

Nonprofit online university expands to Missouri

ALAN SCHER ZAGIER - Associated Press (AP)

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COLUMBIA, Mo. (AP) — Terry Effink had the battered knees of a 20-year U.S. Postal Service carrier, five kids who are 12 or younger and hopes of finally finishing college after leaving Southeast Missouri State University more than two decades ago with plenty of time in the classroom but no degree.

When the 45-year-old Oran resident learned that the school in nearby Cape Girardeau only offered daytime accounting classes — little use for a working parent — those plans came to a halt.

Six months later, he's instead enrolled at Western Governors University, a nonprofit virtual school that Missouri Gov. Jay Nixon and chief executives in other states are increasingly embracing as a low-cost solution to the dilemma of working adults who began college but didn't graduate.

"We'll be helping Missourians who never finished college, who are underemployed and who need degrees to move up, reach their full potential," Nixon said in his late January State of the State address, announcing the partnership between Missouri and the Salt Lake City-based virtual school.

That same night in Nashville, Gov. Bill Haslam unveiled similar plans to help the estimated 800,000 adult Tennesseans who have some college credit finish what they started. His plan requires legislative approval, while Nixon expects to issue an executive order to form Western Governors University Missouri.

The governors of Indiana, Texas and Washington have established similar alliances in recent years.

"It's a workforce and economic development issue, almost more than an education issue," said Bob Mendenhall, a one-time Utah technology maven who has been WGU president since 1999, two years after the 19 members of the Western Governors Association created the school.

The school charges about \$6,000 for annual tuition, rates far cheaper than those of its for-profit competitors and even at many public four-year universities, including the University of Missouri.

The average student is 37 and two-thirds of its students work full-time. They can receive more than 50 types of bachelor's or master's degrees in four core fields: business, health professions, information technology and a teachers college.

Students advance through classes at their own pace, rather than rely on academic semesters of fixed length, in a process known as competency-based education. Faculty members are called student mentors, not professors.

"You pass courses based on the mastery of the content as opposed to 'I've sat in a class for 16 weeks,'" said Leroy Wade, an assistant commissioner with the Missouri Department of Higher Education. "So if I can pass the test in two weeks, I can move on. If I need more time, I can take it."

In Eftink's case, that meant completing self-directed courses in organizational behavior, leadership and college algebra in about four to six weeks in the fall. He needed six months, though, to complete a particularly rigorous course in business law.

For now, between 400 and 500 Missouri residents are enrolled at Western Governors University, a fraction of the school's 40,000 students nationwide. Missouri enrollment will likely increase dramatically, as the university not only seeks learners but also hires a chancellor, opens a physical office and hires between 60 and 80 employees, according to Mendenhall.

In Indiana, the two-year-old WGU branch boasts 3,000 students. Former Gov. Mitch Daniels, who is now president of Purdue University, called the online college the state's "eighth university" and appeared on highway billboards and in its TV ads.

The Missouri campus won't receive state money, Mendenhall said, but expects to tap up to \$4 million in federal Community Development Block Grants. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is donating another \$750,000. The university also hopes to provide eligible students with state financial aid, Wade said.

Mendenhall stressed that Western Governors University won't be competing for recent high school graduates with "bricks-and-mortar" colleges.

"It's clearly a supplement to the state higher education system," he said. "We don't really serve the same student."

For Eftink, earning a college degree would fulfill a promise he made to himself, his wife and his children, as well as a chance to get off his feet in a job that means walking eight to 12 miles daily.

"I always wanted to go back," he said. "I felt like I had left something undone."

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