WGU Reaches Major Milestone: 10,000 Students

The dreams of WGU's 19 founding governors continue to be realized as the university reaches another milestone: 10,000 students! Those students make their homes across all 50 states, range in age from 16 to 76, live everywhere from remotest rural areas to major cities, and pursue WGU degrees in business, education, information technology, and health professions.

The cumulative number of graduates now exceed 2,500; two years ago there were only about 700. Strong enrollment growth, broader acceptance of WGU's competency-based education approach, and sound fiscal management have contributed to WGU's current success. The university is also fundamentally self-supporting, receiving no direct state support. Approximately 96% of total revenue is from tuition. Grants and contributions constitute 4% of revenue.

Western Governors University funded approximately $1 million in scholarships during the past 12 months, with an emphasis on scholarships for rural mathematics and science teachers and for military spouses.

Diverse Graduates, Compelling Stories Comprise WGU Graduating Class

More than 70 students from 27 states traveled to Salt Lake City to attend the winter commencement ceremony for Western Governors University on Saturday, February 16th, 2008. In total, degrees were awarded to 630 graduates from 48 different states. Those not in attendance in person participated via a real-time video stream over the Internet. The largest graduating class ever for WGU earned 397 undergraduate degrees and 213 graduate degrees or certificates.

The graduates heard from two commencement speakers: Dr. Clara Lovett, well-known educator and a founding member of the Board of Trustees at WGU, and Thomas Pelto, AT&T Regulatory Vice President and long-time Board of Trustees member. WGU bestowed both with honorary doctorate degrees.

Mr. Pelto told the graduates that his company, AT&T, had an initial affinity for WGU because of the university's "anytime, anywhere" orientation and that WGU brings connectivity to learning without limits. He also emphasized to the graduates that attitude and aptitude are two ingredients for any professional," said Pelto. "That is where WGU's competency-based programs are a key differentiator - you can't get by merely showing up and staying awake." In her speech, Dr. Lovett stressed that the WGU model is unique and its graduates are well ahead of others on the higher education front. She told the graduates, "I'm so proud of you, especially the ones who work two jobs and have little ones running around."

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Within fascinating and striking educational and personal stories, and following tradition at WGU, four selected graduates spoke about their WGU experiences. Bill Sparkman, who had a career as an executive and as a journalist, is switching to teaching after raising a child as a single parent and currently facing a serious illness. Sparkman round out his non-Hodgkin's lymphoma during his demonstration teaching, but he persisted in studying and in driving across the country from
Western Governors University has been awarded a $725,000, three-year grant by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), one of the most highly respected philanthropic foundations working to make meaningful change in healthcare for all Americans. The grant will be used by the College of Health Professionals at WGU to develop online nursing degree programs, including a new Bachelor of Science in Nursing program.

In addition to the RWJF, other major initial corporate supporters in this effort include Tenet Healthcare, all large and well-known national leaders in healthcare. Despite projected nurse shortages, nursing schools turn away tens of thousands of qualified students each year largely because they lack the faculty to teach them. RWJF believes that alternative educational options such as the one that Western Governors University plans to employ are imperative to combating the nursing shortage.

“We are delighted to support this innovative program,” said Sue Hassmiller, Ph.D., R.N., F.A.A.N., team leader and senior program officer for the Foundation’s human capital team. “This new program assists our goal of ensuring that our nation has a diverse, well-trained health care workforce to meet the needs of all Americans by providing education to qualified candidates who would otherwise not attend nursing school.”

**WGU President Mendenhall Participates in EDUCAUSE Panel**

Dr. Robert Mendenhall took part in the panel discussion “The Role of Information Technology in an Age of Access, Affordability, and Accountability” in late 2007 in Seattle, Washington, part of the EDUCAUSE 2007 Conference. EDUCAUSE is a nonprofit association whose mission is to advance higher education through distance learning and our online university and its success in expanding access to higher education for adults seeking bachelor’s and master’s degrees.

In addition, he spoke of the important role of IT in WGU’s online learning model. Other panel participants included Charlene Nuxoll, President Emerita of Montgomery College; and David Ward, President of the American Council on Education. The panel was moderated by NPR’s Mara Liasson. An interview podcast with Dr. Mendenhall and EDUCAUSE’s Matt Pasickowicz can be heard on WGU’s website at: http://www.wgu.edu/about_WGU/wgu_news.asp or the full panel discussion on the same topic can be accessed on the EDUCAUSE site at: http://connect.educause.edu/Library/Abstract?RecID=45363

**WGU Receives Two Distance Learning Awards from U.S. Distance Learning Association (USDLA)**

The United States Distance Learning Association (USDLA) recognized WGU with two 2008 International Distance Learning Awards. WGU received the 21st Century Award for Best Practices in Distance Learning, the USDLA’s highest award, in recognition for WGU’s achievements as the nation’s first competency-based online university and its success in expanding access to higher education for adults seeking bachelor’s and master’s degrees.

Dr. Janet Schnitz, Executive Director of the WGU Teachers College, received the award for Outstanding Leadership by an Individual in the Field of Distance Learning. Since 2004, Dr. Schnitz has led the rapid growth and development of the WGU Teachers College, which is the only online college that is NCATE accredited. It currently has more than 5,300 students enrolled in 22 programs.

“We are honoring Western Governors University and Dr. Schnitz as leaders in the industry,” said Dr. John G. Flores, CEO of USDLA. “Western Governors University has raised the bar of excellence and we are truly honored by WGU’s contributions to the distance learning industry.”

“We are very honored to have received these two awards from the USDLA,” said WGU President Dr. Robert Mendenhall. “WGU has been committed to our mission to provide access to higher education through distance learning and our competency-based learning model. We’ve succeeded in large part because of the dedication of individuals such as Dr. Schnitz. Her unparalleled leadership has guided our Teachers College to many ‘firsts,’ such as our NCATE accreditation, and it has become one of the premier teachers colleges in the nation.”
Student Spotlight

A True Family Affair for WGU Students

Charice Black not only had the support of her WGU mentor, but also her family—her father, sister and brother-in-law are all students at WGU. "It is nice to be able to talk to them, celebrate, complain and get encouragement as we all share the WGU experience," Charice said. Shortly after her divorce, Charice needed a challenge. She was inspired to go back to school when her father, Dale Nelson, at age 60, decided to pursue his teaching degree at WGU.

After checking into the programs offered, Charice found the Master of Education in Learning and Technology fit with her current occupation. She is the Distance Education Specialist for Utah Education Network, primarily supporting the statewide videoconferencing system.

Her father, Dale, formerly a dairy farmer, quality assurance manager and grocery store owner, made a career change into teaching. He's currently teaching science at Enterprise High School in Enterprise, Utah. Dale earned his initial licensure through WGU, and he returned to work on his master’s degree. "Returning to school after 35 years has been challenging but rewarding," Dale said. "One of the best parts is the support received during phone conversations with my daughters as we discuss our progress at WGU."

Charice's sister, Dottie Brereton, is attending WGU to pursue her elementary education degree. She and her husband, Dean, live in a rural area of Utah. "Had I been attending another school, my education would most likely have been put on hold," Dottie said. "But because of the flexibility and mobility of WGU, I have been able to continue working toward graduation."

Dottie's husband, Dean, is working on his Master of Nursing with an emphasis in education at WGU. He is currently a full-time instructor at Snow College teaching first year nursing students. In addition, he is a R.N. with the Army Reserve and serves as the Officer in Charge of the DM T-Triage section of the Combat Support Hospital. "I was looking for an online program that would fit my schedule and I needed something flexible so I could stay on track when deployed with the Army," said Dean. "My wife and I motivate each other to keep on track with our studies. It will be a great reward to graduate with my wife, best supporter, and favorite study buddy."

New Degree Programs—M.S. Educational Leadership, B.S. Nursing

WGU is now offering two new degree programs in the education and healthcare fields.

The new Bachelor of Science in Nursing is designed to help working nurses expand their knowledge beyond the clinical aspects of nursing with topics in patient education, health promotion, technology integration and healthcare systems and policies. This program is designed for nurses who already have an associate’s degree or diploma in nursing, hold a current unencumbered nursing license and are working in the profession.

New Student Communities

WGU has made substantial improvements to its student communities to help strengthen communications among students and mentors.

The learning communities encourage development of competence, support academic progress, and build relationships with other students and mentors.

The program communities focus on the field of study related to that program and include links and current activities related to that profession. These help students go beyond building competence to see how what they are learning relates to the real world in their particular field of study.

Each community is facilitated by a mentor who can provide academic help by directing students to appropriate learning resources and encouraging collaborative work. They are available by e-mail and instant messaging.

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D. Nelson, Student
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“Diverse Graduates, Compelling Stories Comprise WGU Graduating Class

My degree has let me become a bigger part of those projects [NASA and NOAA] and get back to the science that first inspired me. We need to let dreams change, refocus and be reborn.” – Laura Barber, Graduate

There are no failures - just teaching moments. Find a way to make it work.” – Bill Sparkman, Graduate

Kentucky to Utah to accept his hard-earned teaching degree in person. “There are no failures,” he said, “just teaching moments. Find a way to make it work.”

Will By cleared many hurdles, coming from West Africa, learning the English language, and pursuing his passion of computer and Internet knowledge.

“With any degree, she maintained, ‘has let me become a bigger part of those projects and get back to the science that first inspired me. We need to let dreams change, refocus and be reborn.’”

New WGU Provost, CTO, and College Dean

Sal Monaco, Ph.D. has joined WGU as Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs. He comes to WGU with more than 25 years of management responsibility in business, higher education and with the United States Air Force. Dr. Monaco worked at the American College of Education as Provost and Executive Vice President and, prior to that, he held various positions in higher education. He spent ten years at the University of Maryland University College (UMUC), where he served as the Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School of Management and Technology. He holds a B.S.E. from Manhattan College, a M.S.E. from the University of Michigan and a Ph.D from the Lally School of Management and Technology at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.

Dave Wilson has joined WGU as Chief Technology Officer. Wilson followed a diverse career path before coming to WGU. At Genova Diagnostics, he led the creation of new information systems and at KOZ.com, he built the top-tier multidisciplinary engineering team that created the award-winning KOZ Community Publishing System. He holds a B.S. in Electrical Engineering from Clarkson University.

Dr. Sandra Wise is WGU’s new Dean of the College of Health Professions. She held the position of Provost at St. Petersburg College, Health Education Center, since 2006. Dr. Wise also has worked as a faculty member and dean at the University of Phoenix, faculty member at Nova Southeastern University, and professor at the Medical College of Ohio. In addition, Dr. Wise has experience in numerous clinical settings, including medical centers and public health departments. She received her doctorate in Health Education at the University of Toledo.

New Trustees Join WGU Board

Governor Bill Ritter, Jr. (D-Colorado) has been elected to the Board of Trustees of Western Governors University, replacing Arizona Governor Janet Napolitano who served from 2005 to 2007. “Western Governors University is an important component of the postsecondary landscape in Colorado. It represents the leading edge of online, competency-based higher education,” says Governor Ritter.

WGU would like to extend deepest thanks to Kim Jones, former Vice-President of Global Education and now President and Managing Director for Sun Microsystems in the UK and Ireland, for her years of service as a founding member of the Board of Trustees. WGU welcomes Kate Driscoll, Area Vice-President, Government, Education and Healthcare, as our new board member representing Sun. Many thanks also go to Sun Microsystems for all the company’s help and continuing financial and in-kind support.

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