Congress OKs Financial Aid For Students in WGU Classes

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THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

This week's congressional approval of the Higher Education Reauthorization Act brought some good news for the computer-based Western Governors University.

The legislation calls for a "demonstration program" to expand student financial aid eligibility for distance-learning colleges.

Previously, students at such schools were not eligible for federal financial aid, something Gov. Mike Leavitt has said "discriminates" against students who do not attend school on a traditional campus.

"We're very happy," said Jeff Edwards, WGU's marketing director. "It shows we have enough credibility to warrant this kind of federal support."

WGU, co-founded by Leavitt and Colorado Gov. Roy Romer, opened this fall.

Student turnout has been lighter than expected, and one the reasons could be cost. WGU essentially acts as a broker for computer-based classes provided by existing colleges within WGU's 17 member states. Some states charge WGU students out-of-state rates, which means cost for a three-credit class can range as high as $850. Some courses, however, cost less than $300.

Edwards said the new legislation should open the door for more students, and it does not provide for a time or dollar limit for the demonstration program.

"This is a significant day in the evolution of technology-based learning," Romer and Leavitt said in a joint statement. "Demonstration programs will now begin to eliminate some student-aid restrictions and allow more non-traditional students to obtain higher education, including full-time workers, parents, people in rural areas or people with disabilities.

The governors noted that WGU is the only technology-based school identified in the legislation as a demonstration program.

"WGU is already working with the Department of Education to use provisions of the act to secure student-aid access for our students," the governors said. "It is our expectation to offer student aid as soon as possible."

WGU's campus is located on the Internet at www.wgu.edu.