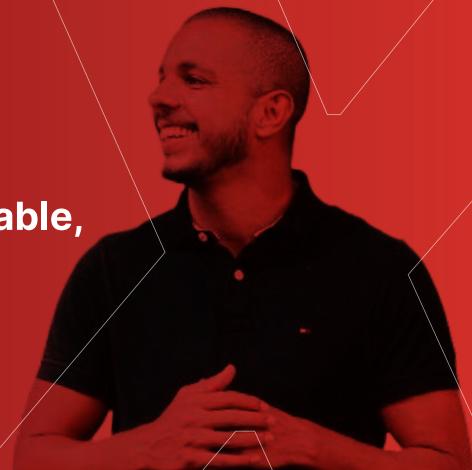# Western Governors University and the Open edX Project
Transforming Lives Through Scalable, Competency-based Education

Courtney Hills McBeth
Western Governors University (WGU)

Introduction

Western Governors University (WGU), a beacon of innovation in higher education, has forged a partnership with the Open edX platform to continue to enhance the delivery of its Competency-based Education (CBE) courses. WGU is a nonprofit, online university founded by 19 U.S governors in 1997 to provide a new educational model with the flexibility learners, who traditionally have not been well served by higher education, need. Its CBE model measures subject mastery, allowing students to progress at their own pace. The university offers an affordable 6-month term flat rate that averages around $8,010 per year; 57% of WGU undergraduates completed their degrees in 2022-23 without taking a federal student loan. Importantly, graduates experience positive earnings and employment outcomes. Operating at significant scale, WGU currently serves close to 190,000 full-time, degree-seeking students.

The Organizations That Made This Possible:	WGU	OPEN edX

Competency-based education empowers students to be self-directed in their learning, focusing on developing the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in their careers. With a focus on real-world skills, CBE's emphasis on workforce readiness helps learners gain the credentials they need to secure meaningful employment. This leads to increased economic mobility and improved life outcomes.

This case study delves into WGU's strategic adoption of the Open edX platform, exploring the challenges WGU overcame, the transformative impact for learners, and its pivotal role as the first Mission-Aligned Organization, driving the future of open-source education.

> "Most learning management systems and platforms are built around the traditional model of learning that is limited to the requirement of a calendar and a gradebook. Our competency-based education model lets our students learn on their own schedule and pace, requiring students to prove mastery rather than achieve a grade or certain seat time."
>
> **Courtney Hills McBeth** │ Chief Academic Officer and Provost at WGU

Problem

WGU's commitment to delivering accessible, high-quality education through its unique CBE model faced scaling challenges. Their legacy learning management systems (LMS) were ill-equipped to handle the institution's rapid growth and the nuanced demands of CBE. The need for granular student data to facilitate personalized support, the imperative to efficiently reuse and adapt content, and the desire to integrate cutting-edge technologies like AI demanded a more robust and flexible solution.

> **"The Open edX platform gives us total control to customize the platform for our students and our learning model, including allowing us to directly author and leverage third-party authoring or design and useful development process tools."**
>
> **Courtney Hills McBeth** | Chief Academic Officer and Provost at WGU

The **Solution**

WGU selected the Open edX platform, recognizing its open-source nature, inherent scalability, modularity, adaptability, and powerful data analytics capabilities. By becoming the first Mission-Aligned Organization, WGU signaled its commitment to not just utilizing the platform but actively shaping its future. The Open edX platform empowered WGU to:

- **Implement a Data-driven Ecosystem:**
  Establishing a robust data infrastructure enabled WGU to track student progress with unprecedented precision, facilitating timely interventions and personalized support. For instance, data analysis allows WGU to identify students struggling with specific competencies and deliver targeted resources, significantly improving completion rates.
- **Optimize Content Creation and Delivery:**
  Leveraging content reusability features, WGU streamlined the creation and maintenance of its extensive course catalog. This modular approach allows for rapid updates and customizations, ensuring the curriculum remains relevant and engaging.
- **Provide a Truly Personalized Learning Experience:**
  The platform's flexibility allowed WGU to tailor the learning environment to its unique curriculum structure, enabling students to progress at their own pace and demonstrate mastery in a way that aligns with their individual learning styles.
- **Drive Innovation Through Community Collaboration:**
  By actively engaging with the Open edX community, WGU gained access to a wealth of expertise and facilitated the integration of innovative technologies, including AI-driven learning tools. This collaborative approach accelerates the pace of innovation and enhances the overall learning experience.

> **By partnering with the Open edX community, WGU harnesses the power of open source to scale and evolve its innovative approach to education.**

WGU's strategic implementation of Open edX software involved:

- **A Strategic Partnership:** Becoming the first Mission-Aligned Organization underscored WGU's commitment to long-term collaboration and platform development.
- **A Rigorous Data-driven Approach:** Implementing advanced analytics to track student progress and personalize learning experiences.

- **Strategic Content Migration:** Migrating existing course materials and developing new content within the Open edX framework, aiming for near-complete platform utilization.
- **Seamless Customization and Integration:** Leveraging the Open edX platform's open-source architecture to customize the platform and integrate it with existing WGU systems.
- **Active Community Engagement:** Contributing to the Open edX community through knowledge sharing and collaborative development.

> "One of the reasons we are excited about the Open edX platform is the open-source model, as it enables us to understand the architecture and data flow of the components that allow us to create the right abstraction layer to push the data for our students into the system."

David Morales | Chief Information Officer and Senior Vice President of Technology at WGU

WGU's adoption of the Open edX platform has yielded measurable results and impact:

- **Unprecedented Scalability:** The Open edX platform's robust architecture has enabled WGU to serve a rapidly growing student body, expanding access to high-quality, affordable education. WGU now serves nearly 190,000 students.
- **Accelerated Innovation and Agility:** Collaboration with the Open edX community has fostered the rapid development and integration of cutting-edge learning tools, ensuring WGU remains at the forefront of educational innovation.

- **Optimized Content Delivery and Maintenance:** Content libraries and modular course design have streamlined content creation and maintenance, reduced costs and improved efficiency.
- **Advancing the Future of CBE:** WGU's leadership and contributions to the Open edX community have the potential to play a crucial role in driving the adoption and advancement of CBE across higher education.

Key Success Factors

- **A Shared Vision:** WGU's unwavering commitment to students, the CBE model, and its proactive approach to leveraging technology.
- **Active Community Engagement:** Fostering collaboration and knowledge sharing within the Open edX community.
- **Data-driven Decision Making:** Utilizing data analytics to personalize learning and improve student outcomes.
- **A Culture of Innovation:** Embracing new technologies and continuously enhancing the learning experience.
- **Strategic Open-Source Collaboration:** Leveraging the open-source model to accelerate development and reduce costs.

Future Directions

WGU remains committed to pushing the boundaries of CBE and enhancing the capabilities of the Open edX platform to improve student success and outcomes. Future initiatives include:

- **Expanding AI Integration:** Implementing advanced AI-driven tools to provide personalized feedback and enhance learning outcomes.
- **Developing Robust and Relevant Content Libraries:** Creating comprehensive and timely content libraries to further streamline content creation and maintenance.
- **Streamlining Authoring Processes:** Enhancing tools and functionalities to simplify the authoring process.
- **Addressing CBE Adoption Barriers:** Sharing best practices and providing support to institutions seeking to implement CBE.

Advice for Other Institutions

- **Embrace Open Source:** Recognize the transformative potential of open-source platforms like the Open edX platform.
- **Prioritize Data Analytics:** Invest in robust data tracking and analytics to personalize learning.
- **Focus on Learner-centric Design:** Design learning experiences that meet the unique needs of diverse learners.
- **Foster Collaborative Partnerships:** Engage with the open-source community to drive innovation.
- **Address Procedural Hurdles:** Proactively address the procedural challenges associated with CBE implementation.

Conclusion

WGU's strategic partnership with the Open edX community exemplifies the power of open-source platforms to scale and advance innovative educational models, such as CBE. This partnership is not just about technology; it's about transforming lives through accessible, high-quality, results-oriented education.

WGU

Transforming Lives Through Scalable, Competency-based Education

OPEN edX