

WGU to Grant \$1 Million in Online Access Scholarships to Close the Digital Divide Learning Gap

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ST. LOUIS –With many colleges and universities incorporating online learning into their curriculum as COVID-19 concerns continue to grow, those who do not have access to affordable, high-speed internet and want to further their education are often left behind. To help address this issue and increase access to education for adults across Illinois and Missouri, online, nonprofit university WGU Missouri has announced it will grant high-speed internet access and provide devices to its students who are in need through its Online Access Scholarship program. The scholarship offering is part of a broader WGU initiative aimed at working with policy makers and private industry to close the digital divide by providing more Americans access to reliable internet in their homes.

The Online Access Scholarship will cover internet installation and monthly access costs for the duration WGU students are active and in good standing. The scholarship will also provide recipients with a refurbished laptop, complete with a webcam. This opportunity is available for prospective high-need students who might not otherwise be able to get online to complete their education.

“Lack of high-speed internet access continues to be a barrier for those who are interested in earning their degree but need the flexibility online education offers,” said Dr. Angie Besendorfer, Chancellor of WGU Missouri, which has more than 3,000 currently enrolled students and more than 4,300 alumni. “COVID-19 has only highlighted this problem as millions of Americans who have lost employment make the difficult decision to cut WiFi from their monthly expenses, making it impossible for them to complete online studies. Making sure students have high-speed internet and reliable devices will not only provide them with access to high-quality education from the safety of their homes but will also set them up for success in the long run as they work to further the skills needed to advance their careers and improve their lives.”

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) estimates 21 million Americans lack access to high-speed internet. In Illinois, just over a million people do not have access to affordable, high-speed internet, and in Missouri, the number of people who lack access to high-speed internet is slightly higher, at 1.2 million. In many cases, when access to broadband is available,

Americans are still unable to afford the monthly payments. [The Pew Research Center](#) last year reported that 44 percent of adults in households with incomes below \$30,000 do not have broadband.

Covid-19 has compounded the problem — creating economic hardships for millions of Americans while also making online access more important than ever. The pandemic has driven double digit growth for broadband in the span of a couple of weeks. A [recent report by OpenVault](#) found that average broadband consumption at the end of the first quarter in 2020 rose to 402.5GB per user, an increase of 47 percent compared to the first quarter of 2019's average of 273.5 GB.

For those whose jobs have been impacted by the pandemic, returning to school to prepare for new career opportunities is critical. However, the loss of income may make it impossible to pay for broadband services students need to return to school. WGU's Online Access Scholarship will support this need by allowing students to learn from the safety of their homes.

"I am currently unable to take on work at my warehouse job because my seven-year-old son has asthma, and I am unable to put him in childcare and risk him contracting the virus," said St. Louis resident Eulonda Beard, one of the first recipients of the Online Access Scholarship who was furloughed from her job and had to drop her online classes because she couldn't afford internet access. "Receiving this online access scholarship means I can go back to school and finish my IT degree so I can pursue a career in web development. I want to focus on UX design and develop websites that are more accessible to people of all abilities. This scholarship has put me closer to my dream. Being able to go back to school will open up a lot of different opportunities for me, including financial freedom. The thought of buying a car and paying bills ahead of time while doing something I love is amazing."

Beyond the Online Access Scholarship, WGU Missouri is working to solve the digital divide problem on several other fronts. These include a partnership with the National Governors Association to identify problems, resources and solutions; advocating for policies that improve and expand the nation's digital infrastructure; and coalition-building efforts that will help raise awareness of broadband inequities.

"WGU Missouri's mission is to provide working adults with access to high-quality and affordable higher education opportunities, and advocating for reliable, high-speed internet access for all is a key part of this mission," said Dr. Besendorfer. "So many individuals are missing out on learning opportunities because they do not have quality, high-speed internet access, and we are committed to changing this – not only through this scholarship offering – but by working with state and local legislators. Our hope is that every resident – regardless of income level or where they live – will soon have access to affordable broadband internet."

For more information about WGU's Online Access Scholarship, visit www.wgu.edu/access or call (385) 428-3125.

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