



WGU Texas Comments on House Higher Education Committee

Interim Charge #3

Review progress toward the goals of the 60X30TX plan, including institutional strategies for responding to diverse and rapidly changing workforce needs and demands, including workforce education, industry certification, and degree programs to address healthcare shortages. Specifically review community colleges' capacity to meet the goals of 60X30TX, including a review of taxing districts and service areas versus geographic areas of need. Review the Tri-Agency Workforce Initiative's work-based learning, industry-aligned internships, and industry credential initiatives. Consider whether legislative action may be needed to expand work-based learning and recruitment efforts for adults who have previously completed some college level coursework.

About WGU / WGU Texas

Western Governors University (WGU) is a non-profit, accredited, fully online university that was established in 1997 by 19 state governors and enrolls more than 123,000 students nationwide. **WGU Texas** is one of the largest state affiliates of WGU, with approximately 13,000 students currently enrolled, and was created by the Governor of Texas in 2011 by [Executive Order RP75](#) to expand access to affordable higher education for Texas residents through online, competency-based programs that address key workforce needs.

WGU Texas' defining principle is putting students at the center of everything we do—every initiative, policy, or decision is evaluated and prioritized based on its impact on student success. We have excelled at creating flexible, personalized learning experiences that lead to great outcomes for our students and meet the needs of employers. We offer more than 60 bachelor's and master's competency-based degrees in four high demand fields: Business, IT, Health, and Teaching.

WGU Texas primarily serves students from underserved populations: 74% are underserved, 74% work full-time, 42% are first-generation, 22% are low-income, 20% are Hispanic, 15% are African American, 14% are active-duty military, veterans and military family members; and 9% live in rural counties.

We are more affordable than comparable institutions. We charge a flat-rate tuition for each 6-month term, currently \$3500 to \$5500, depending on the student's major, plus \$145 resource fee which covers all learning resources and online library. We offer competency-based education, which means students can draw on existing knowledge and skills to demonstrate mastery of course material and can move on to the next course, allowing them to complete an unlimited number of courses each term. Our students can also apply for federal grants and loans, and institutional scholarships, but are not eligible for state financial aid.

1. Demonstrate how WGU Texas is critical to meeting the 60x30 goal.

WGU Texas enrolls students from all but 20 of the 254 counties in Texas and serves active-duty military personnel and their spouses at overseas military installations. Most students start with some college. The average age of WGU Texas students is about 34 with an age range from 18 to the 60s and beyond; 10% of the total state enrollment (13,000) are ages 21-25 (1,263), and another 15% are ages 26-29 (1,918).

WGU Texas has grown approximately 20% each year since its establishment in 2011 and has awarded over 15,000 degrees. We expect to continue growing and we are not limited by seat or building space. Programs like WGU, which can scale, are critical to offer affordable, high-quality, higher education options for the estimated 3.2 million Texans with some college and no degree. This is particularly a critical time with COVID-19 displacing thousands of workers, requiring people to stay-at-home to minimize spread, and forcing traditional universities to transfer course content online.

WGU Texas is strongly committed to applying innovative thinking and the latest technology to put higher education firmly within reach of more Texans in order to achieve the *60x30TX* overarching goal of having 60% of young adults (ages 25-34) holding some type of postsecondary credential by 2030.

2. Demonstrate how WGU Texas works with community colleges, employers and other relevant stakeholders.

In 2011, WGU Texas signed a statewide [transfer pathway](#) agreement with the Texas Association of Community Colleges and all 50 community college districts. Individually, WGU Texas has signed partnerships with 17 community colleges across the state to provide a structure to support transfer articulation of all degree programs or natural transfer between community college and WGU Texas. And we are working to create partnerships and articulation pathways with each of the state's 50 community colleges. Community colleges that partner with WGU Texas can help their students prepare for diverse post-graduation needs, offering accessible four-year degree programs and a focus on strong transfer articulation agreements.

OWL Transfer Pilot Program. This fall, WGU Texas is partnering with 3 community college districts (Austin Community College, Lone Star College System, and Tarrant County College District) to implement WGU's [Onward with Learning \(OWL\) Transfer Pilot Program](#). This pilot program provides seamless academic pathways for students to complete their associate degree and guarantees scholarships and admission into specific majors at WGU to promote timely graduation. OWL focuses on early engagement and preparation to ensure students are ready to succeed at WGU when they enroll. By opting to participate in the OWL program students receive regular communication from WGU that will support them in their pursuit of an associate degree with encouraging information on time management, study skills, career opportunities, and co-advising for course selection. The program also provides three free transfer preparation courses that nurture students through their associate degree, provide transfer benefits to WGU, and allows students to experience what a day in the life of a WGU student looks like.

Business Partnerships. WGU Texas has more than 90 partnerships across the state that include healthcare industry partners, Information technology industry partners, education

industry partners, and business industry partners, such as the Texas Association of Business, Greater Houston Partnership, Texas Association of Mexican American Chambers of Commerce, Hospital Corporation of America (HCA), Microsoft, City of Austin, Houston Independent School District (ISD) and Brownsville ISD. Most partner institutions receive tuition discounts and scholarship opportunities for their employees to pursue. Members, employees, and clients have access to an affordable, high-quality, competency-based education and WGU Texas works with each partner organization to develop programs that focus on preparing students for in-demand careers and workforce skills. *See:* <https://www.educationdive.com/news/with-skills-mapping-colleges-create-a-universal-language-to-explain-valu/557422/>

3. What are WGU's outcomes for students and employers?

WGU offers competency-based education which is knowledge-based, not time-based. Students advance by demonstrating their knowledge and abilities rather than accumulating credit hours. This model better serves adult learners who enroll with specific skills sets, allowing them to graduate faster and at their own pace. From day one, students are assigned a program mentor who works with the student from enrollment through graduation, providing regular guidance and instruction regarding their programs. Course instructors work with students as they engage specific courses proving subject matter expertise and individualized instruction. *For more information on CBE,* <https://www.wgu.edu/about/competency-based-education/what-is-cbe.html>

Graduate Success. The WGU-Harris Poll is conducted online annually and 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 that we offer. The results are: 76% said the majority of competencies related to work (compared to 75% nationally); 95% were employed (compared to 93% nationally); 88% were employed in their degree field (compared to 88% nationally); and 83% were employed full time (compared 81% nationally).

Graduate Satisfaction. The WGU-Harris poll also measures graduates' satisfaction with their education experience. The 2019 results are: 85% are satisfied with overall experience; 86% are satisfied with academic help; 96% would choose WGU again; and 97% have recommended WGU to others.

A Better Return on Student Investment. On average, WGU graduates increase their pre-enrollment salary by \$11,800 per year within two years of graduation (compared to the national average of \$4,500), and by \$20,300 per year within four years of graduation (compared to the national average of \$8,200).

Reducing Debt. The average student loan debt for WGU undergraduates who borrowed for school and who graduated between July 1, 2018, and June 30, 2019, is \$14,941—a decrease of \$433 year over year and half the national average. While 65 percent of graduating undergraduates across the nation borrowed for their education, according to The Institute for College Access and Success (TICAS), only 57 percent of graduating WGU undergraduates borrow student loans. Recent research from Goldman Insights—commissioned by the Texas Public Policy Foundation—revealed that while pursuing their teaching degree, non-WGU students graduated with 49 percent more student debt than WGU students.

In 2013, WGU launched its [Responsible Borrowing Initiatives](#) (RBI), a personalized student advising program aimed at encouraging students to borrow only what they need—not everything they are eligible for. Since then, the average borrowing per student per year (among undergraduates who choose to take out loans) has decreased by 30 percent—a big factor in the reduction of student debt at graduation.

Employer Satisfaction. Based on a 2019 survey of 300 employers of WGU graduates by Harris Poll: [96% of employers say they will 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 grads are prepared for their jobs; 95% rate the soft skills of WGU graduates as equal to or better than graduates from other institutions.](#)

See also *Forbes* article on “WGU-The Best Kept Secret in Online Colleges”:
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/dianahembree/2017/08/10/western-governors-university-the-best-kept-secret-in-online-colleges/#5dd31c2c6b48>

4. Provide WGU degree completion data and how WGU compares to other comparable universities.

[The vast majority of WGU students \(95%\) have previous college experience before enrolling at WGU. As such, they do not qualify as first-time, full-time students and therefore their success at WGU is not counted in the U.S. Department of Education’s College Scorecard data. When graduation rates are calculated for all students, WGU’s 6-year graduate rate for undergraduate students is 49%, which continue to be above the national average of 38% for comparable institutions serving adult learners. WGU’s 4-year graduate rate for graduate students is 43% in 2019. Our goal is to achieve a 65% 6-year graduation rate by 2025. For more information on our graduation rates, see: <https://www.wgu.edu/about/students-graduates/retention-graduation-rates.html>](#)

The average time it takes to graduate from WGU Texas is about 2.5 years for a bachelor's degree, which costs about \$15,000. By contrast, to complete the 120 credits that are usually needed to earn a bachelor's degree, students usually spend at least four years in college. The national average is over 5 years. Bachelor’s degrees online may take longer to complete than a master’s program because they include general education and lower-division courses. Master’s programs are usually more specific and detailed, and have less credits, and take less time to complete.

5. How does WGU Texas contribute to the supply of high-need professions (nurses, teachers, other)?

Health Professions College (including nursing): 3,904 graduated, 2,668 currently enrolled. WGU Texas is the second largest producer of nurses in Texas. The WGU prelicensure nursing program is accredited by the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education. The curriculum is designed by experts and employers to ensure students learn and master the skills to excel as a nurse in the field. Our nursing graduates’ passage rate for the National Council Licensure Examination (NCLEX) over the last three years has been well above the 80 percent benchmark, with a 100 percent passage rate in 2019 for WGU Texas’ [BSN prelicensure program](#). For a list of all health and nursing programs, see: <https://www.wgu.edu/online-nursing-health-degrees.html>

IT College: 1,730 graduated, 2,706 currently enrolled. WGU recently launched the [Information Technology Career Framework MicroBachelors Program](#), which includes three courses that are self-paced with a recommended length. Each course is a standalone course and directly translates to a WGU course, which effectively accelerates the time-to-degree after completing the certificate:

- Information Technology Foundation: 9-10 hours per work, for 6 weeks
- Network and Security Foundations: 9-10 hours per week, for 8 weeks
- Scripting and Programming Foundations: 9-10 hours per week, for 8 weeks

WGU has transitioned to a new digital platform that allows us to develop additional standalone, non-degree micro-credentials to support multiple types of students with multiple learning pathways and multiple price points that will ultimately provide greater access, flexibility and affordability. Beginning in late spring 2021, we will launch additional micro-credentials in IT, healthcare, and business. *For a list of all IT degrees, see:* <https://www.wgu.edu/online-it-degrees.html>

Business College: 5,498 graduated, 5,234 currently enrolled. *For a list of all business degrees, see:* <https://www.wgu.edu/online-business-degrees.html>

Teachers College: 2,834 graduated, 2,238 currently enrolled. *For a list of all teaching degrees, see:* <https://www.wgu.edu/online-teaching-degrees.html>

Recommendation: Financial aid for all students who qualify. State aid or state higher education benefits are often available only to students at specific institutions, or of certain ages, but all students of need or other specified qualifications deserve state support that allows them to pursue education at the school that best meets their needs and prepares them for the workforce. Students should be able to access their state's need-based aid programs to attend any high-quality institution with proven student success and employment outcomes. It makes sense to invest in students attending high-quality, accredited institutions that accommodate students' schedules and family obligations, provide a potentially shortened time to degree, and have demonstrated student outcomes at a lower cost. **Not investing in these students will make accomplishing the goals of 60X30TX very difficult to achieve.**

WGU was created by states for states to provide additional access for students to high-quality higher education. Too often, however, outdated state laws, rules, and regulations deny students equitable access to use need-based and other grant funding to attend innovative schools like WGU. More states have been correcting this, resulting in more options and better outcomes for students.

WGU Texas would like to work in partnership with the State of Texas to recommit to and revitalize the following provisions of the MOU that created the institution with the goal of providing greater access to higher education opportunities for Texans through online learning and competency-based education:

As an integral part of the establishment of WGU Texas, the Governor's Executive Order will confirm the State's support of WGU's efforts in Texas and will call upon:

The THECB to recognize, endorse and support online, competency-based education as an important component of the State's higher education system; to work to eliminate

any unnecessary barriers to WGU Texas' delivery of such education programs; and to work with WGU Texas to integrate its academic programs and services into the State's higher education policy and strategy.

The TWC to explore, consider and implement appropriate and effective methods to promote online, competency-based education opportunities like those that WGU Texas will provide to dislocated workers, veterans and other Texans in need of higher education achievement and degrees.

The TEA to explore, consider and implement appropriate and effective methods to promote and partner with WGU Texas to expand the supply of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) related teachers in Texas.

THECB, TWC, TEA and all other agencies whose assistance is required to create appropriate data-sharing processes, as may be required by state or federal guidelines, to assess WGU Texas' performance and determine the extent to which it helps the State achieve the goals of its higher education system.

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