

WGU Indiana provides more access to courses

Students now can use scholarships to pay its tuition

By **Scott Olson**
solson@ibj.com

Working Hoosiers seeking bachelor's or master's degrees have one less obstacle to contend with, following an agreement between the state and an online university that could produce more college grads.

The arrangement allows students to use state scholarship money to pay for tuition at WGU Indiana—something not allowed before the partnership. WGU Indiana is a branch of Western Governors University, a private, not-for-profit university designed for working adults trying to earn degrees.

In August, Western Governors University Indiana said that after having been open for six months, Indiana enrollment had surpassed 800 students and that it was adding nearly 100 students a month.

Teresa Lubbers, the state's commissioner for higher education, acknowledged WGU Indiana's growing role in the state's attempts to make college more accessible to working adults.

"The bricks-and-mortar type of institutions are changing the way they deliver education, too," Lubbers said. "But this is a delivery system that looks different than anything else we have in Indiana right now."

Here's a few of the reasons:

WGU tuition averages \$6,000 a year, and students can take as many courses as they wish during that time, which provides a big incentive to finish a degree.

They receive credit not based on hours in the classroom but by writing papers, completing assignments and passing exams that demonstrate content knowledge. Moreover, WGU assigns faculty mentors to students to supervise their work.

"The traditional classroom will still be important for lots of young people. But for other people, the traditional classroom is not where they're going to get their education."

Stan Jones, Complete College America president

Students can earn degrees in business, teacher education, information technology and health professions. Those completing associate degrees at Ivy Tech Community College can transfer their courses to WGU Indiana.

Upon the June announcement, Gov. Mitch Daniels said he considered WGU Indiana to be the eighth state university, although it is technically a private program and will not get state funding like other colleges.

Yet his sentiments belie the state's efforts to improve its college graduation rates. College completion has been the top issue for the Indiana Commission on Higher Education the past three years.

The commission set a goal for Indiana to be among the top 10 states by 2015. Just over half of students at state-supported, four-year institutions graduate within six years. The four-year graduation rate is a woeful 29 percent—but equal to the national average.

Perhaps even more troubling, however, is that Indiana ranks 44th in the number of adults (23 percent) with a bachelor's degree or higher, according to U.S. Census Bureau figures from 2005, the most recent year for which they're available.

"We have some pretty ambitious goals," Lubbers said. "We need 10,000 more bachelor's degrees each year between now and 2025 [to meet job demands]."

Based in Salt Lake City, Western Governors University was launched in 1998 by 19 governors, including former Indiana Gov. Frank O'Bannon, who banded together to give adults more options to earn a college degree.

Stan Jones preceded Lubbers as the state's commissioner for higher education and was involved in bringing the WGU online program to Indiana 12 years ago.

Jones, who founded the Complete College America not-for-profit in Washington, D.C., about two years ago, lauded Daniels' decision to expand the WGU program in Indiana.

"We are a more mobile society now," he said. "The traditional classroom will still be important for lots of young people. But for other people, the traditional classroom is not where they're going to get their education."

Indeed, colleges saw a 17-percent increase in online enrollment in the fall of 2008, according to a survey published in January 2010 by the Massachusetts-based Sloan Consortium.

Online enrollment is growing much quicker than traditional college enrollment, which increased just 1.2 percent. The report also found a total of more than 4.6 million online students overall, up from 3.9 million in 2007.

Twenty-thousand students—whose average age is 36—are enrolled in WGU programs nationwide. But only about 300 reside in Indiana. It's Allison Barber's job to increase the number.

Barber, who was appointed WGU Indiana's first chancellor in June, is a former Indiana public schoolteacher who operated her own public relations firm in Arlington, Va. She is based in Indianapolis, but will spend much of her time traveling the state touting WGU Indiana's benefits to businesses that might need employees to further their educations.

Barber said many WGU students live in rural areas and don't have the income to attend traditional four-year universities.

"Western Governors University comes into play because it really offers access for the adult learner," she said, "because they usually are under-represented."

WGU Indiana is supported financially by the Indianapolis-based Lumina Foundation for Education, as well as the Seattle-based Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.