

EDUCATION

WGU Tennessee hopes to bridge digital divide with scholarships for internet, computers

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In an effort to reach more Tennesseans, especially in rural areas, Western Governors University recently launched a \$1 million national scholarship program to help provide students access to high-speed internet and other technology.

With more than 23,000 students located in the school's Southeast region, the online nonprofit university learned more about the challenges some of its students have faced since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic.

"We have thousands of students that we struggle to provide access to education for because they don't have a strong Wi-Fi connection," said Kimberly Estep, chancellor of WGU Tennessee during a meeting with Tennessean reporters and editors. "We have students who, before COVID hit, would sit in the local Starbucks or the McDonald's or the local public library and then for several weeks they couldn't get to those sources of Wi-Fi. That really brought this first to our attention."

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The new scholarship program is part of WGU's broader efforts aimed at closing the digital divide and engaging with more students or potential students.

The majority of WGU's more than 4,400 Tennessee students live in the state's larger metro areas like Nashville, Knoxville, Memphis and Chattanooga — but those students can also benefit from the new program.

The "Online Access Scholarship" program not only provides computers or laptops to students with a financial need but also will pay that student's internet bill.

"When you look at our state, it is the rural places in Tennessee that lack the appropriate technology and don't get good Wi-Fi service, and when they get Wi-Fi service, it's horribly expensive and isn't a reasonable expense for low-income families," Estep said.

WGU is also preparing to potentially see increased interest from students who might have planned on attending or currently attend a traditional on-campus or even flagship university, but are stuck in virtual classes right now.

Many colleges and universities have already faced COVID-19 outbreaks since students have begun returning to campus this fall — prompting closures or transitioning classes back to virtual learning.

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WGU was "born online" though and Estep argues the school provides better quality online programs than schools that are suddenly forced to go online.

Though many WGU students are typically older, non-traditional returning students or career changers, the school's fastest growing demographic right now has been students who are ages 19 to 24, according to school officials.

Reliable internet access has quickly become a major concern for higher education and K-12 education alike. At least one in four students in K-12 public schools in Tennessee are learning online this school year and many college students have also transitioned to virtual learning.

Nearly one in four Black and Hispanic students don't have access to broadband internet, and at least 492,000 Tennesseans don't have wired internet access capable of 25 mbps download speeds, a minimum requirement for most online learning, according to a report by the Tennessee Chamber of Commerce and Industry. And that was before the COVID-19 pandemic.

At least 40% of Tennesseans don't have access to a low-priced internet plan — costing \$60 a month or less — and another 274,000 Tennesseans don't have a provider offering internet to their home at all, according to a report by Broadband Now.

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Many organizations look to tackle the digital divide among K-12 students, but the divide also affects older learners and their families.

Jared Bigham, senior adviser on workforce and rural initiatives for the Tennessee Chamber of Commerce, previously told The Tennessean that for students to even have a chance at success, three things must exist:

- broadband access for every family across Tennessee;
- adequate technology or equipment for students to learn at home;
- and appropriate professional development for educators on how to successfully facilitate virtual and/or blended instruction at any educational level.

"We have to get to the point where high-speed access is just like any other utility that we have in households, like electricity and water," he said. "That's when we know that we have bridged the gap."

Estep hopes that the online access grant will complement other efforts the school is making to help its students amid the pandemic.

WGU also launched an Emergency Relief Fund in May 2020 to provide micro-grants to students hit by financial or medical hardships due to COVID-19. At least 135 students in Tennessee have received \$67,500 in aid.

WGU's \$1 million online access scholarship is for students nationwide, but the school is targeting specific areas in each of its seven regions, with East Tennessee a focus for the Southeastern region.

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