

Sandoval announces partnership with nonprofit online college

By RILEY SNYDER - Associated Press - Tuesday, June 16, 2015

CARSON CITY, Nev. (AP) - Nevada Gov. Brian Sandoval is creating a partnership between the state and a nonprofit, low-cost online university designed to ease access to two- and four-year college degrees and help combat shortages in fields such as teaching.

Sandoval signed a proclamation Tuesday creating a Nevada branch of the Western Governors University. The Republican governor said expanding the school's offerings in the state will help an approximately 377,000 Nevadans with some college credit to finish their degrees.

"This partnership will provide additional educational opportunities particularly for our working adults who may have never had the opportunity to complete a degree," he said in an announcement video.

The online school offers degrees in business, teaching and information technology. It's based on "competency learning," meaning students don't have assigned class times and instead can work at their own pace and time.

Tuition is charged at a flat rate of \$3,000 every six months, and students can take as many classes as they can manage. University president Robert Mendenhall said many students in the program graduate in less than four years, and that the school model better serves working adults who don't have time to sit through traditional college classes.

"We're really addressing a whole different population in the state that's typically underserved," he said.

Nancy Brune, director of the nonprofit Guinn Center for Policy Priorities think tank, said expanding online offerings for degrees in high-demand fields would be a boon to Nevada companies seeking a better-trained workforce without having to look out of state.

"It's a win-win on several levels," she said.

Western Governors University courses have been offered in Nevada since the program began in 1996, but Mendenhall said creating a state-specific program helps in attracting more students to the program.

"The truth is that most potential students in Nevada have never heard of us yet, and hopefully that will change as we introduce WGU Nevada in the state," he said.

Nevada will join five other states including Texas, Indiana and Washington in creating the state-affiliated schools.

More than 900 Nevada students are currently enrolled in WGU classes, and Mendenhall says the school aims to attract more than 5,000 students to begin taking classes over the next five years.

The partnership will be funded through a \$2 million grant from a separate education-focused nonprofit called USA Funds, and through tuition payments from students. Nevada State College administrator Spencer Stewart will lead the school in Nevada.

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