



Removing Barriers for Working Learners Series

Personalize Learning

2022 State Policy Playbook





Removing Barriers for Working Learners

Personalize Learning

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

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. This section of *Removing Barriers for Working Learners* shares recommendations policymakers can use to ensure learners in their state can partake in a new model of education, one in which higher education systems **personalize learning** to meet the unique needs of all learners.

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 We have asked students to adapt to an outdated model for too long, rather than asking education to adapt to students.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.



The Path Forward

WGU has always been, and always will be, committed to continually evolving to meet the needs of contemporary learners.

WGU's decades of experience across states and with hundreds of thousands of students has led us to focus our policy efforts on the most pressing needs of working learners, which in turn helps all learners. We believe education must:

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

The lessons learned from COVID-19 have sharpened this commitment. We have seen that education is capable of transformation on a large scale, and we believe it is more urgent than ever that education be customizable, affordable, accessible, and provide learners with the skills needed for in-demand jobs. 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 that challenging yet exciting work.

Other policy insights in the *Removing Barriers for Working Learners* series:



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 for more information.