

\$3M grant to aid online teacher education

Western Governor's University receives Labor Department funds to help train rural educators

From eSchool News staff and wire service reports

Western Governors University, a private, nonprofit online school founded and supported by the governors of 19 western states, will receive \$1 million per year for three years from the U.S. Department of Labor to test a new teacher education model. The program's goal is to help rural school systems find and retain highly qualified teachers in hard-to-staff disciplines such as math and science. WGU will offer online scholarships for rural teaching candidates, as well as academic support and mentoring following graduation from the program. The program allows individuals to continue residing in their communities while accessing their classes online.

February 27, 2007—To help increase the pool of highly qualified teachers in rural school systems, particularly in the hard-to-fill disciplines of math and science, the U.S. Department of Labor has awarded a \$3 million grant to Western Governors University (WGU), an online school. WGU says it will use the money to develop a new model for web-based teacher education that can be implemented on a national scale.

"America's economy is increasingly knowledge-based, and our future success depends on today's students excelling academically, especially in math and science," said Secretary of Labor Elaine L. Chao. "With this \$3 million grant, Western Governors University will launch an innovative program to boost the quality of education in rural areas through improved and [more] accessible teacher training."

WGU will partner with the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) to implement and evaluate this rural teacher initiative. The project will include working with states, workforce investment boards, one-stop career centers, and rural school districts to identify and prepare potential teacher candidates.

Additionally, the grant will help WGU provide scholarships of up to \$1,500 per student, per term, for up to five terms. Each scholarship will cover more than half the cost of online tuition for a six-month term, for a total of up to \$7,500 for qualified students.

"One of the biggest issues is that many rural districts don't have convenient access to an accredited teachers college," said Ken Sorber, WGU's vice president of strategic relations and the grant project leader. "If you get very remote, and you're talking about areas where it's hours away to go to a college, typically you'll find fewer highly qualified [teachers] in math and science."

Rural school administrators feel the pain of losing teachers to districts in less remote areas.

"Our district is more than rural; it is isolated," said Toni Turk, a federal programs director with the San Juan School District in Utah. "As a result, recruited teachers often face culture shock, and many give us only three to five good years before moving on to other career options."

Turk added: "As a rule, we don't attract those with advanced degrees who have matured in their careers. Accordingly, we have learned that we have to 'grow our own.' This necessitates finding the needed resources to assist teachers with career-broadening opportunities. Because of our isolation, distance-learning arrangements are a real assist."

Turk said Utah in particular is not producing enough teachers to offset retirements.

"Education in Utah has become a teacher's market," Turk said. "More often than not, urban districts are able to offer positions in communities with more amenities. Accordingly, we need to find ways to make us more competitive in attracting teacher replacements."

WGU, a nonprofit, private university founded and supported by the governors of 19 western states, will receive \$1 million per year for three years to test the new teacher training model.

WGU will offer academic support and mentoring throughout the program, as well as professional development opportunities for up to one year following a student's graduation from the program. The distance-learning aspect of the program allows individuals to continue residing in their communities while accessing their classes online.

WGU's mission is to expand access to higher education through its online, competency-based degree programs. Because the degrees are offered online, they are accessible to those living in rural areas who cannot travel long distances to participate in classes at traditional campuses.

The competency-based programs focus on measuring what students know and can do, rather than measuring time or credit hours, and allow working adults that have competencies for example, in math and science to complete their programs more quickly but without compromising the quality of education, according to the university. The WGU Teachers College was established four years ago and has more than 4,000 students, including more than 1,000 students in math and science teacher education.

The school already has graduated more than 1,100 teachers, and its graduates have become licensed teachers in nearly every state. "Rural areas throughout the country are in need of talented professionals to prepare young people for careers in growing industries," said Emily Stover DeRocco, assistant secretary of labor for employment and training. "The [online] competency-based curriculum Western Governors University is testing will offer new and innovative ways for prospective teachers to gain their credentials and find rewarding careers in rural America's classrooms."