

Lessons Earned Podcast

Strada Education Network

S. 2, E. 4: Scott Pulsipher, President, Western Governors University

TRANSCRIPT

Co-Host Andrew Hanson, Strada Education Network

[00:00:01] From Strada Education Network, this is *Lessons Earned*. I'm Andrew Hanson.

[00:00:09] In this podcast, we sit down with education leaders, policy thinkers, and workforce experts who are trying to improve education and career outcomes for students of all ages. We're recording this season remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic. And we want to know how this crisis is affecting students and educators and how it will shape our workforce in the years to come. Today, the president of Western Governors University, Scott Pulsipher.

[audio clip](#)

Scott Pulsipher, Western Governors University

Much of what we're experiencing today is like retail shift 25 years ago. Twenty-five years ago, a lot of online shopping wasn't a particularly good experience, but look how far we've come.

Andrew

Welcome to *Lessons Earned: Putting education to work*.

[audio clip from radio broadcast](#)

[00:01:09] Let's get you caught up on the big headlines for today. Students at Ohio State University have been told all classes will be held online. The same goes for Harvard and Princeton as well...

Andrew

As the coronavirus began to really take a toll on the United States, colleges across the country began shuttering their doors and moving their classes online.

[00:01:27] By April, nearly every school in the country had closed down their campuses and pivoted to online learning. Western Governors University, however, was a notable exception.

[00:01:39] That's because WGU was designed from the beginning as an *entirely* online university, and as other institutions struggled to adapt to this new world, Western Governors has sort of already figured it out. Today, Ben Wildavsky and I sit down with the president of that university, Scott Pulsipher. We talk to Scott about how WGU approaches online learning differently than other schools and why he believes the future of higher education is online, even after the pandemic is under control. So we wanted to start by asking him, What are the core ingredients of a *quality* online education?

Scott Pulsipher

[00:02:19] Yeah, that is definitely one of the questions of the day. So in the context of WGU, I think one of the first and most important things in designing an online, but for that

matter, any educational model, is probably to make sure that you put the student at the center of everything that you do. I think now, more than ever, we have the opportunity to kind of rethink the entire student experience, given that technology and online delivery is going to be a fundamental characteristic of the future of learning. And when you put the student at the center of things, you're realizing that it's not just the delivery of instruction. It's not just the delivery of lecture material, because all of that, in some context in an online world, is just content. And so you really have to rethink the instructional model to say, How are you really supporting an individual student to progress in his or her learning?

[00:03:13] The other thing that technology or that this future world of things everyone should be thinking about is, what data now becomes available to us to really assess, you know, what has effectiveness or efficacy in the learning experience itself. And you can start to actually isolate or identify engagements or behaviors or interactions or whatever it may be to actually see whether it's improving learning, whether it's increasing student progress--and not only for one student, but in fact, for many different types of students. And so I think that data and the use of it is particularly interesting. The last thing I would say is the construct of time is very different in an online world. It actually becomes *my* time, not the provider's time, right? If you think about so much of what technology and online allows us to do is to kind of bend the access to things and the way it's experienced to what time is available to us and when we want to do things and in what sequence, etc. And so we have to kind of rethink even the construct of time and how it flexes and varies when you're in an online environment.

Andrew

[00:04:23] Right. I think that's really interesting. So, you know, right now we're sort of doing this massive experiment with respect to online education. And I want to ask you about how you think the current situation will affect the public perception of online learning. I could see it going in one of two ways: On the one hand, people could realize that it's, you know, a more convenient and effective way to learn. On the other hand, many of the institutions aren't really set up to facilitate high-quality online learning so a lot of students could also be having a substandard experience. Where do you land on this question? Do you think the current situation is going to help the perception of online learning or could it be a hindrance?

Scott

[00:05:10] I suspect it depends upon who you ask. I would maybe approach it this way: For the vast majority of individuals whose primary reference has been an in-classroom on-campus environment, if that's your reference and all of a sudden all that's taken away and all you have is an online delivery of a lecture and content, that's a woefully undeveloped experience for those that came to expect so much more. And so that is the largest portion of the enrollment. And so I think they are going to be underserved dramatically in the online experiences that they're having, such that it won't be a good outcome, meaning the perception of online will be largely a negative one, and that's very unfortunate.

At the same time, there is a growing population of both learners and just consumers generally who recognize that actually our best experiences, regardless of the experience, whether it's shopping, banking, you know, travel, our best experiences are enabled online. And some are just going like, well, who are the best providers of that? Much of what we're experiencing today is like retail shift, you know, 25 years ago. Twenty-five years ago, a lot of online shopping wasn't a particularly good experience, but look how far we've come. I

think, you know, the first experiences with these things are going to be underwhelming to where we'll be, we'll have more students who are frustrated, who are longing for the prior experience, etc., and that can be a detriment to moving forward. But there will be a steady and growing wave of transitioning to a tech-enabled online future.

Andrew

[00:06:53] So Scott, one potential barrier that sort of always comes up in conversations about online learning is high speed Internet, something that, you know, a significant share of the population still doesn't have access to. So is there something that institutions like yours or others can do to address that, or is it all in the hands of the Internet service providers?

Scott

[00:07:17] From the pure providers, yes. We are not ones who can go out and lay cable or expand satellite broadband and things like that. But what we can do as an institution is recognize that this is a barrier to equitable access to high-quality education.

[00:07:28] And in the current scenario, it's definitely been amplified. We have to recognize that broadband Internet is now not a convenience. This is not like satellite TV. This is a utility. This is fundamental to essential services and, particularly, access to education.

[00:07:45] So I think that's one of the cases where funding can start to be made available to directly expand, you know, the infrastructure that's necessary, whether it's fiber or cable or satellite. We have to make this a reality. This is also the case where federal aid programs can include technology, computers, high-speed Internet subscriptions, etc., like those are eligible expenses, not dissimilar from if I were living on campus, right?

Ben Wildavsky, Strada Education Network

[00:08:14] Very interesting. Yeah. I mean, I think certainly making the case probably is going to be easier than it would have been, you know, pre-COVID, just because if everybody is seeing this, as you say, both at the K-12 and at the postsecondary level. I want to talk about the nuts and bolts of WGU. But I wonder if we could start with just a wider question about what are your guiding principles?

Scott

[00:08:36] Yeah, our guiding principles are this.

[00:08:41] You know, that first and foremost we start with the fundamental belief in the worth of every individual and a belief in their innate capacity for learning.

[00:08:50] That is a principle because it means that it's incumbent upon us as the provider of learning to adapt to that talent, to that inherent and innate capacity for learning, and that worth to make sure that we can increase the probability that every individual can succeed. And I think that's important because it's different than saying, how do we establish, if you will, selective admissions criteria to say, hey, those who are already demonstrating capacity for learning or a propensity to advance in particular fields, like, how do we invite and admit such students like we pretty much are now? It's our job to admit everyone such that then we have to figure out how to adapt and invest and adjust and be flexible so that we increase the probability that every individual can succeed.

Andrew

[00:09:37] So, Scott, in addition to being an online university, the other sort of defining characteristic of Western Governors is that you do something called competency-based education, which has been around a long time, but for those of us in our audience who who don't know and you met one of them in an elevator, how would you explain it?

Scott

[00:09:59] Yeah, I think everyone's already experienced competency-based education. They just didn't recognize that's what it was called. And by that, what I mean is, if you ask any adult who went to a traditional model of education, they had already personalized their learning.

[00:10:13] Think of those courses that you had your freshman or sophomore year that you kind of realized after a few visits you didn't necessarily need to go to the lecture anymore, that it wasn't something that was a must-do, because if I don't, I'm going to get behind or something else like that, or you didn't go because you actually possessed the prior knowledge and you just hadn't gotten credit for it yet.

[00:10:34] You realize that, I could probably accelerate through this. The only struggle was, you had to wait till the end of the term to take the final and get the grade. Well, in a competency-based model, that's effectively what's happening, which is you're keeping the standards for learning. You keep those constant for every single student in that course, but you then let the time vary. And this is an example. If you think of a working learner, an easy one to point to is, you know, take someone who's been already in software development for 10 years, but they've never acquired a bachelor's degree and they matriculate into a bachelor's degree in computer science or networking or data analytics. And next thing you know, they may likely possess a lot of prior knowledge that they can leverage as they accelerate through material that they already know and can demonstrate proficiency in those learning outcomes. And it allows them then to spend the time that they do have on the areas that they need greater focus, that they're lacking.

[00:11:32] And so they need advanced learning. So that's the design.

Ben

[00:11:36] And Scott, can you tell us, what kind of results you're seeing. If you were really to make the case to someone that this competency-based program focused on skills, on proficiency, that it really gets results, what would you point to?

Scott

[00:11:49] Yeah, I would point to a variety of different things. You know, some of the things that if we were to categorize them first and foremost is like, just look at the progress in attainment rates of our students. Even this year alone, our four-year attainment rates are fast approaching 45 percent, which compared to national averages, we're seeing that we're several percentage points above national averages, such that even in two years from now, our six-year grad rates will be at or above national averages as well. That's also contemplating those attainment rates among the 70 percent of our population being in one or more underserved categories. And so these are individuals who had some prior college but didn't complete, and so we're able to actually achieve really high attainment rates.

More importantly, you know, the employer satisfaction with our graduates is really, really quite high in the sense that 96 percent would say they would hire another WGU graduate. Ninety-five percent rate their job performance of graduates as excellent or very good.

[00:12:46] So these are just examples that these individuals are acquiring the competencies that are relevant to the jobs they need to pursue and they're doing really well when they get them.

Andrew

[00:12:57] So you've laid out what I think a really compelling case for competency-based education. Are there any drawbacks? I mean, why hasn't this taken over higher education?

Scott

[00:13:09] I think some of the challenges or the barriers to it are there is definitely a cultural dynamic or a cultural inertia against some of these things and that it's really hard for us to, for example, the degree itself, is as many reference, the coin of the realm. Well, as soon as things are not about the degree and they become more about the credentials and the competencies demonstrated like, you know, how much do we really have then this branding of all the institutions, like the shift away from selectivity or exclusivity or scarcity as measures of quality, like, recasting the measure of quality in higher education towards competencies and outcomes and relevancy, like that's really hard to do. There are major impediments to it.

Ben

[00:14:04] Well, you know, that's actually I mean, I think that's a very powerful point. You know, in a way, it speaks to just how different your approach is from traditional higher education. Certainly the research universities that a certain kind of pursuit of new knowledge and research excellence being kind of the guiding star, which, you know, many people have argued is not necessarily relevant to your, certainly to your typical undergraduate, who's trying to acquire a set of skills.

One thing I think that's kind of relevant here is this U.S. Department of Education audit that took place a few years ago in 2017. And the inspector general found that a lot of your courses didn't offer what they call, quote, "regular and substantive interaction between students and instructors." Now, of course, that decision was eventually reversed, and I wonder, in retrospect, you know, it seems like the IG's finding was based on really a misunderstanding of how you think about faculty. And I wonder if you could give us a little bit of clarity around that. You know, how do you structure your student-faculty relationships and how is that different than what the sort of the norm has been?

Scott

[00:15:10] Yeah, this is actually a really good point, because I think it's still a, there's more misunderstanding about this than there is clarity. We basically disaggregated the faculty role from one doing everything to four. So those who design the curriculum, those who teach the curriculum, those who evaluate students' performance are independent of one another, so you can truly say if an individual is proficient.

Ben

[00:15:34] Yeah. So that's kind of, you know, in a way people talk a lot about unbundling degrees and you've unbundled the faculty role itself.

Scott

That's right.

Ben

Now, going back to the inspector general's report, you know, the reversal of that initial decision, in some ways it seems like that reflects a paradigm shift in higher ed. You know, some of the federal regulations that govern accrediting agencies, for example, have loosened quite a bit under the current administration. I think the idea is, the hope is, this will allow institutions like yours and others to be more flexible and to be more innovative. But of course, there are critics and they will argue that these kinds of moves will undermine accountability for institutions. And I'm wondering, you know, it sort of strikes me as a balancing act. If you're a regulator, how do you set up a system that lets people be innovative--you don't want to stifle that--but that also lets institutions be held accountable?

Scott

[00:16:28] Yeah. Our belief is definitely accountability should be measures of impact, not not measures of *how* it's done. If you only prescribe the *way* it can be done, then you're only going to get one thing, and that's only going to serve a certain profile of learner well. It's not going to serve a lot of diversity in learners. And so I think what we are favoring, which is how do you enable innovation by being more flexible on, Here are the standards and measures that we want. And one of those can be, by the way, regular and substantive interaction with a student, between faculty and student. That is a requirement. But how you deliver on the ... of their flexibility. But if the model is only, you give a lecture three times a week and that's regular and substantive like that.

[00:17:17] When you put an online, and think of it this way: This is just content. If I could just stream the lecture when I want to view it, then that we like, how is that regular and substantive interaction? Because it's basically asynchronous consumption of a learning resource.

[00:17:30] Other examples of like, you know, we believe in holding ourselves accountable to attainment rates, to job-placement rates, to income gains. That's why we think WGU has even survived, because our outcomes have proven that our model actually is pretty good and it serves a large population of learners really well.

[00:17:49] We'd like to see that same thing for all new innovations that we can't, you know, we can't just fall victim to this notion that we exist, therefore we're valuable. Actually, no. We want to see whether you're delivering on the promise to the consumer of education in the first place, that student, especially if we have proposals like free college and everything else, like that's a really expensive proposition for a taxpayer. If we aren't measuring whether that benefit that's free is in fact returning the value it's supposed to return, especially for the disadvantaged and underserved populations. I think we can hold ourselves accountable to measures of outcomes and impact more than how it's done.

Andrew

[00:18:31] So, Scott, you've outlined what I think is a really unique and exciting vision for higher education in this interview, whether you've talked about, you know, the tighter focus on measurable skills as an outcome or a more flexible view of the pathways to get to that good job or the other goals that students have. So let me ask you this: Looking forward down the road, 10, 15 years. In a perfect world, what will higher education look like for you?

Scott

[00:19:06] Well, there's a couple of things that I feel more confident on than less. One is we do believe that in fact, certain trends will continue, that in that kind of decade from now that you will have the majority of individuals in higher education will actually be over the age of 24, because working learners will need to acquire skills and competencies that have shorter shelf life. And that is the nature of that future work that we are going to be more in a continual learning loop and always stacking the competencies that we require. The other dynamic that we recognize is that if the current COVID thing is that shot in the arm, which is a technology-enabled future of learning, that is going to be there and it is going to be a fundamental characteristic of it, such that some of the things that we are betting on is that we will have much more what we simply referred to as personalized learning journeys. That means that we can better adapt to serving an individual because of the way in which technology and the data and the online engagement, our ability to adapt to their time and availability, we will make it possible to dramatically increase the number of individuals that can access high-quality education *and* complete their high-quality education.

[00:20:29] The second thing that we think is true is that the degree itself will remain, but you'll see it being unbundled. But we do believe that there is an emergence of certifications and microcredentials and that they will be increasingly relevant in the future of education-to-work. And that's something that we kind of fully anticipate and expect. Those are factors whether or not, by the way, it's competency-based in a pedagogical model, we think less.

[00:20:57] And so this is the last thing to enable both of those is that we do believe in a skills-denominated future and that's skills-denominated future is, I think, going to unlock talent and create pathways in and at a scale and at a means in a way that we have yet to experience. So it's really pretty exciting in terms of what that can unlock for the future of our society and an equitable access and attainment in higher education.

Ben

[00:21:26] Yeah. So skills as the new currency. Well, that's a great note to end on, Scott. We really want to thank you so much for giving us so much of your time and your insight. It's been a great conversation and certainly look forward to running into you again before too long, if not physically, then online.

Scott

[00:21:41] Well, Ben, I appreciate it. Andrew, thank you for the time. And it's just been a real privilege and pleasure to be with you both.

music

Andrew

[00:21:53] That was our conversation with Scott Pulsipher. Thanks for joining us on *Lessons Earned*.

voiceover

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