



# Renewing the Promise of Higher Education:

WGU ALUMNI OUTCOMES REPORT 2021



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## Introduction

2020 presented significant challenges to the ways Americans work and learn, requiring institutions of higher education to adapt how they deliver value to their students. Conversely, the transition to remote or hybrid learning — combined with a forced reimagining of the workplace — has spurred students across the country to consider, more than ever, the value of a college degree and a university’s ability to set them up for success during and after their academic journey.

Since 2014, Gallup has quantified college graduates’ academic and post-graduation outcomes through the Gallup Alumni Survey. This nationally representative study measures college graduates’ current wellbeing and employment, as well as retrospective assessments of their college experiences. The most recent installment of this survey was conducted in January 2021, allowing Gallup to examine the ways COVID-19 impacted bachelor’s degree holders, which educational experiences were most critical to key post-graduation outcomes and how individual universities performed against national benchmarks during the pandemic. All comparisons to the national graduate average in this report refer to 3,271 bachelor’s degree holders who graduated between 2015 and 2019 and completed the Gallup Alumni Survey between Jan. 15 and Jan. 29, 2021.

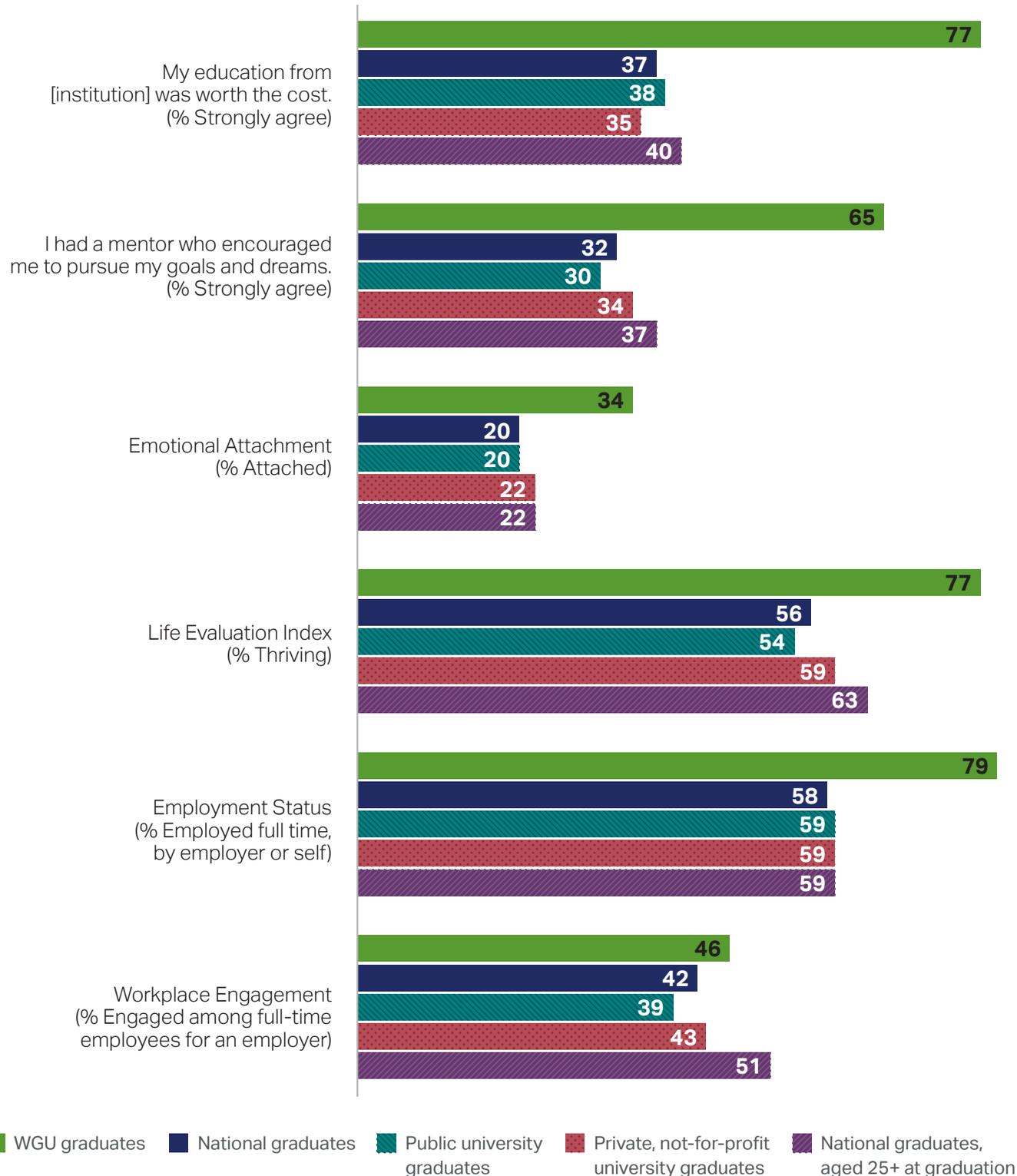
Leveraging many of the items included in the Gallup Alumni Survey, Western Governors University conducted its own survey from Nov. 11 to Dec. 15, 2020, to compare the experiences and outcomes of its undergraduate alumni against college graduates nationally, particularly in the areas of wellbeing, employment, workplace engagement, emotional attachment to their alma mater and the overall value of their bachelor’s degree.

TABLE 1:  
RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS AMONG 2015-2019 GRADUATES

	<b>WGU GRADUATES</b>	National graduates	Public university graduates	Private, not-for-profit university graduates	National graduates, aged 25+ at graduation
Total respondents	<b>2,565</b>	3,271	1,868	938	1,419
Mean age at graduation	<b>40.3 years</b>	25.9 years	25.6 years	25.3 years	31.4 years
Female graduates	<b>61%</b>	54%	56%	53%	39%
First-generation college graduates	<b>61%</b>	28%	31%	25%	26%

# Key Findings

CHART 1:





## Delivering a Valuable, Equitable Education

Western Governors University provides several critical support structures to its students to ensure they are well-positioned for success in their studies. Sixty-seven percent of WGU alumni strongly agree they had access to the resources they needed to be successful academically while completing their undergraduate degree — which is nearly 30 points higher than the national college graduate average (38%). WGU graduates also cite highly accessible student support services: 63% say the availability of these services was excellent, significantly higher than the national average of 42%.

WGU also takes an intentional approach to mentoring students. The school assigns every student a program mentor upon enrollment. That mentor guides the student through their eventual graduation. As a result of this intentionality,

**65% of WGU alumni strongly agree they had a mentor who encouraged them to pursue their goals and dreams.**

Gallup research has found this key experience to be one of the strongest predictors of future wellbeing and workplace engagement.<sup>1</sup> It also sets WGU apart from universities nationally, as just 32% of all national college graduates strongly agree they had such a mentor — a percentage 30 points less than that of WGU graduates.

<sup>1</sup> Gallup, Inc. & Purdue University. (2014). Great jobs, great lives: The 2014 Gallup-Purdue Index report. <https://www.gallup.com/services/176768/2014-gallup-purdue-index-report.aspx>

“*I felt like I was probably the only student they had. I know I wasn’t, but they learned a lot about my personal story...and that impacts you, the way you learn, interpret criticism. So for people to take the time to get to know you as a person, that was huge. It was nothing but encouragement.*”

GINGER, WGU ALUM, CLASS OF 2020

Importantly, WGU ensures these resources and support structures reach and serve underserved student populations. First-generation college graduates of WGU are just as likely as other alumni to strongly agree they had access to these resources, student support services and mentors.

“*I had tried to go back to school probably three or four times. And it just never clicked with me. But this has been probably the best educational experience I’ve had.*”

GINGER, WGU ALUM, CLASS OF 2020

WGU students not only receive support and resources at higher rates than the national average, but also at a lower cost. WGU offers a flat-rate tuition system, allowing students to complete their bachelor’s degree for about half the national average cost.<sup>2</sup> As a result, 43% of WGU graduates complete

their undergraduate coursework without taking out any student loans. Among WGU graduates who did take out student loans, only 12% strongly agree or agree their student loans have prevented them from working in a job they are truly passionate about. Nationally, 40% of college graduates who took out loans say that their student debt prevents them from working in a job they are truly passionate about.

WGU’s comparatively strong performance across these factors coalesces into students’ endorsement of the value of a WGU degree:

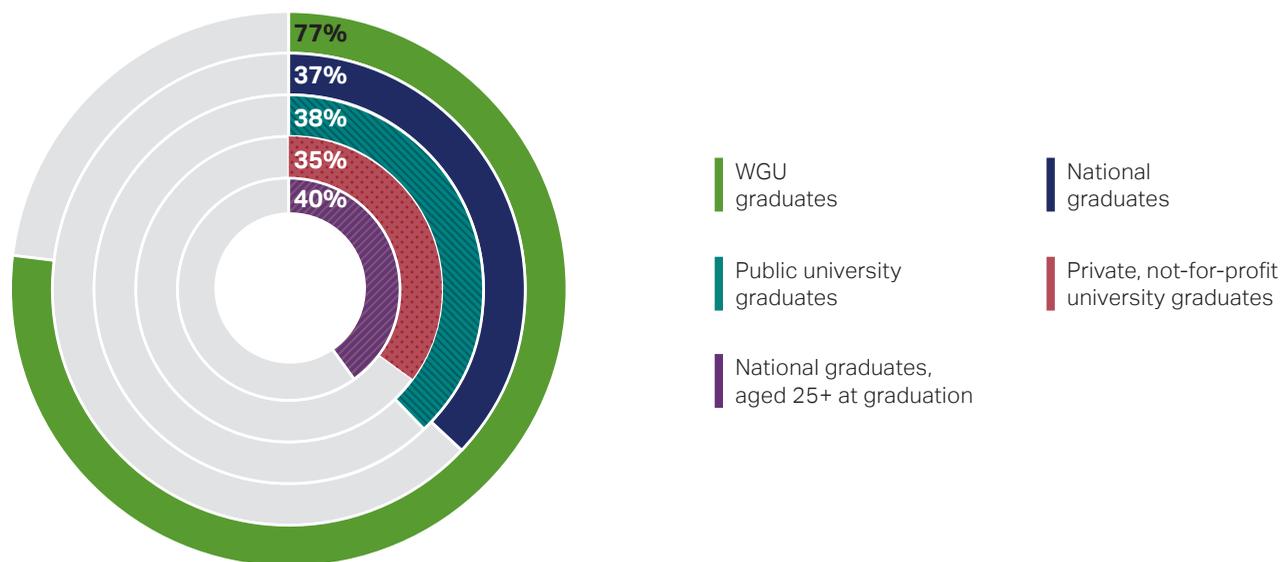
**77% of the university’s alumni strongly agree the education they received was worth the cost.**

This is more than double the percentage of college graduates nationally (37%) who strongly endorse the value of their degree.

CHART 2:

**My education from [institution] was worth the cost.**

% Strongly agree



2 Tuition and Financial Aid. (n.d.) Western Governors University. Retrieved February 26, 2021. <https://www.wgu.edu/financial-aid-tuition.html>

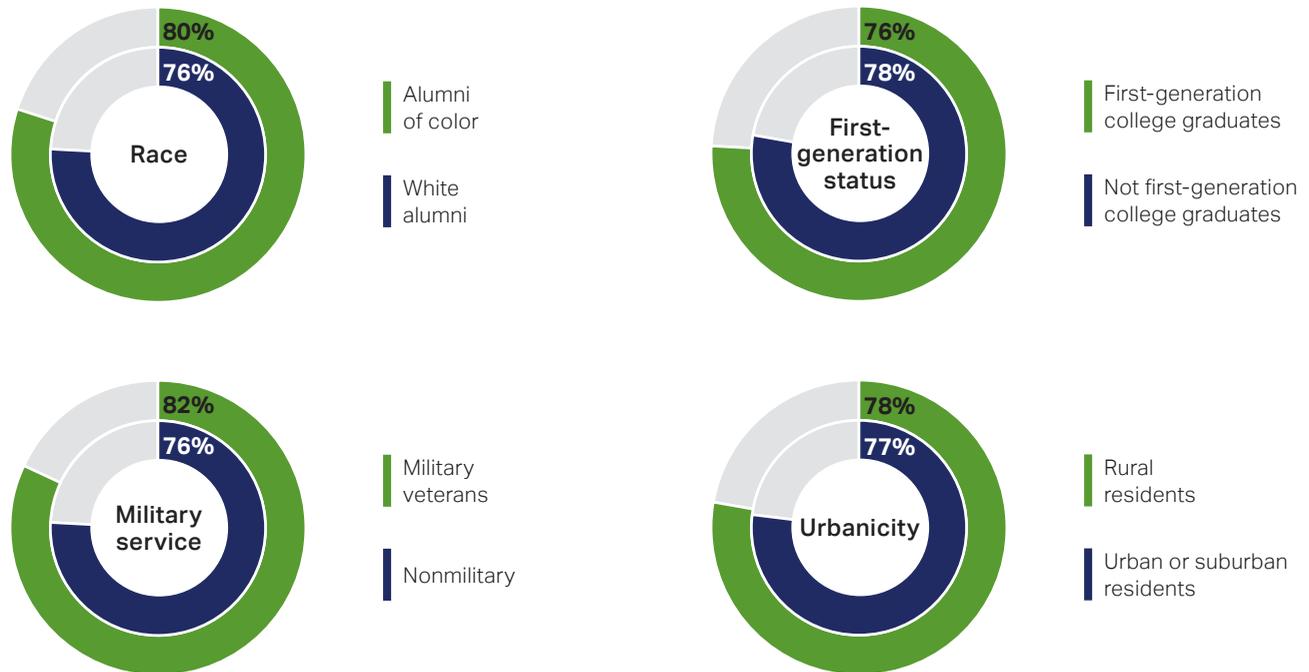
Moreover, historically underserved student populations are at least as likely as all other graduates to endorse the value of their WGU degree. WGU graduates of color, military veterans, first-generation college graduates and residents of rural

communities are all about as likely as — if not more likely than — graduates who are not members of these groups to strongly agree their degree was worth the cost, making a degree from WGU not only valuable but equitable.

CHART 3:

**My education from Western Governors University was worth the cost.**

*% Strongly agree*





## Creating a Community of Care and Trust

The value of attending Western Governors University is also reflected in its graduates' belief that their university has their interests in mind not just as students, but also as members of the WGU community. More than half (51%) of alumni strongly agree WGU is passionate about its students' long-term success.

“*At the beginning of every course I would send an email to my instructors to introduce myself and where I was in my progress at WGU. Each one of them replied to me quickly, gave me a list of tips, additional study resources and their schedule of availability so it was easy to schedule time with them if I needed to. That's hard to get to at a different university where you have to chase after them to get that information.*”

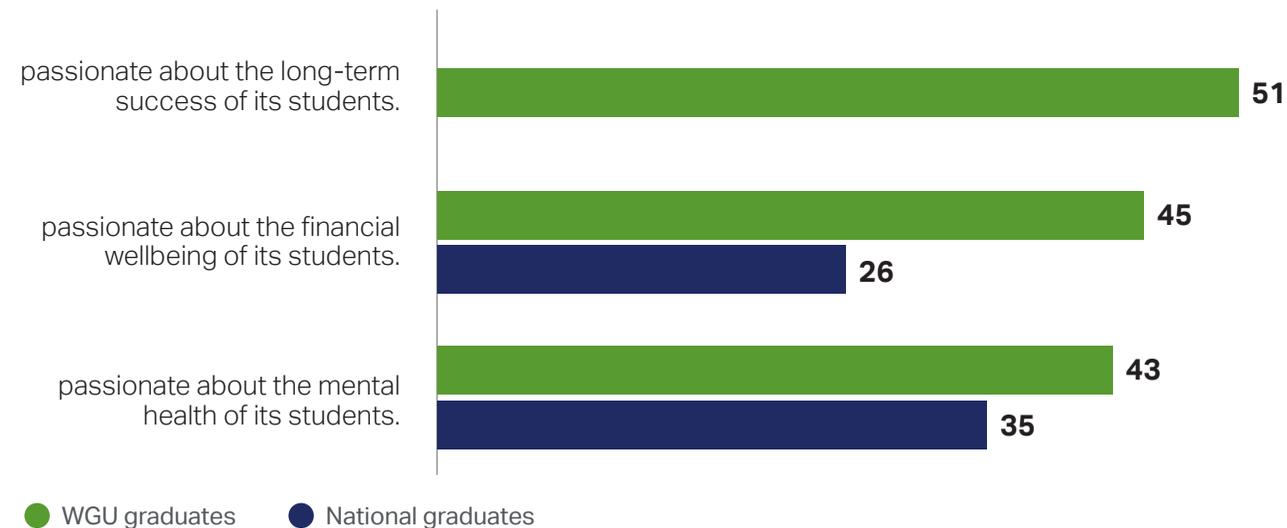
ARMANDO, WGU ALUM, CLASS OF 2020

This finding is not limited to future success, as alumni also acknowledge the commitment that WGU has to its students' wellbeing. In 2013, WGU launched its Responsible Borrowing Initiative, designed to assist and encourage students to make responsible financial decisions in the pursuit of their degree. This initiative may be why WGU graduates are eight points more likely than the national average to strongly agree their alma mater is passionate about the mental health of its students (43%), and nearly 20 points more likely to say it is passionate about its students' financial wellbeing (45%).

CHART 4:

**Western Governors University is...**

% Strongly agree



These are particularly critical educational factors in 2021, as 36% of Americans said they were worse off financially in January 2021 than they were one year prior.<sup>3</sup> In addition, a November 2020 Gallup poll found that Americans’ assessment of their mental health had reached a 20-year low,<sup>4</sup> making universities’ support of students’ wellbeing as critical as ever.

Beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, the events of 2020 have sharpened the focus on racial justice in the U.S. and placed a greater emphasis on diversity, equity and inclusion in higher education and the workplace. When asked about critical aspects of diversity at the university, 79% of WGU graduates of color say it is a good place for racial and ethnic minorities, in line with the national average of 78%.

**Seventy-one percent of graduates of color strongly agree that if they had raised an issue of discrimination, the university would have fully investigated it — more than double the 33% of graduates of color nationally who say the same.**

3 Brenan, M. (2021, February 3). Americans’ Views of Their Financial Situation Worsen. Gallup.com. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/329207/americans-views-financial-situation-worsen.aspx>  
 4 Brenan, M. (2020, December 7). Americans’ Mental Health Ratings Sink to New Low. Gallup.com. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/327311/americans-mental-health-ratings-sink-new-low.aspx>



*"I kept the promise I made to my parents and myself at 16... and that promise was to graduate from college. When it looked like that might not be a possibility, I came across WGU. A university that would cost me a fraction of what it costs at other colleges, allow me to keep my job, care for a sick spouse, homeschool my child, be a track and cross-country mom, and graduate in half the time."*

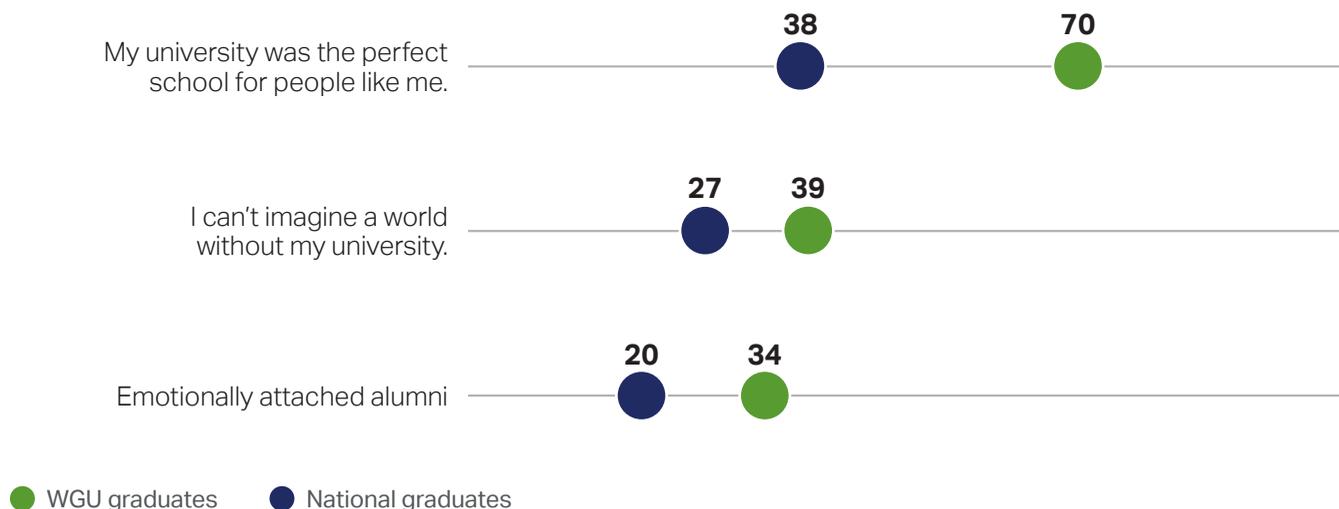
MIRANDA, WGU ALUM, CLASS OF 2020

To measure the emotional attachment graduates feel to their alma mater, Gallup uses two survey items: "My university was the perfect school for people like me" and "I can't imagine a world without my university." Seven in 10 WGU alumni strongly agree the university was the perfect school for people like them — likely a combined result of WGU's above-average ability to provide its students with the resources they need and the passion it shows for its students' success and wellbeing.

This rate is nearly twice the percentage of college graduates nationally (38%) who strongly agree their alma mater was the perfect school for people like them. WGU graduates are also significantly more likely than the national average to say they cannot imagine a world without their university (39% of WGU graduates versus 27% of all national college graduates). The 34% share of WGU alumni who strongly agree to both emotional attachment statements is 14 points higher than the national average.

CHART 5:

% Strongly agree





## Graduating Thriving, Engaged Alumni

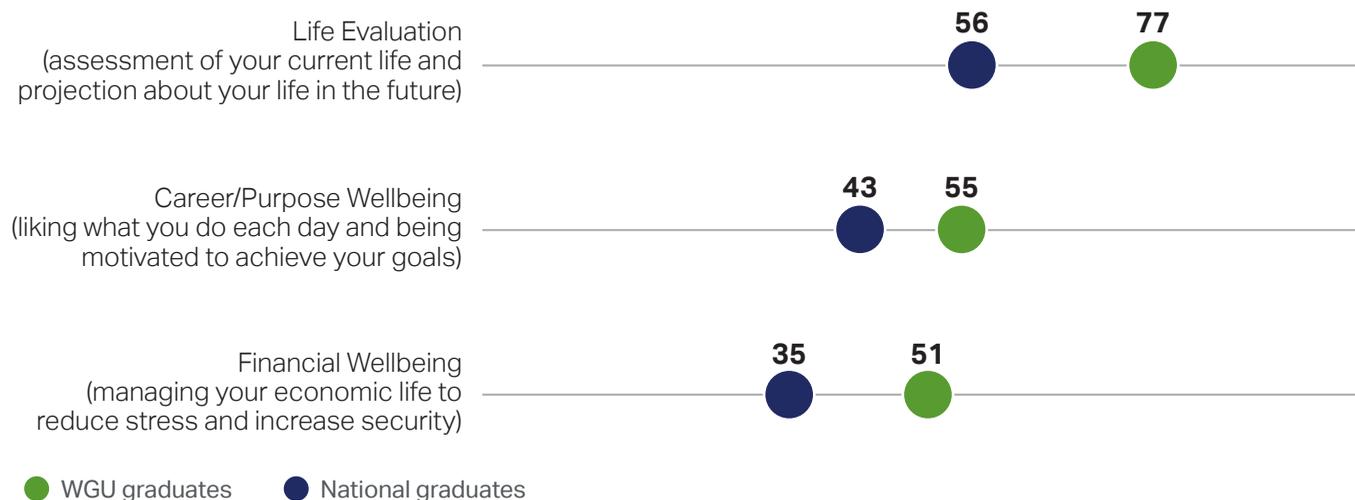
Through this commitment to its students' academic success, Western Governors University produces alumni who are more likely than the national average to be thriving in their wellbeing, successful in the job market and engaged in the workplace.

Despite a pandemic that drove national wellbeing to its lowest level since the 2008 financial crisis,<sup>5</sup> WGU alumni continue to thrive at levels higher than the national average in several key areas. Seventy-seven percent of WGU graduates are thriving on the life evaluation index, which asks respondents to assess their current life, as well as their projected life in five

years, on a scale of zero to ten.<sup>6</sup> This response is more than 20 points higher than the national average among college graduates (56%). Moreover, WGU graduates are 12 points more likely than the national average to be thriving in their career and purpose wellbeing and 16 points more likely to be thriving in their financial wellbeing.

### CHART 6:

#### % Thriving



5 Witters, D. & Agrawal, S. (2020, August 16). After Record Drop, U.S. Life Ratings Partially Rebound. Gallup.com. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/315614/record-drop-life-ratings-partially-rebound.aspx>

6 For more information about how Gallup uses the Cantril Scale, see <https://news.gallup.com/poll/122453/Understanding-Gallup-Uses-Cantril-Scale.aspx>.

The COVID-19 pandemic has not prevented WGU alumni from succeeding in the job market: 79% of WGU alumni are employed full time, which is more than 20 points higher than the national average (58%). In addition, WGU alumni are significantly less likely than college graduates nationally to be underemployed. While 3% of WGU graduates are employed part time but want full-time work, nearly five times as many national college graduates (14%) reported being employed part time with a desire for full-time employment.

Beyond being employed at higher rates, WGU alumni are also securing jobs that are fulfilling and engaging. Gallup research finds that the top reason students pursue a college degree is to get a good job,<sup>7</sup> and among WGU graduates who were seeking employment,

**57%** said they had a good job waiting for them when they graduated.

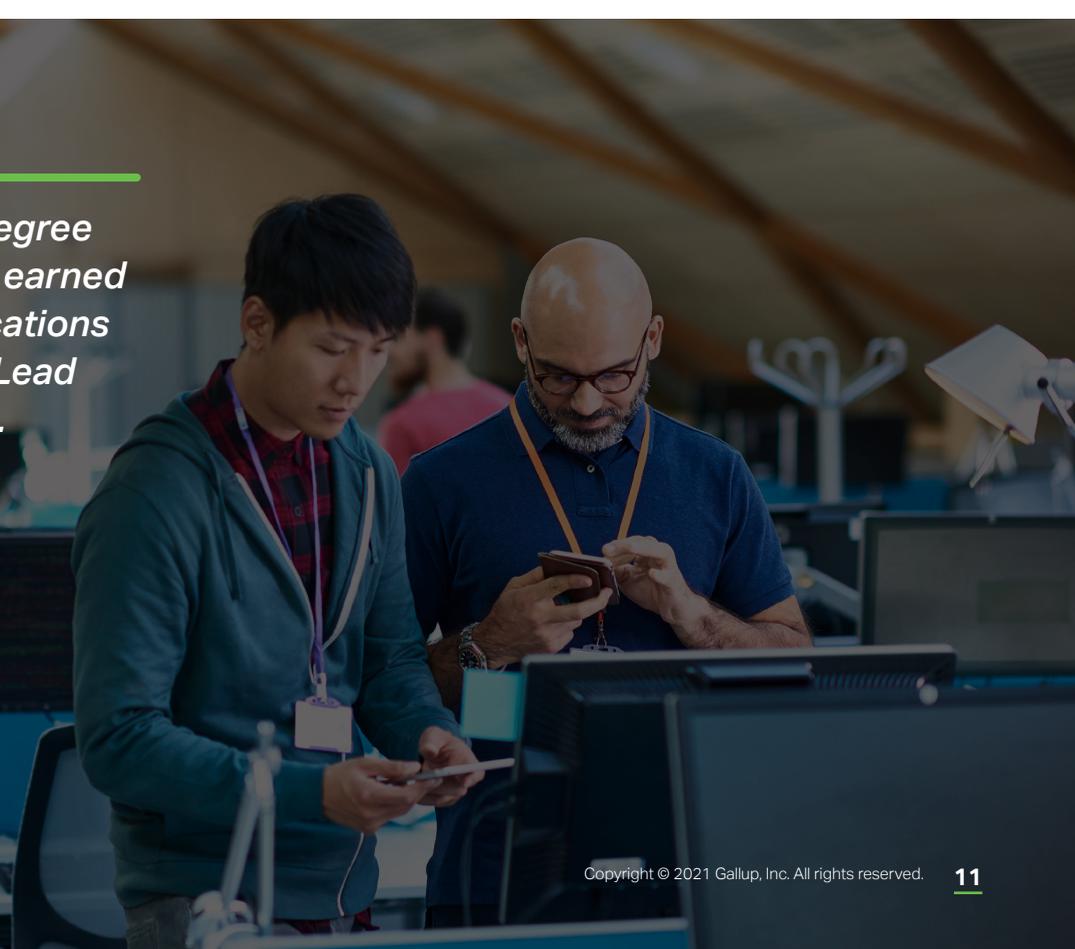
This finding is nearly twice as high as the 30% of national college graduates who said the same.

WGU alumni's ability to secure good jobs likely contributes to their workplace engagement rate that is higher than college graduates nationally. Engaged employees are enthusiastic about their work, psychologically committed to their organization and always looking for ways to achieve better outcomes. It is notable, then, that among WGU graduates who are employed full time for an employer, nearly half (46%) are engaged at work, which is four points higher than the national average among college graduates. Beyond the personal benefit of WGU alumni working in jobs that are rewarding to them, these graduates are driving their organizations forward and providing greater value to their employers than their less-engaged colleagues.

<sup>7</sup> Busteded, B. & Auter, Z. (2018, February 13). Career-Relevant Education Linked to Student Well-Being. Gallup.com <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/226934/career-relevant-education-linked-student.aspx>

“*Only a year into my degree program at WGU I had earned seven industry certifications and was promoted to Lead Technology Specialist. And now, I also have a bachelor's degree!*”

**ARMANDO, WGU ALUM,  
CLASS OF 2020**



WGU alumni appear to have weathered the pandemic more successfully than their peers. WGU's graduates are significantly less likely than the national average

to have lost their jobs or lost income due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

CHART 7:

**Compared to bachelor's degree holders nationally, WGU alumni are...**

**5x**

**LESS LIKELY**

to say they have been permanently let go from their job

**3x**

**LESS LIKELY**

to say they have had their hours reduced

**3x**

**LESS LIKELY**

to say they have been temporarily laid off from their job

**2x**

**LESS LIKELY**

to say they have experienced a loss of income

**...as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.**

# Methodology

Results from this study are based on 2,565 web survey responses from WGU alumni who graduated between 2015 and 2019. Gallup conducted the survey from Nov. 11 to Dec. 15, 2020. WGU provided the sample of alumni email addresses. Alumni were included in the study if the institution had an email address on file.

Results for the national study used for comparison purposes — the Gallup Alumni Survey — are based on web surveys, with a random sample of 3,271 respondents with a bachelor's degree or higher, who graduated between 2015 and 2019, are aged 18 or older, have internet access, and live in one of the 50 U.S. states or the District of Columbia. Of these, 1,868 graduated from public universities and 938 graduated from private, nonprofit universities. There were 1,419 graduates from the national sample who were aged 25 or older at graduation. Gallup conducted the survey from Jan. 15 to Jan. 29, 2021.

Gallup Alumni Survey interviews are conducted via the web, in English only. Samples are weighted to correct for unequal selection probability and nonresponse. The data are weighted to match national demographics of gender, age, race, Hispanic ethnicity, education and region. Gallup bases demographic weighting targets on the most recent Current Population Survey figures for the aged 18 and older U.S. bachelor's degree or higher population.

All reported margins of sampling error for the Gallup Alumni Survey of all college graduates include the computed design effects for weighting.

For results based on the total sample of 2,565 respondents with a bachelor's degree from WGU, the margin of sampling error is  $\pm 1.9$  percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

For results based on the 3,271 respondents from the Gallup Alumni Survey with a bachelor's degree conferred between 2015 and 2019, the margin of sampling error is  $\pm 1.7$  percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

For results based on the 1,868 respondents from the Gallup Alumni survey with a bachelor's degree from public universities conferred between 2015 and 2019, the margin of sampling error is  $\pm 2.3$  percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

For results based on the 938 respondents from the Gallup Alumni survey with a bachelor's degree from private, not-for-profit universities conferred between 2015 and 2019, the margin of sampling error is  $\pm 3.2$  percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

For results based on the 1,419 respondents from the Gallup Alumni Survey with a bachelor's degree conferred between 2015 and 2019 when aged 25 or older, the margin of sampling error is  $\pm 2.6$  percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

# About Western Governors University

Western Governors University (WGU) is a competency-based, online, nonprofit university founded in 1997 by 19 U.S. governors who saw advancement in technology as an opportunity to expand access to higher education by making it possible to study and learn independent of time and place. These governors saw the transformative power of competency-based education (CBE) — an academic model that focuses on measuring learning rather than time.

CBE is ideal for adult learners, who come to college with different learning styles and levels of knowledge. Rather than enrolling in semester-long courses with fixed schedules, students move through courses as quickly as they can demonstrate that they know the material. They study and learn on a schedule that fits their lives with regular, one-on-one instruction and support from faculty. Programs and courses are designed with input from academic and industry leaders to ensure their relevance to employers and the workplace.

WGU's defining principle is focus on the student — every WGU initiative is evaluated and prioritized based on its impact on student success. The efficacy of WGU's learning model and student focus is demonstrated in results — a graduation rate significantly higher than other institutions serving adult learners; student, graduate, and employer satisfaction levels that outpace the national average; dramatically lower student debt levels, decreasing annually; and better employment outcomes for its graduates.

The university offers more than 60 bachelor's, master's and post-baccalaureate degree programs in the key workforce areas of business, information technology, K-12 teacher education and health professions, including nursing. WGU's 132,000 students and more than 227,000 graduates reside in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and at military installations worldwide.

# About Gallup

Gallup delivers analytics and advice to help leaders and organizations solve their most pressing problems. Combining more than 80 years of experience with its global reach, Gallup knows more about the attitudes and behaviors of employees, customers, students and citizens than any other organization in the world.

**Gallup partners with higher education institutions to improve the employee experience and student experience through advice and analytics about the university culture, employee engagement among faculty and staff, and the curricular and programmatic experiences in which students engage.**

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