

Roy teacher is first to graduate from WGU

Getting master's online let her keep her school job

By Alan Edwards
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Three years after its creation, the online Western Governors University has its first graduate.

Gennie Kirch, a fortysomething Roy elementary school teacher, received her diploma in La Jolla, Calif., Friday as part of a Western Governors Association conference. Utah Gov. Mike Leavitt and other

governors appeared in full academic regalia for the brief ceremony.

"Today we not only recognize Gennie's outstanding achievement, but we have the first example that WGU is helping create the kind of higher education system that is required in the demanding society and economy we live in," Leavitt said.

The virtual university, basically consisting of online classes from several universities throughout the West, was Leavitt's brainchild. He has remained its staunch champion through periodic criticisms that it wasn't attracting enough students and was not living up to its hype.

Kirch, getting a master's degree in learning and technology, said the online route was the only one that could have worked for her. Armed with a bachelor's degree in elementary education from Weber State University, she had wanted to get a master's for 15 years and in fact applied to and was admitted to Brigham Young University in 1985 for the purpose. But then her brother and mother died, money and time got tight, and she had to put it off.

"I'm really grateful to be able to go to a college that was tailored after my needs," she said. "... When I learned of WGU, and that my master's program could be

designed for me, it seemed too good to be true."

One of the reasons Kirch was attracted to WGU was that she could remain in her teaching job. Ironically, she had to leave her students two days in order to attend the graduation ceremony.

"I don't like to be away from my students," she said. "I didn't want to be the first (to graduate), but I wanted to get it done, too."

No ceremonies are planned for subsequent graduates.

Kirch's motivation to enter the program was a Deseret News article in June 1999 announcing full tuition scholarships for 50 teachers. She applied for and received one.

Jason Brimhall, seeking an associate's degree in network administration, entered WGU in a similar way. After being laid off from Packard Bell a year ago, he was offered a scholarship from the Utah Information Technology Association

"I decided I couldn't turn it down," said Brimhall, 26, who is currently an information systems manager for the Eye Institute of Utah.

"Education is very important," he said. "However, occasionally other things are more important at the moment than going to class. With WGU, it all depends on what I have time to do and how comfortable I am doing it."

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