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## Western Governors University: University of the Future

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*Keynote Address*

***Western Governors University  
University of the Future***

Robert C. Albrecht  
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***Abstract***

*Western Governors University was initiated by Western governors in response to perceived needs in the marketplace and as a supplement to the traditional institutions. WGU offers competency-based credentials at a distance. Students are required to sit for assessments that measure their skills and competencies. The curriculum for each degree is defined by competencies rather than courses. The programs are particularly suited to non-traditional students who are unable to attend residential institutions.*

The background to the initiation and development of Western Governors University involves changes in post-secondary education that are occurring in the United States and elsewhere. The rapid population growth results in half of the world's population being under 20 years of age. As a consequence, a large campus must open every week to accommodate the growing demand. As a primary provider of higher education, that demand becomes part of the environment for higher education in the U.S.

Yet the cost of higher education in the United States continues to escalate: the cost has increased by one-third in the past fifteen years. Hence a structure which was intended to serve large portions of the public continues to cost more than some segments can afford. The rapid growth in population will be less served rather than more because of these costs. The model for higher education simply is not scalable to the demands placed on it by the population increases.

The need for education increases, and the number of providers grows to meet that need. The "education industry," as some call it, has become financially attractive, and publishers, software companies, and other commercial providers have entered the competition with schools and colleges. Perpetual learning, workplace needs, just-in-time learning and certificates rather than degrees have become parts of the learning demands. This increased demand for education and training has also lead institutions to increase their distance learning activities. Most institutions have distance learning offerings; however, all but a quarter of them offer fewer than 25 courses, according to a recent government survey. With the new demand for distance learning, 75% of all institutions intend to expand those offerings.

These developments occur at a time when the economy and the society are shifting from the industrial age to the knowledge age. For education, the industrial age is marked by residential campuses running on the familiar academic calendar, offering degrees from college and universities in which the curriculum is controlled by full-time faculty members. In the knowledge age, learning takes place at the workplace, in the home or on the campus. The content will be packaged in certificates as well as degrees; the providers will

include publishers and other corporate providers, as well as colleges and universities, and the consumer will determine many of the characteristics of the time, place, and form of the educational process.

Western Governors University was initiated to meet the demands proceeding from these changes. Fifteen governors of the Western Governors Association met in 1995 and 1996 to plan a university that would have the following characteristics:

|                 |                     |
|-----------------|---------------------|
| Market-oriented | Distributed faculty |
| Independent     | High quality        |
| Client-centered | Cost effective      |
| Degree-granting | Competency-based    |
| Accredited      | Quickly initiated   |

Such an institution had seldom been initiated in the United States. Incorporated in 1997, WGU actually opened its (virtual) doors in September, 1998. The University continues to receive support from the governors; eighteen states now support WGU. The governors each provided \$100,000 as one-time grants, and they serve as members of Western Governors University. Each further agreed to establish at least one local center in each State, to work to overcome barriers to distance learning and to support fund raising for this private institution. Strong international interest has also emerged. Memoranda of understanding have been signed with agencies in a number of countries, including Canada, Mexico, Japan, China, Armenia, and the United Kingdom.

The institution which was established by the governors has been realized along the lines of the vision with which it began. The degrees are competency-based; the content is that taught in the provider institutions. As a degree granting institution, WGU must have accreditation. That process began with the establishment of IRAC ( the Inter-regional Accrediting Commission), an organization created by four of the regional accrediting agencies—North Central, Northwest, the Western Association of Senior Colleges and the Western Association of Junior Colleges. WGU was granted "eligibility" status in the spring of 1998 and seeks "candidacy." The accrediting process is essentially that used for traditional in-

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stitutions. The members of IRAC are chosen from the commissions of their regional accrediting agencies; the process includes an institutional self-study and a site visit by a team chosen by the accreditors. WGU, however non-traditional it may be in some respects, will award degrees equivalent to those offered by traditional institutions.

WGU credentials—certificates and degrees—are based on competencies rather than credits. Rather than completing a set number of credit hours which define the curriculum or the degree, the student must demonstrate through third party assessment (i.e., not the assessment of the faculty member who provides the content) the competencies which make up the curriculum. How is the curriculum established? Once a discipline is chosen for the development of a credential, a faculty committee, made up of faculty members on contract from other institutions, is appointed to define the standards for the degree. Depending upon the nature of the certification, these standards are drawn from industry or academic sources. Once these are defined or identified, the committee, called a Program Council, writes the competencies that students must demonstrate to meet the standards.

WGU students can take assessments to demonstrate their possession of those competencies whenever they are ready. They may have acquired the competencies through past course work or through self study; or they may take courses—residential or distributed—to prepare for the assessment. Once the student has demonstrated competencies in all of the domains (a domain is a collection of competencies in an area such as mathematics) required, a credential is awarded to the student. The completion of domains is analogous to the completion of courses; progress towards a degree is measured by “passing” the assessments—similar to “passing” courses.

In the academic structure of the University, the faculty functions are unbundled: that is, the faculty who provide content through their home institutions are generally not the faculty who build the curriculum. The assessments which measure student competencies are created by companies such as ACT or the Educational Testing Service.. The advisor/mentors who are the critical guides to all degree-seeking students are faculty qualified people, and they do not teach courses for WGU (the University is not a content provider) and are not involved in the assessment process.

The initial degree offerings of the University include an Associate of Arts and an Associate of Applied Science in Electronic Manufacturing Technology. The former degree is a typical AA transfer degree based on similar degrees in two and four year institutions. The structure of the WGU degree requires the student to demonstrate competencies in three areas:

**Pre-requisite skills**—communication, mathematics, research and basic work-related skills

**Cross disciplinary skills**—critical thinking, problem solving, information gathering and evaluation;

all applied in the context of natural sciences, social sciences and the humanities

**Distribution component**—natural sciences, physical sciences, humanities, history

Twelve other credentials are now being developed in the areas of information technology, allied health, business and education. These will be available to students during the coming months.

Students interested in the WGU credentials can access the University through its Smart Catalog on the web at [www.wgu.edu](http://www.wgu.edu). After browsing the web site and learning more about the University, its structure and its offerings, students may decide to apply for admission. At that time they are assigned an advisor/mentor who works with them to define their academic and career goals, to assess their experience as it applies to those goals, to evaluate their readiness to take the assessments in their chosen curriculum, and to identify sources of content (such as courses) they may need to increase their readiness to take assessments. If distance learning offerings seem appropriate, the advisor/mentor will guide the student through the offerings of provider institutions that are listed in the Smart Catalog. The advisor/mentor will also aid the student in understanding the concepts of competencies and competency-based credentials.

Western Governors University does offer credentials equivalent to that of other institutions. However, the student market it serves tend to differ from those of the traditional institution. The competency-based degrees and the assessment process are especially suited to non-traditional students who have been in the work force. Many of those people find that their educational experience is limiting their ability to achieve academic and career objectives.

Western Governors University, then, is a competency-based, degree granting institution of higher education. A distance learning university especially designed to serve mid-career students, it will soon offer a spectrum of certificates and degrees in fields such as information technology, education, allied health and business. While working in partnership with traditional institutions and other providers, WGU seeks to reach students who often cannot take advantage of the offerings of many colleges and universities. The credentials it offers are particularly addressed to those students.

The knowledge age presents new patterns of learning and credentialing and offers many new learning opportunities. While the typical undergraduate student may still attend the residential institutions, many more learners will seek education from home, from the workplace, from learning centers. Furthermore, they will look for certificates and other credentials that can be earned through technology. Western Governors University will respond to these and other so-called non-traditional educational degrees.