

Merrill R. Mitchell
Redacted by Senate HELP committee

February 22, 2012

Sen. Tom Harkin
731 Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Sen. Harkin:

I am writing this letter to share my experiences as both an employee and student at Ashford University. I also want to share my concern about the effects of these for profit Universities.

I began working at Ashford University as an enrollment advisor in June of 2008. During my time there, my team went through seven different managers. Ashford based our pay based on weekly enrollment numbers. I struggled in reaching these goals. I would make all the necessary calls, take all the necessary steps, but could not meet them. It came down to one thing, I cared about my students. Many of the prospective students were simply seeking out information, trying to see if an online university was the right fit for them. If a prospective student wasn't ready, or wanted more time to think about it, I gave them that opportunity and made sure they had my information. When I explained my situation to my manager at the time, they told to "get them in, make them fill out the application, get them started right away before they have a chance to think about it." As you can imagine, I disagreed with this practice.

My demise as an employee began when I started receiving my benefits package. Ashford offered free tuition for employee's (this was a big reason why I chose to work there). I signed up for the tuition wavier, filled out my application, and was all set to start. A couple days went by and I received my first write up. Management hounded me for my low enrollment numbers, which resulted in my new student leads turned off. I was forced to make calls from dated contact list that were years old. Needless to say, my enrollment number did not improve. My next problem came from Ashford's yearly convention in Las Vegas.

The convention in Las Vegas was mandatory; however, I did not want to go. We were required to place a \$250 down payment for our rooms in advance. When I told my manager that I did not have the money for the down payment, they replied "start saving." I felt that the expense of the convention should be used to improve the campus facilities. Not more than a week later, Ashford terminated me from employment despite a 100% retention rate of my students.

I am not the person who becomes complacent. I constantly seek to improve my skill sets, my knowledge, and myself. I still wanted to earn my Bachelors degree and elected to continue my pursuit through Ashford.

My difficulties as a student began in the spring of 2011. I tried to log into my new class only to find that my schedule was empty. I called my academic advisor to find out what happen, she explained that it was due to a balance of \$900 owed on my account. She transferred to the financial services office only to find out they had no idea where this came from. They believed to be a problem with federal funding and they instructed me to call the federal student loan office. So I called. The federal student loan office showed no problems or concerns with my financial aid and they suggested I get back in touch with Ashford's financial office.

I contacted Ashford once again to let them know what the federal office told me. My financial advisor "guessed" that the balance came from an Iowa Pell Grant that was returned as a result of moving to Missouri.

At this point, I was ready to seek educational opportunities elsewhere. I informed Ashford that I no longer wanted to attend their courses and that I was seeking education at a local university. They told me that they would not release my transcripts unless I paid the balance. Unfortunately, not all the credits I accumulated would transfer to one of the public universities near Joplin, MO. I elected to pay the balance and return to Ashford's classes being that I had less than a year left.

On May 22nd, 2011, The Joplin Tornado destroyed my home forcing me to take a break from classes. I spent all night searching through the debris at Home Depot, trying to find survivors before I even made it to my home. I put my neighbor's needs before my own and did my best to help everyone I could.

I was able to contact Ashford a couple days later to explain the situation. It took this long because cell phone service was out and most of the city did not have power. I spoke with my academic advisor and told them I would not be able to attend classes for a while. He kept asking me when I would be able to return. There was no way I would be able to tell when I could attend. I was homeless; I had to stay in several hotels until I eventually found an apartment to live in while my home was repaired.

When I tried to get back into classes at the end of July, I found out Ashford dropped me from their program due to lack of attendance. I was able to get back into my program after great difficulty.

Towards the end of August, I went to log into my classes where I found that, once again, Ashford dropped me. Ashford told me that I reached my limit for federal aid and that I would have to take out private loans to continue. Ashford had to know I was getting close to my limit and instead, chose not to advise me on my situation.

I got an email in December from Ashford that I had a past due balance of \$1345 without prior warning. When asked, Ashford told me that since I withdrew from classes, part of my funding was returned to federal aid. Even though I did not withdraw from classes,

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Ashford would not schedule me. I again contacted the student resolution center and explained the story.

I worked in mechanics for many years. If a customer of mine needed a \$1300 repair, I would inform them of the situation and explained the steps needed to make the repairs. I would not make the repair and expect them to pay, holding their vehicle in my shop until the balance was paid. This is exactly what Ashford is doing to me and thousands of other students. I have yet to come to an agreement with Ashford.

I know my story is similar to many people who are just trying to earn their degree. People who are wanting to improve their quality of life. It is dis-hearting to hear all of these stories from so many people. People who work full time, take care of their family, all while attending school on a fulltime basis. If you were to ask me, I'd say the 70,000 students who make up Ashford' online program are some of the best role models in America.

Look up the definition of University in the dictionary. You will read *an educational institution of the highest level*. Ashford University is far from the highest level.

I appreciate your office's investigation into this manner. These students deserve so much more.

Sincerely,

Merrill R. Mitchell
www.relationshipinc.net