

# TRANSCRIPT: WHAT REDDIT GOT WRONG

*The following transcript is a verbatim account of the video or audio file accompanying this transcript.*

## **Speaker 1 (Moderator):**

[MUSIC PLAYING] WGU's IT audio series-- flexible, portable, profound. [MUSIC PLAYING]

## **Speaker 2 (Summer Ball):**

Hi, and welcome to What Reddit Got Wrong. I am Summer Ball, program faculty manager in the College of IT at Western Governors University. And with me today is Dr. Eric Lagally, associate dean in data science in the College of IT, and also Dr. Joe Dery, Dean of data science in the College of IT. Hi, guys, how are you today?

## **Speaker 3 (Dr. Joe Derry):**

Doing well, Summer.

## **Speaker 4 (Dr. Eric Lagally):**

Doing well, thank you.

## **Speaker 2 (Summer Ball):**

Fantastic. So we're calling it What Reddit Got Wrong, but I think we do need to put a little disclaimer out there. It's really more social media because not all the questions I found came from Reddit specifically, but the title is just a little too catchy to pass up. So that disclaimer is out there. And with that said, how about we jump into a few questions.

## **Speaker 3 (Dr. Joe Derry):**

Sounds good.

## **Speaker 4 (Dr. Eric Lagally):**

Sounds great.

## **Speaker 2 (Summer Ball):**

Fantastic. So I found the questions, like I said, in social media. I've also got the answers that people provided them. And I just want to ask each of you to let me know, did they get it right? And if not, what is right? So the first question-- and Joe, why don't I just point this one to you. The first question is, they said, I'm just wondering if anyone knows what the course start and end dates are for. Should I be worried about them. And the answer they received is, nah, don't worry about it. It's just there is a tool for your mentor. It doesn't apply to us. It just tells your mentor when to send you an email. So Joe, right or wrong?

## **Speaker 3 (Dr. Joe Derry):**

Well, I definitely appreciate the question, Summer, and thank you for pulling myself and Eric together today to respond to some of these. And the way that I want to phrase this one-- I want to start with an example. And I want to use the example of a marathon. So for those of you that don't know, I'm in the Boston mass area. And every year, we have the Boston Marathon, one of the most famous marathons in the world.

And the way that I would answer this question is by thinking about, if you were going to run that marathon but you were going to wear a blindfold, you're going to put earplugs in, and you weren't going to know where you were at any particular point in time, how effective would you be in getting to that finish line?

So when I start thinking about start and end dates, the reason why they're there is to help you pace. They're there to help you get to that end date based on your goals. So because WGU is a competency based University where we're interested in measuring when students have achieved their competencies and acquired those skills that are needed for future successful careers, we're not so much interested in time and seat.

Meaning that you need to have the discipline to be able to pace accordingly to get to that end of that marathon, that graduation date to get that degree in hand. And the start and end dates form landmarks, they form different points of motivation to say, OK, well, based on the pace that I'm going, I think I can get there in six months or one year or two years or three years or four years or whatever it is based on your path that you align to in collaboration with your mentor when you start the program.

Now, without those, it becomes more of a procrastination and a guessing game. And just my human nature is, if you don't have deadlines set to be able to progress through your courses, more than likely, you're going to be stacking things up against the end, and you're going to be rushing, you're going to be burning the midnight oil, and you're going to be stressing yourself out to be able to get to where you need to be by the end of a six month term.

Now, the beautiful thing about WGU being competency based is our terms are flat rate, meaning, of course, that six month period, it's all, you can eat in collaboration with your mentor or figuring out that plan. So if you can put these start dates, it really helps you to start pacing. It helps you to figure out, OK, well, if I want to get from A to B on this milestone-- it's like getting to the three mile marker in the marathon, here are the things I'm going to do that.

If you take that mile marker away, you're guessing. You're a little bit blind to it, and you're not exactly sure when and where you're going to get to something added stress to the picture. So that's something we want to avoid. So I'm going to bring this up. These start and end dates are absolutely critical to helping you to pace. They're helping you to get to that goal that you have and make sure that you're not spending more money than you need to.

If you're trying to get through a master's program in 18 months, for example, and you're not paying attention to these mile markers in getting to that end of that marathon, this program may drag on for 24 months or 36 months or 48 months or whatever it is, costing you more money as you're going and keeping you from getting to that dream job that you're trying to achieve. So I would say that Reddit in social media got this one wrong. These are critical markers to help you succeed in the marathon that is your degree journey.

### **Speaker 2 (Summer Ball):**

Wow, yeah. I hadn't thought about a marathon. That's pretty interesting. I would probably end up way off track, nowhere near the finish line. And I do know too, six months can go a lot faster than I think it's going to. So yeah, those milestone markers are really important. Thank you for that. So Eric, I want to pose this one to you.

The question that the student asked is, I'm looking to a career switch. I don't have a background in IT or data. Is it still possible for me to complete this program in two terms? And the answer they received was, oh, yeah, you can probably have it done in two terms. I didn't have to study much for it, and I work in finance. Did they get it right or wrong?

### **Speaker 4 (Dr. Eric Lagally):**

Well, good question, Summer. And I think with most good questions, the answer is it depends. Depends on the student we're talking about. I'm going to go back to Joe's marathon metaphor here, I really like that, and I think it applies to this answer as well. Certain people will start a marathon at the start line, and maybe they don't have much background in the discipline.

So they have to go through, and they have to learn a lot of content. They have to learn the foundational content, they have to learn the more advanced concepts, and then they will do their capstone and they will complete the program and have all the skills that they need to have to be successful in the workplace.

Other folks may start halfway through the race. Maybe they've already got an associate's degree. Maybe they're coming in with a lot of prior work experience, and they've got a lot of these competencies already in hand. And so for students like that, obviously, you might expect them to finish faster than someone who is only starting at the starting line.

So each student's experience is going to vary depending on what program we're talking about, what your specific experience and educational background have been. So just as an example, in the data analytics programs, there are three major categories of skills that we teach. These are skills in programming, skills in math, specifically statistics, and business influence skills.

It's pretty rare to be an expert in all of these. And quite frankly, those folks who are experts already have degrees and they're out working in the world and getting paid quite a bit of money. So it's likely the different students will come in with different experience in each of these skill areas. The cool thing about WGU is that it's set up to be flexible and adaptable to everybody's needs.

As a competency based University, we're more concerned with ensuring you have the skills mastered when you graduate. If that takes longer for you than for another student, that's OK. We provide a lot of support too in various ways. So everybody will encounter some challenges in their program at some point. And as you encounter those challenges along the way, we have our program mentors-- your team, Summer, we have instructors, we have support centers, and other resources that can help.

So thinking about back to Joe's point about pacing and those mile markers, each course has an average pace. This is the pace at which most students tend to move through the content. And that pace will depend on how big the course, is how much content it is, how advanced it is, and every student's individual experience and prior work in that area.

So those are rough guides in terms of how long one might expect to take in a course, but it's more about making sure that you have those skills well in hand as you graduate and you go out and advance your career. So I would say this answer is probably true for some students, but it's not true for every student.

### **Speaker 2 (Summer Ball):**

That's good to know because even though we're all people, even though we're all looking to increase our knowledge, it's never an apples to apples comparison because we don't know the background that another person has. And so I think that's-- you're probably right. It's true for some people, but not for all. Well, Eric, let me hit you with another one.

So the question that they asked is, I didn't pass my assessment. Now it says I have to meet with my instructor before another attempt. Is this true? Why do I have to do this? And the answer they received is, I did it, but I thought it was a waste of my time. So I just let them talk and then told them I was good and they needed to open my access. Just be firm with them. They have to do what you say. Oh, Eric, right or wrong?

### **Speaker 4 (Dr. Eric Lagally):**

This one, I think, Summer, needs some correction. I would say this is probably wrong. When students don't pass an assessment-- you take an assessment in a course and unfortunately it doesn't quite go the way you were hoping it would go, whether it's an objective assessment, so those multiple choice exams, or whether it's a performance assessment, something that you submit an artifact, a piece of work, whether it's a paper or a presentation, and it comes back and you're not successful, that's a sign that there are sections of the content, some of those competencies, that you haven't yet mastered.

And what we found through our 25 years of experience at WGU is that many students who don't create a plan to prepare for their next attempt are simply going to attempt over and over again unsuccessfully. This has the effect of slowing your pace to graduation and as a result can cost you more money, which, as Joe was talking about, is not what we want to have happen.

The cool thing is, as I mentioned earlier, we have these instructors. Our instructors, our subject matter experts. These are folks who have years, decades in many cases, of training in industry, doing exactly the sorts of things that they're teaching. They have lots of experience not only in the content, but also in instruction, how to teach students.

So they have a very good sense of what works best for all sorts of different students to help you learn the content in the courses that they support. So setting a study plan with an instructor is actually a good thing after you don't pass an assessment attempt. By the way, you can actually set a study plan with an instructor even before you attempt for the first time.

They can really help you understand, what areas you're coming in with that you're already strong at? And what areas you might want to spend a little bit more time in? And within that, how you might study most effectively for who you are as a student? So the study plan that emerges from those conversations reflects your needs as a student, what's going on in the rest of your life in terms of your time requirements, family commitments, and so on, as well as what the instructor feels will help best prepare you on the next attempt.

So that's really the study plan is designed to help you. And I certainly recommend that study plans are always followed, and that you have a conversation with your instructor. If you feel like the study plan isn't going to meet your needs, absolutely, tell them that. Say, hey, this is something that I think might need a little modification, and they'll work with you on it.

If you ever feel like an interaction with an instructor could have been more helpful than it was and you feel like you're not able to have that conversation, you can always talk to your mentor about this. And your mentor can help facilitate a more productive interaction the next time. We're really here to help you as a student. And so if that's not being helpful, let us know and we'll fix it.

### **Speaker 2 (Summer Ball):**

Fantastic. I like the idea of taking the guesswork out of what you need to be ready to be able to pass because I think everyone wants to be able to pass it at least the next time and to take that guesswork out. That study plan sounds like it would be a great tool. All right, Joe, you're up. So here's the question I have for you.

My mentor calls me constantly. I'm getting frustrated because I thought this was supposed to be at my own pace, but I feel like the weekly calls are just too much. The response they received was, I just don't answer. I only reach out to get a new class open. That's all they do anyway. What's your take on this? Right or wrong?

### **Speaker 3 (Dr. Joe Derry):**

Well, I think I'm going to stick with the marathon example that I had earlier with the difference from an actual marathon being that you have somebody running alongside you throughout that marathon. They're not just as a mentor, but as a coach. Someone who's encouraging you to succeed, being able to help you if you're running into hurdles or roadblocks along the way, and the mentor model is something that WGU really has that's unique.

As you're going through the marathon, having somebody there that can help you to see what's coming around the corner, that can respond to how you're feeling, what's going on in your life, and really help to best position to succeed in that particular term, or in of course, or with the WGU experience that you have, that's a relationship and a benefit that is there to help you to get across that finish line at the pace that you're after.

Now, in terms of maybe somebody is calling too frequently or they're emailing or they're texting, a lot of that is two way communication. A part of it is letting your mentor know what works for you, and making sure that you establish a cadence that's built on mutual respect that really reflects what you're looking to get out of it, but also understanding that these folks are literally there to help you. That is what their job is.

That's what they're really focused on doing, what they're passionate about, and they want to see you cross that finish line and get that degree more than anything. They're also doing a lot more than just opening classes. Again, they're

thinking about term planning with you. They're connecting you with potential resources to help you. In some cases, they may help you with a particular subject area that you're stuck in.

A lot of our mentors are skilled in a lot of the domains of your program as well in addition to the course instructors that Eric was talking about earlier. These are really your personal coach. They're there to really keep that student centered approach that we have a WGU alive and active. So I think for this particular student, that answered, I just don't answer and that's really all they do in terms of opening new classes, I'm a little sad for that particular student because I don't think they realized the full benefit that they could have gotten from that mentor relationship.

In a lot of ways they're now running that marathon with a more limited support network. So my advice to this person if they're ever listening to this podcast at some point or if anyone listening is ever questioning, who is this mentor, what are they doing, and do I need to talk to them? It really comes down to, how can that mentor help you to be successful, and making sure you have that two way communication to figure out the relationship and the cadence that makes sense.

### **Speaker 2 (Summer Ball):**

That's a good point. And since we don't have specific class times, the mentor really can be the lifeline for the student to help make sure that things are going OK and keep them connected. And if they run into trouble, also help them there. So that's a really good point. All right. Eric, we're going back to you. The question we have is, I don't understand or I don't like the learning resource for the class. I'm in. What should I do? And the answer they were given is, I used YouTube for some things and googled other topics. What's your take on this? Right or wrong?

### **Speaker 4 (Dr. Eric Lagally):**

Well, that's an interesting one, Summer. Let me maybe start by talking a little bit about how we select learning resources for courses at the WGU. So the way that we design our curriculum is a little bit different from a lot of places that you'll encounter in higher Ed. And the reason why is because we're competency based.

So we start from those skills, those competencies, that are most important to employers for the jobs that we want our students to have when they graduate. That's our starting point. That's our end all be all. If we can get those students those skills, then we've succeeded. So we start by writing down, what are those lists of skills and what are the competencies that students need to have in hand as they graduate?

From there, we'll design the course. And so we designed the course around those competencies. And then the last step is we actually go in and we look at learning resources. Once we have an idea of what we want to teach and how we want to teach it, then we go out and we look for, what are those learning resources that best allow us to do that?

And so learning resources for a course are designed to present the content in a variety of different ways because, of course, we all learn slightly differently. So most courses that you encounter will contain a variety of different resources and different formats. Some have a lot of videos, some have e-texts, some have a lot of practice items and quizzes, hands on practice, and so on.

So that's designed intentionally to make sure that there's something there for everybody. If you feel that the main learning resources for a course aren't helping you learn, you do have options. As I was talking about earlier, the instructors are really the experts in those courses. So I encourage students who don't like the learning resource to reach out to your instructor.

Your instructor is probably going to be able to recommend some supplemental resources that they have vetted for quality, accessibility, and accuracy. And those are all, of course, very important. The trouble that we can run into when we start searching for learning resources on the internet or on our own is that these resources often haven't been vetted in that way by a subject matter expert.

And therefore, they can contain inaccurate, incorrect, or confusing information that can make things worse. Not for nothing, they can also sometimes introduce nasties onto your computer like spyware and other malware. These are

all things that we check for here at WGU. So I would say, reach out, have a conversation, again, with your faculty, with your instructors. If you feel like the learning resources in the course aren't helping you learn the way you want to.

### **Speaker 2 (Summer Ball):**

I like that. I like how the instructor can help identify something that adapts to what the student needs, their learning style, and possibly get some supplemental support that's up their alley. That's a great answer. All right. Well, Joe, let's bring you back to you then. Here's the question. It says, I'm studying for an exam and have taken the pre-assessment a few times. I'm passing the pre-assessment.

That means I can pass the exam, right? The answer they were provided says, you should be good to go. The questions will probably be a lot like what you saw in the pre-assessment. And this one has a follow up. It says, I took the exam, and I don't understand why I didn't pass. This is so frustrating. So, Joe, where did it go wrong?

### **Speaker 3 (Dr. Joe Derry):**

Well I think this one's a little bit of a loaded question and answer mainly because the experience of that particular student really weighs in here. But if I step back for a second, the way that I view pre-assessments is there a way to give you a pulse check. So again, you're getting ready for a particular part of the marathon. Maybe you're doing some sprints before or you're checking your blood pressure. You're trying to understand exactly what you can expect in the real deal and in the real assessment in this case.

And these pre-assessments are there to help you gauge how you're doing, check your understanding, and your comprehension. But at the end of the day, they're also a sample of the overall content. They're a rigid fixed set of sample questions and prompts that are there to help you practice.

Now, the more that you take the pre-assessments, you're going to start seeing some repetition there. You're going to get better at answering because they're not going to keep on being these newly generated things. So in theory, the more you take the pre-assessment, the better you're going to get a muscle memory and remembering some of those prep questions.

So you may end up, over the course of taking these-- maybe you're doing it 2, 3, 4 times, thinking that you are perfectly ready to go. But in essence, you really just did some memorization exercises. For this reason, when you start thinking about pre-assessments, a lot of times, it's better to really tackle that after you reviewed a lot of the course content.

So getting through trying to understand, what areas you may be struggling with? Reaching out to your faculty member, to your instructor to help with comprehension of some of those skills and competencies that you may be struggling with. Take the pre-assessment and see how you're doing. That's going to help point you to particular areas that you may want to go back to.

And perhaps you're going to spend some time with your course instructor actually diving into the areas that you may have struggled with in the pre-assessment, and then you're going to attempt the assessment itself. Now, the spirit of the questions is going to be similar. But as you dive in there, there may be particular content areas that weren't represented on the pre-assessment that maybe throw you a bit of a curveball.

And if that wasn't something you had covered in enough detail when preparing for the assessment, you'll learn more about that as you work with your course instructor after the assessment attempt. And you come up with that study plan that Eric was talking about earlier to really focus on these are the areas you need to double down on to really understand before you go and attempt that assessment again.

So for this particular student, they may have done really well in that pre-assessment and maybe there was a particular set of skills, these competencies that threw them a little bit of a loop. And the best follow for them is not to get frustrated, but to step back and say, OK, now I'm going to understand what I need to go work on and refine. My

course instructor is there to help me to put a plan together so I can be successful, and then you'll step into that second attempt more confident at that point.

The other way to think about this too is maybe you're at some point in your life, you've come across the SATs or some other kind of standardized testing. And if you're like me, you've taken some pre-assessments some pre-test--some practice tests there. And personally, I would get really good at the practice test. And then you get in the room and you're actually in that environment of a proctored setting where you're doing the assessment, and there's other variables that are there.

So the same way you're running the marathon-- the weather may be different that day, it may be raining, maybe the temperature is a little different. You have other things going on in your life that may not have been there in your practicing. And there's always this notion of outside factors and confounders that can also come in too. So it may have nothing to do with your knowledge of that particular competency, but just the fact that you have other things going on in your life.

So long story short to this, don't get frustrated. Take a few deep breaths and step back. Talk to your mentor. Talk to your course instructor. Come up with a plan and then schedule time that works to take that assessment attempt again, and we'll see what happens. And fingers crossed assuming you're taking all these steps, you'll be able to get through that with success and move on to the next course of the program.

### **Speaker 2 (Summer Ball):**

Perfect. I love how you said that this is a pulse check. And it's not exactly what they're going to see, but it's the spirit of what they're going to be asked. So they get an idea. That's a really good thought. And it's helpful to know that, hey, don't memorize all of this because it's not going to be exactly this way. Well, I know that you've been using metaphor of the marathon and our marathon of this podcast-- not so much of a marathon, is soon coming to an end because I have our last question.

So Eric, let me bring it back to you. Here's the question. It says, I didn't pass a class last term, but completed it this term. It shows as passed for this term, but it still shows this not passed for last term. Why won't they fix this? And the answer provided says, email Records. Let them know, they'll fix it. Did they get it right or wrong?

### **Speaker 4 (Dr. Eric Lagally):**

Well, Summer, unfortunately, this one they got wrong. And the reason why has to do with how we are structured as a University. So WGU is what we call a title 4 institution. That's a bunch of language that basically means that we can grant federal financial aid, which we do. Because we can grant federal financial aid, that means we have to adhere to some federal regulations, as you might expect.

As a result, students are required to maintain what we call satisfactory academic progress or SAP as a measure of the progress that they're making towards the completion of their degree. So every time you pass a course, your satisfactory academic progress goes up, and every time we don't pass a course, it goes down.

Basically, that's because SAP is a measurement of how many of the courses that you enrolled for did you complete within the time that you had to complete them? So you will receive-- students will receive a grade on their permanent academic records for any courses in which they enrolled or in a term. So there's two possible outcomes, as I've already mentioned. Those grading can be passed or not passed because that's how we operate at WGU.

We don't have letter grades, I think most people understand that. So it's either you pass the course, you completed that final assessment successfully, or you didn't. And so those are the two options. And if you want to know more about that, there's a great article in the student handbook that you can look up. It's called grading scale. It has a lot more information on this.

At any rate, when you enroll in your courses as part of your term registration, you are actually making a commitment to complete those courses for that term. You're saying, I'm setting this in my term registration, and I intend to finish it



by the end of the term. So if one of those registered courses within the term is not completed, the course will show as a not passed for that term even if the course is completed in a subsequent term.

So for that reason, it's always going to reflect best on your transcript if you can complete all of your courses for which you enrolled by the end of the term in which you first enrolled them. That maintains the highest SAP or satisfactory academic progress.

### **Speaker 2 (Summer Ball):**

And that makes me think, it goes back to the first question we had. That if we want to make sure that we have passed on our transcripts, those mile markers are milestones of the course start and end dates can help us get there to make sure that we get a pass instead of a not passed. These are all the questions that I had for today. I want to ask, though, Joe, Eric, do you have any final comments you want to share with us?

### **Speaker 3 (Dr. Joe Derry):**

My final comments I think I'll share is, be wary of what you see on social media. You don't know the unique circumstances of that particular student or potentially even if that person was a student. I think a lot of these questions were great, and they really come down to the uniqueness in a lot of ways that Western Governors University brings to the table in our competency based self-paced model.

I do think, though, when these questions come up, again, you have your mentor to speak to. If you are a prematriculated student, meaning a prospective student, you have the enrollment counselors that you can speak to. You have folks like Eric and myself that you can speak to. Both of us love talking to students and prospective students.

And once you're a student, we also have a campus community a virtual campus community available where you can go and post these questions to current students and faculty members and get a community response. So there's a lot of ways to be able to get insights into these kind of questions when they pop up. Just be wary of going to unmoderated sources where, again, you're not even sure if that person is a student because they may be feeding you information that may not be complete or may misdirect you unintentionally.

### **Speaker 4 (Dr. Eric Lagally):**

And I would just say, Summer, that WGU is different as an organization, as a University. And that's by design. It's intentional. And so it makes sense that a lot of these questions would come up because they don't match students prior experience at other universities or other colleges or community colleges.

One of the other things that makes WGU unique that Joe just mentioned is that we really are here to help. We are student centered at WGU, and we want to help. As you look at the leadership across the University, you find that a lot of the leaders at the University started off as mentors and instructors.

And that really comes from the fact that we are interested in helping students learn all the way from our front line faculty all the way through to our most senior leaders. So we really do want to help. We are here. We will listen. If you have something you want to say, please do reach out and we will do our best to make sure that you get what you need to move forward and pass those courses and graduate.

### **Speaker 2 (Summer Ball):**

Very good Thank you so much for your time. And who knows? Maybe in the future, we'll have some more questions to answer, or maybe people will just know that they can come to us directly and they'll get the answers straight from us so they don't have to go to anyone else. Who knows? Could be. It was great talking to you all today. Have a great day.



**Speaker 3 (Dr. Joe Derry):**

Thanks, Summer.

**Speaker 4 (Dr. Eric Lagally):**

Thanks to you too.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**Speaker 1 (Moderator):**

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