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Western 1479 governors plan online university

Boise State plans to be a part of it

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and Charles Etlinger

New York Times News Service
The Idaho Statesman

Boise State University wants to link up with a new electronic university that will span the vast spaces of the West.

Without so much as a ritual shovel to break the ground, the governors of 10 Western states on Monday laid an intangible cornerstone for a new "virtual university" that they promised would soon allow students to

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earn degrees online.

At a meeting in Omaha, Neb., the governors pledged to raise the money and lower the bureaucratic barriers to the plan. Governors say the first students will be working in electronic classrooms next year.

BSU President Charles Ruch, who watched the session on TV, said he hopes the new Western Governors' University will enhance Boise State's electronic teaching.

At a time when higher education costs are outpacing inflation, universities are looking for cheaper ways to teach far-flung students. BSU already offers courses via radio and television — and is expanding its courses on the Internet.

Ruch doesn't worry about losing students to the virtual university.

"The fact that so many individuals are going to need post-secondary education — there's just lots of business for all of us," he said. "I see it opening a lot of doors for some individuals who might not be able to come to our campus or hook up with our system."

The Western Governors' University is the most ambitious distance-learning venture yet.

The university would be an accredited regional institution, in the form of an independent non-profit corporation. It will have power to grant certificates of proficiency that would be recognized by employers, course credits that would be recognized by traditional colleges and universities, and full degrees.

At first, credentials would be offered in a limited number of specialties, but they could eventually be earned across the full spectrum of disciplines.

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