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New Leadership for WGU At a Time of Growth

SALT LAKE CITY -- At the fall meeting of the Western Governors Association, two western governors were elected as co-chairs of Western Governors University (WGU), the nation's only accredited, online competency-based university (www.wgu.edu). New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson and Nevada Gov. Kenny Guinn take over leadership of the WGU Board of Trustees from Utah Gov. Mike Leavitt and Washington Gov. Gary Locke.

The governors take over leadership of WGU at a time of impressive gains and growth. In the first nine months of the year, enrollment in WGU degree programs doubled from 750 to over 1,500 students. WGU is currently growing enrollments about 10 percent per month, adding 150-200 new students every month. The university has students from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, two U.S. territories, and eight foreign countries. In the past fiscal year ending June 30, 2003, revenues increased over 50 percent due to increased enrollments, and net assets increased 37 percent. The university added three new corporate sponsors to its National Advisory Board in the past year, including Dell, Google, and Siebel Systems.

In February of this year, WGU was fully accredited by four regional accrediting commissions, becoming the only university ever to be simultaneously accredited by multiple regions. In March, U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige announced the launch of the WGU Teachers College, the only national program providing accredited, online, competency-based degrees, including elementary and secondary licensure, to K-12 teachers and prospective teachers in math, science, elementary education, and learning technology. In the last six months since the announcement, more than 600 students have enrolled in teacher degree programs.

In addition to the success of the Teachers College, enrollments in WGU's business and information technology degrees also more than doubled in the past year. The university recently announced five new bachelor's degrees in business, and eight new degrees in teacher education, including degrees in secondary math and science.

Last month, 35 students received degrees from WGU in commencement ceremonies in Salt Lake City. WGU has now graduated a total of 65 students, representing 14 states and Canada, with eight associate's degrees, five bachelor's degrees and 52 master's degrees.

Utah Gov. Mike Leavitt also received an honorary doctorate in humane letters from WGU, recognizing his founding role in the university and his leadership as long-time co-chair of the Board of Trustees. Following his appointment by President Bush to lead the Environmental Protection Agency, Gov. Leavitt resigned from the WGU Board and was elected chairman emeritus.

"Beyond all the numbers, the real story is found in the comments of WGU students," said WGU President Bob Mendenhall. Wyoming high school teacher Patricia Eardley received her master of arts in learning and technology degree in October, and told the graduating class, "As I was teaching my students about scientists, it made me think of an analogy between science and WGU. For centuries, people believed in Ptolemy's theory of the universe, that the earth was the center and everything else rotated around it. That's what I thought of my traditional university. I went to classes when they said, I took what classes they said, and I met with professors on their schedule. When Copernicus came into the picture, he said the earth is not the center, but the sun is. I like to think of myself and my education as that sun in the center with Western Governors University revolving around me. Now I get to pick my time schedule and I get to pick the classes that I need and tailor it to what I need. So I became the center of the learning universe."

Another graduate, Utah teacher Jim Langston, said, "Having been to several colleges and universities, I can truly say this is the most challenging. I savor the master's degree because I had to work much, much harder. With this being competency-based, I feel like I own the knowledge instead of just having acquired it through 'seat time'."

Cathryn Waters' commencement message reflected the thoughts of many students when she said, "WGU provided me the flexibility to balance my work, my family and my school. I worked at my own pace, whenever and wherever I was. Plus, the competency model gave me credit for the knowledge and skills that I'd learned from many years of work."

The WGU Web site is found at www.wgu.edu. WGU was founded and is supported by 19 states and governors, as well as 25 leading corporations and foundations. WGU offers associate's, bachelor's and master's degrees in three areas: IT, business and education.