

A Conversation with Western Governors University's Sarah DeMark



This interview is part of a series that explores work-based learning and seeks to broaden the ecosystem of quality postsecondary education for today's learners. ACE is grateful to the Joyce Foundation for its generous investment in this work.



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Introduction

Western Governors University (WGU) is a private, nonprofit, online university based near Salt Lake City, Utah, with a mission of expanding access to education. WGU's use of competency-based education allows students to accelerate their degrees and enter the workforce by leveraging skills and competencies gained in previous work or educational experiences. Learners can complete bachelor's degrees in business, education, information technology, and health care and earn master's degrees and graduate certificates. Throughout the course of their programs, learners receive degree-specific mentorship that includes assistance with organizing schedules, regular check-ins, and job support.

This interview with Sarah DeMark, vice provost of workforce intelligence and credential integrity and interim provost at Western Governors University, was edited for length and clarity.

How has WGU been approaching this integration of learn and earn?

Western Governors University was founded . . . to close the skills gaps [governors] were seeing in their states and realiz[ing] that traditional higher education wasn't meeting those needs. At WGU, our competency-based model allows students to progress through their programs based on the demonstration of their mastery of skills and competencies rather than time spent in a classroom. If a student can learn faster. . . or lean on knowledge and skills they have already gained from previous or work experience, they can accelerate through their courses.

Traditionally, WGU offered only degree programs, which were mapped exactly to workforce development needs. . . . Every degree program and every credential that we offer leads to in-demand jobs. They are all pathways to opportunity.

But now degrees aren't all that you offer?

We are starting to offer more industry-relevant microcredentials. . . . every assessment within our credential programs strive[s] to be clearly aligned to what an individual would be expected to do on the job. Here's our philosophy: If an employer wouldn't care to see that assessment in your portfolio as an example of the work you can do, then why are we asking you to do it?

How do you maintain a deep connection to the needs of employers?

We leverage third-party labor market insight data . . . but we also have program-level councils that include employers and other industry representatives. These councils help us understand both current needs as well as future trends.

It sounds as if existing experience can apply to skills assessment.

Yes. . . . It's a win for students to make a strong linkage between the skills and their direct application to the job. If they're not currently working in that field, we have developed scenarios and problems where students can still demonstrate their skills and competencies in a work-relevant setting.

How are your faculty coached or mentored to think in this way about assessment?

We take the traditional faculty member and divide them across four different roles There are program mentors who serve in an advising function, and [they] start with individuals from day one and continue to support them throughout their program. There are course instructors who are subject matter experts and support individual courses with supplemental instruction or any additional support within the course itself. There are evaluation faculty, who are also subject matter experts and serve as that objective grader. Then the last faculty role includes instructional and assessment designers who create that master curriculum of which all faculty support. In addition to holding a master's or terminal degree, most of the student-facing faculty have actual work experience in the field.

What are the advantages of having a master curriculum?

A master curriculum allows us to not only ensure that students are achieving the outcomes and the competencies we say they're achieving but, given our scale, it [also] allows us to leverage a lot of data for the students going through these courses so we can continue to fine-tune. . . . If that linkage to career relevancy is unclear, we review the curriculum and assessments and identify opportunities to create additional alignment. It is critical to make those high-value skills clearer to students so they can better communicate their skills and competencies in language of employers.

What innovations are you seeing in this learn and earn space?

Hopefully we're going to see the digitization of the skills and achievements that individuals are earning packaged in a learner-owned wallet that can be shared with employers or other education providers. . . . Education providers will be pushed to better communicate the underlying skills and value of the credentials they are creating and producing. In turn, employers will need to be really clear about the skills they are looking for in individuals. College degrees will no longer be the only minimum requirement for hiring.

How do you want to see this arena evolve? What folks should we be paying attention to?

We can recognize that people are learning skills that are incredibly valuable that might get them to jump onto different ladders There could be on-the-job training that could be microcredentialed or earned The world[s] of education and work are going to get closer and closer as we start to compile that picture of what an individual can do over a lifetime. Skills-based connectors in this ecosystem across education and hiring are going to be key players to watch.

What do you think are the biggest challenges in terms of helping students to have that integrated experience?

Given the current disaggregated and disconnected state of learning and employment records Individuals, education providers, and employers will all benefit from speaking the same skills-based language. Getting down to the context around these skills and how they're being applied is going to be really important work. It's going to be critical to set[ting] up that skills-based infrastructure.

What do employers need to know about building these pathways?

Education providers should partner with employers to better understand the skills they are looking for, and those skills should be mapped directly into the credential programs. These embedded skills need to be transparent to individuals, education providers, and employers to support better decision-making and mapping talent to opportunity.

It is even more critical for employers to be part of conversations about any skills-based microcredentialing. If employers don't understand the meaning and value of a credential, then individual credential holders are not going to get any real benefit. Having that employer voice in terms of what it is that they're looking for and what makes sense to them is going to be key.

What role can psychometrics play?

There is an increasing need to produce the details behind any claims of competency. We at WGU have a large psychometric team, but you can also outsource psychometric support. . . . Universities should invest more in psychometrics.

WGU Program Overview

WGU's unique approach to online learning—competency-based education (CBE)—is proven to help students accelerate their degrees and get into the workforce. WGU measures impact on individuals and works to expand CBE practices so even more students can benefit. All learners receive mentorship from enrollment through graduation. Program mentors are focused on ensuring that students have support, stay on track, and accomplish their goals. WGU instructors are experts in their fields who are dedicated to student success.

