

'Virtual university' is goal of governors

By The Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — Westerners interested in higher education but short on time and money will be able to attend classes from their personal computers at a fraction of the normal cost within a year from now, Gov. Roy Romer said yesterday.

"This is one the biggest ideas I've seen in a long time," Romer said at the Western Governors Association's two-day meeting in Las Vegas. "The Western governors are very interested in creating a way to use computer-assisted learning — finding ways students and adults can learn and get credit for learning."

The WGA unanimously passed a resolution yesterday approving the creation of a "virtual university" for use by the 18 states and three territories that make up the association. The on-line learning system will make resources from colleges and universities throughout the West available to citizens.

Under the plan, people will be able

to receive certificates for learning that they can present to employers, without having to complete the traditional two- or four-year programs.

"It's a system based upon the student, based on competency, not credits," he said. "It's revolutionary. Right now, the way you get hired is you get a degree from an accredited college. What we're saying is, let's change all that so more people can acquire skills, while maintaining the quality."

Junior and community colleges are expected to be the first ones to participate in the virtual university, and others will join on later, Romer said. Students will go to central locations in each state to receive their certificates after completing virtual university classes.

"The world changed just a little, tiny bit today," said Utah Gov. Mike Leavitt. "There will be in the future access to relatively low-cost high-quality instruction . . . and people will find it appealing."