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2002 Was Year of Advancement for Western Governors University

SALT LAKE CITY - Western Governors University (WGU) today released its annual status report. In the third year of granting degrees, the nation's only online, competency-based university doubled enrollments in the past year. Growth was especially strong in WGU's new bachelor's degree programs in business and information technology, where the university added over 100 new students.

WGU also graduated 33 students in 2002, from nine different states, including seven with associate's degrees, one with a bachelor's degree, and 25 additional students with master's degrees. The overall retention rate for WGU students increased from 73 percent to 78 percent, substantially better than the national average for distance learning, which is consistently below 50 percent.

The year was also noteworthy in a number of other areas. During 2002, WGU developed three new degree programs for its Teachers College, the fruition of a \$10 million Star Schools Grant from the U.S. Department of Education. To become available during the first quarter of 2003, these include the first national teacher certification programs at the bachelor's, master's, and post-baccalaureate levels. WGU was also awarded a \$3.7 million Transition to Teaching grant from the Department of Education, in conjunction with large school districts in Las Vegas, Nevada and Houston, Texas. The grant will assist school paraprofessionals in those districts in earning bachelor's degrees with teacher certification through WGU's new online education degree programs.

In addition, school districts around the country are trying to meet the requirements and accountability standards of "The No Child Left Behind Act," signed into law in December, 2001. According to WGU President Robert Mendenhall, "WGU's associate of arts degree is a program that satisfies the new requirements and meets the education needs of many paraprofessionals. It specifically addresses the areas of math, reading and writing and is perfect for many paraprofessionals because it allows them to work independently on their own time schedules. Plus, they may be able to apply knowledge and competencies already gained to accelerate their time to a degree."

During 2002, total program enrollments at WGU increased to a total of 750 students. WGU has another 450 non-degree-seeking students enrolled in courses, giving the university a total enrollment of 1,200 students. Last year, WGU had approximately 2,000 non-degree-seeking students enrolled in courses, but the university chose to emphasize its degree programs and moved away from marketing individual courses.

WGU is now focused on more rapid growth. "In a time when universities around the country are experiencing budget woes and considering enrollment caps, WGU looks toward expansion," said WGU's Provost Douglas Johnstone. "Working adults whose expertise has outpaced their educational credentials -- and who need those credentials to advance in their careers -- appreciate the opportunity WGU gives them to demonstrate their competence."

The real measure of WGU's success, according to Johnstone, is the impact the university can have on its students' lives. Greg Marshall, who received his associate of science in information technology in December, emphasizes the value of distance learning to him. "I am one of those people that have been helped by distance learning programs and, in particular, by Western Governors University. My job requires that I work odd hours at random times. Many days start at seven in the morning, come with a couple of hours off in the afternoon, and finish with a stint of teaching until nine at night. Because I am also supporting a family, including a wife who is attending a local college, quitting work or cutting back is not an option." According to Marshall, "Western Governors University's competency-based degree program has finally allowed me to work towards a degree. My dream of getting a college degree will be fulfilled because of distance learning programs like WGU's."

WGU offers the only online, competency-based degrees in the country. The university has enrolled students from 46 states and nine countries. To help students succeed, WGU assigns a faculty mentor to work with each student throughout their program. WGU was founded and is supported by the governors of 19 states, as well as 25 leading corporations and foundations. WGU offers associate's, bachelor's and master's degrees. Its three degree areas are information technology, business, and education.