



# —THE— ONLINE EVOLUTION

and companies like Google, were making very large donations to have entire college curricula available online for free.

MOOCs (massive open online courses) were touted as a way to democratize high-quality education and give students throughout the world access to MIT professors, Stanford engineering courses, authoritative lectures on Shakespeare, and more. The results fell short of the hype. Most MOOC enrollees, it turned out, were people who already had access to higher education. The rates at which students stuck to the courses and finished a credential proved very low. Early in 2019, Doug Lederman at *Inside Higher Ed* wrote, “It has become a platitude by now to say that massive open online courses largely failed to achieve the promise many advocates saw.”

EdX, Coursera, Udacity, and other platforms are still in existence today as education technology platforms. They enable universities to offer some valuable services at low cost, like a Georgia Tech master’s degree in computer science hosted through Udacity, or the Global Freshman Academy created by Arizona State that runs on the edX platform. MIT’s OpenCourseWare site, though declining in use, still had 1.6 million total visitors in April 2019.

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## College over the Internet has surprised in many ways

By Ashley May

“Whatever happened to the online college revolution?”

Just a few years ago, Internet-based instruction was a red-hot topic in higher ed. Top universities and big names in Silicon Valley were setting up profit-seeking online learning ventures such as Coursera and Udacity. Nonprofit organizations like edX were proliferating. The Andrew Mellon, Hewlett, Gates, and MacArthur foundations, among others,

Some useful products have emerged, but hardly a new force in higher education. The biggest questions raised during the MOOC craze of 2012 and 2013 are still hanging out there: How can technology ease access to higher education? Speed completion of complex learning? Reduce the cost of degrees? Will technology ever redefine our current education model? Or will it simply augment the existing status quo—where nearly 2 million students drop out of college every year without a diploma?

### **The online college that snuck up on the establishment**

Major change often comes from unexpected quadrants. In the case of making online education more mainstream, it isn't higher-education gurus, or Silicon Valley whizzes, who have gotten farthest, but rather leaders in some thinly populated, lightly governed Western states. Western Governors University is a fully online nonprofit college that now graduates tens of thousands of degree completers every year.

At a meeting of the Western Governors Association in 1995, Utah chief executive Mike Leavitt proposed to 18 fellow state leaders that they consider using the Internet, then very new, to offer higher-ed opportunities to students who need more flexibility to succeed—flexibility on place because they live in thinly peopled regions without much college infrastructure, flexibility on time because many already have job and family responsibilities. After a year of discussion, many of those Western governors agreed to put up \$100,000 of state seed money to design a competency-tested online university.

As current WGU president Scott Pulsipher puts it, they decided

to build a new model of college from “whole cloth.” As they created their organization, all the standing assumptions of higher-ed orthodoxy were up for discussion. In 1997, their unusual institution launched. Once up and running it was available to any interested student, living in any region.

The resulting university has what Pulsipher calls a “student obsessed” culture. This can be observed in many fundamental aspects. Like the fact that students can enroll at Western Governors University on the first day of any month of the year. And that students pay a flat rate for a six-month term, and can progress through material at their own pace, with assessments at the end of each course to evaluate whether they are competent. This allows students to breeze through content they already know, and linger on new or difficult material.

Many students are able to move quickly from course to course—which can save a lot of money. The median time to complete a bachelor's degree at WGU is two years and four months. At the flat rate of \$3,250 per six-month term, this means the average student spends about \$17,000 on his or her degree.

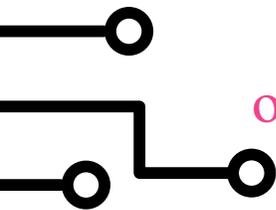
Most unusually, the university divides its faculty into four separate roles. One group works solely on developing courses and curriculum; they don't teach, they are specialists in creating academic content. Another group of faculty teach the courses. In addition to instructing online audiences they use scheduled

appointments to interact with students one on one. A third group only oversees evaluations. As disinterested parties who aren't attached to the curriculum or the course instructor or the student, they can be impartial judges of competency. The fourth faculty role is mentor. They confer with and guide students, help them select the right courses, troubleshoot problems, and encourage completion.

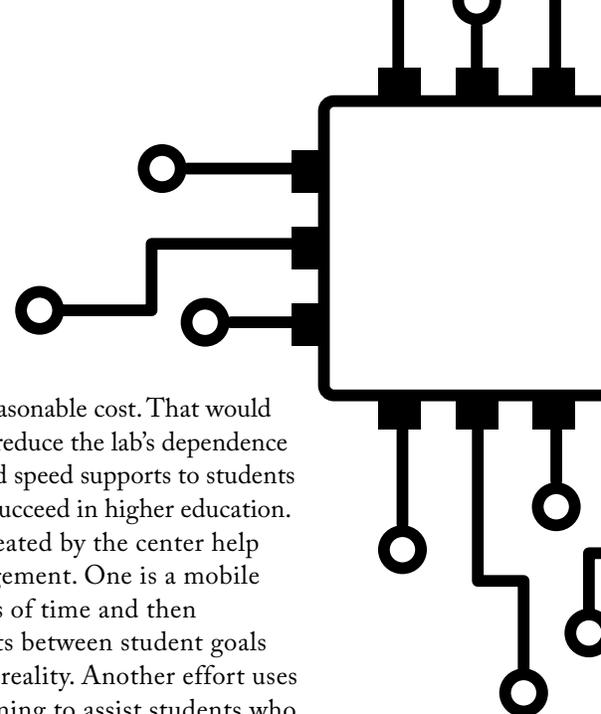
WGU has a very large enrollment—more than 115,000 full-time students right now, and rising every year. Fully seven out of ten students are first-generation college attendees, rural residents, ethnic minorities, or low-income. A large majority are working full time at a job at the same time they are pursuing their studies. Most WGU students are referred to the school by one of three sources: an acquaintance who is a student or alum, an employer (WGU has over 250 employer partners), or a community college. The school has developed hundreds of community-college partnerships, and in some states like California, Florida, and Ohio, a student can go straight from an associate's degree into WGU's bachelor's curriculum.

Despite this wide national reach, Western Governors University has a relatively low profile. Though it offers scads of useful lessons to philanthropists interested in helping struggling Americans complete educations that can improve their employability and life prospects, relatively few donors know much about WGU. That's because this university, mission-driven though it is, does not run on philanthropic money. The whole system was designed to be self-sustaining on tuition alone.

The school does give aid, from its own cash reserves. And about 70 percent of students are using federal loans or grants to help pay their way. When I ask Pulsipher where philanthropic dollars might help, he suggests scholarship dollars that would let students “reduce their reliance on federal loans.”



**Can technology solve  
big problems in higher ed?  
Or merely augment the status quo?**



### How donors can amplify success

A place that donors might be even more useful in amplifying the long-term success of WGU, though, is in helping the university explore, condense, and share the main lessons of its unusual model. WGU is doing bold and new things. Many of its discoveries could fruitfully be copied and applied elsewhere.

WGU would like to package their well-developed competency-evaluation services and share them with other schools and companies. That could speed the movement toward “portable,” “stackable” credentials that are recognized nationally for their ability to improve the productivity of workers. In a fast-changing workplace where “lifelong learning” is of growing importance, WGU has a lot to share with other educational providers and employment trainers. Donors might help them translate and distribute useful findings.

And WGU is not done discovering. It would love to examine more deeply how its students learn. Why some students persist while others don’t. Ways to help students with “math anxiety.” And so forth.

A decade ago, WGU set up an institutional research department. This is used to, for instance, test competing versions of curricula. Pulsipher tells a story about A/B testing an accounting curriculum. One version was developed by an influential person in their organization. The other was written by a little-known author. Version two performed better with students, though, so the administration rolled out the no-name version. “There’s a huge lack of randomized-control trials in education,” states Jason Levin, former head of institutional research at WGU, and that’s “why advancement in education has lagged behind advancement in medicine.”

Last year WGU launched a new nonprofit, run by Levin, called the Center for Applied Learning Science. It is devoted to using rigorous scientific design, testing, and “rapid prototyping” to improve learning and student outcomes. CALS research now extends beyond WGU students to other institutions as well, bringing in principal investigators from all over who are specialists in the science of learning.

Levin tells me the Center is particularly interested right now in psychological barriers to student success. “Their own belief about intelligence, their view about effort and intelligence, their views about mistakes and the learning process.” These aren’t just subjects for CALS to write papers about. There is an emphasis on building products to help students overcome obstacles like these, and then testing them to see if they work. The master plan is to eventually license learning tools

to other institutions at a reasonable cost. That would create a revenue stream to reduce the lab’s dependence on philanthropic funds, and speed supports to students who might otherwise not succeed in higher education.

Two tools recently created by the center help students with time management. One is a mobile app that tracks actual uses of time and then summarizes misalignments between student goals and what is happening in reality. Another effort uses MBA-style strategic planning to assist students who are prone to run off their desired tracks.

The learning center’s 20-person operation currently runs on a \$3.2 million gift from WGU, an award from MIT’s J-PAL lab for interventions that improve math learning, and a National Science Foundation grant for improving coaching of students. Carnegie Mellon professor Carolyn Rosé, who is partnering with CALS on the NSF project, explains that “WGU is one of the nation’s largest universities, serving a population of working individuals.” Their experience can be mined to find “sociotechnical solutions” that help vulnerable populations navigate “a dramatically changing career landscape.”

### Repackaging is not enough

Of the 20 million new jobs created by the U.S. economy since 2011, the vast majority required some skill or education beyond just high-school training. If nearly all workers are going to need some specialized employment credential or degree in the future, we’ll need to educate millions of people who traditionally have not progressed beyond 12th grade. Perhaps that’s why MOOCs were so enthusiastically embraced a few years ago. They were basically free, easily accessible, focused on practical education, featured some of the best lecturers in the world, and let students proceed at their own pace.

The lesson, though, of WGU and other successful online-learning providers is that simply shifting our existing college offerings to the Internet will result in failure with most students. New ways of thinking about what higher education is for, and how everyday citizens learn, are needed. Different forms of higher education and fresh content will be needed if millions of people previously unserved by colleges and universities are to prepare themselves for a brighter future. **P**