"When we encourage our children to be confident, self-reliant, self-directed, and responsible individuals, we are giving them power." - Louise Hart

Western Governors University:
How Competency-Based Distance Education Has Come of Age

by George Lorenzo
Editor and Publisher

A relatively large and far-reaching group of educators, government officials and corporate leaders have helped shape the success of Western Governors University (WGU).

Born out of a brainstorming discussion in 1995 between governors from the Western Governors Association (www.westgov.org), WGU is the only regionally accredited and very first NCATE accredited higher education institution in the country that offers only distance-education, competency-based degree programs. Basically, WGU students earn their degrees by passing assessments, unlike traditional higher education where students must complete a specific number of credit hours to earn a degree.

From 500 Students to 8,000 Students in Record Time

WGU occupies the top three floors on an eight-story business office building located in Salt Lake City, Utah and has more than 390 off-site and on-site employees.

WGU did not officially start until the summer of 1999, offering seven degree programs in business, information technology and education. By February 2003, WGU had 500 students. Today there are more than 8,000 students enrolled in 46 undergraduate and graduate competency-based degree programs, which includes four degrees offered through a new College of Health Professions that launched in Fall 2006.

What drives WGU's relatively fast-moving success? The succinct and basic message that has remained the same throughout its short history is that WGU provides "an excellent physically and financially accessible education to an under-served population," said President Robert Mendenhall in a 2001 interview conducted by James L. Morrison, then editor of **The Technology Source** (see "Renaissance at Western Governors University: An Interview with Robert W. Mendenhall," **The Technology Source** Archives, May/June 2001, http://technology source.org/article/ renaissance_at_western_ governors_university/).

A Different Kind of Higher Education

This population consists primarily of adult learners with an average age of about 38. Tuition is charged as a flat rate and is relatively reasonable at $2,790 per 6-month term for all programs except the MBA and MSN degree programs, which are $3,250 per 6-month term. When many institutions raised their tuition rates in 2006 by as much as eight to 12 percent, WGU did not.

As noted on its website, "WGU treats all students as full-time students and charges tuition at a flat rate regardless of the number of competency units attempted or completed by the student. The standard term is based upon a full-time enrollment of at least 12 competency units for undergraduates and 8 competency units for graduates. Students who complete more or fewer units are charged the same tuition rate."

The rapidly growing enrollment numbers and reasonable cost, however, are not as important as the competency-based education model that has been successfully

IN THIS ISSUE:

Western Governors University

implemented by WGU, notes Mendenhall in a June 2007 interview with *Educational Pathways*. "It's not an end goal (enrollment growth); it's more of a means to an end for expanding access and trying to provide a high-quality, low-cost education using a different model," he explains. "The bigger story behind the growth is this model. It is attractive to adult students, because they don't have to take a bunch of courses in subjects they already know; they can focus on what they need to know."

Recent education graduate Emily Tomkins is a good example. At 29, her circumstances are typical of many adult learners who are seeking a fast track to a career change. For Tomkins, her new career path, catalyzed and obtained through WGU, entailed earning teacher certification and just recently getting hired in a full-time position as a first-grade elementary school teacher in a South Dakota school district near her home in Sioux Falls. Her mission was accomplished in 16 months. "I am really grateful to WGU because they provided me with an avenue by which I could get that initial certification and really pursue my life's passion when there was no other option for me to do so," Tomkins says.

Meeting the Fluctuating Needs of Adult Learners

Says Mendenhall: "If you start with what we know about learning, generally, and adult learning,

> *"It is attractive to adult students, because they don't have to take a bunch of courses in subjects they already know; they can focus on what they need to know."*
>
> Bob Mendenall, President of Western Governors University

specifically, we know that learners bring to the learning experience different backgrounds, different levels of knowledge and skill. Secondly, we know that people learn at different rates. So, why would we design a higher education system that says, 'guess what, you all have to take the same number of credit hours; you must take the same required prerequisite courses, and the same required major courses, and you get a few electives? And, oh, by the way, the length of each course will be four months.'"

A Story About Change

Tomkins had earned a dual-major bachelor of arts degree in music and anthropology in 2001 from Ohio State University. She found work as an archeologist in Wisconsin, but her life changed direction when her husband landed a dream job as principle bassoonist for the South Dakota Symphony Orchestra. Now, with a move to Sioux Falls, Tomkins began a totally new and different career path. After a part-time gig, she was promoted to music manager for a local Barnes and Noble store. Previous to this position, she did some substitute teaching for about one year in a school district

near Sioux Falls.

"I was moving up and doing the whole corporate thing," Tomkins says. "Barnes and Noble is certainly not a bad company to work for, but I felt that I missed the interaction I had with children, (as a substitute teacher) and so I decided that I should go back and teach, since that was where my passion was."

Tomkins enrolled in the Post-Baccalaureate Teacher Preparation Program (K-8), which qualified her to become licensed as an elementary school teacher. In short, this particular program was just what Tomkins was looking for. As noted on the WGU website, it's "the fastest way to become an elementary school teacher if you already have a bachelor's degree. The program trains you to become a highly-qualified teacher and includes supervised practice teaching in an actual classroom setting."

About a year prior to making this transition, Tomkins and her husband had a baby boy. "Things weren't so simple any more," she says. "I could not go to a traditional school. We have a mortgage and a child. I could not tell my husband, 'well, I'm just going to throw my career away and go back

to school for three or four years.' So, I did a lot of research into alternative ways to get that initial teacher's certification, and WGU turned out to be the best program."

How It Works

The first course on Tomkins's slate, which is required by all WGU students, was a four-week, online orientation course titled "Education Without Boundaries." The course prepares students for how to learn online and how to begin the entire process of a competency-based education.

Each student is assigned a faculty mentor and a progress manager who communicate with him/her regularly on an "Academic Action Plan" from beginning to end of program and act as an instructional resource, advisor, and always-available guide on the side. Students work their way through domains and sub-domains that require them to demonstrate their competencies through a series of carefully designed assessments. Students can accelerate their degree completion depending on the competencies they may already have while juggling the demands of their personal and work lives.

Additionally, while moving through domains and assessments,

"You do a lot of reading and a lot of research; you really have to prove that you understand the specific learning goals that the school has laid out. It is a demanding program. I firmly believe that my experiences at WGU were just as rigorous as any class that I ever took at Ohio State."

Emily Tomkins, WGU student

students have access to online learning communities where they can interact asynchronously in discussion forums with fellow students who are going through the same learning processes and assessments. The faculty mentors double as facilitators, as well as answer pertinent questions, inside these online learning communities.

A WGU learning resources division provides students with access to the WGU Central Library, which is operated by the University of New Mexico General Library, as well as access to a wide range of additional learning resources, including fully online courses from other higher education institutions, e-learning modules from commercial vendors, textbooks and other learning materials.

"You do a lot of reading and a lot of research; you really have to prove that you understand the specific learning goals that the

school has laid out," says Tomkins. "It is a demanding program. I firmly believe that my experiences at WGU were just as rigorous as any class that I ever took at Ohio State."

How Competency-Based Programs are Developed

The building of valid, academically demanding degree programs at WGU starts with Program Councils, says Mendenhall. "We convene panels; we call them Program Councils. These are outside experts from both industry and academia who define what they would expect a graduate to know and be able to do."

In addition, a separate Assessment Council, made up of national experts in gauging and assessing learning in higher education, works with WGU to come up with the most appropriate ways to measure what a graduate must

Western Governors University

know and be able to do. "We have a whole battery of assessments that include objective tests, performance tests, portfolios and projects," says Mendenall. For example, in the Teachers College, all students seeking initial licensure must experience 12 weeks of live student teaching in the classroom under the observation of a clinical supervisor who uses a rubric, vetted by the Assessment Council, that covers eight separate observations related to specific performance tasks.

In the College of Information Technology, WGU also utilizes what the industry values as bonafide assessments, in addition to its own assessments. "Wherever there are widely accepted industry assessments of competency, we will use those in our programs," Mendenhall explains, pointing to, for instance, a variety of Microsoft, Oracle, CIW, Sun and Comp TIA certifications that its information technology undergraduates must obtain. In a College of Business undergraduate program with an emphasis in human resources, students work toward their Professional in Human Resources (PHR) Certification from the Society of Human Resources

> *"We think we have begun to prove the validity of competency-based education, at least as we do it. We think the marketplace is accepting of it and that our graduates appreciate the relevancy and currency of our academic content."*
>
> Patrick Partridge, WGU vice president of marketing

Management (SHRM). In a Masters of Science in Health Education program, the curriculum incorporates mastery of competencies established by the National Commission for Health Education Credentialing, Inc. (NCHEC). Upon completion of the program, students are eligible for a Certified Health Education Specialist (CHES) designation - a nationally recognized health education professional credential in the United States.

Growing in Validity and Acceptance

Overall, WGU continues to figure out how to effectively implement and adapt to a dramatically different approach to education, says Patrick Partridge, vice president of marketing. "We think we have begun to prove the validity of competency-based education,

at least as we do it. We think the marketplace is accepting of it and that our graduates appreciate the relevancy and currency of our academic content."

Partridge further explains that the competency-based approach fits the needs and wants of a relatively small segment of prospective students who have a "certain higher level of self sufficiency. We don't need to make WGU's version of competency-based education the be-all and end-all of education, or online education. It is simply a somewhat evolved model that we think is really appropriate for a lot of adult education students. We are adaptable ourselves to learning, as time goes on, how to make it better and make it even more of a fit for more people."

For more information, see www.wgu.edu

The Life and Times of a WGU Elementary Education Mentor

At age 45, Roberta Ross-Fisher has achieved a good number of important career milestones, all very much related to education. She has a bachelor's degree in elementary education; a master's degree in K-12 reading; a Ph.D. in curriculum and instruction; and has taught at the K-12 level for 16 years - "everything from kindergarten to the fourth grade, to Title I reading, to gifted students, to working with adolescents for their GEDs," she says. Additionally, Ross-Fisher

has served as an associate professor, chair of a teacher education program and dean of an extension campus for Missouri Baptist University. Such impressive credentials have served her well, as well as a good number of students at WGU, for the past 19 months, since she became an elementary education mentor for WGU's Teachers College, a job that she loves.

Students Seeking Fulfillment

She and her husband live in

rural southeast Missouri, where she works out of a home office, counseling at any given time about 75 to 80 WGU graduate-level adult learners who have returned to school to pursue a second career as elementary school teachers. "My students have bachelor degrees in business, in the science fields, in computer technology. For whatever reasons, they have never felt fulfilled," she says. "At some point in their lives, they wanted to become a teacher, but life took them in a different direction.

The Life and Times of a WGU Elementary Education Mentor

"These individuals are people who are coming back for that second chance, that second job. They realize that in most instances there is a lot to be said for personal fulfillment and satisfaction, that there is much more to life than a large paycheck. They are very well aware that they will never get rich by being an elementary school teacher, but this is really what they want to do, and they feel passionate about it."

Full-Time Flex

Counseling 75 to 80 graduate students is "indeed a full-time job," she adds. "There is no doubt about that, but my hours are my own. I have the flexibility for setting up my own appointments with students each week or every other week, depending on where they are in their programs."

Typically students who have been in a WGU degree program for six months or less have a phone appointment with Ross-Fisher once each week, in addition to a once-per-week e-mail communication. Those students in the program for six months or more, and who have become acclimated to the WGU system, talk with Ross-Fisher every other week. She says she gets about 100 e-mails every day and has a personal policy of responding within 24 hours.

In addition, she leads an online learner community in language

"There is a real bond forged between the mentor and the mentee. And certainly, while academics must remain at the forefront of our conversations, there's always room for the personal aspect as well."

Roberta Ross-Fisher, WGU elementary education mentor

arts, where she provides academic guidance for not just her assigned students, but for all students seeking elementary education degrees, both graduate and undergraduate. She maintains these asynchronous message boards where students post questions about certain tasks or assignments they are engaged in, she explains. In addition, she participates in pre-scheduled, synchronous online chats, called "study-buddy groups," where students support each other in preparation for any upcoming assessments they may be scheduled to take.

Organizational and Interpersonal Relationship Skills a Must

While the mentor job does have its flexibility, it really takes a highly organized person who pays close attention to detail to be successful and effective. Plus, while a mentor is not required to be a life consultant, he or she definitely needs to have interpersonal relationship skills, as "the mentor-mentee relationship in

nearly every instance becomes very strong," says Ross-Fisher. "There is a real bond forged between the mentor and the mentee. And certainly, while academics must remain at the forefront of our conversations, there's always room for the personal aspect as well. . . In short, what I have observed is that as a mentor I will help celebrate the success of my students, but I will certainly also cry with them in times of sorrow."

Ross-Fisher adds that over her years as an educator interacting with students on many different levels in traditional settings, the only difference she sees in working with WGU students, is that "you simply don't get to see the person's face. I continually am amazed at how close I become with my students. Relationships are really what it's all about. If it were just purely academics, I don't know if the students would be as satisfied with WGU, nor would the mentors be as satisfied. It's the relationships that really make the difference."

Lumina Foundation Grant to Help Study the Underserved

The Lumina Foundation recently granted WGU a $400,000 award to conduct in-depth research and evaluate the university's success in providing improved access and attainment for members of underserved populations seeking degrees. More than 75% of WGU's students fall into the underserved category, defined as students living in rural

areas, members of ethnic minorities, those with household income of less than $35,000 annually, and those whose parents never attended or graduated from college.

The project will help WGU pinpoint which factors are effective for these populations and identify any necessary changes and improvements to the WGU model. WGU President Robert

Mendenhall said, "With this grant, WGU will research and document the experiences of underserved students and how retention, academic progress and assessment pass rates are affected. Researchers will also compare those results to experiences and results observable at other benchmark institutions."

About WGU's Teachers College

About 4,300 students are enrolled in the Teachers College at Western Governor University (WGU), which accounts for little more than one half of the entire student population of WGU.

It's interesting to note that one of the founders of WGU, former Wyoming Governor Jim Geringer, said that he, along with other founders, initially believed that the College of Information Technology would see the most significant growth at WGU. Over time, however, Geringer and his colleagues have been pleasantly surprised to watch the Teachers College take on that role at WGU.[1]

Grants and Scholarships

A number of important milestones have contributed to the growth of WGU's Teachers College. For one, in 2003, WGU received $10 million from the Department of Education to boost its overall development, which has amounted to $2 million per year up through September 2007. Also in 2003, WGU was awarded another $3.7 million from the DOE for a "Transition to Teaching Grant" to help Nevada and Texas school districts meet their growing demand for new teachers. WGU has also been active in the Department of Defense "Troops to Teachers" program, offering $1,500 supplemental scholarships to help active-duty military and veterans become teachers.

Most recently, WGU, in partnership with the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, received a $3 million grant from the Department of Labor to increase the national pool of qualified rural teachers, particularly in the hard-to-fill disciplines of mathematics and science. The grant will allow WGU to provide financial, academic and clinical support for teacher candidates,

"Distance learning has reached a point of maturity that has made it acceptable," says Janet Schnitz, executive director of the WGU Teachers College, adding that gaining NCATE accreditation has helped to open a door for the next level of online learning innovation to move forward.

including scholarships of up to $7,500 for qualified students.

Accreditation Enhances Credibility

But just as important as federal dollars and scholarship programs, the Teachers College reached a prestigious milestone when it was accredited by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) last year. This accreditation validated that WGU's competency-based programs meet one of the highest criterias by which professional education programs are evaluated.

Meeting Traditional Accreditation Standards Through Distance Education

Janet Schnitz, executive director of the Teachers College, notes that NCATE accreditation definitely enhanced the credibility of the Teachers College. Educators across the country now recognize that an institution such as WGU, with a unique and different teaching and learning approach, can, indeed, meet NCATE standards. "Distance learning has reached a point of maturity that has made it acceptable," Schnitz says, adding that gaining NCATE accreditation has helped to open a door for the next level of online learning innovation to move forward.

Schnitz explains that WGU has started to have more interactions with state education departments since becoming NCATE accredited.

"It's almost like we have come of age now," she says. "We just did a preliminary site visit with California and they want us involved more at the state level. They want more of a liaison interaction with us; they want us to come in and sit on their committees. This is not only based on the fact that others can learn from us, but from the fact that you can be different and still succeed. You can still meet the standards that they expect you to meet."

Quality and Consistency are Key

Since Schnitz joined WGU during the summer of 2003, her mission has been to maintain and boost academic quality and consistency across all of the Teachers College undergraduate and graduate programs. In order to achieve that mission, she has worked closely with WGU's Education Program Council and Assessment Council, two capable and experienced groups of educators who have helped to mold the college and the institution into what they are today.

Meet the Program Council

The Education Program Council consists of seven members plus Schnitz. Program Council member John Conyers, for instance, is a former superintendent of the third largest school district in the state of Illinois, School District 15. In 2003, School District 15 became the third school district in the nation to win the Malcolm

Baldrige National Quality Award presented by the U.S. Department of Commerce. The prestigious award is the nation's highest honor for quality and performance excellence. Schnitz explains that Conyers is helping the Teachers College in the area of Total Quality Management and how to utilize data-driven, decision-making processes.

Program Council member George Ann Rice was the associate superintendent, Human Resources Division, at the Clark County School District in Las Vegas. Rice had district-wide responsibility for the recruitment, selection, placement, induction and retention of more than 16,600 licensed teachers, 1,000 administrators and 9,000 support staff employees.

Member Melvin Hall is a professor of Educational Psychology and Educational Leadership at Northern Arizona University. "He deals with rural and minority populations," says Schnitz. "He helps us with under-served populations as well as through his expertise in the northwest accreditation process." Member Michael Blocher is a professor of Educational Technology at Northern Arizona University. "He is a leader in distance education and has helped us improve our delivery systems and our attention to learning communities for students," Schnitz explains.

Other Education Program Council members include Darline Robles, superintendent of schools for the Los Angeles County Office of Education, and Richard Lesh, Rudy Distinguished Professor of Education from Indiana University. Robles has expertise in the hiring of teachers and in diversity issues that come along with the territory of working with large school districts. Lesh is an expert in the delivery of mathematics programs and has a wealth of experience in electronic delivery

"The Education Program Council is basically an outside validation for our programs. These are people who are still active in the field, who are still active in the national organizations, who are influencing hiring decisions in school districts, and who are still working with different higher education delivery models. We rely on them to help us set the relevant competencies we should be looking at."

Janet Schnitz, executive director of the WGU Teachers College

systems and design.

Rounding out the Council is Craig Swenson, who joined WGU as its new Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs in May 2006. Swenson was former Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs at the University of Phoenix system and president at Apollo Publishing and Learning.

"The Education Program Council is basically an outside validation for our programs," Schnitz adds. "These are people who are still active in the field, who are still active in the national organizations, who are influencing hiring decisions in school districts, and who are still working with different higher education delivery models. We rely on them to help us set the relevant competencies we should be looking at."

The Assessment Council

In addition to the Education Program Council, a WGU institution-wide Assessment Council plays a major role in how the Teachers College continues to develop its competency-based programs. "The Assessment Council looks at the validity and reliability of our assessments and their delivery across the whole university," says Schnitz. "With our staff psychometricians, they help us develop the kinds of models we will use."

Currently WGU uses three kinds of assessments: objective-

based, performance, and, in the case of the Teachers College, actual demonstration assessments. "We supervise in the field an internship program for demonstration teaching," says Schnitz, adding that the Assessment Council came up with the structure of this model and is always continuously developing and improving upon the model. "They go in on a regular, rotating schedule and pull out the results from the assessments from different programs and look down at the item types and item results. They throw out items or throw out whole assessments as not being valid or reliable in order to get the kind of results that we are looking for. They will come back to us and say 'this has too few items, or these items are not measuring the competencies that we think they should, or this one is not tied into and validated by the work you are doing in practice, so you need to figure out how to get these more closely aligned.' The Assessment Council is critical to what we do."

What's Popular?

The most popular Teachers College degree program at the undergraduate level is the B.A. in Interdisciplinary Studies (K-8), which, according to the WGU website, "teaches you the content knowledge and teaching skills to

become a certified elementary teacher or middle school generalist. At the graduate level, the M.A. in Mathematics Education (K-6, 5-9, or 5-12) is currently attracting the most students. This degree "prepares you to certify in secondary mathematics, a high-demand second teaching field. Or, at the elementary level, you will complete a professional development program in K-6 mathematics."

"There is a large need for math teachers, and we have been particularly successful in recruiting math students to the university," Schnitz claims, adding that the Teachers College math program is aligned with National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) standards. Schnitz notes, however, that retaining some of the newly admitted students in this particular program has become a challenge because some of these students come in either unprepared mathematically or they "think that it is going to be a cakewalk because it's online. We still get students who think online is easier. That does not play out when they find out how much writing is involved and that there's rigor in the program. It is not a cakewalk to come into WGU and get a degree by any stretch of the imagination."

End Note
1. Vaishali Honawar, "Accreditation Makes Virtual Teachers College Real Thing," **Education Week**, December 6, 2006, Vol. 26, No. 14.

WGU Learning Resources and the Self-Directed Student

Dan Eastmond, director of learning resources at WGU, is the person responsible for making all of the necessary arrangements with a wide variety of outside parties who provide instructional materials and resources that enable WGU students to complete and pass their competency assessments and earn their degrees. He works across the university to ensure that students have access to instructor-led online courses from other institutions, independent-study e-learning modules from various commercial enterprises, the appropriate textbooks through the WGU bookstore, and the wide and varied number of important information resources available online through the WGU central library system that is hosted and run by the University of New Mexico. "I make those arrangements through negotiation and contract, and then my team (a learning specialist, a learning resources coordinator and a learning resources clerk from WGU, along with a cyberarian based at the University of New Mexico who is paid by WGU) implements those through our system so that students can seamlessly get the learning materials that they need," Eastmond explains.

The learning specialist assists Eastmond with negotiating contracts, putting together operations, and incorporating learning resource tasks and procedures into the WGU enterprise system. The learning resources coordinator deals with overseeing operations, getting resources into the WGU catalog, and ensuring that students can click on the appropriate online resources that are aligned to their Academic Action Plans. The learning resources clerk assists the learning specialist and the learning resources coordinator and is also responsible for textbook adoptions and for the management of student tutoring services that are provided to those students in need of academic assistance (which are in addition to the mentoring and progress management counseling that students have regular access to).

Working Relationships
For instructor-led online learning courses, some of WGU partners include Chadron State College, Rio Salado College, Utah State University, California State University, and Northern Arizona University. Eastman explains that some of these online-learning-provider partnerships leave open slots for WGU students in their traditional online courses that are offered on a full-semester basis. Other arrangements have open enrollments in 8- to 12-week online courses that are offered on a consistently revolving basis throughout the year.

"We also work with some nimble entrepreneurial enterprises that offer online courses on a monthly or twice-monthly basis," says Eastman, referring to such companies as Wasatch E-learning. Plus, some information-technology or business-oriented, independent-study e-learning modules that can take anywhere from four to eight hours to complete are provided by such companies as NetG and SkillSoft. Eastman also mentioned that MyLabSchool, which has a collection of online tools designed to help students transition to teachers, and TeachScape, a technology-enabled professional development services company for educators, are utilized in the Teachers College.

WGU Learning Resources and the Self-Directed Student

The Independent Learner

Ironically, the most successful students at WGU, according to Janet Schnitz, executive director of the Teachers College, are those who work well with accessing and utilizing the many independent (also referred to as "individualized") learning resources that WGU provides, not the students who rely on taking the instructor-led online courses offered by institutional partners.

In addition to self-paced e-learning modules, independent learning resources, for example, can include everything from links to important websites that are closely aligned to competencies, textbooks, online simulations, active participation in cohort discussion forums, journal articles and other research resources that are found through the online library services, and much more.

"We find that the students who rely (mostly) on online courses are usually the weaker students, and they also need more guidance and support," says Schnitz. "The students who work with our independent learning resources

"What we have found is that when we provide just instructor-led online courses from other institutions, the students wait for the professor to tell them what they need to know, what they need to do, and what resources they need. These students are not as self-directed."

Dan Eastmond, director of learning resources

and our mentors seem to do much better in the programs we have to offer." Schnitz adds that many students come into WGU "being field dependent," and, over time, become "field independent" and more able to build their own educational pathway.

Eastmond explains that WGU is starting to move towards providing more "self-directed, smaller learning resources that we can bundle together and have our students study. What we have found is that when we provide just instructor-led online courses from other institutions, the students wait for the professor to tell them what they need to know, what they need to do, and what resources they need. These students are not as self-directed."

Self-directed Over Other-directed

"When our institutional research department studied our graduates, they found that those who had graduated, or those who were making good academic progress, had used or taken advantage of our independent learning resources," Eastmond continues. "Some of the students who were not making progress, or were dropping out, were relying more on instructor-led courses." In other words, they were more other-directed than self-directed. Such studies have pointed WGU in a direction whereby the institution, overall, is "very intentionally trying to move students in a way that empowers them to be more self-directed learners."

ePortfolio Tool Delivers Efficient Performance Assessment System

The use of ePortfolio technology is an extremely important part of the teaching and learning environment in the Teachers College at WGU. Every student in the Teachers College is required to have an ePortfolio.

Students create their ePortfolios with TaskStream, which, as noted on its website, is web-based software with competency assessment capabilities that allow its licensees and users "to facilitate the alignment of skills requirements, standards and other performance indicators with work products, artifacts and other learner evidence."

Students learn how to use ePortfolios through an online training program that includes voice and video components. There is also a full-time trainer on the WGU staff who provides support as students go through the process of learning how to build their ePortfolios. The ePortfolios are housed on TaskStream servers through an Application Programming Interface (API) arrangement that ties the ePortfolios to WGU's SCT Banner system.

Grading Performance Assessments

The Teachers College uses TaskStream as a highly efficient

way to deliver performance assessments that students respond to online and where graders access the student's work online. Performance assessments are located throughout the so-called "domains" and "subdomains" of every education program in the Teachers College, and they all contain multiple tasks, such as scored assignments, projects, essays and research papers. Each task also contains a grading rubric. Having students submit their completed tasks into their ePortfolios for archiving and grading has elimi-

continued on following page

ePortfolio Tool

nated the need to e-mail tasks to students individually and then parcel the student's work out to individual graders.

For example, under the "Foundations of Teaching" domain is a subdomain titled "Classroom Management" that has at least 10 tasks that a student is required to complete. When the student submits the completed task in Taskstream, it goes into what's called a Direct Response Folio (DRF) where a grader goes in and assigns a grade of one to four (and feedback), with three being the minimum passing grade.

There are about 160 graders in the Teachers College. Graders must have at least a master's degree in the area they are assigned to grade. Plans are to possibly double the number of graders working for WGU in the near future.

These rubric-driven performance assessments cross over multiple disciplines to measure competencies within each teacher certification program, including undergraduate degrees, post-baccalaureate certifications, and graduate degrees. The implementation of TaskStream within WGU allows students to show the growth in their work as they revise the assessments to meet the mastery level.

Where It All Comes Together

All this work throughout their education really comes to fruition when students complete the "Demonstration Teaching" component of their education. Demonstration Teaching is for teaching certification programs that require a live classroom teaching observation component, which WGU arranges through a 12-week, in-class teaching experience at schools that are close to where these WGU student-teachers live.

WGU's Demonstration Teaching, for both undergraduate and graduate-level students, has a teacher work sample component that is aligned to the popular Renaissance Partnership for Improving Teacher Quality rubric for assessing a P-12 (pre-school through 12th grade) teacher's work. The teacher work sample is composed inside their ePortfolios and is structured around a unit that contains all the lessons plans and themes that cut across all the curricular areas the student teachers are working in. Referred to as a "Professional Portfolio," this particular ePortfolio houses representations of the results of their interactions, recommendations from colleagues and administrators, a variety of resume-like elements, and basically the full gamut of materials that these student-teachers need in order to document their experiences and competencies, says Janet Schnitz, executive director of the Teachers College.

A Professional Portfolio table of contents will include a student's biography; a philosophy of teaching statement; a resume; examples of lesson plans and materials; a professional products section that will include a number of essays and evaluations; academic records; references; a statement on "why I want to be a teacher;" the aforementioned comprehensive teacher work sample; and a reflection folio.

The comprehensive teacher work sample provides direct evidence of the teacher candidate's ability to design and implement a multi-week, standards-based unit of instruction, assess student learning, and then reflect on the learning process. The WGU teacher work sample requires students to plan and teach a four-week standards-based instructional

unit consisting of seven components: 1) contextual factors, 2) learning goals, 3) assessment, 4) design for instruction, 5) instructional decision making, 6) analysis of student learning, and 7) self-evaluation and reflection.[1]

"We are very focused on measuring teacher effectiveness based on student results, and that comes out very clearly in the teacher work sample," Schnitz says.

The reflection folio is composed in a journal-style, or in a style similar to laboratory notes, as part of an online cohort seminar in which students interact with each other and a facilitator. Each week of the cohort seminar, students post their reflections on a variety of important topics related to their work, such as ethics within the classroom, or on other topics related to the challenges and issues they are dealing with as student teachers.

The Bottom Line

"Students have to be able to share and show their ability to master competencies," Schnitz explains. "Just putting out scores and objective test data is not enough. They have to really be able to demonstrate their abilities, and portfolios are a great way to do that. TaskStream is a robust environment for us. We are a big user, and they work with us to understand what our requirements are, and they help us maximize the use of the tool."

End Note:

1. Douglas Johnstone, "A Competency Alternative: Western Governors University, **Change**, July-August 2005.

Talking with Ruki Jayaraman, WGU's IT Programs Director

To get a sense for what's going on in WGU's College of Information Technology, Educational Pathways talked with IT Programs Director Ruki Jayaraman. The College of Information Technology offers six BS degrees and participates in the WGU MBA program that offers an emphasis in information technology management. About 1,350 students are enrolled in the College of Information Technology, which is in the process of developing two new graduate-level programs, one with an emphasis in enterprise data architecture and the other with an emphasis in database security and standards.

EdPath: What kind of students typically enroll in WGU's IT programs?

Ruki: The majority of our students (close to 70 percent) are already in the workforce. They've already been in IT for several years. In most cases, they already have the competencies, and they come into the degree program and take the assessments to demonstrate that they have the competencies to get the degree. A lot of these students come to us because, sometimes, in order to get ahead in their careers, they need to have a degree.

EdPath: Please tell us about the mentors in these programs. What backgrounds do they have, and what's a typical mentoring session like?

Ruki: The WGU mentor model is more of an academic advisement kind of a model. Our mentors don't teach as such. In terms of their backgrounds, the minimum qualification that they all have is a master's degree. A lot of them have Ph.D's. They're pretty well qualified, and most of our mentors, if not all of them, have had industry experience in IT. Typically they mentor the students on not just all the WGU policies and procedures, and getting them ready for assessments, but they also mentor students on some of the content. While they don't teach, they do offer a lot of content-related support as the student prepares to take the competencies and pass the assessments.

EdPath: Where are mentors based?

Ruki: They are dispersed everywhere. What we try to do when we assign students to mentors is match up time zones, so this way it makes sense for students that are on the east coast to work with mentors on the east coast.

EdPath: Do mentors ever come to Salt Lake City?

Ruki: Twice a year we have academic meetings where they come here for three days, and usually we try and coincide that with our graduation dates, so this way they can attend graduation and actually meet with their students face-to-face and watch the students walk during graduation. We have a whole bunch of academic meetings where we have training sessions, where we share best practices. We have other useful sessions where we get other departments to come speak with the mentors. So, it's pretty good.

EdPath: Do mentors go through any kind of online training program?

Ruki: Yes, we have a pretty extensive online training program when the mentors come on board. Before they are assigned to students, we provide them with two to three weeks of intense training, and we assign them to a senior mentor who they shadow for a little while in order to get a sense of how the mentoring works. It's a pretty good model, and it's all online. Because we are an online institution, and that's how our students learn, it makes sense to have our mentors go through the whole learning process to gain the competencies to become a mentor online as well.

EdPath: Before they graduate, students must complete a capstone. What are those like?

Ruki: The capstone is pretty much a culmination of everything the student has learned and acquired in terms of competencies. The capstone is equivalent to a dissertation, or a thesis, or a senior research project that students do at traditional universities. The student is required to basically demonstrate that they've acquired competencies in all of the areas that fall inside the program, including general education and liberal arts requirements. There are also the IT pieces that they have to integrate and synthesize into everything that they've learned. The capstone typically ends up being an IT project that they've worked on. For example, a student that is in the database emphasis is supposed to set up an enterprise database system, or a data warehousing system. They're supposed to actually put together a business plan about the enterprise data architecture, if you will. And then what kind of database, what kind of technologies would they use? What is the architecture and the technology that they would use? How would they install the database? How would they set up the users and the permissions? So it pretty much involves a detailed implementation plan in the area of IT where they're setting up a network or setting up

Talking with Ruki

all of the firewalls, setting up a database system, setting up security on the database system. It's a major IT project, and the capstone would involve writing a proposal for that project. That means the writing has to be really, really good. Everything that they've learned in the English domains, the language and the communication domains, come into play. They also need to put together a budget model, so everything that they may have learned in quantitative literacy also comes into play. And then there is a critical thinking piece, so some parts of troubleshooting and some parts of trying to put together the risk factors comes into play because they take assessments in critical thinking and problem solving. And we have some detailed rubrics for the capstone that actually tells them what is required inside of the capstone.

EdPath: Can you give us a sense of what students do when they leave the program?

Ruki: Yes, a lot of the students want to come back and get their master's. And I am so thrilled with the direction we are headed in because a lot of our assessments are industry-based certification exams. A lot of our assessments are vendor assessments. So the competencies that we measure in the IT programs are real world, hands-on, very much things that are used in the day-to-day lives of an IT person in the industry. Those are the competencies that we actually built into our program. Our graduates are productive on day one because our competencies are based on real-world competencies; they are very hands-on and very much oriented to the work force. In a lot of IT organizations a degree is not as important as having the hands-on skills. Employers say "give me somebody that I can quickly make productive on day one on the job as opposed to having to go through a long, extended, training period where we have to teach them because they're so theoretical-oriented." So this is where the value of our degree is - incorporating real-world, hands-on skills. This is what we hear all the time. Employers also say "give us students who are content certified, that are CIW certified, that are Oracle certified, Microsoft certified. We don't care if they come with a degree in hand as long as they have these." And this is demonstrated at WGU by students actually walking away with industry certifications.

EdPath: What about new programs on the horizon?

Ruki: We are in the process of developing two master's degree programs. In fact, one of them - I wish I could take it myself - is going to be a degree in enterprise data architecture, which is very much needed in the marketplace. It's going to be totally hands-on; it's going to be very business-focused and very little academia-focused. We're really excited, and we're hoping to be able to launch that either in the last quarter of this year or the first quarter of next year. The other one is in security. Once again, it is extremely hands-on because security, especially data security and standards, are very much needed in the industry. So these are the two that we are hoping to launch. We've done a fair amount of market research on these two programs, and what we're offering I think will be very much needed in the marketplace and very unique.