**Online university aims at working adults**

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In Fayette County, one in five residents has some college but not a degree, providing fertile territory for Indiana’s newest public university.

Adults who have work and family but still want a college degree are a target for WGU Indiana. It specializes in offering a chance for people to learn from home at their own speed.

Indiana joined WGU – Western Governors University – in June 2010. The online university became the eighth state university. The university started during a meeting of the Western Governors Association in 1995.

Former Pentagon employee and Indiana school teacher Allison Barber became the chancellor and has led the university through its formative years.

Since WGU is online, classes are always available. In traditional settings, some working adults trying to get a degree can’t graduate because they have to wait on one course that might not be offered until the following semester or year, she said. That never happens at WGU. They’re never dependent on a course offering or professor.

Barber said by telephone that Indiana’s model is unique.

“We were the first state to take the online model and make it a state university,” she explained. “Since Indiana did it in 2010, Washington state and Texas have both launched their online university model following in Indiana’s footsteps.”

The university has 2,100 Indiana residents enrolled, she said. Enrollment is growing at 30 percent a year. To date, more than 150 have graduated. Students graduate every month, she said.

“The reason that is possible is because the student can transfer in credits from other universities or Ivy Tech,” she said. “They come to us with some college already and then because we have an accelerated program, students can move at a quick pace to get their degrees, which adults love. We’re all about the adults.”

The university does not spend time teaching students what they already know, Barber said. Many adults have work experience that can be applied to their education.

“Being competency based means that you come to WGU Indiana and can test out of what you’re already competent in,” she said. “Then whatever are you need to learn to be successful is what you will focus on. Our adults are drawn to this model because it’s really just disheartening for adults who decide to go back to college to sit in the classroom being taught what they’ve done on the job for the past 15 years.”
The university enrolls every month because working adults may not be able to start college in August or January.

The term is six months instead of semesters which is better for working adults. If someone enrolls in April, their school year is April to April and every student has their own school year, she said.

WGU charges a flat fee for a term rather than charging by the credit hour.

Students can take as many courses in a term as they can handle for a flat rate of about $3,000 a term, she said. If the university charged by the credit hour, it would discourage students from moving as quickly as the university encourages them to do.

Students can take 12 credits, which is needed to receive financial aid, but many students take 18, 20 or more of what the university calls competency hours, she said.

“We want to encourage adults to take as many classes as they possibly can, as quickly as they can, so they are back out in the workforce with their bachelor’s or their master’s degree,” she said.

Tuition has never been raised since launching the university, in part because the overhead is so low with mentors, counselors and professors operating from their homes, she said. The office in downtown Indianapolis includes only a small staff.

WGU Indiana has a partnership with Ivy Tech Community College, Barber said.

Students who graduate from Ivy Tech with an associates degree, which makes them marketable for certain jobs, can transfer to WGU Indiana, making them eligible for a 5 percent tuition discount. They are also eligible for Ivy Tech scholarships. All credits transfer towards their bachelor’s degree so they can earn that degree in two years, usually sooner.

The university is fully accredited so credits transfer into and out of the university, she said.

“We rarely see students transferring out of WGU Indiana because they are usually transferring to us to finish what they started somewhere else,” she said. “We have seen students transfer in with credits from three or four colleges and we tie it all together for them to finish their program.”

The university offers four areas of study: Teachers College, College of Health Professions, College of Business and College of Information Technology. They are in high demand for employment. The newest degree program is a Masters of Science in Information Technology-Network Management.

The student experience at WGU Indiana is rated higher than at traditional colleges. Mentors talk with students at least weekly, she explained.
“The way we look at adults is ‘How can we show them the most respect?’” Barber said. “We show them respect by not teaching them what they already know. We then give them access to higher education that is affordable. We respect they are busy so they can start whatever month works for them. Then we will respect their time so they can accelerate to their college degree and they do it on their own path.”