

POLITICS NEWS

Veterans could be first to pay as DeVos rolls back for-profit college oversight

Veterans are often sought out by schools with low graduation and job-placement rates because of their access to federal aid.

Are for-profit colleges targeting veterans in their recruiting?

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Ashford has faced an ongoing, orchestrated effort among certain activist groups to paint our entire sector as irresponsible.

NBC reporters contacted us prior to publication asking us to respond to a number of spurious allegations. We provided thoughtful, thorough, and good-faith responses, and raised a number of our own questions and concerns about bias, accuracy, sourcing, and context of their reporting. They never responded. We have posted that full correspondence publicly, because we believe NBC's readers and viewers deserve all the facts so they can decide for themselves who holds the high ground on credibility.

This is misleading. The vast majority of Ashford's contact with prospective students are directly solicited by the students themselves, e.g. by filling out contact forms on our web site.

Some prospective students are referred to us by other, current students. Even in these cases, contact is initiated by email, not phone calls, unless a call is requested. NBC knew this and deliberately omitted it from their story.

How did Mr. Dean know this? As we informed NBC, No enrollment services advisor would have access to any information about a prospective student's income nor any reason to ask them about it. It simply is not a part of the enrollment process. In addition, all our outreach efforts are national and not focused on any specific communities. Put another way, if Mr. Dean had information about prospective students' income, the most important question NBC should be asking is how in the world he obtained it.

What is true is that unlike NBC's assertion, veterans are, as a group, less likely to live in poverty than the average American, and have substantially higher median earnings, according to Department of Veterans Affairs analysis.

Unsubstantiated hyperbole. The story presents zero evidence to support this statement, which is so vague and subjective as to be of no journalistic value.

False and irresponsible reporting. According to independent analysis, Ashford's \$485 cost per credit for undergraduates is below both the overall national average (\$574), and the national average for four-year, for-profit schools (\$647). It is also less than half the average cost per credit for four-year, not-for-profit institutions (\$1,039). Furthermore, we award our military and veteran students grants that reduce their per credit costs to \$250, less than half the national average.

Readers deserve to know that Ashford has never been found guilty of any criminal or civil wrongdoing, and it is irresponsible to insinuate otherwise.

This assertion is highly misleading, and refers to the fact that only 90% of a for-profit school's students can use federal student aid. Ashford University has operated well within the 90/10 regulations for many years.

To be specific, students using GI Bill benefits comprise approximately 10% of our total enrollment, and we currently estimate that students using GI Bill benefits will generate approximately 7% of Ashford's revenue during fiscal 2018. Even if, for some unfortunate reason, we lost all our students who use military money, we would still be in compliance with the 90/10 regulations.

The allegations of wrongdoing against Ashford University by the California Attorney General are not true and are extremely unfair. Ashford never intentionally or systematically misled students or falsely advertised its programs. We intend to prove that in court.

We have designed and implemented robust training and supervision programs for our staff to assure that prospective students receive the facts necessary for them to make informed decisions about enrollment and financial options. Those training and technology programs effectively prevent, detect, and remedy any statements made to prospective students that are inconsistent with our core values.

The truth is that the California AG in this case is attempting to misuse an extremely tiny subset of outdated and isolated student interactions we already uncovered and have addressed through our compliance personnel. Despite the mischaracterizations by the AG in its lawsuit, we have constantly instituted best practices and set industry standards.

Although we can't speak for other schools, this would imply that Ashford University seems to be especially effective as serving the unique needs of students who have served in our military. The vast majority of our students using GI Bill support come to us through word of mouth, rather than any marketing campaign from Ashford - a testament to our ability to serve the unique needs of military students.

How did NBC come to interview Mr. Dean and at whose behest? They won't say. From our correspondence with NBC:

"[W]e would like to know whether Mr. Dean or NBC are working with any activist organizations as either a source or impetus for this story. This is especially critical since, as we previously made you aware, the last former employee to disparage Ashford in the press did so in coordination with an anti-Ashford group. In that case as in this one, the former employee made a number of demonstrably false statements that echoed the talking points of these groups. After we confronted these falsehoods publicly, the publication that printed them was forced to retract the piece in its entirety."

Our students have consistently ranked the education they received from Ashford University as among the best in the country.

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) found that Ashford provides an academic challenge that ranks with the top 10% of four-year colleges in the United States, and is comparable to the top 10% in higher-order learning.

Results from the NSSE also show that Ashford senior students rated their experience at Ashford significantly higher than NSSE participating institutions, with 73% of Ashford students evaluating their entire educational experience as good (35%) or excellent (58%). Ashford students have high quality experiences with faculty and academic advising, and engage in high levels of effective teaching practices.

According to NPS Surveys, 96% of respondents would recommend Ashford to others seeking their degree.

Ashford University is the first university in the nation to receive full institutional recognition for its institution level implementation plan from The Quality Matters™ program for the university's commitment to online course quality. Quality Matters is an independent nonprofit whose mission is to assess online learning programs for quality and rigor across all sectors of higher education.

Ashford degrees prepare students who otherwise might not have a chance at a college education - including those from the military - to succeed.

We are barred by law from asking current or prospective students about any medical conditions. There is no process where veterans or any other prospective student could be targeted based on medical conditions.

NBC is comparing apples to oranges. And we told them as much prior to publication. The graduation rate for the most recent group of students using GI Bill benefits is 31%. This rate is very much in line with graduation rates of all 4-year institutions with open admissions policies (32%), according to the US Department of Education (<https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=40>).

The average loan debt for military students graduating with a bachelor's degree in the 2016-17 academic year was \$8,222, which was less than the average loan debt of public 4-year bachelor degree graduates by about 69% (\$26,900), and 75% below that of bachelor degree graduates at private, non-profit 4-year institutions (\$32,600).

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It's certainly true that we want prospective students to trust Ashford faculty and staff. It's completely false that we would ever instruct staff to take advantage of or mislead anyone, military, veteran, or otherwise.

As mentioned, we offer the Ashford Promise to new students, which allows students to drop enrollment before they are financially committed in any way. All entering students, including student veterans, attend the first three weeks of their first course as a no-risk trial period. If, at the end of that three weeks, they are not satisfied with the experience for any reason, they can elect not to continue their enrollment at no cost. If a student is not passing their first class at the three-week point (which is half way through the first class) they are also not permitted to continue. No tuition is charged or debt incurred.

Since the Ashford Promise began in 2012, students have been allowed to attempt over eighty-five thousand courses and then change their mind and leave the university without any financial obligation, student loan debt, or adverse academic impact. Those who felt Ashford would add value to their lives stayed and continued to work towards their degree.

Bridgepoint and Ashford University, through the Ashford Promise, have helped students make the right choice. In doing so we have foregone approximately \$127 million dollars in revenue, demonstrating our commitment to putting students first.

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By Heidi Przybyla and Laura Strickler

WASHINGTON — Eric Dean made a career of calling military veterans to urge them to enroll at Ashford University, a for-profit school based in San Diego that offers online degrees. Dean, who was instructed in sales techniques at Ashford, said he tried to befriend hundreds of current and former sailors and soldiers — many from the nation's poorest communities — to convince them to attend.

"I've seen the inside," Dean told NBC News in an interview, saying he had been "pressured into essentially selling my soul to throw fellow veterans under the bus" by misleading them about the educational outcomes about the school's graduation and job-placement rates.

Dean, who'd served in the Navy, quit Ashford in December 2017 because he said he objected to the school's practices and now says veterans with PTSD were among his recruits.

Under President Barack Obama, the Department of Education cracked down on for-profits like Ashford. With its high sticker price, questionable job placement success and 16 percent graduation rate — considerably lower than the national average of about 60 percent. Ashford was described in a Chronicle of Higher Education investigation as "a poster child for the ills of the for-profit college sector," and the school was sued by the state of California, which said it was misleading students about tuition cost and burying them in loan debt.

and most of their revenues come directly from taxpayers through federal financial aid. The schools also spend heavily on marketing and recruiting students who qualify for federal aid, especially veterans.

Here's why: For every dollar of GI Bill funding for-profit schools secure, they qualify for an additional \$9 in federal student aid. For-profit schools have been eight of the top 10 recipients of GI Bill tuition and fee payments since 2009, according to an analysis of VA data by Veterans Education Success, an advocacy group for veterans that has worked against the tactics used by for-profit schools.

The Department of Education under Obama created a "terminal advisor" role, making it easier for students to enroll at their federal student loan if a school is found to have used illegal or deceptive tactics in getting loans.

A 2017 lawsuit by California's attorney general alleges Ashford misled prospective students and engaged in other illegal practices. Dean says recruitment techniques included avoiding direct answers about low graduation rates in order to maximize enrollment.

"It was all unethical, the way we were misleading students," said Dean.

While Full Sail has not drawn as many high-profile legal challenges as has Ashford, it ranks near the top of a Department of Veterans Affairs list of 1,600 schools with official complaints filed against them. NBC also found 13 complaints about Full Sail filed with the Florida attorney general's office.

Florida attorney general's office
Only three other schools, all for-profit — the University of Phoenix, Colorado Technical University and DeVry University online — had more complaints.