

My First Term Experience at WGU

My educational journey has not followed a direct path. After I graduated from High School, I enrolled at the local college to take the first step toward earning a degree. I was only able to take one or two classes each semester, since I needed to work full time to support my family. After the second semester, I quit school. The combination of school, work, and family responsibilities was more than I could manage at that stage of my life. I spent the next few years in a dead-end job earning barely more than minimum wage. My wife took care of our two children and provided care for other peoples' children to supplement our income. We were able to scrimp and make ends meet, but we worked very hard to just get by.

I knew that I would never advance in my current job or earn much more than I was already receiving to do the work. Earning a college degree would be the best way to advance my career and earn more money; however, taking one class at a time at the local college was not the answer. I began to ask around and that is when I learned about Western Governors University.

A friend had just finished his degree through WGU and recommended I check into the college to see if it would be a good fit. He said I could earn my degree completely online and at my own pace—there had to be a catch! I was leery at first and apprehensive to pay the \$65 application fee, money was already tight, but since my friend used the WGU Refer-a-Friend program, there was little risk. This program allowed my friend to refer me, giving me credit toward a free application and in turn giving my friend a gift card. Win/win! I thought I would simply learn a bit more about the school and rule it out as a possible choice—truly believing it was too good to be true.

After I applied, an enrollment counselor contacted me to tell me more about WGU. It was during this process I learned about Competency-Based Education. WGU bases their degrees on real-world competencies as opposed to seat time. This meant I could apply the knowledge and skills I already had toward earning a degree simply by demonstrating mastery of the required courses. Being able to draw upon my own experience to complete assessments faster and progress through my courses quicker meant I could save more money! On top of the cost effectiveness, I learned that my program would be personalized to my schedule and flexible to my needs. I received an enrollment checklist to help navigate the process of applying, receiving admittance, and beginning my program. Overall, the enrollment process was hassle free and informative.

During the Orientation process, I found out more about my WGU experience. I created a study schedule during the orientation process that outlined my plan for achieving my goals and allotting specific times for studying. I knew my study schedule would be a challenge at time, but it was crucial to have a plan in place of how I would juggle work, family, and school. I also learned about more of WGU resources from library services to learning communities and the Student Success Center. While I appreciated the available resources, I didn't think I would need to utilize them.

WGU connected me with a Student Mentor to help me through my program. I appreciated that my Student Mentor was specialized in my program and worked with me to develop a blueprint for degree completion. However, during my first term, I felt capable of tackling my courses on my own. I resisted meeting with my Student Mentor and only scheduled meetings with my Course Mentors a handful of times. I didn't feel the support from my Student Mentor was necessary, nor did I want to allot additional time to discuss my progress. I dodged calls frequently during my first term. I already had a full plate—overtime hours at work, trying to be present during my kid's activities, all the while keeping up with my courses. I simply did not have time to talk about my performance and I was embarrassed to admit that I struggled with time management. On the occasions I did meet with my Student Mentor, I was reluctant to discuss my struggles, often painting a very different picture than my reality. I'm sure my attempts to gloss over my struggles did not go unnoticed to my Mentor, as I wasn't progressing and noticeably falling behind in my courses.

During my first term, I barely met OTP, on time progress towards graduation. It was obvious that if I continued on the same path, I wouldn't earn my degree. Like my previous college experience, I was struggling with issues of life balance and time management. Reflecting upon my relationship with education, I realized that while I loved to learn, I had difficulty asking for help. I finally understood that asking for help was not a weakness, in fact, it was crucial to be successful at times. I finally shared my concerns about time management with my Student Mentor. I also shared my avoidance of asking for help—even when it was crucial. My Student Mentor really understood my struggles; she validated the roadblocks I was encountering and was committed to helping me find solutions. It was then that I realized the meetings with my Student Mentor were not an added obligation, but instead an asset. The meetings were simply another tool to help me accomplish my goals. Through many conversations about my struggles, my Student Mentor reminded me of the resources WGU offers. She connected me with the Student Success Center, and I was able to learn techniques for balancing my life, time management, and even more effective ways to approach my study time.

I also realized that during my first term, I resisted meetings with my Course Mentors. I've always been independent and felt capable of learning the material on my own. When questions would arise during my study time, I'd spend hours searching for answers rather than scheduling an appointment with my Course Mentor. With the support I was receiving from my Student Mentor and the Student Success Center, I finally understood that avoiding the help from Course Mentors were halting my progress. I wasted valuable time searching for answers on my own when the Course Mentors could have provided clarification on material. After this realization, I set solid goals of meeting with my Course Mentors. These meetings were invaluable and allowed me to finish my courses quicker. The Course Mentors were knowledgeable and able to provide insight into the material, knew of additional resources, and helped me stay on a path to success. I wasted months being resistant, if only I had taken the approach sooner!

It has been said, "Experience is what you get when you don't get what you wanted." My educational experience is a testament to this notion. While I did not follow a traditional path to earning my degree, my journey has provided me with invaluable lessons. The bumps along the way shaped me into a stronger person. I learned the true value of perseverance, the significance of asking for help, and that being independent did not mean doing it all on my own. I would simplify my first term at WGU in one word: growth.