

## **VIRTUAL UNIVERSITY CALLED VIRTUAL REALITY**

By Lucinda Dillon

*The Deseret News*. Salt Lake City, Utah: April 27, 1998. pg. B1

*Copyright The Deseret News, April 27, 1998*

Gov. Mike Leavitt said Monday he expects a "competitive train wreck" about his idea for a virtual university.

As plans for the online Western Governors' University move forward, Leavitt is spending more time allaying fears and addressing concerns about his plan to offer a college education over the Internet. "It may be a painful process," Leavitt told people gathered for the Technology Standards for Global Learning Conference. "It's a very challenging proposition, but it's an exciting proposition as well."

The market will demand cheaper college courses that students can access from their home computers, Leavitt told 350 people at the technology education conference Monday, and educators, officials and the technology industry must come together to create standards for this inevitable evolution in education.

In a question and answer session after his keynote address, some participants expressed concerns about the way Leavitt's Western Governors' University will evolve.

"There are some people in my state who say this is a political decision (to support the virtual university concept), and they wonder about the state's long-term commitment," said Eric Jones, of Central Community College in Nebraska.

"It can't be a political process," Leavitt told the group Monday. "If it does, it will fail."

But Jones said afterward Nebraska's governor is one of 18 in the country who support the idea, but the state will have a new governor in January. "People wonder, if the governor changes, will the level of support for the idea change?"

WGU is the brainchild of Leavitt and Colorado Gov. Roy Romer. It was formed last year to offer courses and degrees to students taking classes over the Internet and other telecommunications systems.

Consternation from educators seems to be escalating on the topic of virtual learning.

On Friday, some members of the Utah State Board of Regents said they felt left out of the loop concerning plans for the online Western Governors' University.

"We've not come to grips with the WGU," said regent Pamela Atkinson. "We haven't been kept up to date. We don't know where it's going."

The regents are devising a master plan for the state's nine colleges and universities and are uneasy about the potential effects of the WGU. They've had only occasional contact with officials of the virtual university.

WGU expects to roll out an electronic catalog of course offerings within the next two months.

Leavitt acknowledged fears from some faculty and academicians. "I talked with a professor who said, 'This scares the hell out of me,'" the governor said. "I told him, 'If it does, then just don't do it.'"

He said school boards, regents and faculty senates will not decide whether a college or university should offer this type of education. "The market will make this decision."

An educator once told Leavitt four factors will inhibit WGU success: bureaucracy, regulation, tradition and turf. "None of these barriers are technological," he said, asking attendees to help develop a plan to address these four hurdles.

Students in the marketplace - retirees who want to return to school, young people for whom college has grown too expensive, older students without child care or other circumstances to travel to a college campus - will eventually demand the WGU concept.

But Thomas Maher, who directs a distance learning program for graduate students at Colorado State University, asked Leavitt to clarify how the marketplace will drive WGU's success.

“This may be a market where the producers and the product aren't interested. What do you do?”

There are critics of the idea, and Leavitt said people who don't believe in it shouldn't offer online services. “Students will begin to see the low-cost (convenient) education elsewhere, and their students will leave,” he said. Through this competitive process, colleges will learn they have to offer online learning.

In the future, there will be academic college degrees based on competency and those issued from the prestigious or “name-brand” schools throughout the country.

It won't be easy to convince some educators and students that taking college classes online is the best way, but over time they will learn that the online, “student-centered” approach is better, he said.