



No Degree; New Option

WGU Indiana Offers Potential Solution

By Charlee Beasor

WGU INDIANA



There's one number Allison Barber is concerned with: 730,000.

There's good reason the chancellor of Western Governors University Indiana (WGU Indiana) is worried. "In Indiana, we have 730,000 adults that have some college but didn't finish," she declares.

"You can't miss stepping back and looking at our nation. Our nation is now No. 10. We're No. 10 of college graduates in the world. That's a nationwide issue. It's a crisis," she adds. "We're (Indiana) No. 45 in the country of people with college degrees."

According to statistics from the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 63% of the nation's jobs will require some form of postsecondary education or training by 2018. Employers will need 22 million new workers with degrees. Those numbers point to a deficit of 300,000 college graduates every year for the next seven years.

WGU Indiana – the online, non-profit university – became an official state university when Gov. Mitch Daniels signed an executive order in June 2010. The university's focus is combating the above statistics by making a degree attainable for Hoosier adults.

"Gov. Daniels realized that our model could probably help Hoosiers finish their degree or go back and get a degree to make themselves more marketable," Barber comments. "The beginning of our story is helping Hoosiers; the end is economic development."

A different kind of university

Western Governors University (WGU) was formed in 1997 by a group of 19 state chief executives, primarily from western states but including then-Indiana Gov. Frank O'Bannon. While the online university has had a national presence since then, it had never been "adopted" by a state until Daniels signed on. Earlier last year, Daniels became a member of the WGU board of trustees, and he serves as a WGU Indiana advisory board member.

WGU Indiana is regionally accredited by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities and nationally accredited by the Distance Education and Training Council. The university offers more than 50 bachelors' and masters' degrees in four areas: College of Health Professions, Teachers College, College of Business and College of Information Technology.

"It's as important for us to know who we are as it is for us to know who we are not," Barber describes. "It is not the university for someone who has not worked in an office, who has not had a computer class."

She also points out that WGU Indiana is completely self-sustaining, meaning it does not receive funding from the state.

"We really are the university of the people. We're non-profit, self-supported on student tuition. We take no money from the state, although our students do qualify for federal and state aid. We're thin to win," she says.

The university is competency based, which essentially means students earn degrees based on demonstrating what they know versus the amount of credit hours they've taken.

“Everything about what we’re trying to do is really to respect who our student is, which is true for all universities. But our student is the adult, so how do you respect them? You say to them, ‘You’ve learned a lot, you’ve come to higher education knowing different things and you learn at a different rate,’” Barber explains.

Designed for the adult

Aside from the competency-based curriculum, there are a few other reasons WGU Indiana might be a better fit for some adults: mainly flexibility and affordability.

That’s what made Suzanna Smith of North Salem take a look at WGU. The mother of two received her bachelor’s degree in accounting and is currently enrolled in WGU Indiana’s MBA program. Her goal is to become a certified public accountant.

“Going to WGU, the best part was the flexibility of when I could work on it,” Smith recalls. “It made it a lot easier for me to achieve my goal of getting a bachelor’s degree.”

The average student obtains a bachelor’s degree in about two and a half years. The master’s degree can be earned in two years, 18 months or as quickly as the student can complete it.

Terms at WGU Indiana are six months, with students able to take as many competency units (equivalent to credit hours at other institutions) as they can during that time. Tuition, about \$3,000 per term, is charged at a flat rate at the beginning of each six-month term.

Mentors – key to success

While taking courses at WGU Indiana, Smith experienced the loss of her father, who suffered a heart attack and passed away a month before her son was born.

“It was hard with all that stuff going on. With WGU, with the mentors, they were a good support system. I didn’t take any term breaks, but I did take a couple of weeks of gathering myself. It was great to have the support and understanding,” she says.

WGU Indiana hosted its first commencement ceremony for seven graduates in October 2010 at the Indiana Statehouse. Brian Whitman (left) of Bloomington has his tassel turned. Dawn Hanson (right) delivers a speech to the audience while (from left) Chancellor Allison Barber, Gov. Mitch Daniels and Western Governors University President Robert W. Mendenhall listen.

Each student is paired with a mentor on his or her first day at WGU Indiana. The mentor is with them through the time they earn their degree.

Mentors call students once a week during the first term. Following the first term, students can elect to work with the mentors less. Mentor Cathy Chamberlin, however, relates that most of her students want to talk on a regular basis.

“One challenge as an online university is trying to develop a personal relationship; it’s so important to retention. It can be hard to make that human connection, but that’s what the mentoring role does; it’s giving them a relationship with the university,” Chamberlin affirms.

As a mentor, Chamberlin ensures that the students are following through: “I’m not here to run their program; I’m here to facilitate it. Unless they’ve set the goals, they’re not their goals. If they fall short, I understand. I’m not one to cry over spilled milk. It’s then, ‘Where do we go from here?’ ”

Partnerships abound

The school announced at the beginning of January that over 800 Hoosiers are enrolled in WGU Indiana, meaning enrollment had tripled in six months. Part of that number is likely due to a partnership with Ivy Tech Community College.

“Ivy Tech is doing a great job from the community college standpoint. We’re encouraging their graduates to roll right out of Ivy Tech and right into WGU Indiana with a discount and scholarships available,” Barber comments. “The biggest benefit is we recognize and accept the transfer credits.”

The school is also reaching out to businesses across the state, alerting them to WGU Indiana as a viable option for employees who need more training.

“A lot of our businesses provide tuition reimbursement. If you do a few thousand dollars (in reimbursement), WGU is a great partner for you,” she states. “We partner with businesses who want an educated workforce; 70% of our students work





Barber emphasizes the need for more Hoosiers to earn college degrees and discusses how WGU Indiana helps make that possible by offering an online education and affordable tuition.

full time. If you're an employer, you want your workforce to excel, and it's better to educate your current employees than to go out and try and find new employees."

Another new partnership is with TechPoint. Jim Jay, president and CEO of the technology trade association, is working with WGU Indiana to provide webinars for employers.

"TechPoint is focused on economic development. We're looking to help develop the tools necessary to build the workforce and any element of education is important," he notes.

"Work experience is critical. The WGU student is going to have years of experience in the workforce most likely; that will weigh heavily. When I talk with CEOs hiring in the tech sector, they're interested in someone with a couple years of experience under their belt, someone that has lived in that work environment."

Complement or compete?

In creating WGU Indiana, Gov. Daniels called it "Indiana's eighth state university" and said it "will fill the clearest and most challenging gap remaining in our family of higher education opportunities."

What about those schools that already have an online or distance learning curriculum?

Dr. Henry Smith, president of Indiana Wesleyan University, points out that his school has been offering a cohort model as a distance learning option, where students come to a specific location and take a weekly evening class.

"We've done that for over 25 years. We were early in providing adult education," Smith indicates. "For the first time this past fall, we had more of those (adult education) students that were online than were in our cohort activities in the region."

Smith isn't sure yet what kind of impact WGU Indiana will have on IWU's enrollment, but says the school plans to count on its brand to see it through.

"All of us are trying to maximize enrollments; it certainly makes a big difference in longevity and existence. Often we're very competitive in terms of pricing and fighting for faculty," he emphasizes. "We're known for increasing quality and we play on our name. We're not here today and gone tomorrow.

We are an Indiana institution."

He also admits that IWU wasn't exactly received with a ticker-tape parade when it opened cohort buildings in Kentucky, so the school has now been on both sides of the battle.

"We're all in it together and providing more education for working adults in Indiana is what it's all about," he adds.

Indiana University's School of Continuing Studies has been in the adult higher education arena for 40 years, states Daniel Callison, dean of the school.

"One of the things that people sometimes forget is how important our outreach has been in the state of Indiana with the regional campuses that were also established about 40 years ago," Callison asserts. "More and more courses are offered on the weekend and evenings and there is growth in online options."

Both Callison and Smith are primarily concerned with WGU Indiana's effect on the already-shrinking amount of federal and student financial aid available.

"What bothers me a little bit with WGU coming on board is that here's a new set of higher education offerings placed into the mix without there being a larger pie for financial assistance. Right now, it's thinner for everyone else. I really hope someone in the state finds the magic solution where there's more financial assistance for everyone," Callison explains.

Smith acknowledges the same trepidation. "We've had less aid over the past two years and have not been able to make it up. When you widen the pie, someone gets a little less. That's my concern."

Both also agree the status quo, however, will not sustain Hoosiers.

"We have to keep in mind that the state of Indiana has this huge population of adults that do not hold college credentials," Callison maintains. "It won't solve all the problems, but having more people with the undergrad degree completed certainly helps. We've got a long way to go. It takes all of us at this particular point to try and address the problem."

Barber doesn't sense competition with the other state universities, as she reiterates the number of Hoosiers without degrees.

"There are enough students for every university in this state to help somebody. We offer one thing: non-profit, online education in these four career fields. We're competency based and this is what we do. If we're a good fit, let's get at it," she says.

"Indiana's a great place; we have a lot of great, really terrific higher education opportunities. We have 60 universities in the state of Indiana. That's great. But, to be redundant on purpose: 730,000 Hoosiers with some college but no degree. Somebody needs to be focused on that group, and that's us."

INFORMATION LINK

Resources: Allison Barber and Cathy Chamberlin, WGU Indiana, at <http://indiana.wgu.edu>

Dr. Henry Smith, Indiana Wesleyan University, at www.indwes.edu

Daniel Callison, Indiana University School of Continuing Studies, at <http://scs.indiana.edu>

Jim Jay, TechPoint, at www.techpoint.org