“Distance learning” is one of those phrases that are commonly known but loosely defined. It encompasses many things—from online self-study courses to Webinar-type environments that incorporate chats and networking among attendees. Regardless of how you define it, distance learning has earned its place in the world by accommodating millions of learners who, if required to sit in a classroom or travel to a campus, might otherwise have to forego the additional education.

In honor of this issue’s focus on distance learning and distance education, it seemed fitting to provide an actual example of what I consider to be the epitome of an organization doing it effectively, rather than to write about it abstractly as a concept.

COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION

Western Governor’s University is truly “the future of education” in practice. Non-profit and completely online, WGU was created by 19 state governors to increase access to higher education and lifelong learning. The university’s mission, to “provide a means for people to learn independent of time or place,” is truly unique in its application. It is also unique in that it is the first online university in the United States to be competency-based; students earn degrees by demonstrating competencies rather than completing required courses or credit hours.

WGU was founded on the premise that “it is important that higher education meet the challenges of a changing economy and society.” The university’s primary commitment is to produce highly competent graduates “using flexible distance education techniques to expand access.” WGU’s programs are flexible; students can begin their degree programs at the beginning of each month. Rather than semesters or credit hours, tuition is based on six-month terms. Students demonstrate competencies through assessments (assignments, papers and tests). Each student is assigned a mentor, who works with the student to develop an academic action plan, which is based on degree requirements and student’s needs and schedule. The mentor serves as the student’s “personal trainer” throughout the degree program, coaching, encouraging and directing the student to learning resources as needed.

ONLINE ASSESSMENTS

The university’s rapidly growing enrollment, year after year, has demonstrated that the concept of flexible distance learning, whenever, wherever, is catching on. This increase in enrollment also demands that WGU continue to find ways to expand access to assessments with a reliable technology platform that can accommodate its growing number of degree programs. To meet these demands, WGU has partnered with a well-known test services provider with the capability to support WGU’s requirements reliably, cost-effectively and without technological restriction. This provider has worked with WGU for over a decade to develop an Internet-based testing platform, or IBT.

This Internet-based testing platform is fully integrated and supports the entire life cycle of WGU assessment exams, including authoring, publishing, candidate test delivery, test administration and reporting. The powerful combination of services allows WGU to publish a test from anywhere on the front end and deliver the assessment at the back end at any proctored location. During assessment exam delivery, WGU has the ability to activate “lock-down” features that restrict access to any other systems, providing an added measure of security.

SCALABLE TECHNOLOGY

Over the past several years, WGU’s assessment volume has grown by 100 percent, and using this Internet-based testing platform provides scalability for unlimited growth in the coming years. The technology platform is also capable of hosting pre-assessment exams for WGU students who wish to measure their level of knowledge in a specific area before sitting for an exam.

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