

**Testimony of Western Governors University
Higher Education Conference Committee | May 12, 2022
Delivered by Patrick Baker, Director of Government Relations**

Chairwoman Bernardy and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. My name is Patrick Baker and I have the pleasure of serving as the Director of Government Relations for Western Governors University and am speaking to you from my home in Mankato.

I'd like to first give you a bit of background on what makes our university unique. Over 25 years ago, 19 bipartisan governors of western states and territories founded WGU as a solution to meet a growing need for a college-educated workforce – a need that was not being fully met by traditional higher education. From the beginning WGU was designed to be different. Our founding governors knew that the college student of the 21st century would be very different from students in the past. For millions of working adults, the dream of pursuing a college education could only become a reality once the boundaries of time and place could be removed.

These governors founded WGU to be nonprofit, affordable, 100% online, and with a focus on working adult learners. As such, WGU utilizes an exclusively competency-based learning model. Simply put, this model measures skills and learning rather than time spent in the classroom. We hold learning constant, and time variable allowing students a more flexible and faster path to degree. In short, WGU was created by states, for states to complement – not compete with – state systems of higher education.

Today, WGU offers programs at the bachelor's and master's degree levels in four high-need areas of workforce development: Teaching, Health & Nursing, IT, and Business. WGU is the largest nonprofit university in the country with 130,000 full-time students across all 50 states, including 1,500 right here in Minnesota. More importantly, WGU has 275,000 graduates – nearly 4,000 of whom are in Minnesota.

WGU students in Minnesota are unique and distinguish us from our peer in-state institutions – 87% of them are over the age of 25, 87% work while enrolled, and 63% represent one or more underserved populations. The “average” WGU student in Minnesota is quite literally a working mother. In fact, less than 1% of our undergraduate student body came to WGU with only a high school diploma. Virtually all of our students have tried traditional brick & mortar options before coming to WGU.

What the current Senate language would do is provide Minnesota residents attending WGU the opportunity to participate in Minnesota's financial aid programs. In doing so, the Legislature can help expand access and equity for Minnesotans and work together with WGU to unlock opportunity and strengthen the state's economy.

In the legislation we're proposing, WGU would be subject to the same regulatory standards as other in-state institutions. We just simply would not have a bricks and mortar location in the state.

As Chair Rarick indicated yesterday, the Office of Higher Education has put forward language to establish a pilot project to permit Minnesotans to receive access to state aid who attend up to 10 online universities that meet very strict criteria to model this initiative and report the results back to the Legislature. We are open to this concept and continue to work with OHE on this proposal.

Before I close, I want to ensure I specifically address key areas of interest raised by the Committee:

- According to Office of Higher Education, Minnesota needs more than 100,000 adult learners to earn a postsecondary credential by 2025 and that in order to meet this goal “there should be a concerted effort to enroll adults with no college experience and re-engage adults with some college but no credential.” WGU can be part of what will need to be an all hands on deck effort to help Minnesota achieve its workforce goals and make higher education more accessible.
- WGU utilizes a fundamentally different model of online education that is distinctive from our peers that also offer courses online. The primary differentiator is that each WGU student is assigned a full-time faculty mentor who meets with that student weekly from the day they enroll to the day they graduate providing intensive support along their education journey. Our faculty work evenings and weekends to ensure that our students can study and receive support on their own schedule.
- WGU provides education that is time and location agnostic allowing Minnesota students attending WGU to stay in their communities, with their families, and in most cases, employed full time.
- WGU is affordable. A student will pay less than \$8,000 per year for an unlimited number of courses. This low cost means that our students graduate with half the debt of the national average and our students default at half the rate of the national average.

Today, an estimated 566,000 Minnesotans have some college but no degree. This is untapped human potential, and these are the students WGU was built to serve. It is our contention that a focus on how to best serve residents and students, not institutions, will best guide a legislator’s approach on how make higher education more accessible to working learners. In fact, legislatures in several states have amended their financial aid programs in a similar fashion to what is proposed in this bill to positive results of moving significantly more adult and underserved learners to degree completion while not jeopardizing their financial aid programs.

WGU is ready, willing, and able to partner with the State of Minnesota to be part of much-needed solutions to remove barriers to opportunity and to improve the benefits of education so our neighbors and constituents attain better jobs and a higher quality of life. Thank you for your time and consideration and I’m happy to answer any questions.