



Certified Internet  
Web Professional

CASE STUDY

## Western Governors University

# CIW Provides and Validates Technical Competence for I.T. Students at WGU

### Western Governors University

A fully accredited, competency-based online university

### HEADQUARTERS

Salt Lake City, Utah

### PROGRAM

Bachelor of Science, Information Technology

More than 3,800 active students in IT degree program

*"The robustness and rigor of CIW exams and content [fits with the] high level of quality within our IT degree program. And we didn't have to create our own curriculum or exams."*

—Gwen Britton  
Senior Product Manager of Information Technology Programs, WGU

## Challenge

Western Governors University had launched its Information Technology (IT) degree program nine months earlier, but the program was missing some elements. WGU needed to quickly fill these gaps to serve its students and the IT industry.

As an online university, WGU has no "brick and mortar" campus; it offers self-paced, self-study distance learning to motivated students who want to earn degrees but lack the time or proximity to attend scheduled college classes. Mentors, rather than instructors, assist students in planning and executing their own matriculation. As a nonprofit online university, WGU is unique. The average age of WGU's students is 36 to 38 years, and most are working people going back to school to finish degrees or to earn new degrees for advancement at their jobs. Some are career transitioners.

WGU is one of the most widely accredited online universities, and it's the first online university in the United States to be competency-based: All advancement is based on passing assessments, or exams, which gauge competency. This competency-based self-study model requires students to prove their knowledge in each area of a program before advancing to the next, rather than serving classroom time. Thus, WGU's educational model relies heavily on strong content — solid courseware or "learning resources" to ensure that students are competent in each required skill or discipline, and thorough assessments that evaluate students' expertise in those skill sets.

When WGU's College of Information Technology reviewed its existing programs in June 2006, the staff knew the IT program had some gaps. The program offers a Bachelor of Science degree that includes general education, liberal arts and business courses, and also offers specialization in IT subjects such as software, databases, networking and security. For its IT content, WGU already had relationships with giants such as CompTIA, Sun and Oracle, but it needed content that taught the product-neutral basics of IT, which the big vendors did not provide.

"We needed assessments that were not geared toward a particular product, but with solid content," said Gwen Britton, now WGU's Senior Product Manager of Information Technology Programs. "Students need basic skills and understanding of IT concepts that can transfer to specific products."

## Solution

Gwen researched several options for vendor-neutral IT assessments. Her team presented WGU with the CIW IT certification program. A meeting ensued in October 2006 in which Gwen's team and a team of WGU mentors interviewed the CIW program staff. WGU determined that CIW was an excellent fit for the university's IT assessment needs.

"We wanted an entry-level exam that would diagnose the basic skill sets in IT. CIW Web Foundations Associate did that," Gwen said. "We also needed a generic assessment in designing Web sites." For this, CIW Web Design Specialist was a perfect match.

Gwen and her team found that CIW's IT skills objectives mapped very closely to WGU's own skills objectives for its IT degree students, even though the two sets of objectives had been developed independently.

"We supply the right content, but we're not the experts on WGU's program — they're the experts," said CIW's Mary Zimmerman. "WGU knows what its students need to know."

### CIW BENEFITS

#### For the School

- Existing exams and curriculum
- Quick implementation
- High-quality, standardized content
- Industry-sanctioned skills objectives
- Affordable pricing
- Outstanding customer service
- Personalized content options
- E-learning, classroom learning, self-study options

#### For the Student

- High-quality, standardized content
- Industry-approved skills objectives, industry-standard knowledge
- Both instruction and assessment
- E-learning, classroom learning, self-study options
- Industry-valued professional certification
- Affordable pricing
- Technical competence

Indeed, the creators of the CIW programs approach the development of the CIW skills objectives the same way. They enlist committees of educators, business professionals and employers — people who know the skills needed for success in the workplace — as the authorities to determine the skills objectives for its CIW certification exams. CIW certifications are renowned in the industry for validating vendor-neutral IT job skills and knowledge.

On January 1, 2007 — within three months of meeting with the CIW staff — WGU had successfully embedded the CIW Web Foundations Associate and CIW Web Design Specialist certification exams into its IT degree program as mandatory assessments. "Students can't transfer in any equivalencies for these exams," Gwen said. "They have to prove their competence in these areas by passing these assessments," then they advance to the next subject.

Implementation of the CIW exams into WGU's IT degree program went very smoothly — "seamlessly," Gwen said. "No downtime, no disruptions. We do everything online, so it was simply a matter of identifying the assessments we liked, mapping the objectives, then arranging the exam vouchers, and we were done. The CIW exams were ready to go.

"It's also key that the CIW team is fantastic," she continued. "The level of service is outstanding; there's no runaround. They are always there when we need them. It's not about having all the answers — it's how quickly can you turn around and find the answers and provide them. CIW has not left us wanting for anything."

### RESULTS

The CIW exams worked so well for WGU that when Gwen and her staff realized they did not have enough of the right content from their traditional curriculum providers, they looked to CIW for curriculum as well. In addition certification exams, the CIW program publishes Official CIW Curriculum. By June 2007, WGU had embedded CIW courseware into its IT degree program, specifically Web Foundations Associate and Web Design Specialist.

"Our students and mentors love the CIW books — we get overall positive feedback," Gwen said. "Students need strong content to ensure they know their stuff, because they self-study for all assessments. And good learning resources always benefit mentors. Courses that provide good structure allow mentors to focus their time on monitoring students' progress

**Added WGU IT Academic Mentor Charles Paddock, Ph.D., "The exams and learning materials are all top-notch. I wrote a textbook for Prentice Hall in a past life and appreciate what it takes to put them together."**

**The price of the materials is another reason CIW works well for WGU. At WGU, students pay a set tuition fee for each six-month term. Tuition includes all learning resources plus vouchers for two attempts at each exam.. This "rolling enrollment" model allows students to begin a term on the first of any month, rather than following a traditional quarter or semester system. "It's a great deal for students," Gwen said. "However, curriculum is the most expensive part for us, because WGU absorbs the cost for learning resources." The affordability of CIW exams and courseware ensured that the cost of the learning resources did not exceed WGU's tuition.**



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### CIW—Certifying the Business of the Web

- Instruction and certification in vendor-neutral IT skills for 21st-century job roles
- IT fundamentals, Web page authoring, networking, Web site design, e commerce, database design, Web languages, programming, security, network administration
- High-stakes certification exams
- Official CIW Curriculum
- E-learning, instructor-led, self-study options
- Online assessment and instruction tools

CIW program developed and owned by Certification Partners, LLC  
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Empowering people globally through certification and professional development

Get caught in the Web!

Remember that unlike most online universities, WGU is nonprofit. The self-study program allows dedicated students to accelerate their education and get their degrees sooner than a typical college student, if they wish. (Students also receive no penalty if they take longer than a typical college semester to complete a course requirement.) Students progress at their own pace, taking as many assessments as they want, with no strict time requirement. If they finish the minimum requirements for a term, they can take more courses and assessments. At the end of their degree program, each student submits a portfolio and presents a capstone project. Students receive a well-rounded education, and in the process they can also earn professional certifications from CIW, Microsoft, Oracle/Sun Java and CompTIA that are valuable to employers worldwide.

### Benefits

With the success of the initial CIW exams and courseware in WGU's IT degree program, Gwen has since approached CIW for more content. "We needed a generic, technology-neutral relational database exam. We also needed JavaScript, Perl, and database design products." CIW had the content and even went the extra mile to fulfill WGU's requests for some updates that would fit with WGU's program. "Everyone is easy to work with, and very responsive to suggestions and requests," Gwen said.

When asked what sealed her decision to work (and continue working) with CIW, Gwen answered quickly. First, CIW had the vendor-neutral content that WGU needed, and it came with the industry's endorsement. "We didn't have to create our own curriculum or exams," she said. Second on her list was the outstanding customer service she has received. But perhaps most important, she said, was "the robustness and rigor of CIW exams and content. We try to maintain a high level of quality within our IT degree program, so our partners must maintain high quality as well.

"We're a good match, a great partnership," Gwen said, "and it's a pleasure all around working with CIW.

### For more information

WesternGovernors University  
[www.wgu.edu](http://www.wgu.edu)

WGU Information Technology program  
[www.wgu.edu/online\\_it\\_degrees/information\\_technology\\_degree.asp](http://www.wgu.edu/online_it_degrees/information_technology_degree.asp)

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