Virtual University Will Offer Authentic Degrees by E-Mail

By JOHN H. CUSHMAN Jr.

OMAHA, June 24 — Without so much as a ritual shovel to break the ground or a granite slab to mark the spot, the governors of 10 Western states today laid an intangible cornerstone for a new "virtual university" that they promised would soon allow students to take courses by computer and earn degrees on line.

At a meeting here, the governors pledged to raise the money and lower the bureaucratic barriers to the plan, which has been more than a year in the making. While details are still uncertain, the governors say the first students will be working in electronic classrooms next year.

Although there are already many examples of students learning at long distances from their teachers and colleagues, ranging from courses taught by mail or on television to those using the Internet, the Western Governors' University is the most ambitious yet.

The university would be an accredited regional institution, in the form of an independent nonprofit corporation, with power to grant certificates of proficiency that would be recognized by employers, course credits that would be recognized by traditional colleges and universities and full degrees.

At first, credentials would be offered in a limited number of specialties, but they could eventually be earned across the full spectrum of disciplines and at every level of accomplishment.

"This is not a replacement for the existing system of higher education," said Gov. Michael O. Leavitt of Utah, who, along with Gov. Roy Romer of Colorado, has led the effort. "It is a new element. It is a supplement. It is a way of creating new choices and new opportunities. But while this is not a replacement, it is an important part of a quality education for everyone. Because this is the way the world is going to work in the future."

Terry Hartle, vice president of the American Council on Education, an association representing 1,800 colleges and universities, said the governors were being driven largely by a rising population and an expected boom in enrollment in their region, which they could not realistically hope to meet by adding to traditional colleges and universities.

"Technology is already having a profound effect on all sorts of education," Mr. Hartle said. "The question is whether you can deliver quality higher education on a massive scale using existing technology. High quality higher education is hard enough to do when you have people on campuses and in classrooms. Whether or not you can do it successfully at distances and at a large scale we do not know."

The governors envision a university in which teachers and students will obtain reading materials not just from libraries, but also from databases; where term papers will be handed in by E-mail, and where classes will meet in on-line collaborative sessions, perhaps using video and voice links as well as keyboards.

The governors say the whole arrangement will not only spread opportunities across the region's vast distances, but will also make education cheaper.

At the same time, the university would be integrated with traditional educational settings — libraries, high schools, community colleges and state university systems, along with training programs in the private sector and even county agriculture extension agents.

Neither the teachers nor the students would need to be in the Western states, but the agreement of so many states — and of their education communities — to support the project would add to its credibility, the governors say.

The main questions center on whether an education obtained at a keyboard and a cathode ray tube can be as good as one earned amid the ivied halls, sporting fields, and laboratories of the traditional system. Other difficult questions are where the money will come from, whether the on-line university will compete for students and resources with traditional schools, and how a corps of teachers skilled in the new communications technologies can be recruited and trained.

Another question is whether electronic learning will deliver education to the disadvantaged, or whether the differences between computer haves and have-nots will only widen an education gap when computer skills are a prerequisite for schooling.

The governors' agreement called for each of the states to contribute $100,000 to continue the planning process. The full start-up costs have been estimated at $6 million to $10 million.

Conspicuous by its lack of involvement is California, whose population, economy and university system dwarf those of the other Western states and which has not been as active as the others in the early planning.

Among the existing models of nontraditional schools that suggest the direction the governors' university could take are the Maricopa Community Colleges, a consortium in Arizona that is about to offer an associate of arts degree entirely over the Internet.

At a more experimental level, there are virtual-reality campuses on the Internet like Diversity University and Athena University, which are trying out novel educational programs of their own.

But enthusiasts say that what is available now is just a rough prototype of what visionaries in the field say is coming.

At a practical level, businesses are interested in employees with programming skills and the ability to run computer networks, subjects natural to learn on line. Several big computer companies are supporting the governors, as is Simon & Schuster, the big educational publisher.

The planning documents for the venture are available on the World Wide Web, at:

http://www.westgov.org/smart/vu/vu.html.