

Deseret News, Wednesday, September 24, 2003

You'll never get lost on WGU campus

By Lee Benson

Deseret Morning News



HOLLADAY — The campus of Western Governors University consists of a suite of basement-level offices in a one-story building tucked behind a bank in the middle of the Salt Lake Valley. Office staff walk briskly and quietly through the halls of the WGU administration building, which, by point of fact, is the school's *only* building.

I stumbled across the WGU "campus" purely by chance last week because a woman who works in the administration building was selling her car.

"Oh," I said when I was greeted by the WGU logo in the lobby, "I didn't know this place was here."

The receptionist looked up.

"Neither," she said, "do the students."

Welcome to Online U. Western Governors University, the brainchild of Utah Gov. Mike Leavitt, is alive, well and physically — unless you count the offices of the bookkeepers and accountants in Holladay — nonexistent. WGU isn't in a place. As John Becker, the school's public relations director, says, "It's in the ether . . . it's in the computer right there on your desk, in your bedroom, in your kitchen or in your office. It's wherever and whenever you want it to be."

"One of the things I've learned by working with WGU is that the Internet is a real place and it is part of everybody's life," says John.

WGU, John explains, allows people to go to college without leaving their keyboard. "It's for people who can't get a degree anywhere else because they have families and jobs and other things in their lives like soccer," he says. "It's for people who have to study and learn at lunch or at 10:30 when the kids are asleep and the news is over, and that's half of what online

education is.

"The other half is what you've learned on your job or in your life or in a class. All that applies here. Everything is competency-based. It doesn't really matter where you learn it as long as you learn it."

WGU's student body is more than 1,500 strong and climbing. Half-a-dozen more students may sign up tomorrow, replacing half-a-dozen who have completed their requirements for a degree. Students — along with their teachers, or, as WGU calls them, "mentors" — are located around the country and the world. There is currently a WGU student at the North Pole, while numerous military personnel are hitting the books as we speak, computer style. Other active students are in Argentina, Canada, Chile, Denmark, Japan, Peru, the United Kingdom and Germany, as well as throughout the United States.

Another 35 proud WGU graduates are scheduled to go through a commencement ceremony this Saturday. The exercises will be held at the governor's mansion garden in Salt Lake City.

Everything is invisible except for the end.

"We decided it would be kind of a letdown to have somebody e-mail you your diploma," says John. "So we have these periodic ceremonies. But you don't have to be present to graduate. If you don't want to come or can't come, we'll get the diploma to you. That's how it works."

And even if you elect to travel to Salt Lake City to get your diploma in person — which is what graduates from as far away as New York and New Jersey are planning this weekend — you still don't ever have to lay eyes on the administration building in Holladay.

In the WGU universe, the physical campus is supposed to be invisible.

Please send e-mail to benson@desnews.com and faxes to 801-237-2527.

© 2003 Deseret News Publishing Company