

PRESS RELEASES

News Brief - 11/5/97

Welcome to WGU

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Western Governors University Advances Plans for the First Collaborative Virtual University in the United States

SALT LAKE CITY, UT -- Governors Mike Leavitt of Utah, Roy Romer of Colorado and Jim Geringer of Wyoming met on Oct. 27, 1997, for the Western Governors University (WGU) National Advisory Board and Board of Trustees meetings. The meetings were hosted at 3Com Corporation's headquarters in Santa Clara, California, by Eric Benhamou, chairman and CEO of 3Com and chairman of the WGU National Advisory Board (NAB). The governors, who have been active advocates for WGU since its inception in early 1996, joined their fellow board members and more than 35 guests to move forward with WGU's academic mission and discuss ongoing development and fundraising efforts.

During the NAB meeting, WGU CEO Jeff Livingston announced that WGU has finalized negotiations with IBM regarding the online Catalog, which potential students will use to research educational options, assess their academic skills and enroll in courses. Version 1 of the online Catalog will be completed in time for the pilot phase, scheduled to begin in January 1998. Involved in the pilot offering are one private and 16 public institutions of higher education and two corporate providers ready to deliver courseware and/or enroll students in the pilot phase. Initially, students enrolled in the pilot program may choose from two WGU programs, the Electronics Manufacturing Technician (EMT) certificate program and the Associate of Arts degree program, along with a variety of other course and program offerings. Additional content from a much-expanded number of providers will be added to the WGU Catalog as the year progresses.

WGU also announced that International Thomson Publishing and KPMG Peat Marwick have joined the NAB. A new mission statement for WGU was approved by the board and new committees were formed to address topics such as technical standards, business strategy, policy, development, funding and curriculum/skills sets. The board reviewed a revised marketing plan, and personnel policies and procedures and financial statements were presented. Lastly, WGU introduced a new 14-member Board of Trustees, four of whom are governors from the participating states.

Competency-Based Learning: A New Model for Higher Education

Instead of being just another distance learning content broker, WGU is looking to create a totally new learning model based on independent verification of learner competency. In one of its capacities, WGU will grant degrees based on demonstrated competencies. WGU anticipates employers will quickly recognize the value of hiring an individual who has received a competency degree in a specific field over an individual who has completed a broad range of courses.

"We are coming up with a totally different kind of product," said Roy Romer, governor of Colorado. "What is finally going to drive the success of WGU is how well the employment market responds to the competency degree guarantee, which will ultimately affect how people get jobs."

The response by industry to the WGU competency model has been strong, as reported in the meeting by WGU staff members. Already, corporations in semiconductor manufacturing have shown support for the WGU EMT certificate to help them meet the huge demand for skilled workers in their industry. "With the WGU competency certificate, an employer can know exactly what skills a potential new hire can bring to the job they seek to fill," said Bob Albrecht, WGU's chief academic officer.

WGU to Create an Academic Common Market

Governor Mike Leavitt outlined his concept of an "academic common market" for members of the NAB. In the beginning, students may choose competency degrees over traditional credit-based degrees simply on the basis of cost and time savings. Students can obtain formal recognition for their existing knowledge or competency through low cost assessments and then enroll in only the courses they need to complete the degree program, saving both time and money. As more employers recognize the value of hiring individuals with proven competencies, more academic institutions will develop competency-based content to be offered through WGU. Eventually, individuals will have the opportunity to choose from a wide array of academic offerings regardless of their location or economic status, and gain the added benefit of a competency certification.

But Governor Leavitt acknowledged that this change would not happen overnight. "We have to become an aggressive marketing organization and build the demand for competency-based credentials," Leavitt said.

The WGU is relying on its corporate partners to help with the creation of the competency model. By first offering competency-based corporate training programs, focusing on specific skills currently in demand in the workplace, WGU hopes to lay the foundation for competency-based degrees and certificates. As more and more students with competency certification penetrate the workforce, employers will gain confidence and begin endorsing this revolutionary new learning paradigm.

3Com Corporation, Sun Microsystems and International Thomson Publishing are three corporate partners interested in providing content through WGU. The training programs from these providers are highly compatible with the WGU competency model and are designed to fill the immediate needs of employers. Already scheduled to begin offering courses in January are Novell and Micron.

About Western Governors University

Western Governors University was formed in 1997 as a result of the interest of the governors of the western United States to share higher education distance learning resources. WGU is a competency-based, degree-granting, virtual university that delivers cost-effective education using the Internet and other advanced telecommunications and networking technologies. WGU's mission is to expand educational opportunities for learners everywhere, offering courses from a wide array of sources. Educational access will be provided to a dispersed population of students who might not otherwise have access to higher education and to those needing workplace training. Its corporate offices are located in Salt Lake City, Utah, with academic offices in Denver, Colorado.