Odyssey of an Innovation:  
The Regional Accreditation of Western Governors University

By Chip Johnstone, Provost and Academic Vice President, Western Governors University

Western Governors University (WGU) achieved eligibility for multiregional accreditation in 1998 and candidacy in 2001. Initial multiregional accreditation followed in 2003. WGU’s origins are unique in the history of American higher education as is the path it followed to recognition by the educational community. No other university in American history was established in the same way with the same competency-based mission, and no other university was—or is likely to be—accredited in the same way.

Origins of the Western Governors University

In the summer of 1995, at a meeting of the Western Governors Association in Park City, Utah, frustration, need, and opportunity produced the most radical idea for a new university since the late 1960s. At that earlier time the turmoil of the Vietnam War spawned a generation of “colleges without walls”—institutions such as Charter Oak State College, Empire State College, Regents (now Excelsior) College, and Thomas Edison State College. These institutions pioneered in providing alternative paths to a college degree that did not require campus residence, while responding to individual learning interests and recognizing prior experiential learning as a legitimate component of degree programs.

By 1995 a different kind of turmoil was about to engulf higher education, and a different kind of frustration sparked new thinking from some of those most responsible for funding it. Learning technologies and the Internet were about to enable learning to occur “any time, anywhere.” And as always, tenure, turf, and tradition were the chief obstacles to achieving its potential.

The meeting of the Western Governors Association in Park City did not convene with the idea of launching a new university. The governors had not planned to focus on higher education and had no idea they shared the same frustrations with it. Once introduced, however, the concerns they expressed touched a common nerve. The governors believed their state systems were not producing enough skilled graduates to ensure the quality workforce they needed. They were concerned that the escalating cost of higher education combined with their states’ rapid population growth would outrun the funds available for more campus buildings. They recognized that emerging learning technologies could expand access by delivering instruction at-a-distance, but those technologies were not being introduced systematically across the western region. And despite all of these concerns, their state systems of higher education seemed unresponsive and unwilling to change.

The initial model conceived by the western governors was both appealing and novel. Each founding governor would contribute $100,000 to its establishment, but that would be the only state funding the fledgling institution would receive. Western Governors University (WGU) would be private and not-for-profit. It would only deliver its programs online. All programs would be competency-based. WGU would be market-oriented, developing programs only in areas of high need for skilled graduates. It would be student centered, focused on learning, not research.

The InterRegional Accrediting Committee

By the summer of 1996 WGU had a charter, ten sponsoring governors (a number which later rose to nineteen), and a distinctive mission. The problem of credibility rose almost immediately. How would such a radical idea be accepted by the academic community and by employers? Initially, the governors considered bypassing accreditation entirely. They felt they had the power to rewrite the rules of academic engagement. Accreditation, they said, was part of the problem, not the solution.

By the fall of 1996 the governors embarked on the opposite approach. They recognized that WGU would not only have a better chance of acceptance by working within the system rather than against it, but also a better chance of influencing systemic educational change. For their part, the four regional accrediting associations whose states were charter members of WGU did not want just one region’s accrediting body to write the standards that all would have to honor. They also envisioned other virtual universities emerging
that would present the same cross-regional problems. Collectively, therefore, the governors, the WGU planning team, and the executive directors of the Northwest, North Central, Western Senior, and Western Junior accrediting associations created the InterRegional Accrediting Committee (IRAC) to oversee WGU’s progress toward regional “legitimacy.”

The committee, with four members from each region, would put WGU through the same three-step process that other regionally accredited institutions follow—eligibility for candidacy consideration, candidacy for accreditation, and initial accreditation. In doing so, it would create a common set of eligibility criteria and common standards for accreditation that would honor WGU’s unique educational model but also hold the university to cross-regionally accepted standards of performance.

The WGU Model in Detail

The WGU model was—and is—unique in several ways.

The absence of direct instructional responsibility is one of the principal elements of the traditional faculty role that WGU has deliberately deconstructed. Faculty in American colleges and universities normally design their own courses, establish their own course objectives, instruct their courses, evaluate their students’ work in those courses, and assign their students’ grades. They perform these multiple functions with great autonomy and often little oversight. WGU regards those “bundled” functions as among the principal causes of the uneven and unreliable quality of American higher education today. Hence it uses Program Councils made up of academics from many different institutions as well as professional practitioners to define its degree structures and their specific competencies.

WGU faculty perform exclusively as mentors to their students—guiding them through the entire degree process, from admission to graduation. The University draws on instructional resources from other colleges and universities, from businesses and from training organizations in order to avoid replicating instructional expertise that is available elsewhere. It uses both computerized grading and trained external graders to evaluate student work according to defined university rubrics. And it establishes the standards for its assessments through the authority of an Assessment Council consisting of nationally recognized experts in learning outcomes measurement.

For accreditation purposes, the WGU model is unique in the following ways:

- Measuring degree progress through competency assessments rather than by accumulating credit hours
- Outsourcing some of the major services that are traditionally considered essential campus responsibilities – The University contracts, for instance, with outside vendors for bookstore and financial aid services. In addition, the WGU has no library of its own but contracts with the University of New Mexico for all its library services.
- The “unbundling” of the traditional faculty role. WGU faculty do not teach. If students need direct instruction to prepare for any of their competency assessments, they obtain it from outside educational partners (colleges and universities, businesses, or training organizations) with whom WGU contracts for that purpose.

Measures for Accreditation

IRAC’s eligibility requirements (ER) and accreditation standards had to recognize these unique features of the WGU model while fitting them into the commonly recognized framework of regional accreditation. Thus, for instance, in order to ensure that WGU would be a degree-granting institution, not just a kind of Underwriters Laboratories certifier of competence, ER 7 stipulated that A substantial portion of the institution’s education programs lead to degrees and a significant proportion of its students are enrolled in them.

To ensure that even in their redesigned role WGU core faculty (not faculty from its instructional providers or even from its Program Councils) remained in charge of its academic programs, ER 12 specified: The institution has a core of qualified faculty with primary responsibility to the institution and sufficient in size to
support all of the institution’s educational programs. The institution provides a clear statement of faculty responsibilities including development and review of curriculum as well as assessment of learning.

And in explicit recognition of its outsourcing arrangements for course instruction and library services, ER 15 required assurance that WGU owns or otherwise provides access to sufficient information and learning resources and services to support its mission and all of its educational programs. IRAC determined that WGU met these and the rest of its twenty eligibility requirements in May 1998.

The ten accreditation standards (AS) that WGU had to meet likewise integrated the requirements of the four regions in a framework tailored to the uniqueness of the model. As expected, the standards demand considerably stronger evidence of compliance and devote more attention to WGU’s distinctiveness than do the ERs.

AS 2, for instance, deals in familiar language with institutional integrity. But section 2.2 of that standard further stipulates: When programs are delivered by electronic means, special provisions are in place to address academic honesty, the authenticity of student work, and the security of records.

Similarly, AS 3 deals in familiar language with governance and administration, but section 3.6 adds: When the institution delivers services with a heavy reliance on contractual relationships with other organizations, the division of responsibility and authority between the institution and other organizations is clear.

AS 4 deals with Educational Programs in largely familiar terms, but section 4.1.6 stipulates: “If the institution uses a measure of achievement other than academic credit such measures are clearly stated and published. Efforts are made to articulate such measures with the academic credit system.” Section 4.4.3 further specifies that When an institution relies on other institutions for the delivery of learning activities or the assessment of student learning, it has the means to assess the quality and effectiveness of such activities and maintains overall responsibility for them.

Similar adaptations of familiar accreditation requirements ripple through AS 5 (Information and Learning Resources), AS 6 (Institutional Leadership), AS 7 (Students), and AS 9 (Physical Resources).

Measuring Up to the Accreditation Standards

An eleven member evaluation team appointed by IRAC visited WGU offices February 7–10, 2000. On June 5, 2000 IRAC deferred taking action on WGU’s candidacy “for a period not to exceed six months.” The Committee was concerned that WGU’s initial degrees were not fully developed and functional, that the role of the mentor faculty was not fully defined, that there were insufficient data regarding student enrollment and progress, that the University’s finances were not sufficiently stable, and that its development plans were overly optimistic. In brief, WGU was not ready to advance to candidacy.

IRAC subsequently arranged a “focused candidacy visit” October 18–20, 2000 to follow-up on these concerns. The evaluation team included one member appointed by each of the four IRAC regions with Dr. Sandra Elman participating ex officio as IRAC’s chair. The team’s report commended the university for successfully addressing all of the concerns expressed following the February visit. Its recommendations urged WGU to begin focusing on long-term planning for growth and financial stability, increasing the depth and stability of its learning resources and their alignment with student needs, and expanding institutional research to validate the competency model with regard both to current students and to graduates’ success in the workplace. On November 21, 2000 IRAC formally conferred candidacy for accreditation.

WGU’s planning for the next step began the following day. IRAC had earlier agreed that the Northwest Association would be its lead accrediting agency, and that the general policies and timelines of the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU) would prevail. Accordingly, WGU was required to advance to initial accreditation within five years. The university, however, hoped to achieve it much more rapidly.

By early 2001, it had already appointed the founding dean of its Teachers College and within a few months thereafter received a $10 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education to build a national program for
teacher certification and advancement. But without regional accreditation, very few states would be willing to license WGU’s graduates as teachers. Mere candidacy for accreditation would not suffice.

Accordingly, the university launched a full court press to ready itself for its next evaluation and to persuade IRAC to grant an early review. In February 2002, WGU’s President and Provost met with IRAC’s four regional directors and convinced them that it would be ready by fall for that major step. Dr. Jane Jervis, President emerita of The Evergreen State College, led the nine member evaluation team’s site visit to the university’s headquarters in Salt Lake City, November 3-6, 2002. Among the visiting team’s commendations, perhaps none were more affirming than its finding that WGU “continually assesses its performance and nimbly responds to assessment findings, both in student learning and in organizational effectiveness,” and its praise for the university’s “development of high-quality statements of learning competencies and multimodal competency assessments, and for their ongoing testing, revision, and improvement.” Even recommendations for continuing improvement, such as this one, conveyed acceptance of WGU as a successful institution: “The evaluation committee recommends that WGU undertake and act upon a systematic review of organizational design as it moves from an entrepreneurial start-up institution in which close personal contact and improvisation are possible, to a scalable institution delivering a broad range of programs and serving a large number of students.”

On the basis of the team’s report, IRAC accorded Western Governors University multiregional initial accreditation, effective February 13, 2003. The committee also agreed that each of the four regions would list WGU as accredited within its region for the following two years. Thereafter, the university’s accreditation would reside exclusively with the Northwest Association and WGU in the future would subscribe to the NWCCU’s policies and procedures.

**Lasting Impact of IRAC**

With that action, IRAC formally disbanded. What had begun as an unprecedented collaboration to establish an accreditation template that could be applied to other distance institutions ended with the transformation of regional accrediting association attitudes toward those institutions. The regionals developed a common set of principles of good practice in distance education and incorporated them in their accreditation standards. They agreed that in the future the region in which the headquarters of a distance institution is located will provide the accrediting agency for that institution, and that, as with traditional institutional decisions, the regions will honor each others’ judgments in matters of distance accreditation. In sum, it may be said that one of IRAC’s most important contributions was to help legitimize distance learning for American higher education.

IRAC also played a leading role in propelling the national movement toward learning outcomes assessment. Across every region and within virtually every institution, emphasis has shifted over the past decade from learning inputs—faculty/student ratios, library holdings, admission standards—to learning outputs. Today, without exception, every regional accreditor places more emphasis than it did ten years ago on what students know and can do as a result of their educational experience at a college or university. The results are still modest as disheartening reports of grade inflation and documentaries such as PBS’s Declining by Degrees continue to attest. But the shift is evident, and it is due in no small measure to the rise of Western Governors University and to IRAC’s role in verifying its quality.

**Result: A Thriving WGU**

For WGU, the partnership with IRAC has made an enormous difference in its attractiveness to students. The university enrolled its first degree students in the fall of 1999. By February 2003, when it received initial accreditation, it had only 500 matriculated degree candidates. One year later it had 1,900. Two years later it had 3,400 and by February 2006 it had over 5,500. Degree programs had grown from 9 to 29, and the university was about to open its fourth college, the College of Health Professions. The IRAC partnership proved that regional accreditation can recognize, validate, and celebrate innovation. It proved that innovation need not mean alienation. It proved that professionals on both sides of the accreditation table can come together not as adversaries but as colleagues, mutually committed to understanding, improving, and affirming models that aim to improve the quality of an American higher education. And that, after all, is as it should be.

**Postscript**
There is a story within this history that cannot be fully told here but deserves mention. In the summer of 2000, as WGU was preparing for its second candidacy visit, it decided also to apply for national accreditation with the Distance Education and Training Council. The university completed a comprehensive self-study, hosted a nine member evaluation team in early winter 2001, and received DETC accreditation at the Council’s annual meeting that April. The DETC process was much shorter than IRAC’s, but its standards were equally high and its evaluation every bit as probing and thorough. It is a model worth emulating in many respects. Indeed, from WGU’s experience, the one important criticism of the regional process that can be made is that it takes too long. It will be a rare institution, especially a private one, that can sustain itself throughout the five to eight years that it ordinarily takes to achieve initial regional accreditation. That is the one way in which the regional process most threatens the survival of innovation.

Western Governors University: http://www.wgu.edu

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