



**IMS GLOBAL**<sup>TM</sup>  
Learning Consortium

## Article Series on Learning Impact

### The Future of Competency-based Learning

In light of today's economic and workforce-related trends, higher education institutions need to move away from measuring the amount of time spent in the classroom and toward competency-based learning, says the president of one of the nation's largest online universities.

"Competency-based education, the concept of measuring learning rather than time, just makes so much sense and I think education in general eventually has to evolve there," said Bob Mendenhall, president of [Western Governors University](#) (WGU). "There are 37 million adults in this country with some college education and no degree. That's 22 percent of our entire workforce. And frankly, their jobs are going away and they are planning to remain in the workforce for another 20 or 30 years. Measuring competencies meets this lifelong learning model. They are simply going to need more education in order to keep the job they have, much less get a better job."

Mendenhall, who has more than 30 years of experience in technology-based education, will be a plenary speaker at [Learning Impact 2013](#) in San Diego, 13-16 May 2013.

Founded by 19 governors, WGU is a non-profit, accredited online university that enrolls about 40,000 students from all 50 states. Its primary market is adult learners who are willing to commit to at least 20 hours of study weekly in a variety of disciplines. Average time to earn a bachelor's degree through WGU is three years, compared to the average five years at a traditional university, and the cost of tuition at the Salt Lake City-based university is only \$6,000 per year. WGU's enrollment continues to grow by 30 percent annually.

“The real innovation that we’ve created is this competency-based learning, which essentially means that we’ve defined for each degree the competencies that are expected of a graduate,” he said. “We develop assessments to measure those competencies, and when someone can demonstrate that they possess all those competencies, they graduate independent of how long it took. We’re really measuring learning rather than time. That’s particularly attractive to working adults who have been in the workforce and have developed competencies that exceed their formal credit hours. If you’ve been working in the accounting department for 15 years, you really don’t want to be told that you have to go back and take Accounting 101.”

Content for WGU’s programs is provided by 80 learning resource providers.

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– *Bob Mendenhall, president of Western Governors University*

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While the university recommends that students have available a computer equipped with certain browsers and tools, administrators also are aware of the growing popularity of mobile devices for accessing content.

WGU has an integration strategy which allows for the efficient and seamless transfer of content from its many learning resource providers to the variety of platforms used by its students. Mark Weathers, the university’s chief technology officer and liaison with the [IMS Global Learning Consortium](#), said that in order to ensure interoperability, the university maintains a set of

standards with which potential learning resource providers are expected to align.

“Before IMS came along, we had to go in and figure out how to connect with each one of these providers,” he said. “Out of 80 learning resources, we probably have about 50 custom drivers. When the LTI ([Learning Tools Interoperability](#)) standard was published, we realized this would solve a lot of our problems. If we can get our learning resource providers to adhere to the LTI standard, then we only have to write one driver that supports LTI and it will save us an immense amount of time. On our strategy going forward, LTI is the preferred way of providing interoperability to our providers. We currently have about 20 LTI-based providers in production.”

Weathers said making the content available to students quickly is the most important factor when working with learning resource providers. For those whose products meet LTI standards, he said they can often get them online in less than a month. For those providers requiring a custom driver, the time to market can often take as much as six months.

“Getting everyone together without an organization like IMS would be virtually impossible,” he said. “With a lot of providers, they think their way is the best way. What we’re looking for is a common way that everyone can use.”

As institutions of all types look at competency-based and other innovative learning models, they need to establish a firm integration strategy based on open standards that allow for the seamless integration of educational applications, content and tools. This strategy is what the IMS Global member community calls the “Open Innovation Revolution” to enable institutions to experience as much as a hundred times improvement in the adoption of digital learning tools to improve the teaching and learning experience. Without a firm integration strategy, it is a major challenge to optimize digital technology to meet students’ diverse learning needs.

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Mendenhall said some institutions like Southern New Hampshire University, Northern Arizona University, and the University of Wisconsin are beginning to explore using the competency-

based model in some of their offerings. He believes higher education will continue to move in this direction although it will likely take decades to fully accept.

“I think the current economic climate adds pressure for change,” he added. “We see universities at least thinking about new models that would allow them to make more revenue or keep their costs from continuing to escalate at twice the rate of inflation. It doesn’t mean that we get rid of classrooms or do it all online. It really means, in the end, that we carefully define the learning outcomes and we measure them. To me, it implies that we find a way to individualize it more to the students, which then implies that it’s not necessarily a four-month class. And that implies that it has to be facilitated by interoperable technology in order to individualize it.”

## About IMS Global Learning Consortium

IMS Global is a nonprofit organization that advances technology that can affordably scale and improve educational participation and attainment. IMS members are leading suppliers, institutions and government organizations that are enabling the future of education by collaborating on interoperability and adoption initiatives. IMS sponsors Learning Impact: A global awards program and conference to recognize the impact of innovative technology on educational access, affordability, and quality. For more information visit [www.imsglobal.org](http://www.imsglobal.org) or contact [info@imglobal.org](mailto:info@imglobal.org).

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