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Chadron State Enrolls First Online Student

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Nebraska's Chadron State College recently earned a byte of cyberhistory by enrolling the first student in the new Internet-based Western Governors University.

Dr. Teresa Holtrop, a 42-year-old general pediatrician at Detroit's Children's Hospital of Michigan, has enrolled in an applied statistics course taught by Chadron State's Charles Bare.

She paid \$127 per credit hour, plus a \$15 matriculation fee and a \$30 Western Governors University fee for the three-hour course, making her WGU's first student. The school opened its virtual doors earlier this month.

Dr. Holtrop is the first of 1,000 students WGU officials hope to enroll by the end of this term. So far, however, just 10 students have enrolled. Computer problems have snarled the processing of 75 other applications, said school spokesman Jeff Xouris.

Monty Finkel, interim dean of Chadron State's School of Science and Mathematics, said the class Holtrop selected is a standard, popular course that typically attracts nonmath majors. It teaches students how to use and understand statistics in everyday life.

So why would a Detroit doctor from a hospital affiliated with 34,000-student Wayne State University enroll in a course taught on a campus of 3,000 in remote northwestern Nebraska?

Dr. Holtrop said she needs to clearly understand how statistics work so she

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can do a better job of designing and interpreting research.

"I'm also a parent and spend my work week frantically trying to fit in too many tasks," she said Wednesday. "As a morning person, it seemed ideal to be able to sit at my computer in my quiet basement home office and tackle this rather dry subject before anyone else in the house was up."

The WGU course via the Internet also eliminated a 40-minute commute to Wayne State for a similar class, which would have been "quite a bit more expensive," she said.

Dr. Holtrop read about WGU in Time magazine two months ago.

"I had never heard of Chadron College and still am not sure I know how to pronounce it," she said. "I'm totally amazed that I'm the first one to sign up."

The idea for a virtual university came out of a Western Governors Association meeting three years ago as a

way to serve sparsely populated areas at a low cost. The virtual school spans 17 states, including Nebraska. Chadron, which was the leader in distance education for the state college system, is the first Nebraska school to participate in the launching of a new university with no campus.

WGU has a staff of about 20 working in Denver and Salt Lake City and has raised \$9.5 million in public and private funds. It does not offer any of its own classes, but acts as a broker for Internet and television classes provided by existing schools, which charge whatever they want. WGU's course catalog, called the SmartCatalog, went online Sept. 3 and offers 198 classes.

The university has not received accreditation and offers only two-year associate of arts degrees.

In addition to the Internet classes, WGU offers competency-based degrees that will be awarded to students who pass WGU's tests. There are no requirements that any classes be taken. That is one of the reasons for the slow enrollment, said Jeff Edwards, WGU's director of marketing. Students want to talk to WGU advisers to learn more about how to get a degree, not just take a few courses.

This report includes material from the Associated Press.