Western Governors University (WGU) recently received a $3-million grant from the U.S. Department of Labor to help increase the number of trained teachers in rural areas over 3 years. AACTE will partner with WGU to evaluate the initiative.

The central vision for the project is to increase the national pool of qualified rural teachers, particularly in the hard-to-fill disciplines of mathematics and science, and to disseminate a new model for addressing workforce development of rural teachers that can be implemented on a national scale.

“We hope that this collaboration will help broaden innovative models of teacher preparation in rural areas and address the need for rural teachers in the science and mathematics disciplines,” said AACTE President/CEO Sharon P. Robinson. “Ultimately, we see this as an effort to serve all learners and to improve K-12 student achievement in rural communities.”

AACTE will utilize the findings from the project to discuss results and observations with teacher education leaders and state-approval agencies. A final evaluation report, which the Association will disseminate, will include analysis of lessons learned that may be applicable to other models.

The project will involve working with states, workforce investment boards, one-stop career centers, and rural school districts to identify and prepare potential teacher candidates. WGU will offer qualified candidates up to $7,500 in online scholarships as well as academic support and mentoring following graduation from the program.

In addition to preparing and placing highly qualified teachers in hard-to-fill rural positions—who, in turn, presumably will have an impact on thousands of students annually and hundreds of thousands over their teaching careers—this project has the potential to create a self-sustaining effort long into the future in rural teacher education.

The Department of Labor funding will support the initial investment of outreach to rural students and school districts as well as the creation of ongoing relationships for recruiting and serving students, including mechanisms for student teaching and clinical supervision.

Once these mechanisms are in place, WGU will continue to interface with the workforce-development system in meeting the critical needs in rural K-12 teacher education and will serve these districts and teachers for many years to come.

In its broadest aspect, this project will also serve as an important model of the value and quality of distance learning for rural students and demonstrate the effectiveness of competency-based education for working adults and second-career professionals in teacher education.
AACTE’s evaluation component of the project will focus on the use of technology-based delivery systems in traditional teacher preparation programs as well as on using education faculty partners from project states as a leadership cadre to help colleges of education establish collaborative activities with local and state workforce agencies.