



Western Governors University: A Learning System for the CyberCentury

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Fifteen western governors are working hard to add a new and exciting element to higher education. We have created an innovative educational entity called Western Governors University, a collaborative enterprise that we believe will help usher higher education into the fast-paced global economy of the new millennium.

WGU has three purposes:

- To increase access to lifelong learning and job-training services for all students of all ages, no matter where they are.
- To become an education "free port," opening a broad distribution channel so public and private education providers can deliver their educational services to a burgeoning world-wide market.
- To create a learning system that emphasizes student competency and assessment of learning, moving away from the old measures of "seat time" and credit hours.

This shift takes WGU into the realm of the revolutionary, into a challenging new environment for post-secondary education that values learning and competency, but cares little how, where, when, or from whom the competency was gained.

In the past, people had to go to campus to receive information and gain knowledge. Today, in the Information Age, the opportunity to gain knowledge flows to wherever the people are — at home, at work, on the road, or wherever.

This shift might seem simple, but it is absolutely revolutionary in its ramifications. Working with our institutions of higher education and the CEOs of the country's major technology companies, we are creating a global free market for educational services, delivered to any location at any time.

Obviously, there are significant barriers to a project of this size, scope, and promise. Myriad rules, regulations, and even laws hinder the realization of the WGU vision. I first began thinking about the prospects of a collaborative distance-learning effort when I visited

Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, in 1995. I met with NAU President Clara Lovett and she showed me the innovative and successful distance-education programs under way in northern Arizona. I described for her our similar efforts in Utah, noting that we were delivering hundreds of courses via interactive video to nearly all of our high schools and colleges in the state.

Then I suggested, perhaps naively at the time, that it might make sense to connect our two systems so we could each take advantage of the courses and degrees offered by the other, thus avoiding a great deal of redundant course development work and other expenses. Dr. Lovett smiled and said while she would love to connect our systems, it was unlikely to occur.

"And why not?" I asked.

"Four reasons," she replied. "The first is bureaucracy; the second, tradition; third, regulation; and fourth, turf."

In the next few weeks I thought a great deal about those barriers. I noticed that Dr. Lovett did not list technology as one of them. When the Western Governors' Association next met in June of 1995, I raised the issue of distance learning with my fellow governors and a wide-ranging discussion ensued about this exciting new approach to education. I asked whether there was interest in collaborating, breaking down the barriers, and linking our systems. Heads nodded and all hands went up. I suggested to my fellow governors that they, more than anyone else, were best positioned to break through the barriers we would confront.

At the time of this writing, 15 governors and several dozen higher-education institutions are involved in WGU, with more expected to join. A professional staff is working; implementation and business plans have been adopted and are being carried out. The governors and their appointees are serving as the WGU board of trustees. Some of the top higher-education management and distance-learning experts in the country are working as consultants. A group of CEOs from the country's top technology companies have formed a WGU National Advisory Committee. We are working with western accreditation agencies to obtain full accreditation. Pilot institutions have been selected to deliver and receive classes and courses. The first classes are expected to be delivered in early 1998, with full implementation occurring later that year.

Unique Elements of WGU

Besides the size of this effort, a unique element is its focus on competency. Gov. Roy Romer of Colorado suggested taking the project to a level far beyond simply teaching courses across state lines. He proposed that this collaborative institution measure student success by assessing learning, not by who provided the learning, the credentials of the provider, or how long a student sat in class. The other governors agreed, and thus WGU will operate not just as a broker and deliverer of educational services, but will also bring a focus on competency and assessment of learning.

This shift is crucially important because it takes into account the world-changing forces of the Information Age. The education monopoly, which existed for some 2,000 years, has been broken. In the twenty-first century, as learning becomes a lifelong pursuit, so many different sources and opportunities to gain knowledge and learning will exist that the seat-time, credit-hour measurement system will be difficult to maintain. In an era when information and training services are delivered through so many different methods interactive video, E-mail, satellite, the Internet's World Wide Web, CD-ROM, 500 television channels, and so forth, it will be impossible to ensure the quality of each individual, school, or business that delivers courses, or of the courses themselves. Thus, the focus must be changed from who provided the course, and how many hours it was taught, to assessment of whether true learning occurred. Instead of trying to hold back the onslaught of education and training opportunities, we must develop sophisticated assessment methods to measure and certify learning and competency. This would allow us to recognize learning achieved through life experiences and on-the-job training. Should not an entrepreneur who has run a successful

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business for ten years have an opportunity to qualify for a business degree along with the 22-year-old who has sat in classes for four years?

During a visit to San Juan High School in a remote part of Utah, I met a teacher whose experience demonstrates why we need this change in focus. He was instrumental in bringing technology to this school, which has a large population of Native American children, many of whom live in poverty. Without a degree in computer science or engineering, he attended training seminars, studied a lot, and taught himself. He was resourceful enough to obtain grants to buy computers and network

equipment, and he taught students to install the networks. The area is very remote, so getting repair service was a problem. Using video courses from hardware and software companies, he and twelve of his students were trained and certified as factory-authorized repair personnel. This man began teaching computer classes at a nearby college extension site on an adjunct basis. He then decided to obtain a master's degree in computer science and applied to a major university in the state. He was rejected for the program because he had not taken the proper pre-requisite computer classes. He described his experience and informal training. But rules were rules.

Ironically, if he had received credit for the classes he taught others, he would have been accepted. But the traditional university system would not acknowledge those classes because he *taught* them, he didn't *take* them. That's bureaucracy and tradition. WGU will measure and assess knowledge and proficiencies and then recognize them, no matter what their source.

Why Governors are Involved

Governors are not higher-education experts, but we are best positioned to break through the barriers of regulation, bureaucracy, tradition, and turf of which Dr. Lovett spoke. Our role is to serve as catalysts to bring the combined power of several state governments behind a new concept. This could not be accomplished by one governor alone, but several governors joining forces can provide the leadership to get this job done. Pressure and impetus for change in higher education must often come from the outside. Governors are uniquely positioned to serve as catalysts for change.

WGU's Relationship with Existing Universities

This initiative is not meant to replace traditional institutions. It merely adds a new element. I fondly recall the autumn day not long ago when my wife and I dropped our oldest son off at his college dorm and helped him unpack, make his bed (probably the only time it was ever made), and stash his suitcases under the bed frame. I drove away with a lump in my throat, but was excited for him, knowing the many growing experiences and challenges he would face. This is not about eliminating those campus experiences, those rites of passage. Sitting at home in front of a computer would not have met my son's needs at that time in his life. Teachers and traditional classrooms will not be replaced by technology. On the other hand, there are numerous non-traditional students and those who need retraining, many with jobs and families, whose needs are not met by the traditional campus experience.

A few in higher education view this project as a threat, but most see immense opportunities. A stated purpose of Western Governors University is to open new, worldwide markets to public and private educational institutions. The corporate job-training market alone is valued at more than \$200 billion annually. With technology changing so rapidly, the need for employee training and retraining grows commensurately. This worldwide market is about to explode. We sometimes view distance education too narrowly, as merely a way to save money. We should expand our vision and look for opportunities to make money. Most traditional higher-education institutions are presently not well-positioned to take advantage of these opportunities because they mostly teach on-campus courses during working hours.

Corporate education and individual lifelong learning needs can be coordinated through the Western Governors University, giving education providers access to these emerging and existing markets.

Value to Students

This institution will provide many new choices and a more convenient way of accessing educational opportunities. It will also enhance quality. Each student should have at least a portion of his or her education delivered through technology, because this is the way the world will work in the future. The day will come soon when Utah students will study international relations with students in Mexico and students in England at the same time. That's a powerful enhancement of basic quality. In time, this institution will provide broad access to people who may not otherwise receive it.

The Importance of Lifelong Learning, Job Training, and Retraining Needs

A new workplace, with a new kind of worker, has appeared in the Information Age. Lifelong learners are the students of the twenty-first century. The average Information Age worker will retrain often. Three of four workers who lost their jobs in 1994 will require additional skills to obtain new employment (Kirk 1994). An institution that requires a student to attend classes between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. will have difficulty satisfying that need. Many of these workers have families and jobs; they need educational opportunities that cater to their schedules and are accessible at any time from any place. High-tech skills swiftly become obsolete. Business requires workers to utilize technology to solve problems. Through WGU, students will have access to lifelong learning opportunities to acquire necessary twenty-first century employment skills.

WGU Financing

This institution is an entirely new concept and will require a unique economic equation and business plan. The capital and revenue sources could include investment capital, a base of appropriated funds (participating states have each invested \$100,000), donated capital, for-profit vendor involvement, and fees and tuition. However, it will primarily draw its operating revenues from fees and tuition, most of which will return to providing institutions with some small portion for the administration of the institution itself.

Organization

WGU will have a small central office; its numerous local and regional centers will provide services for students. The functions of the central office will include financial management, maintenance of academic records, quality control, arranging assessments, auditing the local and regional centers, overseeing student services, and establishing requirements for degrees and certificates. The local and regional centers will provide pre-admission services, interim and final

assessments, counseling and advising, information services, help with local programming and needs assessment, and access to the technology-delivered courses.

An exciting element of this learning enterprise will be the World Wide Web site or "smart catalog/advisor" that is being developed in collaboration with IBM as the university's nerve center. While it will list courses offered through WGU and will provide students with a wide range of information, it is much more than a catalog. It will link learners and providers of advanced technology-based courses, programs, and learning modules. It will provide information on the assessment of specific competencies leading to certification in a variety of fields. It will also provide initial advisement services, such as assessment of learners' readiness for specific learning experiences.

While flesh-and-blood student advisors and counselors will still be required, the catalog will make their jobs easier, helping them to take a prospective student through the entire process, from class selection to financial aid to delivery methods, to assessment of competencies and the granting of certification or degrees. The catalog also will be heavily used by educational service-providers and by industry and business representatives to enroll their employees in job-training programs. It will be available 24 hours a day from any location with Internet access.

Accreditation

Degrees from WGU will be fully accredited. That's a standard we want to maintain to ensure quality. Ultimately, it will not be accreditation agencies that will determine the success of this endeavor — it will be the marketplace. Is this institution good enough to attract students? And will industry and business recognize degrees and hire graduates? We firmly believe the answers to both questions will be affirmative.

Greatest Obstacles

We don't know all the obstacles. This is pioneering; we don't know what's over the next hill. But clearly, our greatest obstacle will not be the technology. Our greatest obstacles will be sociology and working through the "people" element — the regulation, bureaucracy, tradition, and turf. I had a conversation with a member of a faculty who said, "This virtual university idea scares the heck out of me." My response was, "I've got an easy solution — don't do it. If this is not something you find intriguing, you don't need to get involved. This is all voluntary. But if you're prepared to innovate, if you want to step forward and be a pioneer, if you want to be part of the next wave of educational innovation, venture forward with us." That is our message to those who are concerned and fearful.

References

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About the Author

Michael O. Leavitt has been governor of Utah since January 1993. Leavitt is working with other governors to establish the Western Governors University, which will provide students more choice and flexibility, and broader access to college through technology.

He sits on the executive committee of the National Governors' Association and the Republican Governors' Association. The governor has held regional and national leadership roles among governors. He is past chair of the Republican Governors' Association and the Western Governors' Association and the past president of the Council of State Governments. He has received numerous awards, including the American Medical Association's Nathan Davis Award, which recognized him as the public official of the year for his efforts to improve health care in Utah.