"Distance Education" Comes of Age
Western Governors University opens with many unanswered questions

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—JEFFREY LIVINGSTON,
WESTERN GOVERNORS UNIVERSITY'S CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER

As the Western Governors University prepares to launch its first pilot projects, some of the problems facing this ambitious attempt at non-traditional higher education have been solved but many more have not.

On the positive side, in little more than two years, WGU has advanced from an idea proposed by two governors—Democrat Roy Romer of Colorado and Republican Mike Leavitt of Utah—to a consortium of 16 states and one territory (Guam) that is about to test its first degree and certificate programs.

Romer, Leavitt and other governors who face rapidly rising college enrollments hope that WGU, emphasizing computer and television instruction and other "distance education" methods, will provide a less expensive alternative to building new campuses.

WGU officials say a limited number of students will be able to sign up for the first three pilot programs in February—a general Associate of Arts degree and an Associate of Applied Science in Electronic Manufacturing Technologies. A non-degree "certificate of mastery" in electronic manufacturing technologies also will be offered.

In addition to offering degrees and certificates, Western Governors University also will serve as a broker, matching students with distance education courses already available from colleges and universities in the member states.

Twenty-one educational institutions and high tech companies have agreed to provide courses for WGU so far (see sidebar). Most are public colleges and universities but one is a private school (Regis University, in Denver) and two are high tech firms—Novell, Inc. and International Thomson Publishing.

An electronic "SmartCatalog/Advisor," listing WGU's first 50 or so courses, is expected to be available soon. By April 1, when WGU is supposed to be open to all, perhaps 125 course listings will be in the electronic catalog.

Several "back room" services have continued on page 6
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been arranged. Washington State University will handle course registrations, the University of New Mexico will offer online library services, and the Illinois-based Follett Corp. will provide bookstore services through an extensive online catalog. But many important tasks remain undone.

WGU will be “competency based.” That is, students will advance only after they have demonstrated mastery of the material, not after completing a certain number of courses or credit hours. Their progress is to be monitored by “mentors”: full-time WGU employees who come from either academic life or from business or industry. However, only one mentor had been hired when this article was completed in mid-January.

Jeffrey Livingston, WGU’s chief operating officer, said only a few mentors are needed for the pilot programs and that many more will be hired later. However, several educators who have been watching WGU’s development closely believe the multi-state university will have a hard time gaining its badly-needed accreditation. Unless much more is known about both the size and the quality of the mentor corps.

A set of competencies for the first two pilot program degrees has been largely completed—by the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, in Boulder, Colorado—but an assessment council that is supposed to evaluate the tests is not in place, nor are there as yet any assessment centers, where students can go to have their mastery of course material tested.

Plans for student centers, where advice and counsel and access to technology would be available to students, and where assessments could be made, seem to have been moved to the back burner. Once, these were believed to be critical to the success of the Western Governors University. Now, according to Robert Albrecht, chief academic officer, they are still in the plans but are not at the top of the agenda.

“One of our financing mechanisms didn’t come through,” Jeffrey Livingston explained, so the student centers have been delayed. “We don’t think we need to have them for the pilots but we still think they are crucial and we’ll have to have them in place for our general opening in the spring.”

Jeffrey Livingston, former aide to Utah Governor Mike Leavitt, is chief operating officer of the Western Governors University.

WGU still has not announced what courses will be offered when the pilot programs begin nor what they will cost. Livingston said registration fees might be waived for students in the pilots but they will have to pay tuition to provider institutions for the courses they take. Albrecht estimated that these costs could range from $75 to $400 per course.

There are transfer problems to solve, since WGU will measure student progress through “learning modules,” not the credit hours or courses completed that are commonly used by colleges and universities.

There is no certainty that the Western Governors University will be accredited by the several regional accrediting bodies that now are studying the question. Nor is it clear how WGU will scale the barriers created by the many different higher education laws and regulations in each of its member states.

With all these problems still to be solved, many people involved in the WGU effort have urged a “go slow” approach. “Let’s promise more than we can deliver,” one of them said. But people close to the planning process say that some governors are pushing for a fast start, even if WGU is only partly ready.

“There’s a political reality that’s making all this possible,” one planner said. “There’s a pace that has to be maintained that is, frankly, overwhelming.”

Some planners fear that WGU is making a mistake by making claims that cannot be supported, at least not yet.

“The hype is out in front of the infrastructure,” one insider said. “There is a substantial disconnect between the PR about WGU and what is actually there.”

Said an accrediting agency official, “Their public information effort is four and a half steps ahead of the people who are doing the work.”

Livingston acknowledged the problem. “There’s kind of a dilemma that we’ve got here,” he said, “between pressure to move fast and wanting to do this right.”

Western Governors University has dual headquarters. Livingston and the marketing and public relations staff are in Salt Lake City, Utah, while Albrecht’s small academic staff is housed in Aurora, Colorado, outside Denver.

The planned budget for this fiscal year is $12 million. Livingston said, while the financial plan calls for an annual budget of $50 million to $75 million by the 2005-2006 academic year.

Where this money will come from is a mystery.

Each state paid $100,000 to join the consortium but that money was spent long ago. WGU has received several foundation grants, and the State of Colorado recently chipped in another $3 million for curriculum development.

The university will receive some fee revenue for brokering distance education courses by member state institutions.

Of late, WGU has turned increasingly to private corporations for help. Several companies, including MicroSoft, 3-COM, IBM, Apple and AT&T, have paid at least $250,000 apiece, in cash or “in kind” services, for the privilege of joining the WGU National Advisory Board.

This movement toward a corporate funding model has caused WGU to lose some of its original appeal in large western states with small populations.

“The need for money is driving this now,” said a top higher education official in one of the member states, who asked not to be identified. “The emphasis is on job-training programs for large corporations in urban settings, not on distance education in remote locations.”

Livingston agreed. “I don’t believe the board would allow us to drift away from the remote rural areas,” he said, “since that was one of the initial purposes of WGU.”

Even corporate support is not likely to keep WGU afloat until student revenue allows the multi-state institution to become self-supporting. How will bills be paid in the meantime?

“We’re exploring with our board some different options for raising dollars but we’re not ready to discuss them publicly yet,” Livingston said.

So long-range financing for WGU remains uncertain, as do many other aspects of its operations. It is difficult to write about the Western Governors University because so many details are murky and are likely to remain so for some time. However, what follows is an attempt to describe where things seem to stand in several important areas:

Pilot Programs
The electronic manufacturing technologies certificate and degree were selected because they were needed for workers in the microchip industry and related businesses. The general Associate of Arts degree is intended, in part, for students who want to transfer to the four-year baccalaureate programs that WGU hopes to offer in the future.

There are more than 200 students who will be permitted to enroll in the pilots, which Livingston described as “a way to test all our systems.” With the starting date almost at hand, however, WGU officials could not say what courses would be offered, how much they would cost or how and where student mastery of the course material and required skills will be tested.

While testing the degree and certificate programs, WGU expects to be actively engaged in arranging for its students to take distance education courses already offered by many colleges and universities in the member states.

That is fine with institutions like Washington State University, where on-campus enrollment is flat but off-campus, distance education enrollment is skyrocketing. President Samuel H. Smith thinks that teaming with WGU will add even more off-campus students.

“We’re gambling that down the road a significant part of the market is going to want non-traditional course delivery,” Smith said. “If you’re willing to make changes and take risks, this is a growth period.”

An unanswered question is: Why would off-campus students bother to enroll in the Western Governors University if they can get the same or better education at a computerized or electronic instruction directly from Washington State?

Curriculum
WGU degrees will not be unusual in subject matter or scope but the structure will be very different. Each Associate degree will consist of about 12 “learning modules.” For example, one module in the general Associate of Arts degree would cover quantitative analysis, including mathematics and math reasoning skills.

A course is normally defined in terms of credit hours, or “time,” said Albrecht, the chief academic officer, “but a WGU module is defined in terms of content.”

When a student, under the guidance of a mentor, has learned the material in one of these modules—by taking courses listed in the “SmartCatalog” or in some other way, that student asks to be tested. Much of the testing is to be done at the assess-

A Lineup of Course Providers

T HE WESTERN GOVERNS University’s first course providers include 16 public colleges and universities, one private university and two corporations.

Public Institutions:
University of Alaska Learning Cooperative  
Northern Arizona University  
Colorado Electronic Community College  
Dallas County Community College (Texas)  
University of Guam  
University of Hawaii  
Montana State University (Bozeman)  
Community College of Southern Nevada  
North Dakota State College of Science  
Chadron State College (Nebraska)  
Eastern New Mexico University  
Oklahoma State University  
Eastern Oregon University  
Utah State University  
Washington State University  
University of Wyoming

Private Institution:
Regis University (Denver, Colorado)

Corporate:
Novell, Inc.
International Thompson Publishing
ment centers that do not as yet exist.

Content for the pilot programs appears to have been agreed upon by WGU officials were not to say which courses from what providers would enable a student to meet the requirements.

"SmartCatalog/Advisor"

This electronic system will tell students what courses are available—the medium (such as the Web or videocassette or satellite), the time courses are offered, what they cost and other necessary information. Students also will be able to use the catalog/advisor to register for courses, order books, request library materials and monitor their progress toward a degree, said Sally Johnstone, director of the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications, which did the design work. "This is a 'one of a kind' system," Johnstone said.

At first the electronic catalog will list only about 50 courses—two or three from each of the 19 providers (see sidebar). Some of these will relate to the pilot programs; some will not. WGU officials and planners were unwilling at least as mid-January to say what these courses might be. By April 1 there could be as many as 125 listings, they said.

Assessment

"As a competency-driven institution, the testing aspect of WGU is going to be crucial," said Peter Ewell, senior associate at the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems. Some assessments will be paper and pencil tests; others, when appropriate, will be hands-on tests conducted in laboratories or work settings. According to Albrect, the assessments will cost $75 to $100 each.

Ewell is in the process of identifying currently available tests—like the New Jersey Test of Basic Skills—that match the WGU learning modules. He said 80 to 90 percent of the modules can be tested by instruments that already exist. For example, there are nationally accepted standards for the skill levels needed to earn the electronic manufacturing technologies certificate and degree.

However, the assessments must be done at secure locations and these have not yet been identified. A ten-member Assessment Council, which will help to select and evaluate the tests that are used to measure student progress, has yet to be named.

The members of this council and two others— the Providers Council, which will screen courses and programs for the SmartCatalog/Advisor, and a Program Council, charged with supervision of the content of WGU degrees and certificates, will be college and university faculty members working part-time for WGU. But none of this is in place as the pilot programs begin.

Mentors

These will be full-time WGU employees who "will have the same credentials as beginning faculty," Livingston said. "They will hold the terminal degree in their fields." A WGU mentor will serve as the student's primary academic advisor, exploring the student's background and goals, determining what skills the student already has and which ones need to be acquired. Most of this will be done by telephone or e-mail.

When the mentor determines that the student has mastered, say, four learning modules needed for a particular degree, the mentor will advise the student to take those courses. "The heart of this degree work is in helping the student find sources for the content and then coming for assessment," Albrecht said. "That's the guts of it." He stressed that how the student acquires the knowledge or skill, whether through a formal degree, self study, distance learning or standard college courses, is not important. What is important is proof of the knowledge gained or skills mastered.

But the role of the mentor is crucial in this process and, although both Albrecht and Livingston say there are plans to hire at least 100 mentors, so far there is only one.

Student Centers

In early discussions, these were considered a WGU success but they seem to have faded in importance as the planning effort has continued.

The centers are to be outposts in each member state where students can gain access to computers and other technological tools and where they can get advice from actual human beings, not from electronic devices. The centers might also be used for assessment purposes.

However, as soon as WGU establishes a physical presence in a state, it becomes subject to strict higher education laws and regulations that vary from state to state. For example, how will WGU deal with the fact that each state charges a different out-of-state tuition fee?

John Calhoon, former senior policy advisor to Colorado Governor Romer and a consultant to WGU, has compiled a four-inch-thick report detailing every complexity facing WGU as it seeks to operate in all of its member states.

According to Calhoon's report (which excludes Texas, which was not yet a member when the report was prepared), WGU probably will be able to gain entry into all of the member states on some of experimental basis, because of the political clout of the governors involved.

Western Governors University will be "competency based." That is, students will advance only after they have demonstrated mastery of the material, after completing a certain number of courses or credit hours.

"But still, the details of how each state will have to handle will be on an individual basis," Calhoon emphasized. "There are no shortcuts. It's a huge process."

Costs

These are difficult to pin down, even through the start-up date for the pilot programs is at hand.

WGU has not announced its registration fees or what students will be charged to take courses listed in the SmartCatalog. The only firm figure is the $75 to $100 per assessment charge, set by Albrecht.

A consultant's report suggested that WGU charge an admission fee of $50, plus a $20 enrollment fee for each course. In addition, there will be fees for using the online library and book services. Livingston suggested fees might be waived for students in the pilot programs, but said they would have to pay for the courses themselves. Albrecht said these charges could range from $75 to $400.

Accreditation

Western Governors University, which has no campus, no faculty (except the "mentors") and no courses of its own, presents special problems for the nation's accrediting bodies.

Because WGU hopes to set up shop in so many different places, four different regional accrediting agencies formed a special body known as the Internet Accrediting Commission (IRAC) for the exclusive purpose of dealing with WGU's complex accreditation request. This was done after Governors Romer and Leavitt met with accreditors several months ago.

IRAC includes representatives from the north central Association of Colleges and Schools, the Northwest Association of Colleges and Schools and two subsets of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges—one for community and junior colleges and the other for senior institutions.

Steve Crow, executive director of the north central agency, said the four regional bodies were motivated to work together because WGU afforded an opportunity to create a potentially important alternative model. "There is a clear awareness of a new agency," he said. "We don't want to get caught with a limited number of accrediting tools. We've got to come up with new approaches and answers."

At the same time, accreditation officials worry about the quality of WGU's offerings.

"We want to be sure the accreditation process doesn't kill this promising idea," said one, "but we also don't want it to kill us."

At this point, WGU has not submitted an eligibility application to IRAC. Eligibility means only that WGU is potentially accreditable. Beyond that lies the "candidacy" period, during which the institution must conduct a self-study and also must submit to evaluation by others.

So far, IRAC has come up with a list of 20 eligibility requirements that WGU must meet before it can continue with the accreditation process. "If WGU fulfills its plan, it has the potential to be accreditable," Steve Crow said. But he added, "I'd like to see them move a little faster."

Other accrediting agency officials said that without such important elements as the mentors, faculty councils and assessment and student centers in place, it will be impossible to judge WGU's quality. "There's nothing there yet to look at," said one.

It is too early to know how the recent decision of Texas to join the WGU consortium will affect the accreditation process. The inclusion of Texas means that yet another accrediting agency—the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission—comes into play.

James T. Rogers, executive director of the southern agency, said that he, like other accreditors, has questions about WGU's quality control. "The jury is still out as far as issues of quality assurance," Rogers said. "And my office is reluctant to extend overwhelming approval until the quality of technologically-delivered education can be compared to traditional offerings." He added, however, that the southern association would be happy to work with IRAC.

With so many unanswered questions and unsolved problems, the Western Governors University faces an uncertain future. But many believe that WGU, whether it succeeds or fails, has changed forever the higher education landscape. "Whatever happens, WGU has advanced the discussion about non-traditional forms of higher education, especially distance education, by ten years," said one close observer.

And most of those who have been struggling to bring the Western Governors University to life remain optimistic.

"Sure, there are problems but they are not insurmountable," said Sally Johnstone of the Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications. "All the pieces are there. We have to make sure they all fit."