

Accreditors Postpone Decision on Milestone for Western Governors U.

By DAN CARNEVALE | JUNE 12, 2000

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An accrediting committee has delayed a key decision on approving Western Governors University until November, and has requested additional information from the university about how it operates.

The Inter-Regional Accrediting Committee, which met at the university's headquarters in Salt Lake City in late May, delayed a decision on approving the institution as a candidate for accreditation, according to a statement issued by the university Wednesday.

The committee, which is composed of representatives from four regional accrediting bodies, was created four years ago specifically to handle the accreditation of Western Governors, a distance-education institution formed in 1998.

The university awards degrees on the basis of competency-assessment examinations that determine the understanding of subjects that students gain from work experience and college work. A consortium of institutions provides distance courses for students to take to gain knowledge before taking the exams.

Accreditation involves three-steps -- eligibility, candidacy, and full accreditation. During a candidacy review, accreditors determine whether an institution is set up and runs properly. Within a few years, the accreditors decide whether to grant full accreditation.

Before last month's meeting, Western Governors officials had expressed confidence that the committee would approve the university's candidacy.

However, rather than rule on the candidacy, the committee asked the university to submit additional information on how its assessment model works and on how students can transfer credit to another institution, said the Rev. Patrick J. Ford, chairman of the committee and vice president for academic affairs at Gonzaga University, in Spokane, Wash.

Father Ford said postponing the decision should not be interpreted as a criticism of the university. Rather, he said, it reflects how complex it is to have a committee of accrediting agencies assess a new model of providing higher education.

"This is a unique institution, and it has been a unique process," Father Ford said. "A little time will take care of all of this."

Western Governors officials referred inquiries from *The Chronicle* to the accrediting committee. But, in a press release, they maintained confidence that the university would receive candidacy status in due time.

"While we would have preferred more certainty, this is part of the process for a new institution," Bob Mendenhall, the university's president, said in the press release. "W.G.U.'s status as an eligible university has not changed, and no negative judgment about the quality of our degrees is implied by this deferral."

Gov. Mike Leavitt of Utah, a Republican who serves as co-chairman of the university, said he believed the university's unique approach to higher education was part of the cause for the delay. "We realize that it will take time for the traditional accreditation agencies to feel comfortable with this kind of innovation," he said in a prepared statement.