

PRESS RELEASES

News Brief - 12/01/00

[Welcome to WGU](#)

[What We Are](#)

[Who's Involved](#)

[Vision, History & Mission](#)

[Press Releases](#)

[Newsletters](#)

[Administration](#)

[About Your Privacy](#)

[Glossary](#)

[FAQs](#)

[Return to Press Releases](#)

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First Graduate of Online University Receives Degree from Governors

LA JOLLA, CALIFORNIA -- Gennie Kirch, a Roy, Utah elementary school teacher, received her master of arts degree in learning and technology on December 1 in a ceremony attended by the governors of 11 Western states. The special occasion was held in conjunction with the Western Governors' Association meeting in La Jolla, California, and celebrates the first commencement ceremony and the first graduate of Western Governors University, an online, competency-based university.

Western Governors University (WGU) was established by 19 governors and 22 Fortune 500 companies and foundations to expand access to higher education. WGU's unique competency-based model utilizes online resources from multiple universities, colleges and commercial providers. The university offers associate's, bachelor's and master's programs in technology, business and education.

"For the past 15 years, I've wanted to get my master's degree, and was even accepted in a traditional university, but time, money and family circumstances prevented it from happening," said Kirch. "When I learned of WGU, and that my master's program could be designed for me, it seemed too good to be true."

Kirch said it wasn't easy, however. "I often studied in the middle of the night when I had the time, and when the Internet was faster, but sometimes I wasn't sure I could keep going. I think it was definitely as difficult as a traditional classroom education -- maybe harder," she said. She credits her mentor, Dr. Vince Shrader, and her family for supporting her through the course of study.

Utah Gov. Michael Leavitt said Kirch's graduation is an important milestone, not only for her and WGU, but also for the future of higher education. "Today we recognize Gennie's outstanding achievement. We also celebrate the emergence of Western Governors University. WGU gives individuals the tools to thrive in the new economy by providing education and training with efficiency and flexibility."

The governor said WGU's unique design allows recognition for a student's life and work experience. Like Gennie, each student is assigned a personal mentor, a professional in his or her field, who directs and guides students through their program. "WGU mentors are the 'high touch' piece of our 'high tech' university," he said.

Also attending the graduation ceremony was Dr. Eric A. Benhamou, chairman and CEO of 3Com Corporation and WGU board member. Benhamou commented on WGU's recent "Candidate for Accreditation" status granted by the Interregional Accrediting Committee (IRAC).

"This is the validation of competency-based education that industry has been pushing for years. We are delighted that virtual education and e-learning are gaining the institutional credibility they deserve."

About WGU

WGU is an online, competency-based university. It is one of only a few online, virtual universities to achieve candidate for accreditation status and is the only competency-based university to gain that status. With just a few clicks at www.wgu.edu, a student can find competency-based degree programs, an online catalog of quality distance-learning courses, an online library, bookstore, and one-on-one access to a personal WGU mentor who will guide the student through his or her customized degree program.

WGU was founded and is supported by 19 states and governors as well as 22 Fortune 500 corporations and foundations. Current WGU competency-based degrees include: associate of applied science degrees in IT/network administration, IT/CNE, and IT/software applications, as well as an associate of arts, associate of science in business, bachelor of science in business, and a master of arts degree in learning and technology.