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EDUCATION

Go Western, Young Man.

The best relatively cheap university you've never heard of. (Hint: it's only online)

BY KATHLEEN KINGSBURY

LET'S NOT WASTE ANYONE'S time or money. You won't find that phrase emblazoned on a T shirt, but it's essentially the motto of Western Governors University (WGU), a private online school that has worked hard to prove it is anything but a diploma mill.

Established 11 years ago by the governors of 19 states, the virtual university—which is administered from Salt Lake City—has experienced a surge in admissions as more college students look for low-cost alternatives. Enrollment topped 10,000 last spring, growing at a rate of 40% in both 2006 and 2007.

Some 4 million Americans sign up for a distance-learning course each year, whether at an extension of a bricks-and-mortar institution or at an online-only school. Although the latter category is populated mostly by for-profit companies, WGU stands out as a nonprofit funded mainly by tuition and the \$20 million in seed money supplied by those 19 governors. To help bolster its reputation, the school obtained accreditation from both regional standard bearers and the National Council for Accreditation of

Teacher Education (NCATE), the professional body recognized by the U.S. Department of Education for certifying teacher-preparation programs. (WGU remains the only online institution that has NCATE's seal of approval.) Such moves were designed to "lend WGU more legitimacy as an educational institution," says Health and Human Services Secretary Mike Leavitt, who helped found the school when he was governor of Utah.

Today WGU is the nation's largest supplier of math and science teachers in urban school districts. And its alumni are hired by such FORTUNE 500 companies as Microsoft and AT&T. "[WGU] has earned a reputation for producing high-quality graduates, particularly in education," says Kevin Kinser, a professor at New York's University of Albany who studies online learning and is not affiliated with WGU.

The school's success is owed in large part to its competency-based approach. Instead of requiring that students take specific courses or amass a certain number of credit hours—as most colleges do—WGU asks only that students



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demonstrate mastery of the subject matter via online exams or papers that could take a day or a decade, depending on the student.

WGU has no full-time instructors, at least not in the conventional sense. Course work for its four majors—education, IT, business and health care—is developed by and licensed from outside vendors. But WGU does have about 250 full-time faculty members who work as mentors, checking in with students by phone every couple of weeks to ensure they are making progress in their courses and to recommend additional resources. "I get to know each of my students much better than I did when I lectured to them once a week in class," says Alisa Izumi, a business professor at WGU who lives in Granby,

Mass., and used to teach at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

At \$3,000 per six-month semester, WGU charges a sixth of the average annual tab at private four-year colleges and half as much as an online for-profit like the University of Phoenix, a mega virtual school that has some 200,000 students. And WGU lets you take as many courses as you can fit in a semester, which means some students are able to finish an undergraduate degree in as little as two years. "Before WGU, I would have had to drive almost two hours to Richmond," says Sandy Newsome, a teacher in rural Virginia who is getting her master's in math education. "Learning this all from home seems so much smarter." Sure does. ■

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