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Guest columnist

Washington state's partnership with online universities offers quality option

Western Governors University President Robert W. Mendenhall argues that the proposed partnership between the online, nonprofit university would provide state residents with another quality option for higher education.

By Robert W. Mendenhall

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THE proposal currently in the Legislature to partner with Western Governors University to create WGU Washington has led a few critics to question if a low-cost, online university can also be high quality.

WGU is a nonprofit university founded by 19 U.S. governors, including former Washington Gov. Mike Lowry, to expand education access and capacity. The university was not created to replace traditional schools — it is designed to meet the educational needs of working adults (the average student age is 36) who are not able to attend those traditional colleges and universities. The creation of WGU Washington will provide state residents another option for college at no cost to the state.

While there are other online options in higher education, WGU is unique — not because it is online, but because it uses competency-based learning. This academic model, which uses technology to teach and allows students to advance when they demonstrate their knowledge, decreases the average time required to graduate without sacrificing academic rigor. Unlike traditional models, which allow a student to pass with a "C" or even a "D," WGU's model requires students to earn at least a "B" on all assignments and exams before they can pass a course.

WGU offers rigorous, comprehensive bachelor's and master's degree programs. As is the case with more traditional universities, WGU bachelor's degrees require students to complete the equivalent of two years of liberal-arts coursework, followed by the equivalent of two years of upper-division work in their major field of study. WGU is fully accredited by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, the same body that accredits the University of Washington.

In independent surveys of employers of WGU graduates, 95 percent said WGU grads meet or exceed their expectations; 56 percent said they exceed their expectations. In addition, 97 percent rate WGU grads as equal to or better than employees they have hired from other universities and 94 percent said they would hire another WGU graduate.

While study at WGU takes place online, students have a high level of interaction with faculty. In the most recent National Study of Student Engagement (NSSE), WGU freshmen rated the level of student-faculty interaction higher than freshmen attending "brick-and-mortar" schools.

Each WGU student works one-on-one with a faculty mentor, connecting regularly via telephone, email and instant messaging. In addition, each course has a faculty mentor (almost always a Ph.D.), who leads discussions and answers questions through phone calls, emails, online communities and webinars. This allows students to interact with faculty whenever they need help and guidance, something not available in most traditional universities.

Given the growing need for a more educated work force, it makes sense to expand high-quality college opportunities for Washington residents. Creation of WGU Washington would do just that, offering the best of nontraditional opportunities — high quality, affordability, flexibility and reduced time to graduation — at no cost to the state.

Robert W. Mendenhall is president of Western Governors University.