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# WGU backers blast critical audit

## They suspect report on online university was politically motivated

By Maria Titze

Deseret News staff writer

Nestled between glowing reports about two other public/private partnerships, the Western Governors University received pointed criticism in a recent audit sent to state legislative leadership.

But the reason for the audit and which lawmaker requested it is not clear. And representatives of WGU, the fledgling online college that is the brainchild of Gov. Mike Leavitt and former Colorado Gov.

Roy Romer, say the report is politically motivated.

The report notes the WGU has spent a total of about \$516,000 in state funds since 1997. The rest of WGU's budget comes from private corporate and foundation donations.

SmartUTAH and Envision Utah have also received a combination of private and public funding and were audited in the same report.

The report concluded that unlike those organizations, the WGU has "struggled to define its role and purpose."

There is an "insufficient number of tuition-paying students" to support WGU, probably because of its "lack of accreditation and high tuition rates," the report said. "Other institutions of higher education have expanded their distance-

learning programs and are filling them with their own students. WGU must also be accredited to attract more students."

But WGU President Bob Mendenhall says the audit is not only inaccurate but politically motivated.

"If you're asking for my personal opinion, it's clear this is one of Gov. Leavitt's major projects, and it's an election year, so if you can make one of the governor's major projects look bad right before an election . . . well, it all looks a little funny," Mendenhall said.

Mendenhall said the data were requested six months ago and the report used numbers at least six months older than that. He says WGU is on track for accreditation and interest in the online

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program is steadily increasing. He wonders why the report would be released now.

Auditor General Wayne Welsh said the lawmaker making the "specific request" for the report asked for his name to be kept secret, which is "unusual, since most lawmakers don't mind having people know they requested it."

Senate President Lyle Hillyard,

R-Logan, and House Speaker Marty Stephens, R-Farr West, are co-chairmen of the Audit Subcommittee. Sen. Mike Dmitrich and Rep. Brad King, both D-Price, also sit on the board. None of them made the original request for the audit.

Hillyard, the only member of the committee available for comment today, said he "doesn't know the background" behind its request. The committee as a whole, however, did approve it.

The governor's spokeswoman, Vicki Varela, called the audit "nar-

row and very limited in its scope." She says it was not a formal audit "and doesn't tell the story of WGU's success."

Varela says WGU is on the brink of accreditation and things look good financially.

Mendenhall said WGU has no plans to ask lawmakers for more state funding. "Last year we raised over \$2.5 million from corporations and foundations," he said. "Financially, we're just fine, thank you."

E-MAIL: [mtitze@desnews.com](mailto:mtitze@desnews.com)