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Develop 'controversial' strategies, WGU grads urged

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Graduating college students should "develop a controversial strategy," something unique that will make them stand out.

That's was the advice Scott McNealy, co-founder and chairman of Sun Microsystems and founder of Curriki, gave to graduating students at Western Governors University's commencement Saturday morning at Kingsbury Hall.

WGU is a fully accredited nonprofit university that uses online technology to expand access to quality higher education.

"You need a strategy to win," McNealy told the 600 graduating students. "It should be something different," and it has to be true.

He said using open-source methods was his unique company strategy, and 20 years later it is still working well.

McNealy also encouraged students to "have a cause" and "find a way to give back" to the community.

"People like to have causes," he said. "People will follow you if you are more than a paycheck to them."

Curriki.org is one way McNealy said he gives back to the community, with open-source curriculum and resources.

He stressed that there's no way college students should be spending billions of dollars a year for textbooks, and he'll be promoting less expensive alternatives online.

McNealy noted that current economic times are tough, and he wishes he were hiring right now.

"It will get better," he promised.

WGU President Robert W. Mendenhall awarded McNealy an honorary doctorate degree. McNealy's financial contributions helped get WGU started.

Former Utah Gov. Mike Leavitt, the outgoing secretary for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, introduced McNealy as the keynote speaker. Leavitt stressed the power of mentoring and referred to McNealy as "the godfather of the Internet" and of WGU. Many have benefitted from McNealy's mentoring, he said.

One of the four student speakers, Scott Saunders from Rancho Cordova, Calif., said it took him two years, one month and four days to earn his bachelor's degree in information technology.

Saunders said he didn't like school before and had always believed he was resourceful enough to get by without a degree. Once he acknowledged his lack of education and found WGU, Saunders gained more confidence and proved to himself he could graduate.

"I now like school," he said, indicating he will pursue a master's degree and perhaps others.

Only 80 students were in attendance at the commencement itself. Most watched it distantly over a live video stream on computers. The 600 graduates over the past six months hail from 45 states — including more than 50 from Utah.

One WGU graduate from Utah was Davis Stovall, who earned his MBA with an information technology emphasis. Besides working full time at the LDS Church Office Building as a manager in the IT department, Stovall has supported a wife and five children during his studies. He's also a veteran and reservist. He earned his bachelor's and master's degrees from WGU, too.

WGU is based in Salt Lake City and employs more than 300 Utah residents. For more information on Western Governors University, visit www.wgu.edu.

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