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Oregon Education Investment Board Testimony, February 7, 2012
(Due to teaching obligations, Dr. Schuberth was unable to attend the meeting. This testimony was submitted for public record).

I am an assistant professor of religion at Portland State University and a co-founder of CORE: Calling Oregon to Reinvest in Education. I know that we all share a concern for the quality of higher education in Oregon and for ensuring that we maintain quality as we explore new possibilities for partnerships such as Western Governors University(WGU). On January 3, 2011, I gave a testimony[1] to the Oregon Education Investment Board regarding WGU's education model, which I believe does not deliver a college education, as well as the possible negative economic impact of including WGU as part of the Oregon University System. In talking with colleagues and others familiar with WGU, serious questions have been raised about WGU. I would hope we receive satisfactory answers to these before we commit ourselves to working with them.

1. WGU will not release its regional accreditation materials. When legislation was pending concerning a relationship between WGU and the Washington State University System, Washington State faculty asked for these materials; WGU refused.[2] Almost every other private college and university makes these materials publicly available, often on their websites. We need to ask: why the secrecy? If WGU is to be a true partner with Oregon, we must demand transparency.

2. Colleagues in education have questioned how WGU received accreditation from the NCATE (The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education) considering their curriculum. Washington State Professor Johann Neem asked a fellow UW professor, a Microsoft engineer, and a professor from Shoreline Community College to review WGU's math curriculum; they found it at the level of "remedial math."[3] Despite NCATE accreditation, Oregon should ask for our own education graduate programs to conduct an independent review of WGU's curriculum to determine if they think graduates will be of the same quality as those coming out of our state programs.

3. In order for a student to continue receiving financial aid at a college or university, her university must report that she is "progressing." Serious questions have been raised about how WGU measures progress and some employees have said they believe students are being allowed to remain at WGU while doing little or no work.[4] Oregon has a responsibility to ensure that WGU is being held to, and is holding their students to, the same requirements for financial aid as any other OUS school. This is important, because taxpayers at the federal and state level provide a huge proportion of WGU's income in the form of student aid.[5] WGU's website directs applicants to advice about possible support from Pell grants, the VA, unemployment retraining and other sources paid for by taxes.

4. WGU claims to provide a cheaper education than online for-profit universities such as Phoenix and brick and mortars universities; however, in the past, WGU's tuition has been lower

in part because WGU was subsidized by federal earmarks.[6] WGU has spent over $2.2 million on lobbying since 1997, most of the money going to Robert Bennett, former Republican Senator of Utah, whether directly or through his Political Action Committee SNOWPAC.[7] This lobbying seems to have paid off between 2000-2006 in $21 million from the federal government. $12 million of this money was in earmarks. The Salt Lake Tribune reported that "other Utah schools were receiving much less,...In two of the six years Western Governors University has received earmarks, money came not from the education spending bill, but from the Defense Department. In 2004 and 2006 fiscal years, the school got $1 million each from the Defense budget, noted as "operations and maintenance - Air Force."[8] Proponents of WGU say that it will be better for students than for-profit colleges because it is non-profit. However, student dollars, and —if Oregon moves forward with legislation—Oregon tax payer money in the form of Oregon Opportunity grants, will be paying for millions in lobbying fees that in the end, take money away from other services and state universities. "Non-profit" simply means that they don't distribute profits to shareholders; "non-profit" does not mean they can't spend money on advertising and marketing, $700,000 plus administrators' salaries,[9] and millions in lobbying. The primary reason WGU is cheaper than competitors like the University of Phoenix is because they don't employ faculty that teach, not because they are somehow more efficient at delivering a college education. As a private non-profit, WGU is not required to make their finances public, nor do they. Oregon needs to ask for transparency so that we can accurately assess the true cost of a WGU education.

5. The most frequently disclosed bill for the WGU lobbyists was one concerning information about climate change.[10] Robert Bennett was one of the key sponsors of this bill, which claims that the executive branch shouldn't measure the environmental impact of various projects. (S.3230:NEPA Certainty Act).[11] Oregonians, who are not known as climate change deniers, need to know why a potential university in their system, WGU, would be lobbying with their money for this kind of bill.

6. The president of WGU, Robert Mendenhall, gave thousands to www.protectmarriage.com, an organization that was a key supporter of California's Prop 8.[12] This proposition states that "only marriage between a man and a woman is valid or recognized in California." This organization also supports "academic research which demonstrates what we already know: that children raised in the embrace of traditional marriage have the best chance to lead happy and productive lives, and that the next generation of society benefits from children raised in a home with both a mom and a dad."[13] Is an ideologically-driven research agenda that seeks to "prove what we already know" compatible with the research goals of other OUS schools? Does WGU extend benefits to domestic partners or same sex couples? Employees have said they do not. Oregon would have no control over WGU's hiring practices. Should tax dollars be used to promote policies that most Oregonians would consider discriminatory?

I hope that the OEIB and our legislators take the time to inform themselves about the true economic, educational and social costs of including Western Governors University in our university system. Thank you for your time.

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[1] http://www.oregon.gov/Gov/OEIB/OregonEducationInvestmentBoard.shtml
[2] http://handbill.us/?p=5155 ; personal conversations with Washington State University faculty.
[3] http://handbill.us/?p=5155
[4] http://fedupatwgu.wordpress.com/2012/01/20/fraud/ ; personal conversations with colleagues knowledgeable about WGU practices.
[5]http://usaspending.gov/search?query=&searchtype=&formFields=eyJSZWNpcGllbnROYW1lTGNhc2UiOlsiV2VzdGVybiBHb3Zlcm5vcnMgVW5pdmVyc2l0eSJdfQ==
[6] http://archive.sltrib.com/article.php?id=4087722&itype=NGPSID&keyword=&qtype=
[7] http://influenceexplorer.com/organization/western-governors-university/cd54ae2b4ec948b9a865d50eb2f28a8c
[8] http://archive.sltrib.com/article.php?id=4087722&itype=NGPSID&keyword=&qtype=
[9] http://handbill.us/?p=5031
[10] http://influenceexplorer.com/organization/western-governors-university/cd54ae2b4ec948b9a865d50eb2f28a8c
[11] http://thatsmycongress.com/index.php/2010/04/21/inhofes-ostrich-in-the-climate-sands-bill/
[12]http://data.influenceexplorer.com/contributions/?r#b3JnYW5pemF0aW9uX2Z0PVdlc3Rlcm4lMjBHb3Zlcm5vcnMlMjBVbml2ZXJzaXR5
[13] http://protectmarriage.com/about/our-programs