With IMS Global's Learning Tools Interoperability Standard, Providing Students Content at Western Governors University is Easier and More Efficient

Western Governors University (WGU) is one of the most progressive institutions for higher learning in America today. Because the non-profit, accredited online university is competency based, its nearly 40,000 students, spread across all 50 states, can learn at their own pace. Average time to earn a bachelor's degree through WGU is three years, and the cost of tuition is less than $6,000 annually, including all books, courseware, and online lab fees. No wonder the institution's enrollment continues to grow by 30 percent annually and student satisfaction is rated at 97 percent.

"It's interesting that there is still a lot of discussion and debate about the true higher purpose of a college education," said Steve Klingler, WGU's vice president of student experience. "At WGU, we are not confused. Our mission is to help students achieve their dreams for a degree and career success by providing a personal, flexible, and affordable education based on real-world competencies."

WGU's online degrees are based on real-world competencies as opposed to seat time or credit hours. The focus is on ensuring students possess the skills and knowledge needed to be successful, not whether or not they've attended class. The university's curriculum is centralized and the majority of its courseware and learning materials are supported by more than 50 content providers.

"Unlike traditional environments where faculty have full ownership of what is taught, how it is taught, and how learning is measured in each course, our courses are defined and developed by a centralized team of instructional designers, assessment specialists, faculty and other subject matter experts. This ensures quality and consistency for all students, regardless of which faculty are supporting them, and it frees up our teaching faculty to spend more time working with individual students."

There are four colleges within the university: business, education, information technology, and health professions. And Klingler said WGU is constantly in the process of adding new courses.

While the centralized approach ensures all WGU students are provided the best quality learning materials, until recently, the university was faced with the challenge of integrating all that disparate content into their student learning system.

"Two years ago the vast majority of our providers didn't support any form of integration," said Klingler.
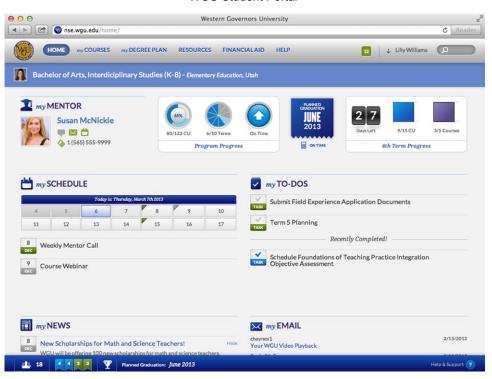
"So we would provide a lot of written instructions within our course space, telling students where to go in a provider's site and what to do when they got there. Additionally, we provided support within our system to request a key code for the student who wasn't already enrolled with that provider, and faculty would approve the request and then our Learning Resource Desk would actually issue the code and email it to the student. Depending on the provider, that process might literally take hours or days. In some cases, the providers were physically shipping the materials, CD-ROMs, books, and so forth. Those manual processes were time consuming and frustrating for students who are already very busy and come to us seeking the flexibility to complete their studies."

That approach forced WGU to perform dozens of custom integrations, he added. A number of standards were followed, but still seemed prone to IT intervention and custom programming every single time because of differences in how the various standards were implemented.

Klingler said that when the IMS Global Learning Consortium's Learning Tools Interoperability (LTI™) standard was initially introduced in 2010, it was perceived by some as yet another standard among many. "LTI became increasingly prominent, however, and we became increasingly insistent that our providers support LTI. It was clear that was the standard we wanted to embrace."

The most obvious advantage to supporting the LTI standard, he said, is that it allows for the seamless transfer of materials to the myriad computers and mobile platforms favored by WGU's students. "LTI has been an amazing solution because it is the only integration standard that I'm aware of that simply works. If providers say they support LTI, we just know we're good to go. Even partners who had previously implemented custom integration APIs or were dependent on key codes, as we've come up for contract renewals, we have asked them to implement LTI and they are always able to do it in just a couple weeks or less. And it works. It's been just a wonderful solution all the way around."

Because WGU is student centric, the seamless transfer of data between the institution and its content providers enables the university to support the learning success of each student. "It's good to know what a student is doing, but if you can't bring all of that data together, it's meaningless," Klingler added. "We just did some analysis with a provider and they were adamant that they'd done the analysis and that there was nothing conclusive there. Once we got the data, we were able to combine that with course level formative and summative assessment

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data and some really important discoveries came out of that. It allowed us to identify some very distinct study patterns that successful students employ versus unsuccessful students. It enabled us to provide effective guidance to all students that raised achievement in that course."

Although there are universities that have larger enrollments than WGU, the university enjoys purchasing influence with content providers due to its central curriculum model. "We have, for example, some 9,000 students enrolled in three college Algebra courses right now, all using the same learning materials. We've been able to leverage that influence to secure commitments for supporting LTI. And as we get a partner to support LTI, we gain the benefit of that across their platform for all their courses."

"Smaller providers have actually been more receptive and nimble," Klingler added. "Take MindEdge, for example. They only have a dozen course offerings, but they implemented LTI in under a week, and that was helpful leverage, too, because we could then say to the big publishers: 'If the little guys can do this in a week, even with your bureaucracy, surely you can do this in a month.' We let it be known that as we're adopting new courses, where we have multiple strong offerings to choose from, we will favor the ones that support LTI."

Another benefit of the seamless transfer of data is that it's enabled WGU to adopt a new business model for publishers' billing systems. Previously, the university paid publishers for key codes in advance and then allocated them to students as they were needed.

"Because of the seamlessness of LTI integration, we have been able to radically change the business model and secure agreement from each of our providers in that we no longer pay for entitlements in advance. In fact, we don't even pay simply because a student went seamlessly to their site through a LTI integration," he said. "We have worked with each provider to identify a usage threshold that constitutes student engagement with the resource. For some courses, it might be a student has accessed the course material five times. Or it might be that they've read 40 pages or spent 30 minutes in the online lab. LTI allows us to eliminate the key codes and simply let the systems seamlessly provision the student account and provide single sign on access when the student is ready. With LTI and the additional tracking that we've deployed, we know what the student is studying and can identify when and where they need extra help from faculty. This new business model better serves students and it aligns the actual expense with the actual usage, which is especially important in a competency-based program where every student may not need to use all the materials. The new model has been a really useful thing and has allowed us to eliminate not only delays and administrative overhead, but has enabled us to reduce and better manage our costs.

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In fact, over the past 15 months we have reduced the cost of our learning resources by 31.5% through a combination of this revised business model and by simply negotiating for lower prices. Additionally, in an increasing number of courses our partners have agreed to take this business model to the next level and we now pay for learning resources only when students actually pass the course. Since WGU creates our own assessments the only way our courseware providers can make more money is by increasing the number of students who successfully learn. This has changed the dynamic from a transactional customer/vendor relationship to something more strategic where all parties are unquestionably aligned around identifying student needs and supporting their success."

Rob Abel, IMS Global's chief executive officer, said that WGU offers an innovative education model based on open standards that enable the university to deliver unprecedented agility and flexibility to support competency based learning. "Adopting the IMS Global LTI standard not only allows for the seamless transfer of content to improve the learning experience for their students, but also provides the university timely information to more effectively personalize the course materials to help students succeed. It's the ideal learning impact for which the standard was intended."

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 or contact info@imsglobal.org.

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