



Removing Barriers for Working Learners Series

# Reimagining Higher Education

2022 State Policy Playbook



# 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.

## Western Governors University is Reimagining Higher Education

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.

# 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 by Transforming Higher Education

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

# 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

## 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. State policymakers have an unprecedented opportunity to remake education in their states. As they do so, we hope the *Removing Barriers for Working Learners* series offers an innovative and helpful framework to guide this challenging yet exciting work.

Please contact the WGU Public Policy Office at [PublicPolicy@wgu.edu](mailto:PublicPolicy@wgu.edu) for more information.