Jennifer Schuberth
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My name is Jennifer Schuberth, I am an assistant professor at Portland State University and a co-founder of CORE: Calling Oregon to Reinvest in Education.

This February, Oregon may join three other states (TX, WA, IN) by establishing an official relationship with on-line Western Governors University (WGU) through legislation proposed by Representatives Dembrow and Johnson. This move could eventually open the way for students to apply Oregon Opportunity Grants to WGU. We feel that such a relationship with WGU would be disastrous for the students and citizens of Oregon.

What is Western Governors University? Their webpage explains that "the faculty at WGU is committed to WGU's unique student-centric, competency-based approach that places the greatest emphasis on student learning." However, WGU's faculty does not function in the traditional sense of the word "faculty." They neither teach, nor develop curriculum, nor conduct research. They are "experts with primary responsibility for defining the essential competencies for each subject area." In fact, faculty don't even develop online material; instead they identify already existing resources, much of which are open source. Students engage in self-study to prepare for assignments that test various competencies. Bob Mendenhall, President of WGU, explains "we use the technology to teach — not the faculty." "Student mentors" follow students' progress, contacting them to ask if they have completed tasks. "Course mentors" assist students in each "course," but they simply point students to resources, they do not discuss content. Assignments are graded by anonymous graders. There are no grades; students either pass or fail and 78% of them will fail out.

The adoption of WGU-Oregon will lead to very little progress towards the governor's education outcome targets (20-40-40). It will leave more low income students in debt, and will pull jobs out of Oregon. WGU's student body is non-traditional and its president has said that, "most WGU students would have a hard time getting accepted into a four-year state school."[1] Proponents argue that WGU provides these students the opportunity to fulfill their dreams; however, with a 22% graduation rate and 2011-2012 tuition at $5870, WGU leaves 78% of its mostly low-income students in worse financial positions after enrolling.

Moreover, WGU duplicates already existing programs. Portland Community College already offers many online courses taught by professors, not mentors. It costs only $2913 for the 2011-2012 school year. Oregon is already offering non-traditional students online education taught by real faculty at half the cost of WGU.

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[1] http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/localnews/2014547061_wgu20m.html

Unlike our community colleges and universities, WGU does not employ Oregonians, but instead hires people from all over the country and world at low wages. As the number of Oregonians attending higher education increases, greater reliance on WGU will not create new jobs in Oregon. Faculty who might have been hired, who would bring with them their expertise from top schools and leading industries from around the world, will not be hired. However, WGU also has the potential to lead to job losses for Oregonians. WGU offers undergraduate and graduate degrees in information technology, business, health science and education. It is not difficult to imagine that Oregon universities, faced with decreased funding, will decide they can no longer afford their education or business schools and will instead direct students to WGU's programs. If WGU is good enough to be associated with the Oregon higher education system, then how will PSU or UO's programs argue that they are worth the cost of the buildings and the professors? Why should students spend more on their education at a brick and mortar school when Oregon is telling them that WGU is a cheaper and faster way to get a B.A.?

Lastly, if the state decides that "competency" based college degrees are a good idea, then the state could easily provide a set of competency tests to Oregonians at a lower cost. WGU offers nothing more than an online set of textbooks, most of which are open source, coupled with a life coach. Oregon could allow students who are highly motivated to study on their own and take tests administered by the state, much like those for teacher certification. WGU has no library, no health center, no computer labs, no faculty offices, no professors and they produce no new online resources. When one understands what WGU actually offers, the $5870 per year price tag seems outrageous, as does the president's compensation of $689,150 (twice that of PSU's President).[2] If low income Oregonians are taking on upwards of $15,000 in debt to attend WGU, the state needs to ask, on what is that money being spent?

We should be providing quality K-12 education to all Oregonians and for those who want to and are academically prepared to go to college, we should provide quality higher education, taught by real faculty, that does not put students in debt for the rest of their lives. Education costs money, but alternatives such as WGU will be even more economically devastating in the long run for individuals and the state.

Thank you.

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[2] This number is from 2008, the last time that the data was available. http://www.deseretnews.com/article/700081912/Western-Governors-University-presidents-salary.html For a comparison of Mendenhall's compensation with other private universities and colleges, see: http://handbill.us/?p=5031