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Co-Directors Appointed for Western Governors University Initiative

Govs. Mike Leavitt of Utah and Roy Romer of Colorado have appointed two higher education officials to oversee the continued development and eventual roll-out of the Western Governors University by the summer of 1997.

Serving as co-directors of the WGU initiative are E. Jeffery Livingston, executive assistant to the Governor and associate commissioner of higher education for the Utah System of Higher Education, and Robert C. Albrecht, associate vice president of the University of Colorado.

The WGU will expand higher educational opportunities by using advanced information technology to cross state and institutional lines and will provide a means for assessing competencies acquired by students. The concept was conceived at a meeting of the Western Governors' Association last year, and an implementation plan was approved at WGA's annual meeting on June 24. Leavitt and Romer serve as lead governors for the initiative.

"Jeff and Bob are extremely qualified to guide several critical activities, including the development of a business plan, leading toward its successful implementation by next year," Romer said. Livingston and Albrecht will work part time at the Western Governors' Association to provide strategic direction for the initiative and coordinate public and private outreach efforts.

"We believe there is a strong market for the type of educational services the WGU will offer," Leavitt said, "and we want to make certain it will meet the needs of potential students, employers and educational providers."

Livingston said increasing access through technology and certifying learning outcomes and competency acquisition are the distinguishing characteristics of the WGU.

"The critical initial tasks are to develop an appropriate role and strategy for the university's initial certificate and degree offerings, and to complete the development of the online Catalog," Livingston said.

An electronic catalog or advisor will be developed allowing students to identify skills they already have or may need to receive certification or a degree. It will also enable students to sign up for and take courses and will assist in assessing their mastery of learned skills.

"The prospect of increasing access to postsecondary education for expanding populations is challenging and exciting," Albrecht said.

"Initiating the enterprise to accomplish that will require extensive cooperation and participation across the private and public sectors. We believe the governors' vision is timely and its realization significant for large segments of the population."

Albrecht oversees the fiber optics network for the University of Colorado and represents the Colorado institutions to the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications. He chairs the steering committee for that organization.

Livingston has served as a member of the WGU design team, which developed the WGU implementation plan. He advises Gov. Leavitt on higher education issues related to technology. As a Utah higher education associate commissioner, Livingston has been involved with system-wide strategic planning, including the use of technology to deliver and enhance education services.

While Albrecht and Livingston will direct development of the business plan, a final document will be approved by a steering committee composed of WGA governors who have signed a memorandum of understanding to move the project forward. So far, 12 governors have signed the MOU. That document commits each governor to seek \$100,000 for the next phase of development, to establish at least one local WGU center in his state and to help identify and eliminate barriers to its establishment.

The WGU will have a small central operation, which will offer certifications and degrees by drawing on existing institutions and other providers for courses. Each participating state will have at least one local center that will offer support services and serve as an access point for people who want to take advantage of the various educational opportunities offered.

Governors who have signed the MOU include Fife Symington, Arizona; Roy Romer, Colorado; Benjamin Cayetano, Hawaii; Phil Batt, Idaho; Marc Racicot, Montana; Ben Nelson, Nebraska, Gary Johnson, New Mexico; WGA Chairman Ed Schafer, North Dakota; John Kitzhaber, Oregon; Mike Leavitt, Utah; Mike Lowry, Washington; and Jim Geringer, Wyoming.

The initiative is headquartered at the offices of the Western Governors' Association in Denver; however, the WGU will eventually be a nonprofit, independent corporation.