

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.

I'm here with Scott Pulsipher, President of Western Governors University. Scott, thank you for joining me.

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

Oh, it's always a pleasure, Ramona.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Always a pleasure to talk to you too.

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

Great to see you.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I love what you guys do there, 'cause the thing I like the best about WGU is it's open to everybody. You don't have to be an 18-year-old coming out of high school, you don't have to be a 40-year-old, it's open to everybody. Tell everybody kind of the model of what your learning methodology is.

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

Yeah, it starts probably with a very simple truth. I want to say even that way, that is a truth, which is there is inherent worth in every individual, and that we believe and know that in fact, if given the opportunity, each one has something big to contribute. The other thing that we know is that everyone has the innate capacity for learning. It doesn't mean that we learn the same way or that we go at the same pace as everything else, but I think we know that every individual can learn.

That's probably one of the things that makes us most human is our ability to reason and learn and develop. So, we apply that by just simply recognizing and says, well, if in fact everyone can learn and everyone has the opportunity to contribute, how do we make these pathways as accessible and affordable and traversable for every individual?

I think the other key assumption is is that rather than trying to omit those that we think are going to do really, really well in our standardized model, we try to flip that around and say, how do we adapt to serve every individual? So it almost feels like to that one student, like the whole of the university, the whole of WGU was designed exclusively for them.

That's a very different approach than most traditional higher education where they can focus on those admissions criteria and who are the individuals we're looking for to fill out the class to assume that we're going to get the best of the best. We kind of reject all that notion and say, actually, isn't everyone top talent? Doesn't everyone have the capacity to develop and grow? Are we going to grow in different and complementary ways? Absolutely. But that said, that's an approach to say our institution was designed to help you be successful, and we're going to do that for each individual and then try to do it hundreds of thousands of times.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So, you're meeting the learner where they're at and where their needs are?

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

Oh yeah, absolutely. I think the idea of personalized or individualized is often the way I like to say it, 'cause individualized is, we are trying to make it highly probable that every one of you are going to be able to complete the education credential that you came to acquire from WGU. When you do that, that's going to be the first step on your path to living a self-determined life.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I like that you make that connection, that it's not just about getting that piece of paper or that piece of data now on your computer that says you graduated-

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

Yeah, right. Digital credential, yeah.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

... right, but it's a step toward an economic mobility, a step toward a goal for your career.

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

That's right. Yeah, and that may be even another contrast with our thinking around education and its purpose and design is that we see education as a means to an end. It's also captured in our mission statement, to change lives for the better by creating pathways to opportunity. So if our whole mission is to activate talent into opportunity, then you see the design of education as a means by which individuals can acquire their knowledge, skill, and ability to advance their life.

It's not for a hobby, it's not for personal interests. There's plenty of options out there for people to do that, our value proposition is how do we help you attain the opportunity that education is the pathway for? So when you design that way, we measure our success differently. We think about student progress, pace, persistence towards completing the credential, but we also obsess about now having completed that credential, did you actually achieve the opportunity? Was that economically valuable? Are you engaged in your world of work? We look at all those graduate outcomes and ensuring that the value proposition opportunity was now made possible by having traversed the education credential at WGU.

So, when you come back to this personalized learning approach too, by the way, is that we intend to deliver that value proposition for every individual that starts. So, personalizing learning means that regardless of who you are and your background and your disposition or even your aspirations, we're trying to ensure that we have an equal probability of success regardless of who you are.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Even before the pandemic, you were online too, so you don't have to be there in Utah to take these courses. So, if I say, "Ooh, that sounds like WGU's for me," how is that plan put in place for me? How's that learning plan put into place?

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

Yeah, it really does start with even just discovering that WGU has options out there for you, so I like to talk about a simple flow of that. What is it that you want to do? So, what vocational identity do you have? How do you see yourself contributing to the world? Once you have that idea, then you're narrowing down to like, all right, which of the programs that WGU offers are right for you, given what you want to do? Then the question is like, where should you start?

So not every student should start at the same trailhead, if you will, not every individual should go at the same pace. It's how do we start understanding your persona, your approach to learning, your prior learning experience, the credits you already have, all those things, like what job you currently do, to say, all right, we're now going to present to you a personalized trail, if you will, or a pathway again to say, this is going to likely increase your probability of success. Then there's of course the question, when do you want to start? How do you want to pay for it? That's true, but then you start.

So, much now is actually, all right, we understood what we could from what you came to us with, but now it's all about observing what you're doing and how do you engage with different content, how you're interacting with your instructors, what kind of challenges do you have in life that are disrupting or changing your approach to your education? We're adapting in all of that real-time based upon all of that interaction and those observations, et cetera. The whole point is to provide not only technology-enabled recommendations as to what's your next best step, but also having all of the mentorship that comes from your instructors and your program mentor.

By the way, that's a good reminder. The program mentor is someone who's with you from the day you start your program until the day you graduate. Their job isn't to just augment your instruction and your learning, but to also help you deal with all the challenges, disruptions, offsets that you may have, et cetera, and that mentor's still been a huge contributor. It's like a bit of a secret sauce into helping our students complete at much higher rate than they might otherwise.

So, that's how we're utilizing all of this. What are you coming to us with? What can we learn about you? What approach do you have? But then also really interpreting all the behaviors you have while you're engaged with us, so we can present to you the best recommendations as to what would be your right next step. That's how we think about it.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

As technology, the world of work change, AI, all of this stuff that comes into play on a daily basis, how it changes what employers are looking for, what you need in your career, how do you adapt at WGU?

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

Yeah, you probably hit on two key things in that question to begin with. One is, how are we always adapting and advancing the curriculum to be relevant to the world of work? That certainly, technology's increasing the pace of that change. We know the shelf life of skills is declining or the knowledge is declining, meaning you're going to have to make sure that what you're learning in our curriculum is directly relevant to the opportunities you see within the next call it three to five year horizon. That may be two to three year horizon, maybe one to two year horizon in the future.

We're always leveraging our engagements with our advisory, our employer networks, we have over 250 employers, so that we're always ingesting that workforce data back into the design and development of our curriculum. I think one of the key things that our students rely upon us is for the relevancy of what they've learned to the jobs they want to pursue.

The second key thing is is that we are trying to ensure that we're leveraging the best and greatest technology, latest technology. AI is certainly one of those. It is a tool that will dramatically increase our

ability to personalize and individualize that learning and the journey through it. It will certainly increase our ability to at pace develop the curriculum, dramatically diversify the assessment, our item banks for those assessments.

It's ensuring that we're leveraging the technology to be more relevant, more timely, more personal, and ultimately more efficient, therefore lower cost for our students as well. Technology is a really powerful tool. It certainly has been a key ingredient for our ability to implement the innovation that we've been dreaming up, is how do we leverage technology to implement that innovation?

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You just are announcing a new relationship partnership with Social Finance.

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

Yeah.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Tell me about that program.

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

Yeah, we're really excited about our new partnership with Social Finance. Social Finance, you may know, has had a long history in providing really focused financial models and funding models to support the activation of talent from all those underrepresented communities, that we need more and more of that talent into the workforce. This is an opportunity for WGU, a large nationally scaled provider of very workforce-relevant credentials and pathways.

This is the one that was particularly focused on health, nursing in particular, that even right now there's estimated 35,000 to 40,000 nursing vacancies exist across the country. We know that number is going to keep growing, by the way, because of the aging population and the higher demand for the healthcare services that are needed. So here at WGU as a nationally scaled provider of nursing programs, that we're the institution that operates in the most states for pre-licensure nursing programs, we're now in over 20 different states. This allows us to leverage that scale to solve a strategic workforce gap that exists in healthcare. The hospitals, health systems, community health centers that need those qualified individuals, here is a talent provider now that can do that with a high degree of relevancy, really high pass rates.

A second key thing in that is not just the strategic workforce, but the diversification of that workforce. WGU has that track record of activating these underrepresented populations, whether they're rural communities, underrepresented races or ethnicities, low-income households. This is also helping that workforce represent the communities that they're serving.

The third key thing with Social Finance and partnership is that we can design a funding model that's actually adding economic benefit to all the parties involved. I'll start with the employer, because the employer, there's a really high cost. It's estimated to be roughly \$50,000 a year for every unfilled role and the hiring and turnover associated with that. If you also consider vacancy rate and hiring of traveling nurses, hospitals and health systems, they're bearing a lot of economic costs for the unfilled nursing positions. So if they can actually fill those positions with guaranteed high quality talent, it's worth it to them.

The second key one is certainly these diverse individuals from different backgrounds, affordability of a credential, it's a real deterrent to getting the workforce that you need. Well, here's a model by which

roughly \$35,000, half of the program to complete at WGU can be funded out of this fund with Social Finance to provide that upfront funding of your education. Then of course for WGU, we're the provider of that. That funding for the student is coming to us to provide all those services to that individual.

Now, the funds can also be used to cover non-tuition-related expenses. The net of that though is now we as a low-cost provider, but with high quality and highly relevant programs and individuals now have a much more lower cost option with also the financing and funding to go with it, and now an employer can have guaranteed talent. The benefit of that is now the employer is also participating in the repayment of the financing. So if one of those graduates goes to employer partner and stays for three years, they can have their full loan repaid in three years. Not 20 years, in three years.

If for any reason you don't go to a partner employer, you will also have a loan, but that loan will be at concessionary rates. You're basically repaying principal only, no interest, and so you get a no interest loan to fund your education into that opportunity. It even accounts for downside risk about if you aren't employed or you don't get a job or you aren't above an earnings threshold, you're not going to pay for the education.

Now, we know that you didn't start your education because you didn't want to be not employed. You want to be employed, you want to have a great job, and so we see the benefit of WGU with its ability to activate that diversity of talent at a low cost with direct relevancy, that allows us to provide a national-scaled solution by which we can bring those talent into the workforce, and employers are also solving their workforce gaps and their economic costs associated with it. So, we think it's like a trifecta of goodness in terms of education to opportunity.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

When is this going to go into effect?

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

We launched it just this July, and so we have our first students enrolling in the program supported by the fund. WGU is also a partner to that. We're seeking broader base of funders that are contributing to the \$100 million dollar capital base that is the ReNEW Fund. That is reinvigorating nursing educational workforce, that's what the ReNEW Fund stands for. That's \$100 million capital facility that allows us to finance thousands of new nurses over the next 10 years.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

In that, do they get the WGU mentorship, the whole package?

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

They get the whole package.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Yeah.

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

They get the full package. We would afford them everything that they need to increase the probability that they're completing. That's one of those strengths too, is that the licensure pass rates of our nurses is also above the national averages for nursing pass rates, so not only can you go at the pace that's right

for you and do it at a lower cost and have this strategic funding from the ReNEW Fund, you're also going to be highly skilled and highly qualified for the jobs that you're seeking. So, we just launched that this month.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You said you're in certain number of states, so that includes the healthcare partners that you may have who are potential employers?

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

That's right, because when we're in over 20 states that we offer pre-licensure programs into, those health systems and hospitals, et cetera, are also mostly aligned with those states. Now, we're not stopping at 20 states. WGU will continue to increase the number of states in which we can provide these initial licensure programs. That's one of those key things. This is where, if you will, that regulatory triad exists around higher ed is that states have to authorize the institution, you have to be accredited, you also have to have the federal regulatory compliance and stuff like that. So for nursing, this is one of those cases, you have to be authorized state by state and so you don't have any reciprocity across the country.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

This sounds like the idea, as we talked before, is meeting the learner where they're at, but you're also meeting the employer where their needs are-

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

That's right.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

... and in the partnership together, you're creating opportunity.

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

Yeah, you're actually hinting at a theme that was also part of WGU and its founding. Western Governors University, it was actually established by states for states. That is still true if you talk about the US and we'll talk about the economy broadly, but in fact, there's not a national economy in the sense of like, oh no, all sectors operate in all states, and all workforce needs are the same across all states and communities. The national economy is actually just made up of all the diverse regional economies and state economies.

So we've even seen that in our enrollment, is that programs that will be in really high demand in one area will not be the same programs that are in high demand in another area. The same way when you look at employers and the demand for talent, it's like, oh no, that's as diverse as the states are that comprise the United States. So that created by states for states is a theme that still exists in WGU today, that our national scale has actually happened because we've been relevant locally.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Scott, thank you.

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

Thank you so much, Ramona.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Always a pleasure.

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University president:

It's always great to be with you.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Scott Pulsipher, President of Western Governors University, he sat down with me for the Work in Progress Podcast at the JFF Horizons conference in Washington in July. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, Editor-in-Chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.