

The Salt Lake Tribune

WEDNESDAY November 05, 2003

Leavitt leaves post of online university

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The Salt Lake Tribune

One job Gov. Olene Walker will not be replacing the departing Mike Leavitt in is his top leadership post at Western Governors University, an accredited online, competency-based university founded in 1997 by 13 Western governors and 22 Fortune 500 companies and foundations.

At its recent meeting in Big Sky, Mont., WGU's 16-member board selected New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson to replace Leavitt on the WGU Board of Trustees. Like their predecessors, Leavitt and Washington Gov. Gary Locke, Richardson and Nevada Gov. Kenny Guinn will be co-chairmen of the board of trustees.

"The leadership role rotates among the various states," said WGU spokesman John Becker on Tuesday. "It's coincidental that the change occurred with [Leavitt's] departure. It was just time to move it out of Utah."

Following his appointment by President Bush to lead the Environmental Protection Agency, Leavitt tendered his resignation from the WGU board. Members named him WGU chairman emeritus.

WGU is governed by a board made up of educators, business leaders and governors. Trustees are elected by the governors of the states that participate in WGU, explained Becker.

During last month's WGU commencement ceremony in Salt Lake City, Leavitt was given an honorary doctorate in humane letters in recognition of his founding role in the university and his leadership as longtime board co-chairman.

At that time, 35 students received degrees from WGU. Since its founding, the online university has graduated 65 students, representing 14 states and Canada, with eight associate degrees, five bachelor's degrees and 52 master's degrees.

WGU does not develop its own curriculum. Instead, it pools courses already available at other universities and administers their instruction over the Internet.

Richardson and Guinn take over leadership of WGU at a time of impressive gains and growth, said President Robert Mendenhall.

In the first nine months of this year, enrollment in WGU degree programs doubled from 750 to more than 1,500 students.

WGU is adding 150 to 200 new students every month, he said.

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