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VA pulls GI Bill funding for Westwood College

By **LINDSAY WISE**
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March 9, 2011, 10:01PM

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The Department of Veterans Affairs has pulled **GI Bill** funding from all three Texas campuses of a for-profit college accused of misleading advertising and enrollment practices.

The unusual decision to suspend tuition assistance affected about 90 student veterans at **Westwood College's** campuses in Houston, Dallas and Fort Worth.

The Texas Veterans Commission, which is contracted by VA to evaluate and certify Texas schools, withdrew Westwood's GI Bill eligibility in December after the **Government Accountability Office** reported that Westwood and 14 other for-profit colleges made questionable statements about graduation rates, failed to provide clear information about the program's cost, and exaggerated applicants' potential earnings.

"Because of the money that veterans are now bringing in with the new **Post-9/11 GI Bill** — the fees are completely covered and the money goes directly to the school - the schools have a big incentive to enroll veterans," said Connie Jacksits, director of veterans education for the Texas Veterans Commission. "There's a lot of money available, and something they're finding in general about for-profit schools is they don't always have the graduation rates that they promote, as well as the job prospects."

U.S. Sen. Richard Durbin, D-Illinois, called on the VA this week to more aggressively identify colleges and universities taking advantage of GI benefits and remove the schools from the program.

Westwood's Texas campuses were placed on probation and fined \$41,000 last year by the **Texas Workforce Commission** for high-pressure recruitment practices and other violations, including failure to file changes of ownership and failure to notify the agency of four pending lawsuits against the school.

In one of the most striking incidents, a Westwood admissions employee allegedly coached a prospective student to make false statements to qualify for financial aid, according to the Texas Workforce Commission.

The campuses now operate under conditional certificates of approval. Westwood must demonstrate that it has corrected the reasons for the probation before the conditions of probation can be lifted. During this probationary period, the school could face revocation of licenses in Texas at any time.

Students attending Westwood's Texas campuses on the GI Bill were paid through the fall term, but future enrollments will not be approved for VA benefits.

So far, 60 student veterans have transferred from Westwood to other institutions. Thirty chose to stay enrolled.

"We will continue to work with the Texas Veterans Commission to resolve this issue, as we have successfully done so with the Texas Workforce Commission," Westwood College spokeswoman Kristina Yarrington said in a written statement. "We have matched dollar-for-dollar what these students would have received from the VA education program or assisted in transferring their credits to another eligible institution."

This isn't the first time Westwood has come under scrutiny. In 2009, Westwood's parent company, **Alta Colleges**

Inc., of Denver, agreed to pay the U.S. government \$7 million to settle a lawsuit accusing the Texas campuses of submitting falsified federal student aid forms.

In agreeing to the settlement, the company admitted no legal or ethical wrongdoing.

The for-profit sector enrolls about 10 percent of all college students in the country, said Donald Heller, director of the Center for the Study of Higher Education at **Pennsylvania State University**. They get by almost entirely on federal financial aid money, which can account for as much as 80 or 90 percent of their revenue, Heller said.

For-profit colleges seem appealing to some veterans because of the flexible coursework, he said.

"Many of the for-profit colleges have online programs over the Internet, and those are often very attractive to vets because vets are older, first of all," Heller said. "They often have families. They're often working part time, so being able to sit at home and do their education over the computer looks very attractive to them."

Westwood operates 17 campuses in California, Colorado, Georgia, Illinois, Texas and Virginia. Fewer than 5 percent of the 13,000 students are part of the GI program, Westwood officials said.

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