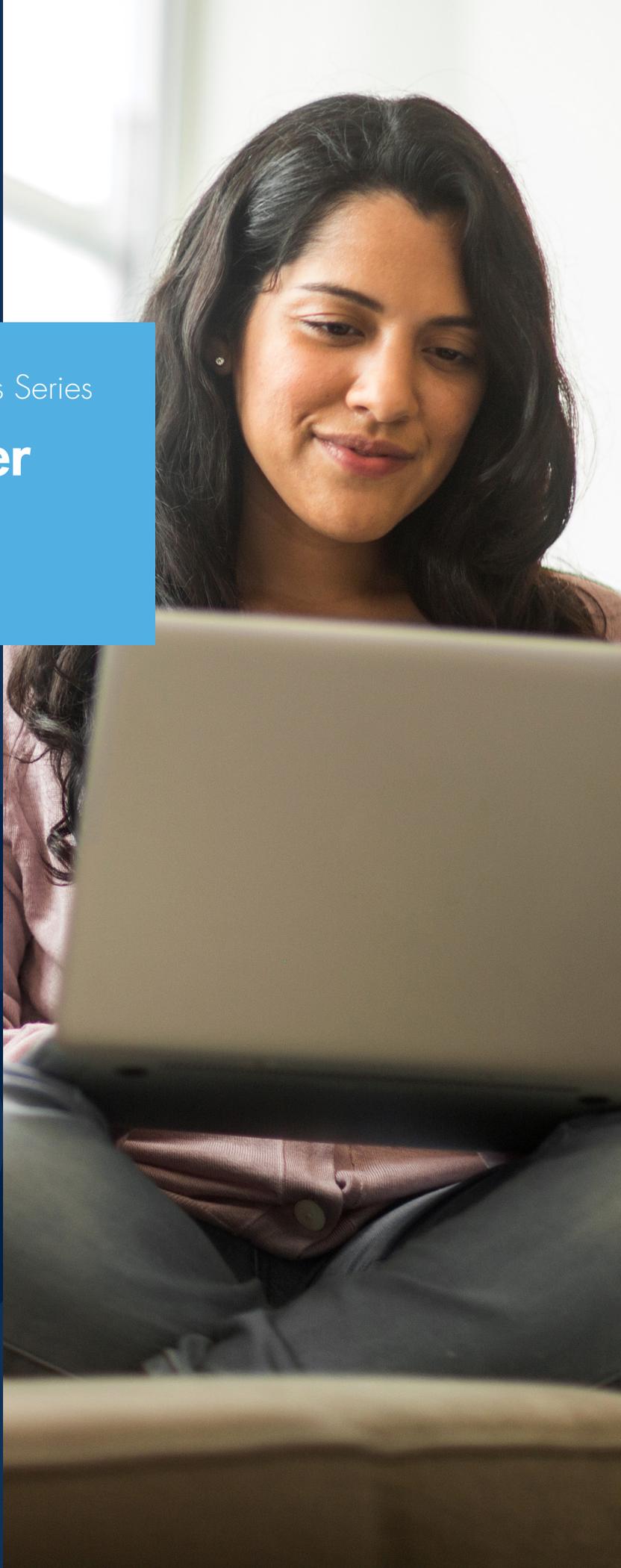# WGU

Removing Barriers for Working Learners Series

Provide Whole-Learner Support Services

2022 State Policy Playbook

Removing Barriers for Working Learners
Provide Whole-Learner Support Services

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. This issue of *Removing Barriers for Working Learners* shares recommendations state policymakers can use to ensure higher education will **provide whole-learner support services** to students in their states.

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, including 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.

The Path Forward

WGU has always been and always will be committed to continually evolving to meet the needs of contemporary learners. The lessons learned from COVID-19 have sharpened this commitment. It is more urgent than ever that education be customizable, affordable, accessible, and provide learners with the skills needed for in-demand jobs.

Higher education institutions and their related policies must continually assess their performance to serve learners better and remain relevant. 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

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

Personalize learning

Create affordable, accessible, and equitable pathways to opportunity

Build on-ramps to work

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.