



State of the University Address

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The mission of WGU is to change lives for the better by creating pathways to opportunity.

In all that we do, we strive to improve quality, access, and outcomes in education to reinvigorate its promise as the surest path to opportunity.

It's a commitment we take very seriously.

In holding ourselves accountable to this mission, we measure what matters most – the value and impact we deliver for our students – and we share those outcomes in our Annual Report.

If 2020 was the year of the pandemic, 2021 for WGU was the year of living the One-by-One cultural belief to “solve for the individual student and advance outcomes one student at a time.”

Despite persisting challenges, it is good news to report that in calendar year 2021 more than 47,000 students graduated. Focus on their success was paramount, and we used our resources and fixed our attention on supporting them through disruptions of illness, job loss, economic hardship, and more.

Even as we were resolute on student success, we accelerated our pace of innovation towards personalized learning and a skills-based, workforce-relevant, and stackable credential offering.

We also are working with a range of private sector partners through the Open Skills Network (OSN)—a WGU-led, broad cross-industry coalition dedicated to advancing skills-based education and hiring—to build out an open-sourced skills framework that improves consistency of both learning outcomes and hiring practices for greater value and alignment to students.

Although the Annual Report looks back at milestones in 2021, I also want to recognize that we're celebrating a special year at WGU—our 25th anniversary.

Taking a moment to reflect on our 25 years of innovation, we see some incredible accomplishments:

- In our first 20 years, we graduated 100,000 individuals.
- By the end of 2021 we had the privilege of helping more than a quarter million graduates find new pathways to opportunity through higher education.
- And at the end of our 25th year, we will have supported 300,000 or more individuals achieve their degrees and credentials.
- That means in just 5 years, we will have nearly tripled the number of WGU alumni.

I am incredibly proud of our students, who represent an unprecedented level of dedication, persistence, and resilience.

Students like Zachary Johnson, who came from a traveling military family and served as a firefighter in the Illinois Air National Guard when he was deployed to Iraq in 2010 for flood relief. After earning two bachelor's degrees at WGU, Zachary sold all his possessions and relocated to Honolulu where he met the love of his life and bought his dream home, all while building a successful nursing career.

It is because of the very individuals like Zachary that we remain data-driven and student obsessed.

I have long said that WGU would not have grown and succeeded if it did not hold itself accountable to achieving the impact it set out to achieve for the individuals it primarily serves, and for the workforce it further benefits.

If we don't set challenging goals or track our progress, or if we fail to be transparent and open about where we stand, then we would miss the opportunity to learn from our gaps, mistakes, and failings in order to deliver the necessary innovation to power WGU forward.

Balancing hits and misses, and in consideration of the sustained impact of COVID-19, WGU has improved both the strength of its position and potential for transformational impact.

The pressures of higher education's escalating costs, inequitable outcomes, and relevancy gaps combined with technology's rapidly expanding impact on the nature of learning and work are accelerating disruption in post-secondary education.



Zachary Johnson delivering the commencement address at WGU's Las Vegas commencement ceremony in 2021.



Zachary Johnson celebrating with friends and family after receiving his diploma.

We believe the most probable future is one where the education-to-work lifecycle evolves to better serve individuals, whether they are seeking their first or their next opportunity. One that will be characterized by:

- Flexible, personalized learning pathways that increase the probability that every student succeeds;
- Skills-based, work-relevant, stackable credentials aligned with the future of work, and
- Greater equity, ensuring that pathways to opportunity work everyone, especially those under-served or disadvantaged.

Ultimately, our success will be measured by progress in advancing completion rates for students, return for graduates, and equity in both access and attainment.

By studying the overall progress of our students in 2021, we see both cause for celebration and areas in which we must continue to improve. We measure our success through the success of our students, and we track their progress through three key results:

- Completion, or the attainment of a relevant, credible credential;
- Return, or the economic benefit of a WGU credential for the individual student; and
- Equity. We are working diligently to ensure enrollment reflects the diversity of the communities we serve, and eliminate disparities in attainment for students of color and those whose socio-economic backgrounds put them at a disadvantage as they continue their education.

By tracking these key results, we know that in 2021, the number of students of color who

accessed WGU's competency-based degree programs and completed their degrees rose steadily throughout the year. Students from economically disadvantaged households also found WGU's programs more accessible in 2021. Another success: we saw the median cost to degree completion—the amount of tuition and fees from enrollment to graduation—drop to \$11,300.

But we also identified areas that will require more effort. For example, it took longer for students to finish their degree programs during the last half of 2021 than in the previous year. We also saw a decrease in the number of economically disadvantaged students who completed their programs and attained a degree.

These are ongoing challenges that we will continue to face head-on as we work to accomplish our mission of offering affordable, attainable higher education credentials for all students.

We are inspired by Kimberly Larsen's story, who overcame many challenges on the way to her degree. Kimberly knew from a young age that she wanted to become a teacher. Only, the path to getting there would look very similar to many of the students we serve at WGU—filled with barriers.

Just a few months before starting her program, a mysterious neurological disorder left Kimberly with debilitating physical and mental symptoms, ultimately leaving her in a wheelchair. With the support of her WGU mentor and instructors, she overcame those obstacles and earned her degree in Interdisciplinary Studies and is now achieving her lifelong dream of becoming a teacher.

It is because of students like Kimberly that WGU was created to do things differently. And in our 25 years, we have built a tradition of breaking tradition. As we look forward to the next 25 years and beyond, we have every intention of continuing that tradition as we focus on how to assist in the transition to skills-based education and work.

In fact, the practices we're starting today, or the solutions we've devised might just be the new traditions that we find ourselves breaking 25 years from now. That takes a whole new type of fortitude and courage than what we've done during our first 25 years.

In the words of Gov. Roy Romer, the former governor of Colorado, and one of our key founders: "WGU...is doing the world's most important work: making available education and training to people who do not have access to it . . . making it available at a cost that they can afford . . . and doing it based upon competency, so that you are qualified to do the work that you were trained for."

Or as echoed by Gov. Romer's fellow visionary, Gov. Mike Leavitt, former governor of Utah, "Competency—the capacity to apply knowledge—is a fundamental principle. As is, the use of technology to scale. And, that value is the combination of both quality and cost—and both matter. Every university should put students at the center. These are forever principles."

With that founding challenge woven into our DNA, we will continue striving to accelerate our pace in advancing our mission to create pathways to opportunity—for everyone.



Kimberly Larsen in her classroom.



Kimberly Larsen delivering the commencement address at one of WGU's online commencements in 2021.