

Remote Access

Western Governors University offers “competency-based” higher education, at a distance

Photos by Patrick Cone, Black Star, for CrossTalk

By Kathy Witkowsky

SALT LAKE CITY

IN A RECENT installment of the popular comic strip Dilbert, the pointy-haired office boss announces that he has enrolled in a distance-learning class to obtain his master's degree. “Is the online degree hard?” someone asks. “Not so much,” the boss replies nonchalantly, coffee cup in hand. “I'm taking my midterm exam as we speak.”

Funny? Not to students at Western Governors University, a private, nonprofit distance-learning institution based in Salt Lake City. Western Governors University (WGU) opened its virtual doors in 1999 with much fanfare and, as its name suggests, the political backing of 18 western governors plus the governor of Guam, each of whose states contributed \$100,000 in startup funding. What the name does not convey is the institution's lofty goal: to create a new model for higher education, one that not only harnesses technology to increase access and reduce costs, but maintains quality by measuring learning outcomes rather than credit hours.

“We wanted a university that was available through modern communications, and we wanted it based upon performance. And that was the essence of the experiment,” recalled former Colorado Governor Roy Romer, who, together with former Utah Governor Michael Leavitt, had the initial vision for WGU. Leavitt was most excited by the flexibility that new technologies could provide, while Romer was focused on the competency-based curriculum. “We

Contrary to early predictions that tens of thousands of students would rush to enroll in Western Governors University, for the first four years enrollment remained in the hundreds.

wanted to be sure that we created a system in which you didn't get credit for a degree based just upon hours of exposure but based upon proven competence that you demonstrated,” Romer said.

Since WGU's inception, online programs have become commonplace, and their widely varying standards have made them easy targets for comedians and

comic strips. But WGU students and administrators say the school's unusual competency-based approach ensures that the institution is no joke.

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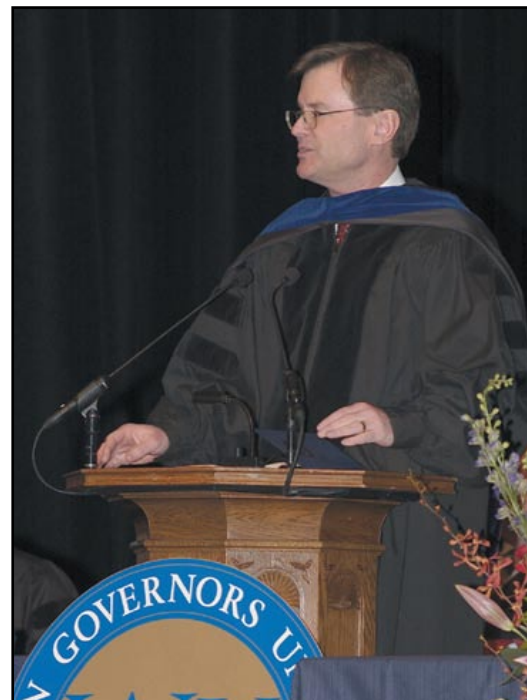
These come in different forms: written assignments completed online; objective and essay exams administered at secure testing centers; and, in the case of student teachers enrolled in WGU's teachers college, supervised observations in local schools. Bachelor's and master's degree candidates must also complete a final project and defend it orally.

The school doesn't care where or how students learn the material. They might already know it, or they might have to learn it from one of the 200 learning resources—a mix of online courses, CDs with website components, and self-paced “e-learning” modules—that WGU licenses. The important thing is that they prove their mastery of the subject.

“Just because it's online doesn't mean it's easy. There was a lot of work involved,” said Amanda Clark, 25, of Dallas, Georgia, a suburb of Atlanta. In January, Clark was one of 44 ecstatic graduates to attend WGU's most recent commencement ceremonies, which were held in a rented hall at the University of Utah, about seven miles from the sleek, eight-story office building where WGU is headquartered. (Another 199 graduates were able to watch the ceremonies on a webcast.)

There to cheer Clark on as she received her bachelor's degree in interdisciplinary studies from WGU's teachers college were her husband, two children and parents. The occasion marked not one but two important milestones: They had flown on an airplane for the first time to be in Salt Lake City; and Clark, an honors student who had dropped out of high school shortly after getting married and giving birth, went through her first graduation ceremony. It probably won't be her last: She has since enrolled in another distance institution's master's degree program, which she plans to continue when she starts a new job teaching first grade next year.

Also in attendance was former Governor Romer, who was



WGU President Robert Mendenhall says the largely online university is small but influential: “Demonstrating a different model is more important than our size or enrollment growth.”



Western Governors University Provost and Academic Vice President Douglas “Chip” Johnstone came to WGU after 18 years at Empire State, the distance learning arm of the State University of New York.

awarded an honorary doctoral degree from the institution he helped to conceive. “It is really fun to have an idea that works,” Romer said in his commencement address. It wasn’t always clear that this one would. Said Romer, who is now superintendent of the Los Angeles Unified School District, “This has been a steep hill, sometimes a rocky road.”

In part, that was because of the western governors themselves, who had created enormous expectations for the institution, said David Longanecker, executive director of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE). “Governors are people who think big and talk big,” Longanecker said. “So the hype was going to be big.”

“There was a lot of hype about it,” agreed Peter Ewell, vice president of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems. Ewell was instrumental in designing WGU’s first curriculum, and he serves on the university’s assessment committee, which is meant to ensure the integrity

of the testing process. “It became a huge political symbol of a threat to higher education.”

That was never the intention, according to Romer. “The objective was not to change higher education but to expand the outreach,” he said. “We saw it as filling in the gaps more than anything,” said former Wyoming Governor Jim Geringer, now chairman of WGU’s board of trustees. “But other higher education institutions saw it as direct competition for dollars,” he said. “If we didn’t intend to shake up higher ed, we did anyways.”

That became painfully clear when Geringer met with the provost and faculty senate at the University of Wyoming to explain the concept of WGU. “They were very defensive and even disparaging about it,” Geringer said. “We didn’t view it as a diversion of existing funds from higher education, but they

certainly did. They saw it as a poke in the eye with a sharp stick.”

Even people who liked the concept were skeptical. “I thought it was an interesting and novel and bold approach, so I was hopeful that it would work. But frankly, I wasn’t optimistic,” Longanecker said.

To some extent, Longanecker’s skepticism proved justified. Predictions that tens of thousands of students would rush to enroll turned out to be off by a long shot; for the first four years, enrollment remained in the hundreds. An idea that WGU would generate money by acting as a broker, maintaining a vast catalog of distance courses offered by institutions throughout the west, quickly proved unrealistic. And it took far longer than the governors anticipated for the school to gain accreditation and secure additional funding to come up with programs that would attract more students.

One major turning point came in 2001, when the school was awarded a \$10 million, five-year U.S. Department of Education grant to develop a teachers college, which opened two years later and now accounts for two-thirds of enrollment. Another came in 2003, when WGU, which was already accredited by the Distance Education Training Council, was awarded regional accreditation. “We had no concept for how much it took to get something like this off the ground,” admitted Geringer.

In the intervening years, WGU largely fell off the educational radar screen. In fact, said Longanecker, “I think a lot of people presume that it failed.”

They are wrong.

It is true that WGU has not lived up to its early hype. “You don’t hear people talking about it anymore. Whereas, when it first started, that was all people talked about,” said Carol Twigg, president and CEO of the National Center for Academic Transformation, a nonprofit organization that focuses on the use of technology to improve student outcomes and reduce educational costs. WGU may be doing a fine job for the small population it serves, Twigg said, but because it has remained so small in the face of an explosion in online and adult learning, she added, “I don’t think it’s having much of an impact on the landscape of higher education.”

What WGU has done, said Longanecker, is provide evidence in favor of competency-based education. “I don’t think it’s the wave of the future, but I do think it provides a way we can say: You can do this. You can focus on competency,” he said.

“It didn’t fulfill all of the dreams we had,” Peter Ewell acknowledged. “But it’s in pretty solid shape now. I’m just sorry that it took so long.”

Since receiving regional accreditation three years ago, WGU’s enrollment has skyrocketed, growing more than tenfold to 5,200 students from all 50 states and ten foreign countries. And enrollment is projected to double to 10,000 within the next two to four years, increasing to 15,000 by 2013, said WGU President Robert Mendenhall.

The school has awarded nearly 700 associate’s, bachelor’s and master’s degrees, and it has expanded its initial offering of four degree programs to 29 degree programs in education, information technology and business, as well as seven post-baccalaureate programs for educators. This fall, it will open a

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new college of health professions, its fourth degree area. Student surveys have been overwhelmingly positive. And Mendenhall has been appointed to the U.S. Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education.

WGU's 5,200 students constitute just a tiny percentage of the estimated 1.2 million students

enrolled nationally in online programs. But the numbers are only part of the story, said Mendenhall, who came to WGU in 1999 with a background in technology-based education. (He co-founded and was president and CEO of a computer-based education and training company, and he later ran IBM's K-12 education division.) "Demonstrating a different model is more important than our size or enrollment growth," Mendenhall said.

"We'll always have a lot of people who have never heard of us," said Douglas "Chip" Johnstone, WGU provost and academic vice president, who also arrived at WGU in 1999, after 18 years at Empire State College, a distance-learning institution that is part of the State University of New York. But already, said Johnstone, "We have changed the nature of the discussion and the nature of the results."

"I think it's a model that many of us will have to learn from as student outcomes become more critical," said WICHE's Longanecker. "They aren't *the* model. But they are *a* model."

Margaret Miller, director of the Center for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Virginia, was more circumspect. "I would say the jury's still out. But I'm very glad someone's trying to do this," she said. "There is no challenge more important than how we get more people better educated in the world." Combining online learning with competency-based assessments, she said, seems to be the most promising strategy. "If they have found a way to do this, then we all owe them a huge debt."

They have, and we do, according to Sandra Elman, president of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities.

"A lot of people wanted to be very cynical about this institution," said Elman, who chaired the Interregional Accrediting Council that was formed specifically to accredit WGU. (The council, which brought together four of the nation's regional accrediting associations, disbanded after awarding WGU accreditation in 2003; the Northwest Commission has since taken over sole accrediting responsibility for the institution.)

Elman was not one of the cynics. But, she said, "I was very, very cautious and very conscious of the fact that anything that we did with a fairly experimental, innovative university

should not in any way compromise the integrity or principles of regional accreditation." And she was concerned that the governors might tire of the long and arduous accreditation process. According to board chairman Geringer, Elman's concern was justified. "There were a few of us who just hung on by our fingernails," he said.

To its credit, Elman said, the leadership of WGU stayed the course. And today, she considers WGU "a success story," that "is affording access to quality programs through its competency-based virtual delivery programs."

Each of those programs has been designed by one of three "program councils"—one for each degree area WGU offers—of industry experts and faculty from WGU and other institutions. They identify the skills and knowledge a student needs in order to graduate. Then a separate council of outside experts (the "assessment council") identifies or develops ways to check those competencies, which are graded, either by computer or hired graders, on a pass/fail basis.

Exams are administered at authorized testing centers. In order to pass, students must achieve the equivalent of a B grade or better; where possible, WGU also uses accepted standardized national exams. Students can attempt each assessment twice before incurring additional tuition charges.

WGU does not develop its own courses or materials, but instead licenses them from about 30 sources. These include courses from traditional educational institutions such as Chadron State College in Chadron, Nebraska, and Chemeketa Community College in Salem, Oregon; online learning modules produced by for-profit educational providers such as Teachscape; and corporate training in information technology from NETg. Students may also learn from textbooks or other independent study materials; WGU contracts with the University of New Mexico for the use of its library services.

It is the job of the WGU faculty to help students figure out which of these resources meet their individual needs. These so-called "faculty mentors" are academically qualified experts, most of whom hold a terminal degree in their field. But they don't actually teach. Instead, their job is to guide each of their students—80 is considered a full load—through a custom-made academic process.

The average age of a WGU student is 37, and 70 percent work full-time, often in their fields of study. Most programs



A January graduate of Western Governors University, 47-year-old Angie Lambert says WGU "didn't waste any of my time like other college classes have."

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do not require a minimum grade point average or a specific score on aptitude tests for admission, but the majority of students come to their programs with at least some proficiency in their degree area. WGU recognizes that their skills often have outpaced their educational credentials.

“We fill a hole that they don’t have the knowledge in, and we let them succeed and fly in the areas that they have already mastered,” explained Jennifer Smolka of Waxahachie, Texas, a WGU mentor since 2004 who is also the program coordinator for the master’s degree in education.

WGU administrators say that the system is not only more efficient, it is also more economical. Students can matriculate at the beginning of any month; they pay a flat fee of just under \$2,790 every six months, during which time they can progress as rapidly as they are able to pass assessments. (WGU will accept some transfer credits but none from upper-division courses.) Theoretically, it is possible to earn a degree from WGU without ever taking a single course or learning module through the school—with the exception of the required introduction, “Education Without Boundaries.” That has never happened, but some students have graduated in as little as six months.

“One of the great things we can demonstrate is [higher

education] doesn’t have to cost \$15,000 a year, and it doesn’t have to go up by eight percent a year,” said WGU President Mendenhall. The school would not release its current annual budget, but officials said that total revenues for the last fiscal year were \$19.3 million. This year, 85 to 90 percent of revenues will come from student tuition, which covers the entire cost of a WGU education; corporate donations and grants—which total about \$40 million to date—are used to develop new programs.

WGU can keep its costs down because it doesn’t have to build or maintain a physical campus or support athletic and other expensive activities that students at bricks-and-mortar institutions have come to expect. Nor does it have to pay its faculty to develop new courses, conduct research or grade students’ work. That frees up the school’s mentors to focus exclusively on their students. There are currently about 100 mentors; three to eight new ones are hired each month to keep up with enrollment growth.

Mentors are key to the WGU model, because they are more than just academic advisers. “We are a counselor, a tutor, a guide,” Smolka said. “We are the shoulder to lean on and the hand to pull you up out of the hole and to push you when you’re going. It’s a little bit of everything.”

WGU’s administrative and technical staff, which now numbers about 150, works out of the Salt Lake City headquarters, but like WGU students, mentors are spread across the country. So it is rare that Smolka has the

UPDATE **Western Governors University** **July 2008**

IN JANUARY 1998, Western Governors University was completing its initial planning phase, and was preparing to begin a “pilot” period, when *National CrossTalk* published the first of two articles about the fledgling university. The champions of WGU promised that “distance education” methods emphasizing computer and television instruction would provide a new and less expensive alternative to traditional campuses.

The big predictions that were offered risked making a more modest success look like a failure, and that is arguably what happened.

At the beginning, there were concerns that political realities were creating pressure for a “fast start.” Some planners feared that WGU was making a mistake by promising more than it could deliver, at least initially.

Distance education was a relatively new phenomenon, and WGU was acknowledged as a trailblazer. Still, the university’s pilot program in 1998 was very small. There were 200 students, only one faculty “mentor,” and a lot of questions. One of the doubters who was quoted in the 1998 article said, “The hype is out in front of the infrastructure. There is a substantial disconnect between the PR about WGU and what is actually there.”

By 2006, when *National CrossTalk* reported on WGU again, the university had grown to an enrollment of 5,200 students from all 50 states and ten foreign countries, and had gained accreditation. Its novel “competency-based” approach to awarding degrees, although one that did not spread to other institutions, continued to offer a challenging alternative to traditional credit-hour programs.

But at the same time, other online education programs became commonplace, surpassing WGU in their size and impact.

In a 2008 interview, WGU President Robert Mendenhall said the perception that the university has failed to meet expectations is based on a misunderstanding of how the institution developed. “When the governors started this, the view was that this could be the online university that all the states would utilize—that all the states would deliver their online courses through WGU,” he said. “If you count up all the students in the western states, that would be tens of thousands, but that never happened. It never even started to happen.” Instead, according to Mendenhall, “the model fundamentally changed.”

“I think there are a number of ways to measure impact,” Mendenhall added. “One of our clear missions was to establish a new model for higher education—in essence, one that measures learning as opposed to time, measuring what students know, and graduating them based on that, rather than on the number of credit hours they have accumulated.”

The big predictions that were offered for Western Governors University risked making a more modest success look like a failure, and that is arguably what happened.

In 2008, WGU’s enrollment reached 10,000, and is projected to increase to 15,000 by 2011. Mendenhall pointed out that these figures are two years ahead of the projections offered in the 2006 article. “It’s a little faster than we had anticipated,” he said. WGU has awarded more than 700 degrees, and there are now more than 3,000 graduates of the university.

opportunity to meet her charges in person. Still, she said, they develop close relationships through regular e-mails and phone conversations. "Instead of getting a new professor every 16 weeks, you have somebody who's there throughout the whole program with you," said Smolka, who has a Ph.D. in educational computing with an emphasis in distance learning, and formerly taught at the University of North Texas. "I know and have a better relationship with my students in this model than I have had in ten years of other higher education experience."

Beyond the personal satisfaction of helping students gain an education, there are monetary incentives. WGU does not offer tenure, and WGU officials declined to provide salary figures or even a range of salaries. But compensation—not only for mentors but also for all employees, including senior administrators—is based primarily on the success of the school's students: their progress, retention, satisfaction and graduation rate.

So far, WGU appears to be doing well in all of these areas. The school has not been offering bachelor's degrees long enough to be able to calculate a six-year graduation rate, but the one-year retention rate is more than 70 percent. Compared to their peers, WGU students do well on national standardized exams, school officials say. For instance, WGU students graduating with a bachelor's degree in human resources management have a 91 percent pass rate on the Society for Human Resources Management certification exam, compared

to a national pass rate of 67 percent.

In a 2005 survey of 1,771 students, 92.5 percent said that overall they were satisfied with their studies at WGU. About 85 percent of the 693 degrees WGU has granted were conferred within the past two years, so the school has not yet conducted a longitudinal study of its graduates, though it plans to launch one within the next year. But a preliminary follow-up study of two groups of 32 graduates found that 80 percent said they had been promoted within two years after earning their degree. "Overwhelmingly, they expressed great satisfaction with the degree and what it had done for their careers," said WGU Provost Johnstone.

That was certainly true of the students who attended the graduation commencement in January, WGU's tenth.

Angie Lambert of Evanston, Wyoming, enrolled at WGU's teachers college because the closest four-year institution was



Amanda Clark and her daughter Aubrey came from a suburb of Atlanta, Georgia, to attend the January graduation ceremony in Salt Lake City.

"We graduated 2,300 students in the last two years," Mendenhall said. "We had 5,200 students two years ago, so more than half of those students have graduated already, and those numbers will get bigger every year."

In late 2006, WGU won accreditation from the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, making it the only online teachers college to be accredited by the organization. The teachers college accounts for nearly two-thirds of WGU's enrollment.

There are now 36 degree programs, plus several post-baccalaureate programs at WGU. "We have introduced new degrees in the health college," Mendenhall said, referring to the College of Health Professions, which the university launched in fall 2006. "There is an M.B.A. in healthcare management, an MS in health education, two master's degrees in nursing, and a bachelor's in nursing for existing RNs." The university also has new programs in special education and educational leadership.

But WGU is no longer at the forefront of distance education. "Everyone's doing it now," Mendenhall said. "Most of it isn't very good. Most of it is just putting the classroom on the computer, a mode of distribution," he said, adding that WGU has a different emphasis.

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"We are at the vanguard of the national focus on affordability and accessibility," he said. "Over 75 percent of WGU students are underserved, coming from one of four categories: low income, minority, rural, or first-generation (college student). In the key parameters in the national debate on access, affordability and accountability, WGU is a leading example of how a new model can address those concerns."

Tuition at WGU increased by \$100 in September 2008, to \$2,890 per six-month term. "It is the first increase in three years," Mendenhall said. "We are quite focused on delivering higher education cost-effectively and without double-digit tuition increases."

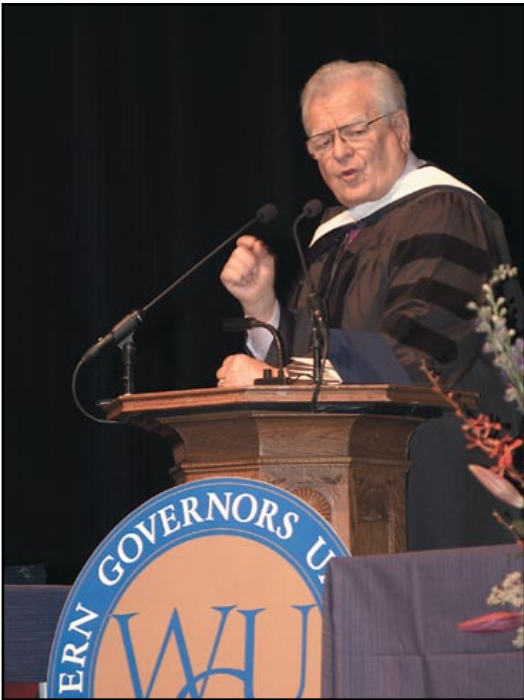
When Congress reauthorized the Higher Education Act in 2007, distance education was made eligible for full financial aid. "That's a huge national impact," Mendenhall said. "We can't take all the credit for it, because online ed has grown significantly in the last ten years. But we were one of the earlier ones, and instrumental in getting financial aid for distance education."

Congress has also made competency programs eligible for financial aid. "In essence, they said that programs that utilize direct assessment of learning, in lieu of clock hours or credit hours, are eligible for federal financial aid," Mendenhall said.

The competency-based approach is in step with a larger national emphasis on outcomes in education, but Mendenhall is hard-pressed to cite examples of such programs elsewhere in higher education. "This has made it much easier for other institutions to adopt this type of model, but we cannot point to another institution that does it that way," he said.

"That's the reason we started as a new institution," Mendenhall added. "It's very difficult to start a higher education institution. But that's easier than changing one."

—Todd Sallo



Former Colorado Governor Roy Romer spoke at the Western Governors University graduation in January. Romer and former Utah Governor Mike Leavitt were instrumental in starting WGU.

in Salt Lake City, and she couldn't afford to spare the hour it would have taken to commute each way. "I loved the WGU program," said Lambert, who already had earned an associate's degree from Western Wyoming Community College before she enrolled at WGU in September 2003. "It didn't waste any of my time like other college classes have."

And the WGU degree paid off. Even before she formally graduated in January with a bachelor's degree in interdisciplinary studies, Lambert had been offered—and had started—a new job teaching fourth grade.

WGU also serves

urban residents who need the convenience of anytime, anyplace learning. "What we've discovered is that access is just as much an issue for working adults as rural residents," said Mendenhall.

That was the case for Brian Taylor of Salt Lake City, who graduated with a Bachelor of Science in business with an emphasis in information technology management. "College was a dream I had as long as I could remember," said the 39-year-old Taylor. But after graduating from high school in 1985, Taylor had to go to work to help support his parents and siblings, and he later had to continue working to support his wife and daughter.

For years, Taylor worked in information technology without a degree. But in the late '90s he began to realize it might be holding him back. "More and more, I was finding clients who would say, 'Well, do you have a degree?'" said Taylor. "There was business that I was not able to do because I didn't have a degree."

So he was thrilled to discover WGU. "I was looking for something that would allow me to take the experience I already had in the workplace and apply that street-smart knowledge to my studies," he said.

Now that he is armed with that college degree, said Taylor, "I am confident that I can go into any business. And I have the credential to say my services are worth X, and my clients will have no qualms about paying for it, because they'll know they're getting a quality service."

Not every student is so wildly enthusiastic. One said that while he was pleased that WGU is allowing him to finish up his degree in marketing management both quickly and efficiently, supports its competency-based model, and has an excellent relationship with his mentor, he also has a litany of complaints. His admissions counselor was "abysmal," he

said, adding that he found some of WGU's software systems to be "unreasonably slow and poorly designed," and that he has been disturbed by an overall lack of attention to detail. "I routinely find spelling and grammar errors in all manner of communication from WGU, including course materials, and even in assessments," e-mailed the student, who asked not to be identified. "Is no one editing these documents?"

The same student also wrote, "They've really got something to prove, which I would expect would push them to strive for a high level of competence in everything they do. But unfortunately, I don't think they've risen sufficiently to those challenges, and it leaves them open to a lot of criticism."

WGU is well aware of this student's concerns, which it has taken seriously. So seriously, in fact, that Johnstone offered to waive the student's tuition in exchange for ongoing, regular reports. Some of the student's concerns have already been addressed, Johnstone said, and probably would have been even without the student's input, though perhaps not as quickly. "I consider him to be a really valuable resource to us," Johnstone said.

That willingness to engage in serious self-reflection is one of the things about WGU that impressed Sandra Elman, who led the accrediting team. It is one of the reasons she is so optimistic about the school's future. "It engages as an institution in its own self-examination as to what it needs to do," Elman said.

"I think that it will continue to offer quality programs," Elman added. "Through its own ongoing assessment of its student base and societal needs—because it's very conscious of societal needs—it will shape and reshape its programs to best meet the needs of students who partake in this kind of higher education."

And there are more and more of them. Because of that, WGU officials said their next challenge is twofold: to find qualified, good mentors; and to keep up with technological advances. If they continue to do so, Mendenhall said, there's no practical limit to the number of students they can eventually enroll. "I don't think we have aspirations to grow and grow and grow," he explained. "But on the other hand, we don't have any caps in mind." ♦

Freelance writer Kathy Witkowsky lives in Missoula, Montana.

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