

deseretnews.com

Deseret Morning News, Saturday, February 10, 2007

WGU students to graduate — and meet

By Erin Stewart

Deseret Morning News

College graduation is a time to say goodbye for most college students. For new graduates from Western Governors University, however, this weekend's commencement is the first time many of them will ever meet.

Graduates from the online school headquartered in Utah are coming from 23 states around the nation to officially receive their degrees today and meet students, teachers and mentors they've only known as online log-in names.

"I'm really excited to see them and congratulate them personally," said Joel Ellington, a 47-year-old Pleasant Grove resident who will graduate with a master's in education.

Roughly 100 of this year's nearly 500 graduates will travel to the school's semiannual commencement Saturday at Abravanel Hall in Salt Lake at 10 a.m.

At the competency-based online school, students like Ellington work with their peers online and communicate with their professors via e-mail instead of face to face. For Ellington, that cyber contact turned out to be just as bonding as sitting in a traditional classroom together.

"In the age of electronics, we've become accustomed to it a little bit and we could prompt a discussion that brought us very nearly as close as if we'd been in the same room," he said. "We could have impromptu meetings anytime we wanted instead of saying, 'Let's get together at Debbie's house.' It's easier to drop a line and then within an hour you've got a chat going."

The other 494 students graduating with Ellington this weekend have all completed a degree in one of four programs — health, education, information technology and business — and have moved through the program based on their level on skill rather than their previous education.

A mentor works with each student enrolled online at WGU to make sure they are at the level they should be and getting the help they need to get their degree. That one-on-one approach to online learning coupled with the competency focus has helped the school grow from only 500 students in 2003 to nearly 7,500 students logging on to WGU from 48 states today.

BY THE NUMBERS

Western Governors University

7,500	Students enrolled
495	Students graduating this weekend
23	States represented in graduation
39	Average age of graduates
18	Youngest student
63	Oldest student
4	Colleges*

* Business, health, education and information technology

Deseret Morning News graphic

"For working adults who have developed a lot of competencies but don't have a degree to show for it, we're a very attractive option," said Robert Mendenhall, president of WGU. "We have graduates who are running their own companies or consulting for Fortune 500 companies."

As a sixth-grade teacher and now a member of the Utah National Guard, Ellington said the online option was the only school that worked with his schedule and his skill level. Although he had to be self-motivated to get the work done, he said he couldn't have received his master's degree through a traditional university.

And while his mentor lives in Texas, Ellington said she was always there to give him a push or a hand when he needed it.

"My mentor would engage as often as was needed. There were times we'd go for three weeks without talking because I was fine. But she kept a pretty close eye on my progress and if something got bogged down I'd get a call from her," he said.

E-mail: estewart@desnews.com

© 2007 Deseret News Publishing Company