

# Online WGU grads exult as they line up for degrees

*Internet university helps working adults fulfill their dreams*

**By Nicole Warburton**  
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For Ammon Cookson, Saturday meant the difference between having a job and being unemployed.

For Gina Baird, Saturday meant that after 10 years of substitute teaching she could finally teach in her own classroom.

While only two, their stories were representative of the February 2005 graduating class of the Western Governors University (WGU), which held commencement ceremonies Saturday at the Salt Lake City Public Library.

Touted as the nation's only accredited online university that offers "competency-based" degrees, WGU has become a way for working adults like Baird and Cookson to pursue college degrees.

They can keep their jobs, work at their own pace — and eventually earn a diploma

## **116 earn diplomas**

The Western Governors University began enrolling students in 1999 under the direction of 19 state governors. It is a nonprofit organization supported by more than 20 corporations and foundations.

Since creation, WGU has more than doubled in size, with more than 3,000 enrolled this past year.

Saturday's graduating class boasted 116 graduates from 29 states. Forty students from nine states attended the commencement ceremony.

without spending time in a classroom.

"This is a new model of higher education," explained Robert Mendenhall, president of WGU.

Of the 40 students in attendance Saturday, nine received bachelor's degrees and one an associate's. Baird received a teaching certificate while the rest earned master's degrees.

Cookson called the day a



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**Vicki French shows her delight in getting a degree Saturday from Robert Mendenhall, left, president of the university. Next to her at the right is Curt Burnett, a Questar official who was giving out scholarships.**

milestone in his life.

"Like Chuck Yeager, my impenetrable barrier was

getting a degree," said Cookson, a father of six from Hillsboro, Ore. "But getting credit

by rear-end and seat time wasn't for me."

Two years ago, he enrolled in

the university and began to pursue a business degree in information technology management. Saturday was significant because it marked the end of an experience that helped him find a new job with GE Healthcare Information Systems.

"My whole perspective changed," Cookson said. "No longer did I cringe at the wants that had degree requirements."

Mendenhall called that experience representative of the mission of WGU. Not only do graduates earn a degree — but they become empowered.

"We have taught these people to use their brain and become independent learners," he said.

Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. added to Mendenhall's statement, telling students to use their education to encourage others and contribute to society.

"The greatest exercise for the human heart still today remains, not running, weight lifting, not aerobics," he said, "but reaching down and lifting one another up."

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