“Back to school” time can be bittersweet for students. It’s hard to say goodbye to the carefree days of summer, but it can also be exciting to return to an organized learning environment. It can also be bittersweet for adults who long ago completed their formal education. Many miss the feelings of accomplishment received after writing a great essay or doing well on a test. They miss the praise and encouraging words from teachers and the thrill of learning something new.
Increasingly, moms, dads and other adults are also returning to school. More often than not they’re returning to college because of the added value continuing education brings to their careers, with better paychecks or promotions.

But for many, fitting school into an already hectic work or home schedule seems an impossible dream.

Not necessarily, according to Craig Swenson, Ph.D., recently named provost and senior vice president of Academic Affairs of Western Governors University (www.wgu.edu), a nonprofit accredited online university founded and supported by 19 Western state governors.

WGU is a leader in distance education reform and was the only university named in the demonstration project for distance learning included in the 1998 Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. As a result, Congress recently opened up financial aid for distance learning for online institutions generally. Also, competency-based education programs were approved as eligible for federal financial aid. WGU also won competency-based education approval for VA benefits.

With students in 50 U.S. states and 10 foreign countries, WGU offers students flexibility, quality, competency-based education, and a strong support group including dedicated faculty mentors.

Today’s busy adults need a university that allows them to fit their education around work and other responsibilities. Sometimes that means not being able to travel to a physical campus to attend classes, day or night. WGU students can do their studying at a time and place convenient for them.

Penny Allison, a mother and teacher who wanted to obtain her master’s degree found WGU to be the perfect choice for her schedule.

“I am able to work when it is convenient for me,” Allison said.

“Sometimes that is 2 a.m., because I work three jobs and have a family.”

She has worked diligently to finish her degree quickly. She started the program in January 2006 and is set to be finished late this fall.

WGU is unique in that it is the only fully accredited online university that offers degrees based completely on competencies. Students demonstrate skills and knowledge through a series of assessments that have been carefully designed to measure knowledge of a field of study. This means that students can earn a college degree by using prior work, college or life experience, along with new skills learned through the university.

Not all students are able to finish as quickly as Allison, but the flexibility of WGU allows students to set goals, study and pass competency assessments around their already busy schedules.

WGU offers bachelor’s and master’s degrees in the areas of information technology, business and education. WGU is regionally accredited by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, one of the major accrediting commissions recognized by the U.S. Department of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation. Graduates of WGU, armed with the best skills and knowledge of their field have a great deal to offer their employers.

“I believe that WGU is the most innovative higher education institution in the United States, with a single-minded focus on improving the cost and quality of higher education,” Swenson said. “Many people think that higher education is all about teaching, but it is really about learning — helping students become learners, gain competencies, and measuring and credentialing those competencies. That is what WGU does and it is why this institution is so important as a model to our higher education system.”

Some may worry that with all the flexibility offered at WGU it might be hard to stay focused and on track. But WGU students are not left alone while pursuing their education. Professional mentors advise students on the classes they need and guide them through the assessment process. They provide support and encouragement every step of the way and help students stay on track and create an educational plan that works for them. The mentors do not teach classes and their time spent is totally focused on keeping the students on track.

But support does not only come from the faculty mentors. Students of WGU, though not in a classroom together, can still form strong friendships and help each other. Students Sara Miller of Mississippi, Mary Ellen Wagstaff of Utah and Katie Gray of Michigan, have formed a strong online relationship. In their online study group, they review each other’s papers, share notes and insights, and talk each other through the sometimes stressful times.

The bond they formed became particularly important to Miller after Hurricane Katrina destroyed her home. She lost her computer, books and all her work. Wagstaff and Gray came to the rescue. They had saved Miller’s papers on their computers and provided moral support as well during the difficult tragedy. Thanks to the support group the women formed, Miller was able to continue her education. The women’s friendship is sure to last well beyond graduation.

On July 15, WGU said farewell to another group of highly skilled graduates. Approximately 60 graduates received their degrees in person at a ceremony in the Rose Wagner Theatre, representing more than 300 who have received their degrees since WGU’s last graduation ceremony in January of this year.

During the ceremony, WGU President Bob Mendenhall noted, “This graduation is a wonderful milestone in the growth of WGU. Because we’re enrolling 400 to 500 new students each month, in future years our graduations will include thousands of adults who returned to college to earn an undergraduate or advanced degree.”

Thanks to WGU, getting your education has never been easier.