Accreditation Makes Virtual Teachers College ‘Real Thing’

BY VAISHALI HONAWAR

When Western Governors University introduced its teacher-preparation program, there were those who scoffed at the idea that teachers could be trained from scratch—virtually. Now, three years later, it has earned the imprimatur of national accreditation while seeing its enrollment multiply from fewer than 100 students to 4,500.

Officials attribute the growth chiefly to word-of-mouth publicity from satisfied students. After the nod from the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, or NCATE, they expect the numbers to increase further.

“There are always those that regardless of accreditation look at online instruction and don’t think that it is on a par with other universities. It will be impossible to think that of WGU now,” said Janet W. Schnitz, the executive director of its teachers. “This university is the real thing.”

The teachers college, whose offices are in Salt Lake City, operates in a style that is different from that of a brick-and-mortar institution. Mentors located across the country work closely with aspiring and currently employed teachers striving to get a bachelor’s or master’s degree or certification.

The student body tends to be different, too. The average age is 56, and the program attracts a larger than usual number of male and minority students.

But in the end, university officials say, what Western Governors offers is no different from what teacher education programs at traditional institutions aim to provide: a solid foundation for beginning teachers to enter the classroom.

Assessment-Based

Just as if they were attending those traditional schools, wgu students are expected to satisfy core course requirements. The difference is they can skip over English I, say, if they can pass the accompanying assessments. Courses might also be skipped because of a student’s prior experience or education, but the student would still have to pass a test to demonstrate competence in that subject.

A mentor, who is usually assigned to the student from the beginning of his or her college career to the end, helps tailor the schedule. The mentor also works with the student throughout the program to review his or her progress.

The components that go into each student’s education are similar to those at a traditional university, says Jennifer Smolka, the online coordinator for the master’s program at the teachers college. “But we have richer experiences because we have a broader base from which to draw, and not just one instructor teaching one course,” she added.

Not a single course, in fact, emanates directly from WGU. Students have access to courses and course materials from institutions as diverse as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Stanford University, the National Museum of Natural History in Washington, the University of Colorado at Boulder, and the University of North Texas, among others.

In some instances, the Western Governors students are working online with instructors at those institutions; in other instances, they are taking self-study courses.

Courses are evaluated and their content is checked thoroughly, according to Ms. Schnitz. The college also tries to draw from programs that are regionally or nationally accredited, she said.

The teachers college also requires each student to student-teach in a classroom for 12 weeks—known at WGU as demonstration teaching.

Candidates usually start by teaching just one or two classes at schools in their communities, but later graduate to teaching all day and are often responsible for every aspect of the class, Ms. Smolka said.

At the heart of the system, though, are the assessments, which could include multiple-choice questions, projects, and essays. Pass and they prove their competence and advance. Fail and they stand still.

Because WGU’s program is competency-based, the accreditation process was made easier, said Donna M. Gollnick, a senior vice president at NCATE.

“We could follow what the candidates know and what the assessments are saying,” she said.

Setting the Pace

Created by 19 governors of Western states, Western Governors University, a nonprofit institution, started in 1998 and originally granted degrees in business and technology. The teachers college, which opened in 2003, was designed to answer the need for more teachers who meet the ‘highly qualified’ standard under the No Child Left Behind Act, especially in geographic regions and subject areas where teachers are in short supply.

Today, the college accounts for more than two-thirds of the students enrolled at the university.

Moreover, with a degree from the teachers college, students in 48 states can meet licensing requirements, either directly or through reciprocity, officials say. And the other two, Indiana and Kansas, are in negotiations with the school.

The college’s success came as a surprise even to those who were behind its creation. Former Gov. Jim Geringer of Wyoming said he and other founders expected the technology school to be the most popular because of growth in that sector of the economy, but were delighted by how rapidly the teachers college grew. “It took a little different direction than we anticipated,” he said.
Setting up a competency-based program was important because the governors wanted to foster a new approach to higher education, Mr. Geringer said.

“The approach we put in place was to have a very strong academic-advisory committee map the competencies needed for each discipline, then regularly review the competency measures to assure content and achievement,” he said.

Part of WGU’s attraction could be the low fees. The college charges students $2,790 for six months—a figure officials say is about half what other online universities charge for similar programs. Students can take an unlimited number of assessments during this time.

“The sky is the limit,” said Ms. Smolka.

If they wish, students can shorten the length of the program and reduce the overall cost of a degree by setting a faster pace.

University officials say the college has also been successful in its goal of reaching those frequently underserved by other teacher education institutions. As many as 33 percent of the students at WGU live in rural areas; 41 percent have parents who never went to college. About 19 percent of the students enrolled are members of minority groups, 10 percent of them African-American. Around 38 percent of the students are men.

“Often our students have tried to be successful at other careers, have been in [military] service, started a family,” Ms. Smolka said. “Those needs are really at the heart of who our students are. And what works for them is the flexibility offered by an online program, she said.

That’s one of the things that attracted Chauncey Ivey to Western Governors University. The 45-year-old had recently retired from the U.S. Air Force after 20 years of service and wanted more than anything to become a teacher. But he needed a program that he could complete while staying close to his family in Philadelphia. He found it while browsing the Web.

The WGU program allows him to be independent and to set his own pace, so he can go faster than he would have been able to at a traditional university, said Mr. Ivey, who enrolled in July 2005 and is on track to get his master’s degree early next year.

“The main thing that drew me was that this is a competency-based program…. It shows you how much you don’t know, and teaches you what you need to know to be able to teach in a classroom,” said Mr. Ivey, who is African-American and who wants to become a high school social sciences teacher. He is now doing his demonstration teaching at Germantown High School in one of Philadelphia’s disadvantaged neighborhoods.

Quality and Quantity

Besides WGU, another online university that offers teacher programs is Capella, which has offices in Minneapolis and offers graduate and doctoral programs in education. Last year alone, it awarded 101 doctorates, the seventh-highest number in the country in that field, according to the think tank Education Sector. Kaplan University, which is also online, offers teacher education programs, as does the University of Phoenix.

“There’s definitely a growing trend,” said C. Emily Feistritzer, the president of the National Center for Alternative Certification, a private research group based in Washington. Older teacher-hopefuls, she added, are more likely to seek out alternative programs, including online ones that get them into classrooms sooner.

Some other online programs have been in talks with NCATE, although none has yet applied for accreditation, according to Ms. Gollnick. Several NCATE-accredited universities also offer students the choice of taking some courses online.

It is too early yet to say whether the teachers prepared through WGU and other online programs are as successful as those coming out of traditional institutions at improving student achievement. But program officials as well as observers cite several advantages to the growth in nontraditional teacher education, including those online.

Ms. Schnitz said the teachers college at WGU is helping make a dent in teacher attrition. “If you have an older population, they are less likely to leave teaching,” she said.

Bruce N. Chaloux, the director of the electronic campus for the Southern Regional Education Board, in Atlanta, said high-caliber online programs can help alleviate teacher shortages faced by states where the numbers of students graduating from colleges of education are far lower than the demand for qualified teachers.

“There’s a real challenge in several states,” Mr. Chaloux said. Maryland, for example, fills just a quarter of its teaching slots each year with graduates from its colleges, he pointed out.

But the growth in online programs should be accompanied by strict quality control, some observers say.

Richelle Patterson, an assistant director of educational issues at the American Federation of Teachers, said the step WGU took to seek national accreditation was important and set a good example for similar programs to meet the same high standards that are required of many traditional ones.

“It all boils down to quality, because if you are sacrificing quality for quantity, you are doing a disservice;” she said.

WGU officials cite statistics to show the effectiveness of its teacher graduates. According to one survey, approximately 96 percent of employers believe that graduates know the subject matter they plan to teach, while 100 percent said the graduates could explain important principles and concepts in their states’ standards.

Ms. Smolka said the teachers college even offers support to graduates. For instance, an alumni mentor is available to former students who want to discuss on-the-job challenges.

“We work really hard,” she said, “at keeping the connection.”

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<th>Western Governors University Teachers College</th>
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<tr>
<td>■ Year established: 2003</td>
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<tr>
<td>■ No. of students: 4,500</td>
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<tr>
<td>■ Location: Salt Lake City</td>
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<tr>
<td>■ Average age of students: 36</td>
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<tr>
<td>■ Percent minority students: 19</td>
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<td>■ Percent male students: 38</td>
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<td>■ Cost: $2,790 for six months</td>
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SOURCE: Western Governors University