



State Policy Playbook

April 2022



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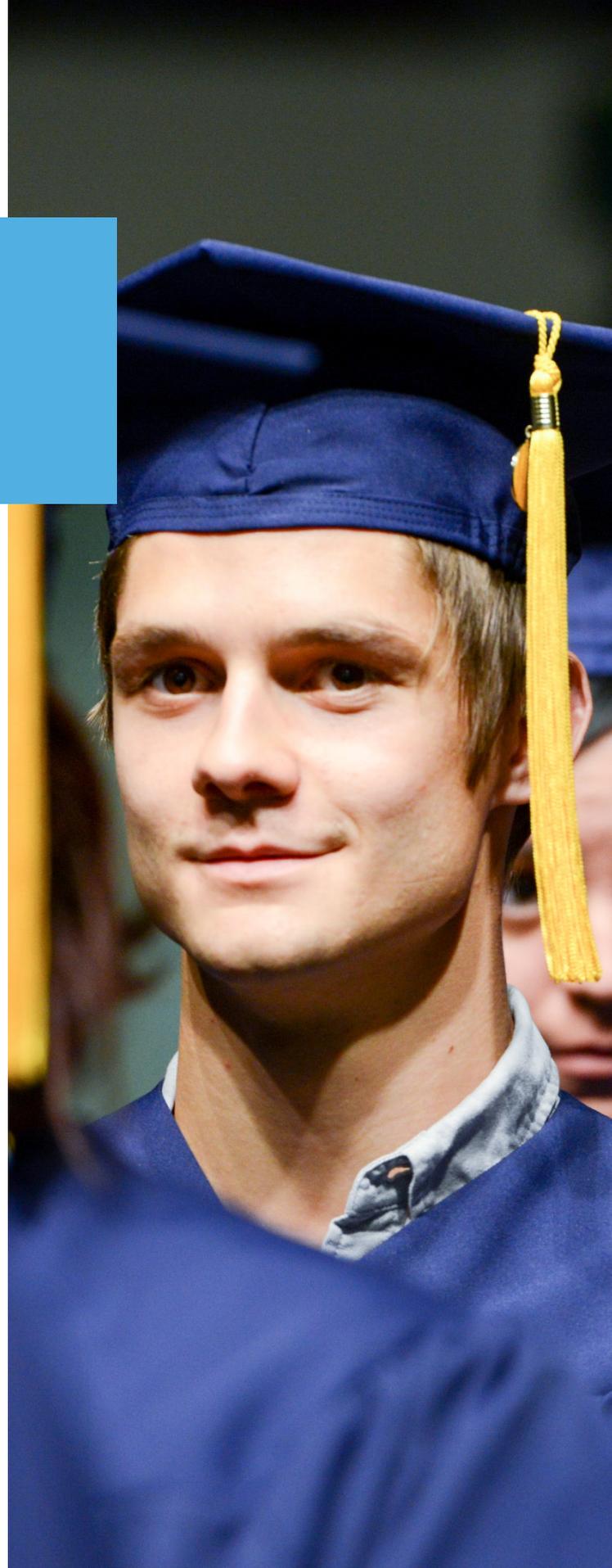
Removing Barriers for Working Learners

Western Governors University's *Removing Barriers for Working Learners* series is intended to capture the central public policy lessons learned through Western Governors University's (WGU) history of serving learners—particularly working learners—and is reinforced by our experiences over the past few years.

From its founding, WGU has been and continues to be driven to design solutions to answer the critically important question: What do learners need, particularly working learners? WGU believes higher education must:

- Personalize learning
- Create affordable, accessible, and equitable pathways to opportunity
- Build on-ramps to work
- Provide whole-learner support services

These are critical elements for working adults, without which successful upskilling and reskilling opportunities cannot happen. But all learners benefit from a higher education model built on these priorities. When learners benefit, society benefits. College graduates are less likely to be unemployed and more likely to make significantly higher wages over a lifetime, allowing them to contribute to economic growth and vital communities. Conversely, they are less likely to need state assistance through the form of programs like the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, and Supplemental Security Income, preserving resources that can be devoted elsewhere. When higher education fulfills its purpose—providing pathways to opportunity—individuals and communities thrive. Utilizing the lessons learned from COVID-19 and the nimbleness of institutions like WGU, postsecondary education can continue to transform itself, and in doing so, can change the economic and workforce future of our communities.



Breaking Down Barriers to Higher Education

The higher education landscape was in transformation long before the COVID-19 pandemic. Shifting demographics, technological advances, rapid adjustments in employer needs, and a new emphasis on costs nudged along incremental shifts in higher education institutions, policies and practices across the United States. In 2020, COVID-19 became an accelerant for transformation. Most institutions moved instruction online and launched programs to meet a myriad of learners’ needs, focused on issues such as broadband access, housing, and mental health. Many policymakers across states focused on short-term retraining programs to help displaced workers get back to work. These plans and proposals shifted from being trending

initiatives before the pandemic to becoming critical imperatives nearly overnight.

We are not yet post-pandemic, but this much is clear: learning is no longer a one-and-done journey with graduation as the end goal. Higher education must be an accessible tool to upskill and reskill throughout an individual’s life. It must serve as an investment that propels learners forward to completed credentials and new opportunities. This renewed vision for higher education can help reinvigorate the promise of higher education as a gateway to success and lifelong opportunity—for all students, anytime, anywhere, and in any stage of life.

Removing Barriers for Working Learners

Traditional Higher Education	Higher Education Without Barriers
Select learners allowed	All learners welcomed and barriers to equitable access removed
Learners come to the institution	The institution meets learners where they are
Instruction, policies, and practices guided by status quo and tradition	Learners’ needs guide instruction, policies, and practices
Learners adapt to institutional structures	Institutional structures adapt to learners
Institutions are gatekeepers that filter out the unprepared	Institutions provide support to help learners persist and complete
Costs determined by the institution’s operational needs and learners’ willingness to pay; a substantial part of revenue spent on physical maintenance of campus facilities	Costs minimized to foster accessibility and provide an ROI and economic lift for learners; revenue focused on instruction and learner support
Broad education	Tailored education to address learner and workforce needs, with industry-aligned skills embedded in the curriculum
Institutional focus on enrollment	Institutional focus on student outcomes—completion, return on investment, and equity

Twenty-five years ago, 19 U.S. governors created WGU to expand access to higher education—the surest path from talent to opportunity. These governors believed that college had become too expensive and disconnected from the workforce, failing to meet the needs of their state economies. They were concerned about barriers to degree attainment for all populations and felt the existing higher education model did not create a pathway to career advancement for individuals struggling with poverty, underemployment, and low-wage careers. These governors founded WGU as an affordable, innovative, results-driven educational institution that prepares learners of all backgrounds for great careers.

The result was an online, competency-based program that allows learners to progress at their own pace—a flexible, cost-effective solution that focuses on the most in-demand skills. WGU is unique in that, from the onset, it was designed to serve primarily working learners and was built with the needs of those learners in mind. At the core of WGU is continual reflection and reinvention to meet the ever-evolving needs of learners and employers, with a focus

on “skills as currency” and a commitment to measuring success through equitable student outcomes, including completion and return on investment.

While no one was prepared for the COVID-19 pandemic, WGU was uniquely well-suited to serve student needs. WGU entered the pandemic with an effective online education model, a strong culture of student support, and the ability to meet learners—particularly working learners—right where they are, helping them upskill and reskill. During a time of tremendous disruption in higher education, WGU launched new broadband initiatives, committed to new strategies for addressing gaps in outcomes for students of color, and between March 2020 and December 2021, graduated more than 87,000 learners—many of them completing a degree in only two or three years. While higher education as a whole [saw enrollment decline](#), particularly among students from historically underserved populations, WGU was able to grow and support thousands of learners in achieving their goal to earn a degree.

The Path Forward

WGU continues its mission of transforming opportunities for hundreds of thousands of learners, but there are still 36 million Americans with some college and no meaningful credentials. In addition, with a [declining birth rate](#) and an anticipated [downward trend in the pipeline of high school graduates](#), the traditional student population is forever changed. States can no longer simply rely on single institutions to innovate; they must create opportunities for innovation at scale. State and local policymakers are uniquely positioned to accelerate changes in educational practice that improve opportunities for all learners by transforming the policies, practices, and culture of higher education to be radically adaptive and learner focused.

WGU was founded by state leaders, and we believe in the critical role states play in higher education policy. We invite all state and local policymakers to join us as active partners in our pursuit to reinvigorate education to serve today’s learners better, particularly working learners. The *Removing Barriers for Working Learners* series is a set of policy guides that highlight what WGU has learned in the last two decades, as well as complementary best practices across states. The series focuses on the four core commitments higher education must make to meet the needs of today’s learners.



Personalize learning



Create affordable, accessible, and equitable pathways to opportunity



Build on-ramps to work



Provide whole-learner support services



Removing Barriers for Working Learners

Personalize Learning

We believe that learning should be personalized.

Core to WGU's mission as a nonprofit educational institution is unapologetic advocacy for expanded access to education that works for all learners. We have asked students to adapt to an outdated model for too long, rather than asking education to adapt to students. This is evident with working learners, who are often asked to fit themselves into a model built for high school graduates without significant work experience or family responsibilities. WGU serves a high percentage of working learners who previously attended traditional institutions and expressly sought out WGU for flexible schedules and online offerings.

It is time to shift from the traditional "one-size-fits-all" model, which assumes students attend a place-based institution immediately upon graduating high school, to continuous lifelong learning accessible to all learners everywhere. This means learners come from different places, at different times in their lives, with different experiences and goals. To meet students where they are, higher education must become more responsive. Policymakers can help ensure systems are designed to adapt to learners' needs so that no matter the realities they face, they have affordable options that provide them with the opportunity to succeed.



“WGU helped me not only obtain my degree but also learn more than I imagined possible on the short timeline I had. I had attended both a college and an in-person university before and felt that overall I didn’t learn much. WGU was different. Self-pacing allowed me to review the items I knew quickly and spend extra time on the things I struggled with. There were tons of resources and I never felt that I was left alone to figure it out myself.”

—Sandra Rytting
WGU Student

Policy Recommendations

Transforming higher education into a system that consistently offers customized learning experiences will not happen overnight, but policymakers can promote the transition by expanding best practices and removing barriers. Specifically, policymakers can:

- Craft policies that encourage recognition of prior learning
- Remove barriers to competency-based learning
- Improve transfer pathways
- Expand internet access and adult digital literacy

Recommendation: Craft Policies that Encourage Recognition of Prior Learning

Education has traditionally focused on the completion of courses as the primary way of demonstrating student skills and knowledge. This particularly disadvantages working learners who are forced to invest time and money in “relearning” content they have already mastered by sitting through duplicative courses. A learner who has mastered a skill—whether in the workplace or the classroom—should have that mastery recognized. Many gain skills in the workplace, formal and informal apprenticeships, and military training. These learning opportunities can lead to high-quality outcomes that are often workforce relevant but too often go unrecognized. The result is that skilled individuals often undertake coursework that replicates what they previously learned in a real-world setting, causing unnecessary delays and inflating the cost of education. State and local policymakers can better serve learners by ensuring credit for prior learning at state institutions.

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) defines credit for prior learning (CPL) as “a term for various methods that colleges, universities, and other education/training providers use to evaluate and formally recognize learning that has occurred outside of the traditional academic environment. It is used to grant college credit, certification, or advanced standing toward further education or training. Other common terms for this process include prior learning assessment (PLA) and recognition of learning.”

Recommendation in Action

- Indiana enacted [HB 1281](#), which permits state aid to be used to pay for costs associated with prior learning assessments.
- Florida’s [HB 7071](#) called for the State Board of Education and Board of Governors to develop a “systematic, cross-sector approach to awarding credit for prior learning.”
- Education Commission of the States published an [introduction to Prior Learning Assessment policies](#) that highlights four main themes for consideration in creating a policy and provides additional state examples.

Recommendation: Remove Barriers to Competency-Based Learning

Students at traditional universities are often held to a cadence of coursework guided by semesters, increasing the time and cost of completion rather than allowing learners to progress at their own pace by demonstrating knowledge. This particularly disadvantages working learners, for whom time is at a premium. WGU is a pioneer of competency-based education (CBE), individualized learning that allows students to demonstrate content proficiency regardless of time, place, or pace of learning. Through WGU's CBE model, learners who come to WGU with some college or life experience can more quickly demonstrate the education, knowledge, and skills they achieved in either a formal or informal educational setting. This allows them to move through education more rapidly and more affordably. Case in point: WGU students graduate in two and a half years on average, compared to the five-year national average.

*Indiana Code section 25-2.1-1-6.2 defines **competency-based learning** as “systems of instruction, assessment, grading, and academic reporting that are based on individualized learning to allow an individual to demonstrate proficiency of professional development content, regardless of time, place, or pace of learning.”*

The flexibility of CBE—no defined start and end dates, with learners moving at the pace that works for them—makes it particularly advantageous to those balancing education with other priorities. However, that same flexibility means that CBE is frequently misunderstood and disadvantaged by outdated laws and institutional practices that focus on time instead of skills. For example, financial aid is often tied to credit hours, such as requirements about the number of credit hours a student must be enrolled in to maintain financial aid. Unfortunately, a learner in a CBE program focused on demonstrating skill proficiency cannot easily translate their experience into a full-time versus part-time categorization. Similarly, financial aid programs may have requirements about the pace at which a learner must progress, whereas CBE is intentionally designed without a set calendar for progression. Policymakers should examine legislative and institutional hurdles within their states that potentially stand in the way of encouraging innovative educational models like CBE.

Recommendation in Action

- The Utah System of Higher Education (USHE) and Utah policymakers have encouraged CBE, including [SB 195](#), which led to partnerships between USHE institutions with Regent-approved private providers to accept competency-based and transfer credits. The work paved the way to more CBE options for Utahns; for example, Salt Lake City Community College has several CBE programs and was one of the first community colleges to join the Competency-Based Education Network. As stories [featured at the Competency-Based Education Network demonstrate](#), this has created new and flexible opportunities for learners in Utah.
- Ohio awarded [Innovation Grants](#) that provided selected institutions with funds to encourage the adoption and expansion of CBE. As a result of a grant, two Ohio community colleges worked together to adopt and expand CBE. They were able to have their faculty, online learning experts, financial aid staff, advisors, and others collaborate on ways to address common roadblocks to CBE at their institutions. These two institutions collaborated with the Ohio Department of Higher Education to [offer a conference on developing a CBE model](#) for other Ohio colleges and universities.
- Efforts to promote CBE in K–12 education may become a model for higher education. As an example, Idaho [passed legislation for public school districts](#) that created a CBE network to encourage collaboration and required the state to develop a plan for scaling CBE.

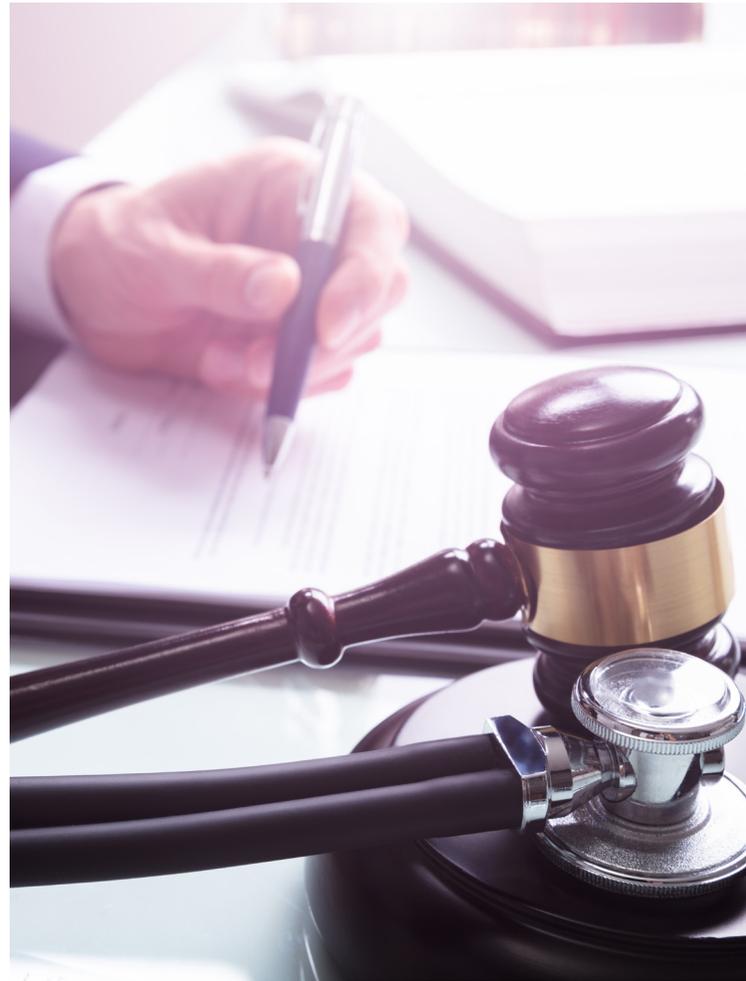
Recommendation: Improve Transfer Pathways

Continued state efforts are necessary to stem the arbitrary loss of previously earned, credited learning between institutions when students transfer. These efforts are vital because many students do not finish a degree at the same institution in which they started. For example, over one-third of students who began college in 2011 transferred to a different institution over the following six years. Many states have adopted laws and policies that require statewide transferability of lower-division courses and guaranteed transfer of associate degrees among public institutions within the state. Beyond guarantees among in-state public colleges, however, this type of guaranteed credit transfer is needed among more institutions, within states, and across state lines.

WGU has pioneered this type of work, working with community college systems across the country to establish [seamless pathways](#) that allow many learners to begin as upper-division students at WGU. These pathways often include guaranteed admission and tuition discounts. WGU has statewide community college articulation agreements with states like Ohio and California and is currently developing transfer agreements with historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) to allow students to begin their education on HBCU campuses before transferring to WGU. Increased credit articulation agreements and other public policy levers that extend digitally across state lines can help ensure that learners gain and retain appropriate credit for their time, effort, and cost.

Recommendation in Action

- California joined many other states in 2021 by [enacting two bills designed to make transfer easier](#), Assembly Bills 928 and 1111, which called for the creation of a standard course numbering system, coordination between California’s higher education system to increase transfer, and formation of a general education pathway that meets transfer requirements for the state’s universities.
- Multistate educational collaboratives could be utilized to achieve interstate transferability, building upon models such as the [National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements](#) (NC-SARA) and the Midwest Higher Education Compact (MHEC) [Multi-State Collaborative on Military Credit](#) to achieve credit transferability of military service credit across a 13-state region.
- One “reverse transfer” initiative, [Degrees When Due](#), encourages states and institutions to review transcripts to provide associate degrees, whenever possible, to students who have transferred from a community college to a four-year institution without completing a bachelor’s degree. By receiving degrees when enough credits are completed, students gain an educational achievement record.



Recommendation: Expand Internet Access and Adult Digital Literacy

WGU supports state and local policy efforts to expand reliable broadband access. WGU was an early adopter of online learning because it recognized that the internet made learning more accessible for millions of learners, especially working adults, by increasing flexibility and reducing logistical hurdles. For many learners, online learning is a gamechanger—and yet far too many students still cannot access online learning, whether due to the lack of broadband service, a device, or digital literacy skills. For example, according to the Pew Research Center, in February 2021, [35% of Hispanic and 29% of Black households](#) (as opposed to 20% of white households) did not have access to the internet. Broadband access is critical to close equity gaps in educational attainment for students of color and those with low socioeconomic status.

Additionally, an essential part of access to learning must include increasing digital literacy skills. Digital literacy goes deeper into the fundamental ability to interact effectively and be successful in a technology-reliant society. [A recent survey](#) found that 76% of workers do not feel prepared with adequate digital skills. 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.

Recommendation in Action

- COVID-19 led to a [proliferation of broadband legislation](#) across the country intended to expand broadband access, including legislation to improve broadband districts and create broadband grants.
- 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. A free [digital literacy curriculum](#) is also available to the public, covering online communication and collaboration; interaction with hardware and devices; and computer privacy, safety, and security. States have adopted innovative policies and programs to encourage digital literacy; for example, Arizona has employed “digital navigators” who provide free technology tutoring to the community, including upgrading digital skills, while the New York State Office for New Americans has focused on [digital literacy initiatives for immigrants](#).
- Higher education institutions can partner with broadband providers and others to close the digital divide for learners. For example, WGU worked with major cellular carriers and broadband providers to provide [Online Access Scholarships](#) putting quality online higher education within reach for thousands of learners.





Removing Barriers for Working Learners **Create Affordable, Accessible, and Equitable Pathways to Opportunity**

We believe that pathways to opportunity should be affordable, accessible, and equitable.

WGU is committed to affordable higher education, reflected in a unique tuition structure that is thousands of dollars lower than the national average annual tuition for most colleges and universities, both public and private. The cost of higher education pushes it out of reach for far too many and chokes the talent pipeline. Unleashing opportunity and talent will require driving down the costs by rethinking the model itself, empowering students as educated consumers, and making aid accessible to all learners and for all types of education. This is particularly true for working learners, who are often ineligible for traditional financial aid, whether proactively upskilling to provide new opportunities for their families or forced into reskilling due to forced industry shifts. The return on investment for education is vital for working learners.





Higher education can and should be affordable for all learners. With the average increase in the annual cost of college outpacing the growth of family income or state investment, an affordable higher education has become more of a dream than a reality for far too many. This is evident in the average cost of a college degree [more than doubling since 1988](#). Meanwhile, national student loan debt has grown from [\\$240 billion in 2003](#) to nearly [\\$1.6 trillion today](#), with over 44 million Americans holding debt incurred as a student. Policymakers have increasingly recognized the importance of accessible aid, as demonstrated by a recent spate of legislation across states that would [require students to complete their Free Application for Federal Student Aid \(FAFSA\)](#) with the goal of making college more affordable.

Policymakers must continue to confront and stem rising institutional costs through financial literacy and responsible borrowing, so students understand the cost of their education and return on their investment. Ultimately, policies must ensure that existing resources are allocated to align with and meet the demands of today's learners.

"Completing my degree at WGU was the best experience I have had in higher education. I spent the better part of six years trying to complete a degree at a local college campus. After years of difficulty and failure I gave up. Long story short, I found WGU and was able to complete my degree! Every single person I spoke with at WGU was supportive and kind. They truly cared about my success and helped me to achieve me dreams."

—Chelsy Miller
WGU Student

Policy Recommendations

When individuals thrive, communities and economies thrive. Yet for far too many learners, the path to higher education is littered with unnecessary obstacles. Policymakers can help ensure more affordable, equitable, and accessible pathways to opportunity by addressing obstacles such as cost and by injecting more flexibility into financial aid systems. Specifically, policymakers can:

- Minimize time and cost
- Unlock access to aid for nontraditional learners and nontraditional institutions
- Increase access to microcredentials and short-term training

Recommendation: Minimize Time and Cost

WGU was launched to address three fundamental constraints limiting educational opportunity: place, time, and cost. These constraints impact all learners but particularly working learners, who often have personal limitations affecting their flexibility and ability to invest time and money in higher education. Embracing online education resolved the issues with place, but WGU also takes a radical approach to cost and time, and more importantly, understands how cost and time intersect.

WGU addresses cost directly through a unique tuition model that allows students to take as many courses as they like over a six-month period for one flat fee, including electronic learning materials for enrolled courses. In tandem with WGU's CBE model—which allows learners to move at their own pace—this structure allows students to progress through education more flexibly, more often, more quickly, and more affordably. Policymakers have and should continue to embrace the same philosophy, one that addresses the long-standing constraints of affordability and time that too often prevent learners from accessing higher education.

Recommendation in Action

- [States have taken various approaches to control higher education costs](#), including tuition freezes. Efforts to reduce costs should be considered in tandem with overall investments in higher education and financial aid to ensure these efforts reduce costs for learners.
- Guided pathways have emerged [as a common focus across states](#), providing learners with more structured guidance that encourages timely completion.
- Some states and systems have explored ways to directly reduce time to degree as a mechanism for reducing cost; for example, Ohio law requires state institutions of higher education to [have a plan](#) for how baccalaureate degrees on their campus can be completed in three years.



Recommendation: Unlock Access to Aid for Nontraditional Learners and Nontraditional Institutions

Working learners deserve access to higher education, and they deserve support that allows them to pursue education in the format and at the institution that best works for their unique needs. Unfortunately, few state financial aid programs are available to working adults, and even fewer programs fund access to less “traditional” institutions, even if they are accredited institutions with proven outcomes. Policymakers should examine existing financial aid programs to see if barriers to working learners can be removed. If not, they can build customized aid programs accessible to working learners. It makes sense to invest in working learners and to facilitate access to high-quality, accredited institutions that accommodate students’ schedules and family obligations and have demonstrated positive outcomes.

State aid is often a maze, with siloed programs accessible only to learners meeting specific qualifications or specific programs or schools. This is particularly true for working learners: state financial aid and state higher education benefits are often available only to first-time, full-time recent high school graduates. In addition, funds are often only available for specific types of institutions, such as institutions with a state-based physical location, rather than online and/or competency-based academic delivery models. In addition to ensuring there is aid available for working adults, policymakers should focus on making that aid as accessible as possible. The same principles of accessibility and flexibility should also be applied to state workforce development funds, as well as federal funds for job training from the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act and Trade Adjustment Assistance.

Recommendation in Action

- The Illinois [Monetary Assistance Program](#) allows residents enrolled in a minimum of three credits access to state financial aid, which provides access to adults enrolled in one course at a time.
- Ohio’s [Second Chance Grant](#) provides grants for adults in Ohio with some college but no bachelor’s degree to return to college to complete their degree.
- The University of Maine system has [scholarships for adults](#), including those new to higher education and those returning to school after more than a three-year absence.



Recommendation: Increase Access to Microcredentials and Short-Term Training

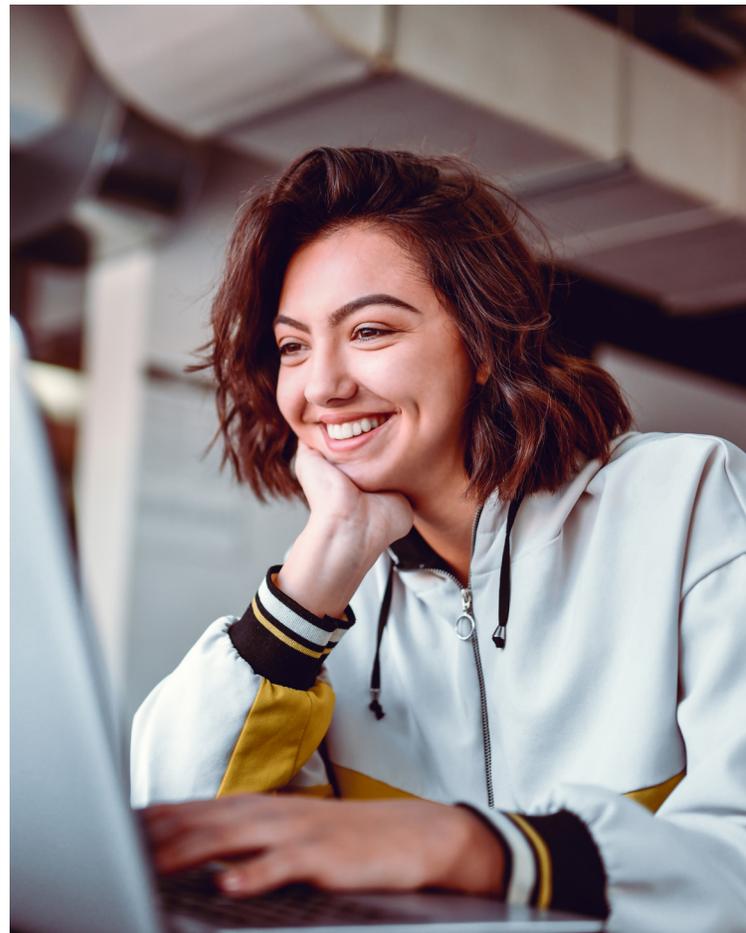
Microcredentials like certificates, certifications, badges, and other types of industry-recognized credentials can offer more accessible options for reskilling and upskilling, as well as meet employer needs more efficiently. The massive economic disruption caused by COVID-19 underscored the need for microcredentials, which enable displaced workers to return to the workforce with newly refreshed skills as quickly as possible while recognizing that many of the jobs that are gone may never return. Microcredentials are also a valuable tool for organizations hoping to retain employees during the “Great Resignation,” during which [a record number of Americans](#) have voluntarily left their jobs, and could prove a key strategy in retaining employees by [providing reskilling and upskilling opportunities](#).

Ongoing economic transformation and employee mobility means that workers will continue to need and want accessible opportunities to reskill and upskill in the years to come. Microcredentials will remain important. States can lead the way by supporting high-quality microcredentials that are competency-based, personalized, and validated, with excellent learner and employer outcomes. As the Education Commission of States has noted, [quality, value, and stackability](#) ensure that microcredentials help learners achieve both short-term and long-term goals.

Unfortunately, many people seeking to enroll in microcredential programs are ineligible for forms of financial aid, whether seeking their first credential or additional skills beyond their degree. Efforts are underway at the national level for expanded access to Pell Grant funding for short-term certificates. Still, in the interim, state aid can be shaped to allow learners to gain immediate, workforce-relevant knowledge and skills to quickly address critical labor shortages in states and industries. Some states have explored [tax incentives](#) to encourage employers to provide educational benefits to employees, including those that can be used for stackable credentials. In addition, state financial aid can be modified to further residents’ attainment of high-quality and workforce-relevant short-term certificates and microcredentials.

Recommendation in Action

- The Missouri [Fast Track Workforce Incentive Grant](#) provides last-dollar funding for low-income adults pursuing a certificate, degree, or industry-recognized credential in an area designated as high need. Missouri requires recipients to live and work in Missouri for at least three years after completion.
- Utah recently enacted the [Adult Learners Grant Program](#), which provides financial assistance to adult learners pursuing an online degree or certificate in a high-need field.
- Florida’s [Open Door Grant Program](#) provides funding for short-term, in-demand programs. Funds can be used for tuition, fees, exams, books, and materials.





Removing Barriers for Working Learners

Build On-Ramps to Work

We believe in building on-ramps to workforce needs.

Since its inception, WGU has focused intently on its role in preparing individuals for success in the workplace. Working learners expect nothing less. WGU offers degrees only in in-demand areas, continually prioritizes skills, and regularly collaborates with workforce partners to ensure programs align with their needs. These efforts translate to [success for WGU graduates](#). For example, 97% of employers reported WGU graduates were prepared for their jobs, 87% rated their performance as very good or excellent, and 97% said WGU graduates exceeded their expectations.

It is time for the larger system to break down the silos between education providers and employers. Working learners invest their time and effort in education to create new opportunities for themselves and their families. There must be a payoff for that investment. Education must center itself on in-demand skills. As technology fuels continued changes in those skills, we must create new opportunities for learners to gain marketable skills in degree or credential programs and easily advance their skills throughout their lifetimes.

Learners have always deserved educational opportunities aligned with workforce needs and employment opportunities, but the significant rise in the cost of higher education has made this alignment even more critical. For many individuals contemplating college or workers considering reskilling or upskilling, calculating the return on investment—not only of money but also of time—is crucial. We must bring government, businesses, education leaders, and other relevant partners to the table to devise solutions that bridge education and work.



Policy Recommendations

Shifting to a skill-focused rather than a degree-focused higher education system will unlock the ability of students to articulate the high-demand skills they have gained and find the meaningful work they seek. From an employer perspective, it will become easier to identify individuals with both the hard and soft skills needed to succeed. Policymakers can help create a skills-focused higher education system by following these four recommendations:

- Put skills at the forefront
- Upskill and reskill existing staff
- Strengthen workforce connections
- Integrate work experience

Recommendation: Put Skills at the Forefront

Higher education is habitually driven by the degree as the unit of higher education measurement, which leaves individuals with workforce training or some credits but no degree without any verifiable educational credentials. It is time to embrace skills as the currency of education and the driver of curriculum and outcomes. This includes establishing partnerships to innovate, develop, and scale new pathways in highly in-demand skill areas. Building partnerships and designating funding to build and scale solutions for in-demand and highly needed programs is key to meeting individuals' employment needs, as well as a state's workforce goals. Learners and workers need access to quick, efficient, high-quality workforce solutions, especially in newer, quickly changing occupations and future-facing careers. WGU can be a partner in these efforts.

Per the Open Skills Network, a "skill" represents knowledge, abilities, or learned behaviors described in a short phrase that communicates discrete, discernable value an individual can demonstrate or acquire.

Recommendation in Action

- States can partner with [efforts already underway](#) to pilot and adopt the use of a Learning Employment Record (LER), a learner-owned, skills-based transcript that takes the traditional academic transcript to a new level—one that includes academic records, certifications, work accomplishments, and descriptions of accumulated skills.

The Open Skills Network defines Learning Employment Records (LER) as "comprehensive, exchangeable digital records of achievements learned in school, on the job, through volunteer experiences, or in the military and may be represented as skills, competencies, course, certifications, degrees, and other credentials. LERs may also contain validated work history, portfolio artifact/evidence, self-asserted accomplishments, etc. Learners control their privacy, discovery, and sharing of their LER."

- The [Open Skills Management Tool](#) (OSMT) is a free, open-source tool to facilitate the production of rich skills descriptors (RSDs) that help create a common language for skills across institutions and employers. WGU partnered in the launch of the [Open Skills Network](#) (OSN) in 2020, which served to increase collaboration between employers, educational institutions, and others working to ensure freely available tools to promote skills-based learning and hiring. When it comes to creating technical solutions for the benefit of all learners, more minds are better than one.
- Alabama launched the Alabama Credential Registry to catalog degree and non-degree offerings in the state, which will work in tandem with the Alabama Skills-Based Job Description Generator and Employer Portal, as well the Alabama College and Career Exploration Tool, to connect employers and employees in a [skills-based talent development system](#).

Recommendation: Upskill and Reskill Existing Staff

Many critical workforce needs can be met by providing paths for existing staff to upgrade their skills. The education field provides a perfect illustration of both the potential and the need. With an alarming and growing [shortage of classroom teachers](#), innovative pathways are essential to filling the gaps and meeting the needs of today's learners across the educational continuum. Upskilling paraprofessionals holds immense potential: paraprofessionals work in districts already and have a commitment to students. Providing pathways for paraprofessionals to become teachers is an opportunity to diversify the educator pool, improve student outcomes, and in doing so, create systemic change.

Similarly, many healthcare systems recognize the value of supporting existing staff in upgrading their skills to [fill critical workforce shortages](#) and have focused on "retrain to retain" programs. With these types of upskilling and reskilling programs, workers can earn higher-level credentials and better pay while meeting critical workforce needs. Additionally, this helps organizations build their resiliency. As [McKinsey & Company noted](#), "Adapting employees' skills and roles to the post-pandemic ways of working will be crucial to building operating-model resilience." The pace of technological change guarantees that the ability of a company to adapt and thrive depends on facilitating pathways for employees to upgrade their skills continually.

Recommendation in Action

- New Mexico's [Grow Your Own Teachers](#) program offers scholarships and a pathway for educational assistants to become fully licensed classroom teachers.
- Tennessee provided [new upskilling opportunities](#) for direct care staff in healthcare by designing a competency-based training program with valuable short-term credentials embedded. [The Tennessee Promise](#) and [Tennessee Reconnect Funds](#) help keep costs low for working learners.
- Nebraska's [Career Pathway Advancement Project](#) seeks to meet the needs of individuals with disabilities and employers by providing upskilling opportunities in high-demand fields through apprenticeship and training.





Recommendation: Strengthen Workforce Connections and Integrate Work Experience

The relationship between education and the workforce can and must be collaborative and integrated. Institutions and training providers should work closely with employers to ensure the curriculum reflects the most in-demand skills on the front end. During education, while learners and workers earn new skills, they should have the opportunity to apply and stack demonstrated skills toward a recognized degree or credential valued by employers. WGU's College of Health Professions [recently redesigned the Bachelor of Science in Nursing program](#) to do precisely that, allowing learners to accumulate six credentials on the way to a degree. Lastly, there should also be a way for workplace learning experiences to be recognized and incorporated into an individual's identified set of skills. We are entering a new generation of opportunities, hastened by rapidly changing technology and a global pandemic that must include short-term, competency-based workplace-based training and programs.

Recommendation in Action

- In the wake of COVID-19, individual health departments nationwide hired hundreds of contact tracers to work with patients to identify and stem potential chains of disease transmission. Johns Hopkins University created a [5.5-hour course](#) offering a training certificate for individuals to enter this line of work very quickly. This is a timely example of how higher education institutions can work with government agencies to promptly set up programs that address an urgent workforce need and provide a pathway for retraining displaced workers.
- Institutions and states are looking at ways they can harness the power of CBE to help [address critical workforce shortages in early childhood education](#). Illinois, one leader in this space, has worked with the licensing body to have the same competencies and definitions embedded in curriculum across state institutions.
- WGU, like many other institutions, has [national](#) and local advisory boards composed of business, philanthropic, and education leaders who provide counsel to ensure workforce-relevant programs.
- [New Mexico](#) used federal funds from the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act to create the New Mexico Workforce Connection Center, enabling employers and job seekers to leverage resources, including skills assessments and on-the-job training programs to address skills gaps. Funding is available for positions in in-demand industries.



Removing Barriers for Working Learners

Provide Whole-Learner Support Services

We believe in supporting the whole learner.

Educating for opportunity means focusing on outcomes: it's not about how many individuals begin a program but about how many complete it. Student-first institutions don't just accept that learners have challenges; they expect learners to have challenges and proactively build policies and practices to help learners move beyond barriers. WGU is passionate about learner success and supporting individuals as they complete their degrees. WGU isn't staffed like a traditional university; instead, to ensure learners have the support they need both personally and academically, students have three types of faculty they interact with: Program Mentors, Course Instructors, and Evaluators.

WGU was designed to support all learners, particularly working adults, and their unique needs. All learners deserve support, but working adults are typically balancing myriad roles—as students, caretakers, employees, and breadwinners—that lead to more demands, and in turn, lead to the need for additional support. This is in tension with a long-held expectation that older learners should be more independent. The result of that expectation is a loss for society: too many learners hit unexpected challenges and withdraw from learning in the face of those challenges.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic and its incredible disruption, many learners did not or could not complete their education, and the impact on those individuals—and society as a whole—comes at a high cost. Federal relief funds from the COVID-19 pandemic created a new focus on wraparound support and provided unexpected added resources. Both during and beyond this crisis, it will be up to policymakers to ensure that the emphasis on learner support services persists and to recognize that working learners need support just like their younger classmates.





“WGU was much more than I thought. A supportive team, a great mentor, good content, flexibility, support, and an affordable price. WGU is transforming lives. I could get my degree, and I’m so thankful to WGU and its amazing team.”

—Fernando Avelino
WGU Student

Policy Recommendations

While the student-level work happens at the institutional level, policymakers can help encourage the adoption of student-first practices across the higher education system. Through an array of levers, policymakers can encourage institutions to:

- Advance opportunities to learn
- Provide targeted support
- Focus on outcomes

Recommendation: Advance Opportunities to Learn

WGU recognizes that not every learner is prepared for the rigors of a college education on day one. WGU acknowledges that many of today’s prospective learners—whatever their age—need additional support and mentoring to succeed in college. This led to the creation of the WGU Academy, a college preparatory program to help learners succeed when readiness is a barrier to success. The Academy allows participants to complete college-level courses for credit in addition to a noncredit program, the Program for Academic and Career Advancement (PACA), which helps individuals develop confidence, persistence, and a positive academic mindset prior to participating in a regular degree program. Upon completing the Academy curriculum, graduates are guaranteed admission to WGU. They can also use their Academy experience to enroll in another institution. The Academy works: WGU Academy graduates [make better progress at WGU during their first term relative to their peers](#). As states grapple with the aftermath of COVID-19 and its impact on students’ learning trajectories and college readiness, readiness programs like the Academy can play a critical role in recovery.

Recommendation in Action

- Local leaders, institutions, and states have launched [readiness programs](#), often piloted through the support of private foundations, that have proven to help low-income and first-generation students with the college process and provide additional mentoring options. These models should be supported as a means for states to provide better access and support for learners.
- Tennessee’s [Seamless Alignment and Integrated Learning Support \(SAILS\)](#) program allows students in high school to take college developmental math coursework during their senior year so that they can begin college on track.
- [Strong Start to Finish](#), convened by the Education Commission of the States, has been bringing policymakers together to deepen work around supporting all learners and is an excellent source of knowledge.



Recommendation: Provide Targeted Support Services

Learners often face a mix of barriers that inhibit their success in educational attainment, and working learners often have additional concerns, such as childcare and household maintenance, that younger learners may not have. WGU offers social, emotional, and financial wellness programs to support students. Comprehensive wraparound services that include academic and nonacademic support services—such as [program mentors](#), [mental health counseling](#), emergency aid microgrants, and assistance with food, childcare, or transportation—can make the difference between a student staying in school and stopping or dropping out.

Recommendation in Action

- The City University of New York’s [Accelerated Study in Associate Programs \(ASAP\)](#) nearly doubled graduation rates by providing participating students individual advising, career counseling, tutoring, tuition reduction, transportation, and textbook assistance. This program has been replicated in Ohio with similar outcomes, and additional programs have arisen in California, West Virginia, and other sites in New York. To close equity gaps and drive student success, these comprehensive and individualized support services should be implemented wherever possible.
- Arkansas’ [Career Pathways Initiative](#) helps lower-income learners leverage Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) dollars to enroll in community college and pay for related expenses while providing them with additional support services throughout their time in the program.
- Many institutions, [including WGU](#), have developed emergency aid funds to help students defray nontuition emergencies. With many of these programs funded by federal COVID relief dollars, state policymakers should consider ways to sustain similar programs in their states.



Recommendation: Focus on Outcomes

Higher education has often measured its success based on student enrollment, with too little attention on learner success. Over the last few decades, focusing on enrollment rather than education's potential impact on an individual's life and society as a whole contributed to a slow erosion of faith in the promise of higher education. When the focus shifts instead to outputs—completion, lifelong learning, gainful employment, and equitable outcomes—everything else shifts, too. Institutions then must reconsider their academic delivery models, practices, and policies. To encourage this shift, policymakers should require access to transparent data on learner outcomes, which can drive needed reflection and policy adjustment within their states.

In addition to collecting and reporting on state data, policymakers can promote public awareness of resources like the U.S. Department of Education's [college scorecard](#), which is a user-friendly source of comprehensive information about institutions, including student outcomes.

Recommendation in Action

- Indiana is one of several states to [track and report student outcomes and equity gaps](#). Reporting this information in a usable format helps learners, families, and policymakers make data-informed decisions about higher education.
- Many states have adopted outcomes-based funding models that incentivize institutions to focus on learner success. It is time to [reexamine those models](#) to ensure they support not just outcomes but equitable outcomes also.
- A cadre of states explored new metrics for increasing shared accountability around workforce outcomes as part of the [National Governors Association Workforce Innovation Network](#); for example, Washington examined the possibility of measuring the effectiveness of state systems in moving job seekers towards self-sufficiency.





Learn More

We can rebuild American higher education together by developing a more adaptive, integrated educational model that harnesses the power of technology to respond to learners, rather than requiring learners to fit into an outdated model that serves neither learners nor employers well.

Please contact the WGU Public Policy Office at PublicPolicy@wgu.edu for more information.