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ACROSS THE NATION

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## Online School Could Address ESEA Decrees

### 'Teachers College' Offers Web Credential Route

BY SEAN CAVANAGH  
Washington

An Internet-based university has launched what is being touted as the nation's most comprehensive online program for teacher certification, offering the possibility of easier access to improved credentials for thousands of instructors who will soon need them to meet new federal requirements.

Western Governors University this month unveiled its "Teachers College," which promises to link new and currently employed teachers to a broad network of college courses, entirely through the Internet.

Operating out of an office building in Salt Lake City, the university has the potential to transform an unnecessarily slow and bureaucratic certification process, its backers say. Those supporters include the federal Department of Education, which regards the new college as a potentially integral tool for states to comply with upcoming deadlines for hiring highly qualified instructors under the "No Child Left Behind Act" of 2001.

"This isn't designed to supplant what is going on in our colleges and universities. This is designed to complement them," said Gov. Michael O. Leavitt of Utah, who joined Secretary of Education Rod Paige and a bipartisan group of federal lawmakers at a March 10 press briefing held here to announce the college's opening.

*Continued on Page 11*

## Web Program to Include Six Months of In-School Training

*Continued from Page 1*

Still, those officials said they hoped the college's enrollment would rise quickly. "Our goal," the Republican governor said, "is to make sure the seeds grow."

The Teachers College offers no classes of its own, aside from an introduction to the program. Instead, it allows students to tap in to courses from as many as 45 universities around the country. University officials say its new program will streamline certification by judging students on various "competencies," or sets of academic skills, rather than "seat time" spent learning in a traditional classroom. WGU students wanting certification also must go through about six months of supervised training in K-12 schools. Ultimately, they earn degrees not through credit hours, or by completing a set number of courses, but by passing a set of assessments, the number of which depends on their needs and past educational experiences.

The online Teachers College could have the biggest benefit for working adults such as those entering teaching from other fields whose schedules won't allow them to attend traditional, on-campus certification programs, its backers say. It will also meet the needs of instructors from urban areas and rural schools who currently lag behind on certification, WGU supporters maintain.

In 2001, the Education Department provided WGU with a \$10 million grant to help start the Teachers College. The nonprofit WGU is one of the few online universities whose students are eligible for federal financial aid, university officials say.

The teachers program will eventually seek direct acceptance from all states, said Marti Watson Garlett, the dean of the Teachers College, so that students would not have to go through the extra step the reciprocity policies entail.

Online teacher education courses are common, Mr. Imig said, and he knows of universities allowing teachers to become certified through computer-based programs. What makes WGU unusual is its broad reach, he said. "It's not the technology," he said, "it's the fact it's going to be spread to all of these different states."



**Gov. Michael O. Leavitt:** Says online school to complement, not replace, regular colleges.

Under the 2001 law revising the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, all classroom paraprofessionals hired on or after Jan. 8, 2002, who work in Title I schools, or provide instruction in core academic subjects, must take one of the following steps, depending on their educational backgrounds: get two years of postsecondary experience; earn an associate's degree; or, depending on their educational experience, demonstrate their skills on a state or local assess-

ment and show the ability to assist in instruction in certain academic areas. Paraprofessionals hired before that date must meet those mandates by the end of the 2005-06 school year.

In addition, the law requires that all teachers in core academic subjects be highly qualified in the subjects they teach by the end of 2005-06—or by this academic year, for new hires in Title I schools. "Highly qualified" is generally defined as being fully licensed, and having demonstrated competency in a subject.

The Teachers College offers associate's degrees; bachelor's degrees with teaching certificates; master's degrees in teaching; and certification for teaching for students with bachelor's degrees. The length of the program depends on the past academic record of students, among other factors. But associates' degrees and teacher certification generally take two years, Ms. Garlett said, and master's degrees can be achieved in a year. Students are required to take tests of their abilities along the way, with the number of assessments depending on their educational backgrounds and academic progress.

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#### A Matter of Reach

Colleges and universities typically provide degrees or training to aspiring teachers, then recom-

mend them to states for certification. So far, only Arizona, Nevada, and Texas have officially accepted WGU's program for licensure. But through already-established reciprocity agreements between states, teachers will be able to use their WGU degrees to secure certification from 43 other states, too, university officials say.

Agency officials say. The unveiling of the Teachers College drew a generally favorable response from teacher education groups, who said they see potential in the initiative, as long as WGU upholds its plans to combine online learning with mandatory time spent in front of K-12 classes.

"It's an interesting variation that reshapes the way we prepare teachers," said David G. Imig, the president of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, in Washington. "It will be watched very closely."

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governors of 19 Western states and financial support from several corporate partners.

Students in the Teachers College pay \$2,250 per six-month term, or \$4,500 a year, working under schedules they arrange with WGU advisors. Enrollees are assigned mentors, most of them former university and K-12 staff members with doctorates in education-related subjects, who review students' academic records and help them craft course schedules they need to get their desired degrees.

Mentors and students are expected to communicate by phone or e-mail every two weeks, though many of them will talk much more often, Ms. Garlett said.

Using computers, students are then able to begin their coursework, most of which can be done by logging on to the WGU Web site. Homework includes assigned reading, writing papers, building lesson plans, and creating tests for precollegiate students.

All WGU students seeking a teaching certificate are required to undergo "demonstration teaching," or training in an actual classroom under the supervision of a teacher, typically for six months. WGU hires the teachers. If a student is already working in a school, that supervisor could be someone in the same building.

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**FOLLOW-UP:** The university's Web site can be viewed at [www.wgu.edu](http://www.wgu.edu).