

Western Governors Seek To Tap Technology for 'Virtual University'

By Andrew Trotter

Information networks and e-mail seminars could soon replace ivy walls and university quadrangles for some students if a vision for higher education adopted by a group of state governors bears fruit.



At a meeting of the Western Governors' Association in Omaha, Neb., last month, 10 of the 18 governors who are members of the Denver-based group signed on to a plan to create a "virtual university" that would use communications technology to distribute college courses and training to students nationwide.

Led by Govs. Michael O. Leavitt of Utah and Roy Romer of Colorado, the 10 governors agreed to seek \$100,000 each from their state's legislature to draw up a business plan for the project. A contractor's study has estimated full start-up costs for the project at \$6 million to \$10 million.

Although the university eventually would offer degrees and be fully accredited, it would have neither a campus nor a printed catalog of courses. Instead, the courses listed in an on-line catalog would use methods common to distance learning, such as group collaboration by electronic mail.

And another key concept, long championed by Gov. Romer, would be used: Certification of achievement would be based on a student's demonstrated competency rather than on the number of credit hours earned.

Repackaged Courses

Under the current plan, a central hub would be created to set skills standards, develop assessments, provide quality control, and offer student services, which students would have access to through local outlets that could be "franchises" in existing organizations, such as libraries.

Many details, including how to pay for the project, remain unresolved, but planners say they hope that what is being called the Western Governors University will offer courses as early as next summer.

Initially, the university would rely on repackaging courses and on expertise from universities, corporations, and other organizations, according to Jeffrey Livingstone, an adviser to Gov. Leavitt. Many resources, as well as students, are likely to come from outside the sponsoring states, Mr. Livingstone said.

"Most students for the foreseeable future will probably be in an existing [university] program and will augment their studies by tapping into programs at the virtual university," said Tom Singer, the WGA official who is managing the project.

By turning to a technological "delivery system," the governors hope to save money on bricks and mortar. Many Western states have rapidly growing populations and high demand for education and post-employment training.

"The delivery system does away with time, scheduling, and geographic barriers and allows [students] to come together and pick out those services and training they need," Mr. Livingstone said.

Arthur Levine, the president of Teachers College, Columbia University, in New York City, pointed out that 65 percent of high school graduates will attend postsecondary education within a decade after high school. "With those kinds of numbers, we can't afford creating new campuses, hiring new faculty," he said.

At the Omaha meeting, Mr. Romer emphasized that the virtual university would coexist with existing educational institutions. But organizers acknowledge that a whole range of organizational and revenue issues remain to be worked out.

Among the hurdles are state laws and regulations on licensing and accreditation that might hamper its operation across state boundaries.

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