

ADMINISTRATION

11 Western Governors to Study Creation of 'Virtual University'

By Goldie Blumenstyk | DECEMBER 15, 1995

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Governors of 11 Western states have agreed to explore the creation of a "virtual university" in their region, one that would deliver courses through computer networks, television, or other technologies, and would award degrees on its own.

A few of them want to take the idea even further, making the proposed institution into an alternative university that would redefine traditional notions of higher education by awarding academic credit for knowledge acquired on the job, or from sources such as commercial tutorials on the Internet or CD-ROMs.

The governors said such fundamental reform was needed to prepare for expected enrollment increases in some of their states and to respond to demands from employers for better access to education and job training.

They also are counting on the approach to save money.

But some in academe fear that the governors are rallying around an idea that favors financial and political expedience over high-quality education.

The decision to explore the virtual university came at a meeting here this month of the Western Governors' Association, which was attended by 11 of the region's 18 chief executives. They criticized higher education for moving too slowly in recognizing technological opportunities and assailed accreditors for stifling innovation.

"People are learning all over, in places that are not part of accredited universities," said Gov. Roy Romer, a Democrat from Colorado and the most vocal champion of the virtual university. But the certification of what is learned has always been in the hands of the university, he said. "We're coming into the age where that is going to be blown apart."

In calling for a "virtual university," the governors lumped together two different but related goals. One was for their states to work together to develop and embrace courses that could be delivered to campuses in their region through computer networks and other technologies.

The other goal, promoted most strongly by Governors Romer and Michael O. Leavitt, Republican of Utah, is to give academic legitimacy to the other kinds of learning that technology now makes possible.

Governor Leavitt, for example, said that there were thousands of courses to which he could gain access through his computer or television, but that no institution is organized specifically to measure his learning from such classes. Unlike traditional institutions that teach and offer credentials, the alternative "virtual university" would limit itself to awarding credentials, using a set of measures that assess students' mastery of various subjects.

Just how the two ideas would work in a new institution is still unclear, but backers of the plan said the governors' approach made sense. "They are faced with more demand than they can afford," and they see technology as a partial solution, said Dennis P. Jones, president of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems. He wrote a paper that outlines the options for a virtual university. The center, a non-profit research organization in Boulder, Colo., with ties to Governor Romer, is expected to be involved in future planning for the "virtual university."

The idea of competency-based degrees is not new in higher education. Empire State College of the State University of New York, for example, has been offering them since 1971.

But observers said the scale of the governors' proposal makes it significant. And the opportunities opened up by technology make the idea more feasible.

For the governors, the new approach responds to a number of continuing and pressing concerns.

In Arizona, California, Colorado, and Utah, where school-aged populations are growing, politicians face pressures to make college more available. New campuses are not a solution, they say. Utah, for example, expects its college enrollment to grow to 150,000 from 80,000 in the next 12 to 15 years. "The money doesn't exist to build ourselves out of this environment," Governor Leavitt told his colleagues.

Mr. Romer, among other governors, is also excited by the idea of a university that awards degrees, certificates, and credits based on measurements of what students have learned. He and other state leaders have called for such "assessment" in higher education for nearly a decade.

Governors and other policy makers have been pushing to make higher education more affordable and accessible to older, working students, and to make institutions more responsive to the changing workplace, where many jobs now require continual retraining.

Governor Romer said he wanted an institution or a system "where we certify and verify for the student and the employer that learning has occurred." The governors devoted most of their attention to the issue of job skills, but Mr. Romer said the virtual university should go beyond that. "This method is applicable to civics, ethics, politics, art," he said.

As part of its effort, the governors' association said it would push accrediting agencies to become more flexible. "The accrediting institutions have a death grip on how you verify competency," said Governor Romer.

He and other governors said they had serious doubts about the value of accreditation. Governor Leavitt characterized it as "a roadblock" to change and said he considered accreditors to be perpetuators of a system that equates spending with quality. "Nobody elects them. They come into our states and tell us we're not spending enough money. I'm sorry -- who are they to tell us that?"

The attack on accreditors did not go unanswered. Margaret Kaus, assistant director of the College Commission of the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges, told the governors that agencies like hers could adapt. "You're going to find that the accreditors are not going to be a barrier to you."

But the director of the commission, Joseph A. Malik, noted in an interview that the governors were taking on a complex issue. "Measuring quality by competency is not an easy task," he said. Traditionally, he added, assessments of competency has been thought to rest with a qualified faculty member. "I don't know if this new institution is going to have a faculty. So who's going to decide, and how? These would seem to me important questions to be sorted out."

Two professors who deal with technology issues agreed in interviews that higher education needed to embrace new teaching tools and styles, but questioned whether states really could save money without sacrificing quality.

Assessment measures that were more than "simple-minded tests" of knowledge would be costly to produce, as would courses in which students and teachers really interacted with each other, said Dick Barrett, a professor of economics at the University of Montana. He also was concerned that people who turned to other sources of education would be "bombarded by aggressive marketing," without the benefit of counseling that a college can provide.

He and others also questioned whether knowledge acquired from a host of sources was really the same as an education.

"If we start mass marketing degrees totally for life experience or watching TV or CD-ROMs, then we start cheapening education, which doesn't get you where you want to go for economic development or self-fulfillment," said Susan J. Levy, a professor of economics at Shoreline Community College. She and Mr. Barrett are members of an American Federation of Teachers committee on technology.

College presidents and higher-education policy makers who participated in the meeting urged governors to include faculty members in their planning.

Others reminded the governors that the states themselves maintain barriers to a cost-efficient education delivered by technology. Charles Hurt, dean of the School of Library Science at the University of Arizona, said he had a cease-and-desist order from Georgia authorities "because my satellite courses made it to the State of Georgia."

Another barrier could be the governors themselves. "I got a lot out of the interaction with my professor," said Gov. Benjamin J. Cayetano of Hawaii, a Democrat. He said many of his values were shaped during college, and he questioned whether a virtual university could replace that.

Another Governor, Republican Jim Geringer of Wyoming, suggested that a virtual university that certified competencies might "fill a niche," and that using technology to share courses was worthwhile. But the traditional college experience would have to be preserved, he said. "Culturally, I don't think we're going to get away from the university as a rite of passage."