



WGU 

**THE WGU
STATE POLICY
PLAYBOOK**

July 2020

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Answering the Question: What Do Students Need?

Nineteen U.S. governors created Western Governors University (WGU) in 1997 to expand access to higher education—the surest path from talent to opportunity. They believed college was becoming too expensive and disconnected from the workforce, failing to meet the needs of their state economies. They were concerned about barriers to degree attainment for disadvantaged populations and felt the existing model did not create an adequate pathway to career advancement for those stuck in poverty. These governors created WGU to be an affordable, innovative, results-driven educational institution that prepares students of all backgrounds for great jobs.

WGU has accomplished that mission for hundreds of thousands of students, using a competency-based model that allows students to progress at their own pace. However, there are still 36 million Americans with some college and no meaningful credential. We must do more to remove barriers and improve the benefits of education so our neighbors and constituents attain better jobs and a higher quality of life. Simply put, today’s students need an education that works for them. Education and skill acquisition should no longer be a “one and done” endeavor at a two- or four-year institution, but a lifelong journey that must be accessible, equitable, attainable, and affordable.

State and local policymakers are uniquely positioned to accelerate change in educational practice. Because WGU was founded by state leaders and because we believe in the critical and unique role states have in setting policy, we invite all state and local policymakers to join us as active partners in our pursuit to reinvigorate the promise of education to better serve today’s students.

From its founding, WGU has been and continues to be driven to design solutions to answer the critically important question: **What do students need?** Our mission at WGU is to improve quality, access, and outcomes in education and create pathways to opportunity. We now have an obligation to share with state policymakers our best public policy recommendations to address the nation’s education and workforce development issues. The *WGU State Policy Playbook* shares the five central public policy lessons learned through our history of serving students, in that today’s students need:



Access to Lifelong Learning



Affordable Learning Opportunities



Relevant Programs Connected to Work



Recognition for Learning—Regardless of Where They (L)Earned It



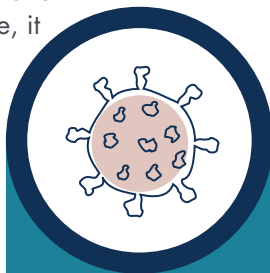
Modernized, Common-Sense Approaches to Regulations and Licensure

This playbook offers solutions to the needs of today’s learners and students. The recommendations discussed in the following pages reflect many of the “hot topics” in statehouses throughout the country, including how to serve adult learners better, connect talent with opportunity, upskill and reskill workforces, transition to lifelong learning, and ensure better student outcomes.

What Do Students Need in the Time of COVID-19?

The COVID-19 pandemic increased the urgency and flexibility with which we must respond to students' needs. The pandemic has devastated businesses and left the economy reeling. Unemployment rates continue to skyrocket, reflecting the millions of families who have lost jobs and wages. The Federal Reserve reported that 19% of adults lost a job or had their hours reduced in March 2020. The impact was even more alarming for lower-income workers, with 39% of workers with incomes below \$40,000 reporting job loss in one month during the height of the pandemic economic closures.¹

The COVID-19 crisis also dramatically illuminated longstanding societal inequities driving economic instability for people of color and low socioeconomic status. The CDC reports death rates from COVID-19 are massively and disproportionately high for black and Hispanic populations.² Unemployment rates disproportionately impact communities of color as well: April 2020 data from the U.S. Department of Labor shows that while the white population has a 14.2 percent unemployment rate, it soars to 18.9 percent for Latinos and 16.7 percent for African Americans.³ The ability to work from home and weather the pandemic is more viable for those with higher education levels: 63% of workers with a bachelor's degree or higher have been able to work from home, while only 20% those with a high school diploma or less have had the same opportunity.⁴ For far too many, lack of access to education has caused not only lower income and less-stable, higher-risk jobs but also less access to healthcare, less healthy food availability, and higher-density housing situations.



THE COVID-19 CONNECTION

WGU's policy priorities for modernizing higher education center on improvements and changes that have been overdue for years. In the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, these needs have become especially acute. Throughout this playbook, we have highlighted the ways in which the COVID-19 crisis has amplified longstanding systemic challenges that must be addressed—now more than ever.





The effect of COVID-19 on higher education is also stark as the loss of family income is contributing to expected decreases in new students enrolling and in students returning to higher education institutions. Current students also have unique pressures such as navigating unanticipated online learning environments, potentially without adequate broadband or sufficient support; attempting to choose fields of study that will provide them with a sound return on their investment at a time when unemployment is at a record high; and mapping out a plan of study on a fixed academic calendar at a time when they may only be able to reasonably predict their financial and time capacity a week at a time.

The supports students need from policymakers are not necessarily different from before COVID-19, but the crisis creates urgency around the need for innovation, now. For example, students always deserved access to flexible and high-quality education; however, the sudden and dramatic shift to online learning necessitates strong **broadband** and **digital literacy** initiatives. Developing these short-term and long-term solutions to connect all students, from pre-K through higher education, must be prioritized.

As COVID-19 shutdowns devastate personal finances and state economies, Americans need smart, quick solutions to get back to work. Common-sense affordability initiatives like **providing aid for short-term credentials** and **degree options aligned to job opportunities** must be elevated as state policy priorities. The need to help essential workers cross state boundaries to assist in the emergency response to COVID-19 makes **accelerated licensure reform** imperative and also underscores what was already known: that bureaucratic hurdles making it challenging for workers to go across state lines to work are out of sync with the needs of the fluid, modern workplace.

WGU began because students needed affordable, flexible learning options that prepare them for careers. Those needs—affordability, flexibility, and successful onramps to careers—have not lessened in the time of COVID-19. Students today need more affordable options, more flexibility to access learning, and more opportunities to reskill and upskill into jobs as we transition to the new economy. The gaps that have existed between students have been intensified, and so must the search for solutions. We will continue to be relentless in asking what students need and pushing for equitable policy solutions designed around today's students as we jumpstart the might of the American economy into a more prosperous post-COVID world.



THE COVID-19 CONNECTION

The COVID-19 pandemic made clear an already-existing reality: Students from all backgrounds need access to higher education and equitable outcomes—but inexcusable discrepancies exist based on race, ethnicity, place of residence, and life circumstances. The “digital divide” has long created barriers to accessing low-cost, flexible online learning in rural areas and for families of lower socioeconomic means; COVID-19 has made those barriers more visible and more immediate. The pandemic has exacerbated adult learners’ ongoing challenges navigating education while meeting caretaking and job responsibilities. Even before the pandemic, lifelong reskilling and upskilling needed to become the norm, with pre-pandemic estimates stating that 30% of jobs in the United States would be automated by 2030.⁵ Many companies are now accelerating investments in innovation and automation due to the global pandemic.⁶

1. STUDENTS NEED Access to Lifelong Learning

All Students Need Access. Demographic and Geographic Inequities Must Be Resolved.

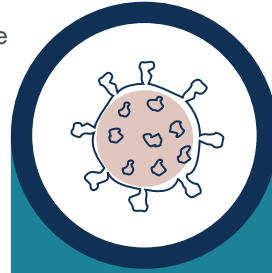
Core to WGU’s mission as a nonprofit educational institution is unapologetic advocacy for expanded access to education that works for all students. This means shifting from the traditional “one-and-done” model that assumes students attend a place-based institution immediately upon graduating high school to continuous lifelong learning that is accessible to all learners everywhere. While the blueprint for success in today’s economy is complex, education beyond high school breaks cycles of poverty and creates opportunities.

We must move from a one-size-fits-all educational model to one that meets learners where they are. It is incumbent on policymakers to help ensure systems are designed around student needs so that, no matter the realities they face, they have affordable and flexible options that provide them with the opportunity to succeed. WGU is proud to serve a high percentage of adult students with extensive life experience, many of whom have some college but no degree, and who find that the flexible schedule and online nature of WGU balances best with their other life responsibilities.

Recommendation: Expand Access to Reliable Broadband.

WGU supports state and local policy efforts to expand reliable broadband access to support education delivery to students. Reliable broadband allows students everywhere to access education and ongoing skill training at any time.

In order to close equity gaps in educational attainment for students with low socioeconomic status and for individuals of color, broadband access is critical. According to a 2017 U.S. Census report, 36.4% of Hispanic and 30.3% of black households (as opposed to 21.2% of white households) do not have access to the internet.⁷ With the proliferation of high-quality, online options for postsecondary education, the continued lack of access for individuals to basic broadband service can be the lone barrier to a student's education, career, and overall well-being. Broadband is the cornerstone of a community's ability to train, retain, and attract workers to fill vital roles like teachers and nurses. States, localities, businesses, education providers, and the federal government must work together to lead efforts across multiple agencies and regions to provide reliable broadband access.



THE COVID-19 CONNECTION

While the internet continues to be a tool for educational transformation, it is more than that: COVID-19 has shown that broadband is the backbone for all education, not to mention remote working, healthcare, and everyday interactions. While students will eventually return to classrooms, education will forever be inextricably linked to broadband, and policymakers must commit to closing stark gaps in access to broadband.



OREGON IS PROMOTING DIGITAL LITERACY

Oregon enacted legislation to create a Rural Broadband Office, with promoting digital literacy, equity, and inclusion as a key element of the office's functions.

Recommendation: Promote and Expand Digital Literacy.

An important part of access to learning must include an increase in digital literacy skills for students. Digital literacy goes deeper into students' fundamental ability to interact effectively and be successful in a technology-reliant society. States must lead the way in increasing basic digital literacy skills for the millions of Americans who cannot use a computer and are not comfortable with online learning.⁸

Businesses, governments, and foundations have been making strides in bridging the digital literacy gap by making devices and training available to learners of all ages.⁹ Existing resources such as public libraries¹⁰ and adult literacy programs¹¹ have been utilized to advance digital learning and provide access points for low-income, urban, and rural individuals. Free digital literacy curriculum is also available to the public to cover topics such as online communication and collaboration, interaction with hardware and devices, computer privacy, safety, and security.¹² Some states are proposing to provide structure and funding to digital literacy initiatives (examples include Arizona¹³ and Utah¹⁴), while others, such as Oregon, are promoting digital literacy as a function of their Rural Broadband Office.¹⁵ Endeavors such as these are necessary to address digital blindspots at a foundational level and support learners as they enter and advance through their education and careers.

Recommendation: Support Onramps to Learning, Such as the Academy at WGU.

WGU recognizes that not every student is prepared for the rigors of a college education on day one. WGU's history of success recognizing that many of today's prospective students—whatever their age—need additional support and mentoring to succeed in college led to the creation of the Academy at WGU, a college preparatory program to better serve students when readiness is a barrier to their success. The Academy allows students to complete college-level courses for credit in addition to a noncredit program, the Program for Academic and Career Advancement (PACA), which helps students develop confidence, persistence, and a positive academic mindset before taking on a regular degree program. Upon completing the Academy, students are guaranteed admission to WGU, or they can apply to enroll in another institution. The Academy at WGU can be part of the solution for public policymakers to efficiently and effectively provide developmental education to students.

WGU applauds the many college readiness efforts across the United States at the institution, state, and local levels. These readiness programs, often piloted through the support of private foundations, have been proven to help low-income and first-generation students with the college process and provide additional mentoring options.¹⁶ These models should be supported as a means for states to provide better access and support for students. Strong Start to Finish, convened by the Education Commission of the States, has been bringing policymakers together to deepen work around supporting all students and is an excellent source of knowledge.¹⁷ As states grapple with the aftermath of COVID-19 and the impact it has on students' learning trajectories and college readiness, these readiness programs can play a critical role in recovery.



NEW YORK PROGRAM SUPPORTS STUDENT SUCCESS

The City University of New York's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) nearly doubled graduation rates by providing participating students individual advising, career counseling, tutoring, tuition reduction, transportation, and textbook assistance.²⁰ This program has been replicated in Ohio with similar outcomes, and additional programs have arisen in California, West Virginia, and other sites in New York.²¹

Recommendation: Provide Targeted Supports to Ensure Student Access and Success.

Students often have a mix of barriers that inhibit their success in educational attainment. Comprehensive wraparound services in distance education as well as on-campus environments, that include academic and non-academic supports—such as program mentors,¹⁸ mental health counseling, micro-grants for emergency student aid,¹⁹ and assistance with food, childcare, or transportation—can make the difference between a student staying in school and stopping out. To close equity gaps and drive student success, these types of comprehensive and individualized supports should be implemented wherever possible.

Recommendation: Set Access and Attainment Goals and Measure Progress, with a Focus on Underserved Students.

Attainment goals should be set by states and be regularly revisited. The goals should include provisions around access, success, and completion to ensure that underrepresented and underserved populations are effectively served. These goals must have effective strategies attached, such as expanding capacity in a state's higher education system, better aligning the cradle-to-career spectrum, ensuring high-quality and low-cost online options to meet students where they are and at a cost they can afford, and incorporating competency-based education so students can move flexibly through coursework.



INDIANA IS TRACKING STUDENT OUTCOMES

States can replicate efforts, such as those in Indiana, to track and report student outcomes and equity gaps. Reporting this information in a usable format helps not only students and families but also policymakers to make data-informed decisions about educational options. Other states can use these reports as a model to inform policy and goals for educational attainment and to bridge attainment gaps for underrepresented populations.²²





THE COVID-19 CONNECTION

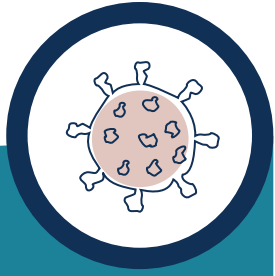
COVID-19 has made affordability, already fraught, more challenging. State budgets are reeling from the impact of COVID-19, and policymakers have difficult decisions ahead about prioritizing limited resources. Without structural changes or additional investments in underserved populations, the pandemic risks leaving Americans without access to an affordable education to lead to a new job or career. Furthermore, the convergence of high levels of unemployment and student loan debt led Congress to allow a six-month interest-free student loan forbearance as millions of Americans, suddenly jobless, have no way to make monthly payments. The future beyond those six months is unclear, but what is clear is that asking students to continually shoulder the ever-rising costs of college tuition is unsustainable.

2. STUDENTS NEED Affordable Learning Opportunities

A Sound ROI Begins with an Investment That's Reasonable.

Higher education can and should be affordable and accessible to all students. With the average increase in the annual cost of college outpacing the growth of family income or state investment, for far too many an “affordable higher education” has become more of a dream than a reality. The average cost of a college degree has more than doubled since 1988.²³ Meanwhile, total student debt nationally has grown from \$240 billion in 2003²⁴ to nearly \$1.6 trillion today, with over 44 million Americans holding debt incurred as a student.²⁵ WGU is committed to affordable higher education, reflected in a unique tuition structure that is thousands of dollars lower than the national average annual tuition for most colleges and universities, both public and private.²⁶

Policymakers must confront and stem rising institutional costs, encourage financial literacy and responsible borrowing so students understand the cost of their education and return on their investment, and ensure existing resources are allocated to align with and meet the demands of today's students.



THE COVID-19 CONNECTION

As COVID-19's reach continues to devastate personal finances across the board, the student struggle is clear. Nearly 250,000 fewer returning students from low-income backgrounds submitted the FAFSA this cycle, and completion rates among high school seniors have fallen as well.²⁸

Recommendation: Increase FAFSA Completion.

Filling out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is often a starting point for students to understand that financing their education is possible. Meanwhile, millions of college students do not fill out the application each year, forgoing billions of dollars in financial assistance.²⁷

While WGU and others continue to advocate for a more simplified and streamlined FAFSA process at the federal level, in the interim, states can and should support students through the existing FAFSA completion process. Some states have implemented FAFSA completion as a part of their high school graduation requirements and have provided wraparound support for students.²⁹ Even if a state does not require FAFSA completion, there should be initiatives that include a wide range of services for students that facilitate completing the FAFSA, ensuring that more students have a full picture of their financial support options and opportunities.



LOUISIANA IS LEADING IN FAFSA COMPLETION.

Louisiana has the highest FAFSA completion rates in the nation, with over 77% of student filing applications. They have implemented policies requiring the completion of the FAFSA for high school graduation, along with robust student supports, such as FAFSA Completion Workshops, community events, and comprehensive communication strategies.²⁹



Recommendation: Permit State Financial Aid to Support Microcredentials.

Certificates, certifications, badges, and other types of industry-recognized credentials can offer more accessible options for reskilling and upskilling and a more efficient way of meeting employer needs. States can lead the way by supporting high-quality microcredentials that are competency-based, personalized, and validated, with excellent student and employer outcomes. While microcredentials provide an immediate economic and career benefit without requiring completion of a full degree program, microcredentials most benefit students when they are stackable toward earning a full degree.

States have an opportunity to make significant progress toward this policy change. State financial aid and tax policies can be modified to further their residents' attainment of high-quality and workforce-relevant short-term certificates and microcredentials. Many people seeking short-term certificates are ineligible for forms of federal financial aid, whether seeking their first credential or additional skills beyond their degree. Efforts are under way at the federal level for expanded access to Pell Grant funding for short-term certificates, but in the interim, state financial aid can be shaped to allow students the ability to gain immediate, workforce-relevant knowledge and skills to quickly address critical labor shortages in states and industries.



THE COVID-19 CONNECTION

The massive economic disruption caused by COVID-19 underscores the need for funding for microcredentials. States need to support workers in returning to the workforce as quickly as possible, while recognizing that many of the jobs that are gone may never return. Workers need accessible opportunities to reskill and upskill.

STACKABLE MICROCREDENTIALS

An important concept that supports the promise of microcredentials is stackability—that is, the ability of credentials to build on each other as part of a lifelong learning loop. Stackable credentials allow a learner's education to accumulate incremental value along the learning journey, improving access to both upskilling and reskilling opportunities.



Recommendation: Ensure Equitable Access to Need-Based Funding and Other Relevant Grant Programs.

State aid or state higher education benefits are often available only to students at specific types of institutions, but students 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.

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, bounded by arbitrary requirements of state-based physical locations or accreditation by a specific regional body, deny students equitable access to use need-based and other grant funding to attend innovative schools like WGU. A number of states have been correcting this, resulting in more options and better outcomes for students.

Recommendation: Provide Alternative and Innovative Financing Options.

The need to access learning at multiple points in one's career and life will increase and grow as the workplace changes. Funding lifelong learning opportunities requires both traditional and nontraditional means. Traditional options, such as Pell Grants and state need-based aid programs, must be expanded to meet these demands. In addition, policymakers can embrace ways to give students innovative financing tools to pay for lifelong learning opportunities while avoiding costly debt.

One model includes Lifelong Learning Accounts, which are savings accounts that can be used to fund a broad array of advanced learning, including high-quality short-term credential and training opportunities to achieve necessary skills for success in the workplace. Individuals, employers, and third parties can contribute to the costs necessary to support lifelong learning opportunities, no matter where the person is employed.^{30, 31, 32}

Additional mechanisms such as Income Share Agreements are being discussed and implemented in limited instances across the country.³³ While more work is needed to fully understand and operationalize these methods on a large scale, states have a great opportunity to explore and expand the use of these and other innovative financing options when they are in the best interest of students.

Recommendation: Implement Financial Literacy with Responsible Borrowing Initiatives.

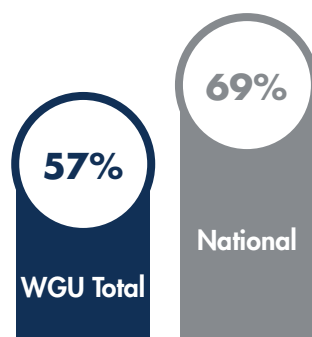
Financial literacy tools play a critical role in helping students to have a better understanding of the impact of debt and to borrow responsibly. WGU has implemented a set of internal practices to educate students on financial implications of student debt under the Responsible Borrowing Initiative (RBI). The core of this initiative is simple, yet seldom practiced: advising students to borrow only their unmet direct education costs. WGU's outcomes, shown below, suggest students at other institutions would benefit tremendously from this approach and that incorporating responsible borrowing into statewide systems would have a direct and long-lasting benefit for students. WGU representatives are available to provide testimony on the value of financial literacy and to share information on WGU's Responsible Borrowing Initiatives.

Reducing Borrowing

Percentage of Graduating Undergrads Who Borrowed for School

*As the percentage of college students who need to borrow for school continues to rise nationwide, WGU's rate is down 5 percentage points since 2015.

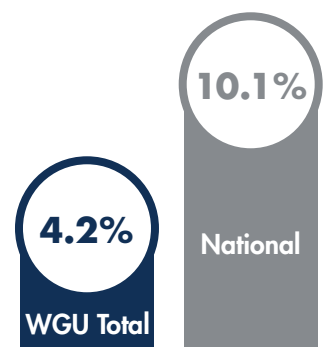
Source: The Institute for College Access & Success



Reducing Default

3-Year Loan Default Rate, Fiscal Year 2016 Cohort

Source: The Institute for College Access & Success





3. STUDENTS NEED Relevant Programs Connected to Work

Students Need to Know the Skills and Knowledge They Gain Will Serve Them in the Workplace.

Students have always deserved educational opportunities aligned with workforce needs and employment opportunities, but the significant rise in the cost of higher education has made this alignment even more critical. For many students contemplating college or workers considering reskilling or upskilling, calculating the return on investment—not only of money but also of time—is crucial. We must bring government, businesses, and education leaders, along with other relevant partners, to the table to devise solutions that bridge education and work.



THE COVID-19 CONNECTION

With unprecedented numbers of American workers filing for unemployment during the spring of 2020, shifting the landscape to one of earning and learning is imperative to get Americans back to work with the skills they need. Displaced workers need opportunities to upskill and reskill into good jobs in stable fields through online and distance learning, and those newly enrolling in college need assurance that the time and money invested will lead to meaningful opportunities. Now more than ever, the promise of higher education must lead to a real return on investment to better the lives of students and their families.



Recommendation: Establish Public-Private Partnerships to Innovate, Develop, and Scale New Pathways in Highly In-Demand Skills Areas.

Building public-private partnerships and the necessary funding to establish and scale solutions for in-demand and highly needed programs is key to meeting a state's workforce goals. Students and workers, especially in newer and quickly changing occupations and future-facing careers, need access to quick, efficient, high-quality workforce solutions. WGU can be a partner in these efforts.



THE COVID-19 CONNECTION

In the wake of COVID-19, individual health departments nationwide are hiring hundreds of contact tracers to work with patients to identify and stem potential chains of disease transmission.³⁵ Johns Hopkins University created a 5.5-hour course offering a training certificate for individuals to enter this line of work very quickly.³⁶ This is a timely example of how higher education institutions can work with government agencies to quickly set up programs that address an urgent workforce need and provide a pathway for retraining displaced workers.



CALIFORNIA AND WGU ADDRESS HEALTHCARE WORKER SHORTAGE

WGU created a medical coding certificate with the Service Employees International Union-United Healthcare Workers West (SEIU-UHW) and healthcare employers in California to effectively develop programs directly aligned to the skills employers need.³⁴ WGU can replicate and scale these types of partnerships with other states and industries, fostering and supporting partnerships that bring about alignment and collaboration among employers, institutions, and government.



Recommendation: Implement Skills-Based Hiring and Career Advancement.

As education leaders, it is imperative to map skills and competencies achieved through education to real-world, in-demand skills for hiring purposes. State policymakers are positioned to facilitate partnerships between employers and education providers to efficiently connect displaced workers to jobs, through embracing hiring practices that prioritize skills and competencies.

While more will need to be done to educate and position skills-based hiring as the leading best practice for implementation, efforts are currently being carried out in early stages by WGU and others through the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the White House's American Workforce Policy Advisory Board. Although businesses will play an important role in skills-based hiring, support from state and local policymakers will be crucial for effective implementation. Many states, such as Colorado and Indiana, are working with the Markle Foundation to bring these practices to scale, including within their states' own workforces. Using skills tied to an interoperable comprehensive learner transcript, states can lead efforts to pilot or implement skills-based hiring with public-sector workforces as appropriate.

In 2020, WGU, along with a number of partners, launched the Open Skills Stack Alliance, a collection of employers, education institutions, and business associations to expand skills-based education and hiring practices across the United States. This new partnership will highlight the workforce relevance of a WGU degree by translating credentials and experience into the high-demand skills they represent.



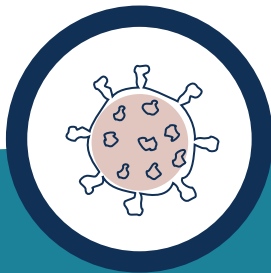
NEW MEXICO IS UPSKILLING TEACHERS

New Mexico's Grow Your Own Teachers program offers scholarships and a pathway for educational assistants to become fully licensed classroom teachers.³⁷

Recommendation: Upskill Paraprofessionals to Meet Critical Workforce Needs.

Often paraprofessionals are working in fields where they could directly upskill to higher-level credentials. With an alarming and growing shortage of classroom teachers,³⁸ innovative pathways are essential to filling the gaps and meeting the needs of today's students across the educational continuum. With these types of upskilling and reskilling programs, students are able to earn higher-level credentials and better pay while meeting critical workforce needs.





THE COVID-19 CONNECTION

These challenges predated COVID-19, and unfortunately, without significant action they seem likely to exacerbate the hurdles students must overcome. A May 2020 survey from Strada found that one out of three Americans between the ages of 18 to 64 have modified or canceled their education plans.³⁹ This significant disruption likely will lead to many transfers and “stop outs,” which will have an enormous impact on these students’ future education or career plans. Students deserve a system that embraces the fact that learning happens in many ways, at many places, and that recognizes the skills students acquire throughout their lives and formal education.

4. STUDENTS NEED Recognition for All Learning—Regardless of Where They (L)Earned It **Value All Learning.**

We must do a better job of helping students show what they have learned and transfer it into new settings, whether that be an educational institution or the workplace. That is far from the status quo. Students struggle to transfer credits to new institutions, receive scant recognition of learning that occurs in less-traditional settings and/or prior to beginning a degree program, graduate with transcripts that say little about their skills, and, should they come a single credit shy of completing their degree, receive no acknowledgement of skills gained during their study. It is a fragmented system, and its fractured nature costs students both time and money.



Recommendation: Stop Credit Loss.

Continued state efforts are necessary to stem the arbitrary loss of previously earned, credited learning between institutions when students transfer. Many students do not finish a degree where they started. For example, over one-third of students who started college in 2011 transferred to a different institution over the next six years.⁴⁰ Increased credit articulation agreements and other public-policy levers that extend digitally across state lines can help ensure that students gain and retain relevant credit for their time, effort, and cost. Many states have adopted laws and policies that require statewide transferability of lower-division courses and guaranteed transfer of associate's degrees among public institutions within the state.⁴¹

Beyond guarantees among in-state public colleges, however, this type of guaranteed credit transfer is needed among more institutions, within states and across state lines. Multistate educational collaboratives could be utilized to achieve interstate transferability, building upon models such as the Interstate Passport through the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) and the work the Midwest Higher Education Compact (MHEC) has undertaken to achieve credit transferability of military service credit across a 13-state region.⁴²

Recommendation: Integrate Work Experience and Employer Trainings into Degree Pathways.

States can provide a framework for capturing employer workforce training and the precious resources employers spend to upskill and reskill their employees. We are entering a new generation of opportunities, hastened by rapidly changing technology and a global pandemic, that must include short-term, competency-based, workplace-based training and programs. While students and workers are earning new skills, they must be able to apply and stack demonstrated skills toward a degree or credential. A seamless integration of employer training into credit-bearing credentials would ensure dollars spent on workforce training have an unmistakable benefit for students, making it more affordable for them to gain the relevant skills employers demand.⁴³



Recommendation: Craft Policies that Encourage Institutions to Recognize Prior Learning.

Learning occurs in many places outside the traditional classroom and through many nontraditional sources: Many gain skills in the workplace, in formal and informal apprenticeships, and through military training. These learning opportunities can lead to high-quality outcomes and are often workforce relevant but too often go unrecognized. The result is that skilled individuals often have to undertake coursework that duplicates what they have already learned in a real-world setting, causing unnecessary delay and inflating the cost of education.

Through WGU's competency-based education, students who come to WGU with some college or life experience can more quickly demonstrate the education, knowledge, and skills they have achieved in either a formal or informal educational setting. This allows them to move through education more quickly and more affordably. State and local policymakers could better serve students by ensuring credit for prior learning at state institutions.

Recommendation: Implement learning and employment records.

The skills-based economy calls for a more comprehensive way for students to exhibit the skills they have mastered than traditional academic transcripts and résumés. Learning and employment records, also known as interoperable learning records or skills-based transcripts, must be developed and adopted as the new currency in the skills-based economy. A student-owned, skills-based transcript takes the traditional academic transcript to an important new level—one that includes academic records, certifications, work accomplishments, and descriptions of accumulated skills. As employers are increasingly skeptical of the value of a degree alone, a skills-based transcript documents what a student can do, along with the credentials completed, to give employers a more complete picture of what an individual has to offer. States can partner with efforts already under way with the American Workforce Policy Advisory Board to pilot and adopt the use of the skills-based transcript.⁴⁴



Recommendation: Adopt and Enhance Reverse Transfer Initiatives.

Leaving school with debt and no credential is a potentially crippling financial event, and it happens to far too many students. Time, money, and effort are expended gaining college credits, but students are left with nothing to show for it if they stop before they complete a full degree. This is yet another reason to scaffold learning opportunities as a sequence of microcredentials. Even if students stop short of a degree, there should be a way to demonstrate the marketable skills they have obtained during their study.

One “reverse transfer” initiative, the Lumina Foundation's Degrees When Due, encourages states and institutions to review student transcripts in order to provide an associate's degree, whenever possible, to students who have transferred from a community college to a four-year institution without completing a bachelor's degree. By receiving degrees when enough credits are completed, students have a meaningful record of educational achievement to show to employers.⁴⁵ This reverse transfer process could be taken a step farther, to award not only associate's degrees but other types of credentials and certificates as milestones in a student's educational journey. These options can signal to employers relevant skills and knowledge for employability in meaningful and financially stable careers.



5. STUDENTS NEED Modernized, Common-Sense Approaches to Regulations and Licensure



THE COVID-19 CONNECTION

COVID-19 caused many states to begin eliminating these barriers, at least temporarily, and in doing so underscored how unnecessary many of these bureaucratic regulations are and how much can be gained by increased flexibility. Before COVID-19, one-third of today's 20 million students were taking at least one course online.⁴⁶ The pandemic forced all students, from preschool through higher education, to abruptly become online learners. The deployment of high-quality CBE to scale can be a proven higher education solution to meet critical needs for both individuals and society, especially when delivered online, and legislative and regulatory frameworks that unnecessarily impede the deployment of online CBE should be eliminated. In healthcare fields, COVID-19 led to licensure flexibility as doctors and nurses moved from state to state. We should continue to press forward with lasting occupational licensure reform to continue meeting workforce needs. Students need reforms and regulations that make sense and provide flexible options to benefit them right where they are today, to open doors to educational opportunities and pathways to careers.

New Ways Of Doing Business.

Students often come up against statutory barriers that limit their options for education and training programs. For example, online competency-based education (CBE) provides faster and more flexible access to higher education. However, many higher education institutions struggle to offer online CBE because of legislative and regulatory frameworks that were built around the notion of a standardized schedule of education delivered on campus. Similarly, graduating students may encounter unnecessary barriers to entering their chosen profession, depending on the licensure standards in their state. Unnecessary licensure hurdles in each state can inhibit a student's path to a career as well as a state's ability to meet workforce needs.



THE COVID-19 CONNECTION

COVID-19 has heightened this imperative, with many states breaking down barriers to professional licensure, at least temporarily, in many healthcare fields to meet critical frontline workforce demands. State leaders must continue to streamline occupational licensing to ensure a more mobile and effective workforce.

Recommendation: Accelerate Licensure Reform.

As learning must be enabled everywhere, so should the credential or license gained be recognized everywhere. Students need relief from costly and duplicative requirements in order to practice their professions.

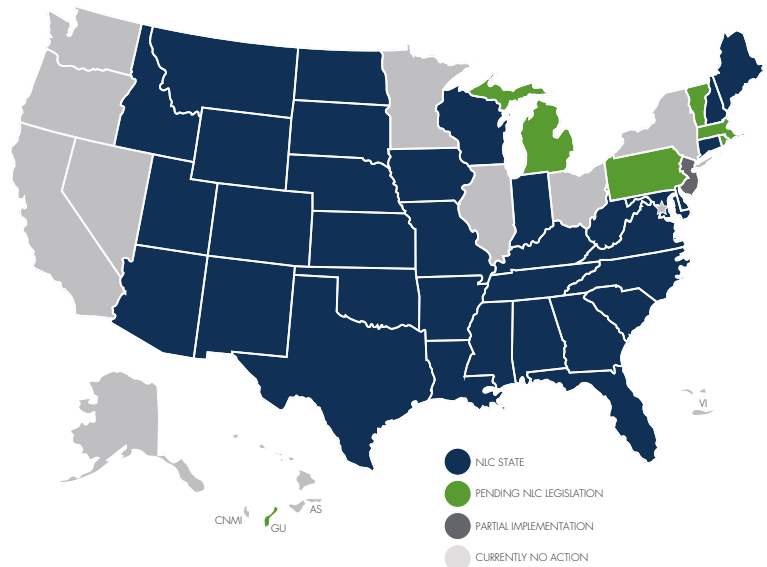
Policymakers must ensure credentials retain relevancy wherever opportunities exist, even across state lines. This can be accomplished through increased and enhanced licensure compacts, more effective reciprocity agreements, and reduced institutional burdens to seeking and obtaining duplicative state-level programmatic approvals that hinder paths toward licensure and opportunity. States should expand the use of interstate compacts and reciprocity agreements for any licensed field—starting with those in-demand occupations whose barriers to entry include a nationally recognized, normed assessment of competence. Immediately, Nurses Licensure Compact should be expanded to all 50 states and a Teachers Licensure Compact must be created. Additionally, using the State Authorization for Reciprocity Agreement (SARA) as an example,⁴⁷ policymakers can reduce

barriers and eliminate duplicative approvals to ensure better mobility. California, the lone holdout, should be encouraged to join SARA. State legislation can also be enacted to require licensure boards to recognize out-of-state occupational licenses.^{48,49} This type of work should be expanded on state, regional, and national levels to ensure states can meet critical needs and demystify occupational licensure requirements across state lines for all students, workers, and employers.

NURSES LICENSURE COMPACT STATE PARTICIPATION

This map identifies states that currently participate in the Nurses Licensure Compact, those that have varying levels of implementation, and those that are not participating in the compact. Nurses in NLC participating states can practice in other NLC states without obtaining additional licensure.

*SOURCE: National Council of State Boards of Nursing; www.ncsbn.org/nurse-licensure-compact.htm



Recommendation: Promote High-Quality Competency-Based Education (CBE).

As a pioneer of its use, WGU has demonstrated the value of competency-based education, meaning individualized learning that allows students to demonstrate content proficiency, regardless of time or pace of learning, both in higher education and in other phases of a learner’s educational journey. However, far too often CBE is misunderstood and weighed down by outdated laws or absent legislative or regulatory frameworks.

Policymakers need to understand not only the benefits of CBE to students but also the legislative and regulatory hurdles that often stand in the way of realizing those benefits. State and local leaders can swiftly and easily provide immediate relief by updating regulations for CBE students.

The Path Forward

WGU has always been, and always will be, committed to continually evolving to meet the needs of contemporary students. The challenges wrought by COVID-19 have sharpened this commitment. It is more urgent than ever that education be flexible and affordable and that it give students the skills needed for in-demand jobs.

As higher education institutions must continually reinvent themselves to better serve students, so must the policies surrounding them. WGU's decades of experience across states and with hundreds of thousands of students has led us to focus our policy efforts on students' most-pressing needs:



Access to Lifelong Learning



Affordable Learning Opportunities



Relevant Programs Connected to Work



Recognition for Learning—Regardless of Where They (L)Earned It



Modernized, Common-Sense Approaches to Regulations and Licensure

State policymakers have an unprecedented opportunity to remake education in their states. As they do so, we hope this playbook offers a useful framework to help guide that challenging, yet exciting work.

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