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## BUSINESS

### PERSONAL FINANCE

# Nonprofit takes new approach to education

Western Governors University lets students study at their own pace and earn their degrees online.

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Halfway into her junior year, Orleatha Smith dropped out of college. She had been juggling a full academic course load at Loyola Marymount University, a pricey private college near Los Angeles, and a full-time job.

And not incidentally, Smith was building up a pile of student debt to pay her tuition.

"I thought I was going to die," she said. "I just couldn't do it anymore. It was too much."

But Smith eventually got her degree from the school that Time magazine once called "the best college you've never heard of" — Western Governors University — which takes a different approach to online education.

"I've tried them all and this is great for working folks," she said. "If you don't have the time and you don't have the money, this place eliminates all the excuses. You can do it when you can and it's inexpensive."

Smith isn't the only one singing the nonprofit university's praises. Jamie Merisotis, chief executive of the Lumina Foundation — the nation's largest education foundation — calls WGU a "disruptive innovator" that's likely to push the entire education system to change in positive ways.

WGU President Robert Mendenhall also recently won the McGraw Prize in Education awarded by McGraw-Hill Cos. to innovative educators. Judges cited the university's "flexibility, accessibility and affordability."

"They have a very promising model," Merisotis said. "We are excited about it because of the way they have positioned themselves to serve an adult audience."

What makes WGU unique? Although the entire school is online, each student has a mentor who works essentially as a college counselor, helping manage the student's course schedule and checking regularly on his or her progress. The course instructors hold webinars and online study sessions, and can be reached to help students having difficulty with their studies.

The mentors and instructors mostly work from their homes, keeping in contact with students online and over the phone.

WGU instructors don't get tenure that guarantees them a job, nor are they encouraged to publish academic papers. Instructors are evaluated based on how well their students do in class and whether their students are satisfied and progressing well in their programs.

Even more unusual is what the school terms its "competency-based model." In a nutshell, that means students study at their own pace. A student can go slowly, of course. But a student who knows the material can get through a class in record time. Whereas a bachelor's degree takes at least four years to get at a traditional university, the average WGU graduate receives a BA in 2½ years.

Smith said her classes at WGU were challenging, but she completed one of her full-semester classes in a single week. Because she had been working in a related field for 13 years, she already knew almost everything being taught in the course. That allowed her to write the papers and take the tests for the course in record time.

"Instead of everybody coming to the same class and sitting there for the same period of time, we tailor education to the individual," WGU's Mendenhall

said. "Why should you sit in a class for four months when you know 95% of the material?"

Because the school is a nonprofit that's focused on making education accessible, it keeps a tight rein on tuition. Undergraduate students pay \$2,800 per semester. That pays for as many or as few units as they can manage to take. The average graduate pays less than \$15,000 for a four-year degree.

The online classes and the ability to progress at one's own pace have made the university a favorite among older students, Mendenhall said. The average age of WGU students is 36. Many are already juggling families and jobs. The vast majority — 82% — falls into what the education establishment calls "underserved" categories: poor, minority, rural or students who are the first in their families to pursue a college degree.

The National Study of Student Engagement, which rates both traditional and online universities, showed WGU as performing equal to or better than other private, nonprofit universities not directly supported by governmental bodies. The ratings were based on academic challenge, quality of advisors and overall educational experience.

Another survey found that 97% of graduates, like Smith, would recommend the university to a friend.

"We're here to demonstrate that higher education does not have to cost \$25,000 a year and have double-digit tuition increases every year to be high-quality," Mendenhall said. "We are really focused on whether we are serving our students."

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