

State aid could be barred at online school

Nixon appears in ads for WGU.

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JEFFERSON CITY — Language added to the state budget with bipartisan support aims to torpedo one of Gov. Jay Nixon's pet projects — allowing state financial aid at an online university that lets students prove they know coursework from experience, before the course instruction actually starts.

Nixon's smiling face graces online ads for Western Governors University Missouri. When Nixon announced his support for the school last year, he awarded it a \$4 million Community Development Block Grant to establish offices in Clayton and directed the Department of Higher Education to treat its students like those who attend public universities for financial aid purposes.

The restrictive language, added by House Budget Committee Chairman Rick Stream to the Access Missouri and Bright Flight scholarships, allows the money to be used "solely at institutions headquartered in Missouri for purposes of accreditation." Western Governors University Missouri bases its accreditation on its parent organization, Western Governors University, which has headquarters in Salt Lake City.

Lawmakers from both parties have told him they don't like the education model or that a large pool of students eligible for Access Missouri means smaller grants, Stream said.

"It's basically taking away from existing universities in our state

and they are concerned about it, and I am too," he said. "Obviously they decrease and the money is not available for the students to use to go to the universities that are out there that are completely accredited and that have been out there for many years."

Changes already approved for Access Missouri helped the department implement Nixon's directive. Award levels will become equal for public and private school students beginning in the fall. To meet a legal requirement that it be "located in the state," the Coordinating Board for Higher Education in June said that an online school must have 25 employees in Missouri and enroll 750 students to qualify.

Western Governors has 88 full-time Missouri employees, including 66 faculty, and almost 1,000 students, Chancellor Angie Besendorfer said. It has awarded 400 degrees in the state and plans its first commencement in August.

The school provides a vigorous program for people seeking high-demand job skills, Besendorfer said. Students pay \$3,000 every six months and may take as many courses as they wish during that period. Each course begins with examinations to measure competency and further education focuses on weak areas, she said.

To pass, students must master the entire course, not just obtain a passing average such as a C from equally weighted test scores of A and F, Besendorfer said. The average student requires three years for a degree.

"People prove what they know, learn what they don't and get a degree and that helps them advance," she said. "We are not a

paper mill, absolutely not."

The lawmakers who represent the University of Missouri campus, Democratic Reps. Chris Kelly and Stephen Webber, said they dislike the education model. A program that certifies current skills and knowledge isn't the same as an education to acquire and expand knowledge, Webber said.

The rule allowing Western Governors students to use Access Missouri is an "end run" around the intent of the law, Webber said. "The purpose of these scholarships is to help people increase their skills or knowledge, not get them credit for something that they already know."

Kelly was harsher in his criticism. Online schools have a bad reputation as "Internet college scams" he said, with "many, many tens of billions of dollars poured down a rat hole in terms of unpaid student loans."

Allowing an online school to use Access Missouri, he said, "is like giving grants to Bonnie and Clyde."

Missouri is 39th in the nation in educational attainment, according to the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems. About 33.4 percent of adults have an associate's degree or higher — about 535,000 people — and an almost equal number — estimated at 543,564 — have some postsecondary coursework but no degree.

Allowing Western Governors' students to use Access Missouri is basic fairness, Besendorfer said. On average, they are 37 years old and working full time.

"They all currently reside in Missouri right now and they pay state income taxes," she said.

