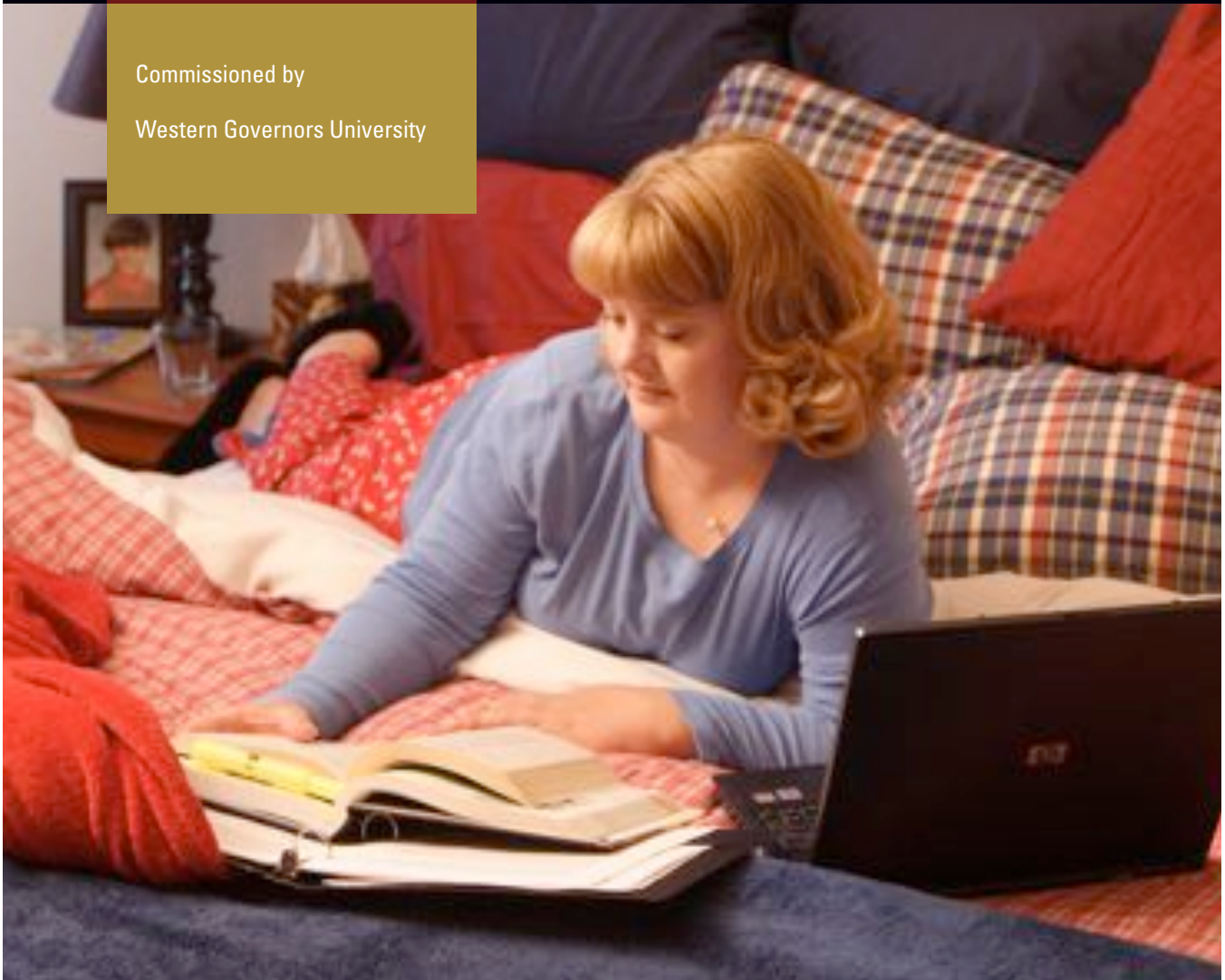


**ONLINE DEGREES
MAKE THE
GRADE:**

Employer Acceptance
Now Common

Commissioned by
Western Governors University





Online Degrees Make the Grade: Employer Acceptance Now Common

“People working all day and studying online all night have the kind of *grrr* most companies could use.”

— Jack & Suzy Welch
The Welch Way

By George Lorezno
President,
Lorenzo Associates, Inc.,
and Publisher of
Educational Pathways

“Would you hire someone with an online business degree?” was a question posed to Jack and Suzy Welch in “The Welch Way,” a column they write for Business Week. (Jack is the former CEO of General Electric, and Suzy, his wife, is the former editor of the Harvard Business Review.) “To count out a candidate based on an online degree may be shortsighted,” they responded. “People working all day and studying online all night have the kind of *grrr* most companies could use.” [1]

The Welchses, like many others in the business and education sectors, have come to realize that the vast majority of online higher education graduates are adult lifelong learners who are self-disciplined, reliable and have a knack for applying practical, experience-based knowledge in the workplace. As corporations continue to see an increase in job candidates who have earned their degrees online, the word has spread among executives, human resource professionals and hiring managers that online higher education graduates are focused employees with strong work ethics. They are known to move up the career ladder quickly. Many have become responsible and productive business professionals and highly effective teachers (see “WGU Grads Advance Their Careers”).

Corporate America has obviously accepted online learning, but this has not always been the case. In some places there still exists unfounded misinformation and misperceptions about the validity of online learning. The Welchses, for instance, also noted that they “would have hesitated” when answering the same question only one year ago.

Most Employers Don't Pass Judgement Based on Education Delivery Mode

Richard Garrett, senior research analyst for Eduventures, an education research and consulting firm (since 1993) headquartered in Boston, explains that most employers today have no qualms about the quality of online education. “If you ask employers about their sense of the quality of online education — is it of equal quality to traditional — the response you typically get is a growing adherence to it being of equal quality.”

Garrett adds that “whomever you ask — whether prospective students, faculty, or employers — you will get a minority who still have a negative knee-jerk reaction and say that they think online is inherently of weaker quality.” However, more than two-thirds “have no inherent

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Case Study

WGU Graduates Advance Their Careers

Western Governors University (WGU, www.wgu.edu) is an award-winning, non-profit, regionally accredited, distance learning higher education institution. It does not have a physical campus and its headquarters is located in Salt Lake City. WGU offers 46 undergraduate and graduate degree programs, with more than 8,000 students in business, education, information technology, and nursing. All of its degree programs are competency-based, meaning students work their way through a variety of rigorous domains and sub-domains that require them to demonstrate their competencies through a series of carefully designed and selected assessments. In addition, WGU students participate in online learning communities, where they interact with students and faculty mentors. Students also utilize a wide variety of online resources that enable them to build their knowledge base and ultimately graduate.

As a solid testimony to WGU's credibility and quality, the United States Distance Learning Association (USDLA) recognized WGU in April 2008 with a 21st Century Award for Best Practices in Distance Learning. In addition, Dr. Janet Schnitz, executive director of the WGU Teachers College, was honored with a USDLA award for Outstanding Leadership by an Individual in the Field of Distance Learning.

Many of WGU's graduates are representative of how adult learners can succeed in the workplace, change their career paths, and be embraced by their employers. Four of these WGU graduates are featured here.

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Total and Online Enrollment in Degree-Granting Postsecondary Institutions Fall 2002 through Fall 2006

	Total Enrollment	Annual Growth Total Enrollment	Students Taking at Least One Online Course	Annual Growth Rate Online Enrollment	Online Enrollment as a Percent of Total Enrollment
Fall 2002	16,611,710	N/A	1,602,970	N/A	9.7%
Fall 2003	16,900,479	1.7%	1,971,397	23.0%	11.7%
Fall 2004	17,272,043	2.2%	2,329,783	18.2%	13.5%
Fall 2005	17,428,500	0.9%	3,180,050	36.5%	18.2%
Fall 2006	17,647,720	1.3%	3,488,381	9.7%	19.8%

Source: Sloan C, Online Nations: Five Years of Growth in Online Learning By L. Elaine Allen and Jeff Seamon, October 2007, page 5

Online Degrees Make the Grade: Employer Acceptance Now Common

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difficulty with online education.” Most employers will look at prospective employees who have online degrees on a case-by-case basis and will not make a radical yes or no judgement simply because of an education delivery mode.

“Online is increasingly familiar, common, and normal,” Garrett further explains. “People recognize

that it comes from traditional schools and non-traditional schools.” Similar to any education environment, “it can be good; it can be bad; it can be diverse. It does not make any sense to just say I am going to do something very concrete [such as decide whether or not to hire someone] just because they heard that word, *online*, or the ab-

sence of that word.”

In the corporate sector, the increased utilization of training, professional development, and certification programs that are conducted over Internet connections, both synchronously (live) and asynchronously (not in real time) has contributed to the overall growing acceptance of online education.

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CASE STUDY: WGU Graduates Advance Their Careers

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Larry Manch

“I now had time to go back to college, but there was no way I could do a traditional brick and mortar school.”

— *Larry Manch*
WGU Graduate

Meet Larry Manch: Larry is a model worth emulating for late-blooming career changers. When Larry was in his late 40s, he decided it was time to do what he always really wanted to do: become a teacher. Larry had logged about 30 years of his life working primarily in retail, from sales, to assistant manager, to manager, to district manager, to actually owning and operating

his own retail store. He also held a job as an area manager for a nationwide inventory service. His higher education credentials for most of his life included a few years of college in which he never earned a degree.

“In all those years I got sidetracked and did not finish college, but I always thought that someday I would go back and get a degree,” Larry says. Working in retail management, however, posed a severe challenge to achieving his dream. “I worked an awful lot of hours,” he says, “about 80 to 100 hours a week. There was no time to go to college.”

In the meantime, Larry got married, and, in typical late-blooming fashion, he and his wife had two children when Larry was in his mid to late 40s (the young Manches are currently eight and six years old). Having children brought an epiphany. “I realized that if I wanted to spend time with my family, that I had to do something different,” he explains. Larry then moved down the career chain to a less-consuming position at an office supply store. “I now had time to go back to college, but there was no way I could do a traditional brick and mortar school. We had young kids; we did not want to do daycare and could not afford it. One of us was going to be home all the time. So it really was not possible to attend a regular college.”

Enter the WGU Teachers College, a regionally-accredited competency-based distance education institution headquartered in Salt Lake City, offering NCATE-accredited undergraduate and graduate teacher education programs.

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Plus, corporations are increasingly supporting the further education of their current employees with reimbursement programs that accept accredited online education courses and programs. They realize that the flexibility and convenience of online teaching and learning modalities are a great fit for busy adult learners seeking to improve their workforce skills and advance their careers. These learners want to stay on their jobs while earning their degrees, as opposed to having to commute to a physical campus every day and possibly jeopardizing their current employment situation.

SHRM Survey Reveals Corporate Support of Online Higher Education

There's plenty of evidence across the corporate sector that supports online education as a viable and effective way to learn and grow over a lifetime. For example, a survey fielded in 2007 by the Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM) that garnered 425 responses from randomly selected human resource professionals revealed that 71 percent of companies reimburse their employees for degrees earned online from regionally accredited (e.g., six regional accreditation bodies recognized by the Department of Education) and professionally accredited (e.g., AACSB in business, ABET in engineering, NCATE in education, etc.) higher education institutions and programs. [2]

"More and more companies are challenged to evaluate a host of alternative degrees as well as international degrees," says Gerry Crispin, who is a member of the SHRM Technology & HR Management Special Expertise Panel and principle of CareerXRoads, an in-

ternational recruitment and employment strategy consulting service. He adds that any employers who may hold negative bias toward prospective employees with online degrees "are primarily from earlier

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CASE STUDY:

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Larry enrolled in October 2004 and completed all of his bachelor's degree course work by December 2005. He did his student teaching in early 2006 and held a few substitute teaching positions before ultimately being hired in the fall of 2006 as a 2nd grade teacher at Montague Village Elementary School in Fort Hood, Texas. "I was wondering if anyone was going to hire me at my age, but they did," Larry says. "I worked extremely hard, and one of the greatest days of my life was when they called me and said 'we want you to start tomorrow'. That was a big moment."

Meet Larry's boss: Principal of Montague Village Elementary, Debra Burch, says that Larry is not the first person she has hired who earned an education credential online, "and he will not be the last, because I value anyone who gets an education any way they can. I realize that when we are talking about someone who may be going back to school after another career or later in life, that person is bringing to the table a lot of experience, unlike the person who goes to college at 18 and graduates and becomes a teacher at 21."

For hiring decisions, Burch says it's more about the individual and "what they were born with. You have to have that calling and know that this is what you were meant to do. You have to have the talent to know that when you can't explain something the first time, you say it in a different way, not bigger or louder. You have to really want to stick with it, and that is what I see in Larry Manch, who is a very intelligent man with a talent for teaching. He cares about his students and wants to know more about the art of teaching."

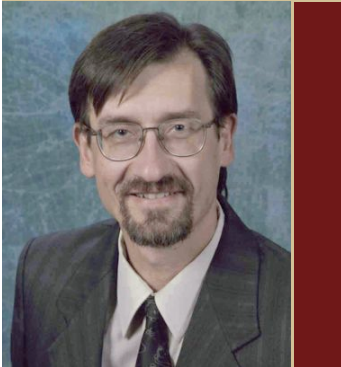
Larry is one example among many self-motivated WGU graduates who have achieved, both educationally and career-wise, what they wanted to do in relatively short order.

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Gary Carmichael

Meet Gary Carmichael:

Gary can easily be described as someone who is self-motivated and disciplined. In his late thirties, he decided to attend WGU to get a Master of Education, with an emphasis in learning and technology. He completed all his coursework in two years while working full-time as a U.S. and World History teacher at Whitefish High School in Whitefish, Montana.

Gary is currently 43, married with two children. In 2007, he was awarded the Montana State Teacher of the Year award. His non-traditional WGU education was not an issue with regard to the award selection process. "It was not a question mark," he says. "I think distance learning is pretty well accepted as long as it is from an accredited university. Also, WGU's NCATE approval really helps."

He adds that while pursuing his master's, "there were certain times of the year that, as a

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SHRM Survey Reveals Corporate Support of Online Higher Education

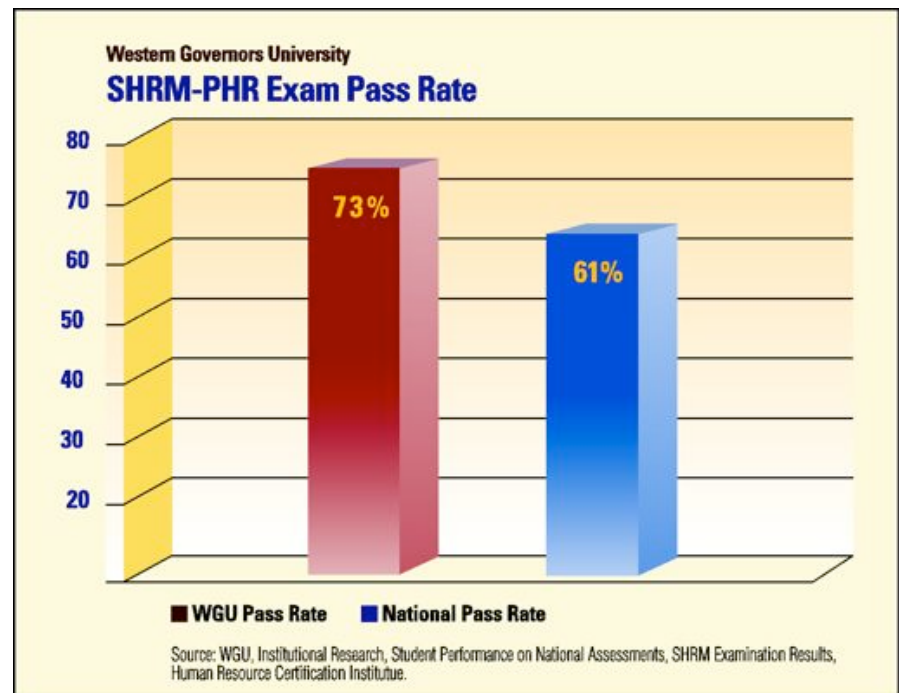
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generations. Today, many of the people who are now hiring may have gotten their degrees, at least in part, online. There are many more adult learners out there who are getting their degrees online, and many of them are now hiring managers."

"If a student is interested in learning and has a passionate instructor, whether it is online or a traditional classroom does not matter," adds Kathy Kroop, who is also a member of the same SHRM panel as Crispin. Kroop is a contingent workforce program manager for Regence BlueCross BlueShield of Oregon, and she teaches Human Capital Development online for a University of Phoenix MBA program. She also earned her MBA online.

Kroop takes part in the decision-making process for hiring tempo-

rary employees at Regence. She says that job candidates who have online education listed as part of their background are viewed no differently than any other job candidates. She adds that she would never challenge the validity of an online degree earned from an accredited institution, referring back to her own experiences as an online learner. "I would challenge anyone to say that it [online education] was not as good, if not better, than in the classroom." In particular, Kroop has fond memories of interacting with her instructors and fellow students online. "There was a rich dialogue that always continued," she says. "I would come home every day, and there would be a new thought that I could respond to [via online course discussions]. It just really stretched my learning opportunities."



State of the Industry Report Shows Commitment to E-Learning

A 2007 State of the Industry report by the American Society for Training & Development (ASTD) revealed that organizations have continued to take steps toward developing a highly developed workforce, and, in particular, that such a commitment entailed “continuing to embrace e-learning.” It was also noted in the ASTD report that the “adoption of e-learning frequently produces efficiency gains.” [3]

In August 2005, ASTD partnered with Capella University (a fully online institution) to survey senior learning executives’ perceptions of the role of online higher education in corporate learning. Among 151 survey participants, 81 percent believed that the role of online higher education would increase or stay the same in their company within the next two to three years. [4]

Ray J. Rivera is a research analyst for ASTD and co-author of a report based on the 2005 survey. He says that although online higher education still suffers, to some degree, from being

perceived as the “poor stepson of land-based universities,” companies are regarding online learning as an alternative to invest in strengthening the long-term capabilities of their employees. “The value proposition is not so much having a prestigious degree behind certain personnel, but rather being able to get more disposable skills into peoples’ hands in a more cost effective way, in areas such as leadership, change management, and globalization.”

In addition, Rivera explains that some of the skills online learners pick up are definitely needed in the 21st century work environment. “You can pick up any top-tier business journal and see on every page that we need leaders who can globalize and localize, but where are they going to get those skills? An online higher education environment, just by the virtue of having to work collaboratively in different time zones and having to resolve the lack of verbal communication, often asynchronously, helps to build important leadership skills.”

CASE STUDY:

Continued...

teacher, I had the time to complete the coursework, and then there were times when it was almost impossible. The flexibility of scheduling courses and taking assessments [under the WGU



program] made a master’s degree a very doable proposition. The flexibility really helped a lot, at least where I was with my life and career.” And, of course, one of the end results of earning his master’s was the boost in status, as expected, on the school district’s salary matrix.

Meet Gary’s boss: Jerry House is superintendent of the Whitefish School District. He explains how online learning works well in Montana, due to the vast distances Montana citizens typically have to travel across the state to get from one urban or suburban area to the next, making it difficult to commute to a physical campus. “Online learning has really been a valuable tool for us. It allows our teachers to work toward advanced degrees and area specialties and not be harmed because of distance.” House adds that he has found that job candidates who have earned their degrees online and have mastered virtual communication skills, “interview better. They are a little bit more prepared.”

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Online Degrees have the same Level of Respect as Face-to-Face Degrees – Fall 2006

	Fully Engaged **	Engaged *
Agree	53.5%	26.8%
Neutral	41.7%	61.1%
Disagree	4.8%	12.1%

Source: Sloan C, Online Nation: Five Years of Growth in Online Learning By I. Elaine Allen and Jeff Seamon, October 2007 page 20

*Engaged: Online offerings will be critical but not yet in formal strategic plan.

**Fully Engaged: Has online offerings that are considered part of the strategic plan.

Professional Educators Embrace Online Higher Ed

Of course, it's also no secret that the adoption of both fully online (never setting foot on a campus) and hybrid/blended (some combination of online and on-campus) courses and programs at respectable colleges and universities around the globe has continued to grow significantly over the past decade. Virtu-

ally every college and university in the country now has an institutional course management system, which is an information technology platform and service that allows faculty to post course materials online for their students to access outside of the physical classroom at anytime and from anywhere — something

that only ten years ago was mostly in beta development in higher education.

Additionally, within the higher education sector itself, there is plenty of support for online education. The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation-sponsored Sloan Consortium (Sloan-C) has conducted an enormous amount of research about online education since it started in 1993. Its recent fifth annual report on the state of online learning in U.S. higher education, based on responses from 2,500 colleges and universities, showed that “for the past several years, online enrollments have been growing substantially faster than overall higher education enrollments.” The report also revealed that 83 percent of higher education institutions offering online courses and/or programs expect their online enrollments to increase. ^[5]

Sloan-C has also gathered an impressive array of first-hand reports from professional college and university educators who design, teach, and manage online courses and programs. These educators have been writing about online education best practices on a variety of levels, including factors related to learning effectiveness, cost effectiveness and institutional commitment, access, faculty satisfaction, and student satisfaction — what Sloan-C calls the “five pillars of quality online education.” Numerous examples of top-notch higher education online teaching and learning environments have been archived at the Sloan-C effective practices website. ^[6]

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WGU Teachers College Students Score Well on PRAXIS Exams

It turns out that WGU Teachers College students also prepare well for national teachers exams. WGU pass rates exceed 90 percent on eight of ten of the PRAXIS series exams used by states in teaching licensing certification processes. These exams measure academic skills and general and subject-specific knowledge and teaching skills. In relation to WGU PRAXIS exam takers:

On the PRAXIS math exam, the WGU student pass rate was 85 percent with 41 percent of WGU students scoring in the top 15 percent nationally.

On the PRAXIS elementary pedagogy exam, the WGU student pass rate was 94 percent with 32 percent of WGU students scoring in the top 15 percent nationally.

On the PRAXIS elementary education content exam, the WGU student pass rate was 97 percent with 28 percent of WGU students scoring in the top 15 percent nationally.



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National Organization Routinely Promotes Online Education

“...many employers have come to value the traits exhibited by holders of distance degrees: maturity, initiative, self-discipline and strong goal orientation.”

— Robert Mendenhall
President, Western Governors University

The United States Distance Learning Association (USDLA) is another high-profile organization that provides strong support and evidence about the validity and

quality of online higher education. One of USDLA’s latest endeavors is the publication of *Distance Learning Today (DL Today)*, a magazine delivered to over 4.5 million readers

nationally as a quarterly *USA Today* insert. With a mission to “expand, explain, and popularize online learning,” *DL Today* has featured many professionally written and well-researched articles showing how online higher education has become mainstream, especially for busy adult learners seeking educational opportunities that allow them to continue working while earning their degrees.

For example, in an April 2007 *DL Today* article, written by the Director of Academic Affairs at Drexel University Online, Kenneth

E. Hartman, a Lockheed Martin Corporation executive is quoted as saying that “online learning offers a world of possibilities and promises to aid in the delivery of critical, strategic training” for Lockheed’s 140,000 employees located in more than 50 countries. Two other executives — one from Subaru of America and another from Universal Health Services — were also quoted in this same article as being fully supportive of online higher education.^[7]

A January 2007 *DL Today* article, written by President of Western Governors University, Robert Mendenhall, dispelled some of the myths about online learning. Mendenhall noted that technology is helping to drive online learning to increased levels of quality and individualization; that online courses often have high levels of student interaction, including highly effective virtual team projects and study groups; and that “many employers have come to value the traits exhibited by holders of distance degrees: maturity, initiative, self-discipline and strong goal orientation.”^[8]

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Business Graduates Do Well on Certification Exams

The success of WGU students is not limited to its Teachers College. In the College of Business, WGU graduate students perform well on the Certified MBA exam (CMBA), which measures an MBA's command of core business fundamentals. Additionally, WGU undergraduate business students do well on the Society of Human Resources Management Professional in Human Resources certification exam (SHRM-PHR), which covers the essential functional areas of human resource management. The WGU pass rate for the CMBA was 57 percent compared to a national average of 54 percent. The WGU pass rate on the SHRM-PHR exam was 73 percent compared to a national average of 61 percent.



“My position required a bachelor’s degree, and they hired me because I had the capabilities and experience, but I had to finish my degree. That is what prompted me to find a school.”

— Bob Roark
WGU Graduate

Bob Roark

Meet Bob Roark: Bob earned both a Bachelor of Science in Information Technology and an MBA from WGU over the course of two years while he was in his late 30s. Bob is married with two daughters. He had an associate’s degree when he enrolled at WGU. “I had been going to school my entire life,” he says. “I would enroll and make it through a semester and then take six to eight months off. It was really difficult. There was a point when I thought I would never finish.”

Enter WGU. Bob was working as a technical solutions manager for Jefferson County in Colorado. “My position required a bachelor’s degree, and they hired me because I had the capabilities and experience, but I had to finish my degree. That is what prompted me to find a school.” He says he looked at lots of institutions, both traditional and online, and chose WGU because of its flexibility, convenience, reasonable cost and the fact that it was regionally accredited. His employer approved a tuition reimbursement schedule, and he was off and running.

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Military Goes Online

The U.S. military has also adopted online higher education in a big way. An online education initiative called eArmyU.com, for instance, has been providing online courses and programs through an extensive network of colleges and universities that offer fully online courses and programs to military personnel since January 2001. More than 32,000 soldiers currently participate in eArmyU from 50 countries, four U.S. territories, and all 50 states. To date, more than 5,300 online degrees have been conferred on eArmyU soldiers.^[9]

There’s also the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support (DANTES) that provides military personnel with distance learning catalogs describing programs and courses offered by schools accredited by regional and national accrediting agencies recognized by the U.S. Department of Education.^[10] DANTES also provides information and referral assistance, often in relation to opportunities to enroll in online higher education courses and programs, to military personnel and spouses interested in a teaching career through its Troops to Teachers^[11] and Spouses to Teachers programs.^[12]

Public Discourse and Press About Online Higher Ed

Of course, education journalists and bloggers consistently cover online higher education in interesting, and sometimes controversial, ways. In a January 2008 *Inside Higher Education* article, a reference to a Zogby International survey indicating that corporate human resources directors and CEOs “valued online degrees from well-known colleges more than those from lesser known institutions” brought a number of interesting comments. A business professor commented that it is important to recognize that graduates of online degree programs often have greater degrees of self-discipline than students who go the traditional route, regardless of which institution they attended. In addition, because online-degree-seeking students are typically busy adult

learners with job and family responsibilities, their ability to balance all of that and ultimately earn a degree is a testament to an inner drive and perseverance. ^[13]

“...graduates of online degree programs often have greater degrees of self-discipline than students who go the traditional route, regardless of which institution they attended.”

From Zogby International survey in 2008 Inside Higher Education Article

Inside a popular blog about eLearning Technology, a question concerning how employers view online degree programs brought a

number of engaging perspectives concerning hiring biases where preferences exist for graduates from traditional face-to-face degree programs over online degree programs. One reader who had the responsibility of interviewing employment candidates at his job explained that he is more interested in a candidate’s critical thinking skills and how he or she can tackle projects as opposed to whether they earned a degree from a specific institution, “online or otherwise.” Another reader, who completed his graduate and undergraduate studies traditionally, explained that he would not devalue a purely online degree, pointing to his brother as an example of a father with a demanding

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CASE STUDY:

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Eventually Bob left his job at the county for a program manager job with a consulting company that was doing work for the United States Geological Survey in Denver. “The bachelor’s degree got me in the door,” he says. “At that point I was thinking about going for a master’s degree.” He explains that completing the course work for his bachelor’s gave him the confidence to continue his education to the next level.

While studying for his master’s, Bob interviewed for a delivery manager position with Stratavia (now Dataveil Corporation), a managed service provider (MSP) based in Denver. “One of the things we talked about during the interview was WGU,” Bob says. “He [the interviewer] told me at that point he would rather hire me as a director, not as a manager. It took him a little while to go back and resell this idea to his bosses [several weeks], and then he offered me a job as the director of service management. A lot of that came from me being in the MBA program.”

Bob adds that the MBA course work has “helped me to understand CEO visionary discussions and articulate many business ideas that I was not able to in the past.” In addition, he received a raise in his new position that increased his salary by 32 percent. “The salary increase I received nearly tripled the initial cost of the WGU tuition. Not only was it a very rewarding experience, I’d say it was an outstanding financial investment.”

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Meet Bob's former boss:

Matt Wilkinson, now a vice president for Subex Azure Limited, was Bob's former boss at Stratavia and the person who interviewed and ultimately hired him. An MBA graduate himself from a traditional brick-and-mortar institution, Matt says that through discussions with Bob about WGU, as well as seeing Bob's work firsthand over time, he learned that "the curriculum between a traditional classroom versus online is much the same, from the focus on leadership to finance and accounting." He adds that "Bob had a more educated view of business in general than his peers. I saw this based on his education and the case-study focus [of the WGU MBA curriculum]. The online curriculum I think helps to force individuals to become quick studies and to become well read. There are lots of documentation, books, articles, and case studies that they have to absorb."

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Public Discussion and Press about Online Higher Ed

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full-time job who was only able to fit in a more flexible and convenient fully online learning degree program into his busy schedule.^[14]

The Chronicle of Higher Education sparked an extraordinarily large discussion in one of its Chronicle Forums when it published an article titled "Employers Often Distrust Online Degrees."^[15] While numerous and varied viewpoints on a variety of issues concerning both face-to-face and online teaching and

learning came out of this Forum, many of the opinions expressed pointed out that there really was no need whatsoever to make any kind of distinction between the two education modalities. Instead, from a purely logical perspective, it was repeatedly emphasized that it was much more important for hiring managers to look at the individual capabilities and competencies that any given job candidate might possess.^[16]

Perspectives on the Quality of Online Higher Education

In another informative article related to online teaching and learning, the President of Excelsior College, Robert Ebersole, wrote that "as more campuses gain experience with online education, its acceptance grows." However, he noted that "online learning may not be for everyone," especially young adults who "benefit tremendously from the socialization and acculturation that campus life provides." In addition, Ebersole explained that:

For a growing number of persons whose schedules are not in sync with the availability of time and place-fixed instruction — professionals, working parents, military and emergency service personnel, and those with limited financial resources — online learning provides the access, flexibility, affordability and, most importantly, quality-

learning experience they need to grow intellectually and professionally.^[17]

In support of Ebersole's notion about quality and intellectual stimulation, a 2006 National Survey of Student Engagement web survey that garnered 4,000 responses from students who identified themselves as distance education learners found that these students report "greater educational gains [in comparison to students taking classes on campus] and are more satisfied overall with their college experience." Plus, they "engaged more frequently in deep learning activities." In addition, distance education students are older on average, with the median age of first-year distance learners at 25 and seniors at 32.^[18]

Transparency by Design

Ebersole, along with presidential colleagues from eleven other higher education institutions, have come together inside a new consortium of adult-serving educational colleges and universities that offer online courses and programs. Called the Presidents' Forum, the group includes American Public University System, Capella University, Charter Oak State College, Excelsior College, Fielding Graduate University, Franklin University, Kaplan University, Regis University, Rio Salado College, Southwestern College, Western Governors University, and Union Institute & University. The Presidents' Forum recently unveiled an accountability initiative called "Transparency by Design" that will provide program-specific learning outcomes data to help students make more informed decisions about where and how they can pursue their higher education interests.^[19]

The "Transparency by Design" initiative is, in many ways, a reaction to the U.S. Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education, which produced a series of meetings, reports, and issue papers that examined access, affordability, quality, and accountability in our nation's colleges and universities.^[20]

Plans for the "Transparency by Design" initiative include producing reports in the first quarter of each year, starting in 2009, that "provide sufficient information so that prospective learners can make informed choices about which adult online institution to attend." Based

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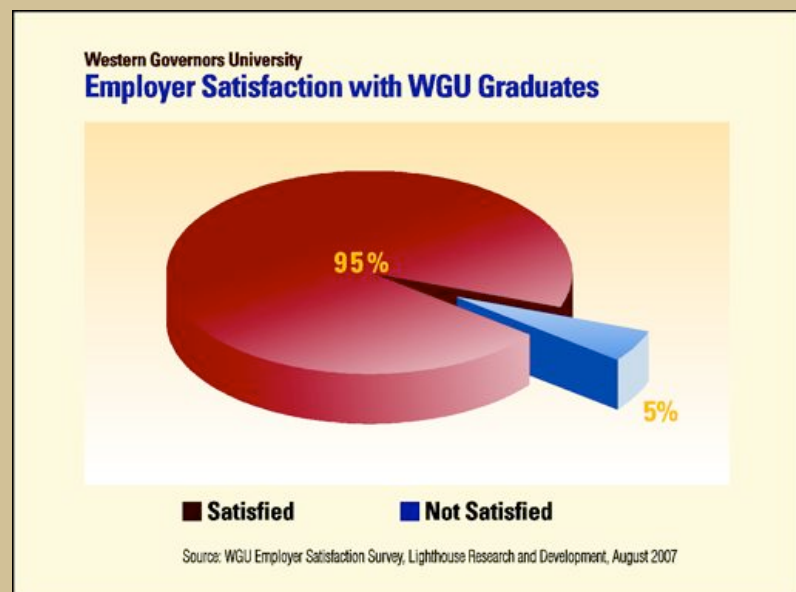
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WGU's Employer Survey Brings Positive Responses

Many employers would agree with the general assessment that online higher education graduates are productive employees. At least that was the overriding result of an Employer Perceptions Survey Report published in February 2009 by WGU. The survey was conducted by Lighthouse Research & Development, whose researchers interviewed 80 employers of WGU graduates. Some of the results of the survey included:

- **95 percent of employers were satisfied with WGU graduates as employees.**
- **90 percent of employers rated the workforce preparation of WGU graduates as good or excellent, with 69 percent also rating graduates as excellent employees.**
- **91 percent of employers said they would hire more WGU graduates if given the chance.**

Overall, WGU graduates were described as equal to or above employees from other colleges and universities, with the majority not needing additional training, limited training, or only training specific to the workplace. Employers also rated WGU graduates high in their ability to learn independently and indicated strong self-motivation and direction.



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Information Technology Students Also Doing Well

Students in the College of Information Technology also do well on a good number of certification exams that they are required to pass as part of their course of study. In particular, WGU is the largest institutional registrant in the U.S. of IT students who are required to pass Computing Technology Industry Association (CompTIA) exams that are included in the cost of a WGU IT student's tuition. CompTIA serves the IT industry as the world's largest developer of vendor-neutral IT certification exams.

In 2007, a respectable number of WGU IT students scored in the top 15 percent of the entire CompTIA test-taking population: 24.5 percent of WGU IT students scored in the top 15 percent on the CompTIA A+ 301 exam, 18.5 percent in the A+ 302 exam, 20 percent in the A+ 601 exam, and 17.5 percent in the A+ 602 exam.



John Wright

"I was getting passed over for jobs because I did not have my bachelor's degree."

*— John Wright
WGU Graduate*

Meet John Wright: John is a good example of a successful WGU IT student. The 36-year-old, married, father of five children earned a Bachelor of Science in Computer Information Systems in a record-breaking six months. He entered the program with an associate's degree and more than 13 years of solid experience and knowledge in the IT field, having worked as a programmer, a manager, a trainer, and a teacher of technical courses for a private training company. In 2002, when the Internet bubble burst, John found himself unemployed until L-3 Communications in Salt Lake City hired him as a programmer, but he wound up having to take an \$18,000 pay cut.

"I was getting passed over for jobs because I did not have my bachelor's degree," John says. L-3, however, provided a full tuition reimbursement plan for him to earn his degree at WGU. "The only stipulation [for

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Transparency by Design

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on a set of principles of good practice, the entire initiative is geared toward telling students "what they should expect to learn, how learning outcomes are assessed, and how well graduates are able to demonstrate that they have achieved the desired learning outcomes." President of Capella University, Michael Offerman said, "We are passionate about serving adults at a distance with high quality higher education, and we are designing reports that have the adult perspective." [21]

In Conclusion

It has become easy to see how the benefits and quality of online higher education far outweigh any left-over pre-conceived negative notions about online education that are now mostly remnants of the past. As noted by Sloan-C's most recent report, almost 3.5 million students enrolled in at least one online course during the fall 2006 term; a 9.7 percent increase over the number reported the previous year. The report also stated clearly that "academic leaders do not believe that there is a lack of acceptance of online degrees by potential employers." [22] All this bodes well for adult learners who are, and will be, actively engaged in advancing their careers through accredited online higher education pursuits, now and well into the future.

CASE STUDY:

Continued...

“...in any hiring situation, it ultimately depends on the individual. Have they been in the workforce for a while, and do they realize the importance and value of having a degree? I think it has a lot to do with looking at that scenario rather than a young person fresh out of school.”

— Dave Drewes
IT Manager, Western
Zirconium and hiring manager
of John Wright



tuition reimbursement] was that it had to be an accredited university,” John says, adding that he passed all his assessments on the first try and was able to use an on-the-job programming assignment for his capstone project.

Eventually the job market picked up and John was interviewed for a position with Western Zirconium, a Westinghouse company based in Ogden, Utah. “I was hired as their lead developer/architect and got \$25,000 more than what I was getting at L-3,” he says.

“I will say that I have used the skills that I learned at Western Governors. I was able to fine-tune my project management skills. I tell anybody who is trying to get their degree to go look at WGU before considering anyplace else.”

Meet John’s boss: Dave Drewes is the IT Manager at Western Zirconium who interviewed and hired John. He says that in John’s case, the degree was important because it served as a basis for meeting job requirements, “but we have other things that we looked at, such as John’s skill level in the programming field. We have several tests that we have people go through to see where their knowledge and skill base is, so that was part of the hiring process, too.”

Overall, Dave explains, similar to Principal Burch, that in any hiring situation, it ultimately depends on the individual. “Have they been in the workforce for a while, and do they realize the importance and value of having a degree? I think it has a lot to do with looking at that scenario rather than a young person fresh out of school.”

Larry’s Big Day

Getting back to Larry Manch — who certainly fits that billing of a person who realizes the importance and value of earning a degree — he is finally working at a teaching job that he considers to have meaning and purpose. “There was just no satisfaction in those jobs [30 years of retail] for me,” he says. “I could not come home at night and think to myself that I really accomplished anything. With this job I can do that.”

For Larry, a big part of that accomplishment came during a WGU commencement ceremony. Larry and his family used their vacation time to travel from Texas to the WGU 2005 commencement ceremony in Salt Lake City. “That was one of the things I wanted to do,” he says. “I wanted to wear the cap and gown and actually walk across the stage and have them hand me the diploma.” His parents happen to live in Southern Utah and were also able to make the trip.

“It was a tremendous thrill to have my wife and children and my mom and dad sitting in the audience when I graduated. I could hear my dad shouting when I walked across the stage. I could actually hear him shouting ‘Yea, Larry.’ It was really an emotional thing. Here I was all these years later finally doing something really important.”

To learn more about WGU and read additional student profiles, visit www.wgu.edu/studentsuccess

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In April 2008 the United States Distance Learning Association (USDLA) recognized WGU with its 21st Century Award for Best Practices in Distance Learning.

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