

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You're listening to Work in Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, Editor-in-Chief of WorkingNation. Work in Progress explores the rapidly changing workplace through conversations with innovators, educators, and decision-makers, people with solutions to today's workforce challenges. Across the country tens of millions of Americans don't have access to reliable internet making it difficult for them to connect to job and learning opportunities. This has been a problem for decades and has only been made more glaring by the pandemic. Joining me now on the podcast to discuss the impact of the digital divide and what is being done about it is Scott Pulsipher, President of the Western Governors University. Thank you, Scott, for taking the time to talk to me.

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

Thank you, Ramona, for having me. It's a pleasure to be with you again.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I love talking to you and I love hearing what you're thinking about because I always feel that WGU is on the cutting edge, on the leading edge of conversation about how we're educating people in the country. So, I appreciate your time.

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

Thank you for that.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I want to talk first about what's causing the digital divide. It's a term that's been around since the Clinton administration. But I think as we become more reliant on technology, it's becoming even a bigger, bigger gulf. And affordability is a problem and not just installation. So maybe talk a little bit about what you see and your perception on all of this.

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

Well, today, if you consider today's experience on a daily basis there's hardly a thing that we don't do that isn't reliant upon the internet. So, the internet is no longer this perceived privilege or some convenience. It is truly fundamental to one's quality of life and our society at large. And I think what we're recognizing is the way that the internet has become this new superhighway connecting businesses, and education, and healthcare and students that when you contemplate the reality of its infrastructure and access to it, you're now starting to see that digital divide. And some of those examples that we talk about is 5% of Americans, meaning this number's more than 15 million individuals do not have reliable access to broadband internet. And most of these individuals are living in rural areas or they may be on tribal lands. But in addition to those individuals, there are tens of millions of Americans who have connection in their neighborhood, but don't subscribe.

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

And most of that is due to affordability or even having the devices to do so. So, the lack of access to high-speed internet is fundamentally creating barriers to the engagement of these individuals and households in our society. So, we're finding that that divide if we don't address it is going to significantly disenfranchise large portions of our population for a long time. And in this immediate term, lastly, I'll just point out on an educational front, if you consider all the K-12 students as well as all those that are in

post-secondary education is just think of how many of them now are learning in a remote environment. One thing we fundamentally believe is that the remote learning model, it's here to stay. Even if it's in combination with in-person, in classroom, et cetera. So much learning is now occurring online. If individuals don't have that internet access, we certainly are going to find ourselves in a situation where large portions of our people are not able to engage in the economy, change their lives. You'll find the work and employment opportunities that they need to advance their future.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

For students this is really a critical issue.

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

Yeah, this was a lot of what I did early on too on the policy front around addressing this digital divide, highlighting the fact that we simply can't accept a circumstance where individuals from certain households where they don't have reliable internet, they're out there in parking lots of restaurants, or they're having to go to a library, or figure out where they can get Wi-Fi anywhere they possibly can. Because even if they are able to do so, the inconvenience of having to do that creates such barriers to the consistent and needed engagement that they need not just with their learning resources, but also with their faculty and peers. This is stunting progress and growth even of the students who are currently enrolled, let alone the now 10 million plus individuals who are still displaced from work because of the pandemic, that one of the biggest things that they need access to is that the re-skilling and up-skilling pathways, whether that's through post-secondary programs with universities and colleges, whether that's through job training or other models of learning.

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

So much of that is being enabled now through the internet and online. So, if you're not addressing these barriers, it's not even possible for you to dramatically expand access to high quality learning and training programs that individuals need to better their lives. So last thing I would say on this point is particularly related to the tech savvy workforce that's needed in the future where the Brookings Institute, for example, found that jobs requiring a high level of digital skill. They've more than quadrupled from 2002 to 2016. And the Smithsonian Science Education Center has reported that 2.4 million STEM jobs went unfilled in the US. It is nearly impossible, if not impossible, to address those jobs if you don't bridge the internet access divide, these digital accesses combined with digital literacy gaps. Solving those problems that is probably the first step in preparing the tech savvy workforce. So, this is truly fundamental, I think, to our talent supply chain for the future.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Picking up on one thing that you were talking about, the access, there's an affordability issue. It's not just in the rural areas, it's suburban and urban and the cost of it, I think I saw a number of that one third of the lower income households don't even have that access.

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

Yeah, that's right. And this is where there's been some really strong and positive trends, both at city level, state level, even at federal level. One of the things that we've often been pushing for is really how do you contemplate the digital access, the reliable high-speed internet access to 25/3. 25 download, 3 megabit speed upload. That has to be a minimum requirement for every household. And how do you address that when in fact the providers are there even whether it's cellular providers or wired based

providers with fiber optics, et cetera? How do households actually qualify for that under the provisions for those living at or below the poverty level, et cetera, the same way they might qualify for food assistance or other things like that?

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

Because so much of that opportunity is dependent upon having that internet access. This is that tens of millions of Americans who are living within the coverage areas of internet, but are kept out of it because of the affordability issues. I can't remember the exact number, but of those from low-income households, you are talking about as many as 1 in 10 or 1 in 15 of these households have students in them that are now not regularly interacting in their educational pathway as they should be because of not having this reliable internet at their home even if coverage is in the area.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

We can see that number that's very important not being able to connect. Are we seeing some of the impacts already? Is there a way to measure what this means? Is it putting people behind a year? Is it putting people behind even long?

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

There are certainly studies that have shown that the impact of having a imperfect or low quality online learning experience that's impacting students broadly. I can't recall all the specific statistics and what the surveys are highlighting, but there's certainly been plenty written about what this pandemic year has done for so many students in their learning progress, generally. Meaning those that were previously in room, but now are online only, and the impact for so many of them.

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

But then it goes even further when you're actually an individual who can't even engage in the online learning that then the impact of that is also going to be more long lasting. You can certainly anticipate the same problems that have already existed, which is it's amplifying the inequities for students of color, for students from low-income households. These ones are bearing the brunt and the disproportionate impact of the pandemic and the shift to increasing remote learning. So that is something that it's hard to argue that we're going to recover from well. How do we really catch up from the many months, if not a full year of a gap in learning that's occurred, especially those who don't have access to high-speed reliable internet.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

What are you doing at WGU to make sure that people who need the assistance is getting it?

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

Yeah, thank you for that question to highlight some of the things at WGU that we've found important, because WGU is still quite unique in that regard, that 100% of our engagement with students is online. It is dependent upon the internet and the other dynamics of that are that they don't have to even be online at a presidentcribed time, et cetera, because most of their courses and content learning resources they can consume when they're available to consume it.

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

Now that certainly doesn't exclude us from making sure that we manage and support the clinical rotations, and the demonstration teaching and that experiential learning. That's also part of our program. So we manage that with our students well as well. But when it comes down to the core technology model, the online learning, one of the things that we introduced is the online access scholarships, where we've committed a million dollars in the first year to provide computers and covering the ongoing cost of internet connectivity for recipients during their enrollment at WGU, because we are trying to and striving to be as close to an open access university as we possibly can.

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

And part of that is also ourselves trying to eliminate barriers that would preclude individuals from being able to participate in our already highly accessible programs. So that's been a key part of what we've done. Two other things I might highlight, Ramona are, one, we have partnered with the National Governors Association to truly convene government and nonprofit internet service providers to really work on defining and addressing state level drivers of digital inequities and making sure that two things really happen, what policy and practices have put in place, but also that there's funding and affordability endeavors on the part of providers, whether it's state and local budgets they're making these things more accessible. And then of course, on a national advocacy scale, that's something that I've taken on more broadly as I've continued to advance this narrative because as we do so we think that helps not only students at WGU, but students across the entire country.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Have you seen a pickup in the number of students during the pandemic, have more people gone to you saying, "Hey, I can't go in person somewhere. I'm going to go to Western Governors University."

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

In reality we have. One of those things I've often liked to say is the WGU was certainly not designed for a pandemic, but boy did it ever amplify our differentiators. We like other institutions have been early in investing in the online delivery and the technology enabled delivery model of learning have certainly been in a position that we were better prepared for the current dynamic. So we, in the last year alone year, over year increase in new student will probably be 25% plus overall. Interestingly, what we're also finding, Ramona is very encouraging, which is the student success, and the progress and completion rate is also going up notably.

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

We don't know if that is necessarily a function directly of what percentage of our students have been impacted economically and displaced in their jobs, such that it's accelerating their completion rate. But overall, I think we'll graduate somewhere between 47,000 and 50,000 students in this academic year alone. That's a significant increase year over year. So, we're seeing some really positive impacts and opportunity coming out as a result of this rapid shift going on.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I love that education quality is still at the heart of everything, no matter how you do it. So that's wonderful.

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

One of the things that I would offer to the listeners is just to recognize that all those things that we may have used before in terms of measuring the quality and accountability for quality in higher education often had to do with process and models of delivering everything else. But here in one year's time, all of a sudden we've had significant disruptions to the modality and to the way in which learning occurs and looks and how faculty and students interact, et cetera. I think this is a good reminder for everyone that when it comes to the promise of education, we have to really focus on, is it delivering value for the students? And are we measuring the quality of the programs, and the institutions and the student experience on the basis of how does it deliver value ultimately for the individual student that other dimensions of measures while inputs to that are certainly not the only or the best measures of quality.

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

Now, my expectation alone on this topic of online enabled learning is that this is going to be a reality of every future student's experience, even if it's in a hybrid mode, meaning even if some is in person and some I do online, our world of education is now rapidly kind of absorbing the impact of technology and powering that innovation, such that we need to make sure that we're focusing on the core measures of quality. How are students progressing? How are they persisting in their programs? Are they completing their programs? Are they getting the jobs and opportunities they expected as a result of completing those programs? Are we reducing the cost of acquiring those credentials? We have to be thinking about the measures that really are important in higher education versus how we delivered it, or the means and mechanisms by which we delivered it, which have long been our view of whether or not an institution or a program was good. We look more at process versus, "This may help us," also start to pivot our view to thinking about how we recast the measures of quality in higher education.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

The Biden administration's infrastructure plan does include, I think it's \$100 billion to extend the faster internet. And do you see that working as a public-private partnership type of model, where they put money in and work with local organizations?

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

In short, yes. That, one, we we're actually really excited about the fact that when the infrastructure spending bills or the infrastructure priorities are advanced at a federal level, as well as the state level, anytime that they're recognizing the importance of this digital divide is a really good thing. So we're quite encouraged by that. We do also believe that the real work can't happen without the public-private engagement. So there are many of the infrastructures that investments themselves that may be done by private organizations, but they need the funding and the capital to do so. And that can come through this federal spending, or it can come through state spending. So that that 15 million Americans that don't even have it, that the infrastructure can be put in place so that can reach everyone, whether that's through satellite, or cellular or fiber optic. That investment needs to be made and having that capital available to the private organizations to do so that's a really good thing.

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

The other way in which it can happen is also through the internet service providers being able to provide the affordable subscriptions, but they're doing so under federal programs that make it possible to do so. At the end of the day the problem isn't solved by one entity alone. It's really going to depend upon federal and state governments as well as then the private organizations, whether you're a service provider, a capital investment, et cetera. So we're excited about the progress that I think is happening.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

There's some controversy about the cost of this, but if we don't put this investment out there now, what's the cost to a society keeping people from that access?

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

For me personally, it's hard to estimate the total cost of it, but there's a really good analogy out there. I suppose, if you consider our interstate highway system and the investment that Eisenhower really pushed around this and how much interstate commerce has benefited in terms of bringing jobs, and commerce and goods, et cetera, to all corners of our country. And then the great dependency that we have on that interstate highway system, it's hard to argue that our GDP hasn't benefited tremendously from that and that communities, and the families in those communities, and the individual households that they also haven't benefited from the same. The interstate highway system did for us what the rail system could never probably do at that same scale.

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

It's not that rail still doesn't matter. So in like manner, I think of it this way, which is when you consider our economy is fundamentally dependent upon the individuals that contribute to it, if you choke out the talent supply chain by not investing in internet infrastructure and affordability provisions so that in fact, every household can have reliable access to high-speed internet, you're talking about tens of millions of individuals that are going to be precluded from participating in that talent supply chain.

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

Accessing the learning that they need to then have the skills and capabilities and knowledge they need to pursue the jobs, being able to actually be eligible for those jobs, and then increasingly tech dependent economy of our future. And that's probably even further amplified, Ramona by the current impact of COVID in the sense that the pandemic you can see even the work and the nature of it. Remote work is here to stay even in all of its variants. But one thing's for certain is that we can draw many, many more individuals into the economy when they have that reliable internet, because now their engagement in it is possible in a remote working environment that now has just been so vastly accelerated in one 12 month period that there's huge opportunity there, but it's only going to be realized if we make sure that the digital divide is addressed.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Yeah, there's a lot of people who don't want to leave their hometowns. They don't want to leave their state to work in a job. And one of the things I've been encouraged by is the fact that businesses are now saying, "Oh, you don't have to. You just need good internet and you can have that job that you might've had to move to Silicon Valley for before. Now you can do it from Chattanooga, Tennessee."

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

Yeah. If I may on this particular point, because I think WGU is a great case study in this regard, both on the students that we serve and the employees, the individuals that work for WGU. Because we've discovered that even from an employer standpoint, we're quite progressive. We have roughly 8,000 employees across the entire United States and even pre pandemic 80% of them were working remotely because we already knew that so much of the work, and the activities and tasks that they're involved with engagement with students, et cetera, it was not necessarily designed for an in-office location, all

the dynamics that are needed there, et cetera. So much of the design of the work already allowed us to access talent from anywhere because what they would be doing and how they'd be engaging is with now 135,000 students who are also across all 50 states and all the interactions with them are one-to-one and it's entirely dependent on the internet.

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

So when you consider WGU itself is so much of the students that we serve are already being served on the internet as the core foundation and all the individuals that we can attract into the talent that we need to serve those students are also everywhere. So we can really have a broad and diverse workforce development strategy, as well as of course, being a nationally scaled institution in a way that if we are entirely campus only and campus dependent. There's no way we could have expanded capacity of classrooms and buildings fast enough to serve the number of students we do today with our educational program. So WGU in some small way, I would say can be a good, interesting case study or microcosm of what a fully internet enabled town supply chain could look like in the future.

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

And now we're seeing the employment side of that town supply chain rapidly moving towards a remote based model or an increasingly remote based, even if it goes from like 10% or 20% to 40%, that's a dramatic shift when you're talking about 20% of 160 million individuals in the workforce in the US, that's massive. That's really positive, but I will say lastly that the money required to solve the digital divide is a lot smaller than what we had to invest in the capital and the infrastructure to build the interstate highway system.

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

So it's a relative return on investment is far greater on solving the digital divide than it would be on some other infrastructure work that needs to be done.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Thank you so much, Scott, for joining us.

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

Thank you, Ramona. It's a pleasure to be with you again.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I've been speaking to Scott Pulsipher, President of the Western Governors university. This is Ramona Schindelheim, Editor-in-Chief of WorkingNation. Thanks for listening.