

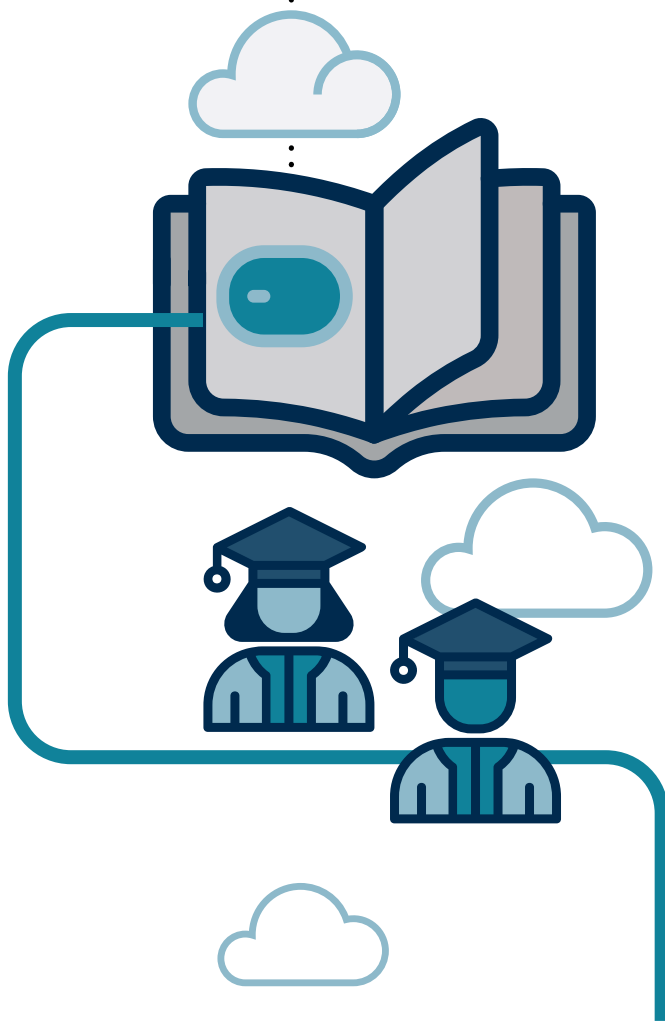
Answering the Most  
Common Questions about

# ONLINE COLLEGES

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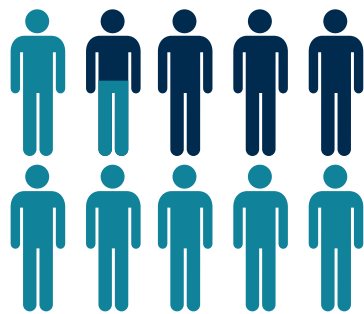
# Introduction



Choosing where—and how—to earn a postsecondary credential is one of the biggest decisions prospective students will make. For busy adults who are juggling work, family, and other personal obligations, it's important to choose a degree program that offers flexibility, personalized support, and a clear path to achieving one's goals.

Prospective students likely have a number of questions about online colleges, including the quality of the learning experience, financial assistance, and more. Here are some key facts to understand as you explore whether an online program is right for you.

# The Rise of Online Education



More than

## 6 million

**U.S. students (36 percent) were taking at least one undergraduate course online by fall 2019.**

Increasingly, students are demanding flexibility in their education, and some colleges are seeking to meet that demand through a variety of online learning options. More than 6 million U.S. students (36 percent of all students) were taking at least one undergraduate course online by the fall of 2019, according to the [National Center for Education Statistics \(NCES\)](#)—and 2.4 million students (15 percent) were enrolled exclusively in online courses.

However, these figures likely underestimate the true extent of the online learning landscape, [Inside Higher Ed](#) reports, because they don't include students who enrolled after the fall. A separate analysis pegs student enrollment in online courses at nearly 52 percent for the 2019-20 school year.

Many traditional colleges have launched online learning programs, blurring the line between traditional and online institutions. Driving this trend is students' desire for more flexibility, with 69 percent of students in [one survey](#) saying more flexibility for attending classes and completing coursework was a key need.

The extent to which traditional colleges have adapted their class structures to accommodate online learning varies widely, though. Many prospective students question whether the flexibility those schools offer extends beyond, for example, allowing students to attend lectures remotely. As a result, many students are now considering online schools, like WGU, that have introduced flexibility into virtually every facet of the student experience.

# Online vs. Traditional Schools: Dispelling Common Myths



Colleges and universities of all sizes are expanding their online offerings. This trend began long before the pandemic, but COVID-19 has accelerated it by changing what students expect from their institution. As online programs expand, fully online or hybrid programs are likely to become more common in general.

**Here are some answers to questions people commonly submit to search engines about online degree programs.**

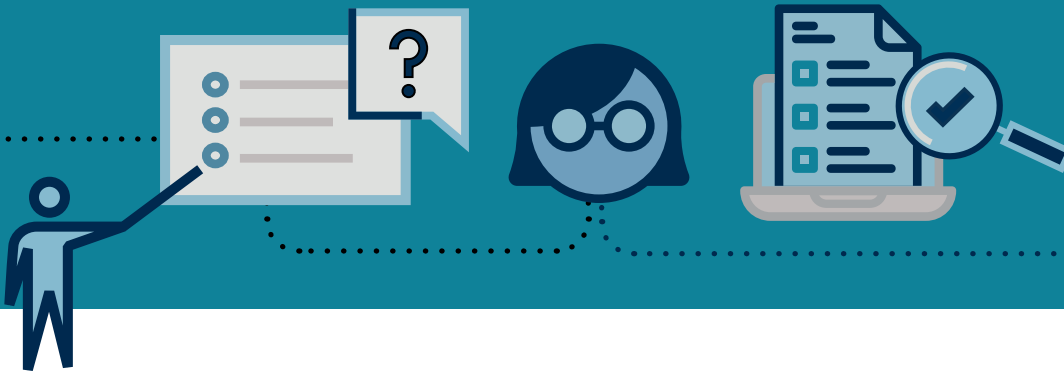
## Are online schools accredited?

When considering whether to attend an online university, students should pay close attention to whether that school and its programs are accredited. Choosing a school that is accredited by a recognized accrediting body is essential because it assures you of a university's quality and reputation. Attending an accredited university means your credits will transfer to most other accredited institutions, and your degree will be recognized and respected by other colleges and employers.

Universities and programs within universities can be accredited by a number of different

organizations—which organization depends on several factors, including the school's location and the program's subject matter. So it's important for prospective students to pay attention to the organizations that are accrediting the university they are considering. Accrediting bodies recognized by the U.S. Department of Education hold online institutions to the same quality standards as in-person programs.

Western Governors University is **accredited** by the **Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU)**, which is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation to



accredit postsecondary institutions. NWCCU also accredits many other major institutions, such as the University of Oregon, Gonzaga University, and the University of Utah.

### Are online classes easier?

Just because online programs don't require students to sit in a physical classroom each week doesn't mean they're easier. To be accredited, an online university must provide a rigorous and high-quality education. Like in-person classes, the level of difficulty often depends on the course.

A March 2020 study from [Gallup and 2U](#) notes that graduates of online learning programs say they experienced an engaging and rigorous education in a setting that equals—and sometimes tops—in-person learning.

In WGU's competency-based education (CBE) system of learning, students progressively master specific skills and knowledge at their own pace. Throughout, students have access to many learning materials. WGU's faculty and mentors are also there to provide instruction, tutoring, and additional help as needed.

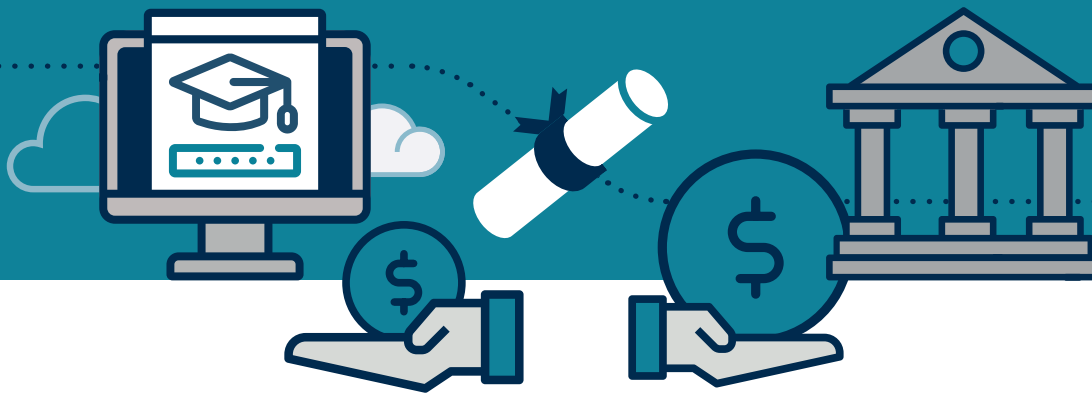
"The instructors are always there when you need them, and they are always willing to

help," says Q. Lynett Smith, who received her master's degree in the Management and Leadership Program at WGU. "The mentors are amazing and really make the program enjoyable. They cheer you on along the way and even offer support when you are just not feeling that you are capable of actually doing the work."

Evaluations at WGU are different than at many in-person programs, though. Students complete an assessment at the end of the course and must **earn the equivalent of a B or better** in order to pass. A student who doesn't meet this standard the first time has the opportunity to put extra work into mastering the material and retaking the assessment. Once they've displayed competency on the assessment, students receive full credit for the course.

**A student must earn the equivalent of a B or better on the course's final assessment in order to pass.**





## Is online college cheaper?

While WGU is more affordable than many in-person universities, what sets it apart is the value that students get for their tuition dollars. In 2020, the average cost for a bachelor's degree at a public nonprofit university was around \$9,400 per academic year, according to [NCES](#); at a private nonprofit university, that price rose to around \$36,700. In comparison, [WGU tuition](#) averages under \$8,000 per academic year.

WGU puts its students first, acting as a careful steward of their tuition dollars. Its tuition model is also more efficient than those of many other universities. WGU charges students for each six-month term, instead of charging per credit. This means students can take more classes each term without paying extra. Plus, WGU's competency-based approach to education emphasizes students' progress, rather than their time spent learning. Students complete courses as soon as they can prove they've mastered the material, instead of advancing only when the term ends. WGU's innovative tuition model and its competency-based approach allow students to set their own pace and earn a degree faster, which can save money.

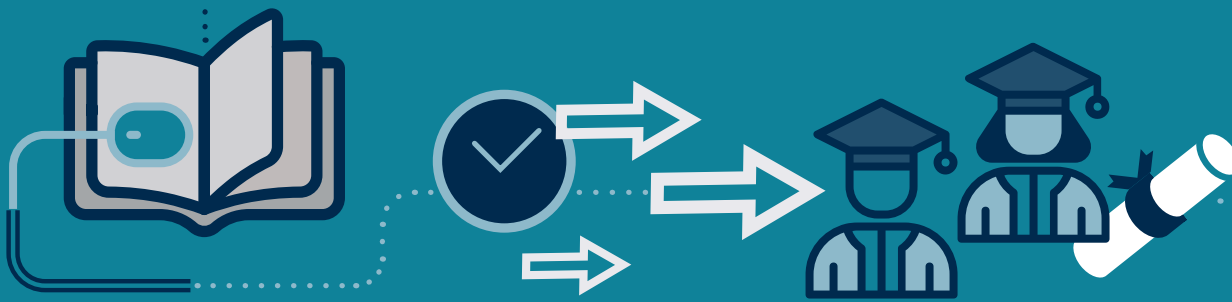
## Are online students eligible for financial aid?

Because WGU is approved by the U.S. Department of Education, students can make federal financial aid part of their plan for paying for school. You can apply via the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA®). Once WGU receives a student's completed FAFSA® application, the student must complete [additional financial aid application steps](#) on WGU's site. Students can use financial aid to pay for tuition, fees, and supplies they'll need for school—including technology such as a computer or internet access.

WGU strongly encourages students to make smart borrowing decisions when it comes to applying for financial aid or college loans.

## Do credits transfer to or from an online institution?

WGU has a generous transfer policy regarding students who have completed outside courses or degree programs and want to transfer their credits. As a



rule, WGU accepts transfer credits from accredited schools when the coursework matches requirements within the degree program that a student is transferring into. This is particularly true if you've attended one of WGU's many partner institutions with whom it has an articulation agreement for seamless credit transfer.

If students have taken classes or earned a degree from a community college or another accredited institution, they can almost always transfer those credits when they submit transcripts as part of a [college transfer evaluation](#).

### Can students graduate faster from an online college?

The speed at which students move through their programs depends on the structure of the school. Some online institutions and degree programs provide more control over how students choose to schedule their learning, while others follow a traditional pacing model.

Through WGU's competency-based learning model, students progress as soon as they've demonstrated mastery of a subject. This unique model measures knowledge rather than the amount of time a student spends logged into a

course. This means they don't have to wait until the end of the semester to move to the next course.

### Are there actual teachers in online schools?

As of fall 2021, WGU had 4,345 faculty members living and working across the United States, including 1,522 Program Mentors, 900 Instructors, and 1,259 Evaluators.

As with all colleges (online or in-person), faculty are key to the success of WGU and its students. As subject-matter experts with advanced degrees, instructors provide

**4,345** Faculty Members

**1,522** Program Mentors

**900** Instructors

**1,259** Evaluators







instruction and teaching on the course material when the student needs it, often in ways that are personalized to the individual student's needs or preferences.

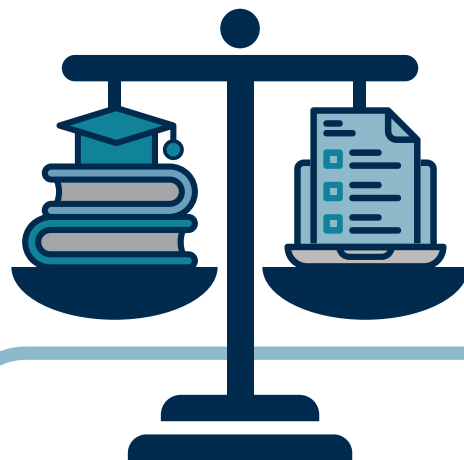
Evaluators are subject-matter experts who determine whether students have demonstrated competency based on assessments. They review assessments and submissions thoroughly and provide comprehensive feedback to help students develop their knowledge.

Another integral part of the success of WGU students is the [mentor program](#). Instead of assigning each student to an academic advisor, each incoming student is given a Program Mentor to help them stay on track. Program Mentors are experts in the field who work closely with a student to help them establish and stick to a study plan, from enrollment to graduation.

## So, what kind of program is better?

"Better" really depends on a student's individual needs and preferences. For instance, what kind of flexibility is needed? Do students have professional, personal, and/or family obligations that dictate how much free time they can dedicate to studying or completing coursework? Do students have the self-discipline needed to learn online, or might they be better served in a traditional classroom?

WGU was created to meet the needs of busy adults with some college experience, who lack a degree. Whatever their needs or preferences might be, students can enroll at WGU with the confidence that the majority of its graduates tend to see a strong, positive return on investment from their degree as well as positive employment outcomes.



# How Online College Works



Prospective students no doubt have many questions about the logistics of earning a degree online. Here are answers to some of the most common questions.

## How many hours should students expect to spend on coursework?

The depth of the material, as well as the types of assignments you're required to complete, can impact how much time it might take to move through a course. Although this varies from one institution to another, WGU students should expect to devote about 20 hours per week to coursework.

## What might a typical assignment entail?

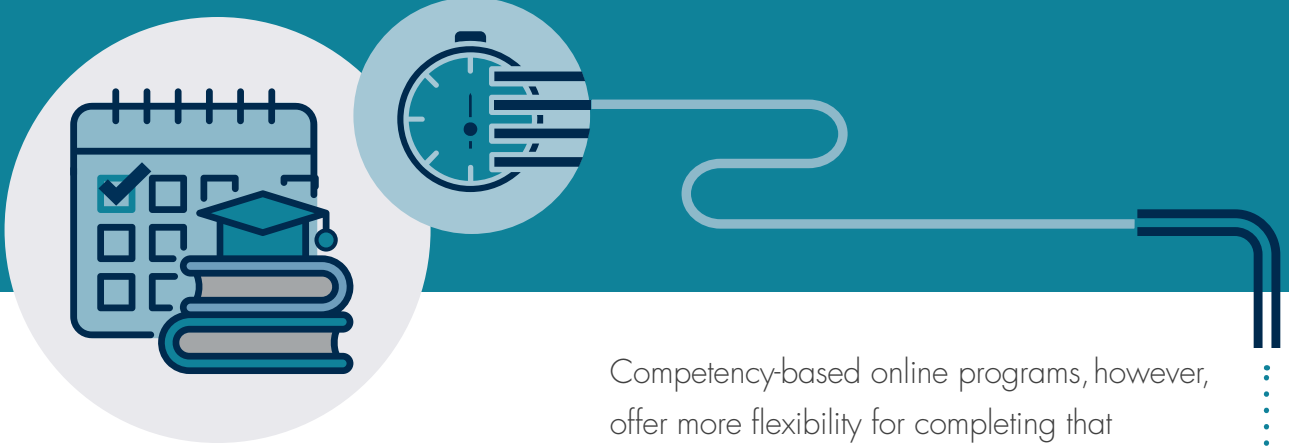
Again, this will vary from one institution to another. WGU's competency-based format uses a variety of assessments to measure students' skills and knowledge. These assessments, which give students the opportunity to demonstrate their

understanding, can take the form of objective exams, research papers, essays, or performance tasks. For instance, an assessment in the teaching program could require students to design an actual lesson plan, while an assignment for a business course might require a research paper on a particular business case study.

At most online colleges, deadlines for assignments are determined by teachers and vary depending on the depth and breadth of the assignment. In a competency-based model, students can complete assignments on their own time and at their own pace.

## What resources and teaching materials are used?

Most online colleges offer the same resources and materials as in-person colleges, giving their students opportunities



for them to learn in the ways that work best for them. Resources are typically delivered in a variety of formats, including e-books, library services, videos, presentations, online cohorts, and learning communities.

The vast majority of WGU courses, for example, rely on e-textbooks instead of traditional textbooks—and all learning resources are included in a low flat fee. Students have unlimited access to the library, which offers full-text journals, magazines, newspapers, and e-books, along with a 24/7 “Ask a Librarian” chat function. Learning resources also include Pearson MyMathLab and the Skillsoft Library.

### How does the workload compare to a traditional school?

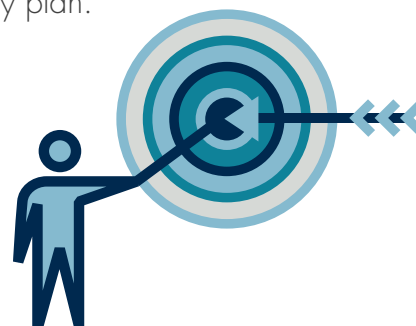
Generally, the number and type of assignments and activities in online courses are comparable to in-person education models. The goal for both models is for students to attain knowledge and mastery in a particular subject, so workloads for each model are accordingly similar in that pursuit.

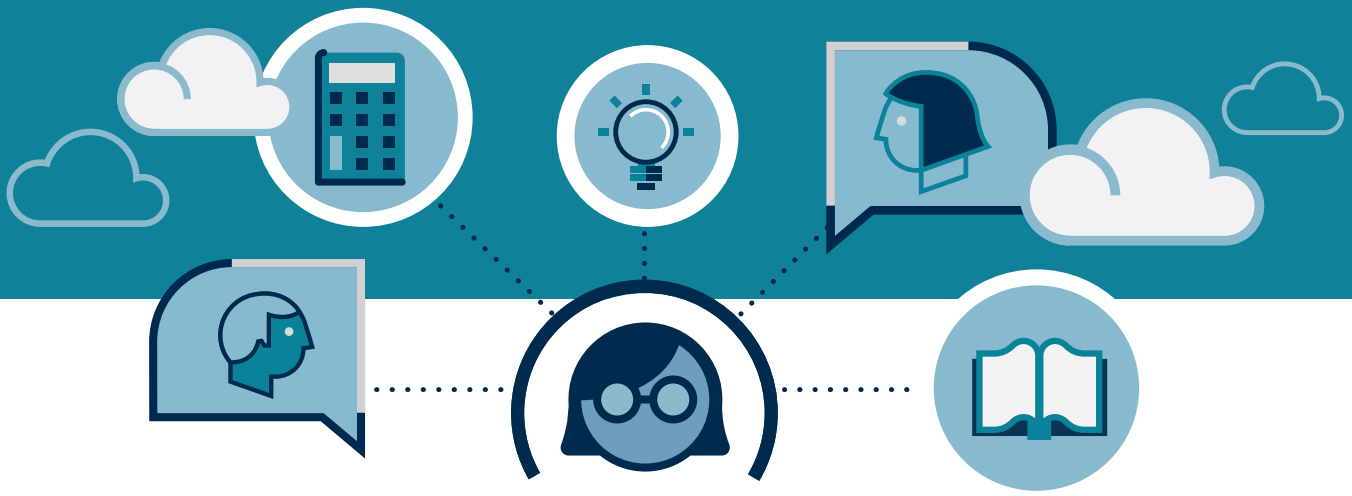
Competency-based online programs, however, offer more flexibility for completing that workload. Students can generally complete coursework when it’s convenient for them, as long as they continue to display on-time progress.

### What support is available to help students remain on track with their studies?

While it’s vital to have self-discipline and manage time effectively, most online schools offer resources aimed at helping students manage their workloads, including virtual office hours with instructors.

WGU’s Program Mentors are faculty members with advanced degrees and real-world experience working in the field their students are studying, and they offer students one-on-one guidance. Your Program Mentor creates personalized term plans that fit your life and goals; provides program instruction and guidance from enrollment to graduation; provides information on programs, policies, and procedures; and assesses your strengths and development needs to help establish a study plan.





## How do students interact with each other? Are there any in-person activities?

Online students have plenty of opportunities for social interactions, as most programs create student communities that foster interactions and camaraderie among students. Many schools encourage program-based social media groups, virtual meet-ups, school-oriented social hours, and group projects where students can get to know each other, find community, and socialize.

At WGU, each course features a “Course Chatter” function that gives students a place to discuss content, ask questions, and share insights. Many WGU courses offer cohort options that give students a chance to interact with the instructor and their student group.

“The Facebook group specific to your discipline will really play a big role in your success, as students provide feedback about

classes, what challenges they have faced, and how they have overcome those challenges,” says WGU alum Aaron Paul C. Roque, who earned his BS in Cybersecurity and Information Assurance and his MBA in IT Management from WGU.

Some WGU healthcare and nursing or teaching degrees require students to demonstrate their knowledge through in-person, hands-on experiences, such as clinicals or demonstration teaching. These can be prime opportunities for students to learn together.

## How do students interact with faculty? How do course instructors provide feedback?

Most faculty/student interaction happens online through discussion tools, virtual office hours, class sessions, and email.

At WGU, cohort meetings give students time with WGU faculty while they present course material in a live session. During these sessions, students can ask questions, get additional learning resources, and test their knowledge





with live polls and quizzes. Students can also use Course Chatter to interact with faculty and ask questions.

Instructors connect with students primarily on the phone or by chat or email as needed. They provide help when students request it, and they give feedback on each project or assignment.

### How can students get extra help?

WGU students can get help in a variety of ways, depending on their needs. The [Student Resource Hub](#) at WGU offers a number of resources. Instructors and mentors are available to help students via email or phone. "You and your mentor will set a time to meet through phone calls on a weekly or bi-weekly basis to make sure that you are reaching your goals," Roque says.

In addition, the Writing Center is available to graduate or undergraduate students working on any assessment. The Student Success Team provides a variety of services to help students be successful. Learning Communities at WGU are maintained by mentors and guide students toward appropriate learning resources. These are all accessible through the Student Portal, a hub for resources and materials. Students

also create study groups on Facebook and other social media platforms.

"The student Facebook group really helped me when I felt like giving up," says Q. Lynett Smith. "Everyone roots for each other, and most of us stick around to root the new students on during their program. It's a beautiful thing to see!"

### Are WGU professors qualified? How do students learn more about them?

WGU instructors are all qualified subject-matter experts, and they all have advanced degrees in the subject in which they teach. Typically, they have a terminal degree, such as a PhD, in their field. Students can learn more about them on the [Faculty portion](#) of WGU's website.

### Where can I find more information about the WGU experience?

[Click here](#) to watch a short video that explains what it's like to be a WGU student.



# Online College Outcomes



With the right online college, students can have a highly successful educational experience. Here's what you should know about online college outcomes.

## How do students and graduates rate their experience?

WGU graduates have high praise for their experience, as detailed in [WGU's 2020 Annual Report](#). According to the National Survey of Student Engagement, 79 percent of WGU grads said they would attend the same institution again if given the chance, compared to the national average of 39 percent. Seventy-one percent of WGU grads rated their entire educational experience at WGU as "excellent," and 65 percent rated their interactions with faculty as a seven on a seven-point scale.



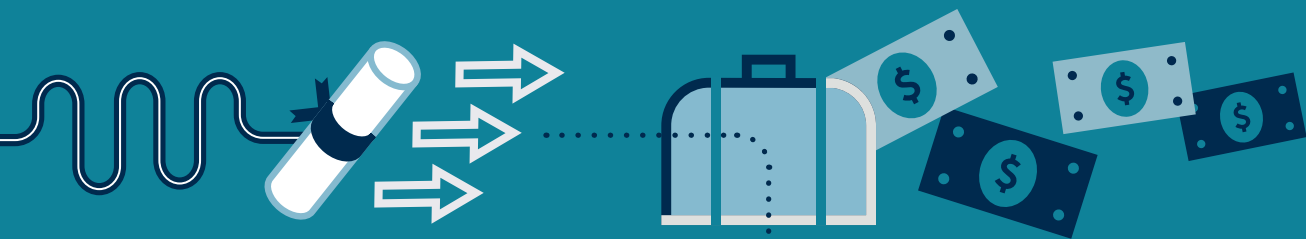
**95 percent**  
of employers said WGU  
graduates were prepared  
for their jobs.

## Who employs WGU graduates?

WGU graduates work for major companies such as Microsoft, American Express, LexisNexis, Facebook, Apple, Oracle, Starbucks, the United States Navy, Target, and more. According to a [2020 survey](#) of 300 companies employing WGU graduates by Harris Poll, 95 percent of employers said WGU graduates were prepared for their jobs, 96 percent said they would hire another WGU graduate, and 98 percent said WGU graduates met or exceeded expectations.

## Is an online degree worth it?

A degree earned online is a great way to advance your education and increase your earning potential. The skills you'll learn can make you more marketable as an employee. On average, WGU students see significant increases in salary within two years of graduation, compared with



their pre-enrollment salaries. What's more, WGU students are able to balance school with work, family, and other life obligations thanks to WGU's unique structure and strong mentor program.

"Online college was definitely worth it," says Bency Pierre, who completed the MA in ELL instruction at WGU. "I have a master's degree, and I did it in less than a year. I didn't have to take out any loans, and I got to speed through it because of my prior knowledge. Getting my master's degree got me a raise of \$20,000. So, I actually got paid for going to school for less than a year. That's unreal to me."

### What are the steps to apply?

Applying to WGU is simple. Visit WGU's [admissions page](#) to start the process. Applicants must complete the admission form, submit their official transcripts, contact an Enrollment Counselor, and complete a FAFSA form for financial aid. This [Enrollment Checklist](#) outlines each of these steps in detail.

“  
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”  
Bency Pierre, MA, ELL



# Online Education: More Than Worth It



In today's fast-paced world, online colleges offer busy adults a path to success. A competency-based school like WGU helps students work around professional and personal demands, making progress toward career goals with the help of mentors, a connected student community, and highly trained faculty.

Prospective students who are motivated to succeed can feel confident an online college like WGU provides a high-quality educational experience that meets their need for flexibility. Learn more about WGU's online degree programs or [apply here](#).



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