

June 2011

Western Governors University Washington

Introduction

With the passage of HB 1822 this year, the legislature opened the door to Western Governors University Washington – Washington’s first online, competency-based postsecondary institution. In addition to establishing WGU Washington, the legislation asked the Higher Education Coordinating Board (HECB) to recognize and endorse online competency-based education as an important part of Washington’s higher education system (eliminating unnecessary barriers to the delivery of competency-based education by WGU Washington), and work with WGU Washington to integrate its academic programs and services into Washington’s higher education policies and strategies.

Online Competency-Based Education

The HECB has long supported online education as a critical adjunct to the traditional classroom-based model. Online resources are now a part of virtually every course, and an increasing number of courses are being taught either partially or totally online. Nationally, the number of students taking at least one online course grew at a compound annual rate of 19 percent between Fall 2002 and Fall 2009. More than 29 percent of all students enrolled nationally took at least one online course in Fall 2009 compared with 24.6 percent in Fall 2008.¹ Competency-based online education differs from other online approaches in that students are able to move through material they already know by taking exams when they are ready. This model works particularly well for returning students who may have significant experience outside the classroom or through training that is not recognized in the transfer process. Using a competency-based approach, students can demonstrate their knowledge by passing assessments designed to measure their knowledge against specified student learning outcomes.

The competency approach is not new. Brick and mortar institutions have a longstanding tradition of using various forms of equivalencies or assessments to award credit. These include institutional approaches such as assessment of prior experiential learning, challenge exams, and national tests such as Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), and the College Level Examination Program (CLEP). In addition, institutions routinely use institution-based or national assessments to place students into courses, particularly in math. What sets the WGU model apart is the combination of competency exams and individualized learning resources and mentoring so that students are provided the resources they need to progress toward their degrees. The model relies on

¹ *Class Differences: Online Education in the United States*, 2010. Babson Survey Research Group & The Sloan Consortium (November 2010).

a system of mentors who stay with the students as they move through their chosen program, and course mentors who have more specialized knowledge in the specific course content and can be a resource when students get stuck. This model allows students to begin their program of study anytime and move through the materials at a pace that works for them. Some move through very quickly and typically complete a degree in two years.

Elimination of Barriers

The key regulatory barrier to expansion of WGU in Washington has been around the Degree Granting Institutions Act. The statute and rules were developed around more traditional approaches to postsecondary delivery, and WGU's lack of defined courses, faculty, and terms make it problematic for WGU to demonstrate that it meets the criteria laid out for degree authorization. That said, WGU is both regionally and nationally accredited and has received other external praise for quality and responsiveness to student and employer needs. The law and rules allow HECB to suspend the authorization requirements as long as the suspension is consistent with the purpose of the law and meets a state need. HECB has suspended the rules in the near term and staff have begun work on a rules change that will include, among other changes, an exemption category for WGU, based on the intent of HB 1822.

Integration of WGU Washington's Academic Programs and Services into Washington Higher Education Policy and Strategy

HECB staff have already been in discussions with WGU Washington regarding data sharing, transfer policy, and other issues. In addition, WGU has signed an articulation agreement with the state's 34 community and technical colleges that will support transfer into programs at WGU. To further support transfer, WGU is reviewing the Direct Transfer Agreement and Associate of Science Transfer Agreement. A representative from WGU has been added to the Joint Access Oversight Group (JAOG), which is the primary group that advises HECB on transfer policy, and the Prior Learning Assessment Washington work group, established by E2SHB 1795 to address goals to increase the number of students who receive academic credit for prior learning. Discussions on data sharing are ongoing but the intent is to gather data consistent with the National Governor's Association (NGA) metrics, which were added to the state accountability framework in E2SHB 1795.

Recommendation

Online competency-based education is a particularly good fit for many students who have some college and no degree, or students who are looking to move beyond their current degree to a higher level credential. The model offered by WGU Washington is consistent with needs identified in the HECB's *2008 Strategic Master Plan* and the *2009 System Design Plan*. Staff recommend that the Board endorse online, competency-based education as an important part of Washington's higher education system. Staff will continue to work closely with WGU Washington to reduce barriers and integrate WGU Washington into the state's education policy and strategy framework.

RESOLUTION 11-14

WHEREAS, The legislature finds that the key to Washington's economic prosperity over the past twenty years has been a thriving employment sector for workers who have high levels of education; and

WHEREAS, the legislature further finds that by 2018, sixty-seven percent of all jobs in Washington will require some postsecondary education, which is an increase of 259,000; and

WHEREAS, Citizens of Washington will not have access to the jobs Washington firms are producing unless the state dramatically increases postsecondary educational opportunities for them; and

WHEREAS, The Board recognizes and endorses the value of competency-based education as an important component of Washington's higher education system; and

WHEREAS, Western Governor's University Washington was established to provide additional higher education options to meet the needs of the state's residents and the needs of employers for an educated workforce;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED That the HECB directs staff to continue to work with WGU Washington to eliminate unnecessary barriers to the delivery of online competency-based education by Western Governors University Washington, and (as appropriate) integrate its academic programs and services into Washington higher education policies and strategies.

Adopted:

June 30, 2011

Attest:

Ethelda Burke, Chair

Earl Hale, Vice Chair