of Education Rod Paige said “This is the best thing I’ve heard since I’ve been in Washington,” and in September the Department committed $10 million over five years to help WGU build the College. Although the grant would not become fully public until after the University achieved accreditation in 2003, the future of the Teachers College was assured. Late in the fall of 2002, the Department also awarded the College a Transition to Teaching grant of up to $3.7 million to provide scholarships and other supporting services so that second career professionals and school paraprofessionals in Dallas, Texas and Las Vegas, Nevada could become fully licensed teachers in those school districts. Through December 2006 that grant has provided scholarships totaling approximately $1.6 million.

President Mendenhall and his Vice President of Development, Max Farbman, also worked aggressively to engage the National Advisory Board (NAB) in the University’s success and to expand its membership. Each NAB member made a substantial financial contribution to the University upon joining the Board, either in cash or in-kind services, and each contributed annual dues thereafter. As a result, by the time it received IRAC’s accreditation early in 2003 WGU had received $26 million in cash or in-kind support from its supporting corporations and foundations, and from the federal government, and it had $9 million in future financial commitments. NAB membership increased from eleven members in 1999 to twenty-three by the end of 2002. New members included America Online, Convergys Corporation, Drake International, Farmers Insurance, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Hewlett Packard Foundation, Marriott Foundation, Oracle Corporation, Qwest Communications, Sallie Mae, SunGard SCT, the Swartz
Foundation, and Thomson Prometric. Because of this broad base of federal and private support, the University operated each year in the black, remained free of debt, and continued to increase its net assets.

The Mentor Role

One of WGU's signature features is the way it has “unbundled” the role of the faculty. In traditional institutions, faculty design their own courses, teach their own courses, and evaluate their students' work in those courses. At WGU, these roles are separated. Program councils and outside subject matter experts determine the competencies and learning objectives students must master. Outside education providers furnish the courses, independent study materials, and other learning resources students use to develop their competencies. Assessments are designed by outside subject matter experts and developed by professional assessment staff. Student results on objective tests are computer-scored, and their essays are evaluated by outside graders. All of these features derive from the University’s determination to ensure that student learning is substantial, reliable, and valid.

With all of these traditional faculty functions distributed elsewhere, one might wonder what else there is for a mentor to do in the WGU system. At first, these guides to student progress were called “advisor/mentor,” and the term seemed to capture the ambiguity about the services they would provide. “Advisor” suggested a more limited role, perhaps providing advice about what courses a student might take or responding to student questions. “Mentor” suggested a more proactive role, one providing comprehensive guidance, support, problem-solving, and encouragement. In fact, as the University gained experience with the role it soon dropped “advisor” from the faculty title and came to recognize its mentors as teachers in the richest sense of the word. Indeed, “mentor” is the most student-service oriented faculty role in American higher education today. Mentors at WGU stay with their students throughout their programs, from admission to graduation. They are their students’ primary source of information about program content, and about the policies and procedures of the University. They must be wise counselors to the students for whom they are responsible. They take deep personal interest in their students’ academic progress and reflect commitment to their students’ success in all their daily work. They must be intimately familiar with the details of the academic programs their students are completing and able to answer or obtain answers to all the questions students may have about their programs. They help their students overcome misunderstandings about program content and provide sound advice on improving mastery of program concepts, knowledge
and skills. They help their students identify their learning strengths and weaknesses and connect them with the resources necessary to extend the former and overcome the latter. They must be well organized and good communicators, interpersonally, technologically, and in writing. Finally, they must be not only capable in these many areas, but also dedicated to performing these functions in full measure.

Marketing and Recruitment

The University engaged a number of initiatives to attract students to its model in these early years. It first developed associate’s degrees in several applied areas because they were not only foundational for later advanced study, the University could also develop their competencies and assessments fairly quickly, and they would give students credentials they could take immediately to the workplace. Even its first master’s degree was targeted at professional level skills for teachers. It carved a number of certificates from components of these degrees so that students could obtain incremental recognition as they progressed through their studies. It also accepted some external certifications in partial fulfillment of a particular WGU degree, such as the Certified Novell Engineer, so that students bringing in such credentials could accelerate their program completion. Later WGU would learn that associate level students were not generally good candidates for its model and would terminate those degrees, but in these early formative years this strategy seemed appropriate.

Promoting its degrees effectively on a modest budget with a small staff was the real challenge. The University recruited students through its web site and purchased visibility in a number of Internet-based education outlets. It became obvious pretty quickly that purchasing newspaper and radio advertising throughout WGU’s member states would be neither affordable nor effective. The most realistic strategy pointed to developing relationships with partner organizations.

One, for instance, was to forge articulation agreements with other institutions. The first of these were with four year institutions, so that WGU’s associate’s degree graduates could be guaranteed an advancement path if they wanted to go on to upper division study. As soon as the University received approval from IRAC in 2001 to offer bachelor’s degrees, it began to forge agreements with community colleges so their graduates could complete upper division study at WGU. The earliest of the four-year college agreements included institutions like Empire State College in New York, Thomas Edison State College in New Jersey, and Jones Inter-
national University in Colorado. Community college agreements ranged from individual institutions to multi-institutional systems like the Dallas Community College District in Texas, the Maricopa Community College District in Arizona, and the state of Nebraska’s two year college system. To build further on this approach, the University also negotiated an umbrella agreement with the League for Innovation in the Community College that guaranteed any employee of a League member institution a scholarship to attend WGU. By the time WGU applied for initial accreditation in 2002 it had completed more than sixty of these agreements with private and public two and four year institutions, and with higher education systems across the country.

Another initiative targeted corporations and government agencies with the aim of providing contractual services to them. It developed, for instance, the AAS in Electronic Manufacturing Technology (AAS-EMT) at the urging of a corporate partner and had some success in attracting students to it from that corporation and others. It also created “state government universities” (SGU) designed to serve public employees of the University’s member states with online training and education. The idea was to develop a special portal in WGU’s website that would be accessible only by the employees of a specific state desiring the service. Through that portal an employee could complete both required and optional training programs online, take advantage of the SmartCatalog to enroll in credit-bearing courses, or obtain advice from enrollment counselors about enrolling for a WGU degree. There was no charge to set up an SGU, but a participating state had to decide the training content it wanted to include, place it on the WGU site, and keep it up to date. In 2001 the University created both “Nevada State Government University” and “Arizona State Government University” along these lines. Over the next two years it enrolled modest numbers of state employees in these SGUs, and in each case some of them later became WGU degree candidates.

A third initiative resulted from a $1 million gift in 2001 from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, matched by a similar amount from the State of Utah, to train public school leaders in the understanding, use, and deployment of technology in their systems and classrooms. The Gates Foundation had sponsored this initiative in all fifty states, but the WGU program was unique in operating exclusively online and in a competency-based framework. Between 2001 and 2003 “Technology for Principals Leading Utah Schools” (T-PLUS) trained over 300 superintendents, principals, and other school officials. The project also had significant side benefits, because it familiarized Utah’s school leaders with WGU’s programs and made them much more
receptive to the teacher candidates who would soon begin graduating from its Teachers College.

Although some of these efforts were more successful than others, all of them taught WGU’s marketing team valuable lessons about what would work and why. It must be said, nonetheless, that until WGU received regional accreditation in 2003 its efforts to recruit students produced only modest results. To be sure, some of the difficulty resulted from the staff and budget limitations of these early years. The difficulty of marketing a new and unaccredited educational model throughout the nation, however, would be daunting for any staff with any budget. Students were reluctant to invest in an unknown quantity and employers were reluctant to provide tuition reimbursement for WGU study. The University worked with the Veterans Administration, for instance, for two years before it would approve GI Bill benefits for veterans attending WGU and did not get that approval until after accreditation. It worked even longer with the Department of Defense to win Tuition Assistance approval for active duty military personnel and did not officially receive it until late in 2005. Once the University passed the accreditation hurdle, however, its Vice President of Marketing, Pat Partridge, harnessed that publicity and the national surge of interest in its Teachers College to a comprehensive, Internet-based recruitment program that has been remarkably successful.

**Progress toward Accreditation**

The University chose to concentrate its programs in information technology, education, and business, three areas judged critically important to the West’s continued economic development and particularly amenable to competency-based assessment. It would not be ready to launch its first business programs until 2001, but by early 2000 it had introduced five degrees and three certificates:

- Associate of Arts (AA)
- Associate of Applied Science in Electronic Manufacturing Technology (EMT)
  - Certificate in Electronic Manufacturing Technology
- Associate of Applied Science in Network Administration (NA)
  - Certificate in Network Administration
- Associate of Applied Science in Software Applications Analysis and Integration (SAAI)
  - Certificate in Software Applications Analysis and Integration
- Master of Arts in Learning and Technology (MLT).
The AA was a foundational program whose competencies in general education were designed to serve all current and future undergraduate degrees. The EMT, NA, and SAAI degrees prepared entry level employees for the information technology industry, and the MLT prepared K-12 classroom teachers to integrate technology with their teaching.

These five degrees formed the core of the self-study the University submitted to IRAC in January 2000 as part of its application for Candidacy for accreditation. In February of that year an eleven-member evaluation team appointed by IRAC visited the institution for three days. At the time, WGU maintained offices in both Denver and Salt Lake City, and the team interviewed staff and reviewed operations in both locations. Its report to IRAC praised the University’s progress but raised some concerns about its readiness for advancement. By September 1999 WGU had only twelve employees. Five months later at the time of IRAC’s visit it had thirty-two, most of whom were still learning their jobs. Many of the University’s systems for enrolling, guiding, and tracking its students were barely tested. WGU had students in each of its programs, but there was as yet little data about student performance. Accordingly, though disappointing it was not surprising that on May 19, 2000 at its meeting in Seattle, Washington IRAC deferred a decision on WGU’s Candidacy “for a period not to exceed six months.”

The University moved rapidly and systematically to address the Committee’s concerns, and a follow-up visit early in November resulted in IRAC’s endorsement on November 21, 2000 of WGU’s Candidacy for interregional accreditation. The InterRegional Committee “was impressed by the progress the university [had] made, its spirit and dedication,” and most particularly its “systematic and regular evaluation of students’ experiences, the institution-wide accessibility of that data and its integration into the institutional planning processes.”

At about the same time that WGU received Candidacy from IRAC, it decided to pursue national accreditation with the Distance Education and Training Council. DETC, established in 1926, is the oldest accreditor of distance learning programs in the United States. Since WGU is by mission a national institution, it made sense to seek the endorsement of distance learning’s most prestigious quality assurance organization. During the winter of 2000-2001 the University prepared another self-study addressing each of DETC’s standards, and on April 4-5, 2001 it hosted a nine member Examining Committee at its headquarters in Salt Lake. Its chair was Dr. Joseph Gurubatham, President of Griggs University, and DETC’s Executive Director, Mike Lambert, participated ex officio. By then WGU had consolidated its operations and closed its
Denver office. It had also introduced its first bachelor’s degree, a Bachelor of Science in Business with an emphasis in Information Technology Management. The DETC team was impressed with the efficiency of WGU’s operations and with the quality of its programs, and on the basis of its report, the Council awarded full accreditation to the University on June 2, 2001. Although its process was much quicker than IRAC’s, WGU found DETC’s standards to be equally demanding and comprehensive. Its endorsement marked another significant milestone in the University’s progress toward full acceptance in the higher education community.

With these successes, WGU slowly began to gain traction with students and receive more favorable publicity. In July 2001 Modern Maturity, the national publication of the American Association of Retired Persons, ranked WGU among the top ten electronic learning sites in the country, a group that included at that time the distance learning programs of Pennsylvania State University, the University of California at Berkeley, and the University of Washington. In January 2002 Salt Lake’s Deseret News headlined an article “Support is soaring for WGU. . . Enrollment has jumped 500% at online university.” A few months later even The Salt Lake Tribune, always the most skeptical of the local media, headlined its first favorable article, “Online university offers students great flexibility” (May 5, 2002).

By then, WGU was deep in the application process for initial Accreditation, the final step in the climb toward “legitimacy” in the academic world and in the mind of the public. The ten Accreditation standards (AS) that WGU had to meet integrated the requirements of the four regions in a framework tailored to the uniqueness of the model. As expected, the standards demand considerably stronger evidence of compliance and devote more attention to WGU’s distinctiveness than do the ERS. AS 2, for instance, dealt in familiar language with institutional integrity. But section 2.2 of that standard further stipulated that “When programs are delivered by electronic means, special provisions are in place to address academic honesty, the authenticity of student work, and the security of records.” Similarly, AS 3 dealt in familiar language with governance and administration, but section 3.6 added that “When the institution delivers services with a heavy reliance on contractual relationships with other organizations, the division of responsibility and authority between the institution and other organizations is clear. . . .” AS 4 covered Educational Programs in largely familiar terms, but section 4.1.6 stipulated that “If the institution uses a measure of achievement other than academic credit such measures are clearly stated and published. Efforts are made to articulate such measures with the academic credit system.” Section 4.4.3 further specified that “When an institution relies on other institutions for
the delivery of learning activities or the assessment of student learning, it has the means to assess the quality and effectiveness of such activities and maintains overall responsibility for them.” Similar adaptations of familiar accreditation requirements rippled through AS 5 (Information and Learning Resources), AS 6 (Institutional Leadership), AS 7 (Students), and AS 9 (Physical Resources).

Once an institution receives Candidacy for regional accreditation it has up to five years to achieve Accreditation. After WGU received Candidacy in November 2000 it worked hard to accelerate that schedule. By February 2002 it was able to convince the heads of the four regional accrediting associations comprising IRAC that it would be ready for accreditation review that fall. IRAC appointed a nine member evaluation team headed by Dr. Jane Jervis, President Emerita of The Evergreen State College, and the team visited the University from November 3-6. By then WGU had forty-three employees, including nine mentors. It offered ten degrees and eleven certificates:

Degrees:

- Associate of Arts
- Associate of Science, Business
- Associate of Science, Information Technology
- Associate of Applied Science, Information Technology
- Associate of Applied Science, Information Technology, CNE Emphasis
- Bachelor of Science, Business
- Bachelor of Science, Computer Information Systems
- Master of Arts, Learning and Technology

Certificates:

Undergraduate:
- Business Foundations
- Business and Technical Skills

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4 The AAS degrees in Electronic Manufacturing Technology and Software Applications Analysis and Integration had been dropped.
• Human Resource Management 2002
• Information Technology Fundamentals 2002
• Information Technology Management
• For Computer Professionals 2002
• For Business Professionals 2002
• Information Technology, Network Administration 2000
• Leadership 2001
• Software Engineering and Development 2002

Graduate:
• Instructional Design 2001
• Technology Leadership 2001
  o (for Utah Principals and Superintendents)
• Technology Proficiency 2001

In addition to these programs, the University had developed the first three degrees of its Teachers College, included their descriptions in its self-study, and asked IRAC’s evaluation team to include them in its review. These included the Bachelor of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies (leading to elementary school teaching certification), the Master of Arts in Teaching (with elementary education certification), and the Master of Arts in Mathematics Education (for both elementary and secondary school teachers already certified).

IRAC’s team report overwhelmingly endorsed the quality of the University’s programs, its staff, and its operating systems. Among the visiting team’s commendations, perhaps none were more affirming than its finding that WGU “continually assesses its performance and nimbly responds to assessment findings, both in student learning and in organizational effectiveness,” and its praise for the University’s “development of high-quality statements of learning competencies and multi-modal competency assessments, and for their ongoing testing, revision, and improvement.” Even recommendations for continuing improvement, such as this one, conveyed acceptance of WGU as a successful institution: “The evaluation committee recommends that WGU undertake and act upon a systematic review of organizational design as it moves from an entrepreneurial start-up institution in which close personal contact and improvisation are possible, to a scalable institution delivering a broad range of programs and serving a large number of students.”
WGU’s success was a historic event in regional accreditation. First, it achieved that goal in much shorter time than most new institutions—less than five years from the date it received Eligibility in 1998. More importantly, it is the only university ever to be simultaneously accredited by multiple regions, and the only competency-based, distance university so recognized. Its success resulted from the unparalleled support of its sponsoring governors, from the dedication and talent of its faculty and staff, and from the willingness of visiting evaluators and accreditors to recognize the innovative potential of the WGU model. As Governor Leavitt noted at the time, IRAC’s endorsement “represents a watershed event in American higher education in that regional accreditation provides a significant external validation of competency-based education as an accepted, viable alternative to the traditional credit-based system.”
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The Expansion Years: 2003-2006

"Without doubt WGU has been a success. Competence-based education has proven not only strong philosophically but also practically, and as a result is beginning to have an effect on traditional institutions of higher education. Now, when pessimists say ‘competency-based education is great in principle but you can’t make it really work,’ there is strong evidence to the contrary from WGU. Increasingly, at WCET conferences and elsewhere, I hear that competence is the core value to be achieved. And WGU has been partly responsible for that because it has done it, and done it well."

Dr. David Longanecker
Executive Director, Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education

Accreditation opened the enrollment floodgates. From 500 students in February 2003, University enrollment more than tripled to nearly 1600 by December, doubled to 3200 by December of 2004, reached 5100 by December of 2005, and exceeded 7300 by the end of 2006. During the last half of 2006, an average of more than 600 new students enrolled each month.

As WGU’s growth increased, so did the number of program options available in each curricular area. By 2005 it began to build a fourth area of emphasis in the health professions, and by mid-2006 it named each curricular area a College. By the end of the year the University offered forty-seven degree and certificate programs at the bachelor’s and master’s levels in the College of Business, the College of Information Technology, the Teachers College, and the new College of Health Professions. (The complete list is included in the Appendix, Chapter X.) As yet WGU had no plans to add doctoral programs, though both students and alumni frequently asked about that possibility and one can certainly wonder what the next ten years will bring. In October 2004 the University did decide, however, to stop offering associate’s degrees. Five years of experience with students who enrolled only for an associate’s degree, and who had little or no previous college experience, had shown they were not good candidates for WGU’s programs. They generally lacked the basic college-level skills, self-discipline, and goal-direction to succeed in a competency-based, distance learning environment. The University made a commitment to help those currently enrolled to complete their degrees, but it took in no new associate level students after December 2004.

Accreditation was the trigger for WGU’s enrollment surge, but it was not the only cause of it, and it could not have been sustained unless the programs, systems, and personnel were available to support it. For instance, the University quadrupled its degree and certificate offerings between February 2003 and December 2006. It quadrupled its marketing staff during
those years, and multiplied its marketing budget tenfold. The number of admission counselors increased from five in February 2003 to twenty-nine by October 2006. It completely redesigned its website and its printed materials for prospective students. It developed comprehensive study guides for enrolled students to use in preparing for their assessments, and it significantly upgraded its electronic collaboration tools to foster online student interaction. It negotiated with the Veterans Administration and the Department of Defense to make its programs accessible to military personnel. It changed its financial aid status with the US Department of Education in order to make financial aid more accessible to students. And finally, it greatly increased its faculty. Whereas “normal” universities hire new teachers at most two or three times a year, WGU must hire mentors every month. Enrolling new students monthly means that faculty have to be trained and ready to serve them, so throughout the past four years WGU has recruited and trained at least four and sometimes as many as twelve new mentors each month. In February 2003, the University employed nine mentors. In December 2006 it employed more than 120.

Apart from multiregional accreditation, the single most important cause of WGU’s enrollment surge over the past four years was the creation of the Teachers College. When Robert Mendenhall was appointed President in the spring of 1999, he made a commitment to the Trustees to launch a Master of Arts degree in Learning and Technology by early fall. Both the Board and the President felt there was a strong need for teachers and other training professionals to master the use of the new learning technologies that were becoming available. When President Mendenhall delivered on his commitment he planted the seed for what would later become the Teachers College.

In January 2001 WGU appointed that College’s first dean, Dr. Marti Garlett, and when the University achieved initial accreditation in February 2003 the first three degree programs of the College were part of IRAC’s endorsement. Less than a month later on March 10, 2003, U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige, joined by Deputy Secretary William Hansen, Governor Mike Leavitt, Nebraska Senator Ben Nelson, and President Mendenhall, publicly announced the launch of the Teachers College and the commitment of the five year, $10 million Star Schools grant from the US Department of Education that had been committed to WGU in the fall of 2001. The College is the first teacher education program in the country with a truly national mission. It is particularly appealing to working adults preparing for licensure as well as to current teachers

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5 It is no doubt clear by now that WGU’s faculty are called mentors, and that the terms are used interchangeably throughout this text.
seeking a master’s degree because its programs enable them to achieve their goals without leaving home or quitting their current jobs.

From its founding, the Teachers College has grown to enroll more than 4000 students in thirty programs leading to the bachelor’s and master’s degree, or to post-degree professional certification. Demand for its programs shows no sign of slowing. It currently has teacher candidates and licensed graduates working in schools in forty two states and several foreign countries. Its degree programs for secondary school mathematics and science teachers are among the largest in the United States. In October 2006 it won accreditation from the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), widely considered the gold standard for the field.

**New WGU Headquarters**

Early in 2004, Senator Robert Bennett and Utah Governor Olene Walker presided at the ribbon cutting celebration when Western Governors University officially opened its new headquarters in a large office building at 4001 South 700 East in Salt Lake City. The University took over the seventh floor of the building and more than doubled its previous office space, boosting it from 6600 to 16000 square feet. A little more than a year later it acquired a second floor of the building, and by the fall of 2006 it had occupied a third.

During the ribbon cutting, President Mendenhall credited Senator Bennett with drawing Congressional attention to the successful programs initiated by the University and for obtaining federal funding to help support it. He has been an outspoken advocate of competency-based learning and the power of the Internet since WGU’s founding. In complimenting the University on teaching students how to use learning technologies successfully, Senator Bennett said, “I know of no place anywhere on the planet where you could have learned these lessons more fundamentally than at Western Governors University.”

**Growth**

Enrollment accelerated throughout 2003 and continued to surge in 2004. The University expanded that year by ten percent each month, enrolling students from all fifty states and eight foreign countries. Tuition revenues also increased dramatically. For the fiscal year ending June 30, 2004, tuition revenues increased 400%, and University net assets increased 37%. In addition, WGU funded over $1 million in scholarships and added three new corporate sponsors to its
National Advisory Board, bringing the total to more than twenty organizations, each contributing $250,000 or more to the institution’s development. Advisory Board members that year included AT&T, BearingPoint, Convergys, Dell, Farmers Insurance Group, Gates Foundation, Google, Hewlett-Packard, Marriott Foundation, Oracle, Qwest, Sallie Mae, Siebel Systems, Simmons Capital, Sloan Foundation, Sun Guard, Sun Microsystems, Thomson Learning, Time Warner, Wasatch Property Management, and Zions Bank.

While the University as a whole doubled its enrollment in 2004 to 3200 students, Teachers College enrollments nearly tripled from 700 to more than 2000 students. By the end of the year the College offered twenty degree and certificate programs. President Mendenhall could justly claim that the Teachers College was “playing a vital role in addressing our nation’s teacher shortage,” and students confirmed WGU’s unique importance to their careers. Sandra Cipra, an elementary teacher who earned her master’s degree, expressed it in terms echoed by many others: “WGU is designed for people who have the desire and drive to get the work done. I live two and half hours from the nearest university. By learning online, I set my own hours of study and overcame geographical barriers while receiving an excellent education. This whole experience has been very rewarding.”

The University’s fifty-eight mentors provided guidance to students enrolled in a total of thirty-four different degree and certificate programs. In addition to those in Education, it offered seven bachelor’s degrees in business, five bachelor’s degrees in Information Technology, and it had just launched its first two MBA programs in Leadership and Strategy and Information Technology Management. Collectively, these Business and IT programs enrolled nearly 1200 students, and while they were not growing as rapidly as those of the Teachers College they were expanding at a steady rate. The University enrolled students from every state, the District of Columbia, three U.S. territories, and nine foreign countries. States with the most WGU students included Texas, Utah, California, Washington, Georgia, and Florida.

2005 saw continued rapid growth in students, and in the financial strength of the University. The fiscal year ended with tuition revenue in excess of $15 million, combined revenues in excess of $19 million, and net assets rose 28% to nearly $4 million. By that fall, the University no longer offered associate degree programs and had consolidated some of its other offerings. It provided a total of seventeen bachelor’s and master’s programs in Education, ten bachelor’s
and master’s programs in Business, and five bachelor’s programs in Information Technology. At year’s end, more than ninety mentors guided the progress of over than 5000 students.

The University’s financial position, enrollments, and future prospects continued to improve steadily throughout 2006. The fiscal year saw tuition revenue increase to more than $27 million, combined revenues exceed $31 million, and net assets increase by 50% to more than $6 million. Students enrolled in forty seven different degree and certificate programs—thirty in Education, eight in Business, seven in Information Technology, and two—the first from the new College of Health Professions—in health care management and health education. Enrollments climbed steadily, reaching 7053 by December, and while the Teachers College continued to have by far the largest enrollments (4021 of the total), Business College enrollments approached 2000 and IT enrollments exceeded 1000. The list of major University supporters also continued to expand as Consonus, Hospital Corporation of America, Microsoft, SAS, and Wasatch Property Management joined the National Advisory Board.

As WGU approached the tenth anniversary of its formal incorporation, there were strong indications that it had turned a corner and would experience in 2007 another major burst in its growth. It had devoted much of 2006 to a major upgrade in its technology infrastructure, anticipating that within the next three years it would need to support more than 10,000 students. It had applied for and achieved NCATE accreditation for its Teachers College. It had launched the first program of the College of Health Professions and expected to launch several more early in the next year. Interest in the University among prospective students was surging. Throughout the last half of 2006 WGU regularly broke all previous records for new student enrollments, and increasingly those incoming students cited their friends, co-workers, and employers as the people who had recommended WGU to them. President Mendenhall put it best when he said to University staff at a briefing session, “Every new organization, if it is successful, reaches a point in its development, a tipping point, where suddenly things begin to go its way. It becomes the place to be, the thing to do, the right choice at the right time. It’s taken us ten years, but it looks like we’ve reached that point. So get ready. The next few years could be a wild ride.”
Graduates

The mark of any successful university is, of course, not only how many students it takes in, but what they learn while enrolled, and how many ultimately graduate. WGU has demonstrated that it is increasingly attractive to students, and its competency-based methods ensure that students’ learning is substantial, timely, and relevant to their professional goals. Graduation rates at traditional universities are calculated in six year cohorts. That is, an entering freshman is given six years to earn a bachelor’s degree before being counted in the institution’s official graduation rate. On that basis, the end of 2006 would mark the first year that WGU had a full six year cohort of potential graduates. Allowing for a normal number of students dropping out and never graduating, one might therefore predict that at most the University should have graduated fewer than 100 students by the end of that year. In fact, however, the University attracts experienced students who generally bring significant competencies with them when they enroll, and it allows them to progress as rapidly as they can pass their assessments. As a result, by the end of December 2006 it had already graduated more than 1300 students. The numbers climbed quickly as the University grew. By the end of 2003, sixty-three students had graduated, including eight associate’s degrees, four bachelor’s degrees, and fifty-one master’s degrees. In 2004, 121 additional students graduated (seven associate’s, twenty-four bachelor’s, seventy-eight master’s degrees, and twelve professional certificates). 2005 added 360 to the number (thirteen associate’s, 182 bachelor’s, 102 master’s, sixty-three certificates), and 2006 added 766 more, with ten students earning associate’s degrees, 475 earning bachelor’s degrees, 136 earning master’s degrees, and 145 earning post-baccalaureate certificates.

College of Health Professions

In 2006 WGU launched its new College of Health Professions to address the growing need for individuals with bachelor’s and master’s degrees in the health care industry. In launching the College, President Mendenhall said, “Projections from the Bureau of Labor Statistics indicate that there will be more than one million vacant positions for Registered Nurses by 2010 due to growth in demand for nursing care and net replacements due to retirement. Approximately 50% of these vacancies will be for R.N.s with baccalaureate or master’s nursing degrees. In addition, assisting practitioners in meeting their career goals promotes opportunities for advancement to positions with increased responsibility and compensation, expanded scope of professional authority, and management of complex human and material resources. Health care agencies, in turn, benefit from employees who continue to experience enhanced job satisfaction and higher rates of retention.”
The new College of Health Professions is the first national, online, competency-based college of health in the United States. Its degrees target adults who are already working in health and health-related positions but need access to additional education to further their career goals. Degree programs include the disciplines of nursing, public health, health education, health care management and health information systems. The first three degrees include a Master of Business Administration in Health Care Management, a Master of Education in Health Education, and a Master of Science in Nursing.

The Hospital Corporation of America (HCA), the nation’s leading provider of healthcare services, composed of 190 hospitals and ninety-one outpatient surgery centers in twenty-three states, England and Switzerland, signed on as the first corporate sponsor of the new College of Health Professions. The Nashville-based organization was one of the nation’s first hospital companies and today employs nearly 200,000 people. HCA has made a significant financial contribution to WGU, and is actively involved in developing the competencies for the WGU degree programs.

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Milestones in Western Governors University Development

1995
January
Leavitt meets Clara Lovett; conversation sparks initial idea for multi-state, linked distance learning delivery network

June 24-26
Park City WGA meeting generates WGU idea

November
Las Vegas WGA meeting retains WICHE and NCHEMS as design consultants; governors formally propose competency-based virtual university

1996
February 6
WGA press conference announces the new university, releases the concept paper “From Vision to Reality: A Western Virtual University,” written by Dennis Jones of NCHEMS

June 24
At the Omaha WGA meeting eleven governors endorse the Implementation Plan, sign MOU committing $100K from each to support WGU’s launch

1997
January 15
Thirteen governors sign the Articles of Incorporation

February 3
Trustees adopt Bylaws, elect Governors Leavitt and Romer co-chairs, and appoint Livingston and Albrecht

October 27
Trustees approve WGU mission statement

December 4
Trustees decide that WGU will remain a private non-profit institution

1998
January 13
First meeting of the Electronic Manufacturing Technology Program Council

January 16
First meeting of the Assessment Council

March 9
First meeting of the Associate of Arts Program Council

May 7
IRAC grants Eligibility

September 2
WGU officially opens for business

1999
April
Mendenhall appointed President

August
Associate of Arts and Associate of Applied Science in Electronic Manufacturing Technology launched

August 24
Jones International University articulation agreement signed, the first to guarantee admission of WGU’s associate degree graduates into a four year, accredited university

September
Master of Arts in Learning and Technology launched.

September 30
12.5 million visits, 377,341 visitors to the WGU website since it opened on September 2, 1998.

October
17 assessment referrals, 43 assessments delivered; 104 approved Education Providers; 864 courses in SmartCatalog
October 1

Johnstone appointed Provost and Academic Vice President

December

Associate degree tuition $3250, master's degree $3850 (plus course costs); 160 enrolled students, 89 seeking degrees; 1223 courses in the SmartCatalog

2000

February

First Congressional grant awarded, $1.8 million

February 4

SUNY Empire State College articulation agreement signed, the second with a four-year institution

February 7-10

First IRAC Candidacy site visit

March

Associate of Applied Science in Software Analysis and Applications Integration launched

March 9

Thomas Edison State College articulation agreement signed, the third with a four year institution

June 5

IRAC defers Candidacy

July

Associate of Science in Information Technology, Associate of Science in Business launched

September 1

Regis University articulation agreement signed, the fourth with a four year institution

November 21

IRAC confers Candidacy

December 1

Genevieve Kirch becomes WGU's first graduate

2001

January

Closed Denver office and consolidated all operations in SLC; 172 active degree candidates; 81 assessment referrals in the past 30 days; decision to cancel SAAI; appointment of Marti Garlett as founding dean of the Teachers College

February

WGU joins the League for Innovation in the Community College as a partner institution

March

212 enrolled students:

April 4-5

DETC evaluation visit for accreditation

April 8

IRAC grants authority to award bachelor’s degrees; first bachelor's degree in Business launched, the BS in Information Technology Management

May 15

Maricopa Community College District articulation agreement signed, the first with a junior college guaranteeing admission of its graduates to WGU’s bachelor’s degree programs

May 18

First BS degree in Information Technology launched, the BS in Computer Information Systems

June 2

DETC accreditation awarded

July

Tuition increase: Associate’s $4500; Bachelor’s $4700; Master’s $4900

September

$10 million Star Schools grant awarded to the Teachers College by the US Department of Education

2002

January 28

BS in Human Resource Management launched

February 23

IRAC agrees to allow WGU to apply for initial Accreditation
March  
University changes tuition policy, begins to charge a comprehensive fee each term that includes course costs

March-September  
Self-study and Accreditation preparation

September 30  
US Department of Education awards the Teachers College $3.7 million Transition to Teaching grant

November 3-6  
IRAC evaluation team visit for initial accreditation

2003

February 24  
IRAC awards initial multi-regional Accreditation; first Teachers College degrees launched, Bachelor of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies, Master of Arts in Teaching, Master of Arts in Mathematics Education

June  
High point in Education Providers (59) and SmartCatalog courses (1800)

July  
1000 enrolled students

July 3  
Cancellation of all Associate of Applied Science degrees

August 29  

September 2  
MA-Science Education launched

September 17  
BS-Marketing Management launched

October 20  
BS-Management Accounting and BS-Finance launched

December  
Cancellation of SmartCatalog access for non-degree students.

December 24  
BA-Social Science launched

2004

February 25  
MAT-Social Science launched

March  
2000 enrolled students

March 5  
BS-IT in Software Development, BS-IT in Project Management, BS-IT in Security, and BS-IT in Network Management launched

March 26  
BA and MA in Educational Studies launched

April 9  
Veterans Administration approves all WGU programs for retired military personnel, retroactive to January 1, 2003.

October 29  
WGU decides to end all associate level programs

November  
3000 enrolled students

November 2  
Master of Business Administration and MBA-Information Technology Management launched

2005

February 2  
Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities reaffirms WGU accreditation

February 24  
MA in English Language Learning launched

February 28  
MBA in Strategic Leadership launched for graduates of the USAF Air War College

June  
WGU decides to develop the College of Health Professions

July  
4000 enrolled students

November 10  
Department of Defense approves WGU for Tuition Assistance

November 17  
NCATE declares the Teachers College a candidate for accreditation

December  
5000 enrolled students
2006

April 29-May 3  NCATE evaluation team recommends accreditation of the Teachers College
May  Craig Swenson succeeds Douglas Johnstone as Provost and Academic Vice President
June 21  Heather Snow earns the Bachelor of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies and becomes WGU’s 1000th graduate
August  6000 enrolled students
October 25  NCATE awards national accreditation to the Teachers College
November  MBA in Health Care Management launched
December  7000 enrolled students

* * * * * *
V. Through a Student’s Eyes

As of 2005, retirement wasn’t all that great for Tomas Garcia, who had two distinguished careers, the first 15 years as an electronic and software senior engineer and then as a business executive with 21 years of national and international management experience, who built several companies into large profitable ventures. “After three years of retirement and traveling, I got up one morning and said, ‘I need to solve a problem or two’ instead of being retired.” His wife suggested becoming a schoolteacher.

Even though he held a bachelor’s degree from New Mexico State University in electrical engineering and an MBA from the University of Denver and completed all of the course work for a MSEE from New Mexico State University, he did not have a teaching certificate. Tomas applied to be a substitute teacher in the El Paso Independent School District where he loved the experience of teaching all grades. To gain his credentials to become a licensed, certified teacher, he considered attending the University in El Paso, but that interfered with his substitute teaching.

Through the office of certification of the El Paso Independent School District, he learned about Western Governors University. He attended an orientation, earned a scholarship and began studying with WGU. Tomas will have his certification within a year.

With his teaching experience and enrollment in WGU’s “Transition to Teaching” scholarship program, Tomas is now a full-time teacher at a middle school in Northeast El Paso, teaching math resource classes (special education for students who are designated to go into mainstream).

“This is a very positive thing,” Tomas says. “I’m giving back to the kids and the community my wisdom and experience. I love it when the students’ eyes brighten up and I know they’ve got it.”

Tomas is one of more than 170 Texans awarded Transition to Teaching Scholarships at WGU to prepare them to become certified Texas teachers. These scholarships are part of a U.S. Department of Education grant requiring students to teach in a high-need school for three years after graduation.

Following a student like Tomas through the WGU program in more detail shows how the University builds an individual degree program and guides a student through it. “John Marston” came to WGU after being out of school for nearly thirty years. After high school he served several years in the military and followed that with a twenty-year career as a police officer in a small city in northern Nevada. In the military he served with a recruiting and public relations unit. With the police he rose to detective, received training in forensics, and ultimately served as deputy in a county crime lab.  

At forty-six John was somewhat older than the average WGU student but plenty young enough to establish a second—or perhaps it should be considered a third—career. Like most other returning students, he was nervous about going back to school. Well over half of all WGU graduates are the first in their families to earn a college degree, and if John were successful he

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6 An earlier version of this story appeared in Change (July/August 2005), pp. 24-33. The author retains the copyright.
would be the first in his family, as well. He chose this University because he is active in his community, lives a long way from a traditional campus where he could attend class, and in any case would not have the time to commute for daily classes because he has to keep his job to support his family. WGU offered the convenience of home study and the chance to accelerate through his degree program because of the knowledge and skills he had developed throughout his career. He also liked WGU’s six month terms, because he knew there would be times in the year when he would be very busy at work or would simply want to take a vacation, and the terms were long enough so that he could fit his studies around those up and down times in his schedule. Finally, John wanted to be licensed so that he could become an elementary school teacher, and he had learned through his research into other schools that WGU was one of the very few places where he could earn that licensure through online study. So he enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies program, which leads to kindergarten through eighth grade teacher certification. Like many WGU students, in some academic areas his expertise had outrun his formal education. In others, he had to fill in the blanks.

With other entering students, John enrolled first in “Education Without Boundaries” (EWB). It is the University’s only required course, and all new students take it during their first month of enrollment. The course introduced John to the WGU system and gave him his first experience with learning assessments, principally by means of the pre-assessments he took to establish his initial competency profile. His EWB facilitator, herself a graduate of one of WGU’s master’s degree programs, guided John and his cohort of about twenty students through the course in an online “learning community.”

EWB can take anywhere from two to four weeks to complete, depending on the student’s initial competency and how rapidly she or he demonstrates the required proficiencies on the various performance assessments that are administered throughout the course. John took the full month, because he had never been to college and high school was a very long time ago. In addition to the pre-assessments that he took in EWB to develop his learning profile as the first step in planning his degree program, he also received training in the use of WGU’s online bookstore, library, Oracle collaboration tools, and other University electronic systems. He did some reading in adult learning philosophy, discussed with other students the special challenges and techniques of distance learning, and practiced conducting online academic research and APA-style documentation.
As soon as John became active with his EWB learning community he was also assigned his mentor and began formal degree planning. WGU is registered with the US Department of Education as a “non-standard term” institution for financial-aid purposes. In order to retain their eligibility for federal financial aid, undergraduates must register for at least twelve competency units each term and successfully complete at least nine of those units, while graduate students must register for at least eight competency units and complete at least six. A competency unit is the equivalent of a semester hour of learning—it is not a measure of time-in-class and homework but of competency achievement.

Given these requirements, it was important for John to get traction on his academic progress as soon as possible. The six-month term is designed to accommodate the inevitable interruptions that adults experience in their schedules, but it can also encourage procrastination, especially in students who have not been in school for some time and are unaccustomed to the special demands of distance learning. To help prevent that possibility, his mentor had extended phone and email communications with John at least every two weeks throughout his program.

His mentor’s first task, however, was to set up a phone conference with John in order to begin finalizing his Academic Action Plan (AAP)—the roadmap to his degree. On the phone together and simultaneously connected to the student portal at WGU’s website, John and his mentor began by looking at the standard AAP for the Bachelor of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies, reproduced in Figure 1. It displayed all the assessments that John had to pass, the order and term in which they would ordinarily be taken, and the competency unit value for each assessment needed to complete the course of study. The initial layout shown here is the default AAP, which John and his mentor modified in light of his pre-assessment results, level of self-confidence in tackling different subject areas, and even his personal schedule over the coming term. If he were to follow this template, John’s degree program would take nine terms to complete.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Courses of Study (Assessments)</th>
<th>Competency Units</th>
<th>Terms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education Without Boundaries</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Term 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foundations of Language and Communication</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetorical and Critical Writing</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research, Writing and Oral Presentation</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Term 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual and Performing Arts Part I</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual and Performing Arts Part II</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Science Part I</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Term 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Science Part II</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economics &amp; World Civilization Part I</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Term 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economics &amp; World Civilization Part II</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and Nutrition</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasoning &amp; Problem Solving in the Context of the Humanities</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Term 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Science Part I</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Science Part II</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Term 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics Part I</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics Part II</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanities</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Term 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools &amp; Society</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Development and Learning</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity and Inclusion</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Term 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Management</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Testing</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foundations of Teaching Practice Integration</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Term 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional Planning &amp; Strategies</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional Presentation and Follow-Up</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional Planning, Strategies &amp; Presentation Integration</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific Teaching Practices: Reading, Writing, &amp; Spelling</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Term 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific Teaching Practices: Math &amp; Science</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific Teaching Practices: Health, VPA, &amp; Social Studies</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific Teaching Practices: Elem Ed Integration</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohort Seminar</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Term 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervised Teaching Practicum</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Reflection and Observations</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Portfolio</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The path shown here lists the assessments and their associated competency units by term, but that is only half the story. The AAP also includes more detail about the nature of the assessments and the learning resources that go with them. For instance, John and his mentor looked at the assessments required for Language and Communication Skills, Humanities, and the Visual and Performing Arts (Figure 2). They decided after reviewing John's pre-assessment scores that he was already prepared to sit for the Language and Communication skills assessments. He had developed those skills both in his recruiting and public relations work in the military, and even on the witness stand in his forensics work as a police officer. It showed in his pre-assessment scores.

**Figure 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language and Communication Skills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focuses on collegiate reading skills, argumentative and critical writing skills, presentation-related skills, expository writing skills, and basic information-retrieval skills. You are required to pass the following assessments:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- <em>Foundations of Language and Communication (LCO1)</em>: Proctored, computer-based objective exam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- <em>Rhetorical and Critical Writing (LCE1)</em>: Proctored, computer-based essay exam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- <em>Research, Writing and Oral Presentation (LCTA)</em>: Performance Assessment that consists of a 5-8 page research paper and short oral presentation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Humanities and the Visual and Performing Arts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focuses on the procedures and criteria for analysis, methods of study, theories, and interpretation of texts, artifacts, ideas, and discourse in the disciplines of the humanities, as well as in those of the visual and performing arts. You are required to pass the following assessments:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- <em>Literature Part I (LIA4)</em>: Performance assessment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- <em>Literature Part II (LIC4)</em>: Proctored, computer-based objective exam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- <em>Ethics Part I (THA4)</em>: Performance assessment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- <em>Ethics Part II (THC4)</em>: Proctored, computer-based objective exam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- <em>Visual and Performing Arts Part II (IVC4)</em>: Proctored, computer-based objective exam.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One of the routine tasks John had completed in EWB was the identification of three possible sites near his home where he could take the WGU assessments online in a secure setting. One was a local community college, a second was a Prometric test center, and the third was at his city library. With these sites identified, his mentor referred John to the assessment scheduling center, which made the appointment for him to take the assessments at his local community college on two consecutive days three weeks later.
John was less prepared for the Visual and Performing Arts assessment proposed for his first term and knew he needed to study before sitting for it. But he felt confident that he could prepare for it independently by using the WGU study guide and the textbook his mentor had recommended, especially if he could interact with other students preparing for the same assessment by joining the online learning community focused on that topic. It would give him a chance to ask questions, share resources with other students, and get and give encouragement.

There were two other assessment areas that John felt already prepared to tackle in his first term—even though they would ordinarily be scheduled in terms two, three, or four. After he and his mentor again reviewed his pre-assessment scores and looked at the social science competencies he would need to demonstrate (Figure 3), they decided that his military and police experience had given him ample preparation for the Social Sciences Parts I and II assessments and possibly also for the Economics and World Civilization Parts I and II assessments. They also decided that his work in police forensics was probably enough preparation for him to pass the science assessments.

Since WGU allows two attempts at each assessment before charging students additional tuition, there was no harm in trying, and success would accelerate John’s progress. Accordingly, his mentor scheduled him for the social science assessments two months into his first term and for the science assessments four months into the term. That gave him enough time for some review in each area, using independent study materials recommended by his mentor.

Figure 3

Social Science Competencies
Bachelor of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies

- The graduate discusses the major themes, events, eras, developments, and influencing factors in United States history.
- The graduate has key geography knowledge and skills, including the relationship between physical geography, culture, and the environment; the influence of physical geography on local politics, world economies, and cultural development; and the modern impacts of demographic trends.
- The graduate explains the roles of major institutions in American government and the contents and importance of historical documents, understands the major principles in the Constitution of the United States, and understands the ways that American citizens participate in government.
WGU sets the passing standard for all its assessments as the equivalent of a B grade in conventional grading systems, and by that standard means, “The student has been fully engaged with the learning materials and activities necessary to master the competencies, has demonstrated the skills needed to utilize the competencies, and has produced work that indicates command of the competencies.” As it turned out, John passed all the Language and Communications Skills assessments, the Social Science Parts I and II assessments, the Natural Science Parts I and II assessments, and (late in his first term) the Visual and Performing Arts Parts I and II assessments. Thus, including EWB, he successfully completed 27 competency units in his first six-month term, more than double the required rate of academic progress for an undergraduate student. And while he did not pass the Economics and World Civilization Parts I and II assessments on the first attempt, he came close. He analyzed with his mentor the gaps in his knowledge, completed independent study courses in economics and world civilizations developed by Thinkwell (an independent producer of computer-based learning materials), retook the assessments in his second term, and passed.

Two general points stand out in this history. First, the initial competencies that “John Marston” brought to his WGU program were his own, but the pattern is typical. Although the standard AAP detailed above for the BAIS degree indicates that it takes nine terms to complete, virtually no students take that long. Some bring completed associate’s degrees into their programs and are able to begin as upper-division students. Others may have some lower-division assessments waived if they have had sufficient college coursework elsewhere and do well on pre-assessments. Most are like “John Marston”—they have little or no transferable college work but bring competencies into their programs that enable them to sit immediately for some of their assessments.

The second point follows: the finalized AAPs of most students will not look anything like the default AAP which John and his mentor began discussing. Depending on each student’s academic background, the depth of learning he or she may have gained through work experience, and learning style (a desire for structured courses versus a capacity for independent study, for instance), the AAP may be rearranged substantially. Some lower-division assessments may be waived through evaluation of official college transcripts. Others may be taken immediately because of demonstrated readiness on pre-assessments. And all of them may be rearranged as a result of mentor-student discussion.
John himself continued to progress through his program. Somewhere in his third term he had a family crisis that prevented him from completing the necessary two-thirds of the competency units he attempted, and in consequence he landed on financial-aid probation. He did not lose his aid—WGU’s status as a “non-standard term” institution enabled him to continue receiving assistance—and with his mentor’s help he recovered his stride in his next term and did not fall behind again. Along the way he continued to use a mixture of independent study materials recommended by his mentor—including textbooks, online learning modules produced by such organizations as Abromitis Online Learning, Teachscape, and Canter & Associates—as well as formal courses from a variety of institutions like Chemeketa Community College in Oregon and the University of Texas at Arlington.

When he had passed the lower-division and interdisciplinary studies assessments for his degree, which he did by the end of his second term, John began his preparation for teacher certification. Before he could do so, however, he had to pass the Praxis I examination. Because Nevada, where he hoped to teach, had not established its own passing score, he had to meet WGU’s default standard—178 on the reading and mathematics sections and 176 on the writing section. These scores, required by Virginia and Maryland, are the highest required passing scores in the nation for Praxis I. John exceeded them by considerable margins. When he then began the professional-studies components of his degree, he had to master competencies in three large domains and their related fields of knowledge and skill—foundations of teaching, effective teaching practices, and demonstration teaching. Each of these required a mix of performance, essay, and objective assessments.

As he began to work on the competencies required in effective teaching practices, some six months before he expected to put into classroom practice the knowledge and skills he had been developing throughout his program, his mentor submitted to the Teachers College central office in Salt Lake City a formal Mentor Recommendation to Enter Demonstration Teaching. It signaled his belief that John would have the requisite knowledge, skills, and personal qualities to become an effective teacher.

During this term John also took and passed the required Praxis II examination, which measured his mastery of the interdisciplinary subject matter required of elementary teachers. His success was not unusual. To date, the average WGU Teachers College graduate has scored 15 percent above the established state-required score on these examinations.
The Recommendation to Enter Demonstration Teaching triggered the start of arrangements to locate a school near John’s home where he could complete twelve weeks of supervised, full-time practice teaching. WGU’s Coordinator of Field Experiences contacted an appropriate school and, with the principal’s help, located a host teacher. Her next task was to locate, this time with the district superintendent’s help, a master teacher in the area who would agree to go through WGU’s training program for clinical supervisors and then to evaluate John’s performance as a practice teacher over the required twelve weeks of his demonstration teaching practicum.

The clinical supervisor observed John for one to two hours on eight separate occasions and submitted reports on each observation using WGU’s evaluation rubrics. In conjunction with his practice-teaching assignment, John also had to participate in an online cohort seminar with other WGU students from around the country who were likewise engaged in their teaching practicum, and he had to complete a professional portfolio (Figure 4). He completed all requirements for the BAIS degree in December 2005 and was hired as a full-time fifth grade teacher by the school in which he had done his practice teaching.

**Figure 4**

*The Teachers College Professional Portfolio*

| The Professional Portfolio is a written document containing a comprehensive Teacher Work Sample. It provides direct evidence of the Teacher Candidate’s ability to design and implement a multi-week, standards-based unit of instruction, assess student learning, and then reflect on the learning process. The WGU Teacher Work Sample requires students to plan and teach a four-week standards-based instructional unit consisting of seven components: 1) contextual factors, 2) learning goals, 3) assessment, 4) design for instruction, 5) instructional decision making, 6) analysis of student learning, and 7) self-evaluation and reflection. |

As an alumnus, John continued to receive mentoring services from WGU for the first full year following his graduation, and he has permanent access to an online alumni community for elementary school teachers like himself. The community is facilitated by a dedicated WGU mentor and provides an opportunity for alumni to continue networking with colleagues throughout the country, to ask and give advice as they encounter new problems at work, to share new professional resources, to maintain book discussion groups, and simply to maintain friendships begun while students at WGU. The University provides mentoring services free of charge for all
alumni in the year following graduation, as well as permanent membership in these online communities organized by degree area.

Although assembled from the details of many other actual WGU students, “John Marston’s” imagined history is quite representative. Whether a business student pursuing a bachelor’s degree or an MBA, an information technology student completing a degree in network design and management, or a registered nurse seeking an MSN, the stories are remarkably similar, yet infinitely personal, individual, and unique. These are students whose educational paths were blocked by financial circumstances, family crises, cultural conditioning, or simply bad personal choices earlier in their lives. When they arrive at WGU they average thirty-eight years of age. They have accumulated a wealth of valuable experience, both personal and professional. They have acquired knowledge and developed skills that would not fit well within traditional university requirements, or even be recognized as applicable toward a degree, but that will serve them well and accelerate their progress at WGU. Most of all they come hungry—hungry to make the most of the opportunity they have discovered, the opportunity that for many has come “just in time” to help them redirect their lives and fulfill their aspirations. In graduate surveys nearly all say that without WGU—without the assistance of a trained mentor and flexible learning resources adapted to their needs that they could use without leaving their homes and communities—they never could have completed their degree. And they thrive in the WGU model precisely because it honors what they already know and can do while adding new knowledge, skills, and abilities that equip them intellectually and pragmatically “just in time” for career advancement.

* * * * *
VI. Anatomy of the Model

It is one thing to declare for competency. It is another to build an educational model that ensures that students achieve it, that measures their performance reliably, and that convinces employers and other academic institutions that the results are valid—preferably more valid than the results they get from traditional grading systems. The governors understood these challenges and selected a design team that could rise to them.

American doctoral programs that train faculty for university teaching and research generally do little to prepare their candidates to be effective teachers and do absolutely nothing to prepare them to develop effective examinations of their students' knowledge and skill. Either they do not believe these skills are important when weighed against scholarly research, or that somehow their newly minted assistant professors will simply acquire these skills on the job by osmosis. Nor do most institutions do more than define the broad requirements that students must fulfill to graduate—number of credits, distribution requirements, courses in the major, and so on. Departments generally take specificity a step further and define the broad coverage within the field that they expect graduates to master. But individual professors have wide latitude in developing the reading lists for their courses, the writing their students will do, the number of examinations they will take, and the relative weighting of these different course components. Nor is there consensus—let alone reliable comparability—on grading standards. An A in professor Allen's American history class may not equate at all with professor Bradford's standards for the same class, and may not even have the same reading list. Moreover, the next time professor Allen teaches that class he may not remember the grading standards he used the last time. He did not develop rubrics for the grades he awarded then, and in any case his standards have changed now that he has more experience. Perhaps his department told him he had awarded too many As, in which case he had better tighten up this time around. Or perhaps he had not awarded any As, students complained, and his department told him he had better start grading on a curve the way everyone else does. Or perhaps he simply does not remember what he did last time because he taught the course a year ago, the leading textbook is in a new edition, and he might as well start all over again.

Degree Structures
WGU’s design team decided from the beginning to eliminate these problems. First, every degree defines specifically and in detail the knowledge, skills, and abilities students have to master in order to graduate. Beginning at the most general level, each degree specifies both the broad and particular areas of knowledge and skill it will encompass—what WGU calls domains and subdomains—together with the relative weightings of these components indicated in competency units. A domain is a kind of large knowledge closet in which cognitively related information and skills are clustered together. A subdomain is a shelf in that closet holding a more tightly integrated subset of that cognitive area. Domains are not all the same size. Language and Communication Skills is, for instance, a domain within the Bachelor of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies program that “John Marston” completed in his first term (see Figures 1 and 2). Its three subdomains include Foundations of Language and Communication, Rhetorical and Critical Writing, and Research, Writing and Oral Presentation. Other domains may be so large as to require more than one term to complete. Foundations of Teaching, a domain that “John” also had to complete, is an example. Its subdomains include Schools and Society, Human Development and Learning, Diversity and Inclusion, Classroom Management, Testing, and Foundations of Teaching Practice and Integration.

Just as a student pursuing the Bachelor of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies would begin with the Academic Action Plan displayed earlier, so a Bachelor of Science student in human resource management (Figure 5) would begin with one showing all its required components and their relative weightings:
But that is only the skeleton. Students also know in advance all the specific competencies for which they will be accountable. Every subdomain delineates in a series of performance descriptions the knowledge, skills, and abilities which students must master, and students have access to these from the moment they begin exploring the WGU website to decide whether they want to apply for admission. The competencies in Figure 6, for instance, represent the upper division accounting and finance subdomain in the human resource management degree:
### Accounting and Finance Competencies
#### Bachelor of Science in Human Resource Management

1. Define, describe and explain the financial statement effects of major financial accounting methods for accounts receivable; unearned revenue; inventory; contingent liabilities; property, plant and equipment; research and development; and intangible assets.

2. Recognize management’s responsibility for selecting among generally accepted accounting principles, and explain how managers can use alternative accounting principles to influence financial statement results.

3. Evaluate, from a manager’s point of view, a choice among alternative financial accounting methods.

4. Interpret a financial statement ratio analysis of data for a real company including the following: (1) calculated ratios, (2) comparison to competitor and industry benchmarks, (3) ratios in light of benchmarks, and (4) conclusions using ratio data about company profitability, liquidity, leverage and asset management.

5. Describe the purpose and identify the costs and benefits of a financial control system for an organization.

6. Explain the positive and negative effects of management accounting information on employee behavior/performance.

7. Demonstrate an understanding of the following financial tools in business settings/decisions: future and present value as applied to an annuity and a monetary unit, perpetuities, compound interest rates, loan amortization, internal rate of return, bond valuation, stock (equity) valuation, and cost of capital.

8. Define and explain a basic application of the Capital Asset Pricing Model.

9. Develop a set of forecasted financial statements to determine financing needs.

10. Explain and demonstrate the use of capital budgeting techniques.

11. Describe working capital management techniques for cash, marketable securities, receivables, inventory, accounts payable, bank operating loans, commercial paper and accounts receivable financing.

12. Describe factors influencing long-term financing decisions for debt, preferred stock, common stock, venture capital, leasing, convertible securities, employee stock options and dividend policy.
Competencies for every degree program are specified to this level of detail. All students must demonstrate mastery of all the competencies in their programs. They are not optional. They are not subject to the preferences of individual faculty members. They are agreed upon in advance by the mentor faculty and the senior program governance authority for the degree area—the Program Council. Uniform assessments are developed to measure them, and the assessment methodology is approved by the University’s Assessment Council.

**Competency and Assessment Development**

The University has always developed the competencies for its degrees internally, following the system described below. Its approach to assessment development, however, has evolved. The initial intention was to use assessments developed by others that were readily available “as is,” such as CLEP examinations and others that were expected to align with WGU’s competency definitions. These rather quickly proved inadequate. There were not enough ready-made examinations to cover the domains and subdomains in the degrees, turnaround time on test scores took too long to be helpful to students, and the available analysis of student weaknesses—areas where they would have to study more to pass the assessment—was too general to help mentors guide their students. Because of these limitations the University soon turned to outside test developers who would create examinations to WGU’s specifications. This system worked much better. It provided properly aligned tests and, because grading could be done by WGU’s own personnel, it also provided good turnaround time on test results with clear analysis of strengths and weaknesses. It is, however, expensive and often time-consuming, because WGU’s test requirements have to align with the developer’s own schedule and other priorities. Thus, although the University does still use outside test developers in selected areas, by early in 2001 it had hired its own experienced psychometrician as Director of Assessment Development and had begun developing at least some of its assessments internally. Today WGU employs a full-time assessment development staff of fifteen who work with subject matter experts to develop the great majority of the University’s assessments. Assessment is competency’s twin. They share the same DNA. Neither works without the other, and together they define the essence of Western Governors University.

The process for establishing WGU’s degree structures and their competencies flows through the academic quality control procedures of the University. It begins when the program director of the degree area, in collaboration with the Director of Assessment Development, convenes a group of six to ten subject matter experts (SMEs). These individuals will be both pro-
fessional practitioners and academics from colleges and universities across the country. The goal is to ensure a broad range of perspectives and ultimately to achieve consensus on the competencies that belong in the degree. The process usually requires several weeks and multiple drafts of competency statements before the results are ratified by the Program Council that has ultimate responsibility for the degree.

All WGU programs require multiple forms of assessments, including computer-based objective examinations, essays, and performance assessments. *Objective tests* include multiple-choice items, multiple-selection items, matching, short-answer, drag-and-drop, and point-and-click item types, as well as case studies and video-based items. *Essay assessments* are used to measure students’ ability to integrate and apply concepts through sustained, well-organized, and persuasive writing. Every degree requires substantial writing of this type. Undergraduate writing competency in this area is developed and measured through the Language and Communication Skills domain at the lower division level, and through the Collegiate Level Reasoning and Problem Solving domain at the upper division level. Graduate level writing competency is developed and measured through sequential essays that students produce term by term as they develop the capacity to undertake their capstone projects. Finally, *performance assessments* are generally carried out over longer periods of time and through several iterations, ranging from a few weeks to several months. As their name implies, their emphasis is on applying the competencies students acquire, whereas the objective and essay assessments focus more directly on knowledge and its articulation. Performance assessments include a variety of products and activities, including:

- portfolios in which students present evidence of work samples developed over time;
- case studies in which they perform extended analysis, and develop and test solutions to complex problems;
- twelve weeks of successful practice teaching for certification candidates in the Teachers College; and
- capstone studies demonstrating the integration of all the elements of a degree in thesis-length documents.

In creating its *objective assessments* the University essentially replicates the procedure it follows in developing competencies. It convenes once again a group of SMEs, including some who participated in the first exercise as well as a few who are new to the process. Their first task is to break out for each competency a set of specific learning objectives. The guiding question for their work is, “What, exactly, does a student at this level (lower division, upper division, graduate) have to know and be able to do in order to demonstrate this competency satisfactori-
ly?” Depending upon the competency, anywhere from one to twenty objectives will result from this exercise, but the most difficult challenge is to describe them in ways that will be measurable. Figure 7, for instance, displays the objectives for a competency in marketing that MBA students must demonstrate:

**Figure 7**
Marketing Competency Objectives
Master of Business Administration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competency 314.3.1:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The student understands concepts and practices associated with marketing goods and services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective 314.3.1-09: Select the appropriate segmentation scheme for a firm based on a specified set of market characteristics (size, demographic, geographic, psychographic, and/or behavior descriptors).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective 314.3.1-10: Identify the appropriate target market for a firm based on a particular product/service.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective 314.3.1-11: Select the appropriate positioning strategy for a firm based on a scenario giving characteristics (competitors’ sizes and positions) of a particular market.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective 314.3.1-12: Describe the criteria for segmenting markets.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective 314.3.1-14: Select the appropriate marketing strategy (product/service, price, place, or promotion) for a particular product life cycle stage (introduction, growth, maturity, or decline).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective 314.3.1-20: Describe customer perceived value.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective 314.3.1-21: Describe the differences between consumer and organizational markets.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective 314.3.1-22: Infer the most likely cause for a particular problem encountered by a firm attempting to sell to an organizational buyer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Once the SMEs have completed this step and the assessment development staff concur that good test questions can be written for the objectives, the group undertakes that task. They will draft several potential test items for each objective, then review them for clarity, utility, and appropriateness and revise as necessary. Their goal is to create enough usable items to produce three randomly generated versions of each objective assessment. Having done that, the process enters its final phase. Guided by the Director of Assessment Development and the Program Director responsible for the degree, the SMEs set the passing standard for the examination. Again the guiding question is, “What should a competent student at this level know and be able to do in this specific subject area?” Again, as defined earlier, the competency standard that WGU seeks for every assessment is mastery comparable to B work in traditional grading systems.
Establishing the passing scores for assessments is, of course, in some measure a judgment call, more art than science. Experience suggests that every group of academic professionals is likely to err on the side of severity, convinced that all students should know some piece of arcanum in their particular fields. That is one reason WGU tries to include at least some non-academic professionals among its SMEs in these exercises. But it also takes other steps to help ensure valid passing scores. If the examination is entirely new, the University beta tests it on outside groups of volunteers selected with profiles similar to the intended student population. If the test items are new additions to a current exam, they will be randomly distributed within it and their performance monitored for validity. Finally, after thirty administrations of a new test all its items are put through rigorous statistical analysis to validate item performance, and those items not working effectively are revised or discarded. Just as the Program Councils oversee the competency development process, the University’s Assessment Council oversees the integrity of this evaluation methodology. Figure 8 illustrates this evolution.

Figure 8
Test Item Validation

Item First Draft: 409.1.2-02.3

STEM: What are the different kinds of tasks that managers use decision support systems to perform?

<p>| | | | | |</p>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Decisions that concern personnel transfer</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>B Complex decision making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Office products purchasing</td>
<td></td>
<td>D Payroll management decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>E</td>
<td>Travel planning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Published Item:

The item undergoes extensive editorial review for Completeness, Content, Structure and Sensitivity. In this case, the item contained a number of structural issues that may have confused the student.

STEM: What kinds of tasks do decision support systems allow managers to perform that could not easily be accomplished otherwise?

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<tbody>
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<td></td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Personnel transfer decisions</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Complex decision making</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Office products purchasing</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Payroll management decisions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>Corporate travel planning</td>
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</table>
In this case, the Stem was re-written to better align with the objective and two of the distractors were modified. The first distractor was rewritten to parallel the structure of the others and the last distractor was clarified.

Statistical Review of Items:
Once published, tests and items are tracked closely to monitor performance. In this example, the item was flagged because the p-value (difficulty) was high and the r-value (correlation) was low.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question description</th>
<th>Difficulty</th>
<th>Correlation</th>
<th>Flagged</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>409.1.2-02.3</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>0.015</td>
<td>FLAGGED</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The statistics indicate that nearly everyone is getting this item correct, which is why the correlation is low. When this occurs, it typically means that the incorrect distractors are not plausible enough. Items are reviewed in-house and then sent to SMEs for review and alteration. Here is their revision:

A Personnel transfer decisions
B Complex decision making
C Office products purchasing
D Workflow management
E Project completion schedules

The SMEs modified two of the incorrect distractors to make them more plausible, which will stabilize the difficulty. The item will go through another series of edits and processing before being re-published in the exam. Once re-published, the statistics will begin fresh and track how the modifications have affected the item’s performance.

Essay and performance assessments are developed with equal care. They undergo a similar revision and editing process as objective test items, with similar review and approval by the relevant Program Council. The investment in time is often more substantial, however, because these assessments are more complex. Both essay and performance assessments cross-validate the competencies measured by the objective tests by requiring the application of different thinking and articulation skills. Essay assessments serve also to prepare students for the more extensive requirements of case study and capstone writing. Collegiate Level Reasoning and Problem Solving (CLRPS) competencies, for instance, are required of all upper division BA and BS students. They select one of ten major contemporary world issues to address through a structured series of research and writing exercises extending over several months. The problems have been selected as not only open-ended and without clear solution, but also to be vulnerable to personal bias and ad hominem argument—how to deal with the AIDS epidemic, for instance, or how to balance religious ethics and medical cloning. The intent is to develop stu-
dents’ research and critical reasoning skills, to enable them to distinguish fact from opinion, evidence from assertion, and to ensure their ability to produce well-reasoned, well-supported and sustained arguments. These skills are developed through nine increasingly complex assignments with feedback at each stage. Students must pass each before progressing to the next, and the sequence culminates at the tenth stage with a twelve to fifteen page argumentative essay graded according to a defined rubric.

Other essay requirements are present in the domains of other programs and are specifically program-centered. Students working in the Teaching Methods domain of the Master of Arts in Teaching Mathematics degree, for instance, must:

“Write an essay of no more than 1000 words describing how to teach students to develop a formula to find the area of a parallelogram. Identify the terms needed and the prerequisite skills the students would require. Include any visual aids, manipulatives, or geoboards that would be helpful to the students. Discuss any questions the teacher will ask students and questions the teacher might anticipate from the students. Include any references in a bibliography.”

Similarly, students in the BS degrees in Information Technology write integrative essays of 1500-2500 words that draw together their earlier work in the program and apply it to solving a newly identified problem in the IT industry. Students in the MBA program who are working on the marketing competency objectives cited above (Figure 7) write an eight to fifteen page essay on a case study involving the branding of a new product. Students working on instructional design competencies for the M.Ed. select and write a research-based essay that discusses “how learning theories such as behaviorism, constructivism, and cognitivism can be used to support teaching and learning.”

Essays such as these are often elements of more extended performance assessments. The integrative essay that IT students write, for instance, is an element of the comprehensive portfolio of work samples they construct throughout the program. MBA students writing essays about marketing are training to undertake the development of a comprehensive business plan for a hypothetical new product or service of their own. The essay describing how to teach students about parallelograms is one of nine tasks that MAT students training to be secondary school math teachers must complete as part of the Effective Teaching Practices domain.

The WGU assessment model is multi-dimensional and progressive. Competency at every stage of every degree must be demonstrated through the acquisition of concrete knowledge, the ability to articulate that knowledge in well-reasoned and persuasive writing, and the
ability to apply that knowledge in a variety of learning tasks appropriate to the degree focus. Objective assessments, essays, and performance assessments weave together to prepare students for their final capstone studies demonstrating the integration of the competencies they have progressively mastered through all the domains of their degrees.

**Test Security**

In a system so reliant on the quality and validity of its assessments, test security is a major concern. WGU takes several precautions in this regard. First, all students make a personal commitment to academic authenticity when they matriculate—agreeing to adhere to the University’s honor code. Objective assessments are always computer-delivered at authorized testing centers, and to take those assessments students must show picture identification. Essays, performance assessments, and capstones are submitted directly to WGU offices and graded individually, and the University makes broad use of Turnitin.com, a highly effective document verification service. Student work is selected at random for submission to this service, and any student document that the grader suspects may not be the student’s own work is submitted as well.

Instances of deliberate cheating seem to be rare, however. Most adults returning to university study are highly goal focused. It is no longer a matter of doing what your high school classmates do. They realize that the degree they seek is more than a simple piece of paper. They need real knowledge, real skill, and cheating will only hurt themselves. Errors of insecurity and ignorance are far more common. That is, students who have been away from college study for a long time—like most who come to WGU—do not fully understand what plagiarism means, where the boundary lies between using others’ ideas to stimulate their own and using them as their own. Their insecurity makes them think they are not smart enough to have original ideas, or to critique others’ ideas. Nor do they fully understand the niceties of APA documentation, which WGU uses. And so they tend, especially early in their studies, to be overly dependent on external sources, and to paraphrase without attribution. The University goes to some lengths to help students understand this issue, to prepare them to use APA documentation, and to boost their confidence, especially in the orientation course, “Education Without Boundaries.” And, until the problem proves repetitive or severe, when Turnitin.com does reveal a close match between student writing and other sources, faculty response is further training and support, not discipline. The current estimate of serious cheating is less than 1% of all student work.
Grading

One of the essentials in the WGU model is that the evaluation of student work should be separate from the instruction related to that work. The founding governors believed—and the University believes still—that one of the most corrosive problems facing American higher education is grade inflation. The problem is pervasive, even among the most elite institutions. Princeton University, for instance, recently became one of the first institutions in the country to limit the proportion of As that could be given in courses. Dartmouth College has also acknowledged the problem. It has reported that the average GPA in 1969 was 2.7. In 2004 it was 3.32. In 1987-1988, 37% of undergraduate grades were A or A+. By 2002-2003 48% were A or A+. And throughout the country, the National Survey of Student Engagement reports that full-time students can earn grades of B or better by devoting only ten to fifteen hours per week on homework.

Grade inflation is not the only problem that can result from intertwining instruction and evaluation. Faculty have little training in creating effective tests and are generally left to their own conditioning when it comes to evaluating their students’ work. In consequence, their standards may vary from course to course, year to year, or even day by day. They rarely operate from pre-defined standards or rubrics, and their own standards may differ widely from their colleagues in the same department.

For all these reasons, WGU separates instruction from evaluation. As detailed above, objective examinations are delivered online through the Internet at secure testing centers and scored automatically. Passing scores are set through rigorous standard setting exercises and approved by the governing Program Council. Written work, however, is submitted directly to WGU offices in Salt Lake City and evaluated by a separate, trained staff of graders according to pre-established rubrics for every assignment. The University currently employs 115 full and part-time personnel in this capacity. Graders go through an extended training program and participate in regular professional development workshops to ensure inter-rater reliability. The rubrics they use in grading assignments are detailed and extensive, and will of course vary with the nature of the assignment. Much of the written work students do is also iterative, passed back and forth between student and grader in several drafts or stages. The objective in such assignments is to bring the student to a particular level of sophistication before passing to the next stage or completing the competency requirement.
A good example is the rubric for the competencies required for Collegiate Level Reasoning and Problem-Solving (CLRPS). It is a five page document, too extensive and complex to reproduce fully here. But recall that the student undertakes a series of nine increasingly complex tasks in CLRPS, involving problem-identification, evidence gathering, analysis, and persuasive argument. These culminate in a tenth task, a twelve to fifteen page essay demonstrating synthesis of all these skills. Graders score student work at each stage. On the final essay, a passing score is Level 4. Figure 9 shows the rubric for just one of that essay’s twelve scored elements, this one having to do with the Interpretation and Analysis of Data:
Figure 9
Collegiate Level Reasoning and Problem Solving
Interpretation and Analysis of Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level 1</th>
<th>Level 2</th>
<th>Level 3</th>
<th>Level 4</th>
<th>Level 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student does not evaluate the evidence presented.</td>
<td>Student does not critically evaluate the evidence presented, omitting a discussion of strengths, weaknesses, assumptions, or biases of evidence.</td>
<td>Student critically evaluates the evidence presented, including strengths, weaknesses, assumptions, biases, or alternate interpretations for some pieces of evidence, but evaluation is lopsided, for example, presenting only strengths (or only weaknesses) of limited perspective.</td>
<td>Student critically evaluates the evidence, including noting at least two of the following: strengths, weaknesses, assumptions, biases, or alternate interpretations for each piece of evidence presented, and evaluation is applied evenly to all pieces of evidence, presenting both strengths and weaknesses of all perspectives.</td>
<td>Student critically evaluates the evidence, including noting at least two of the following: strengths, weaknesses, assumptions, biases, or alternate interpretations for each piece of evidence presented. Student documents specific criteria he/she uses to objectively evaluate multiple pieces of evidence for each perspective presented. The student is able to objectively compare and contrast perspectives using the given evidence.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Equally detailed rubrics govern evaluation for all written work in the University, and the assessment staff conduct periodic detailed analyses of grader scoring to ensure consistency in results.

**Maintaining Quality**

Degree competencies and the assessments to measure them will only be as good as the structures that support them over time. Building degrees and assessments is only half the challenge. Every field changes, and many of the areas in which WGU has chosen to focus change with great rapidity. By policy, therefore, every degree program goes through comprehensive review at least every five years. In practice, however, new programs are generally reviewed in
their first year of operation, and reviews of most others occur well before the end of the five year window. A review may be triggered by any of several critical factors, such as:

- A recommendation from the Program Council;
- An impending specialized accreditation review by an external organization;
- A change in external professional standards to which a WGU program is linked;
- A decline below critical thresholds in key indicators of program performance, such as student satisfaction below 85%, assessment pass rates below 60%, and/or a significant decline in student satisfaction;
- Rapid enrollment growth or decline.

Each spring the Provost and Academic Vice President\(^7\), after consultation with the Program Directors, proposes to the respective Program Councils the degrees that should be reviewed in the coming year. With the Councils' concurrence, the Office of Institutional Research then collects and analyzes the data on program performance and reports the results to the Program Director and the Provost. Reviews may analyze the entire program or focus only on individual elements. Depending on when the last review occurred, the newness of the program, and the triggers for the current review, it may examine all available data, or focus on selected key indicators, including:

- The validity of degree structures, including domains, subdomains, competencies, and objectives;
- The currency and relevance of these structures to applicable professional standards for the field;
- The validity of assessments, including their alignment with competencies and statistical analysis of their effectiveness;
- Student performance on assessments, including passing rates, number of attempts before passing, and surveys of student satisfaction;
- The availability and quality of learning resources, and their alignment with program competencies;
- Student satisfaction, retention, academic progress, and graduation rates;
- Graduate success, as evidenced by performance on state and national examinations, job placement, promotion and pay, and/or expressed satisfaction with the WGU degree;
- Employer evaluations, where available.

\(^7\) Hereafter simply referred to as Provost.
When the analysis of these factors is complete, the Program Director discusses the results with the Program Council and it determines what actions should be taken. On rare occasions an entire program needs to be deconstructed and reassembled because competencies in the field have changed so substantially since it began, but most often revisions entail modest rewriting of competencies, objectives, and test items. As these changes occur, however, they ripple through the learning resources chosen to help students prepare for their assessments—the courses, course modules, textbooks, and study guides. All such resources must be cross-checked and revised if necessary to ensure that students have access to study materials that properly align with the competencies they need to master. In consequence, it generally requires up to six months between initiation of a review and full implementation of the changes that flow from it.

**Governance**

WGU adheres to a corporate style of governance. It has neither academic senate nor unions. The President works closely with his senior executive team and solicits advice on major decisions from all University constituencies, either directly or through their supervising officers. He generally delegates implementation authority to the Provost and his vice presidents, but he retains ultimate responsibility for key decisions. Most formally, he obtains advice from his academic and administrative managers in semi-annual strategic planning sessions. The first occurs in early winter and focuses on goals to be achieved over the next three to five years. The second occurs in early summer and focuses on objectives for the next twelve months. These sessions are distilled into a set of priorities, office by office, and every office tracks progress toward them month by month throughout the year. They may be revised at the winter planning session, but otherwise they provide the rubrics by which each office is measured throughout the yearly cycle. Once agreed upon, both performance assessments and pay increases derive from the results achieved.

Day to day academic decisions are the responsibility of the Provost and his team of academic managers. The group includes the office heads for assessment, learning resources, and academic services, and the program directors for each academic area of study. They meet weekly to ensure coordination of activities, monitor progress toward program goals, troubleshoot emerging problems, and plan new initiatives. The Office of Institutional Research works closely with this team to provide data on student and mentor performance. The academic management team is also chiefly responsible for implementing the University's long range academic devel-
opment plan once its priorities are established through the strategic planning process, and it also drives all of the University’s accreditation activities.

The University’s most visible and most important innovation in academic governance is its system of external councils. When the University began it had no faculty of its own, the blueprints for its operation were at best sketchy, it had no precedents but a lot of faith and hope, and it had no credibility. The council structure arose as the only logical means for solving these problems. Today, of course, WGU has its own full-time faculty—more than 120 of them—but the councils continue to serve a broad array of critically important functions. Because their members bring a range of viewpoints to their work from both academic and professional practice, they help to ensure that WGU’s programs are current in their requirements, relevant to employers in the field, and as rigorous as “best practice” programs at other universities. The councils continue to provide advice to the University’s internal leadership regarding the development of academic policies affecting students; they establish the specific competency requirements for each of their programs; they assist as subject matter experts in developing test questions to measure the competencies, and they provide continuing quality assurance through periodic, formal reviews of program effectiveness. Finally, to help council members experience first-hand the results of their work, and to close the circle between theory and practice, they often serve as readers on student capstone committees and sit in on the oral defense of the capstone master’s project.

The councils were designed to be the University’s senior academic governance authority and still perform that function. Program directors work through them to develop their degrees and to implement program changes, and the councils report directly to the Provost. Figure 10 summarizes their relationship to the curriculum and their position in the University’s academic decision structure:
There are currently five Program Councils and an Assessment Council. Although in the beginning the University created a new council for each degree program, it soon realized that practice was impractical and assigned its councils more comprehensive authority. Today each of the Program Councils is responsible for one of WGU’s major curricular areas—business, information technology, education, health professions, and liberal arts (which oversees the general education requirements of all undergraduate programs and the interdisciplinary major for students in the Teachers College preparing for elementary certification). Because at the beginning WGU also had no means for coordinating the academic policies created by these councils, there was initially a Coordinating Council composed of one elected member from each of the others. As the University grew and developed a sizable internal staff, however, it gradually internalized the coordinating function and ultimately eliminated that Council in 2004.

Each council has six to nine nationally prominent members representing a range of perspectives on the program areas for which they are responsible. Originally, Program Council members were selected from the pool of academics and other professionals invited to attend
regional meetings about the new university. Assessment Council members were, by contrast, individually selected for their specific expertise in assessment by the head of the design team, Peter Ewell. Today, members of these external councils normally serve for three to five years on annually renewable contracts. New members are nominated to and approved by the Board of Trustees. Councils meet four times a year at University headquarters in Salt Lake City, and in addition may perform University-related work at home and online. (All Council members, their credentials, and their home institutions are listed in the Appendix, Chapter X.)

Whereas in WGU’s “unbundling” of the classic faculty role the Program Councils represent the curriculum developer function (defining degree structures and learning objectives), the Assessment Council represents the evaluator function (defining how performance will be measured and the grading standards that will be applied). Like the Program Councils, the Assessment Council was part of the original design structure of the University, and it was established for the same reasons. Lacking at that time an experienced assessment staff of its own and in need of superior external validation of its approach to learning outcomes measurement, the University recruited a nationally eminent panel of assessment experts to oversee its measurement of student learning outcomes.

Inevitably as the University grew, the Assessment Council’s function evolved. Initially, in addition to policy oversight, its responsibility extended to selection of the instruments and determination of the passing scores the University would accept. Both the design team and the Council believed WGU would use assessments already developed by industry or by organizations like the Educational Testing Service. Since the first programs planned for introduction were an Associate of Arts and an AAS in Electronic Manufacturing Technology (as well, for a time, as several other associate level programs in vocational or pre-professional areas where industry licensure or certification tests were available) this assumption seemed reasonable. In fact it quickly proved otherwise. Outside examinations often did not align well with the competencies established by the Program Councils. Turnaround time on examination results took far too long (remember that all this took place at the very beginning of the Internet, before online testing had developed). And test results, when they finally did arrive, did not provide sufficiently detailed information to be helpful in guiding students if they failed. As soon as theory stumbled on experience, therefore, the Assessment Council’s role expanded to helping the University identify test development organizations and defining the specifications for the examinations it would ask those organizations to build.
The first instance of this larger role occurred in the spring of 1999 when President Mendenhall made his commitment to the Board of Trustees to launch the Master of Arts in Learning and Technology by that fall. There were no pre-developed assessments for such a degree so WGU turned to InterEd in Boise, Idaho, to develop its assessments. Thus began a practice (with them and other developers) that predominated over the next two years.

By the middle of 2001, however, following the establishment of the Teachers College, assessment development and the Council’s responsibility for it entered a third chapter. WGU gradually expanded its assessment staff and began to develop its own instruments. In addition to overseeing test specifications—the kinds of examinations that would be used, their scope, length, degree of difficulty, and so on—the Council also presided over the procedures for development. It oversaw the specifications for subject matter experts, item writing standards, item review and standard setting protocols, beta testing requirements, grader standards, and validation measures.

Today, WGU develops the majority of its assessments internally but still contracts with outside organizations for specific instruments, particularly when it needs to produce several assessments in a limited time and the internal staff is not large enough to handle the load. It also still uses pre-established outside assessments where external professional certification is the end-goal of a degree, such as the Praxis examinations for teacher candidates and the certification examinations of the Society for Human Resource Professionals for business students in human resource management. And the Assessment Council, consistent with its broader role in University evaluation, assists the Program Councils in conducting their periodic program audits by analyzing the consistency, reliability, and validity of WGU’s internally constructed assessments. It also makes recommendations to the Councils and the assessment development staff for test improvement, keeps the University informed about external developments in learning measurement, and oversees the University’s policies with regard to the design and use of these instruments.

In sum, the system of governance that WGU has developed provides a unique combination of nimble executive authority and exemplary academic oversight. The president establishes institutional priorities and holds his leadership team accountable for them. He solicits advice broadly and uses it to inform his decisions—but he can and does act unilaterally when he believes it necessary to do so. Academically, the Program Councils and the Assessment Council
provide critical data for the University's academic decisions, as well as external validation for the quality of its programs. The system triangulates on quality assurance and is the primary feedback mechanism for long-range planning. Program Councils work with academic administrators to develop degree structures, competencies, and objectives. Mentors guide students through those degrees and provide a reality check on the Councils' work. The Assessment Council establishes assessment policies, monitors their implementation, and collaborates in evaluating their results. The data on what works and what does not, why and why not, drives the cycle of program revision and improvement.

**Learning Resources**

The idea that WGU would not itself offer instruction but would draw on the resources of external Educational Providers (EPs) emerged partly from the founding governors' concern about costs, partly from their interest in cross-regional collaboration, and partly from the market objectives of the University's mission. Why, the governors asked, should a new institution replicate the courses of other institutions when those courses were becoming increasingly available to distant learners through communication technology? Why reinvent courses when technology would allow WGU to select the best of the best already developed elsewhere, to the benefit of both partners? Why compete when collaboration would produce better results at lower cost for students? And since the original design of the University envisioned an online SmartCatalog containing thousands of courses from dozens of institutions, many of them mapped directly to WGU's competencies, why with a resource like that available would WGU want to build and teach its own courses?

The SmartCatalog continued to develop as a special service to non-degree students until late in 2003, by which time it hosted approximately 1800 courses from fifty-nine EPs. Ultimately, however, it proved unsustainable. It was costly to maintain and diverted energy from the University's central mission to develop competency-based degrees. It could not compete in size with other online catalogs that performed that service as their exclusive mission, such as the Southern Regional Education Board's Electronic Campus and the online catalog of the Sloan Asynchronous Learning Network. As a result, it never attracted the large numbers of external students taking individual courses that the founders envisioned. Even for matriculated students, the idea that a vast catalog of standard distance courses from other institutions would readily align with WGU's competencies and serve as efficient learning resources for WGU students proved incorrect. Some were too narrow in focus, others superficially broad. Many were
available only once or twice a year, or too expensive to justify including in a student’s program. In short, though strong in theory, the SmartCatalog as WGU’s cornucopia of learning opportunities proved unworkable in practice.

Nonetheless, the concept of external Education Providers offering the instruction for WGU students has remained central to the University’s model and has continued as the third key element in the “unbundling” of the traditional faculty role. University faculty do not design and develop courses for their students. They do not teach their students’ courses. They do not grade their students’ work. They serve exclusively as their students’ mentors, guiding them through every stage of their degree studies.

Today, approximately forty major Providers meet the instructional needs of WGU students, and they collectively record some 20,000 individual enrollments annually in their courses, course modules, or self-guided independent learning materials. Providers represent a range of organizations, from colleges and universities to corporate training organizations, museums, and libraries. Their learning materials must be:

- Accessible without regard to time or place, since all WGU students are distant learners;
- Scalable, in order to handle increased enrollments on short notice;
- Modest in cost, since the expense of these resources is covered in WGU’s tuition charge;
- Available for open or frequent enrollment, since students enroll at WGU on the first of every month;
- Modularized, since students often need to fill discrete gaps in their learning and do not need term-length courses;
- Self-paced, since students need flexible access to their learning resources throughout WGU’s six month terms;
- Feedback rich, because students need and expect prompt, accurate, and helpful responses to their assignments in order to sustain their momentum and morale.

In addition to the courses and other instructional resources the University obtains from outside Providers, one of its most essential resources is the University of New Mexico (UNM) library system, which from the beginning has provided all of WGU’s library services. Just as the governors resisted the idea of WGU faculty developing and teaching their own courses, so also did they resist constructing yet another brick and mortar university library. Therefore, this function too was outsourced. UNM provides full-text electronic search capability, interlibrary loan
and document delivery of books and articles, an electronic reserve “shelf,” a special collection reserved for faculty professional development, full-text access to the documents in every major database relevant to WGU’s degree areas, and a full-time staff dedicated to serving the University’s students and faculty. The contract with UNM is renewed annually and its scope expands with the University’s enrollment growth.

There is an interesting side note to WGU’s relationship with UNM’s library. At first, WGU offered these services free to its students, but it found they were not taking advantage of them. In 2002 it decided to impose a modest per-term library fee ($25, now $45) in the hope that when students realized they were paying for the library they would decide they ought to use it. They did. Usage rose dramatically and has continued strong since. Between July and December 2006, for instance, WGU students conducted nearly 75,000 database searches, obtained more than 50,000 full-text documents, and made use of eReserves more than 130,000 times—nearly a 50% increase in usage compared to the entire previous year. Whether the fee was responsible for that surge, influenced it, or was simply coincidental to it is unprovable, but the circumstantial evidence suggests the strategy worked.

The original concept of the relationship between students and their learning resources was that they would have full choice from a rich array of courses and Providers. They would pay a flat fee for their degrees, and they would pay separately for any external courses and other learning resources they used. Their transcripts would show the grades and credits for the courses they took from Providers, even though WGU itself did not award letter grades or credits for passing its competency assessments. Thus students could browse the SmartCatalog and indulge their interests according to their wallets, the time they had available, and the urgency they felt to complete whatever credential they had undertaken. As WGU moved toward the realization that it could not sustain the open catalog while maintaining its focus on developing competency-based degrees, however, it also came to realize that it needed to focus students more carefully on learning resources that would truly help their degree progress.

This transition generally coincided with a related structural change. Originally, the design of the University included an Education Provider Review Council (EPRC) comprised of senior officials of leading universities and corporations from WGU’s member states. It had a dual mission. One was to provide leadership in the difficult task of selecting provider courses for the SmartCatalog that matched WGU’s competency requirements. The second was to screen in
only those institutions that would provide truly excellent service. By early in 2001 it was evident that a modified approach was in order. The EPRC had difficulty fulfilling its assignments. Members felt they could not readily obtain enough information to certify the quality of other institutions’ proposed offerings or their alignment with WGU’s needs, and they had difficulty coordinating their own schedules so that decisions could be made promptly. They also felt some conflict of interest in judging others’ offerings to be as good as their own.

The University therefore transformed the EPRC into an Education Provider Advisory Council (EPAC) and populated it with administrators of distance programs at institutions who had by then proven their quality and were WGU’s leading suppliers of learning materials. This group worked together successfully for the next two years, and it was through their leadership that the online catalog grew to its maximum size. This Council, too, however, had an inherent conflict of interest, and it inevitably tended to become inbred. Understandably, the major Providers on the EPAC felt they could meet WGU’s needs, and that as its program offerings expanded they could expand their offerings to meet those needs. Understandably as well, they had a vested interest in maintaining the open catalog approach, because it could potentially expand their own online enrollments and attract new degree candidates to their programs. By contrast, as WGU faculty gained experience with their students’ learning needs, they increasingly discovered that university courses were less useful than many of the materials prepared by non-academic organizations. Since EPAC was composed entirely of academic members, they were not well-positioned to support the University’s development of resources so contrary to their own offerings. Thus when WGU reached the decision late in 2003 to end the SmartCatalog and refocus Education Provider learning resources exclusively around the needs of its own degree candidates, it also faced the need to terminate the EPAC, internalize learning resource decision-making, and end the practice of reflecting grades and credits on its transcripts for Provider courses. Henceforth, resource decisions would become WGU’s exclusive responsibility, and the credentials students earned would reflect its standards and practices alone.

In retrospect, the seeds for this transition had germinated by the middle of 2000 when WGU faculty began reviewing learning resources in detail to determine whether those resources aligned properly to the competencies they were intended to support. Mentors would review course syllabi and assignments, textbooks, videos, CDs, and often talk directly to course instructors. All of this work was done by the University’s own faculty, not by the EPRC or EPAC, and by the time the InterRegional Accrediting Committee reviewed WGU for initial accreditation
In the fall of 2002, every competency in every program had at least three learning resources specifically mapped to it and rated for its degree of alignment. Given such ownership of resource selection and experience with its consequences, the decision to take on full responsibility for choosing Providers was inevitable.

Today the academic program heads of each degree area comprise the advisory committee for the Director of Learning Resources and staff. As a group they review and make decisions about adding new Providers and retaining or eliminating current ones, while the faculty of each program separately determine from within the approved group the specific learning resources they will use with their students. The active list of Providers normally numbers about forty, though some are more active than others. They range from colleges and universities like the University of Texas at Arlington, Chemeketa Community College, Regis University, Northern Arizona University, Salt Lake Community College, Chadron State College, and Rio Salado Community College to non-academic organizations like LessonLab, McGraw-Hill, Mindedge, Tangent Scientific, Teachscape, Thinkwell, and Thomson NetG. In addition, the University has on occasion contracted with other non-academic organizations such as Abromitis Online Learning and Wasatch E-Learning to develop short courses addressing specific competencies in content areas where other ready-made resources have been unavailable. These have generally run in frequent cycles of four to twelve weeks so that students can take advantage of them on flexible schedules as their needs determine.

There are five content challenges in the selection and use of learning resources:

- They must be appropriately rich in subject matter;
- They must be of appropriate scope;
- They must be calibrated to the level of the student;
- They must include a range of approaches to match the different learning styles of students;
- They must align with the competencies the University will measure through its assessments.

If the content is insufficiently robust it will not develop competency. If it is too broad or contains too much extraneous material, the student will lose focus. If pitched too high, the student will not assimilate the material and will become discouraged. If the student needs the structure of a course, she will not succeed if the only resources available are independent study materials.
And finally, if the content does not align with the targeted competencies the student will fail the assessments.

These challenges lie on one side of the line faculty walk in selecting learning resources. On the other lies the need to prevent choosing materials that are so tightly focused on the competencies that they amount to “teaching to the test.” WGU is obsessive about avoiding this problem. Mentors, for example, never see in advance the objective assessments their students take. There are multiple forms of all objective assessments and, as indicated earlier, grading of all essays and performance assessments is done by a separate team of trained personnel. The courses students take, the study guides the University develops to assist them, their reading assignments, and the independent learning materials they use all require much broader mastery than the specific assessments will measure. Assessments measure selectively from a domain of knowledge, and it is engagement at a deep level with the domain at large that the University targets with its learning resources.

In grappling with these challenges, WGU has become steadily more precise and more prescriptive in its resource selection. Having begun by giving students a wide array of choices in their study materials it has moved steadily toward the focused use of only those resources that align strongly with their respective competencies and that have proven successful. Three examples will illustrate this approach. Students completing the Bachelor of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies en route to becoming certified elementary school teachers, for instance, must pass several assessments in the arts and humanities that encompass the visual and performing arts, ethics, and literature. The literature assessments focus on broad skills of mastery that may be applied to the appreciation and teaching of all genres and periods. The learning resources focus on specific texts and require mastery of those texts (Figure 11), but more importantly they provide the means for developing the generic skills of appreciation and analysis that students can apply to all literatures. In preparing for these assessments, students have the option of following the study guide and its assignments on their own, taking a course developed for WGU around these materials, or pursuing a combination of both.
Figure 11
Learning Resources
To use in preparation for WGU’s Literature Subdomain Assessments

- Western Governors University. *Study Guide for the Humanities Literature Assessment (LIC4) and Performance Tasks in Taskstream (LIA4)*
- Abromitis Online Learning course: Literary Analysis and Interpretation
- Kennedy, X. J. and Gioia, D. *Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry and Drama.*
- Marlowe, Christopher. *Dr. Faustus.*
- Wilde, Oscar. *The Importance of Being Earnest.*
- Clemens, Samuel L. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.*
- Potok, Chaim. *My Name is Asher Lev.*

Similarly, mentors helping Information Technology students prepare for the Software Domain assessment select from the resources in Figure 12, depending on the student’s background, experience and learning style:

Figure 12
Learning Resources
To use in preparation for WGU’s Software Domain Assessments

- Salt Lake Community College: *Java for the Absolute Beginner*
- Wasatch E-Learning: *Introduction to Java*
- Thompson NetG:
  - Java 2.0
  - 86001 Java 2 Programming Part 1
  - 86002 Java 2 Programming Part 2
  - 86003 Java 2 Programming Part 3
  - 86004 Java 2 Programming Part 4
  - 86005 Java 2 Programming Part 5
- Measure Up: *Computer Based Training*
- Sierra, K. and Bates, B. *Sun Certified Programmer & Developer for Java 2 Study Guide*

Or finally, secondary school mathematics teachers pursuing the Master of Arts in Mathematics Education degree must demonstrate competency in number systems, number theory, and algebra; geometry; statistics and probability; calculus and analysis; discrete mathematics;
and secondary mathematics teaching methods. They must pass six inter-related assessments in this domain, and to help their students prepare for those assessments mentors will select from the resources in Figure 13, again depending on the background, experience and learning style of each student:

**Figure 13**

Learning Resources

*To use in preparation for WGU's Middle/High School Mathematics Content Domain Assessments*

- California National University: *Precalculus, Calculus I, II, and III*
- Chadron State University: *Statistical Methods and Data Analysis*
- MIT Open Courseware in *Linear Algebra, Calculus, and Differential Equations*
- Hsu, 1996. *Schaum’s Probability and Random Variables and Random Processes*
- Hsu, 1996. *Schaum’s Outline of Probability and Random Variables*
- Beachy, J. *Online Abstract Algebra*

The results of this much more targeted approach to the use of properly aligned learning resources have been impressive. Ninety five percent of the students who use the learning resources their mentors recommend pass the associated assessments. Interestingly, too, more than three fourths of students graduating from the University report a strong preference for independent learning resources rather than course-based resources, whereas students who drop out of WGU report a nearly equal preference for more structured, course-supported study. These data clearly suggest that the University does better with motivated, self-confident, independent learners, but they also raise reasonable questions about what more should be done to support those less confident but who have the potential to succeed. How far, in other words, does the University’s commitment to expanding access extend, and what is the right balance between maintaining modest, affordable tuition and investing in the support services necessary to ensure the success of more dependent, less well-prepared learners? These questions are among WGU’s continuing challenges as a maturing institution and offer a useful segue to the discussion of the mentor role in student success.
Faculty

Someday, one of my students will walk on Mars. I have a small part in that. A small, wonderful part.

Heather Dodds
Secondary Science mentor

The most rewarding moment is when I see my students walk across the stage knowing the struggles they have experienced in their life, and still they stand tall and proud. I’m as proud of their accomplishments as they are and it is the most fulfilling moment that I can experience!!

Linda Gunn
Business Mentor

I might be up late at night, feeling tired but still glued to the computer. Often it’s because I want to ask an update of just one more student, or check to see if a “new and improved” assignment was turned in, or if that “bear of a test” was finally passed. Sometimes I have to break the tough news about that assessment. But when they thank me for it, I know that I did it with both their personal and professional needs in mind, and in a way that will motivate them to do better next time.

Kate Emmons
Education Mentor

I have a student who has never succeeded in a traditional university environment. Now she is passing assessment after assessment and is so pleased with her achievements that every time I meet with her she expresses great pleasure with her accomplishments. WGU has provided a place where she can realize her potential and has caused high self-esteem to replace a past of low expectations.

Jim Evans
Education mentor

The general conception of the faculty role at WGU has not changed over the past ten years, though as noted earlier it has undergone some evolution in terminology. It has also experienced some increase in specialization. In the first years of the University, although each major degree area had a Program Coordinator providing overall leadership, mentors shared common responsibilities for virtually all aspects of their programs. Mentoring began with high quality, comprehensive advisement. Mentors assisted their students in their educational planning and progress, from initial enrollment to graduation. They evaluated student learning styles, skills, and deficiencies; guided the development of their Academic Action Plans; identified and arranged access to their learning resources; mediated and resolved bureaucratic disputes. They monitored their students’ progress and communicated with them by phone and/or email at
least every two weeks. Finally, they chaired their students’ capstone or final project committee, verified the completion of all academic requirements, and initiated the graduation process. As Figure 14 suggests, the University sought to put the student in the center of a network of services, mediated and guided by their mentor.

**Figure 14**

Other early mentor responsibilities ranged from resource development to University service and individual professional development. Mentors located new learning resources for students to use, including online courseware and independent study materials, mapped those resources to degree competencies, and placed them in the SmartCatalog. They monitored student use of those resources and their subsequent success with assessments, so they could develop an experiential record and improve resource selection. They likewise shared responsibility for promoting and operating the University through committee work, outreach, and other assignments appropriate to their backgrounds, expertise, and interests.

WGU has always believed that mentors charged with stimulating their students’ intellectual vitality and commitment should also be concerned about their own. Although it is a student-
centered institution and does not have “publish or perish” expectations of its faculty, it is none-theless committed to assisting mentors’ continuing professional growth. Accordingly, faculty are encouraged to reserve a day every two weeks for their own professional development—roughly ten percent of their working time. They have wide latitude in the initiatives they undertake. Most are engaged in ongoing research of some kind, a significant percentage of which ends up in formal publication, conference presentations, or both. The University supports conference presentations by its faculty and annually provides a substantial budget to cover the costs of their participation in such events. Other mentors produce study guides for students preparing for assessments, or dig out new learning resources and align them with competency requirements. A number of younger mentors—younger in their academic careers, though not necessarily in age—are enrolled in further graduate study.

Inevitably as WGU grew, mentor roles became more specialized. Between 2002 and early 2005 Program Coordinators gradually took on more explicit responsibility for the success of their programs, monitoring overall student progress and leading their colleagues in developing strategies to improve student retention and graduation rates. Coordinators managed the search process for new mentors, oversaw new mentor training, and conducted the annual evaluations of all their mentors. They were chiefly responsible for ensuring the quality and currency of program competencies, as well as for the quality of learning resources, and as liaisons with their respective Program Councils they both alerted the Councils to programs needing revision and led the revision process.

By early 2005 it had become clear that when they reached a certain size WGU programs would need more leadership than Coordinators alone could provide. There was no clear tipping point, but by the spring of that year the Teachers College had more than 2,000 students, the Business College was approaching 1,000, and both needed more help. The Board of Trustees also had a pointed discussion that February about preparing the University for major growth and had endorsed the need to deepen WGU’s administration—which still in too many places had one player for each position on the team. It was already clear that the University was heading toward 10,000 students, and that it could not build the staff and structure to support that enrollment after the students had arrived. It had to start well beforehand. What emerged as a result was the plan now implemented for WGU’s first three degree areas, the Teachers College, the College of Business, and the College of Information Technology. By early in 2007, when the College of Health Professions enrollments reach approximately 500 it, too, will implement the
same academic structure. Each College has a Program Director responsible for overall leadership, faculty hiring, training, and evaluation; a Program Coordinator responsible for the currency and quality of the curriculum and its learning resources; and a Program Manager responsible for daily problem-solving with mentors and their students.

Within this leadership structure, mentors in each program operate at four levels:

**Level 1** mentors focus on core student-related responsibilities—comprehensive program guidance, academic progress, documentation, communication, participation in learning communities, and ongoing professional development. Minimum requirements for mentors at this level include a bachelor’s, master’s, or doctoral degree and relevant experience in the field, as well as a strong customer service orientation. Generally, Mentor 1 faculty have both the degree and professional experience that their students are seeking to obtain.

**Level 2** mentors perform these core mentoring responsibilities but will also carry other responsibilities, including leadership of mentor teams assigned to special projects, participating in new degree development as subject matter experts, managing learning communities, developing new learning resources, and serving on university committees. Minimum requirements for mentors at this level generally include a master’s or doctoral degree and significant experience in the field, and/or at least three years as a WGU Mentor 1, with the past two years of above average performance in retention, student academic progress, graduation, and student satisfaction.

**Level 3** mentors incorporate Mentor 1 and 2 responsibilities but also take on significant leadership responsibility for curriculum and program development, faculty management, accreditation applications and reports, grant development and/or management, University outreach activities, and special projects. Program Coordinators and Program Managers are selected from the Mentor 3 group. Since this is a senior faculty position, it generally requires a doctoral degree and extensive experience in the field, and/or at least three years as a WGU Mentor 2 with above average performance in both mentoring and leadership or university service.

**Level 4** mentors carry senior leadership responsibilities in the University, involving comprehensive academic management. The role is similar in scope to that of a department chair or dean in a more traditional institution. A typical assignment, for in-
stance, would be to provide the senior leadership for an entire area of study. Level 4 mentors do not generally guide individual students, but they must have demonstrated superior performance as mentors through extensive prior experience at WGU, or through equally relevant and demanding experience in other university settings or in professional practice. They are generally expected to have an earned doctorate and always required to have extensive experience in the field, including significant management and leadership experience.

It is important to note that these levels do not equate to a traditional hierarchical faculty structure. Obviously, each level brings with it more curricular responsibility, but that does not translate to increased “worthiness.” Some of the University’s most credentialed senior faculty choose to remain Level 1 mentors simply because they want to work directly and exclusively with students. The salary range among Level 1 mentors is greater than the ranges for other levels because so many Level 1 mentors are new to the University and young in their academic careers. But salaries at the upper end of that level are quite comparable to those of senior faculty at Levels 2 and 3. The University has deliberately structured its faculty classifications according to function rather than according to seniority or credentials.

Faculty work at WGU is not easy. There is no tenure. There are no contracts. Faculty and all other employees work on an at-will basis. Full-time mentors carry an average of eighty students, and the University is performance-based. Mentors are required to maintain frequent communication with their students throughout their enrollment at WGU. They are expected to contact their students at least every two weeks and to document those interactions. More specifically, however, the communication cycle varies with the length of time the student has been enrolled. During the first month of enrollment, mentors maintain contact with the student twice a week, including once by phone. Between the second and sixth months of enrollment, they contact the student once a week, with a phone call every two weeks. Only thereafter does the basic bi-weekly protocol take effect. Furthermore, if the student is placed on academic probation, the mentor must file a recovery plan with the Program Manager which, among other specific steps, requires weekly email communication with a phone call every two weeks until the student is back in good standing.

It should be evident from this summary that mentor-student communication is at the heart of faculty responsibility at WGU, and that it is the bedrock of the mentoring program. New mentors are not, of course handed eighty students the day they begin employment. More will
be said about their recruitment and training below, but here it is enough to note that normally they take on twenty new students in each of four consecutive months, reaching full load about four and a half months after they begin employment. Nonetheless, a mentor with a full load of students adhering to the communications protocol can expect to make up to forty phone calls each week to his or her students, in addition to other communications by email. A number of these calls will be brief—simply a way to check on the student’s progress and provide a word of encouragement. Others will be much more substantive, reviewing assessment results, planning next steps, discussing questions about learning resources, and so on. Since these are adult students whose lives may be interrupted by job changes or loss, by family illness, or by outright tragedy, a few of these calls will focus simply on listening, support, and encouragement. All but those of sudden emergency, however, will be planned and mutually scheduled, and all of their results will have to be documented as part of the student’s official academic record. It may seem odd that an online university would rely so heavily on telephone communication, but experience has shown that it humanizes the mentor-student relationship in ways that email simply cannot, and that every added touch of this sort improves the likelihood of student success. In the not-distant future, as video-based interactions become more cost-friendly for students, the University will add that element, too, to its interactive platform.

At this writing the University is beginning to experiment with a new academic support role called Student Progress Manager. These individuals will serve as first-level problem solvers, cheerleaders, and aides for students. They will not have faculty credentials but will take over from mentors much of the routine phone calling they now do to check on student progress. If successful, Student Progress Managers will not only add a level of support to students but also free mentors to focus on the more academically demanding aspects of their jobs.

One other point mentioned above needs explanation before moving on. Full-time mentors, as noted, carry eighty students. Initially, the University set the ratio for undergraduate students at 1:100 and for graduate students at 1:80, but by early 2001 it had realized that mentoring undergraduates was every bit as time-consuming as mentoring graduate students. Accordingly, it recalibrated the ratio as 1:80 for all mentors in all programs and has retained that ratio ever since. There was no hard science in these decisions. The University tried to cross-walk the workload for a traditional faculty member teaching three or four courses a semester, plus a summer term load, against a mentor with no teaching responsibilities focused on advisement. It also looked at the International Council on Distance Education’s analysis of worldwide ratios in
distance teaching, running (in 1999-2000) about 1:100. Neither comparison fully worked, but both were useful. Ultimately, it became a matter for learning through experience and, with that one adjustment in the initial ratio, experience has generally affirmed the 1:80 result. The addition of Student Progress Managers, if successful, may allow the mentor-student ratio to increase while sustaining or even increasing the overall level of academic support students receive. Certainly the data compiled to date contain no indication that student attrition increases, progress declines, or satisfaction erodes if the mentor carries eighty students over an extended period of time. On the contrary, it seems that good mentors can manage these loads indefinitely with no loss of quality in student service, whereas ineffective mentors will create unhappiness and lose students no matter how small their loads.

Faculty evaluation and its rewards in this system are directly tied to how well mentors assist their students’ academic progress, retention, graduation, and satisfaction with their WGU experience. Each of these key performance indicators is measured monthly in a series of reports available to the mentor and to all academic managers and senior officials in the institution. It is possible for mentors and managers on a daily basis to access the details of every student’s progress—to know how many competency units the student has undertaken for the term; how many of their assessments have been taken, passed or failed; when the last assessment was taken; whether the student’s progress is on track relative to time left in the term; what the student’s rate of progress is and whether it meets federal financial aid guidelines; and what the mentor’s comprehensive rate of progress is for all of his or her students. If any of these indicators drops below certain trigger points, the situation is flagged automatically for the mentor’s attention, and if necessary for the Program Manager’s intervention.

How different this system is from that of any traditional institution! It is virtually inconceivable that in any campus-based program anyone but the classroom professor would know who shows up for class, how each student is doing throughout the term, or be alerted by the administration to those students in trouble and required to help them. And the prospect that any senior official—department head, dean, or provost—would not only have access to immediate classroom data but have also the obligation to intercede directly with the professor who ignores it is equally inconceivable. It would be far more likely that the faculty senate, or the faculty union, would claim breach of academic freedom and vote no-confidence in the administration than that it would applaud the administration for helping faculty support their students. In traditional settings, the sage on the stage is still the king of the classroom. At WGU students are the cus-
tomers who pay everyone’s salaries. They are not always right, but their needs always come first.

Faculty are evaluated relative to the responsibilities for their assigned level, their success with regard to the four key performance indicators named above—student progress, retention, graduation, satisfaction—and their own professional growth since the last performance review. Both the cycle and the process change somewhat over time. New faculty have a structured performance conversation with the Program Director after six months and nine months of the first year of employment. These evaluation conferences incorporate key data as they become available. The evaluation is reported in a brief memo to the faculty member, to his or her personnel file, and to the Provost. New faculty go through a more complete evaluation process, including student surveys, peer evaluation, and a self-evaluation on the first anniversary of their appointment, with the results placed officially on file as well.

In the second year of a new faculty member’s appointment, the Program Director will ordinarily conduct one structured performance conversation after six months. Additional conversations may occur as necessary, based on the mentor’s continuing performance. On the second anniversary of the mentor’s appointment he or she again goes through the full evaluation process, including self-evaluation, student surveys, and peer reviews.

Thereafter, until the sixth year of the mentor’s appointment, s/he will go through the full evaluation process biannually—that is, at the fourth and sixth anniversary. The Program Director holds, however, an annual performance discussion with each mentor in the years between these formal evaluations (years three and five). The faculty member does not prepare materials for these annual discussions but, as previously, the results are captured in a brief memo and placed in official files. After the sixth year of employment, mentors go through the full evaluation process every three years, with annual performance discussions occurring in the off years.

In a system so focused on mentor performance and student success, one might wonder whether the rewards are equal to the tasks required. The faculty quoted at the head of this section suggest they are, and many others express similar sentiments. WGU has tried to balance both its expectations and its compensations, remaining performance-based while fostering a supportive, caring, and rewarding environment. The evidence to date indicates that it has succeeded in that effort. The mentor profiles included in the Appendix to this book (Chapter X) tes-
tify that WGU has recruited as diverse, energetic, creative, and committed a group of faculty as any institution in the country. Faculty turnover—mentors either terminated by the University or choosing to leave for other positions—has been minimal, generally less than 5% per year, and on annual surveys faculty overwhelmingly indicate satisfaction with their jobs.

Some of the rewards at WGU are financial, and some are deeply personal. The University pays competitive salaries and offers very competitive health and retirement benefits. Faculty work at home and thus have no regular commuting costs and great flexibility in their hours. The University pays all their office costs, including computer, printer and fax, telephone and Internet, postage and supplies. Mentors do on occasion travel to University headquarters in Salt Lake, either for the semi-annual graduation ceremonies and faculty colloquia or for project-related meetings, but otherwise they are free to set their own schedules in accordance with student needs. Because most WGU students work full-time, many faculty elect to work evenings and weekends, arranging downtime on other days during the week.

Without question, however, the most gratifying part of the mentor role is deeply personal. It is the opportunity to foster professional relationships with students over long periods of time, to foster and celebrate their growth from admission to graduation, to know that they have been instrumental in their students’ success, not for ten or fifteen weeks during a single course but throughout the entire arc of their students’ educational experience. Professional academics who relish classroom teaching and get their satisfaction from delivering well-crafted lectures, running a seminar, or pursuing scholarly research are not likely to thrive in this environment. But those who derive their satisfaction through the long-term growth of their students are likely to rate mentoring high on the rewards scale.

Mentor faculty are recruited throughout the nation to work at WGU, and because new students are admitted every month new faculty are also hired every month. Over the past four years, and primarily since receiving initial regional accreditation early in 2003, new student enrollments have steadily risen to a current monthly average over 600. At the other end of the cycle, of course, fifty to seventy-five students will also graduate every month, while others will drop out or take breaks from their studies between terms. The net result of this ebb and flow means that the University has normally appointed over this period between four and eight new mentors every month, producing growth from nine in the fall of 2002 to more than 120 mentors by the fall of 2006. These faculty currently live in twenty-six states, Mexico, and Puerto Rico.
Making good appointments at this pace calls for constant recruiting and an efficient screening process. The University advertises continuously on its website and in national media, both print and electronic. Candidate credentials are first screened by the relevant Program Director, who then conducts a telephone interview if the candidate looks promising. If that is successful, the candidate is then brought to Salt Lake, where he or she interviews personally with the Director and other faculty, as well as with senior academic administrators. Fortunately, as WGU’s reputation has grown, it has attracted progressively stronger faculty candidates, most with direct experience with distance learning as students, instructors, or both. Indeed, the recruitment process is now to a considerable degree self-selective. The University does not hang out a sign saying, “Candidates interested in being the sage on a stage need not apply,” but in fact they do not. It is increasingly clear that faculty candidates seek out WGU because the role is more and more widely understood, and that it is specifically appealing to them.

Nonetheless, throughout its screening process, the University tries to be as candid as possible, not only about what it takes to be successful as a mentor but also about the personal qualities that will make the role satisfying. For instance, to be a successful faculty member in a traditional institution requires three primary competencies, in this order: content mastery, communication skill, and organization. First, one must know the material one is teaching. Second, one should be able to communicate it effectively enough so that at least most students stay awake during class. Third—and a distant last—one should at least be organized enough to keep the class schedule straight, grade papers at least before the end of the term, and get them back to the right students. Success at WGU requires the same three competencies, but in reverse order. Success in the role begins with being well-organized. With it, a new mentor can master the job within six months and have a good chance to be successful. Without it, the job will master him (or her) in six months, and both mentor and students will suffer because of it. Many candidates may be attracted to the idea of the mentor role and the personal flexibility it allows at an institution like WGU but greatly underestimate the time and space-management skills necessary to function effectively as an independent worker. Most of us have grown up in structured environments and received all of our education that way. We may fantasize about the niceties of working alone but be wholly unprepared for it. Unless one has the organizational ability to track, communicate, and record the progress of eighty students through their entire degree programs—not just record their term grades in a logbook—the electronic paperwork alone can be overwhelming.
If organization is the first competency requirement, communication skill is the second. It has three components. The first is technological proficiency. Mentors need to be comfortable with electronic media, experienced in their use, and willing to adapt as the media change and improve. If they are going to inspire confidence in their students, they need to be confident in using the tools they will use to reach their students. Obviously there are unique elements of WGU’s electronic systems and these require training. But the underlying facility with communication technologies is a pre-condition for mentor success. The second component of this competency can simply be called commitment. Some faculty—think again of the research scholar—just do not want to be bothered by human interference with their work. At WGU, the work is all about human interference. Unless one has an appetite for personal contact and willingly takes initiative day after day to reach out to his or her students—likes doing that and does it with zest—those students will wither and, one by one, disappear. Third and finally, effective communication in this environment is a matter of style. The keyboard does not easily project body language, and even effective telephone communication is an art. Students who never see their mentors, other students, or University officials can easily feel lost, unsupported, and at the mercy of an impersonal, inscrutable system. Only the mentor holds the guiding thread through this labyrinth and in every communication that mentor must project warmth, strength, purposefulness, and caring.

Finally, there is the third competency that makes a mentor successful—content mastery. It ranks third in these priorities in part because WGU mentors do not prepare lectures or seminars, do not teach courses, and do not have to publish original research in order to avoid being fired. But mainly it ranks third here because traditional universities hardly count the competencies of organization and communication at all. WGU hires faculty who are masters of the content of the degree programs for which they are responsible because they need that knowledge every bit as much as faculty do on traditional campuses. Mentors need that content mastery because they will be their students’ first recourse when in doubt about how or what to study for an assessment. They need that mastery because students will turn to them when they don’t understand something in a textbook, or when they don’t understand a grader’s comment on a performance task sent back for revision, or when they fail an objective assessment and need the mentor’s analysis of what to do next. And finally, they need it because they will be involved as subject matter experts in creating or revising competencies, objectives, and assessments.
The recruiting process screens for all these qualities but even when the match is perfect there is likely to be a prolonged period of adjustment. Full maturation in the job takes at least a year and begins with WGU’s mentor training program. All new faculty come to University headquarters in the middle of the month preceding their first assignment of students. There they receive their laptop computers, pre-loaded with the software and passwords they will need. They meet key administrative staff with whom they will interact and go through three days of intensive training in the use of the University’s electronic systems. They practice designing “dummy” Academic Action Plans with fictitious students, referring these students for assessments, and retrieving and interpreting test results. They explore the learning resources available in the degree programs they will mentor and how to respond to differing student needs. They role-play with their colleagues, playing mentor and student. Finally, they have an extended teleconference with an assigned senior mentor, who will be their partner and shepherd for at least the next six months and possibly up to a year.

After they return home at the end of these three days, they continue virtual training for the rest of the month, developing their facility in using the University’s systems. They also begin to participate in all their senior partner’s telephone and email communications with the partner’s students, becoming in this way accustomed to the kinds of issues students present and the senior mentor’s solutions for them. They will continue this practice for several months, though the frequency will decline as their own expertise develops. Then on the first of the month following their initial training session, they will be assigned their first contingent of approximately twenty students. As they begin working with these students, their senior partner will listen in on the trainee’s student exchanges, offering advice when necessary and always debriefing after the student session. In each of the next three months the mentor trainees will take on additional cohorts of about twenty students, until they reach the target load of eighty. The senior partner will stay with each trainee throughout this process and usually well beyond. Finally, all new mentors return to Salt Lake for follow-up, face-to-face training in conjunction with the University’s semi-annual faculty colloquia, normally held in July and February. The University has found these to be especially useful follow-up sessions, not only because they build bonds among new and older faculty colleagues, but because they enable new faculty to share solutions to actual student problems that in earlier training they had considered only in theory.
The WGU model is an integrated and coherent whole. Its designers began by wiping away all the accepted verities about the aims, appearance, and operation of a university. They began afresh, first by redefining the essential goals of university education, then by asking what a university should look like in the twenty-first century. Their answers were as radical as they were predictable. Universities should achieve broad consensus about the content of their degrees from experts in the field. They should graduate students who know and are able to do the things their degrees represent. They should meet the same standards of excellence, regardless of who their instructors were. They should be able to progress toward their degrees as rapidly as they demonstrate mastery of degree requirements. Employers and other academic institutions should be able to rely on what universities say about their graduates. Universities should not insist that their students, their instructors, their library, and their laboratories all be in the same place. That model was born of necessity 900 years ago when there was no alternative. Now it limits access, is prohibitively expensive, and the tools are readily available to enable students to learn equally well anywhere and at any time.

Western Governors University was created as a unified whole from these elementary principles. Yet these same principles are readily transferable in whole or in part to other institutional settings. WGU’s essential aims are no different than any other university’s aims. The difference lies in its methods, and the methods are transferable. Other institutions could adapt their own version of WGU’s council structure. They could ensure grading integrity by developing common rubrics and separating graders from instructors. They could develop common assessments and multiple forms of assessments, and use them to ensure reliable and valid outcomes across departments in every course and in every degree. They could break out of the time-based model of degree progress and let their students progress according to their abilities and commitment. Nor would they need to do any of these things across the entire institution. They could begin with pilot initiatives in selected areas and expand as results warrant. The model is available to be copied, adapted, or improved upon. The one thing it will not do is disappear.

The rise of Western Governors University proves that competency-based education is now established in American higher education, and its influence will continue to expand. WGU’s success has already impacted accreditation standards throughout the country, and it
continues to attract a steady stream of interested visitors, delegations, dissertations, and researchers. As it continues to grow and other institutions adopt some of its practices or develop their own, the competency movement will accelerate. Clear as its design concepts were, however, the University did not achieve its present form without a good deal of trial and error. Nor is it likely to remain static in future. It will continue to learn from its experience and to refine its practice in light of what it learns. WGU prides itself on being self-critical, on making performance decisions based on hard analysis. It is time now to explore some of those decisions that have been most critical to its success.

*   *   *   *   *   *   *

*   *   *   *   *   *   *
For WGU, the most graphic witness to the truth of T.S. Eliot’s words appeared in the enrollment projections the governors endorsed as part of the University’s first business plan in 1998. By 2006, it called for 90,000 students to be enrolled from four constituencies. The great majority would be students simply taking a course through the SmartCatalog, but others included employees in training programs developed for industry, students pursuing certifications of competence in specific skill areas, and students seeking WGU degrees. Although there was nothing intrinsically wrong in believing WGU could serve each of these groups, the numbers derived more from early enthusiasm for the WGU model than from a realistic assessment of the strategy and resources their achievement would command. The business plan underestimated the marketing capital such impressive numbers would require. It overlooked the impact of accreditation and the years it would take to achieve it. It underestimated the complexities of developing competencies and assessments. And it failed to take account of significantly better funded online course brokers already in the marketplace, like the Sloan Foundation’s Asynchronous Learning Network and the Electronic Campus of the Southern Regional Education Board.

Yet those were the projections released to the media, and as it became clear over the next few years that they would not materialize they became ammunition for a lot of media mischief. Citing WGU’s “failure” became for a time almost sport for The Chronicle of Higher Education, and in 2001 education pundit John Bear (of Bear’s Guide to Earning Degrees by Distance Learning and other books) claimed that WGU would soon go out of business and be remembered as no more than a bit of political posturing. Ironically, in one area WGU has exceeded those first projections, and in another it has within the past four years alone come close to achieving them. The 1998 business plan forecast that WGU would not generate a positive cash balance until 2006. In fact, it has generated a positive cash balance every fiscal year since 1999, and it has been completely self-supporting on tuition since fiscal year 2005. And
whereas the business plan projected degree enrollments of 9000 by the end of 2006, the University is on track to meet or exceed that number by the fall of 2007.

In truth, however, no creation as radical as Western Governors University emerges in perfect form and without the need to adapt to the realities of the world it encounters. Indeed, most such efforts fail, and arising as WGU did on the threshold of the dot.com bubble, its early struggles led many to believe that it, too, would be just another of the bubbles that burst. Innovative educational institutions walk a very wobbly tightrope, balancing between faithfulness to their innovative design and the need for acceptance by the stakeholders on whom they depend—students, families, employers, legislators, accreditors, and state and federal agencies. A new educational model must overcome the skepticism of all of these groups. It must give shape to its defining ideas while ensuring that the learning its students acquire is credible, valuable, and transferable to society at large. These realities inevitably lead to adjustments in the model, and this narrative has already referred to several adjustments that WGU has made over the past ten years. The evolution from externally appropriated to internally developed assessments, the termination of the SmartCatalog and of the Education Provider Review Council, the evolving role of the Assessment Council, the change in mentor-student ratio, and the establishment of competency as equivalent to a B grade in traditional systems all occurred as adaptations in response to concrete experience.

The University has also made a number of decisions, however, that have shaped its development in more fundamental ways. Some of these established from the very beginning the kind of institution WGU would become. Others resulted from empirical analysis of institutional policies and practice. Some abruptly changed university behavior. Others created change more gradually. All of them became turning points that improved service to students, increased university efficiency, and fostered growth. A closer look at some of the most critical of these decisions reveals how an innovative institution without models to help guide its behavior adapts to the realities of its environment without losing its integrity.

**Private, Nonprofit**

The importance of the decision to establish WGU as a private, nonprofit, nonsectarian institution is easily overlooked until one remembers that private higher education in the American West has nowhere near the dominance that it has in the East. Western higher education is overwhelmingly dominated by public institutions, publicly funded. To establish a private, non-
profit institution in the West—quite apart from the uniqueness of its model—required extraordinary conviction and courage. Moreover, no other private, nonprofit, nonsectarian college or university has been established anywhere in the United States in more than a generation. The costs of such an undertaking are virtually prohibitive, enrollment pressure has generally been met either by increased funding of public institutions or by for-profit institutions, and the philanthropic foundations that often provided major funding for new institutions thirty years ago have since focused on other targets.

The decision to develop a new, competency-based, online institution presented the founding governors with two basic challenges—how to protect and fund their creation long enough for it to become established. The history of educational innovation suggests that truly new models of learning rarely survive unless they have special protections. Usually that involves ensuring that the innovations are embodied in a freestanding institution outside the traditional system rather than as experimental projects within it. Early discussions about the founding of Empire State College, for instance, involved debate about whether to establish it as an independent college or to incorporate its experimental ideas in special program offices on traditional campuses in the SUNY system. So, too, it was no accident that Regents College, Thomas Edison State College, and The Evergreen State College established themselves and preserved their integrity because they remained free-standing institutions with their own presidents, faculty, staff, facilities, and budgets. Once they were firmly established and the success of their educational approach confirmed, they could safely take their place at the table with other institutions in their state systems. But without the special protection of independence during the first few years of their lives they would in all likelihood have been eliminated during the next fiscal crisis their home states encountered.

In each case, as well, there were powerful individuals who stood up for these fledgling institutions and protected them from the inevitable critics who were always eager to see their funding invested elsewhere—most often, of course, in their own campuses or in their own state projects. Had Governor Nelson Rockefeller and Ernest Boyer, the Chancellor of the State University of New York and one of America’s most renowned educators, not been united in their support of Empire State College its fate would have been very different. Had Regents College not had the protection during its formative years of Governor Rockefeller and Ewald Nyquist, New York’s Commissioner of Education and President of The University of the State of New York (the oversight body for all public institutions in the state) it would not likely have survived—
if it had come into existence at all. So, too, the early fortunes of The Evergreen State College. Had the governor in office at the time of its founding not become its second president the College might not have survived the subsequent political infighting over its future. Each of these innovative institutions, in short, needed powerful champions who protected and supported them during their formative years. Without that support, they could not have survived.

So it was with WGU. The founding governors simply did not believe that the model they had in mind could be established successfully within their state systems of higher education. It would be too vulnerable to political attack, to the pressures of academic traditionalism, and—unless it was nonprofit—to conflict of interest accusations. It had to be set up as a freestanding, independent, not-for-profit institution. And they would have to protect it politically and financially until it was firmly established.

With the exception of the grant in 2001 that helped finance the T-PLUS program, the $100,000 that each of the founding governors contributed is the only state funding WGU has ever received.⁸ Instead, believing their new University had national significance, the governors enlisted the support of private industry, Congress, and the US Department of Education to secure the financial footings of their institution. From these sources they generated over $20 million in start-up funding that enabled the University to build and market degree programs, obtain facilities and equipment, hire and train personnel. Today WGU enrolls over 7,000 students and is completely self-supporting. Whereas most private institutions generate less than half their operating revenue from student tuition, WGU’s tuition covers nearly 90% of its operating costs. Tuition, moreover, is modest in comparison to most other private institutions—$5,800 a year for undergraduate students in 2006, $6,500 for MBA students—and it has not been raised for the past two years. Thus for about the cost of a new dormitory on a state university campus nineteen governors conceived, launched, funded, and championed an entirely new university until it could stand on its own. Few decisions in the history of American higher education have had such profoundly cost-effective results.

**Accreditation**

“Working with WGU was a win for both regional accreditation and for WGU’s unique model. It pushed both sides to reach their fullest potential. The four commissions forming IRAC were able to undertake an innovative, unprecedented process and achieve the accreditation of

⁸ Governor Romer awarded $3 million from Colorado state funds for program development in 1998, but when he left office at the end of that year his successor withdrew the grant.
a truly pioneering institution. We learned a great deal about competency-based, virtual education and how outcomes assessment works. WGU pushed us to be creative, and we pushed WGU to develop structures and processes that would last, and to document its system so that others could learn from it. Neither side compromised its integrity, and both sides benefited. It was for me a uniquely rewarding experience.”

Dr. Sandra Elman
President
Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities

The next set of decisions that shaped WGU’s future centered on the problem of credibility. How would such a radical university design be accepted by the academic community and by employers? Perhaps influenced by their dealings with cantankerous legislatures and having little or no direct experience with educational accreditation, the governors initially considered bypassing it entirely. They felt that if they stood together they had the power to rewrite the rules of academic engagement. Accreditation, they believed, was part of the problem, not the solution. It was a barrier to innovation, not a stimulus for it. They saw regional accrediting associations as turf-protectors, designed to shield existing institutions by keeping newcomers out. The associations misplaced their priorities. They judged institutions on their “inputs”—admission criteria, library holdings, faculty credentials, faculty-student ratios, funding sources, and the like—not on the evidence of what students actually learned. They restricted membership in the club, the governors felt, simply by requiring so many years of operation before awarding accreditation.

Because students are understandably wary of enrolling in an unaccredited college or university and generally cannot obtain federal financial aid for doing so, unless a new institution arises under the aegis of a state system it is very unlikely to survive long enough to satisfy regional accreditation requirements.

For their part, the regional accrediting associations that covered WGU’s territory also at first reacted negatively. They did not see how they could recognize an institution that would not have its own library, would not award credits and grades, and would not do its own teaching. What were competencies anyway, and why would measuring them be better than grades from courses? How would remote students ever learn to use an academic library? How could the University ensure that students would learn what they need to know if WGU faculty were not their instructors? What control over instruction would WGU really exercise?

When the governors first presented their ideas to accreditors at a forum in Las Vegas late in 1995 these opposing views seemed unbridgeable, but more positive thinking prevailed
and by the fall of 1996 the two sides had forged an historic agreement. The governors recog-
nized that WGU would not only have a better chance of acceptance by working within the sys-

tem than outside it, but also a better chance of influencing systemic educational change. They
also came to recognize the leaders of the accrediting associations as colleagues willing to sup-
port change, not antagonists of it. For their part, the directors of the four regional accrediting
associations whose states were charter members of WGU were concerned that no one of them
write the standards that all would have to honor. They envisioned other virtual universities
emerging that would present the same cross-regional problems. They saw their collaborative
work with WGU as a unique opportunity to strengthen their relationships with each other and to
improve the cross-regional alignment of their standards. Quite early in the process they be-
came committed to helping WGU become a successful, accepted member of the higher educa-
tion community.

The InterRegional Accrediting Committee (IRAC), with four members from each region,
resulted from their collaboration. IRAC agreed that the Northwest Association’s Commission on
Colleges and Universities (NWCCU) would be its lead accrediting agency, and that the general
policies and timelines of the NWCCU would prevail. The Committee also agreed that once
WGU achieved initial Accreditation, each of the four regions would list it as an accredited institu-
tion within its region for the following two years. Thereafter, the University’s accreditation would
reside exclusively with the Northwest Association and WGU in future would subscribe to the
NWCCU’s policies and procedures.

Two other WGU accreditations need mention in order to appreciate fully the conse-
quences of the governors’ original decision to work for change within the educational community
rather than to attempt to effect it from the outside. First, as noted earlier, WGU went through
the Distance Education and Training Council accreditation process early in 2001. DETC recog-
nized WGU’s importance to the distance learning community, and WGU welcomed the chance
to seek its approval. DETC recognition enhanced the University’s national visibility and im-
proved the opportunities for students to obtain tuition reimbursement from their employers. The
University has continued its close relationship with the Council ever since. WGU was instru-
mental in the successful effort in 2006 to obtain legislative eligibility for DETC colleges and uni-
versities to receive Title IV financial aid funds and is one of the few institutions in the United
States to maintain both regional and DETC accreditation.
Finally and most recently, the University has worked with the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) to obtain professional recognition for its Teachers College. Although regional accreditation is sufficient in many states for WGU graduates to obtain licensure as teachers, NCATE accreditation speeds licensure for graduates in most states and is virtually a requirement for licensure in some. Since the Teachers College has always aimed to serve students in all fifty states—and received $10 million in funding from the US Department of Education to develop programs and a structure to do so—it was probably inevitable that the College would consider specialized accreditation for its education programs. Yet the decision was not self-evident. Like other regulatory agencies in education, NCATE’s essential frame of reference has been traditional models of teacher preparation. It was accustomed to assessing the effectiveness of classroom-based curricula, localized pre-clinical and practicum experiences, and standardized course sequences. It was accustomed to credit hours and grades. It was not at all clear that it would be receptive to a radically different model. Yet so it was. NCATE understood that technology could fundamentally alter the way students received and demonstrated their learning, and that new methods of teacher preparation might prove equally effective.

The point, as always, was to prove it. NCATE encouraged WGU’s application and made it clear that it would be the first distance institution it had ever reviewed. If successful, WGU would set the standard for other distance programs to follow. Accordingly, early in 2005 the University committed itself to the NCATE application process. For more than a year and a half, a faculty committee worked to prepare the necessary candidacy and self-study documents and supporting data, ultimately submitting more than 3000 pages of text to NCATE reviewers and gathering many times that number in exhibits and supplemental documentation.

At the end of April 2006, after spending five days at the University interviewing personnel and reviewing Teachers College materials, an eight member NCATE Board of Examiners agreed that WGU met the Council’s standards at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. The NCATE Board of Directors formally conferred accreditation on October 25, 2006, making the WGU Teachers College the first and only national, distance teacher training program in the United States so recognized. Perhaps most remarkable, the College achieved that status only three years after launching its first programs in 2003, and within eighteen months of beginning the application process for accreditation.
As these accounts attest, the founding governors’ decision that WGU should work for change within the American accreditation system instead of outside it was a fateful one. The most direct benefits to the University are suggested by the figures below (Figures 15 and 16), which portray the rapid increases in both enrollments and tuition revenue in the years following IRAC’s accreditation decision. The DETC accreditation process also helped the University prepare for such rapid growth by increasing its national visibility, improving student access to employer tuition reimbursements, and providing a kind of dress rehearsal for the IRAC review process. And while at this writing it is too early to assess the full impact of the NCATE accreditation decision, the surge in student interest is already underway. While other steps the University has taken to improve its marketing strategies and student service no doubt played some part in its remarkable growth over the past four years, these accreditations were without doubt the triggers for that growth.
Figure 15
Annual Enrollment Growth, 1999-2006

<table>
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<tr>
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Figure 16
Annual Tuition Revenue, 1999-2007
Beyond the direct benefits to WGU itself, however, its work with these accreditors proved beneficial for American higher education generally. Chapter VIII addresses the University’s broader impact on accreditation, but for now it is enough to say that WGU’s work with IRAC helped to set the standards for the regional accreditation of other distance learning programs. Its work with DETC raised the credibility of that organization and helped to attain Title IV eligibility for other DETC colleges and universities. Its work with NCATE helped that organization break through its traditionalism and establish the standards and procedures for the review of other distance-based, non-standardized teacher preparation programs. Few other institutions have had such impact on the American academic landscape in such a short a time.

**Tuition Policy**

The third decision cluster that profoundly affected WGU’s development, and perhaps the first set of really operational decisions, had to do with tuition policy. The University admitted its first two students—Terry Hamm from Anchorage, Alaska and Greg Marshall from Bellingham, Washington—to its Associate of Arts degree program in March of 1999. They were not charged tuition because administrators at the time wanted them to test WGU’s systems, see how they worked, and get feedback from these students on their “user friendliness.” It was not until late fall of that year that tuition charges were first established, and the reasoning behind those charges mirrored the University’s philosophy. It presumed students would enroll with some competency, but they would not all be at the same level. Some would be very advanced, others would be strong in some areas and weak in others, a few would be only modestly prepared across the board. They would also take varying amounts of time to complete their degrees because of their individual strengths at entrance, their learning speed, and the time they would devote to their studies. Tuition should take these variables into account. It should fairly compensate the University for providing the infrastructure and degree recognition students sought, while honoring both their initial level of competence and the speed with which they moved through their programs.

The result of this reasoning was a two tier tuition structure. All students would pay a flat fee for the degree itself. That was tier one. For associate degree students, the fee was $3,250. For master’s degree students, $3,850. Later, when the first bachelor’s degree program opened in 2001, its tuition was $3,650. Students paid these fees in increments but there were no terms as such. Once enrolled, and assuming the student kept up with the payment schedule, s/he could proceed at his or her own pace. Tier two kicked in if the student enrolled for coursework
with one of WGU’s education providers, because the student would pay separately for that service. In such cases, WGU would collect the provider’s tuition, retain thirty percent to cover its services (marketing, the mentor’s work in lining up the resource, billing and collecting the tuition, transcripting, and so on) and remit the balance to the provider. In this way, so the argument went, degree charges mirrored the student’s preparation, the amount of assistance the student needed to develop missing competencies, and the time the student was willing to devote to his or her academic progress. The fee schedule rewarded students for the competencies they brought to their programs by freeing them from paying for instruction they did not need. A flat-rate fee schedule based on competencies reflected the philosophy of a competency-based university.

For more than two years the University held to this policy because it seemed so reflective of its competency-based philosophy. Mentors worked diligently with their students, encouraging them to take courses, to sit for assessments, and to complete their degrees. They worked extensively with their learning resources to be sure they provided the most efficient preparation paths for their students. Yet despite their best efforts, a tuition model intended to serve students well had the opposite effect. Students who enrolled progressed much more slowly than the University expected, because the flat-rate tuition model did not push them to take their assessments. Once they had paid the fee they could progress at their own pace and avoid additional expense by studying on their own instead of taking courses from WGU’s Education Providers. At the same time, many prospective students were unwilling to enroll at all because the University could not tell them with any confidence how much their degree studies would cost—it would depend not only on how rapidly they could develop the necessary competencies but also on how many courses they needed and how much the providers would charge for those courses.

By early in 2002 it had become clear that a change in tuition policy was necessary. Flat fee tuition by then was $4,500 for associate’s degrees, $4,700 for bachelor’s degrees, and $4,900 for master’s degrees. Although these charges were quite modest in comparison to other private universities and even many public ones—even allowing equal amounts for possible course expenditures—by March of that year WGU still had only 225 matriculated students and had graduated only six. In the previous twelve months those students had taken a total of only 282 assessments, and total tuition revenue to that point in the fiscal year was $547,500.
In March, 2002 the University shifted to a per term tuition charge that covers both WGU’s direct services and all external course charges that students might incur in preparing for their assessments. The initial charge was $1600 per term for all students. Students face no additional charges other than for the books and other supplies they might need in their studies. Those who need to take courses to develop their competencies have the freedom to do so without worrying about increasing the cost of their education.

The change in policy did not erode the University’s competency-based approach to educational costs. It affirmed it. The more rapidly students move through their programs, the fewer terms they need to complete their degrees and the less tuition they have to pay. The change in policy simply eliminated the ambiguity about additional course costs. It also helped enrollment counselors by enabling them to focus their discussions with prospective students around motivation and, as more students began to move through their programs, they could give much better estimates of the time necessary to complete a degree. Nor did the change in policy penalize students who had enrolled under the flat fee policy. They were given until November, 2006 to complete their degrees, and only if they were still enrolled after that would they be charged on a term basis.9

The effect of this policy change over the next year was dramatic. It can be seen not so much in total enrollments, which truly surged only after the University earned initial regional accreditation, but in student progress. By March of 2003 there were 492 matriculated students, an increase of 119%. In the previous twelve months, however, those students had taken 1939 assessments, a 588% improvement. Tuition revenue to that point in the fiscal year had nearly tripled to just under $1,500,000, and thirty six students had graduated from the University.

Pathways to Student Progress

Between 1999 and the fall of 2004 WGU made a parallel series of empirical decisions that profoundly changed the ways in which students were introduced to the University and progressed through their programs. From the beginning, the key degree planning document that mentors use with students has been the Academic Action Plan. It lays out the assessments the

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9 A nice footnote to this history is that Terry Hamm and Greg Marshall completed both associate’s and bachelor’s degrees at WGU. The University honored their courage as WGU pioneers by awarding them full scholarships to complete their studies. Terry Hamm earned her AA degree on June 18, 2001, her AS in Business on March 12, 2002, and her BS in Human Resource Management on August 12, 2004. Greg Marshall earned his AS in Information Technology on June 18, 2002, and his BS in Business on May 4, 2004.
student will take, their projected dates, and the learning resources the student will use in preparing for them. From 1999 to early in 2001 the plan template was simply an Excel spreadsheet. It contained the skeleton of what became the present system but was very much a barebones document. Each mentor retained a copy of the template and filled it out with each of his or her new students. Each resulting plan was different, even for students in the same degree program, because it arose from individual conclusions about the student’s background, initial levels of expertise, capacity for independent study or need for structure, and so on, insofar as the mentor could identify them. To help them with these tasks, the enrollment staff conducted an extensive interview with each student about these matters. Students also took an initial skill survey based on competencies in the degree area. But the University had yet to develop the sophisticated pre-assessments or the comprehensive new student orientation program it now uses, so much depended on individual mentor skill and sensitivity in working with their students. Mentors also had a wide array of learning resources they could assign their students from the SmartCatalog and, as yet, not a lot of data about which of those resources were likely to be most effective.

The University recognized these limitations and knew that they contributed to IRAC’s initial decision in early 2000 to postpone a decision on WGU’s Candidacy for accreditation. By the time IRAC’s evaluation team returned that fall, the University had addressed the most serious of them and was at work on the rest. The first of its major efforts to improve student use of learning resources was to make a new attempt at a task that had been unsuccessful earlier—“mapping” learning resources to their related WGU competencies. This time the effort would be more targeted, and it would benefit from more than a year of actual experience with students. The strategy required mentors in each degree program to identify at least three learning resources for each competency and to map them on a scale of 3 (high) to 1 (low) for their perceived effectiveness. Mentors obtained course syllabi from learning resource providers, reviewed the texts required for the courses, and often talked directly with course instructors before deciding which resources to include in their mapping and what rating to give them. They also had to know the resources well enough to determine which of them would be most appropriate for a student with strong, modest, or weak preparation in the area. Though labor intensive, the practice greatly improved the alignment of resources to competencies, improved efficiency, and bolstered both mentor and student confidence.

Mentors used the Excel-based AAP until early in 2001 when the University converted it to a web-based document. The first version simply listed the domains and assessments for the
degree alphabetically, but its utility steadily improved. Subsequent versions included mapped learning resources for each domain of the degree and standard, recommended assessment sequences. These changes greatly increased the sophistication of the AAP. Enabling mentors and their students to access the document through the student portal on the WGU website made its information both more available and more stable. It eliminated the risks of personal computer crashes and inadvertent data manipulation. It facilitated academic conferences because both mentor and student could look at the plan simultaneously, make changes, automatically obtain assessment results, and agree on next steps. Centralizing the data also enabled it to be synchronized with the larger student information system (SCT's Banner 2000) which the University installed that spring. For mentors, finally, the web-based AAP included tracking enhancements that greatly facilitated their management of student progress. One such improvement, for example, automatically color-coded their students’ records green, yellow, or red to indicate whether they were progressing on schedule, were in danger of falling behind, or had fallen behind the required rate of Satisfactory Academic Progress.

What is difficult to convey in chronicling these improvements—indeed, in chronicling every step in the University’s development—is the cloud of uncertainty within which everyone involved with WGU’s development operated. The power of the WGU idea drove its original designers, its initial executive team, and everyone who has joined the University since, but no one knew in advance what would work and what would fail, what would have to change and what would not, what new technology would become available, or which learning resources would be effective and which would not. They were establishing a learning model without precedents, for which no instructional strategies or information management systems had been developed, whether to handle enrollment, record student progress, award financial aid, generate transcripts, or guide mentor decisions. Every software system—Banner 2000, for instance—had to be substantially reprogrammed or ‘patched’ to handle WGU’s unique requirements. Nothing worked ‘off the shelf.’ With only small numbers of mentors and students to provide feedback, most progress occurred through best-judgment decisions and small, incremental steps, never through ‘slam-dunk’ decisions and ‘killer’ applications. The University very early agreed on its four key performance indicators—student retention, progress, satisfaction, and graduation—and all decisions were targeted to achieve those goals. Month by month, senior staff and faculty reviewed performance relative to each of these indicators, tried to adjust University behavior, and continued to improve management systems according to what the accumulating data seemed to be telling them.
New student orientation is a good example of an issue that wove through all of these debates and was under continuous scrutiny. It was an aspect of every academic challenge the University faced during these first two years. Students might be tempted to try the model, but they would bring with them a lot of anxiety about the uncharted territory they were entering. How best to allay those concerns while ensuring that students had the academic and technological skills to succeed was not obvious. Between 1999 and 2001 responsibility for it belonged first to the admission staff and then to the student's mentor. Once admitted, every new student went through an extensive “Intake” interview with an enrollment counselor aimed at ensuring that the student understood the WGU system as thoroughly as possible—as thoroughly, that is, as any such abstract conversation could manage. The student was then transferred to his or her mentor, where orientation continued in the more practical context of developing the student’s Academic Action Plan. Matriculation was not complete until the plan was finalized, and during the several weeks of its development it was the mentor’s responsibility to be sure the student knew how to use the University of New Mexico online library, select resources from the SmartCatalog, follow the requirements of academic documentation, and so on. Mentors also coached students on more personal issues like time and stress management, goal setting, and motivation. The system rested on the establishment of close personal relationships and, obviously, on each mentor’s skill at these several tasks.

By early in 2001, it was clear that the initial system was both time-consuming and inefficient. It would not be sustainable as the University grew, and too much was at stake to leave orientation to mentors for whom these very basic tasks were a distraction from managing their students’ degree progress. After much discussion and research into the orientation programs of other institutions, the University decided that it must build and teach its own course, something it had never contemplated. Throughout much of that year a faculty-administrative team worked on what would become the four week orientation experience known as “Education Without Boundaries” (EWB). It included its own textbook, put together by WGU staff, with study modules, readings, and exercises on all the basic elements of orientation that mentor experience had found essential. The course enabled students to get together online for discussions and chats, marking the first time the University built into its programs the opportunity for group collaborative work. Graduates of WGU’s master’s programs, all of whom were role models for success in the University model, served as facilitators and seminar leaders. About halfway through the course, students also began to work with their mentors, so that by the time they completed it they also had a completed Academic Action Plan and were fully matriculated into the University.
EWB ran for the first time in December, 2001, with a pilot group of four students. The course has continued to develop since then but its essentials remain the same. It has added pre-assessments for every domain of every degree; an extensive library module developed and taught by the librarians at the University of New Mexico, and more extensive readings in the degree area the student plans to enter. All of these enhancements have enriched students’ preparation for degree work while giving mentors much clearer profiles of their students’ strengths and weaknesses, thus allowing them to target learning resources more accurately at deficiencies. As it began, EWB remains WGU’s only required learning experience but now, like all else in its model, students may complete the course as rapidly as they can pass its assessments. By the fall of 2006 more than 600 students were going through it every month, and its impact on student persistence has been significant. From the beginning it substantially improved matriculation rates, and those rates have continued to improve with each refinement. On average, over the five years that EWB has run more than 80% of students complete the course and become fully matriculated degree candidates in the University, compared to fewer than 50% when post-admission orientation was left to the enrollment staff and individual mentors.

EWB provides the gateway for every degree path in the University, but WGU has also learned through experience that students completing that course will still not succeed unless the rest of the way to their degree is as straightforward and uncomplicated as possible. Web-enabling the AAP, color-coding each student’s rate of progress, and mapping learning resources for their likely effectiveness were major improvements for both mentors and students. Each of those steps helped to illuminate the next that needed to be taken. Mentors, for instance, needed more help in mapping learning resources to competencies because the task was so time-consuming and the range of possibilities for investigation was so broad. Between 2001 and 2004 the University worked steadily to address that concern. It expanded the learning resources staff. It completed pre-assessments in every degree area to help identify more accurately during EWB the additional learning preparation students would need. It gathered and analyzed data on assessment results following student use of specific learning resources so that mentors would know which had performed best. It identified “preferred providers” who agreed to embed WGU competencies in their courses or course modules, and it channeled students toward those resources. By 2003 it also began to develop relationships with independent, online learning organizations and to contract with them to develop courses specifically addressing a required set of WGU competencies. (Again, as with the creation of its study guides, the
University keeps its competencies scrupulously separate from its assessments so these developers never create courses that “teach to the test.”

Learning resources were not the only focus of the effort to improve students’ academic progress and satisfaction. Throughout these three years the University steadily expanded the scope and variety of its assessments, gradually replacing those developed by outside organizations with its own. Using its own instruments would ensure strong alignment between the competencies and their assessments as well as rapid feedback to students on test results. In each case it conducted comprehensive reviews of test performance to ensure the appropriateness, validity, and reliability of the instrument. In some areas, WGU created options for students, so they could have a choice of assessments to prove competency in a given area. Lower division general education was one such area. Since its founding the University had relied primarily on CLEP and DANTES examinations to assess lower division competencies in science, social science, and humanities. In 2003 it also began to introduce its own assessments in these areas, with the result that students had a considerable number of test options. They had to pass examinations totaling nine semester hour equivalents in social science and humanities, and six in science. To meet these requirements they could choose a single examination developed in each area by WGU, or they could choose from among eight different humanities assessments, seventeen different social science assessments, and eight different science assessments produced by CLEP and DANTES.

Alignment was the bright red thread of warning running through all of this work with learning resources and assessments. It tied everything together. If there was strong alignment between the competencies and the learning resources students used, they could prepare properly for their assessments. If the assessments aligned with the competencies and measured them effectively, students would master the knowledge and skills the University required. If the alignment was broken at any point in this triangle, the student would study the wrong materials and fail the assessments, or the assessments would produce false results. For this reason, WGU placed increasing emphasis on alignment studies throughout these three years and continually updated its learning materials, objective test items, and performance tasks to ensure their congruence.
As these efforts continued and took effect, the University believed they would produce steady improvement in student retention, progress, satisfaction, and graduation rates. They did, but not to the standards WGU had set for itself. By early in 2004 the University concluded that much of the academic support system it had created needed major overhaul. Incremental improvements were not going to be sufficient. Student surveys, taken twice each year, consistently showed that students still felt confused about the WGU system and uncertain about how to move through it.

After months of preparation, therefore, WGU launched in October 2004 a complete redesign of the ways in which it presents itself and its programs to its students, even (as discussed below) to the point of changing its financial aid classification with the federal government. It redesigned its public website to provide more detailed information about its degrees while improving the logic of its organization and the aesthetics of its presentation. The most important changes, however, were internal. The student portal was completely reconstructed to provide both mentors and students with far more information about degrees and their associated learning resources. Mentors can now directly access a variety of reports about their students' progress that are updated daily. There are online learning communities for every degree program and in most individual assessment areas. They contain all the learning resources recommended for the assessments they cover and provide an online forum for student discussion sessions. Each is facilitated by one or more mentors who hold regular online “office hours” with community participants. Students can make their own arrangements to take assessments through the new portal, and assessment results are fed as soon as they are scored directly back into the online AAP, which both mentor and student can access at will. The AAP includes a running calculation of the student’s SAP rate and alerts the mentor if the student misses a scheduled assessment, falls behind the planned schedule for assessments, or falls below Satisfactory Academic Progress requirements.

The University also created other resources to assist students’ understanding of the programs they are entering and how to move through them. Each new student receives a Program Guide to the WGU model, the role of the mentor, the assessment process, and the purposes, structure, and resources of the degree program he or she is entering. In addition, each competency area has a detailed Study Guide, in effect a WGU syllabus that walks the student through the competencies that are covered, the general nature of the assessments that will measure the student’s competence, and the learning resources the student should use to prepare for them.
Perhaps most important, the order of assessments listed in each degree’s Program Guide has become the single “standard path” for each program and serves as the starting point for each student’s Academic Action Plan. The new AAP reflects the Guide’s order of assessments, together with the recommended learning resources to use in preparation for each of them. Mentors can select among learning resources according to their students’ needs, but the resource options are limited to those that have well-documented records of success. Mentors can also rearrange the assessment order depending on their students’ backgrounds, but the University has eliminated the array of elective assessments for students to choose among, which seemed only to cause uncertainty and confusion. In fact, it has abandoned CLEP and DANTES examinations entirely in favor of assessments it has developed itself that cover those content areas.

The assessments themselves have been significantly resized. Until this reconstruction, many of them had measured large, integrated sets of competencies that covered twenty or more competency units. As a result, students would often spend many months preparing for one set of examinations—often more than an entire term. While the intentions behind these large structures were to help students integrate knowledge and problem-solving skills across disciplines, the results were often more than they could handle. In consequence, in a process approved by the Program Councils and the Assessment Council, WGU faculty resized most of the assessments in every degree program into smaller blocks of three or four units. Only those assessments designed to measure advanced knowledge integration across disciplines, such as culminating case studies and capstone projects, remain larger in size, and even they can be completed in a single term. These changes have made it much more feasible for students to complete the eight to twelve units required each term to maintain Satisfactory Academic Progress.

The sequence of decisions summarized here is a good illustration of the University’s value-driven decision-making. Evidence-based, questioning, and continually in search of improvement, WGU has never been willing to accept its current performance as “best practice.” It has aimed not only to beat other distance institutions’ performance with regard to retention, progress, and graduation rates, but to equal or exceed these national averages for residential institutions as well. The continuing effort to improve the quality of information given to students—to provide clear, understandable, and manageable guidance about how to complete their programs—is the self-evident obligation of any university. But language that is clear to the
sender is rarely as clear to the receiver, and never if the language is foreign. And for many students understanding WGU is indeed like mastering a foreign language. Step by step, the improvements the University has made to date in the student portal, the Academic Action Plan, the size and sequencing of assessments, and the creation of program and study guides have resulted in slow but steady gains in students' satisfaction with their WGU experience. Figure 17 portrays the change in student satisfaction in four key areas between Spring, 2003 and Spring, 2006:

**Figure 17**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Spring, 2003</th>
<th>Spring, 2006</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sense of connection with the University</td>
<td>81.4%</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confident about how to complete the degree program</td>
<td>72.8%</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of mentor relationship and support</td>
<td>83.3%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall quality of WGU experience</td>
<td>77.8%</td>
<td>86.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This table confirms that the changes inaugurated in October, 2004 and thus far described have had a positive effect on students' reaction to their WGU experience. They have also had a positive effect on retention. The University had graduated 1326 students by the end of 2006, substantially exceeding the goal of 1200 that it set for itself two years earlier. By 2006, as well, more than 75% of all matriculated students returned for their second year of enrollment. And cumulative retention across the University in 2006 averaged better than 60%. These numbers compare favorably both to those of other distance institutions as well as to those of most public colleges and universities. Only elite, highly selective private institutions do measurably better.

**Accommodation and Integrity**

One other set of operational decisions impacted these numbers, and the way they intertwined with each other probably affected students as profoundly as any changes the University has made since altering its tuition policy in 2002. They involve the complex interplay between federal financial aid policies, employer (including military) tuition reimbursement policies, the relationship between semester credit hours and competencies, student progress, and—not least—the integrity of WGU's competency-based system. Understanding this nexus of competing forces requires some dissection, but it dramatically illustrates the pressures that an innova-
tive organization faces in trying to establish itself within a traditional environment while at the same time trying to preserve both its innovations and its soul. As such it provides a fitting conclusion to this examination of important turning points in WGU’s history.

When it became the first member of the US Department of Education’s Distance Learning Demonstration Program in July of 1999, WGU entered as a “non-term institution.” That designation required its students to earn the equivalent of thirty semester hours of academic credit in a twelve month period. Though that requirement was both innocuous and reasonable to federal officials disbursing tax money to students, it nonetheless nudged WGU one small, unexpected step toward alignment with traditional measures of academic progress.

To comply with the requirement, the University needed to do several things that subsequently moved it still further in that direction. It had, for instance, to define the size of each of its degrees in terms of semester credit equivalents—sixty semester hour equivalents for associate’s degrees, 120 for bachelor’s degrees, forty-five for its then only master’s degree program (the Master of Arts in Learning and Technology). It had to define the maximum length of time that each of those degrees should take to complete—five semesters for the associate’s degrees, ten for the bachelor’s degrees, and so on. It then had to take all of the required assessments for each degree and divide them evenly across the allowable time for each program. A student’s “Satisfactory Academic Progress” (SAP) thus came to be defined as the completion of that number of assessments each term. So long as a student met that number s/he would remain eligible for federal financial aid. Falling short of it led immediately to probation and—under the policies of WGU’s “non-term institution” status—to immediate loss of aid.

This accommodation to USDOE’s requirements created its own problem. Not all assessments weighed the same or required the same time in preparation. Since students generally took the “easier” assessments first—those needing the least time to prepare, or for which they already had several of the required competencies—they registered a false sense of academic progress. When students later hit those assessments requiring longer preparation their rates of progress often fell sharply, jeopardizing their financial aid eligibility. And because the formula driving their eligibility was so rigid—no SAP, no aid—when they fell into probation, they dropped out of their programs. So WGU’s effort to align its unique system with traditional federal definitions of academic progress in order to assist students by creating semester credit equivalents, standard term lengths, and standard program durations created its own backlash. It jeopardized the academic careers of the most needy and least academically prepared students.
And inevitably, in order to serve students better, it committed WGU to taking further steps to translate its practices into terms that traditional audiences could understand.

The next step involved changes to the WGU transcript. As first designed, the transcript described the specific competencies students master in each broad area or “domain” of their degrees, the date the student completed the assessments for each of those domains, and the relative percentage of each domain in the overall degree. Thus, for example, the Language and Communication Skills and Quantitative Literacy domains each comprised 15% of the Associate in Arts degree that was offered at that time. The transcript assigned neither credit equivalents nor grades to these successfully completed domains, but the University felt that this official description of student progress would enable employers and registrars at other institutions to make an easy translation of domain “credit” into semester credits. In a sixty credit-equivalent associate’s degree, for example, each of those two domains would translate into nine semester credits. The back of the transcript explained this rationale in more detail.

This approach, however, was only partially successful. Outsiders still found the transcript baffling, and WGU staff found themselves further translating and “legitimizing” the system in case after individual case. While most of those efforts were successful, the time given to this approach would simply not be sustainable as the institution grew, unless it became broadly acceptable.

And apparently it would not become acceptable with two audiences the University wanted very much to serve—active duty military personnel and veterans. Despite the University’s best efforts to explain its system, and despite the Department of Defense’s clear commitment to competency in its own training programs, neither it nor the Veterans Administration would authorize active duty or retired military personnel to use Tuition Assistance or VA benefits for WGU expenses. Their regulations simply could not accommodate a system that did not award conventional credits and grades.

Early in 2002 President Mendenhall began to work with defense agency heads, senior military officers, and the Veterans Administration in what became a multi-year effort to achieve WGU’s acceptance. Vice President of Marketing, Patrick Partridge, several members of Congress, and Bill Simmons of The Dutko Group joined him in this effort. The University also developed a close working relationship with senior staff at the Air War College of the US Air Force, collaboratively developed an MBA program in strategic leadership for senior officers graduating
from its distance learning program, and launched it with considerable success early in 2005. But none of these efforts changed Department of Defense or Veterans Administration policy until WGU took the step described previously and assigned “competency units” to every assessment rather than to every domain, with each such unit defined as one semester hour equivalent. Each assessment thus became a “course of study” with its own name. These were listed with their domains on the WGU website, in filings with DANTES, VA, and other military officials, and they now appear on all WGU transcripts. Each degree includes at least the minimum number of semester credit equivalents expected of a degree at that level, and those totals, too, are on the transcript.

Inevitably, the need to define “competency” more clearly in the vocabulary of conventional grades followed from the redefinition of “competency units.” In 1999 the Assessment Council first defined passing an assessment as meaning that a student was “minimally competent.” A student was either competent—had sufficient knowledge and skill to complete successfully the tasks associated with the competency—or the student was incompetent—could not do those things. Over time, however, University staff became increasingly uncomfortable with such a limited definition. Nor did basic certification of competency on a WGU transcript mean much to many employers or the military. They were used to seeing grades, many of them explicitly required grades of B or better for tuition reimbursement, and they had no other frame of reference for understanding what their employees had accomplished. By 2004, when WGU enrollments were rising rapidly and students were beginning to graduate in substantial numbers, these pressures came together. The University realized it could no longer devote the time to explaining its practices individually to employers and graduate schools. It had to present its transcripts in a more familiar language, and it had to make clear on its transcripts that “competency” meant a whole lot more than merely squeaking through.

In the spring of 2004 it therefore reset the threshold for “competency”—and thus the passing scores on all assessments—at the grade equivalent of B or better. The subjectivity and unreliability of conventional grades were, of course, among the founding governors’ major criticisms of traditional higher education, so this step could potentially undermine the essence of the entire WGU model. To prevent that result, the first task was to define the meaning of B level performance. The Director of Institutional Research investigated a wide variety of other institutions’ grading definitions. Perhaps not surprisingly, he found that very few had any clear, common standards. Most seemed to leave grading policy to individual departments, but Harvard
University’s definition of a B grade proved a model that WGU could adapt to its purposes. Accordingly, as noted earlier, passing a WGU assessment now specifically means that “The student has been fully engaged with the learning materials and activities necessary to master the competencies, has demonstrated the skills needed to utilize the competencies, and has produced work that indicates command of the competencies.” WGU’s Program Councils and the Assessment Council have affirmed this policy, and the assessment staff and faculty of each degree area have reviewed and adjusted all passing scores to be sure they meet the standard. Every new assessment goes through a similar standard setting exercise, and all current assessments are periodically re-examined to be sure they remain in compliance. The University’s definition of assessment success and B equivalency appears on every transcript but grades do not.

By the middle of 2004, it was evident to all of WGU’s senior staff that this complex interplay of environmental pressures had already shaped the University’s development in ways its original designers could not have foreseen. The requirements of federal financial aid policy, the pressure for grade and credit equivalencies, the reluctance of large bureaucracies like the Department of Defense to accept the WGU model at all—all of these testified to the difficulties of establishing innovation in a well-entrenched, change-resistant environment. And under them all was the reality that WGU cared about most—student success. The major decisions that WGU has made since enrolling its first students in 1999 overlap with each other in many ways, and it is a bit artificial to separate them out, even in clusters, for historical examination. All of them, however, have turned on two essentials, which were to preserve the University’s core mission and to improve the delivery of its services—the systems, resources, policies, and mentor strategies that translate that mission into actual student success. These core commitments also drove the final step in the decision sequence now under discussion.

When WGU converted its tuition in 2002 from a single, comprehensive fee for the degree to a more conventional term-by-term charge, it also adopted an annual calendar consisting of two six month semesters. The semesters were unusual in length and a new one started every month, but they were clearly definable as fixed terms. Nonetheless, for the next two years the University continued to be registered with the US Department of Education as a “non-term institution” for federal financial aid purposes. It became increasingly clear, however, that changing that designation would be helpful to students. University staff discussed that possibili-
ty with the Department early in the summer of 2004, and in October of that year the Department agreed to reclassify the University as a “non-standard term” institution.

Recall that “non-term institution” students are expected to earn the equivalent of thirty semester hours of credit in each twelve month period of enrollment. By contrast, “non-standard term” institution students must complete 67% of the work they sign up for each term. Since fractional percentages are not allowed, in practice the policy means that undergraduates must sign up for at least twelve competency units and complete at least nine of them. Graduate students must sign up for at least eight units and complete six. Previously, students could accelerate in one term by taking easier assessments and proceed more slowly in the next if they encountered more difficult ones. So long as they completed all the assessments they signed up for and earned the equivalent of thirty semester hours in a twelve month period, they maintained Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) and retained financial aid eligibility.

By contrast, “non-standard term” students have to maintain satisfactory progress each term. But SAP is defined as completing at least 67% of the units they undertake each term and completing their entire program in no more than 150% of the standard number of units for their degree. If a student fails to attain the 67% minimum one term, s/he is placed on probation but retains financial aid eligibility for the next term, providing that extra time to return to good standing. Moreover, in a bachelor’s degree program of 120 competency units, the student can enroll for—and federal financial aid will pay for—up to 180 units. A student can thus take, fail, and retake up to sixty competency units of assessments over the course of the entire degree program without exhausting financial aid eligibility. The advantages of the “non-standard term” designation are obvious. It motivates students term-by-term but is more flexible in its completion requirements, and it allows students to retain financial aid eligibility for a second term if they fail to complete the required percentage of their competency units and are placed on probation.

The University continues to believe that its new designation is appropriate, though it is not problem-free. Its more generous financial aid provisions are far more realistic for working adult students. Financial aid eligibility alone will not keep a student in school, but its loss will surely drive a needy student out. For WGU, however, the transition was not easy. Every degree program’s assessments had to be deconstructed into term by term blocks of no less than twelve competency units for undergraduate programs, eight units for graduate programs. Every new degree program since then has had to be constructed in the same way. The ripple effects
of that task spread throughout the University—to the website, to marketing products, to assessment study guides, program guides, the central student information system, the design of the Academic Action Plan, to mentor training, and so on.

Moreover, some “non-standard term” regulations seem as counterproductive as those under the University’s “non-term” designation, and senior WGU staff continue to debate them with the US Department of Education. It is WGU’s policy, for instance, not to record failed assessments on its official transcript. What matters is competence, and it does not matter how long the student takes to demonstrate it. What matters, and what should appear on the transcript, is the fact that the student attains it. USDOE, on the other hand, insists that some record of failure during the term, if it occurs, be recorded. For the present, the University and the Department have agreed that the designation “Not Passed” may be used to indicate either that the student failed an assessment or did not take the assessment during the term expected. Similarly, “non-standard term” regulations stipulate that students must sign up for the competency units they plan to complete, and that they work only on those units. If a student completes a term’s work early, s/he cannot accelerate by working ahead on the next term’s assessments. That work can only be undertaken in the next term and must be completed in that term. WGU has improvised ways to help students in these circumstances, but it is a particular burden for Teachers College students beginning their practice teaching requirement. Their preparation for that experience often ends part way through a term and the practicum itself, if begun immediately, cannot be completed by the end of that term. Students in that circumstance have no alternative but to take a leave of absence, sometimes for several months. Financial aid regulations will not allow them to begin a new term less than six months after beginning their previous one.

The decisions discussed here, and the reasons for them, indicate that WGU has progressively accommodated itself to standard higher education nomenclature, regulatory requirements, and employer expectations—all of which have been conditioned by the conventional, time-driven definition of the semester credit hour, the grading system, and the expectations that come with traditionalism. The University’s history to date also suggests that the challenge of preserving its integrity while making reasonable accommodations to its environment is not over and may never end. Without exception, WGU has made the changes discussed here to improve its service to students and to promote their academic success. At each point to date it has managed to adjust to the realities it confronted without compromising its core principles. WGU students do not progress on the basis of time on task. They progress only by demonstrat-
ing their competency, no matter how long or short it takes. They do not earn grades. They progress only by passing complex, multi-modal assessments at a high grade level. None of the adaptations the University has had to make has undermined either its mission or its model, but without strong leadership at every step in its development it could easily have lost both.

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VIII. Impact

If WGU has changed in response to its environment, there is also evidence that its environment has been changed by it. The effects that Western Governors University has had on American higher education are in some respects subtle and diffuse, in others focused and direct. Electronically delivered distance education is now broadly accepted by employers, the public, and the higher education community. Regional accrediting relationships have been permanently altered in large part because of WGU’s work with the InterRegional Accrediting Committee. Graduate schools are more and more receptive to WGU graduates. Employers are increasingly willing to provide tuition reimbursement for WGU enrollment. The Veterans Administration provides tuition benefits for retired military personnel. Active duty military can obtain Tuition Assistance. As a direct result of WGU’s success, federal law now makes competency-based institutions eligible to receive federal financial aid and considers electronically delivered education the equivalent of classroom-based instruction. A new pathway has been established for the preparation, certification, and advancement of teachers.

Perhaps all of these things would have happened without WGU but none of them would have happened as rapidly or as coherently. Year by year, the changes that have redefined higher education over the past decade may have seemed serendipitous. From the perspective of a decade they gain pattern and coherence. Indeed what has occurred amounts to a revolution in educational policy and practice, a tectonic shift in the structures, delivery, and outcomes of the American university experience. American higher education today is not what it was ten years ago, and many of the ways in which it has changed were either triggered or accelerated by the rise of Western Governors University.

The media attention that followed the governors’ announcement of their intention to launch a new kind of university was unprecedented. Stories appeared in the New York Times, USA Today, the Dallas Morning News, CNN, and a host of other publications around the country. The Chronicle of Higher Education recorded the institution’s pulse and blood pressure at regular intervals over the first two years of its life—always, it must be said, half a continent away from the infant’s bedside. Throughout 1997, 1998, and much of 1999 one could not attend an educational conference without encountering at least one session devoted to Western Governors University. Jeffery Livingston and Robert Albrecht gave keynote addresses, led symposia, served as panelists, and held news conferences about the University at least twice a week.
throughout the first two and a half years of its existence. Livingston estimates that he averaged one hundred trips a year for the University, and each of them traveled over 100,000 miles annually throughout the United States and as far east as Switzerland, as far west as Guam.

By the end of 1999 the succeeding leadership team of Robert Mendenhall and Douglas Johnstone necessarily turned their attention inward to the practicalities of implementing the model, and media attention either faded or turned negative as early enrollments failed to measure up to the governors’ initial vision. Well before then, however, the impact of the University had been felt. By the middle of 1997, universities from around the west had asked to become educational providers for WGU and pledged to develop distance courses to meet the new institution’s needs. California had decided not to join the WGU multi-state partnership and to develop instead its own virtual university. By 1998 the British Open University had held extended discussions with WGU trustees and executives about forming the Governors Open University. Visiting delegations from Japan and Malaysia had met with WGU officials about developing international partnerships, and the Open Learning Agency of British Columbia had contacted the University to explore a similar alliance. Though the California Virtual University soon collapsed and nothing ultimately developed from WGU’s discussions with any of its potential international partners, they testify to the global attention the University received and to the interest it stimulated in distance learning generally. WGU was a wake-up call for institutions throughout the West, and indeed throughout the country. Electronically delivered distance education had been endorsed by many of the most powerful statesmen and corporate executives in the United States, and it would not be stopped.

**Distance Learning**

“One of WGU’s most important early contributions to American higher education was the discussion it stimulated across the country about new ways of providing degree programs. Ideas such as unbundling the faculty role and separating the learning from evaluation process were new to most educators. In addition, how these ideas were assembled to build the WGU academic program was revolutionary. The WGU model emboldened many educators to introduce innovation and change within their institutions.”

Dr. Marianne Phelps
Supervising officer for the Distance Education Demonstration Program, US Department of Education.

Distance courses had been available to Americans, of course, long before WGU’s emergence, and programs operating entirely through distance instruction were not new either. By
1998 there were nearly 1200 postsecondary distance learning programs in operation in the United States, and they enrolled more than a million and a half students during the 1997-98 academic year. But the fraud and abuse at distance education diploma mills in the 1980s greatly restricted the eligibility of distance institutions to receive federal assistance. The Higher Education Amendments of 1992 prohibited Title IV financial aid eligibility at institutions where fifty percent or more of enrolled students were in distance programs. Even students enrolled in distance courses or programs at authorized Title IV institutions had to be enrolled full-time in bachelor’s, master’s or graduate degree programs during at least a thirty week academic year, and they had to receive at least twelve hours of instruction each week. Until Congress authorized the US Department of Education’s Distance Education Demonstration Program (DEDP) as part of the Higher Education Act Amendments of 1998, all institutions able to award federal financial aid had to abide by these regulations.

The DEDP re-legitimized distance learning and bolted it permanently to the nation’s educational architecture. By 1998 it was clear that technology could redefine both the potential and the demand for “any time, any place” learning. Distance education was not only an integral part of the programming at more and more traditional institutions, it was the best—and often the only—means of access to higher education for millions of Americans. The Asynchronous Learning Network sponsored by the Sloan Foundation, the Southern Regional Education Board’s Electronic Campus, and Connecticut’s Distance Learning Consortium were just three examples of the fact that distance education was already flowing into the mainstream of America’s postsecondary delivery systems.

The DEDP enabled Congress, burned once, to test the success of contemporary distance programs under controlled conditions without risking the scandals that had occurred a decade earlier. It authorized the Secretary of Education to select an initial cohort of up to fifteen institutions, systems, or consortia to participate in the program for five years and to waive whatever standard regulations might be necessary—the fifty percent and twelve hour rules, for instance—in order to allow those selected to demonstrate the effectiveness of their programs. In April 1997 Governor Leavitt argued for WGU’s inclusion in the DEDP before the U.S. Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources. Other governors also worked actively with their Congressional delegations to build support, and WGU’s chief executives at the time, Robert Albrecht and Jeffery Livingston, spent many hours in Washington briefing Department of Education officials on the unique features of the University’s competency-based model. As a result of
these efforts, WGU was the only university specifically named in the legislation establishing the program. It was the only participant intending to operate exclusively online, and at the time it was written into the act it had no students and only the bare outline of its educational model. Inevitably, this special treatment meant that WGU’s development would be watched closely by the Department of Education, by members of Congress, and by the higher education establishment. The early success or failure of the DEDP would be measurably linked to WGU’s own performance.

The US Department of Education formally enrolled WGU in the DEDP on July 15, 1999 and declared it eligible to award federal financial aid funds under Title IV. The fourteen other participants included seven individual institutions, five systems, and two consortia. By January 2001 when the Department submitted its first official report to Congress on the DEDP’s progress, collective distance enrollments among these participants had increased from under 13,000 in 1998-99 to over 18,000 in 1999-2000. Only one institution had been removed from the program. All others were successfully meeting the academic goals they and the Department established in such areas as course completion rates, retention, satisfaction, comparability to residential student outcomes, and so on. All were continuing to evaluate the effectiveness of their programs, and all expected continued rapid expansion of their distance enrollments.

Based on this evidence of success, the Department added nine new participants in 2001 and another five in 2003. Thus by the 2003-2004 academic year, there were twenty-four active members of the DEDP. (In addition to the one removed for cause, four others had by then voluntarily withdrawn from the program.) Participants included nine for-profit institutions, seven private, non-profit institutions, four public universities, three consortia, and one public system. Collectively, in the 2003-2004 academic year they enrolled nearly 300,000 students, many times the number they had enrolled before entering the Demonstration Program and conclusively proving that distance learning had expanded access to higher education. Perhaps most significant, the Department cited two other findings from the DEDP in its 2005 report to Congress. First, the report noted that “there is no evidence of any relationship between distance education and [financial aid] default rates.” Second, it declared that “it is clear that no particular mode of delivery is inherently superior or inferior in terms of educational quality.” These were watershed findings. None but the most stubbornly jaded could any longer deny that distance learning had established its effectiveness.
In practical terms, the effects of these findings are far-reaching. The DEDP continued to expand, test, and evaluate different distance learning programs and methodologies. When the program officially ended on June 30, 2006 it included more than a hundred participant institutions, consortia, and systems. It had also paved the way for significant changes in education law. In the summer of 2006 as part of the Higher Education Budget Reconciliation Act of 2005, the program’s success persuaded Congress to eliminate the fifty percent rules for educational programs delivered through telecommunications. By separating electronically delivered from correspondence-based instruction and declaring the former equal to traditional classroom teaching, the change in law brought technologically delivered distance education fully into the academic mainstream.

The legislation also contained one other landmark provision. From the beginning, WGU had been the only institution authorized by the DEDP to award federal financial aid to students based on direct assessment of their learning, rather than on credits and grades earned. The 2006 legislation specifically authorizes the Department to award Title IV eligibility to any institution that elects to measure its students’ learning in similarly direct ways, so long as it meets the rest of the eligibility criteria: It says that “an eligible program is an instructional program that utilizes direct assessment of student learning, or recognizes the direct assessment of student learning, in lieu of credit hours or clock hours as the measure of student learning.” That language provides an unequivocal invitation to other institutions to develop competency-based educational systems of their own and commits the force of law to assist them in doing it. It results directly from WGU’s success and would not have occurred without it.

A number of WGU’s supporters in Congress, especially Senator Enzi from Wyoming, worked actively in support of these statutory changes. The evidence from WGU’s own remarkable success as well as that from other DEDP institutions argued strongly that they were appropriate and timely. They would expand educational access at less cost than underwriting residential student expenses. The estimated increase in financial aid expenditures as a result of eliminating the fifty percent rules were modest, less than $700 million over ten years. Moreover, increasing financial aid support for distant learners and encouraging the development of competency-based programs could more than return the investment by raising the quality of the American workforce. And the evidence confirmed that new policies could be implemented without risk of waste, fraud, or abuse.
The amendments of 2006 signaled that the Distance Education Demonstration Program had achieved its goals. Few federal investments in education have returned results so dramatic. For regionally accredited institutions across the country the amendments have meant that distance education can now become an unequivocal element in their future planning. Moreover, many institutions operating exclusively online—so long as they meet other quality standards—can now become eligible for the first time to award federal financial aid funds. Member institutions of the Distance Education and Training Council, for instance, virtually none of whom were previously Title IV eligible, have been transformed by these changes in law.

Accreditation

"At the time WGU was created, it was a bold experiment that brought together many different elements of higher education reform in a highly innovative delivery model. It was also remarkable as a non-governmental, non-profit institution having such committed gubernatorial support from so many states. The accreditation response to WGU was almost as innovative as the institution itself, because it brought four regional accrediting commissions together in a way they never had before. In responding to WGU's creation, the four commissions that covered WGU's states demonstrated that they could work together across their own boundaries. The creation of IRAC and our work with WGU was a richly rewarding experience for me personally. It influenced my understanding of both distance education and student learning outcomes assessment."

Dr. Ralph Wolff
President and Executive Director
Western Association of Schools and College
Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities

Regional accreditation practices have also been influenced by WGU’s success. As noted earlier, when the four regional accrediting associations established IRAC they anticipated that it would set the precedent for similar accreditations of other distance education programs in the future. In the end, things did not work out that way, and for the best of reasons. True, it was a logistical nightmare to coordinate schedules so that four regional teams could meet and do their work in a timely way. Far more important, however, was the trust that developed among the four regions for each others’ judgments about nontraditional modes of education. There had been tension between the North Central Association and some of the other regions as a result of North Central’s earlier accreditation of the University of Phoenix and Jones International University, and working together on WGU’s accreditation did a great deal to rebuild trust in each others’ standards. The regional associations also received valuable assistance in their early work with WGU when the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications’ (WCET), itself one of WGU’s design consultants, developed the “Principles of Good Practice for Electron-
ically Offered Degree and Certificate Programs.” The “Principles” gave the regional associations a common frame of reference for judging the effectiveness of distance education and further advanced their confidence in each others’ assessments of such institutions. By 2001 the “Principles” had been adopted by every regional accrediting association in the country.

Thus what had begun as an effort to establish a template for future interregional teams to use when accrediting other distance institutions ended with the transformation of regional association attitudes toward each others’ work with those institutions. The regionals incorporated the principles of good practice in distance education in their accreditation standards. They agreed that in future the region in which the headquarters of a distance institution are located would provide the accrediting agency for that institution. They agreed that they would honor each others’ judgments in matters of distance education, just as they do in judging traditional institutions. In sum, two of the most important and lasting outcomes that WGU’s work with IRAC achieved were to legitimize distance learning in American higher education and to promote the national coordination of its regional accreditation.

More specific accreditation policies were also influenced by the rise of the University, and from the visibility it gave generally to technologically delivered learning. All of the regional associations incorporated in their standards the expectation that students would master the use of appropriate technology in their college experience. The New England Association of Schools and Colleges, for instance, now stipulates that, “The institution ensures that students use information resources and information technology as an integral part of their education. [It] provides appropriate orientation and training for use of these resources, as well as instruction and support in information literacy and information technology. . . .” The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools requires that, “The institution’s use of technology enhances student learning, is appropriate for meeting the objectives of its programs, and ensures that students have access to and training in the use of technology.”

Learning Outcomes Assessment

Equally important, WGU’s accreditation helped leverage the national movement toward learning outcomes assessment. Across every region, and within virtually every institution, emphasis has steadily shifted away from learning inputs and toward learning outcomes as the primary basis for accreditation. The movement toward outcomes had begun before WGU’s emergence, but the University’s success has certainly added to its momentum. Every regional ac-
creditor now places more emphasis than it did ten years ago on what students know and can do as a result of their college or university experience.

The final report of the United States Secretary of Education’s Commission on the Future of Higher Education, released in the fall of 2006, confirms WGU’s influence on this paradigm shift in educational values. Secretary Spellings selected President Mendenhall to serve on the Commission in 2005 as one of fifteen nationally prominent educators, primarily because of the groundbreaking work WGU has done in learning outcomes measurement. The report calls on accrediting organizations to become more open to new models of learning, to speed up the process of accreditation, and to focus accreditation on results and outcomes. Specifically, it calls for making performance outcomes in student learning the core of accreditation practices, outweighing the importance of inputs or processes. Faculty credentials and student ratios, library holdings, classrooms, laboratories, admission standards, and the like may be important, but they are not as important as knowing what students have actually learned and can do as a result of their educational experience. WGU’s influence on national education policy is perhaps nowhere more evident than in this landmark report on the future of American colleges and universities.

What accreditors emphasize institutions will implement. To date the effects of the shift in emphasis that has been building over the past ten years are modest, and in all likelihood dismaying reports of continuing grade inflation and student disengagement from their studies will continue for some time. Nor has any other institution as yet adopted a version of the WGU competency model. But the shift in values is evident and gaining traction. The 2006 changes in federal law and continuing reports about American students’ mediocre performance compared to that of students in most other advanced nations can only accelerate the shift to performance based assessments of institutional quality. These changes are due in significant measure to the rise of Western Governors University.

**Teacher Education**

Finally, and most recently, WGU’s impact on teacher preparation and advancement has already been significant. When US Secretary of Education Rod Paige committed $10 million in 2001 to help launch a national Teachers College at WGU he signaled the teacher education establishment that it was time for change. The demand for quality teachers was outrunning the capacity of traditional institutions to produce them, and too often the teachers they did produce
were unsuccessful in the classroom. More than a third left the profession within three years of their initial certification, and few ever returned. Too often the typical eighteen to twenty-two year old teacher candidate seemed attracted to the field by default—not because it was a genuine calling, not as a mature choice, but because nothing else seemed better, or (worse) everything else seemed too difficult. For their part, the reach of the nation’s education schools was also limited. Practice teaching assignments had to be in the local service area so department faculty could supervise practice teaching. In many instances the schools’ technology tools were obsolete and faculty lacked the training to use them, so the teachers they certified would be no more adept with those resources than the students they would teach, and often less so. Perhaps most perniciously, the traditional limitation of teacher preparation programs to campus-based, classroom environments meant that most adults with family, community, and work responsibilities were frozen out of them. Precisely the kind of student who could make a mature and lasting decision to become a teacher, whether as a first career after raising children or as a second career after retiring from another profession had no means of access.

Secretary Paige recognized that a large talent pool was going to waste at a time when the nation faced a shortage of two million teachers within the next decade. His endorsement coincided with passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, which gave him the authority to act boldly, but supporting WGU was bold indeed. Never before had a teacher education program claimed all fifty states for its certification territory. In 2001 the University was just a candidate for regional accreditation. It had appointed its Teachers College Dean but had scarcely begun to recruit education faculty. It had no authorized degree programs leading to teacher certification and had barely begun to define the competencies that would make up those degrees. It would be more than a year and a half before the University received regional accreditation and those degrees could be launched. Yet the Secretary recognized that WGU’s model, if successful, could flatten the barriers that locked tens of thousands of potential teachers out of the nation’s classrooms and carve a broad new pathway into the profession.

Amazement was perhaps the most widespread reaction of the teacher education establishment to news of the Department of Education’s support. Some colleagues at other institutions were excited at WGU’s prospects, but most simply could not believe that distance learning could produce good teachers. State education departments, which had to approve WGU’s programs in order for its graduates to be licensed in their states, echoed those reactions. For two years Dean Garlett made the rounds of these departments, making the case for WGU’s accep-
tance in their states. Some were persuaded but others simply refused even to consider approval. Some wanted to conduct their own site visit and evaluation. Others wanted voluminous documentation before they would act. Utah’s reaction was unique but also revealing of the control that traditional attitudes exercised in much of the country. The Utah State Board of Education sent all new requests for program approval to the Deans Advisory Council, which included the heads of all authorized teacher education programs in the state. The Board would only consider those programs the Council recommended. For more than two years the Utah deans refused to act on WGU’s application, until late in 2003 the Utah State legislature mandated that graduates of competency-based teacher preparation programs had to be approved for licensure in the state.

Yet the quality of the Teachers College programs could not be denied. For each new degree the University developed it first identified all the professional standards that applied to licensure in that subject area—the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, for instance, or the National Council of Teachers of English, or the National Council for the Social Studies. It compiled these standards in a central database that ultimately comprised nearly 50,000 entries, and it designed each degree to meet every relevant national standard for the subject area. No WGU teacher candidate could graduate without meeting those professional standards. To handle the teaching practicum requirements of certification the University worked with school districts in or near each student’s home community to obtain the support of principals and other officials, and it used their help to identify host classrooms for teacher candidates. With the school districts’ help it also recruited master teachers to serve as student evaluators, trained them in the rubrics to be used, and required them to conduct and report on the results of eight two hour observations during the course of the student’s twelve week practicum.

Gradually the carefulness in this approach prevailed. More and more states began to accept Teachers College graduates directly for licensure, and by 2005 nearly all at least accepted them through the national reciprocity agreement whereby signatory states (forty-eight plus the District of Columbia) agree to accept each others’ graduates as provisional teachers. By then the Teachers College enrolled nearly 3,000 students from all fifty states, and data was rapidly accumulating about their performance on national examinations like Praxis. Because WGU had set its own minimal passing standards for those examinations as the highest scores required of any state in the country, it made sense that graduates taking them would do well. They did. On average, they scored fifteen percent above the state-required scores in their sub-
ject areas. More than thirty percent scored in the top fifteen percent of all students in the nation and received a Recognition of Excellence from the Educational Testing Service.

By the time the Teachers College approached the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education early in 2005 to explore the possibility of accreditation it had a story anyone would be proud to tell, and just a year and a half later it received NCATE’s endorsement. The evidence in support of its decision was overwhelming. A wide variety of surveys confirmed outstanding WGU student performance in the classroom. More than ninety percent of host teachers, student teaching evaluators, and school employers, for example, agreed that WGU’s teacher candidates knew their teaching fields, explained important concepts and principles clearly to students in ways that engaged their interest, integrated technology effectively in their learning strategies, were compassionate and caring teachers, and worked well with parents, their communities, and school officials.

In just three years the Teachers College had grown from a plan with no students to a reality with more than 4,000. Its secondary school mathematics and science programs were among the largest in the country. By the fall of 2006 it had placed licensed teachers in the classrooms of forty-two states, as well as in schools in the US Virgin Islands, Brunei, and China. It had earned the most coveted accreditation in the profession in the record time of eighteen months. It had set the standard for other nontraditional teacher education programs to follow and, just as Secretary Paige hoped, it had carved an entirely new path into the profession. Few institutions in American educational history have had such impact on their professions in so short a time.

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IX. 2016

By any measure, the odyssey of Western Governors University over the past ten years has been remarkable. From the genesis of its bold conception it has passed through every stage of innovation’s journey. It has weathered apparent early failure and the ridicule of its detractors, built block by block a durable foundation, proved the effectiveness of its model, made converts of its skeptics and at last, in each of the past four years, achieved impressive growth in enrollments. It has had broad impact on higher education law, on accreditation, on distance learning, and on teacher education. It will continue to grow throughout the decade to come and will surely continue to influence the development of American higher education. Its new College of Health Professions may have as great an impact on its fields of study as the education programs have had on the preparation and advancement of teachers. There may well be other new degree areas the University will enter as the nation’s workforce needs evolve. If areas of need arise that lend themselves to its competency-based model it has the ability to respond to them.

But the past is easier to record than the future is to predict, so the story of the next ten years will have to wait until it writes itself. Almost surely, however, the most serious challenges the University will face will be internal, not external. Yes, it will face the continuing challenges of competition from other distance learning institutions. Though it has no desire to reach the size of the British Open University or the University of Phoenix, it does plan to double its current size within the next five years and to reach twenty thousand students within the next ten. It will be a challenge to fulfill those projections, but the University has the ability to meet them and they are mission driven. From the beginning, WGU has aimed to have broad influence on the methods and outcomes of American higher education, and both its trustees and its executive leadership have consistently agreed that it will have more leverage on those issues as an institution of twenty thousand than as one of seven. Its mission has also emphasized access, and it has succeeded as a gateway to opportunity for thousands of students otherwise blocked from higher education. Eighty-four percent of its current students meet the federal definition of “underserved”—rural, low income, minority, and/or first in their family to attend college. But if the University is expanding access for a few thousand of these students now, it could serve many times that number if its marketing, support systems, and learning resources could expand to attract, retain, and graduate them.
But these issues are secondary. If the University’s first ten years were focused on the design, development, and validation of the competency model, the two most critical challenges of the next ten years will involve preserving its leadership in competency-based distance education and, above all, keeping its innovative spirit alive. The answer to these challenges is leadership itself. The fundamental question for all innovative organizations is whether they can outlive their founders. WGU made a successful transition from its first generation of gifted innovators—Jeffery Livingston and Robert Albrecht—who steered it through its planning years. President Mendenhall and Provost Johnstone led it successfully through its formative years leading to accreditation, and through the four expansion years since. Now with Johnstone’s retirement and Dr. Craig Swenson’s appointment as Provost the University has begun to enter its third leadership generation, and inevitably at some point in the future it will also seek a new president. There is nothing threatening about that fact. It is simply important to understand that it will happen, to plan successfully for it, and to choose wisely when it does.

For the consequence of any successful innovation is that it tends to become enshrined in a body of practice, policy, lore, and belief that becomes harder to change the more established it is. No educational program survives without systematizing its practices, recording what works, and repeating it. Every innovative institution must balance the need to provide consistent, reliable, and predictable systems and services against the need to remain open to further change. No institution can embrace every new idea that comes along without driving both its employees mad and its students away. But in general, the perils of entrenchment are more dire. The system the institution developed to function effectively becomes a code book, and adhering to the code enables the system to continue. The history of an innovation thus begins to define its future, and what was once new becomes over time defined by its tradition. Once established, the pull of that tradition leads to the devotion of more and more time to building and maintaining the code of right practice. Over time, new innovations tend to be shunned because they threaten the code and deflect the energy that everyone in the institution devotes to its maintenance. The older and more established the ‘innovation’ the more encrusted in ‘tradition’ it becomes. The original innovators are replaced, their successors lack the understanding and the passion of their predecessors, innovation becomes maintenance, and the need for continuing change is ignored until too late. The institution awakens to find the competition has left it behind.
WGU may be particularly vulnerable to these tendencies for two reasons. First, its design was so radical and took so much energy to establish that there is a strong tendency to stop rocking the boat once initial success seems assured, to ride for awhile on the float, as it were, instead of continuing to clear the route for the parade. Second, and feeding into that tendency, the University has focused its academic programs on areas of high national need and these tend to be highly regulated—teacher education and the health professions as two examples. The need to satisfy regulatory appetites in these fields will demand increasing energy. NCATE was the first specialized accreditation the University sought, but it may seek others like it in business, and it will certainly need to do so in the health professions. The larger and more visible WGU becomes the more demanding these regulatory agencies are also likely to become. States may demand, for instance, that the University be accredited by their own education departments, or that it meet certain criteria for operation within state borders, like permanent office space, a resident faculty, and a physical library. Such possibilities may seem utterly foolish for twenty-first century education, but they will be realities for years to come in state bureaucracies and others like them. Whether it complies, obtains exemptions, or succeeds in changing the regulations, the University will have no alternative but to devote time and money to addressing their requirements.

Continuing to be a national leader in educational innovation despite these pressures will not be easy, but it will be essential. Sophisticated as WGU’s systems are now for defining competency and as expert as they are in measuring it, the tools and methods for doing these things will continue to develop. Whether it is computer adaptive testing in the near term, real world simulations a few years from now, or some other technology-enabled means of measuring student learning, competency assessment will change and WGU’s assessment methods will have to keep pace with those changes. Similarly, if a large proportion of the University’s students continue to come from underserved populations, it will have to develop, test, and implement new support systems and mentor tactics for retaining them. By common agreement, attrition among these students is too high. It is high at every institution and WGU’s profile is well within the norm, but if access remains an essential element of the University’s mission—and it will—then operating within the norm cannot be comforting. It will take continuing experimentation with support systems, learning resources, and mentor selection, training, and tactics if the University is to achieve significant improvement in the success of these students. The mentor model itself may well have to change substantially. Over the past year in particular WGU’s research office has developed increasingly sophisticated systems for tracking mentor perfor-
mance and relating student success to specific mentor behaviors. As the results of these diagnostics become clear, they may well point to entirely different strategies concerning faculty work with students. If so, however difficult it may be to change its current practice, the University will have to act on the evidence it uncovers.

Difficult these challenges may be, but they are the right ones for a continually innovating institution committed to world class performance. The quality of WGU’s leadership to date indicates that it can focus on the right priorities, meet that standard of excellence, and continue to be a leader in American higher education. Ten years ago WGU rattled the academic establishment with a bang that sent waves of change rippling throughout the country. For a time it seemed it would never realize its promise and would die out with a whimper. Many predicted it. Some gloated at the prospect. Today it has earned its place as a leading American university. What began as an idea in casual conversation between a governor and a university president in 1995 brought forces for change together in alliances never before seen, and created a university without precedent or peer. In many ways, Western Governors University’s impact on American higher education has only begun. The next ten years will bring their share of surprises, and the story that can then be told is today in many ways unpredictable. But whatever shape that story will have, WGU’s promise continues.

*   *   *   *   *   *   *
X..Appendix:

University Profile, December 2006

Administration and Academic Leadership

Dennis Bromley  
Director of Business Programs  
Ph.D., Utah State University

Glenn Cerny  
Chief Information Officer  
MBA, Eastern Michigan University

Dan Eastmond  
Director of Learning Resources  
Ph.D., Syracuse University

Greg Fowler  
Director Liberal Arts Programs and Director Alumni Services  
Ph.D., State University of New York, Buffalo

David Grow  
Vice President, Finance & Administration  
BA, University of Utah

Ruki Jayaraman  
Director of Information Technology Programs  
Ph.D., Carleton University

Douglas Johnstone  
Provost Emeritus and  
Senior Advisor to the President  
Ph.D., University of Oregon

Stacey Ludwig  
Director of Academic Services  
Ph.D., University of Colorado-Denver

Robert W. Mendenhall  
President  
Ph.D., Brigham Young University

Pat Partridge  
Vice President of Marketing  
MBA, University of Virginia

Nanette Pearson  
Vice President, Human Resources  
BA, University of Utah

Byron Russell  
Vice President, Development  
BA, University of Maryland

Phil Schmidt  
Director of Secondary Education  
Ph.D., Syracuse University

James Schnitz  
Vice President, Quality and Institutional Research  
Ph.D., Northwestern University

Janet W. Schnitz  
Executive Director, Teachers College  
Ed.D., Illinois State University

Ken Sorber  
Vice President, Strategic Relations  
BA, Brigham Young University

Craig Swenson  
Provost and Academic Vice President  
Ph.D., Walden University

Alec Testa  
Director of Assessment  
Ed.D., University of Nevada-Reno
Employees

Total Employees: 332
Mentors: 125

Business: 31
Health Professions: 3
Information Technology: 18
Teachers College: 73

Degrees and Programs

College of Business
- Bachelor of Science, Management
- Bachelor of Science, Information Technology Management
- Bachelor of Science, Human Resource Management
- Bachelor of Science, Finance
- Bachelor of Science, Accounting
- Bachelor of Science, Marketing Management
- Bachelor of Science, Professional Studies
- Master of Business Administration

College of Information Technology
- Bachelor of Science, Information Technology
- Bachelor of Science, Information Technology—Networks Administration Emphasis
- Bachelor of Science, Information Technology—Networks Design and Management Emphasis
- Bachelor of Science, Information Technology—Databases Emphasis
- Bachelor of Science, Information Technology—Security Emphasis
- Bachelor of Science, Information Technology—Software Emphasis
- Master of Business Administration, Information Technology Management Emphasis

Teachers College
- Bachelor of Arts, Interdisciplinary Studies (K-8)
- Bachelor of Arts, Mathematics (5-9 or 5-12)
Bachelor of Arts, Science (5-9 or 5-12)
Bachelor of Arts, Social Science (5-12)

Post-Baccalaureate Programs
Post-Baccalaureate Teacher Preparation Program (K-8)
Post-Baccalaureate Teacher Preparation Program—Mathematics (5-9 or 5-12)
Post-Baccalaureate Teacher Preparation Program—Science (5-9 or 5-12)
Post-Baccalaureate Teacher Preparation Program—Social Science (5-12)

Bachelor of Arts, Educational Studies
Master of Arts in Teaching (K-8)
Master of Arts in Teaching—Mathematics (5-9 or 5-12)
Master of Arts in Teaching—Science (5-9 or 5-12)
Master of Arts in Teaching—Social Science (5-12)
Master of Arts—English Language Learning (K-12)
Master of Arts, Educational Studies
Master of Education—Learning and Technology
Master of Education—Management and Innovation
Master of Education—Measurement and Evaluation
Master of Arts—Mathematics Education (K-6, 5-9, or 5-12)
Master of Arts—Science Education (5-9 or 5-12)
Endorsement Preparation Program—English Language Learning (K-12)

College of Health Professions
Master of Business Administration—Health Care Management Emphasis
Master of Science—Health Education
## Enrollment Numbers

**December 1, 2006**

| Department | Enrolled Last Month | Enrolled This Month | New Starts | New Drops | Term Break Drops | Return | New Term Break | New Grades | Transfer Out | Transfer In | Net Change | Total Drops | Total Grad | Cum Attrition | Currently on TB | 12 mo Drop | 12 mo Grad | 12 mo Attrition |
|------------|---------------------|---------------------|------------|-----------|-----------------|--------|----------------|------------|--------------|-------------|------------|-------------|-----------|-------------|----------------|--------------|----------|-----------|----------------|
| AA         | 12                  | 12                  | 0          | 0         | 0               | 0      | 0              | 0          | 0            | 0           | 0          | 22         | 19        | 41.60%      | 0              | 7          | 6          | 26.00%        |
| AS/ET      | 1                   | 1                   | 0          | 0         | 0               | 0      | 0              | 0          | 0            | 0           | 0          | 10         | 10        | 47.60%      | 0              | 3          | 1          | 49.00%        |
| AAS HEC    | 1                   | 1                   | 0          | 0         | 0               | 0      | 0              | 0          | 0            | 0           | 0          | 8          | 8         | 40.00%      | 0              | 2          | 3          | 33.30%        |
| Aggregate  | 14                  | 14                  | 0          | 0         | 0               | 0      | 0              | 0          | 0            | 0           | 0          | 38         | 37        | 45.70%      | 0              | 12         | 11         | 33.30%        |
| BS-Business| 1.414               | 1.069               | 102        | 33        | 7               | 9       | 19             | 10         | 3            | 5           | 55         | 760        | 592       | 21.60%      | 63              | 200        | 121        | 35.00%        |
| BS-ITSCI   | 916                 | 1.022               | 69         | 22        | 2               | 5       | 8              | 10         | 1            | 1           | 36         | 479        | 162       | 20.00%      | 25              | 234        | 104        | 55.10%        |
| MFA        | 244                 | 272                 | 31         | 5         | 2               | 5       | 4              | 2          | 1            | 0           | 25         | 162        | 18        | 15.00%      | 16              | 69          | 11         | 18.40%        |
| Academic   | 1,664               | 2,262               | 294        | 50        | 16              | 16      | 22             | 23         | 5            | 6           | 139        | 1,403      | 522       | 32.00%      | 107             | 581         | 272        | 22.00%        |
| MLT        | 36                  | 36                  | 0           | 1         | 0               | 0      | 1              | 3          | 0            | 0           | 0          | 74         | 249       | 23.70%      | 2              | 20          | 7          | 24.60%        |
| M.E.D.     | 217                 | 206                 | 17          | 10        | 1               | 1       | 0              | 0          | 0            | 0           | 0          | 154        | 81        | 55.40%      | 7              | 62          | 47         | 32.10%        |
| MLT/MED    | 251                 | 255                 | 17          | 11        | 1               | 1       | 1              | 3          | 0            | 0           | 4          | 228        | 290       | 20.30%      | 9              | 64          | 84         | 39.40%        |
| Interdisciplinary Studies | 1,636 | 1,854 | 108 | 40 | 7 | 17 | 26 | 2 | 1 | 5 | 58 | 1,222 | 290 | 26.30% | 73 | 502 | 222 | 29.70% |
| BA-Math    | 321                 | 331                 | 37          | 11        | 3               | 1       | 5              | 0          | 4            | 2           | 30         | 222        | 12        | 47.00%      | 20              | 130         | 11         | 26.40%        |
| BA-Science | 172                 | 179                 | 14          | 1          | 0               | 0       | 3              | 0          | 4            | 1           | 7          | 175        | 7         | 48.50%      | 6              | 67          | 6          | 25.00%        |
| BA-Social Science | 336 | 359 | 19 | 8 | 2 | 3 | 5 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 31 | 308 | 3 | 46.70% | 15 | 117 | 1 | 24.90% |
| Post-Bac  | 218                 | 224                 | 16          | 8          | 3               | 6       | 2              | 0          | 0            | 0           | 1          | 245        | 161       | 32.80%      | 12              | 84          | 105        | 39.30%        |
| Teaching Cert. | 313 | 330 | 24 | 8 | 0 | 1 | 7 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 7 | 266 | 17 | 44.10% | 16 | 106 | 16 | 23.10% |
| MAT-Elementary Edu | 253 | 263 | 12 | 6 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 10 | 203 | 42 | 39.70% | 13 | 76 | 20 | 29.40% |
| MA/MAT Math  | 68 | 75 | 10 | 6 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 8 | 5 | 5 | 48.00% | 3 | 26 | 3 | 31.00% |
| MAT Social Science  | 26 | 29 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 12 | 51.00% | 5 | 11 | 9 | 21.20% |
| Post-Bac Math  | 14 | 12 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 4 | 7 | 64.00% | 3 | 13 | 3 | 41.90% |
| Math Cert/End  | 128 | 135 | 6 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 7 | 100 | 11 | 40.00% | 5 | 39 | 11 | 29.50% |
| Post-Bac Science  | 39 | 44 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 63 | 16 | 51.20% | 2 | 21 | 13 | 35.30% |
| Science Cert/End  | 3 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 2 | 33.30% | 1 | 1 | 1 | 16.67% |
| Post-Bac Social Science  | 64 | 72 | 7 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 59 | 12 | 48.70% | 0 | 35 | 17 | 26.20% |
| Endorsement TLI  | 12 | 11 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 2 | 18 | 64.00% | 0 | 1 | 1 | 33.33% |
| Master of Arts ESL  | 39 | 64 | 6 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 18 | 4 | 20.00% | 1 | 10 | 3 | 33.33% |
| Total       | 2,872               | 4,021               | 382        | 95        | 19              | 44     | 53             | 7          | 14           | 13          | 109       | 5,167      | 627       | 32.00%      | 173             | 1,249       | 428        | 21.70%        |
| MFT Summary | 4,294               | 5,055               | 483        | 166        | 51              | 61     | 85             | 32          | 19           | 19          | 102       | 4,634      | 1,236     | 56.00%      | 268             | 1,056       | 335        | 19.10%        |
Demographics

1. Graduate/Undergraduate and Gender distribution of students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College</th>
<th>Undergrad</th>
<th>Graduate</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>% Male</th>
<th>% Female</th>
<th>% Not Specified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IT</td>
<td>1001</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>1001</td>
<td>84.0</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bus</td>
<td>1426</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>1673</td>
<td>47.1</td>
<td>52.9</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TC</td>
<td>2688</td>
<td>1474</td>
<td>4162</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>78.9</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5115</td>
<td>1721</td>
<td>6836</td>
<td>36.6</td>
<td>63.2</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Proportion of Colleges and University students that belong to at least one category of an underserved population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College</th>
<th>Underserved Population?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IT</td>
<td>21.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bus</td>
<td>19.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TC</td>
<td>15.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>17.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Underserved Categories by College (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Parents did not attend college</th>
<th>Parents did not graduate from college</th>
<th>Ethnic Minority</th>
<th>Household Income less than $35,000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IT</td>
<td>27.1</td>
<td>41.4</td>
<td>52.6</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>25.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bus</td>
<td>28.5</td>
<td>44.2</td>
<td>63.4</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>20.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TC</td>
<td>38.6</td>
<td>39.4</td>
<td>58.8</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>37.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>34.8</td>
<td>40.9</td>
<td>59.2</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>31.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Satisfaction rates by College

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College</th>
<th>% Satisfied/Very Satisfied with WGU experience</th>
<th>Would recommend WGU to a friend (% Yes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IT</td>
<td>82.6</td>
<td>93.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bus</td>
<td>88.1</td>
<td>93.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TC</td>
<td>80.1</td>
<td>90.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>83.7</td>
<td>91.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. Satisfaction rates by College and Graduate/Undergraduate degree

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College</th>
<th>% Satisfied/Very Satisfied</th>
<th>Would recommend to a friend (%Yes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>Undergrad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IT</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>80.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bus</td>
<td>92.0</td>
<td>87.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TC</td>
<td>78.3</td>
<td>84.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. Satisfaction rates by College and Underserved/Not Underserved Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College</th>
<th>% Satisfied/Very Satisfied</th>
<th>Would recommend to a friend (%Yes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Underserved</td>
<td>Not Underserved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IT</td>
<td>79.1</td>
<td>83.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bus</td>
<td>88.7</td>
<td>85.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TC</td>
<td>82.6</td>
<td>82.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7. Underserved Categories and Satisfaction (Bold indicates significant difference)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>% Satisfied/Very Satisfied</th>
<th>Would recommend to a friend (%Yes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>85.6</td>
<td>94.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Rural</td>
<td>82.7</td>
<td>90.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents did not attend college</td>
<td>83.9</td>
<td>92.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents did attend college</td>
<td>83.4</td>
<td>91.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents did not graduate from college</td>
<td>92.1</td>
<td>83.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least one parent did graduate from college</td>
<td>91.9</td>
<td>84.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household income less than $35,000</td>
<td>92.2</td>
<td>82.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household income $35,000 or greater</td>
<td>92.0</td>
<td>84.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority</td>
<td>87.2</td>
<td>79.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-minority</td>
<td>93.0</td>
<td>84.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### 8. Graduates by College

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College</th>
<th>Graduates</th>
<th>% of Graduates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IT</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bus</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>16.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TC</td>
<td>917</td>
<td>69.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Ed</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1326</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 9. Graduates by College and Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Not Specified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IT</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>16.3%</td>
<td>82.0%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bus</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>54.6%</td>
<td>44.5%</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TC</td>
<td>702</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>76.6%</td>
<td>21.3%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Ed</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>73.7%</td>
<td>26.3%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>863</td>
<td>438</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>65.2%</td>
<td>33.0%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 10. Graduates by College and Minority status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College</th>
<th>Minority</th>
<th>Non-Minority</th>
<th>Unknown</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IT</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>18.0 %</td>
<td>68.6%</td>
<td>13.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bus</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12.4%</td>
<td>74.3%</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TC</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>754</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td>82.2%</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Ed</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15.8%</td>
<td>68.4%</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>1047</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10.4%</td>
<td>79.0%</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

10 Students who received Associate of Arts degrees and did not pursue upper division study in one of the University's Colleges.
The Mentors of Western Governors University:  
A Faculty Sampler

Theon Danet  
Dr. Danet joined WGU in 2006 as an Information Technology mentor, following a career in the US Army, in defense-related industry, and at NASA. In the Army, where she received several meritorious service awards, she was a Cryptographic Telecommunications Specialist, responsible for continuous improvement and support of secure data communications between the White House, the Pentagon, the Defense Intelligence Agency, and worldwide data communication sites. After she left the Army she held a variety of information systems positions while earning first her bachelor’s degree, then her MBA, and finally her Ph.D. She has designed, developed, and implemented SAS Database applications to improve quality control in defense-related operations, provided information technology support to the national Air Combat Command’s Director of Operations, Contingency Operations and Exercises Division, and managed complex automation projects within the Deployment Support Command at Fort Eustis, Virginia. At Fort Eustis she also served as Web Manager for the Deployment Support Command Website. Immediately before joining WGU she worked at NASA’s Langley Research Center in Hampton, Virginia as Center Enterprise Architect in the Office of the Chief Information Officer. Dr. Danet is a true adult learner. While working full-time, she earned her BS degree from the Department of Computer Science at the University of Maryland in 1997, then in 2000 her MBA from the Florida Institute of Technology, and in 2006 her Ph.D. from the Graduate School of Computer and Information Sciences at Nova Southeastern University. Theon lives in Newport News, Virginia.

Don Dodson  
Dr. Dodson holds BS and MS degrees from Texas A&M University and a Ph.D. from the University of Tennessee. He is the author or contributing author of five books and more than fifty articles on health care management and is the founder and first Editor of the Journal of Health Care Marketing, now published by the American Marketing Association. He is also on the Editorial Board of three national health marketing journals and has been a consultant to a wide variety of health organizations, including Vanderbilt University Medical School, Delta Group/McGraw-Hill Health Systems, HCA Columbia, and American Medical International. In the late 1970s Dr. Dodson was the Executive Director of the American Academy of Health Administration in Washington, D.C. He went on to hold a progressive series of senior positions in aca-
demic leadership: Professor of Management and Health Administration and Director of the Health Care Management Program at Appalachian State University in the University of North Carolina system; Professor of Business Administration and Director of the Health Administration program at Winthrop University in South Carolina; Dean of the Graduate School and Chancellor of the Charlotte campus of Pfeiffer University in Charlotte, North Carolina; Research Professor and Director of the Master’s in Health Administration Program for Health Professionals at the University of South Carolina. Immediately before joining WGU, Dr. Dodson was President and CEO of the Accrediting Commission for Continuing and Professional Education, a national organization that reviews and accredits trainers and training organizations. Don joined WGU in 2005 as a full-time mentor in business. He lives in Columbia, South Carolina.

Linda Gunn

Dr. Gunn lives in Merrillville, Indiana. She first responded to a recruiting notice in 2004 for subject matter experts interested in helping WGU develop competencies for its inaugural MBA program. She found the work so intriguing and the competency model so compelling that she subsequently joined the University full-time in 2005 as a mentor in the program she helped design. Linda is a Certified Professional in Health Care Risk Management, but she began her professional career in the mid-1980s as a communications consultant, followed that with an assistant vice presidency of marketing for a communications company, and then served as a senior financial analyst for Kraft Foods. From that diverse grounding she made the transition to the Methodist Hospitals in Gary, Indiana, where she first worked for several years as an insurance coordinator and risk manager. It was during that time that she earned her professional certification. Then, in 2001, she became Director of the Physicians Services Center for the Methodist Hospitals, providing budgeting, financial, and support services for more than 500 physicians. Like the WGU students she mentors, Linda is a lifelong learner. She completed her BS degree in Operations and Systems Management at the University of Indiana before launching her career, but once underway she earned her MBA from the University of Notre Dame and her Ph.D. from the Union Institute and University while working full-time and raising a family. Dr. Gunn has also taught part-time at Calumet College, the University of Notre Dame College of Business, Indiana University Northwest School of Business, Cardean University, and Central Michigan University. She is a former President of the Northwest Chapter of the Indiana Workers Compensation Institute and is currently Vice Chair of the Board of Directors of the Gary, Indiana Health Department and a member of the Board of Directors of Kid’s Chance of Indiana, Inc. She is also a member of the Indiana University Northwest Business Advisory Board and active in the National Black MBA Association as well as the National Association of Female Execu-
tives. At WGU, in addition to mentoring graduate students, she also led the 2006 design team that built the University’s newest MBA program in Health Care Management.

Alisa Izumi

Dr. Izumi joined WGU in 2005 as a mentor in secondary mathematics. She has taught in a number of high schools both in California and in Massachusetts, where she holds permanent secondary mathematics certification, and she has also taught college math at Mount Holyoke College, Mills College, and the University of Massachusetts. Alisa is especially interested in what actually works in the teaching of mathematics, and that interest is evident in her conference papers and publications, such as “Using Inspiration Computer Technology in Introductory Statistics,” “Mathematics and the Socratic Method,” *Measurements of Student Understanding on Complex Scientific Reasoning Problems* (her dissertation), and *EM Power: Mathematics for Adult Basic Education* (2004), which she co-authored. Alisa was Western Massachusetts Regional Coordinator in the mid-1990s for a National Science Foundation grant aimed at improving math and science education in the state, and she was a lead consultant in developing the Massachusetts State Frameworks in Math and Science, which established the objectives for the state’s competency examinations. Dr. Izumi holds the BA in Mathematics from Mount Holyoke College, and the M. Ed. in Research Evaluation Methods and the Ed. D. in Mathematics and Science Education from the University of Massachusetts. She lives in Granby, Massachusetts.

Ruki Jayaraman

Dr. Jayaraman joined WGU in the summer of 2006 as Program Director for Information Technology. Like many IT professionals, Ruki came to the field through a side door. By academic training, she is a political scientist. She earned her bachelor’s degree in Political Science, History, and English Literature at the University of Mysore in India, then also at Mysore a master’s degree in political science. From India she moved first to Canada, where she earned another master’s degree and a Ph.D. in Political Science at Carleton University, and then to Salt Lake City, where she began a university teaching career. It was while teaching at Brigham Young University in the 1990s, however, that she first became seriously involved with the IT field, and late in that decade she switched professions. She became first a senior network instructor and consultant, then Education Services Manager for IKON Office Solutions, a company providing Microsoft, Novell, Lotus/Domino and other training and certification programs. She also earned a number of IT certifications herself: A+, Certified Novell Administrator, Microsoft Certified Professional + Internet, Microsoft Certified Trainer, and Microsoft Certified Systems Engineer + Internet. From IKON she went on in 1999 to become Director of Customer Solutions
for Tomax Corporation in Salt Lake City. There she led the business unit that provided Tier 2 application support for customers on the complete suite of Tomax applications, including Retail.net, Portal Workflow, and Workforce Management. Her clients for these products included large companies like American Eagle, TJMaxx, Benjamin Moore Paints, LL Bean, Safeway, and Trader Joe. At Tomax she also served as a product manager for the Portal Workflow product for a period of time and developed the corporation’s complete training program. Ruki is a founding member and past President of the India Forum of Utah, received the Governor’s Utah Asian-American Sesquicentennial Achievement Award in 1997, and served from 1999-2003 on Governor Mike Leavitt’s Asian-American Advisory Council. WGU students and faculty alike benefit from the unique combination of educational breadth, business experience, and international perspective that she brings to her leadership of the University’s Information Technology programs.

Tedd Kessel

Dr. Kessel came out of retirement—twice—to be a full-time Elementary Education mentor at WGU. With bachelor’s and master’s degrees from the University of Montana, he began his career as a sixth grade teacher in Harlowtown, Montana, but within a few years he became a school principal, first in Glasgow and later in Billings. He continued in school administration until returning to the University of Montana in 1980 as a full-time doctoral student. After receiving his Ed.D. in 1982, Dr. Kessel made another career change and became Director of the Center for Educational Development for the Providence Medical Center in Anchorage, Alaska, an organization responsible for continuing education and training for 1600 health care professionals, community residents, and patients. In the later 1980s he moved back to the lower 48, first directing similar health-related training for Stevens Memorial Hospital in Edmonds, Washington, and then becoming Senior Manager for Employee Development and Quality Improvement at the Boeing Corporation in Seattle. At Boeing Tedd managed training and development work groups throughout the company. For several years he was also a Boeing Loaned Executive to the greater Seattle community, working with non-profit organizations on a variety of community development projects and most especially on the formation of a Seattle-wide program promoting early childhood education, Employer Champions for Children. Through Tedd’s leadership and with the active support of Boeing, the Seattle Chamber of Commerce, city and county officials, ECC set out—and with remarkable success—to help licensed child care programs in the Seattle area meet the standards for national accreditation. Dr. Kessel retired from Boeing in 2003 but he soon ran into a faculty recruiting notice while browsing the Internet and within a few months
became a full-time WGU mentor. He tried to retire again in 2005 but once more found that life too slow and returned early in 2006 to guiding BA and MAT students toward their degrees in Elementary Education. Dr. Kessel lives in Palm Springs, California.

**Michael Raffanti**

Dr. Raffanti lives in Tacoma, Washington. He joined WGU as a mentor in Elementary Education in 2004, but he did not begin his professional career with either teaching kids or mentoring adults in mind. Like many of WGU’s students and faculty the journey toward his calling took many turns, but each contributed a wealth of learning to his ultimate vocation. He graduated *maxima cum laude* from the University of Portland in Oregon with a BA in History and Philosophy, and from there went on to law school at Boston College in Massachusetts. He served on the Boston College Law Review Editorial Board, earned his law degree *cum laude*, and went to work first for a law firm in Florida, then in California. There he became increasingly committed to legal assistance for the underserved. He became staff attorney for La Raza Centro Legal, then served as supervising attorney for the Bar Association of San Francisco’s volunteer legal services program and as coordinator of the Mission High Law Academy. Mission High was a failing school, predominantly comprised of low income students of color. The Bar Association worked with the San Francisco school district, corporations, and other community groups to create a school within a school. It integrated law into the curriculum, paired students with lawyer mentors, incorporated job readiness skills, and set up paid summer internships for all students in the program. It also got Michael interested in teaching. In 1997 he moved north to Tacoma, Washington and became Director of Education for the Pierce County AIDS Foundation while also working toward his Master in Teaching degree at The Evergreen State College in Olympia. After earning his teaching credential, he taught third grade kids for four years but continued toward his doctoral degree as a distance student at the Fielding Graduate University in Santa Barbara, California. Along the way he won a Fulbright Scholarship for study in Tokyo and a Freeman Foundation Scholarship for study in China. Michael completed his Ed.D. in 2005, shortly after joining the WGU faculty.

**Mary Anne Rea-Ramirez**

Dr. Rea-Ramirez came to WGU as a mentor in science and in English Language Learning—and from a background fully justifying those different hats. Immediately before joining WGU in 2004 she had been Research Scientist and Assistant Professor in the Department of Cognitive Science and Education at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts. She began her career in nursing, however, earning her BSN degree from the Medical College of Virginia in
Richmond. After service during the Vietnam War with the US Air Force Nurse Corps, she went on to earn a graduate certificate in Nurse/Midwifery from Georgetown University, then K-12 teaching credentials in Life Science from Southern California College, and in the Teaching of English as a Second Language from the University of California, Irvine. In 1996 she earned the M.Ed. and in 1998 the Ed.D. from the University of Massachusetts, specializing in Math, Science, and Instructional Technology Education. She has been in private practice as a certified nurse-midwife, been a clinical instructor in the nurse practitioner program at the Medical College of Virginia, and been a K-12 nurse, science, and English as a Second Language teacher. In the early 1990s she was the Associate Director of the Nursing Program at California’s Pacific Coast College, and later in the decade before going to Hampshire College in 1998 she was a Research Scientist in the Scientific Reasoning Research Institute at the University of Massachusetts. Dr. Ramirez is the author or co-author of more than forty publications and conference presentations spanning an immense range of topics in science, mathematics, cognition, and learning theory, as well as the producer of three major programs for public television in California, Immigration, The Rain Forest, and Tobacco on Trial. At WGU, in addition to mentoring students in science, she has brought her rich knowledge about learning to the leadership of the design team responsible for development of the University’s Master of Arts program in English Language Learning. Mary Anne currently lives in Richmond, Virginia.

Philip Schmidt
Dr. Schmidt lives in New Paltz, New York. He first came to WGU in 2001 as the leading subject matter expert in mathematics education to aid the University in developing its first programs for the Teachers College. He became so interested in WGU that he accepted appointment in 2002 as full-time Program Coordinator for Mathematics Education. He now serves as Director of Curriculum and Instruction for all programs in the Teachers College, and he led the successful effort in 2006 to receive NCATE accreditation. Through his leadership the mathematics education program at WGU has become one of the largest and most successful in the country in preparing outstanding mathematics teachers for the nation’s public schools. Dr. Schmidt holds the Bachelor of Science in Mathematics from Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, and the Master of Science in Mathematics and the Ph.D. in Mathematics Education from Syracuse University. Before coming to WGU Phil had served as Associate Provost and Professor of Mathematics at Berea College in Kentucky, and as Professor and Dean of the School of Education at the State University of New York at New Paltz. He is one of the nation’s foremost authorities on mathematics education and the preparation of math teach-
ers and is the author or co-author of ten books and innumerable articles on mathematics and its teaching, many of which have been translated into other languages. Among his major contributions to the field are *Geometry* (1989, 1992, 1999), *2500 Solved Problems in College Algebra and Trigonometry* (1991), *College Mathematics* (1992, 1994, 2003), *Elementary Algebra* (1992, 2004), and *Mathematics for the Physics Student*, which will be published in 2007. Phil is an active member of several professional associations and has long been active in community educational affairs. He has served, for instance, on the State University of New York’s Task Force on College Entry Level Skills and Knowledge, on the State Needs Task Group on Public Education, and on the Board of the New York State Advisory Council to the College Board. He was also a member of the District-wide Schools Committee in New Paltz and Coordinator of the School-to-Work Higher Education Initiative for his county’s Board of Continuing Education Services.

**Jennifer Smolka**

Dr. Jennifer Smolka lives in Waxahachie, Texas, and from there serves as both Program Coordinator for WGU’s Master of Education Programs and co-director of mentor training. She joined WGU in 2004 as the natural next step beyond her doctoral studies and long involvement with the application of computer technology to teaching and learning. Jennifer earned her BS degree in Elementary Education with a specialization in mathematics from Texas Tech University and began her professional career as a fifth and sixth grade teacher in the Plano Independent School District (Texas). By the mid-1990s she was back in school herself, earning an M.S. in Computer Education & Cognitive Systems from the University of North Texas in 1997. She continued toward her doctoral degree at UNT while also working for the Texas Center for Educational Technology, where she managed the development of a technology certification program for Texas high school teachers and was the instructional designer for a statewide project to develop and share technology-based teaching resources. Dr. Smolka received her Ph.D. in Educational Computing from the University of North Texas in 2002 and joined WGU two years later. She has contributed widely to the development of technology’s application to education and training as a consultant to corporations, school districts, and organizations such as PBS’s Teacherline and the Centers for Learning & Teaching Network. She is the contributing author of nine published articles and a widely sought presenter at educational technology conferences across the country. She has received a number of awards for her contributions to the use of technology in education, and in 2006 received the College of Education’s Outstanding Alumna award at the University of North Texas. At WGU she has had major impact on mentor training,
on the development of the University’s Master of Education degree programs, and on her students’ lives—as they enthusiastically proclaim.

Hector “Manny” Vasquez

Like many WGU faculty, Dr. Hector “Manny” Vasquez has worn several different hats in his professional career. After earning his bachelor’s degree in Elementary and Middle Grade Education at Langston University in Oklahoma, Manny taught third, fourth, and fifth grade children for several years, first in Hartford, Connecticut, later in Atlanta, Georgia. Then came his first career change. He went to work for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, first as an Aerospace Education Specialist and later as Assistant Coordinator for The Urban Community and Rural Enrichment Program. In this capacity, he conducted lectures, demonstrations, teacher workshops and student programs for NASA in urban public schools throughout the country. Since NASA had a contract with Oklahoma State University to deliver its educational services program, it was natural for Manny to enroll at OSU for an MS degree in Natural and Applied Science, which he earned there in 1997. His work in urban schools also heightened his interest in curriculum development and learning effectiveness, and so when he continued at OSU for his doctoral degree it was in Applied Educational Studies/Aviation and Space. By the time NASA’s contract with OSU ended, Manny had completed all his doctoral coursework. He accepted an offer to join the Walt Disney World Company in Orlando Florida, as a curriculum specialist, where he was responsible for the Life Skills curriculum for all Disney employees, including English Language Learning, Citizenship, GED, ABE, and Basic Literacy programs. He also produced a quarterly journal for Disney employees and managed all production services for Disney’s University Cast Member training facility. Dr. Vasquez completed his Ed.D. degree in 2003, and it was then that WGU recruited him as a mentor for the Teachers College in Elementary Education. Manny still lives in Windermere, Florida.
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Acknowledgements

I am grateful to many people for assisting me in this project. Bob Mendenhall graciously gave me the time and freedom to concentrate on writing this history during my final seven months at WGU. Debbie Lewis worked with me for several months in creating an initial chronology, and in gathering the early press reports, news releases, and anecdotes about the founding of the University. Bob Albrecht and Jeff Livingston read an early draft of the text, added important information about WGU’s early years that only they could know, and steered me away from a number of errors. Phil Schmidt, Greg Fowler, and Stacey Ludwig all read parts of the text and gave me valuable feedback, both in matters of fact and style. Jim Schnitz and Geoff Matthews dug up lots of data about the University’s growth and current status and patiently reformatted it in ways I could use. Steve Crow, Sandra Elman, Ralph Wolff, Dave Longanecker, and Marianne Phelps graciously contributed time to speak with me about their work with WGU and their sense of the University’s significance. Last but by no means least, Jackie Bragdon, as always, has been immensely helpful in finalizing the text and presenting it in decent finished form.

Despite the best efforts of these colleagues, errors of both commission and omission surely remain, and I take responsibility for them. Inevitably, this is a history that filters the facts of WGU’s development through my experience over the past seven years as its founding Provost and Academic Vice President. Others might bring a different perspective to the task, highlight different elements of the story, or wish that I had said more or less about any number of matters. Perhaps those histories can be written later. For the moment, at least, I am confident that the story told here conveys the essence of WGU’s development over the past ten years, and I am grateful for the opportunity to write it.