

# Path to get accredited long, slow for WGU

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## Panel struggling to deal with uniqueness of online university

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Western Governors University — Gov. Mike Leavitt's brainchild — is floating in cyberspace while it waits to become an accredited institution of higher education.

The fledgling online college, scheduled to bestow its first degree next month, has made slower-than-anticipated progress in its bid for academia's seal of approval. The nontraditional university in which classes are taught over the Internet has proved difficult for the 16-member accreditation team to evaluate.

"They're basically making it up as they go along because they never had to do this before," said Kevin Kinser, an assistant professor of higher education at Louisiana State University. Kinser did a doctoral dissertation on WGU while at Columbia University. "As much as they don't want to, by definition, they are setting precedent."

The committee, comprised of representatives from four regional accrediting associations, recently informed WGU it has deferred action on its application for six months. It visited WGU's administrative offices in Salt Lake City and Denver earlier this year and is still trying to come up with criteria by which to assess the institution.

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"This is a very new kind of circumstance and people wanted to feel comfortable they had all the important information before making that kind of decision," said Steve Crow, executive director of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, one of the organizations assessing the virtual college.

While WGU would have preferred more certainty, waiting is part of the process for a new institution, said Bob Mendenhall, WGU president.

Accreditation comes in three stages over three to five years and begins with the eligibility phase. The committee determined two years ago, though not without delays, WGU is eligible. Candidacy is the next step, and the one for which the distance-education institution is striving.

"We realize that it will take time for the traditional accreditation agencies to feel comfortable with this kind of innovation, but the market is demanding it and it will happen," Leavitt said.

WGU has yet to gain wide acceptance in higher education.

"It's seen as not having done hardly anything given the hype about it," Kinser said.

Western governors predicted the online university would revolutionize education when it was launched in 1997. But enrollment has not boomed. Mendenhall told the Western Governors Association last week it currently has 230 students.

"When it wasn't a huge deal, it basically fell off everybody's

radar," Kinser said.

Degrees from accredited schools carry more credibility with potential employers than do those from unaccredited schools. WGU's first potential graduate — a woman in Alaska who's on course for an associate's degree of arts in July — will not have the benefit of accreditation, nor will others who graduate in the near future.

"It's not a waste of their time, although it is something students have to consider right now," said Amy Terjal, WGU director for university affairs.

Meantime, the university has done what it can to legitimize its status by offering financial aid, signing articulation agreements with five colleges and bringing companies such as Microsoft on board. The university is supported by 19 states and 20 corporations and foundations, which have combined to pump millions of dollars into WGU.

"They kind of covered the bases as well as they could, primarily through the political clout of the governors that were involved," Kinser said.

Western governors are growing somewhat impatient on accreditation. The Western Governors Association sent a letter to the committee this month urging it to move things along.

The panel doesn't know how to "think outside the box," Wyoming Gov. Jim Geringer said last week at the association's annual meeting. "They don't want to be pioneers."

Although the evaluation team has yet to pass judgment on WGU, accreditation is not a virtual lock. "They might ultimately fail or ultimately not be able financially to keep going," Kinser said.

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