



September 21, 2021

Sen. Scott R. Martin  
351 Main Capitol  
Harrisburg, PA 17120-3013

Sen. Camera Bartolotta  
19 East Wing  
Harrisburg, PA 17120-3046

SENT VIA EMAIL

Chairman Martin, Chairwoman Bartolotta, Chairwoman Williams, Chairwoman Tartaglione, and Members of the Committees, thank you for the opportunity to share my views about the importance of adult education as part of Pennsylvania's workforce development system. First and foremost, I applaud your strong commitment to Pennsylvania's workforce.

I am Rebecca Watts, serving as Regional Vice President in the Northeast for Western Governors University (WGU). Since our founding in 1997 WGU has been committed to providing a high quality, accredited, accessible, low cost, career-aligned way for adult learners to expand their skills and knowledge to qualify for in-demand careers.

I commend you for considering the importance of adult literacy and basic skills attainment as a critical first step in assuring pathways to opportunity. I urge you to consider building on those foundations by including career-relevant postsecondary education as part of the toolkit for adult learners to ensure that they can thrive, and that employers can find the skilled workers they need.

Pennsylvania's workforce needs are changing, and the value of educational attainment is clear: People earning a bachelor's degree or higher typically have higher lifetime earnings, lower odds of unemployment, and better health outcomes than those who have not. In fact, the median income for the holder of a bachelor's degree in Pennsylvania is \$54,358 (adjusted to 2019 dollars), while high school graduates earn \$32,000, a disparity that compounds over generations. It is estimated that in the "future of work," fully two-thirds of all jobs will require a postsecondary credential.



As workforce needs evolve, adult workers must respond quickly to a rapidly changing employment landscape. Even as the demand for some skillsets wane, we are seeing new, skill-intensive fields emerge, like cybersecurity, health care coordination, and data analytics, with a growing demand for skilled workers to fill those jobs.

To obtain the knowledge required for those jobs, adults need education-to-career pathways that fit into the spaces of their lives, meet them where they are, allow them to leverage their experience to accelerate learning, and enable them to thrive—financially and otherwise. This is where innovative, online, competency-based higher education comes in.

While Pennsylvania has made some progress toward its attainment goal of 60% of residents holding a postsecondary credential by 2025, there is much more work to be done. An estimated 31.4 percent of Pennsylvanians 25 and older hold at least a bachelor's degree, according to the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey covering the five-year period ending in 2019, and nearly 10 percent have had some college experience, but have not yet achieved a degree or credential. There is untapped human potential here, and these are the people WGU was built to serve.

## WGU

WGU was founded by a bipartisan group of 19 governors nearly 25 years ago to expand access to high-quality education for historically underserved individuals and align education outcomes to workforce needs. They recognized that some constituencies were not served well by traditional higher education options in their states, including adult learners, first-generation students, students of color, those from low-income backgrounds, those with some college but no degree, and those from rural communities. And they saw that online, competency-based education could offer an alternative.

At WGU, we are committed to renewing the promise of higher education for adult learners as the surest path to opportunity. We are an accredited, nonprofit, online, competency-based university, serving more than 130,000 active students across all 50 states. Today we serve the very population our founders intended: In Pennsylvania, WGU is currently serving more than 2,400 students, 84% of whom are working, 59% full time. Their average age is 34, and two-thirds are from one or more historically under-represented populations.



We are innovating around lifelong learning, new financing approaches, and exploring ways that a skills-based future can better align individuals with employers through relevant educational opportunities. We know that talent is universal, but opportunity is not. WGU was founded to doing something about that.

WGU offers 60 accredited and career-aligned degrees across four colleges: Health Professions, IT, Business and Teaching. Our programs measure demonstration of skills mastery, not time spent in a classroom. As a result, our bachelors' degree graduates finish in an average of two years and three months. And with fixed-rate tuition and an all-you-can-learn model, they complete at an average cost under \$18,000, with debt per graduate less than half the national average, while achieving income gains at twice the national average.

As you consider the challenges and opportunities in Pennsylvania, we suggest that an optimal workforce development system must invest in human potential effectively, equitably, and efficiently. Flexible, affordable, fully online higher education can help you to do just that.

At WGU, we stand ready to partner with Pennsylvania to do what we were built to do: address workforce challenges, serve historically under-represented individuals and communities, and ensure that adult learners can access the tools they need to help Pennsylvanians meet the commonwealth's essential employer talent needs. Thank you.