



## WGU Texas Comments on House Higher Education Committee

### Interim Charge #4

*Study the prevalence of online courses and degrees in higher education. Examine how institutions providing online courses and programs are accredited, particularly courses and programs originating from states other than Texas. Evaluate how students whose courses and degrees are primarily online perform in terms of persistence and degree completion versus students who take courses in traditional classroom settings. Study labor market outcomes for students with primarily online courses and degrees versus more traditional programs.*

#### About WGU / WGU Texas

Western Governors University (WGU) is a non-profit, accredited, fully online university that was established in 1997 by 19 state governors and enrolls more than 123,000 students nationwide. **WGU Texas** is one of the largest state affiliates of WGU, with approximately 13,000 students currently enrolled, and was created by the Governor of Texas in 2011 by [Executive Order RP75](#) to expand access to affordable higher education for Texas residents through online, competency-based programs that address key workforce needs.

WGU Texas' defining principle is putting students at the center of everything we do—every initiative, policy, or decision is evaluated and prioritized based on its impact on student success. We have excelled at creating flexible, personalized learning experiences that lead to great outcomes for our students and meet the needs of employers. We offer more than 60 bachelor's and master's competency-based degrees in four high demand fields: Business, IT, Health, and Teaching.

WGU Texas primarily serves students from underserved populations: 74% are underserved, 74% work full-time, 42% are first-generation, 22% are low-income, 20% are Hispanic, 15% are African American, 14% are active-duty military, veterans and military family members; and 9% live in rural counties.

We are more affordable than comparable institutions. We charge a flat-rate tuition for each 6-month term, currently \$3500 to \$5500, depending on the student's major, plus \$145 resource fee which covers all learning resources and online library. We offer competency-based education, which means students can draw on existing knowledge and skills to demonstrate mastery of course material and can move on to the next course, allowing them to complete an unlimited number of courses each term. Our students can also apply for federal grants and loans, and institutional scholarships, but are not eligible for state financial aid.

#### 1. Describe how accreditation works for online programs in general and WGU specific.

Accreditation status can give students an indication of a university's general quality and reputation. By attending a regionally accredited university, students are assured of a basic level of quality in education and services; credits are more likely to be transferable to other accredited institutions; the degree is more likely to be recognized by colleges and employers as a legitimate credential.

WGU is regionally accredited by the [Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities \(NWCCU\)](https://www.nwccu.org/). NWCCU is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education as the authority on the educational quality and institutional effectiveness of higher education institutions in the Northwest region of the United States. NWCCU accredits other major institutions such as the University of Washington, University of Oregon, Gonzaga University, University of Utah, Brigham Young University, and University of Idaho. NWCCU is equivalent to the Southern Association of Colleges & Schools (SACS), which accredits public and private, non-profit institutions of higher education in Texas and the Southern region. Regional accreditation is considered the highest form of accreditation given to institutions. Like traditional institutions, online institutions must adhere to the same eligibility requirements, standards of accreditation, and policies adopted by the regional accreditor. See: <https://www.wgu.edu/about/accreditation.html>

## 2. What are WGU's outcomes for students and employers?

WGU offers competency-based education which is knowledge-based, not time-based. Students advance by demonstrating their knowledge and abilities rather than accumulating credit hours. This model better serves adult learners who enroll with specific skills sets, allowing them to graduate faster and at their own pace. From day one, students are assigned a program mentor who works with the student from enrollment through graduation, providing regular guidance and instruction regarding their programs. Course instructors work with students as they engage specific courses proving subject matter expertise and individualized instruction. *For more information on CBE, <https://www.wgu.edu/about/competency-based-education/what-is-cbe.html>*

**Graduate Success.** The WGU-Harris Poll is conducted online annually and tracks post-graduation employment outcomes. In 2019, the survey included 1,247 WGU graduates and 1,437 national, non-WGU graduates from the four degree fields that we offer. The results are: 76% said the majority of competencies related to work (compared to 75% nationally); 95% were employed (compared to 93% nationally); 88% were employed in their degree field (compared to 88% nationally); and 83% were employed full time (compared 81% nationally).

**Graduate Satisfaction.** The WGU-Harris poll also measures graduates' satisfaction with their education experience. The 2019 results are: 85% are satisfied with overall experience; 86% are satisfied with academic help; 96% would choose WGU again; and 97% have recommended WGU to others.

**A Better Return on Student Investment.** On average, WGU graduates increase their pre-enrollment salary by \$11,800 per year within two years of graduation (compared to the national average of \$4,500), and by \$20,300 per year within four years of graduation (compared to the national average of \$8,200).

**Reducing Debt.** The average student loan debt for WGU undergraduates who borrowed for school and who graduated between July 1, 2018, and June 30, 2019, is \$14,941—a decrease of \$433 year over year and half the national average. While 65 percent of graduating undergraduates across the nation borrowed for their education, according to The Institute for College Access and Success (TICAS), only 57 percent of graduating WGU undergraduates borrow student loans. Recent research from Goldman Insights—commissioned by the Texas Public Policy Foundation—revealed that while pursuing their teaching degree, non-WGU students graduated with 49 percent more student debt than WGU students.

In 2013, WGU launched its [Responsible Borrowing Initiatives](#) (RBI), a personalized student advising program aimed at encouraging students to borrow only what they need—not everything they are eligible for. Since then, the average borrowing per student per year (among undergraduates who choose to take out loans) has decreased by 30 percent—a big factor in the reduction of student debt at graduation.

**Employer Satisfaction.** Based on a 2019 survey of 300 employers of WGU graduates by Harris Poll: 96% of employers say they will hire another WGU graduate; 95% rated the job performance of WGU graduates as excellent or very good; 97% said WGU graduates meet or exceed expectations; 97% said WGU grads are prepared for their jobs; 95% rate the soft skills of WGU graduates as equal to or better than graduates from other institutions.

*See also Forbes article on “WGU-The Best Kept Secret in Online Colleges”:*

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/dianahembree/2017/08/10/western-governors-university-the-best-kept-secret-in-online-colleges/#5dd31c2c6b48>

### **3. Provide WGU degree completion data and how WGU compares to other comparable universities.**

The vast majority of WGU students (95%) have previous college experience before enrolling at WGU. As such, they do not qualify as first-time, full-time students and therefore their success at WGU is not counted in the U.S. Department of Education’s College Scorecard data. When graduation rates are calculated for all students, WGU’s 6-year graduate rate for undergraduate students is 49%, which continue to be above the national average of 38% for comparable institutions serving adult learners. WGU’s 4-year graduate rate for graduate students is 43% in 2019. Our goal is to achieve a 65% 6-year graduation rate by 2025. *For more information on our graduation rates, see:*

<https://www.wgu.edu/about/students-graduates/retention-graduation-rates.html>

The average time it takes to graduate from WGU Texas is about 2.5 years for a bachelor's degree, which costs about \$15,000. By contrast, to complete the 120 credits that are usually needed to earn a bachelor's degree, students usually spend at least four years in college. The national average is over 5 years. Bachelor’s degrees online may take longer to complete than a master’s program because they include general education and lower-division courses. Master’s programs are usually more specific and detailed, require fewer credits, and take less time to complete.

### **4. How does WGU Texas contribute to the supply of high-need professions (nurses, teachers, other)?**

**Health Professions College (including nursing):** 3,904 graduated, 2,668 currently enrolled. WGU Texas is the second largest producer of nurses in Texas. The WGU prelicensure nursing program is accredited by the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education. The curriculum is designed by experts and employers to ensure students learn and master the skills to excel as a nurse in the field. Our nursing graduates’ passage rate for the National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX) over the last three years has been well above the 80 percent benchmark, with a 100 percent passage rate in 2019 for WGU Texas’ [BSN prelicensure program](#). *For a list of all health and nursing programs, see:* <https://www.wgu.edu/online-nursing-health-degrees.html>

**IT College:** 1,730 graduated, 2,706 currently enrolled. WGU recently launched the [Information Technology Career Framework MicroBachelors Program](#), which includes three courses that are self-paced with a recommended length. Each course is a standalone course and directly translates to a WGU course, which effectively accelerates the time-to-degree after completing the certificate:

- Information Technology Foundation: 9-10 hours per week, for 6 weeks
- Network and Security Foundations: 9-10 hours per week, for 8 weeks
- Scripting and Programming Foundations: 9-10 hours per week, for 8 weeks

WGU has transitioned to a new digital platform that allows us to develop additional standalone, non-degree micro-credentials to support multiple types of students with multiple learning pathways and multiple price points that will ultimately provide greater access, flexibility and affordability. Beginning in late spring 2021, we will launch additional micro-credentials in IT, healthcare, and business. *For a list of all IT degrees, see:* <https://www.wgu.edu/online-it-degrees.html>

**Business College:** 5,498 graduated, 5,234 currently enrolled. *For a list of all business degrees, see:* <https://www.wgu.edu/online-business-degrees.html>

**Teachers College:** 2,834 graduated, 2,238 currently enrolled. *For a list of all teaching degrees, see:* <https://www.wgu.edu/online-teaching-degrees.html>

## 5. What are WGU's recommendations for addressing the digital divide?

**Recommendation: Expand Access to Reliable Broadband.** While the internet continues to be a tool for educational transformation, it is more than that: COVID-19 has shown that broadband is the backbone for all education, not to mention remote working, healthcare, and everyday interactions. While students will eventually return to classrooms, education will forever be inextricably linked to broadband, and policymakers must commit to closing stark gaps in access to broadband.

WGU supports state and local policy efforts to expand reliable broadband access to support education delivery to students. Reliable broadband allows students everywhere to access education and ongoing skill training at any time. In order to close equity gaps in educational attainment for students with low socioeconomic status and for individuals of color, broadband access is critical. According to a 2017 U.S. Census report, 36.4% of Hispanic and 30.3% of Black households (as opposed to 21.2% of white households) do not have access to the internet. With the proliferation of high-quality, online options for postsecondary education, the continued lack of access for individuals to basic broadband service can be the lone barrier to a student's education, career, and overall well-being. Broadband is the cornerstone of a community's ability to train, retain, and attract workers to fill vital roles like teachers and nurses. States, localities, businesses, education providers, and the federal government must work together to lead efforts across multiple agencies and regions to provide reliable broadband access.

**Recommendation: Promote and Expand Digital Literacy.** An important part of access to learning must include an increase in digital literacy skills for students. Digital literacy goes deeper into students' fundamental ability to interact effectively and be successful in a technology-reliant society. States must lead the way in increasing basic digital literacy skills for the millions of Americans who cannot use a computer and are not comfortable with online learning. Businesses, governments, and foundations have been making strides in bridging the digital literacy gap by making devices and training available to learners of all ages. Existing resources such as public libraries and adult literacy programs have been

utilized to advance digital learning and provide access points for low-income, urban, and rural individuals. Free digital literacy curriculum is also available to the public to cover topics such as online communication and collaboration, interaction with hardware and devices, computer privacy, safety, and security. Some states are proposing to provide structure and funding to digital literacy initiatives (examples include Arizona and Utah), while others, such as Oregon, are promoting digital literacy as a function of their Rural Broadband Office. Endeavors such as these are necessary to address digital blind spots at a foundational level and support learners as they enter and advance through their education and careers.

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