

NCATE accredits first online university

*By Stephen Sawchuk
Staff Writer*

In what is likely to mobilize other non-traditional teacher education providers to seek similar recognition, the **National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education** has accredited Teachers College at **Western Governors University**, a teacher training program offered exclusively online. WGU is the first non-traditional provider NCATE has accredited. The university was created by the governors of 19 states in an attempt to fill the need for teachers in areas where distance and lack of availability act as barriers to certification. The university also offers content and pedagogy courses online.

Other NCATE-accredited universities have had online components or options, but have not been based exclusively online, said NCATE President **Arthur Wise**. NCATE currently accredits about half of the nation's 1,200 schools of education.

In an interview, WGU Teachers College Executive Director **Janet Schnitz** said the accreditation sends an important signal that non-traditional institutions can be judged by -- and meet -- the same quality standards as brick-and-mortar institutions.

"We can be held to, and want to be responsible for, the same standards as any other institution of high quality in the country," she said. "We're not afraid to step up and be judged by the same requirements."

WGU's competency-based program does differ from traditional programs in its format. Rather than requiring students to meet a specific number of credit hours, WGU students must master a set of core competencies to be recommended for certification. Students that come in with a particular background -- experience as a classroom paraprofessional or substitute teacher, for instance -- can master certain competencies, such as classroom management, more quickly than other students.

The program still requires all students to complete at least 12 weeks of clinical fieldwork in a school setting. WGU partners with school systems in each student's home community to locate a supervisor who will evaluate the fieldwork experience.

The program is fully approved in California, Texas, Nevada, New Mexico and Utah, but under a reciprocity agreement, all states except Indiana and Kansas currently recognize WGU graduates.

Wise said two other non-traditional providers have applied for NCATE accreditation, the Boston Teacher Residency program, operated in partnership by **Boston Public Schools** and the **Boston Plan for Excellence**; and New Jersey-based **Foundation for Educational Administration**, a school leadership program.

WGU's accreditation could also help gain more recognition of non-traditional institutions as legitimate avenues to teacher preparation. It will also help more stakeholders distinguish between legitimate, degree-granting online universities like WGU and "diploma mills."

"Students come here seeking a quick path, an easy path to a degree, and that's not what we're about," Schnitz said.

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