



## **Western Governor's University: Using Technology to Provide Educational Opportunities**

Roy Romer  
Governor, State of Colorado  
Co-founder  
Western Governors University

*Editor's note: An essay by Utah Gov. Michael Leavitt opens Part One of the technology issue of Journal of Public Service & Outreach (Vol. 2, No. 2).*

I am excited about a new initiative called the Western Governors University — and with good reason. This “virtual university,” called WGU, is a bold, break-the-mold approach to higher education created by 16 governors from the nation's western region.

This innovative project is based on two key premises. First, regional cooperation will expand educational opportunities to all western residents by using advanced technology to cross state and institutional lines, reach a wide array of students, and offer courses from a wider array of sources. Second, WGU certificates and degrees will be based on competencies demonstrated through rigorous assessment. *Where* learning takes place will no longer be as important as what a student actually learns.

More than one year into the project, we are now in the design and development phase of WGU. A top-notch implementation team, supported by groups of advisors from each participating state, is working to develop a prototype that will be tested later this year.

Eventually, WGU will offer a wide range of academic degrees and workplace certifications, as well as interstate access to the programs and courses of participating institutions. Initially, however, our strategy focuses on a competency-based Associate of Arts degree, a competency-based Electronics Manufacturing certification, and a limited capability for serving as a “broker” for other universities' courses.

What is key to the innovative approach to WGU is the competency-based concept. The credentialing approach of this program offers the following:

---

- the opportunity to develop considerably more flexible and efficient paths of pursuing a degree or certification than the current academic system;

- strong support from industry because it creates a more flexible, high-quality workforce;

- the opening of educational opportunities to an unprecedented extent; and


- the alignment of skills certification programming to provide training that employers say is most needed in the workplace.

WGU certificates and degrees will be based on whether or not students actually learn the material rather than on how much time they spend in a classroom. As a practical matter, this means we

will offer a high-quality education to many more people. The emphasis on competency will improve not only learning and its tangible demonstration; it also will make it easier for people to be hired and rewarded for what they know and are able to do.

WGU will give students and lifelong learners in the western region access to a wider variety of educational resources and will expand the reach of western educational institutions, enabling them to offer their best courses

---



**WGU is not  
a replacement  
for higher education;  
it is a technological  
extension  
of the marketplace.**

---

and programs to students beyond state borders. And it will enhance distance learning, enabling states to work together to tap the incredible promise of information technology.

WGU is not a replacement for higher education; it is a technological extension of the marketplace. WGU is a new learning system where instruction can be delivered to students by computer — on campuses, at home, at libraries, or at work. It uses technology to provide more educational opportunities across the state and the region. Other benefits include reduced costs of post-secondary educational opportunities and a vehicle for cost-sharing; high performance standards that are widely accepted and serve to improve the equality of post-secondary education; and demonstrated new approaches to teaching that can be adopted by more traditional colleges and universities.

WGU will not only provide alternative access to those who might not have the opportunity to attend college, but also will open the system to much-needed competition.

Another key component to WGU is an Internet-based catalog navigator, often referred to as the nerve center. While this catalog

will list various courses by traditional and non-traditional providers, it will comprise more than course lists. Most important, it will map out the skills that must be mastered in order to receive a WGU credential or degree.

The navigator is critical to ensuring that WGU students find their experience a productive and satisfying one, and that they return for further instruction.

WGU is a significant way we can begin to harness the possibility that technology gives us for changing the way we deliver higher education. Technology also transforms the learning system; some courses will be offered on demand, at the student's convenience. Achievement of these significant systemic changes will require the involvement of traditional public, post-secondary institutions, private colleges and universities, companies that provide training, and the many private businesses that are developing courses and curriculum.

WGU hopes to work in partnership with a workplace that is increasingly influenced and changed by the Information Age. Knowledge is expanding at such a rate that we now need workers who know how to learn, whether they work in an office or on a factory floor. Business has a huge stake in helping higher education to change from a system whose objective was to pass on a discrete set of common facts to one that equips students to think and reason. How well we educate, train, and develop the potential of our people will do more to determine our future than anything else and requires participation from businesses and their leaders.

WGU is a model system that mobilizes resources to get results. Whether someone is pursuing higher education for personal or professional growth, this system creates opportunities for learning. It opens the potential experience to millions of people who would otherwise be limited by time, resources, and geography.

We must rethink traditional educational delivery systems and push higher education to raise its sights — we should always seek to raise the quality of our most important investments. We cannot rest on the laurels of a past reputation. While I know there is so much that is right about our higher-education system, there is always room for improvement and innovation. WGU is an important step to ensure our society is an educated society. ■

### **About the Author**

Roy Romer, the thirty-ninth governor of Colorado, has been the state's chief executive since January 1987. He was first elected in 1986, re-elected in 1990 and again in 1994, and, as a result of voter-adopted term limits, will be the last Colorado governor to serve three terms.

Romer's Colorado agenda centers on using technology to improve learning at all levels; reforming higher education; ensuring quality and affordability of child care; improving K-12 education; and making state government more efficient and user-friendly.

His goal is to "make Colorado the best place to raise a child," and this theme has earned support from a wide range of the political spectrum.