Learning Resources in a Competency-based Distance University

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Abstract

Since diplomas are awarded based on the demonstration of knowledge, skills, and abilities through assessment (not on accumulated credits through time spent) at a competency-based university, how do adult learners become competent? What is the role of distance learning resources (online courses, e-learning, library, and bookstore services) within this model? This article presents distance learning resource philosophy, procedures, and issues that arise when providing instruction at the US’s premiere, accredited, competency-based distance university.

Introduction

Imagine earning a college degree from the convenience of your own home or office. Sounds like online distance education, right? However, what if you didn’t have to take a set number of courses and amass credits, but instead you could demonstrate what you already know and can do through assessments – affirming that prior learning and ensuring all new learning would be fresh and new. Add to that the benefit of a faculty member who works closely with you throughout your degree, and an individualized program of study, tailored to your background and eagerness to progress rapidly toward completion. Couple that with peer interaction throughout your studies with other students and faculty members in learning communities. Suppose that you could acquire new learning through online courses, where you might feel more comfortable in unfamiliar subject matter with the structure and expert guidance and feedback from an instructor – or, could have the flexibility of doing guided self-study of textbooks or e-learning modules for content in which you were familiar and only needed brush up before assessment. Finally, imagine that your diploma was from a university that was both regionally and nationally accredited, refined to meet the stated needs of major employers, associations, state and national standards, as well as industry certifying bodies. Does this sound intriguing? Such is the exceptional educational model being implemented by Western Governors University.

In 1998 the governors of 19 states founded Western Governors University (WGU) to provide a competency-based online alternative to the campus-based post-secondary educational enterprises in their states. Although the University had the backing of over 20 prominent corporations and foundations, at the time of accreditation by the Distance Education and Research Council (DETC) in 2002, the offerings were limited to a handful of bachelor’s and associate degrees, and enrollments had reached a plateau at roughly 200 students. The receipt of unprecedented regional accreditation by four western commissions and grant support and funding by the US Department of Education in 2003 turned the corner for this innovative institution. As of September 2006 WGU is realizing its original potential by providing distance education to over 6,100 students seeking 35 bachelor’s and master’s degrees in Teacher Education (many including initial licensure), Business, and Information Technology, (with Health Profession degrees being added in late 2006). The University has over 1250 graduates.

WGU’s mission “is to improve quality and expand access to post-secondary educational opportunities by providing means for individuals to learn independent of time and place and to earn competency-based degrees and other credentials that are credible to both academic institutions and employers.” At the heart of the institution is “competency-based education.” This commitment to CBE translates in into all University policies, practices, and procedures, such as mentoring, use of third-party learning resources, and assessments.

Throughout their degree program, candidates demonstrate their competencies through a series of 15 to 25 substantive assessments. To ascertain students’ proficiency, WGU adheres to rigorous assessment procedures to measure competency. This includes proctored objective and essay exams (delivered at testing sites through contract arrangements throughout the country and overseas – for active-duty military personnel), performance tasks, portfolio items, and capstone projects. The University uses both internally-developed assessments and externally-developed ones. The latter consist primarily of industry-recognized certification exams, such as the SHRM for human resource management, or widely-used and validated teacher education assessments, such as the Praxis examinations for secondary education content knowledge. Only the demonstration of competencies through assessment counts
toward academic progress and degree completion. Program councils, comprised of national experts from the academy, business and industry, government, and school systems, oversee the development of WGU competencies. These senior academics consult for the University on all aspects of the academic programs and serve as our most senior faculty members. They typically meet in person at WGU offices four times a year to monitor program effectiveness, evaluate learning resources, and provide advice on program planning issues.

This competency-based approach allows affirmation of prior college-level learning, while integrating it with new learning. Not surprisingly, WGU’s average student is around 40 years old, working full-time, and hoping to accelerate through WGU’s degree program because of relevant experience before and during the degree program. Students are drawn to the University for its convenience, as well as its relevance; for instance, all study is done at a distance, and students can start any month of the year in one of WGU’s six-month terms. WGU courses of study include: (1) mentoring by faculty experts who assist student work throughout their programs; (2) learning resources like study guides, textbooks, Web sites, and full online courses, that students take to brush up or build competencies from scratch in some areas; (3) learning communities for peer interaction and learning under mentor guidance; and culminate in (4) assessments where students demonstrate competency for completing degree requirements.

Purpose

Because of the University’s competency-based education (CBE) approach, faculty roles, distance program delivery, and the provision of learning resources is quite different than at other higher education institutions. The remainder of this article focuses on the implications of CBE for learning resources (LR). It details the role that these LRs play, the University’s philosophy about their use, and practices WGU follows in collaborating with other institutions. This information can benefit you, the reader, in several ways. You will gain insight into how this innovative model of higher distance education has been successfully implemented over the past decade. The University’s policies, practices, and procedures can inform similar initiatives within the agencies, institutions, and organizations where you are involved with distance education. Additionally, since the CBE approach to learning resources is collaborative, this article may give you ideas to effectively link your own distance offerings to similar consortia to create synergy for your own distance education enterprise.

WGU’s learning resource brokering model

From its inception Western Governors University (WGU) has acquired the learning resources (LRs) that it provides its students through licensing agreements with third parties. WGU uses the term “learning resources” to refer to the wide variety of instructional supports that students use to gain competency. These include online instructor-led courses and independent learning resources (ILRs), such as web accessible e-learning modules, CD ROMs, Videos and workbooks. LRs also encompass textbooks, and library materials. The primary purpose of LRs is to enable students to develop the skills and knowledge necessary for them to successfully demonstrate competency through assessment.

WGU seeks LRs that fit its model of competency-based distance education. These LRs need to be:

- independent of time and place – since WGU students are located through the country as well as some stationed overseas;
- scalable – since there are hundreds of students in each degree program with likely increases throughout the foreseeable future;
- affordable – since LR costs are paid through WGU’s own low-cost general tuition, with 70 percent of WGU students receiving financial aid;
- available for open or frequent enrollment – since WGU students start monthly and are on individual six-month terms;
- modularized – since WGU recognizes that prior competencies shouldn’t require students to repeat material they already know;
- feedback affording – since students require response about their capability and readiness to assess; and
- self-paced – since students need to be able to progress according to their schedule; particularly, WGU seeks LRs that allow students to accelerate.
WGU’s LRs come from accredited higher education institutions, like Rio Salado Community College, Chadron State University, and Davenport University, as well as from commercial educational enterprises, such as American Museum of Natural History, Wasatch E-learning, Canter and Associates, Thomson NetG, and Abromitis Online. WGU seeks the highest quality LRs that fit its model, and retain the flexibility to use similar LRs covering the same content and swap out LRs as it identifies better ones.

WGU faculty members, known as mentors, assist their students in taking pre-assessments that identify individual areas of strength and weakness. The mentor works with each student to build an online academic action plan that schedules the assessments that they will complete during the term with appropriate learning resources. The possible learning resources include two types: (1) guided independent study LRs -- for students with competency in the domain and who are self directed; (2) more structured LRs – usually instructor-led courses, for students with little or no competency in the domain and who with limited self direction. Students enroll in their LRs directly through their online academic action plan, allow them access within minutes to web-based e-learning LRs, triggering same-day shipment of materials, and/or getting them instructions to enroll in their selected term-based online course within days.

WGU seeks, as much as possible, to identify existing resources that align closely to its competencies and performance tasks and use them “as is.” When off-the-shelf LRs cannot be found, WGU works with its providers to first delivery modifications – packaging the LR into smaller units or larger modules (courses) or creating open-enrollment or staggered offerings, fitting enrollment demands. If actual course content and learning activities need to be addressed, it will do so by asking EPs to perform content customization – inserting or elimination of objectives, content, and activities. In rare cases WGU asks a provider to build LRs to WGU specifications with WGU academic personnel providing occasional input with content expertise, assessment suggestions, delivery requirements, and learner characteristics.

Although adult students come to WGU expecting to take online courses (chiefly reflecting their former experience with higher education), increasingly the University is moving toward offering independent learning resources (ILRs) supported within its learning communities. WGU’s goal is for students to become independent self-directed learners. However, third-party online courses too often foster reliance on course pacing, structure, content, and professor direction that may not meet individual student needs. Also, the University’s institutional research indicates that those students who dropped out preferred courses, whereas those who progressed and graduated preferred ILRs. Learning communities provide similar peer discussion and expert feedback from community leaders as their course counterparts do, but the instructional content comes through e-learning modules, online articles, Web site links, and other learning objects with which students engage. Students can independently interact with the learning assets of these learning communities – at their own pace, structure, and according to their own competency-development needs. Similarly, WGU wants to bring the various functions of its online library services (described below) within these learning communities with enhanced interfaces to specific content. In the future it also wants to make relevant portions of its adopted textbooks available within these communities in electronic format as well.

Library and bookstore services

WGU’s competency-based approach enables student independent study under guidance of a mentor, following study guides, and aided by the peer support found in learning communities. Since its opening in 1998 the University has contracted with the University of New Mexico for library services to support all academic areas. A librarian provides the primary interface with UNM library resources for reference services, database search and full-text resource acquisition, interlibrary loan services, and for electronic reserves. Orientation to this distance library is an integral part of a mandatory course in which students participate when they join WGU. Through early research projects, they become familiar with using library resources. Similarly, WGU contracts with an online library vendor to keep a constant supply of its primary textbooks on hand. The bookstore sells these at discounted prices to students, while providing reliable shipping and buy-back services.

The LR model in action

The following depiction of a fictitious student, Laura, represents the detailed learning experience in the University’s business degree program. Laura works in the personnel department of a major corporation. She advanced quickly in her job during early years with the company based on ability to quickly pick up necessary skills and a natural
knack for working with various types of employees. A year ago, Laura was chosen to work closely with the human resource manager, shouldering many of the responsible duties herself when there was a department crisis. However, recently she has felt stifled recently because promotions have gone to those with bachelor’s degrees, and rather than doing the human resource management tasks of which she is capable, she has been relegated to the more routine and clerical tasks. Recognizing her need for a bachelor’s degree in human resource management to move ahead, Laura confronted the difficulty of trying to “go back” to school – now married with an infant son and need for full-time employment to pay the bills. Her husband and Laura talked about how she might capitalize on the several semesters of college she had right after high school, and possibly incorporate some of the human resources training and experience while she has worked in this field over the past seven years. When they discovered WGU, it seemed like an answer to prayer.

After visiting the WGU website and expressing interest through an online form, she appreciated the personalized attention of an enrollment counselor who addressed her concerns and answered her questions in a telephone call and exchange of emails. An inquiry session via telephone conference with a business faculty member (mentor) and a group of other prospective students answered her questions satisfactorily. She was pleased to be able to start within weeks of applying, since the introductory course, “Education Without Boundaries,” for new students, starts every month. During this course she learned how to juggle her time to fit in the 15 to 20 hours per week demanded by the program, learned to participate in learning communities, and learned to use the University’s bookstore and library. Her first writing assignment, a mini-research paper on a business topic, required that she pull several full-text articles from the online library’s databases, and use them correctly, following APA format (which was new to her). During that first month Laura took pre-assessments to determine her content strengths and abilities. She also met her mentor by phone, they shared each others’ backgrounds, and together developed an academic action plan (AAP) – based on transcript evaluations, pre-assessment scores, and Laura’s commitment to work hard and progress rapidly through the program. Her mentor inspired confidence in Laura’s decision to get a Bachelor of Science degree in Business with a Human Resources Management emphasis, and Laura felt the mentor had the skill, empathy, and expertise to guide her through.

Starting with liberal arts, Laura centered her studies in that first six months on completing the Language and Communications (L&C) Domain and Quantitative Literacy Domain assessments. It had been quite some time since Laura had written formally, so she enrolled in an eight-week instructor-led Composition course taught by one of Abromitis Online’s instructors (an education provider with whom WGU contracts). The online course followed an ambitious syllabus, moving through the mechanics of writing (e.g., grammar), expository essay writing, to even developing a 10 page research paper (getting references from the WGU library). While taking the course (and immediately afterward), Laura worked with WGU to schedule herself for assessments, a comprehensive objective exam and essay exam (which were taken at a proctored testing center of a local community college near her home), and she was able to turn in the research paper (with modifications suggested by her mentor) to pass the performance task requirement of the L&C domain.

Math had always been Laura’s strong suit, so she opted to self-study the competency requirements, using the WGU study guide, the recommended textbooks which she purchased from WGU’s online bookstore and a self-paced “Thinkwell’s Intermediate Algebra” package of CDs and Website e-learning; the package arrived in the mail, within five days of enrolling in this LR through her AAP. Laura enjoyed the QL assessments – a proctored objective examination taken by computer at the same testing center, covering algebra, probability, and statistics, as well as a more involved performance task – working with an Excel spreadsheet to demonstrate working knowledge of home financing, analyzing amortizations covering several scenarios.

The next few six-month terms allowed Laura to “get down to business” as she addressed the lower-level Business Core while also completing other liberal arts domains like Natural Sciences and Visual & Performance Arts. Much of the business core involved “brush up” work, using the study guides, textbooks that she ordered from WGU’s online bookstore. She also used e-learning modules in various business topics such as in accounting, law, economics, marketing, management, ethics, and information technology from the Thomson NetG library, which had been tailored to fit WGU’s business competencies. Laura particularly enjoyed these studies because she could relate these concepts to the multifaceted corporation in which she worked. The connections were remarkable! The liberal arts enabled Laura to study new areas which she only had minimal exposure to in high school. This refreshed that knowledge by Laura taking online classes, engaging with CD ROMs and websites (e.g., Thinkwell’s Science program). Those were fascinating at first, but Laura breathed a sigh of relief when she passed the associated assessments in those areas. An intriguing assessment, required of all bachelor’s degree students, is Collegiate-level Reasoning and Problem-solving Skills (CLRPS). A course from Abromitis Online which prepared Laura for this
assessment, involved researching a contemporary business topic from several perspectives, and writing a comprehensive essay explaining those sides as well as arguing for one’s own position. Laura chose to examine positions to make US companies and executives act ethically. Following the course study guide, she accessed some articles placed on e-reserve at the WGU online library about her specific question, and found related full-text articles from the library’s online ABI/Inform database to buttress the various viewpoints and her own perspective. She received great satisfaction from the feedback she received as she progressively completed the various CLRPS assignments, and was pleased when her final essay, which she turned in to WGU assessment, passed the requirements.

Laura’s final three (six-month) terms were devoted to upper-division business studies in the domains of Leadership and Professionalism, Business and Technical Knowledge, and Human Resource Management. Her managers at work recognized the additional knowledge and skills that she was learning in her business program, and Laura found herself with opportunities to use these in additional and more responsible duties on the job. Doors were starting to open at work, even though she had almost a year to graduate. Learning resources for these domains include textbooks, the NetG e-learning modules, as well as some targeted online courses from WGU’s education providers. To get the degree with an emphasis in human resource management, Laura had to pass the rigorous Professional in Human Resources (PHR) certification exam, developed and administered by the Human Resource Certification Institute or the Society for Human Resource Management. For this high stakes assessment, Laura spent over three months preparing diligently in an online course for that specific purpose, offered through WGU’s provider contract with Davenport University. Not only did she interact with the instructor and other students through online discussions, there was a certification preparation package that came with the course – textbooks, workbooks, and access to practice exams at a website. Laura was thrilled to finally pass that assessment and receive the industry standard, PHR certification; this is an important credential in addition to the WGU diploma that would further her career within her company or elsewhere.

The final requirement in Laura’s degree took most of her final semester: to compile a portfolio and develop a capstone project that demonstrated the breadth of her learning as well as the integration of knowledge and skill. For the portfolio the Laura wrote a reflective essay integrating the work she had done throughout her degree on a decision she made, revisiting that decision in light of who she had become. Additionally, for the capstone Laura completed a major project that integrated and synthesized competencies in all domains required for the bachelor in business degree; she demonstrated various competencies in language and communication, quantitative literacy, leadership and professionalism, and the several business areas of management, marketing, economics, ethics and professionalism, along with her major of human resource management.

The learning resources Laura used for these projects included the study guides in the WGU learning community, exemplary sample projects done by previous students, articles from the library, and review of textbooks and Thomson NetG modules. She chose a capstone that examined the human resource department within her company in light of the research and academic scholarship about successful human resource operations. Constant guidance from her mentor was integral to the successful completion of these items. When complete, Laura submitted her materials electronically for grading.

Conclusion

Since students utilize learning resources primarily to refresh and develop competencies that they then demonstrate through assessment, learning resources play a unique role at WGU. Mentors work with students to identify to best fit of LRs that will enable them to move at the appropriate pace through these assessments and their degree programs. The WGU experience with learning resources demonstrates how a competency-based higher education institution can collaborate with other educational enterprises to provide high quality instruction that fits the needs of working adult students. Such innovation leads the way for other programs to work on similar collaboratives in system, state, national, or international distance education consortia or initiatives.