



Written Testimony Submitted on Behalf of Western Governors University

Joint Hearing of the Illinois Senate Education and Higher Education Committees

November 5, 2020

Honorable Chairmen and Members of the Senate Education and Higher Education Committees, thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony on how to strengthen workforce development in Illinois.

Western Governors University (WGU) is the nation's leading nonprofit, online competency-based university with nearly 140,000 students in all 50 states and is squarely focused on providing a workforce-aligned education that meets the needs of working adults and underserved populations. Through WGU's four colleges (Information Technology, Business, Health Professions and Teachers) WGU focuses on the most in-demand workforce needs. In Illinois there are currently 4,151 students enrolled in WGU undergraduate and graduate programs. Of that population:

- The average age is 35 years old;
- 78% are employed full-time; and
- 75% are underserved (minority, low-income, first-generation college, and rural resident).

Of our 200,000 strong alumni base, more than 5,000 are Illinois residents.

Nineteen U.S. governors created WGU in 1997 to expand access to higher education—the surest path from talent to opportunity. Those governors believed college was becoming too expensive and disconnected from the workforce, failing to meet the needs of their state economies. They were concerned about barriers to degree attainment for disadvantaged populations and felt the existing model did not create an adequate pathway to career advancement for those stuck in poverty. These governors created WGU to be an affordable, innovative, results-driven educational institution that prepares students of all backgrounds for great jobs. WGU is designed to serve those who are **not served well** by traditional higher education options.

As COVID-19 damages personal finances and economies and leaves dislocated workers in its wake, it's clear that Americans need smart, flexible, and quick solutions to get back to work. One of the tools available to policymakers is competency-based education (CBE). WGU pioneered competency-based education. We remain the only institution offering competency-based degrees at scale, creating a model that allows students to graduate more quickly and with less debt—and with the workforce-relevant skills employers demand. What is competency-based education? Simply put, it measures skills and learning rather than time spent in the classroom—so students can focus on learning what they need to know to be successful, and employers can be confident that they are hiring employees whose credentials translate to on-the-job excellence.

WGU's results in meeting employer's needs and changing student's lives demonstrate that CBE works.

Employer Satisfaction

Based on a 2019 survey of 300 employers of WGU graduates by Harris Poll:

96%
said they would hire another WGU graduate

95%
rated the job performance of WGU graduates as excellent or very good

97%
said WGU graduates meet or exceed expectations

97%
said WGU graduates were prepared for their jobs

88%
rate WGU grads as excellent or very good at performing technical skills related to field

95%
rate the "soft skills" of WGU grads as equal to or better than grads from other institutions

Graduate Success & Satisfaction

The WGU-Harris Poll is conducted online annually. Among other things, it measures graduates' satisfaction with their education experience. In 2019, the survey included 1,247 WGU graduates and 1,437 national, non-WGU graduates from the four degree fields WGU offers.

Have recommended university to others



Satisfied with overall experience



Satisfied with academic help



Would choose university again



In addition to measuring graduate satisfaction, the annual WGU-Harris Poll tracks post-graduation employment outcomes. In 2019, the survey included 1,247 WGU graduates and 1,437 national, non-WGU graduates from the four degree fields WGU offers. (Note that respondents were not asked whether they started current employment after earning their degrees or were already employed as students.)

Majority of competencies related to work



Total employed



Employed in degree field



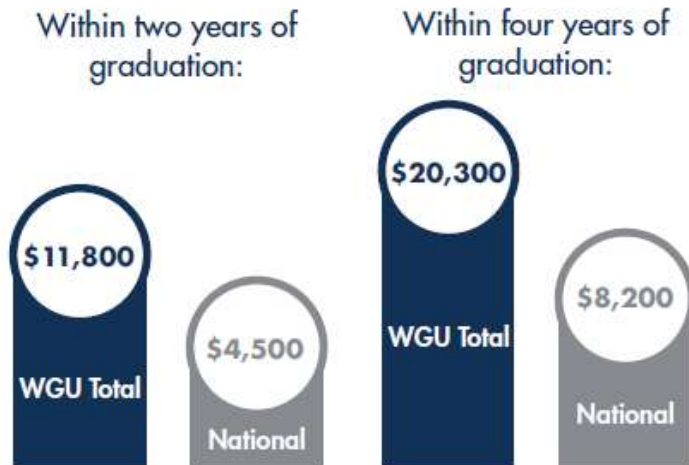
Employed full time



WGU’s model also provides students with a return on their investment more than twice the national average all while keeping the student debt of our graduates at half the national average.

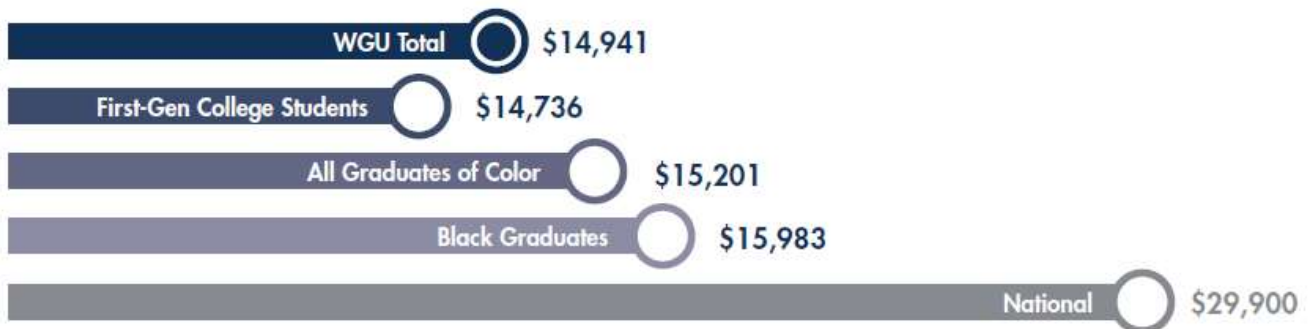
A Better Return on Student Investment

Average increase in annual salary compared with pre-enrollment salary.



Source: Harris Poll

Average Debt at Graduation, WGU FY2019 Graduating Class (Undergraduate)



At WGU, we often say that we won’t rest. At WGU, we won’t rest until students of **every background** have access to the opportunity afforded by a college education. WGU is an innovative, non-traditional institution of higher education whose students are achieving better-than-average outcomes. By continuing to expand student-centric, personalized pathways to higher education, we can ensure that every learner obtains an affordable degree or credential.

WGU is and can be a committed partner by providing educational opportunities to populations in Illinois that are not well-served by traditional higher education models. This particularly includes the nearly 1.8 million Illinoisans with some college but no degree. As a competency-based education provider, WGU can move students to degree completion much quicker and at significantly lower cost. And as a leader in distance education, WGU specializes in serving historically underserved student populations—especially those for whom time-bound and place-bound approaches to education simply don’t work.

WGU is ready, willing, and able to partner with the state of Illinois to be part of much-needed solutions to remove barriers to opportunity and to improve the benefits of education so our neighbors and constituents attain better jobs and a higher quality of life. WGU looks forward to working with committee members to discuss the manner in which WGU can advance high-quality affordable higher education in Illinois.

Testimony submitted by:

Dr. Angie Besendorfer
Regional Vice President
314-677-2302
angie.besendorfer@wgu.edu

Dr. Terrance Hopson
Regional Director
385-428-9911
terrance.hopson@wgu.edu

Patrick Baker
Director, External Affairs
385-428-9176
patrick.baker@wgu.edu