



**Testimony of Patrick Baker, Western Governors University  
Committee on Commerce, Labor and Economic Development, Kansas House of Representatives**

February 15, 2023

**Introduction**

Chairman Tarwater and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. My name is Patrick Baker and I have the pleasure of serving as Government Relations Director for Western Governors University (WGU).

I'm pleased to speak in support of HB 2400.

As some of you may be unfamiliar with WGU, I'd like to start by providing a brief overview of our University.

**Overview of Western Governors University (WGU)**

Over 25 years ago, a bipartisan group of 19 governors of western states and territories founded WGU as a solution to meet a growing need for a college-educated workforce – a need that was not being fully met by traditional higher education. From the beginning, WGU was designed to be different. Our founding governors knew that the college student of the 21st century would be very different from students in the past. For millions of working adults, the dream of pursuing a college education could only become a reality once the boundaries of time and place could be removed.

With the emergence of a new technology – the internet – Americans were able to get online and the possibility of an “anywhere, anytime” education became a reality. These governors founded WGU to be nonprofit, affordable, 100% online, and with a focus on working adult learners. As such, WGU utilizes an exclusively competency-based learning model. Simply put, this model measures skills and learning rather than time spent in the classroom. We hold learning constant, and time variable allowing students a more flexible and faster path to degree.

Today, WGU offers programs at the bachelor's and master's degree levels in four high-need areas of workforce development: Teaching, Health & Nursing, IT, and Business. WGU is the largest nonprofit university in the country with more than 140,000 full-time students across all 50 states, including nearly 900 right here in Kansas.

WGU students in Kansas are unique and distinguish us from our peer in-state institutions – 87% of them are over the age of 25, 80% work while enrolled, and 67% represent one or more underserved populations. Most of our students have tried traditional brick & mortar options before coming to WGU. In short, WGU was created by states, for states to complement – not compete with – state systems of higher education.

WGU students will on average take a little over two years to get their bachelor's degree at a cost of just over \$15,000. Within four years of graduating, wages of an average alumni increase by \$26,000 annually. With more than 300,000 graduates – more than 1,700 of whom reside in Kansas – WGU alumni have earned a cumulative \$261 billion more than they would have without their degrees. That is real money driving family success and economic impact. I've attached a one-pager to this testimony that provides further insight on WGU as well as our student body in Kansas.

### **Overview of HB 2400**

Some of you who served on the committee will recall that WGU had the privilege of speaking before the Special Committee on Workforce Development this past fall. At that time, I discussed a number of ways that Kansas could better support the needs of adult learners in furthering the state's workforce goals. For reference, I've attached a copy of my testimony to the Special Committee and WGU's entire set of policy recommendations for states can be viewed here: [https://www.wgu.edu/content/dam/wgu-65-assets/web-sites/impact/2023\\_Policy\\_Playbook.pdf](https://www.wgu.edu/content/dam/wgu-65-assets/web-sites/impact/2023_Policy_Playbook.pdf).

The first recommendation adopted by the Special Committee was to “[do] all that it can to assist adult learners who are seeking an online education to achieve college degrees in fields that are critical to the growth of the state of Kansas. This may include supporting actions that foster competency-based education...[and] examining ways to provide financial assistance to more students, including those who decide to achieve their degree through an online based model.”

The bill before you today meets the mark of these recommendations entirely by reducing workforce barriers and creating pathways to opportunity for working adult learners.

HB 2400 would establish the Kansas Adult Learner Grant Program. This program would provide financial support of up to \$3,000 per semester for low- and middle-income individuals over the age of 25 seeking a bachelor's degree in a high-need field. The program would also incentivize grant recipients to both complete their degree and stay in Kansas following graduation. This program complements the Kansas Promise Scholarships and has a similar program design.

### **Support for HB 2400 - Addressing Workforce Barriers in Kansas**

But why should this bill be a priority for this Committee and the state?

A study conducted by the Georgetown Center for Education and the Workforce predicts that 71 percent of the jobs in Kansas will require some additional form of education after high school. According to the Lumina Foundation, currently 54.9 percent of adults in Kansas have some form of postsecondary credential. To close that gap, the state's Foresight 2020 report concluded that “[r]e-engaging adults with some college, no degree is critical...[and] to increase the number of returning adults graduating with a credential it is important for institutions to focus on improving barriers related to accessibility and affordability.”

Today there are nearly 400,000 Kansans with some college, but no credential. This is untapped human potential. Re-engaging these adults and moving them to degree completion will be critical to enabling them to better participate in the workforce and for Kansas to achieve its degree attainment goal. The hard reality is that fewer Kansas adults are enrolled in degree programs today than 10 years ago. From 2011 to 2021, the number of adults enrolling at 4-year public universities in Kansas declined by 29%. The

decline was steeper at private nonprofit 4-year universities at 55%. This is an alarming trend that HB 2400 can be part of the solution in addressing.

Working adult learners deserve access to higher education, and they deserve support that allows them to pursue education in the format and at the institution that best works for their unique needs. The Kansas Adult Learner Grant created by HB 2400 would support workforce development in Kansas by increasing access to high-need degree programs like information technology, advanced manufacturing, business, health care, and teaching for adult learners. And it's the last two I want to draw particular attention to – health care and teaching. According to the Kansas Hospital Association, there are nearly 2,200 vacant registered nurse (RN) positions in the state. And according to the Kansas Department of Education, there are more than 1,600 vacant teaching positions.

Ensuring appropriate support and access for adults who may want to enter nursing or a paraeducator who wants to move to the front of the classroom needs to be a high priority. The Kansas Adult Learner Grant can be an especially powerful tool in Kansas's efforts to close the nursing and teaching gap. Even better would be to ensure those individuals can pursue those careers while not leaving their existing jobs. As a university created by states, for states, WGU is particularly well-suited to support state efforts to address the gaps in these two fields. Nearly 200 Kansans are currently in our teachers college – 70% of whom are adults, and, even more importantly, the majority of them are living in rural communities. And I'm happy to tell you that starting next month WGU will for the first time enroll Kansans in our prelicensure nursing program, which will allow students to get their RN where they are living while continuing to work.

As members of this committee know, once someone gets the degree, it's even more important that they stay and work in Kansas. That's why I'm excited about the workforce retention payment in HB 2400. According to a study published in the National Bureau of Economic Research (and reported on here in the Washington Post: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2022/09/09/films-assigned-college/>), Kansas ranks 5th worst in the nation for retention of individuals who received their degree in that state. According to the study, 47% of grads of Kansas higher ed institutions are no longer living in Kansas. Our experience at WGU with our students is that as working adult learners they have a higher propensity to stay in their state of residence since they often have families and roots in the community. The bill's workforce retention payment would provide an extra boost of incentive and targets a population with a high ROI.

Finally, by adopting HR 2400, Kansas would be joining the ranks of many forward-thinking states who have recognized the value of adopting grant programs that target working adult learners to reduce barriers to the workforce.

#### *State Policies in Action*

- The Missouri [Fast Track Workforce Incentive Grant](#) provides last-dollar funding for low-income adults pursuing a certificate, degree, industry-recognized credential, or apprenticeship in an area designated as high need.
- Indiana provides an [Adult Student Grant](#) of \$2000 geared to the adult learner that can be applied toward a 2- or 4-year degree or certificate.

- Ohio's [Second Chance Grant](#) provides grants to reduce financial barriers for adults in Ohio with some college but no bachelor's degree to return to college to complete their degree.
- Utah's [Adult Learners Grant Program](#) was adopted in 2021 by the Utah Legislature to establish a scholarship program to assist eligible adult learners who enroll in entirely online programs in fields with industry needs.

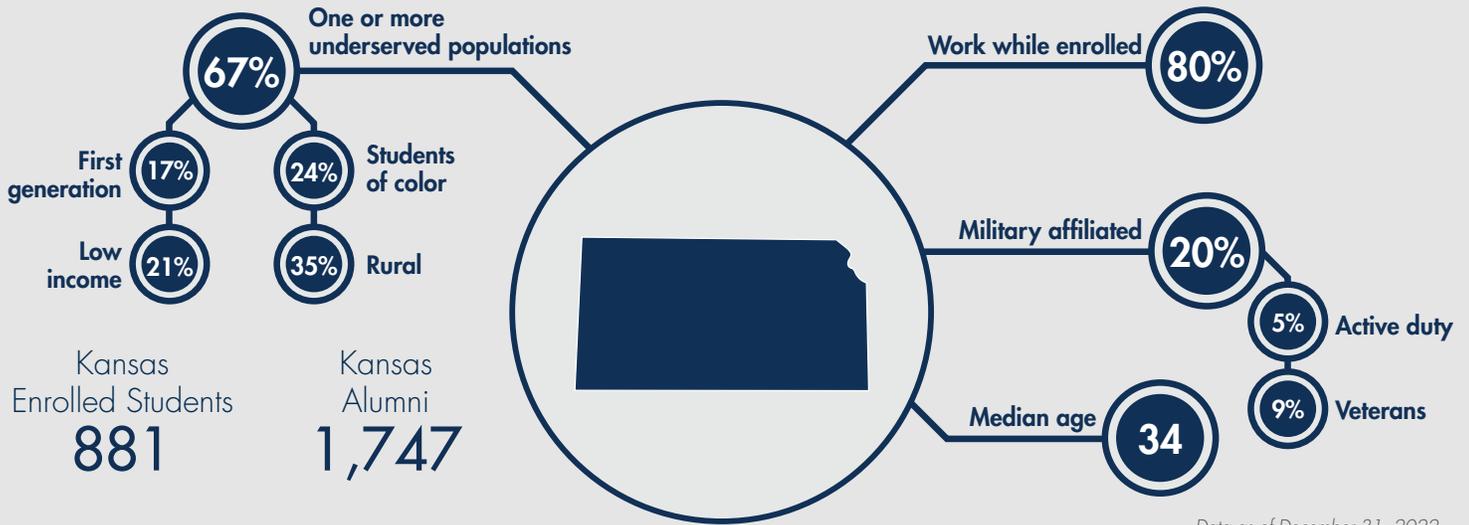
WGU works tirelessly to advocate for policies that will remove barriers for working learners and build on-ramps to work. HB 2400 fully aligns with WGU's policy recommendations and is consistent with best practices adopted by several states. WGU is happy to strongly support HB 2400 which will unlock pathways to opportunity for hundreds of Kansas adults and be a critical tool in the state's workforce toolbox.

WGU is ready, willing, and able to be a part of much-needed solutions in Kansas to remove barriers to opportunity and to improve the benefits of education so our neighbors and constituents attain better jobs and a higher quality of life. Thank you for your time and consideration and I would welcome any questions you may have.

# Appendix



# WGU and Kansas



Data as of December 31, 2022

## Kansas and WGU at a Glance

**381,941**

Kansas residents with some college but no credential as of July 31, 2020<sup>1</sup>

**\$7,452**

Average annual cost in 2021 for WGU undergraduate programs, compared to a national average of \$12,112<sup>2</sup>

**\$143,033**

Amount of WGU scholarship funding awarded to Kansas students in 2021

<sup>1</sup>The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, <sup>2</sup>The Institute for College Access & Success

## Top Employers of WGU Graduates in Kansas

University of Kansas Health System, Blue Valley School District, Olathe Public Schools, Irwin Army Community Hospital, United States Air Force, Wichita Public Schools, AMC Theatres, Amazon, Amberwell Health

## WGU Colleges Enrollment



**196**

Students

enrolled in the Leavitt School of Health



**179**

Students

enrolled in the School of Education



**256**

Students

enrolled in the College of Information Technology



**250**

Students

enrolled in the College of Business

## Education Benefitting Adult Learners

WGU was founded by governors to help solve unmet workforce needs in high-demand career fields like nursing, teaching, and IT. Today, WGU is a key solution to states' efforts to meet all learners where they are and provide flexible, competency-based education programs that meet the needs of employers while contributing to stronger communities and a healthier economy.

139,116

Total Enrolled Students

305,044

Total Alumni

Data as of December 31, 2022

## A Better Return on Student Investment

\$17,388

Average total cost to earn a bachelor's degree at WGU

+\$18,200

Within two years of graduation

+\$25,900

Within four years of graduation

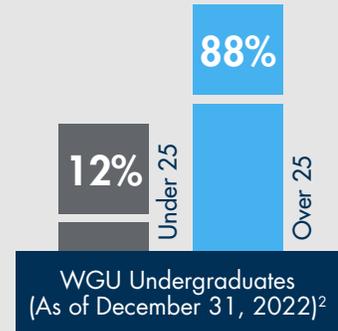
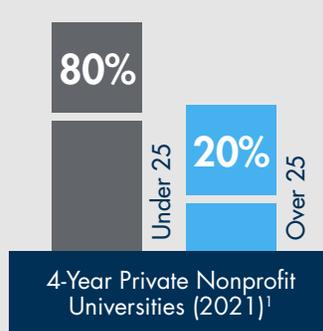
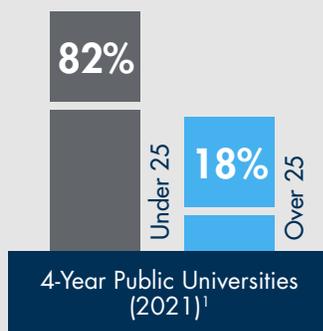
Average income increase for WGU graduates

Source: 2021 Harris Poll

\$826,000

Average increase in lifetime earnings for individuals who earn a bachelor's degree at WGU

## Age Distribution of Undergraduates In the U.S.



<sup>1</sup>U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Fall Enrollment component final data (2003 - 2019) and provisional data (2021)., <sup>2</sup>WGU demographic data.

## Partner with Us

WGU works with policymakers, industry leaders, and community organizations to make higher education accessible, affordable, and accountable. Learn more about our policy priorities and vision for the future of education at [wgu.edu/impact](https://wgu.edu/impact).



[wgu.edu/impact](https://wgu.edu/impact)

[WGU Public Policy](#)

[@wgu](#)



**Testimony of Patrick Baker, Western Governors University  
Special Committee on Workforce Development**

September 29, 2022

**Introduction**

Chairman Tarwater and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. My name is Patrick Baker and I have the pleasure of serving as Government Relations Director for Western Governors University (WGU).

The focus of this Committee – reducing workforce barriers and creating pathways to opportunity – is why WGU was created. Today I'll spend a little time talking a bit about WGU, but more importantly, provide perspective on ways Kansas can remove barriers for adult learners from our experience as a university that works with states across the country.

**Overview of Western Governors University (WGU)**

Over 25 years ago, a bipartisan group of 19 governors of western states and territories founded WGU as a solution to meet a growing need for a college-educated workforce – a need that was not being fully met by traditional higher education. From the beginning, WGU was designed to be different. Our founding governors knew that the college student of the 21st century would be very different from students in the past. For millions of working adults, the dream of pursuing a college education could only become a reality once the boundaries of time and place could be removed.

With the emergence of a new technology – the internet – Americans were able to get online and the possibility of an “anywhere, anytime” education became a reality. These governors founded WGU to be nonprofit, affordable, 100% online, and with a focus on working adult learners. As such, WGU utilizes an exclusively competency-based learning model. Simply put, this model measures skills and learning rather than time spent in the classroom. We hold learning constant, and time variable allowing students a more flexible and faster path to degree.

Today, WGU offers programs at the bachelor's and master's degree levels in four high-need areas of workforce development: Teaching, Health & Nursing, IT, and Business. WGU is the largest nonprofit university in the country with 130,000 full-time students across all 50 states, including nearly 800 right here in Kansas.

WGU students in Kansas are unique and distinguish us from our peer in-state institutions – 87% of them are over the age of 25, 81% work while enrolled, and 69% represent one or more underserved populations. The “average” WGU student in Kansas is quite literally a working mother. In fact, less than 1% of our undergraduate student body came to WGU with only a high school diploma. Virtually all of our

students have tried traditional brick & mortar options before coming to WGU. In short, WGU was created by states, for states to complement – not compete with – state systems of higher education.

WGU students will on average take a little over two years to get their bachelor's degree at a cost of just over \$15,000. Within four years of graduating, wages of an average alumni increase by \$26,000 annually. With nearly 300,000 graduates – more than 1,600 of whom reside in Kansas – WGU alumni have earned a cumulative \$261 billion more than they would have without their degrees. That is real money driving family success and economic impact.

### **Addressing Workforce Barriers in Kansas**

But what does all of this mean for Kansas? There are nearly 400,000 Kansans with some college, but no credential. This is untapped human potential. Re-engaging these adults and moving them to degree completion will be critical to enabling them to better participate in the workforce and for Kansas to achieve its degree attainment goal. The hard reality is that fewer Kansas adults are enrolled in degree programs today than 10 years ago. This is an alarming trend that will require new or amended policies, programs, and partnerships.

WGU works tirelessly to advocate for policies that will remove barriers for working learners and build on-ramps to work. Our entire set of policy recommendations for states can be viewed here: <https://www.wgu.edu/impact/measuring-impact/policy-priorities.html>. Below, I highlight three concrete, high-impact areas for consideration.

#### **1. Strengthen workforce connections, support competency-based education, and focus on skills.**

The relationship between education and the workforce can and must be collaborative and integrated. Institutions and training providers should work closely with employers to ensure the curriculum reflects the most in-demand skills on the front end.

##### Support legislation and regulations that allow competency-based education.

Students at traditional universities are often held to a cadence of coursework guided by semesters, increasing the time and cost of completion rather than allowing learners to progress at their own pace by demonstrating knowledge. This particularly disadvantages working learners, for whom time is at a premium. However, that same flexibility means that CBE is frequently misunderstood and disadvantaged by outdated laws and institutional practices that focus on time instead of skills. For example, financial aid is often tied to credit hours, such as requirements about the number of credit hours a student must be enrolled in to maintain financial aid. To advance workforce alignment and skills development, policymakers should examine legislative and institutional hurdles within their states that potentially stand in the way of encouraging innovative educational models like CBE.

##### *Recommendations in Action*

- The Utah System of Higher Education (USHE) and Utah policymakers have encouraged CBE, including [SB 195](#), which led to partnerships between USHE institutions with Regent-approved private providers to accept competency-based and transfer credits. The work paved the way to more CBE options for Utahns; for example, Salt Lake City Community College has a number of CBE programs and was one of the first community colleges to join the Competency-Based Education Network.

- Ohio awarded [Innovation Grants](#) that provided selected institutions with funds to encourage the adoption and expansion of CBE. As a result of a grant, two Ohio community colleges worked together to adopt and expand CBE. They were able to have their faculty, online learning experts, financial aid staff, advisors, and others collaborate on ways to address common roadblocks to CBE at their institutions. These two institutions collaborated with the Ohio Department of Higher Education to [offer a conference on developing a CBE model](#) for other Ohio colleges and universities.
- Efforts to promote CBE in K–12 education may become a model for higher education; for example, Idaho [passed legislation for public school districts](#) that created a CBE network to encourage collaboration and required the state to develop a plan for scaling CBE.

#### Put skills at the forefront.

It is time to embrace skills as the currency of education and the driver of curriculum and outcomes. Workers today may pose training and certifications not easily reflected in a job market focused on traditional degrees, creating friction to job opportunities. States are uniquely positioned to drive forward a skills-based future economy and can propel a skills ecosystem by joining the work of coalitions like the [Open Skills Network](#) (OSN). The OSN was launched in 2020 as a collaboration of hundreds of employers, government entities, and higher education institutions that are working on making our labor markets more competitive, efficient, and easily navigable by individuals of all backgrounds. The OSN is working to ensure the data needed to support skills-based education and hiring is accessible and machine-readable through a centralized network of open skills libraries. States can provide valuable insight into these efforts, which will smooth the transition to skills-based practices for employers and educational institutions. States can also implement data sharing agreements among state agencies that manage workforce and education systems.

#### *Recommendations in Action*

- States can partner with [efforts already underway](#) to pilot and adopt the use of a Learning Employment Record (LER), a learner-owned, skills-based transcript that takes the traditional academic transcript to a new level—one that includes academic records, certifications, work accomplishments, and descriptions of accumulated skills.
- The [Open Skills Management Tool](#) (OSMT) is a free, open-source tool to facilitate the production of rich skills descriptors (RSDs) which help create a common language for skills across institutions and employers.
- Alabama has launched the Alabama Credential Registry to catalog degree and nondegree offerings in the state, which will work in tandem with the Alabama Skills-Based Job Description Generator and Employer Portal, as well the Alabama College and Career Exploration Tool, to connect employers and employees in a [skills-based talent development system](#).
- State policymakers are positioned to facilitate partnerships between employers and education providers to efficiently connect displaced workers to jobs, through embracing hiring practices that prioritize skills and competencies. States, such as Colorado and Indiana, are working with the [Markle Foundation](#) to bring these practices to scale. In addition, Markle and the State of

Colorado have developed a [Skillful State Playbook](#) to support states in developing a skills-based state labor market.

## **2. Upskill and reskill existing staff, utilizing microcredentials and short-term training.**

Many critical workforce needs can be met by providing paths for existing staff to upgrade their skills. Education provides a perfect illustration of both the potential and the need. With an alarming and growing [shortage of classroom teachers](#), innovative pathways are essential to filling the gaps and meeting the needs of today’s learners across the educational continuum. Upskilling paraprofessionals holds immense potential: paraprofessionals work in districts already and have a commitment to students. Providing pathways for paraprofessionals to become teachers is an opportunity to diversify the educator pool, improve student outcomes, and in doing so, create systemic change.

Microcredentials like certificates, certifications, badges, and other types of industry-recognized credentials can offer more accessible options for reskilling and upskilling and a more efficient way of meeting employer needs. The massive economic disruption caused by COVID-19 underscored the need for microcredentials, which enabled displaced workers to return to the workforce with newly refreshed skills as quickly as possible while recognizing that many of the jobs that are gone may never return. Microcredentials are also a valuable tool for organizations hoping to retain employees during the “Great Resignation,” during which [a record number of Americans](#) have voluntarily left their jobs, and could prove a key strategy in retaining employees by [providing reskilling and upskilling opportunities](#).

### *Recommendations in Action*

- Iowa’s [Teacher & Paraeducator Registered Apprenticeship Program](#) provides a no-cost opportunity for current high school students and adults to earn a paraeducator certificate and associates degree and paraeducators to earn their bachelor's degree all while learning and working in the classroom. WGU is partnered with nearly 80 mostly rural school districts in Iowa as an education provider for this program.
- Florida’s [Open Door Grant Program](#) provides funding for short-term, in-demand programs. Funds can be used for tuition, fees, exams, books, and materials.
- New Mexico’s [Grow Your Own Teachers](#) program offers scholarships and a pathway for educational assistants to become fully licensed classroom teachers.
- Tennessee provided [new upskilling opportunities](#) for direct care staff in healthcare by designing a competency-based training program with valuable short-term credentials embedded. The Tennessee Promise and Tennessee Reconnect Funds help keep costs low for working learners.

## **3. Structure state financial aid to unlock access to aid for nontraditional learners and nontraditional institutions.**

Working learners deserve access to higher education, and they deserve support that allows them to pursue education in the format and at the institution that best works for their unique needs. Unfortunately, many state financial aid programs only fund full-time students, recent high school graduates, or individuals starting college for the first time. Additionally, many state aid programs do not support less “traditional” institutions, even if they are accredited institutions with proven outcomes.

States should examine existing financial aid programs to see if barriers to working learners can be removed. If not, they can build customized aid programs accessible to working learners.

#### *Recommendations in Action*

- The Missouri [Fast Track Workforce Incentive Grant](#) provides last-dollar funding for low-income adults pursuing a certificate, degree, industry-recognized credential, or apprenticeship in an area designated as high need.
- Indiana provides an [Adult Student Grant](#) of \$2000 geared to the adult learner that can be applied toward a 2- or 4-year degree or certificate.
- Ohio's [Second Chance Grant](#) provides grants to reduce financial barriers for adults in Ohio with some college but no bachelor's degree to return to college to complete their degree.
- The Illinois [Monetary Assistance Program](#) allows residents enrolled in a minimum of three credits access to state financial aid, which provides access to adults enrolled in essentially one course at a time.
- The University of Maine system has [scholarships for adults](#), including those new to higher education and those returning to school after a 3+ year absence.

These recommendations, while not comprehensive, offer strong models that Kansas can consider and modify to improve workforce development and update laws or regulations that may act as barriers to entry into the workforce.

WGU has a long history of partnering with Governors and Legislatures to establish state affiliates to help them deliver a competitive, modern workforce that attracts opportunity for their citizens. In 2010, the State of Indiana and Governor Mitch Daniels established the first formal partnership with WGU. At the time, he welcomed WGU Indiana as an online provider of competency-based education to help overcome the needs of working learners with some college, but no degree, who did not see a path forward to a better life for themselves or their families. Since that initial launch, WGU has worked with 12 states to create what we call affiliate partnerships including the states of Texas, Washington, Missouri, Tennessee, Nevada, North Carolina, Ohio, Utah, Idaho, Montana, and, just last month, Nebraska. While each partnership differs slightly in scope, they all focus on engaging with WGU as a trusted, contributing, and consistent member of the state's higher education and workforce system focused on pathways to degree attainment for adult learners.

WGU is ready, willing, and able to partner with the State of Kansas to be part of much-needed solutions to remove barriers to opportunity and to improve the benefits of education so our neighbors and constituents attain better jobs and a higher quality of life. Thank you for your time and consideration and I would welcome any questions you may have.