

# WGU nears accreditation

By Alan Edwards

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Western Governors University, the educational online brainchild of Utah Gov. Mike Leavitt, is one step away from full academic accreditation.

The Interregional Accrediting Committee, a consortium of four regional accreditation commissions, announced Monday that it has granted WGU "candidate for accreditation" status, the second of three steps toward accreditation.

Full accreditation could take place in two to five years.

"This is a tremendous milestone for WGU," Leavitt said. The accrediting committee "has affirmed the quality of education being provided by WGU."

The announcement comes at a good time for the online university, which has been somewhat beleaguered of late.

A Utah legislative audit two months ago criticized WGU for low enrollment and poor performance in competing with other distance-education programs. "WGU continues to face numerous challenges," it stated. "Most of the parties we spoke with wondered whether WGU will survive."

What's more, last summer the accreditation committee put off its decision on candidacy status for six

months, citing inadequate information. That was viewed in some circles as an indication that WGU's accreditation was teetering on the edge.

Committee chairman the Rev. Patrick Ford, academic vice president of Gonzaga University, said that wasn't the case.

"It was not that WGU flunked," he said. "It was just that we felt we needed more information. This is a new national enterprise."

WGU, in fact, is one of only a handful of online universities to achieve candidacy status, and the only competency-based university to do so.

"Competency-based" means degrees are awarded according to demonstrated ability and knowledge rather than earning a set number of credit hours.

As of last January, about 200 students were enrolled in WGU; university spokesman Greg Gough said that number should increase to 300 by next month.

When Leavitt and others announced the university's creation in 1997, they predicted thou-

sands of students would quickly enroll. Critics, including legislative auditors, have taken the university to task for not even coming close to that, but current administrators say those initial figures were wildly optimistic.

"It takes a while because it's difficult to attract students to a nonaccredited program," Gough said. "This (candidacy for accreditation) has been a while coming, and the nice thing about it is it validates

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what we've done all along."

Final accreditation is primarily a matter of WGU showing the committee how students are making academic progress and moving through the program.

The university is scheduled to have its first graduate, a Utah woman earning a master's degree in technology, at the end of this week.

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