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WESTERN GOVERNORS UNIVERSITY

Weekly Prompts From a Mentor

By TAMAR LEWIN

Fifteen years ago, bemoaning the high cost of higher education, the governors of 19 Western states decided to start a nonprofit online institution to help meet their need for a trained work force. The result, Western Governors University, offers undergraduate and graduate degrees in education, business, the health professions and information technology. Everything is online except for student teaching and some nursing requirements.

Most of its 25,000 students are over 25, and have previously earned some college credits.

Instead of being required to spend a certain number of hours to earn a certain sequence of credits, students at Western Governors must show “competency” through assignments and proctored exams.

Marie Hermetz, who paid Western Governors about \$9,000 to earn her master’s degree in health care management, said she heard about the program on the news and switched from one that would have cost up to \$40,000.

“Doing it one class at a time, I would have graduated maybe never,” said Ms. Hermetz, 43, who had a bachelor’s degree in math. “This way, it took just under 18 months. And whenever I ran into trouble, my professors would make arrangements, whether it was through a webinar or a phone call or an e-mail, to help me.”

Actually, Western Governors does not have “professors” in the usual sense: the online curriculum is not developed by the university, but chosen by outside experts, and students have “course mentors” with graduate degrees.

In addition, to counter the isolation of studying over the Internet, each student gets a mentor who calls every week. In fo-



MIKE TERRY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Mariah Long, who got a degree online from Western Governors University while in Germany, went to graduation in Utah.

rum where students rate online programs, most commenters had good things to say about the school; those who did not generally complained about useless mentors, or too much mentor turnover. (A few also complained that the school would not accept enough of their transfer credits.)

Mentors, who handled 80 students at a time, can see when each one has logged on and how much work he or she has completed.

According to a recent Stanford University School of Education study, “coach-

ing” on time management and goal setting increased the likelihood that students at brick-and-mortar colleges would graduate, an effect that might be even stronger among online students, who have less connection with their school.

“The human contact with the mentor, the calls saying, ‘Did you get that chapter done, did you have any problems?’ was critical,” Ms. Hermetz said. “There’s constant communication. I’m sure this isn’t for everybody, but when you’re more mature, and you really want to get something done, I can’t imagine a better way.”

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