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WGU wins accreditation from interregional group

By Norma Harrison
Deseret News staff writer

Western Governors University, the virtual classroom based in Utah, has won a hallmark of recognition for advancing the careers of those professionals who have great knowledge in their fields but little time to spend in the classroom.

A leader nationally in competency-based education, WGU announced Wednesday it has been granted accreditation by the Interregional Accrediting Committee, which consists of the Commission on Colleges and Universities of the Northwest Association of Schools and of Colleges and Universities; the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools; the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges; and the Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges.

WGU is the only university ever to be simultaneously accredited by multiple regions, said John Becker, WGU spokesman.

And the best part is, it was all home-grown.

Western Governors University opened its digital doors for business nearly five years ago with the support of governors from Utah, Idaho and 17 other Western states and high-tech corporate sponsors. Despite Utah Gov. Mike Leavitt's bold prediction that thousands would be enrolled within a few years, the university struggled to find its niche and boost its low enrollment. Last year the university signed up more than 100 new students, bringing its total to 1,200, according to the school's figures. It has awarded 33 degrees — seven associates degrees, one bachelors degree and 25 masters degrees.

"This was Leavitt's brainchild," Becker said. The idea was born several years ago during a Western Governors conference, where the heads of state were lamenting the demands of higher education, how they didn't have the state funds for new buildings and other costs. Leavitt suggested they should take advantage of "this new digital world, and from that, the Western Governors University was born," Becker said.

"It is the only online competency-based university in the country," Becker said. Students who apply are assessed not on their breadth of education but their working knowledge in their respective fields. For example, teachers working in the field can get a master's degree without having to take time off to sit in a classroom. Instead, they can work "virtual class time" around their working schedules — at night, after school, on weekends.

As a result, their courses of study are shorter because they're given credit for what they've already learned hands-on.

"The university is based in space, but its base is anchored right here in Salt Lake City where the staff is," Becker said. "You apply online, you have an assessment and they determine how much you know, and you get credit for what you know, starting from the beginning.

"It's a unique institute."

Said Leavitt, who is co-chairman of the University's Board of Trustees, "This represents a watershed event in American higher education in that regional accreditation provides a significant external validation of competency-based education as an accepted, viable alternative to the traditional credit-based system.

"At WGU, students graduate by demonstrating their competencies rather than by accumulating credits."

WGU offers associate's, bachelor's and master's degrees in three areas: information technology, business and education.

Contributing: *The Associated Press*

E-mail: nharrison@desnews.com