

Leavitt Bringing Team Together for Virtual U.

By Joan O'Brien
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Gov. Mike Leavitt has recruited some old hands in distance learning for a new team dedicated to putting Utah higher education online.

Tuesday, Leavitt introduced his executive assistant for higher education technology and members of the Utah Steering Committee for the Virtual University.

All are already involved in the use of information technology to deliver education to Utah students.

Jeffrey Livingston, until Tuesday the associate commissioner for academic affairs in the Utah System of Higher Education, now serves as Leavitt's executive assistant for higher education technology. He will continue to work with the system as associate commissioner of technology.

Livingston will head the 18-member steering committee, which includes Utah Education Network Executive Director Stephen Hess, College of Eastern Utah President Mike Petersen, the University of Phoenix's Craig Swenson and University of Utah Vice President for Academic Affairs Jeri McIntyre.

"I'm impressed with that group," Livingston said of the 18 members. They are already committed to the idea of a virtual university and won't waste time debating the issue, he added.

"It's clear these people want to get involved and get it occurring."

Livingston's first duty in his new post will be to accompany Leavitt to Washington, D.C., this weekend where Leavitt will present a work plan on a regional online university to members of the Western Governors' Association meeting there.

Last month in Las Vegas, those governors endorsed the formation of a virtual university that can offer a variety of courses from a variety of sources to students throughout the West.

The university's masterminds will employ a range of technologies to deliver those courses, Leavitt said Tuesday. "This is an institution for a new millenium, built on the technology available to us," he said. The virtual university will prepare students for "the way the world is going."

The governor is seeking \$500,000 from the Legislature toward the virtual university, but the state already has invested tens of millions of dollars for information technology. This year, he is seeking another \$13 million for higher education's "technology initiative."

That funding has allowed the state to put pieces of a virtual university in place, and already some 20,000 Utahns are taking technologically delivered courses. Leavitt said students may be taking cyberclasses from the regional virtual university as early as summer 1997.