

VIRTUAL UNIVERSITY LIFTS OFF

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Virtual learning became a reality Wednesday with Gov. Mike Leavitt's ``one small click for mankind."

The Western Governors University is open for business. How much it gets depends on what it has to offer and at what cost. Based on a quick survey, the price to enroll may limit its initial impact. Many three-credit courses cost more than \$500 (not counting WGU's \$30 broker fee per course). Introduction to macroeconomics, offered by Oklahoma State, has a fee of \$1,045. Needless to say there's space available. Leavitt and other officials hope competition will drive the prices down. Still, the concept is a good one. The virtual university provides a fitting alternative for education as the 21st century approaches.

The brainchild of Leavitt and Colorado Gov. Roy Romer, WGU is a cooperative consisting of 25 colleges and universities in 17 Western states, Guam and several businesses. For now.

Headquartered in Salt Lake City and Denver, the WGU enables learners worldwide to enroll in classes offered via the Internet, video tapes and correspondence courses delivered through the mail.

Utah at this point is represented by only Utah State University. USU has 10 graduate-level classes listed in WGU's inaugural catalog of 194 classes. The catalog can be accessed through the WGU's Web site (www.wgu.edu). Some of the classes already are filled and some already have started. Students have until Sept. 17 to enroll in USU's courses.

Money for new buildings and other facilities on college campuses is scarce. When students can get instruction at home or at other off-campus sites, expenses are cut dramatically. The virtual university makes courses available to all students via computers and satellites - courses that are now taught at only a few colleges. A professor who traditionally lectures to a roomful of students could provide instruction to thousands at the same time.

The Western Governors University is working toward its accreditation, having received eligibility status from the Inter-regional Accrediting Committee.

WGU clearly has strides to make before it's practical. But like the Wright Brothers at Kitty Hawk, at least it's off the ground.