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Program Guidebook

Master of Science, Cybersecurity and Information Assurance

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The Master of Science in Cybersecurity and Information Assurance prepares security professionals to protect an organization's operations in cyberspace and safeguard the confidentiality, integrity, and availability of information. The comprehensive curriculum covers topics such as secure network design; cyber defense; penetration testing; cloud security; governance, risk, and compliance (GRC); software design; enterprise architecture; information security programs; and business continuity and disaster recovery (BCDR). The program equips students with competencies in the latest technologies and best practices in cybersecurity to effectively protect their organization's assets and manage operations in today's digital landscape. This program features nationally recognized, high-demand certifications in the field of cybersecurity.

Understanding the Competency-Based Approach

How do competency-based programs like those offered at Western Governors University (WGU) work? Unlike traditional universities, WGU does not award degrees based on completing a certain number of credit hours or a specific set of required courses. Instead, you will earn your degree by demonstrating your skills, knowledge, and understanding of essential concepts.

Progress through a degree program is measured not by the amount of time you spend in class but by your ability to demonstrate competency as you complete required courses along a Standard Path. To help you acquire the knowledge and skills you need to demonstrate competency and complete your courses and program, WGU provides a rich array of learning resources. Your program mentor will work closely with you to help you understand your program's requirements and help you create a plan for completing your courses. You will also work closely with course instructors as you engage in each course. As subject matter experts, course instructors will guide you through the content you must learn to demonstrate competency through the course assessments.

The benefit of this competency-based system is that it enables students who are knowledgeable about a particular subject to make accelerated progress toward completing a degree, even if they lack college experience. You may have gained skills and knowledge of a subject while on the job, accumulated wisdom through years of life experience, or already taken a course on a particular subject. WGU will award your degree based on the skills and knowledge you possess and can demonstrate—not the number of hours spent in a classroom.

Accreditation

Western Governors University is the only university in the history of American higher education to have earned initial accreditation from multiple regional accrediting commissions at once—earning simultaneous accreditation from ACCJC, HLC, NWCCU, and WASC. The university's accreditation from the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU) was reaffirmed in March of 2024. In addition to institution-level accreditation, each school has at least one program that is accredited by a programmatic accreditation. All programmatic accreditations are managed by the Academic Engagement department. Contact compliance@wgu.edu for additional information.

The Degree Plan

The focus of your program is your personalized Degree Plan. The Degree Plan is a detailed blueprint of the courses you will need to complete in order to earn your degree. The Degree Plan also lays out the accompanying learning resources and assessments that compose your program. The list of courses in the Degree Plan is often referred to as the standard path. The amount of time it takes to complete your program depends on both the amount of new information you need to learn and the amount of time you plan to devote each week to study. Your program mentor and course instructors will help you assess your strengths and development needs to establish a study plan.

Students vary widely in the specific skills and information they need to learn. For example, some students may be highly knowledgeable in a particular subject matter and would not need to engage in new learning opportunities. Other students may find that portions of the program require them to learn new information and that they need to take an online class or participate in a study module to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to fulfill program competencies in that area. Some individuals may be able to devote as little as 15–20 hours per week to the program, while others may need to devote more time. For this reason, pre-assessments are there to help your program mentor form a profile of your prior knowledge and create a personalized Degree Plan.

How You Will Interact with Faculty

At WGU, faculty serve in specialized roles, and they will work with you individually to provide the guidance, instruction, and support you will need to succeed and graduate. As a student, it is important for you to take advantage of this support. It is key to your progress and ultimate success.

Upon enrollment, we will match you with a Program Mentor. A Program Mentor will work with you from your first term through graduation. Working with a Program Mentor means you will always have someone by your side on your academic journey. Often, they will be the first person you contact when you have a question or need assistance. Here are some of the main roles the Program Mentor plays throughout your academic program at WGU:

- Meet with you regularly to answer questions, keep you focused, and help plan the next steps.
- Help you develop a personalized term plan based on your personal strengths, challenges, schedules, and needs. This plan includes deciding which courses to take and the start and completion date goals for each course.
- Keep track of your progress through your term plan, and help you make adjustments to the term plan as needed to meet your graduation goal.
- Help you ensure that your course start dates are accurate to keep you on track for each term.
- Refer and connect you to support services and follow up on resolution as needed.

Additionally, as you begin each course, you will be partnered with Course Instructors, who are here to ensure you pass each course on the road to completing your degree program by your chosen graduation goal. Instructors are subject matter experts who are here to assist you in many ways, including:

- Welcome you to the course.
- Help you develop a course study plan.
- Answer content specific questions.
- Keep track of your course progress and engagement, and help you finish on time.
- Offer webinars that provide you with support and information to help you make progress.
- Celebrate with you when you pass an assessment and work with you on a personalized support plan if you need another assessment attempt.
- Work with you and your Program Mentor to discuss any changes to your course dates.

For many of the courses at WGU, you will be required to complete performance assessments. These include reports, papers, presentations, and projects that let you demonstrate your mastery of the required competencies. A separate group of faculty members, called evaluators, will review your work to determine whether it meets requirements. Evaluators are also subject matter experts in their field of evaluation. If your assessment needs further work before it "meets competency," these evaluators, who review your work anonymously, will provide you with evaluation feedback to help you demonstrate competency and allow you to advance.

Connecting with Other Mentors and Fellow Students

As you proceed through your Degree Plan, you will have direct contact with multiple faculty members. These communications can take a variety of forms, including participation in one-on-one discussions, chats in the learning communities, and live cohort and webinar opportunities. As a WGU student, you will have access to your own personal MyWGU Student Portal, which will provide a gateway to your courses of study, learning resources, and learning communities where you will interact with faculty and other students.

The learning resources in each course are specifically designed to support you as you develop competencies in preparation for your assessments. These learning resources may include reading materials, videos, tutorials, cohort opportunities, community discussions, and live discussions that are guided by course instructors who are experts in their field. You will access your program community during your orientation course to network with peers who are enrolled in your program and to receive continued support through professional enrichment and program-specific chats, blogs, and discussions. WGU also provides Student Services associates to help you and your program mentor solve any special problems that may arise.

Orientation

The WGU Orientation course will introduce you to the fundamentals of WGU's competency-based education (CBE) and the expectations, policies, and protocols for students enrolled in a WGU degree program. Orientation will introduce you to WGU's wide range of support resources and success centers. It also will provide you with study strategies recommended by current students and faculty that will help you succeed as a WGU student. Orientation ends with your first assessment at WGU, providing an opportunity to experience WGU's performance assessment process before you begin your degree-focused coursework. The Orientation course must be completed before you can start your first term at WGU.

Transferability of Prior College Coursework

Because WGU is a competency-based institution, it does not award degrees based on credits but rather on demonstration of competency. WGU undergraduate programs may accept transfer credits or apply a 'Requirement Satisfied' (RS) in some cases. Refer to your specific program transfer guidelines to determine what can be satisfied by previously earned college credits. Students entering graduate programs must have their undergraduate degree transcripts verified before being admitted to WGU. In addition to a program's standard course path, there may be additional state-specific requirements.

[Click here for the Student Handbook](#)

WGU does not waive any requirements based on a student's professional experience and does not perform a "résumé review" or "portfolio review" that will automatically waive any degree requirements. Degree requirements and transferability rules are subject to change in order to keep the degree content relevant and current.

Remember, WGU's competency-based approach lets you take advantage of your knowledge and skills, regardless of how you obtained them. Even when you do not directly receive credit, the knowledge you possess may help you accelerate the time it takes to complete your degree program.

Continuous Enrollment, On Time Progress, and Satisfactory Academic Progress

WGU is a "continuous enrollment" institution, which means you will be automatically enrolled in each of your new terms while you are at WGU. Each term is six months long. Longer terms and continuous enrollment allow you to focus on your studies without the hassle of unnatural breaks between terms that you would experience at a more traditional university. At the end of every six-month term, you and your program mentor will review the progress you have made and revise your Degree Plan for your next six-month term.

WGU requires that students make measurable progress toward the completion of their degree programs every term. We call this "On-Time Progress," denoting that you are on track and making progress toward on-time graduation. As full-time students, graduate students must enroll in at least 8 competency units each term, and undergraduate students must enroll in at least 12 competency units each term. Completing at least these minimum enrollments is essential to On-Time Progress and serves as a baseline from which you may accelerate your program. We measure your progress based on the courses you are able to pass, not on your accumulation of credit hours or course grades. Every time you pass a course, you are demonstrating that you have mastered skills and knowledge in your degree program. For comparison to traditional grading systems, passing a course means you have demonstrated competency equivalent to a "B" grade or better.

WGU assigns competency units to each course in order to track your progress through the program. A competency unit is equivalent to one semester credit of learning. Some courses may be assigned 3 competency units while others may be as large as 12 competency units.

Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) is particularly important to students on financial aid because you must achieve SAP in order to maintain eligibility for financial aid. We will measure your SAP quantitatively by reviewing the number of competency units you have completed each term. In order to remain in good academic standing, you must complete at least 66.67% of the units you attempt over the length of your

program—including any courses you add to your term to accelerate your progress. Additionally, during your first term at WGU you must pass at least 3 competency units in order to remain eligible for financial aid. We know that SAP is complex, so please contact a financial aid counselor should you have additional questions.

Courses

Your Degree Plan includes courses needed to complete your program. To obtain your degree, you must demonstrate your skills and knowledge by completing each course's assessment(s). You may be asked to demonstrate competency in a course in several different ways, including proctored exams, projects, essays, research papers, and simulations, among others. Certifications verified through third parties may also be included in your program as a way to demonstrate competency. More detailed information about each assessment is provided in the course of study.

Learning Resources

WGU works with many different educational partners, including enterprises, publishers, training companies, and higher educational institutions, to provide high-quality and effective learning resources that match the competencies you are developing. These vary in type, and may be combined to create the best learning experience for your course. A learning resource can be an e-textbook, online module, study guide, simulation, virtual lab, tutorial, or a combination of these. The cost of most learning resources are included in your tuition and Resource Fee. They can be accessed or enrolled for through your courses. Some degree-specific resources may not be covered by your tuition, and you will need to cover those costs separately. WGU also provides a robust library to help you obtain additional learning resources, as needed.

Mobile Compatibility:

The following Student Handbook article provides additional details about the current state of mobile compatibility for learning resources at WGU.

[Mobile Access for Learning Resources](#)

Program Outcomes

The Program Outcomes are the following:

1. The graduate develops cybersecurity plans, strategies, and policies to support and align with organizational cybersecurity initiatives and regulatory compliance.
2. The graduate provisions information technology infrastructure to ensure that it provides confidentiality, integrity and availability.
3. The graduate operates hardware, software and virtual environments to ensure effective and efficient information technology system performance and security.
4. The graduate defends information technology infrastructure by analyzing and mitigating cybersecurity threats.
5. The graduate investigates cybersecurity incidents or crimes related to information technology and digital evidence by collecting and analyzing cybersecurity information.

Standard Path

As previously mentioned, competency units (CUs) have been assigned to each course in order to measure your academic progress. If you are an undergraduate student, you will be expected to enroll in a minimum of 12 competency units each term. Graduate students are expected to enroll in a minimum of 8 competency units each term. A standard plan for a student for this program who entered WGU without any transfer units would look similar to the one on the following page. Your personal progress can be faster, but your pace will be determined by the extent of your transfer units, your time commitment, and your determination to proceed at a faster rate.

Standard Path *for* Master of Science, Cybersecurity and Information Assurance

Course Description	CUs	Term
Security Foundations	2	1
Secure Network Design	3	1
Secure Software Design	3	1
Security Operations	4	2
Cloud Security	4	2
Penetration Testing	4	3
Cybersecurity Architecture and Engineering	4	3
Governance, Risk, and Compliance	2	4
Cybersecurity Management	4	4
Cybersecurity Graduate Capstone	4	4
Total CUs	34	

Changes to Curriculum

WGU publishes an Institutional Catalog, which describes the academic requirements of each degree program. Although students are required to complete the program version current at the time of their enrollment, WGU may modify requirements and course offerings within that version of the program to maintain the currency and relevance of WGU's competencies and programs. When program requirements are updated, students readmitting after withdrawal from the university will be expected to re-enter into the most current catalog version of the program.

Prerequisites

The standard path at WGU is essential for students to achieve success in their academic pursuits. By following the required sequence of courses, students pace their progress and build the necessary skills and competencies for future success. Prerequisite courses ensure that students have a comprehensive understanding of fundamental concepts and competencies necessary for completing advanced coursework.

The program requires students to complete a subset of courses in a specific sequence. Students and program mentors work together to plan the appropriate prerequisites for advanced courses and adhere to the standard path as required.

The MSCSIA program requires that the following courses be taken as prerequisites to the next set of courses. Some courses may have additional prerequisites, refer to the course pages for more details. Course numbering does not imply the correct sequencing in every case; some courses in the standard path do not adhere to the course number sequence. The placement of these courses aids students with pacing and completion.

(Prerequisite 1) These courses are foundational and are prerequisites to all remaining courses.
- D481 Security Foundations
- D482 Secure Network Design

(Prerequisite 2) Complete this prerequisite before moving to the next section:
- D483 Security Operations

(Prerequisite 3) Complete these prerequisites before moving to the next section:
- D484 Penetration Testing
- D485 Cloud Security

(Prerequisite 4) Complete this prerequisite before moving to the next section:
- D488 Cybersecurity Architecture and Engineering

All prerequisites must be satisfied prior to taking the following course:
- D489 Cybersecurity Management

All courses must be satisfied prior to taking the following course:
- D490 Cybersecurity Graduate Capstone

Cybersecurity and Ethics

When considering a major in cybersecurity, students must understand the importance of ethics and principles such as integrity, responsibility, and respect for privacy. Ethical behavior helps prevent misuse of critical data and fosters trust with clients, employers, and the public. This trust is essential for effective collaboration and security measures. Ethical behavior also guides professionals in making decisions that comply with laws and regulations, preventing breaches, legal issues, or damage to an organization's reputation. Maintaining high ethical standards is key to building a secure and reliable digital environment.

While there are no WGU-specific criteria related to an applicant's background for program participation, some professional organizations like ISC2 require you to disclose any criminal history, association with criminal computer activity, or loss of license or certification during their application process. This may impact your ability to obtain specific certifications that align with WGU's standards of competency. Maintaining a clean legal record is important as it can affect your opportunities for certification and future employment opportunities in the field.

Cybersecurity is not a regulated profession; however, employers often require thorough background checks to ensure candidates have a history of integrity and reliability. Depending on the job, you might also need a security clearance, especially if you'll be working with sensitive government data. Obtaining a clearance involves a detailed review of your personal, financial, and criminal history. Any criminal records can impact your chances of getting these clearances.

Certifications

Certain courses are aligned to industry certifications:

- The course Security Foundations is aligned to the ISC2 Certified in Cybersecurity.
- The course Security Operations has alignment with CompTIA CySA+.
- The course Penetration Testing has alignment with CompTIA Pentest+.
- The course Cybersecurity Architecture and Engineering has alignment with CompTIA SecurityX (formerly CASP+).
- The course Cybersecurity Management has alignment with ISACA CISM.

Notes on specific certifications:
The MSCSIA program requires a passing score on the ISC2 CC certification to earn their degree. Anyone with prior criminal history will not be prohibited from taking the test, but it may prevent one from obtaining their official CC Certification.

This certification also requires that students take the exam at a live, on-site, proctored testing center. Some testing centers may be located closer to well-populated cities. Students should note that testing centers set their own hours and are independent both of the third-party certification agencies and of WGU. It will be important for students to plan ahead so as to allow for proper lead time and consideration of testing center availability, location and hours of operation. Students will need to make their own personal arrangements to meet the testing center requirements to complete the exam.

Areas of Study for **Master of Science, Cybersecurity and Information Assurance**

The following section includes the areas of study in the program, with their associated courses. Your specific learning resources and level of instructional support will vary based on the individual competencies you bring to the program and your confidence in developing the knowledge, skills, and abilities required in each area of the degree. The Degree Plan and learning resources are dynamic, so you need to review your Degree Plan and seek the advice of your mentor regarding the resources before you purchase them.

Security

Security Foundations

Security Foundations lays the foundation for understanding terminology, principles, processes, and information security best practices at local and global levels. This course further provides an overview of networking components, network security vulnerabilities, and countermeasures for protecting information assets through planning and administrative controls within an organization.

This course covers the following competencies:

- *Begin your course by discussing your course planning tool report with your instructor and creating your personalized course plan together.*
- *The learner identifies fundamental networking infrastructure and protocols to support an organization.*
- *The learner identifies information assurance principles to ensure network security of an organization.*
- *The learner identifies network security operation principles, design principles, and best practices to protect an organization's assets.*

Network Design and Management

Secure Network Design

Secure Network Design provides the foundational knowledge and skills to design secure physical and logical network architectures for wired and wireless networks. Course topics include the characteristics of a secure network, techniques to securely configure network devices, network segmentation strategies, root cause analysis, and mitigation approaches based on industry best practices. The course also offers hands-on experience in network vulnerability analysis and network configuration.

This course covers the following competencies:

- *Begin your course by discussing your course planning tool report with your instructor and creating your personalized course plan together.*
- *The learner aligns secure network architectures with industry best practices and the principles of secure network design.*
- *The learner assesses business and technology needs, network security vulnerabilities, and security strategies.*
- *The learner recommends network security and vulnerability solutions.*

Software

Secure Software Design

Secure Software Design focuses on the variety of elements needed to address and implement secure software acquisition and development throughout the software development life cycle (SDLC). The course addresses people, technology, tools, and processes to design and develop consistently secure applications from start to finish. Additionally, it underscores the importance and value of the Defense in Depth principle across the entire SDLC. The course also introduces techniques to adapt common security activities to modern software development practices such as Agile and DevSecOps.

This course covers the following competencies:

- *Begin your course by discussing your course planning tool report with your instructor and creating your personalized course plan together.*
- *The learner assesses software requirements and risks to ensure threats are addressed.*
- *The learner evaluates software security test plan documentation and implementation strategies.*
- *The learner evaluates the effectiveness of software testing and deployment to ensure security and privacy issues are addressed.*
- *The learner examines security principles, standards, and methods within the software development life cycle (SDLC).*

Hacking Countermeasures and Techniques

Security Operations

Security Operations provides learners with the fundamental skills to handle and respond to computer security incidents in an information system. The course addresses various underlying principles and techniques for detecting and responding to current and emerging computer security threats. The course also helps learners explore strategies to leverage intelligence and threat detection techniques, analyze and interpret data, identify and address vulnerabilities, and suggest preventative measures. Methods are introduced to effectively respond to and recover from cybersecurity incidents, evaluate risk assessment methodologies, and apply incident handling laws and policies.

This course covers the following competencies:

- *Begin your course by discussing your course planning tool report with your instructor and creating your personalized course plan together.*
- *The learner applies improvement techniques and automation based on system monitoring and threat hunting.*
- *The learner applies incident response procedures based on digital forensic analysis.*
- *The learner applies security concepts to risk mitigation with regards to privacy and protection.*
- *The learner applies software and system security controls and procedures for data protection.*
- *The learner manages security testing and response in defense of organizational threats and vulnerabilities.*
- *The learner recommends solutions to respond to a detected cybersecurity incident.*

Web and Cloud Security

Cloud Security

Cloud Security prepares learners to design solutions for cloud-based platforms and operations that maintain data availability while protecting the confidentiality and integrity of information. Course topics include cloud service models, deployment methods, identity and access management (IAM) strategies, auditing and monitoring strategies, assessing and mitigating common cloud security threats, and managing compliance and regulation requirements. The course also offers hands-on experience deploying and assessing IAM controls in a cloud environment.

This course covers the following competencies:

- *Begin your course by discussing your course planning tool report with your instructor and creating your personalized course plan together.*
- *The learner analyzes a risk management plan for threat mitigation countermeasures in the cloud.*
- *The learner designs secure cloud solutions for data protection.*
- *The learner implements secure identity and access management cloud solutions for data protection.*

Penetration Testing

Penetration Testing

Penetration Testing introduces learners to the skills necessary to perform penetration testing and vulnerability management within an organization. The course covers widely used penetration testing techniques and tools that focus on planning and scoping, information gathering, vulnerability identification, and attacks and exploits. In addition, it offers hands-on experience and a focus on penetration testing engagement plans.

This course covers the following competencies:

- *Begin your course by discussing your course planning tool report with your instructor and creating your personalized course plan together.*
- *The learner defines the scope and planning for procurement of penetration testing engagements.*
- *The learner develops penetration testing techniques in exploitation of physical, digital, and social vulnerabilities.*
- *The learner evaluates a penetration testing engagement plan.*
- *The learner performs cyber reconnaissance techniques for information gathering and vulnerability identification.*
- *The learner reports the results of cybersecurity assessments with recommended actions.*
- *The learner simulates attacks and responses on an organization's security infrastructure.*

Secure Systems Analysis & Design

Cybersecurity Architecture and Engineering

Cybersecurity Architecture and Engineering provides learners with advanced skills and knowledge to design secure enterprise architecture solutions. The course focuses on assessing cybersecurity readiness and implementing enterprise-wide solutions to protect data and comply with an organization's policies and frameworks. Course topics include integrating software applications, applying enterprise data security controls, evaluating cloud and virtualization solutions, analyzing threats and vulnerabilities, and responding to incidents.

This course covers the following competencies:

- *Begin your course by discussing your course planning tool report with your instructor and creating your personalized course plan together.*
- *The learner designs secure network architecture solutions for the enterprise.*
- *The learner designs technical integration of cybersecurity solutions to protect enterprises.*
- *The learner develops secure architecture to comply with organizational governance, risk, and compliance strategies.*
- *The learner implements secure solutions to manage cybersecurity risks.*

Risk Management

Governance, Risk, and Compliance

Governance, Risk, and Compliance provides learners with advanced skills and knowledge to authorize and maintain information systems utilizing various risk management frameworks. The course focuses on the strategic and long-term alignment of an organization's information security program to regulatory requirements and organizational policies. Course topics include compliance and regulatory requirements, data classification and prioritization, security and privacy controls, compliance audits and remediation, and risk management plans.

This course covers the following competencies:

- *Begin your course by discussing your course planning tool report with your instructor and creating your personalized course plan together.*
- *The learner develops a remediation plan for security and privacy compliance issues.*
- *The learner evaluates a system security plan in line with business organizational strategy and regulatory compliance requirements.*

Cybersecurity Management

Cybersecurity Management

Cybersecurity Management prepares learners to develop organizational information security programs and policies that follow recognized standards, comply with all governing laws and regulations, and meet the needs of the company culture and management organization. The course covers how to perform risk management institutionally, how to manage compliance to information security requirements, and how to delegate compliance, risk, and security functions to specific roles within the organization. It also helps learners apply strategic decision-making as companies adapt to new technologies, processes, and people practices related to processing, managing, and protecting information resources.

This course covers the following competencies:

- *Begin your course by discussing your course planning tool report with your instructor and creating your personalized course plan together.*
- *The learner describes the risks, standards, and roles that inform a company's information security policy.*
- *The learner develops security policy, standards, procedures, and guidelines to strategically secure an organization's assets.*

Capstone

Cybersecurity Graduate Capstone

The Master of Science in Cybersecurity and Information Assurance (MSCSIA) Capstone project allows learners to demonstrate their capability to establish a durable cybersecurity and information assurance program. The capstone project challenges learners to integrate skills and knowledge from all program domains into one project that addresses a significant real-world cybersecurity problem.

This course covers the following competencies:

- *The learner integrates and synthesizes competencies from across the degree program, thereby demonstrating the ability to participate in and contribute value to the chosen professional field.*

Accessibility and Accommodations

Western Governors University (WGU) is committed to providing equal access to its academic programs to all qualified students. WGU's Student Disability Services department supports this mission by providing support, resources, advocacy, collaboration, and academic accommodations in accordance with federal and state statutes and regulations to WGU students and prospective students. Potential and current students needing to request accommodation(s) are encouraged to contact Student Disability Services to initiate the request. To initiate the accommodation process, all potential and current WGU students must complete the secure online Accommodation Request Form located at' *https://www.wgu.edu/wgu/ada_form*. Potential and current students can reach the Student Disability Services team Monday through Friday 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. MT at 1-877- 435-7948 x5922 or at *sds@wgu.edu*. Additional information on accommodations can be found in the student handbook Accommodations for Students with Disabilities policy.

Need More Information? WGU Student Services

Student Support Services team members also assist with unresolved concerns to find equitable resolutions. To contact the Student Support Services team, please feel free to call 877-435-7948 or e-mail *studentservices@wgu.edu*. We are available Monday through Friday from 6:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m., and Saturday and Sunday, 10:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m, mountain standard time.