

Testimony of Joshua Pruyn
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before the
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Thank you for inviting me today and for conducting hearings on this issue.

My name is Joshua Pruyn. I'm a former admissions representative of Westwood College. Westwood is a for-profit school with 17 campuses around the country and an online division, which is the division I worked for. The parent company for Westwood College Online is Alta Colleges, Inc.

I applied for the admissions representative position at Westwood because of my experience with my college hockey team. As captain of the team, I would periodically speak with prospective students about the team and the university. I got satisfaction out of this experience, and I anticipated that I would feel the same in my role as an admissions rep when I accepted the position at Westwood in November of 2007.

I remember the training for the position. It was essentially training for a sales job. We learned sales techniques such as "the seven-step sales process" and "the cookie close." We were told how enrolling a student was a psychological game. We were given a script that told us to tell potential students they could only be accepted into Westwood by interviewing with and securing a recommendation from an admissions representative. In reality, that was not true. There was no recommendation process and absolutely no standard for enrollment into Westwood. A student only needed a high school diploma or GED and \$100 for the application fee. During the interview, we were taught to portray ourselves as advisors looking out for the students' best interests and ensuring they were a good fit for the school. This fake interview would allow the representative to ask students questions to uncover a student's motivators and pain points – their hopes, fears, and insecurities – all of which would later be used to pressure a student to enroll. For example, if a lead told you they wanted to go to school because they hated their minimum wage job as a cashier, we were taught how to remind the lead that of the dead-end job if he or she later declined to enroll.

I remember finishing the training feeling ill-prepared in my knowledge about the programs, the classes, the instructors, and the support systems the school offered. I did, however, learn a lot about sales tactics.

After the official training, my real training on the boiler-room sales floor began. Prospective students were referred to as "leads." Leads came mostly from the internet. Sometimes the student wouldn't even know their information was sent to Westwood. They may have just registered with a job website or contest that automatically sold their information. The lead's phone number and other personal information would immediately appear on our desk. We were urged to rush and call the students immediately, because quite a few other schools would get the

same information and were also trying to call them right away. I remember talking to one student for more than an hour shortly after he requested information. When I called him the next day, he said he was put off by the whole experience because he received 34 voice messages from various online schools attempting to recruit him. This doesn't stop after just one day. We'd continue to call leads several times a day for two weeks.

In the location where I worked there were well over 100 admissions representatives divided into about ten teams. Each team had a name, like "the drivers" or "sopranos." Teams consisted of 10-15 reps and were supervised by a director of admissions and one or two assistant directors. The directors kept the teams in constant competition with one another. At any given time, multiple contests for gift-cards, paid time-off and other incentives were offered in order to motivate representatives to enroll as many students as possible. Every time a team signed up a student, they would set off their signature sound effect – bang a drum, ring a bell, or blow a whistle. An email was sent out to the entire admissions department to announce our latest enrollment – all of this was designed to keep the energy high and the phones dialing.

I remember one email in particular (which has been provided to you). It was sent out after a sales rep signed up his second student of the day. A picture showed gangsters hanging out a car window with assault weapons. The comment read—"Everyone Hit the DECK!!!!!!!!!!!!!! A Drive BY JUST Occurred!" As that email illustrates, many recruiters looked at students as just another target to nail to help meet their quotas. And that attitude was not isolated. It was part of the corporate culture. I was taken aback by the general disdain for prospective students. They were often characterized and described among admissions staff as stupid, lazy, and generally unaware of what was in their own best interest.

In addition to the hyped-up atmosphere, representatives were also kept motivated by the promise of rewards. Each representative had a quota of two students to enroll per week. An "enrollment" was nothing more than a completed and electronically-signed application. Individual enrollments could mean paid time-off or gift cards, and when I was there, a successful year earned the top representatives an all-expenses-paid trip to Cancun. Most importantly, each term representatives needed to turn at least six of those enrollments into "starts." A start consisted of a student who completed all of their financial aid requirements and attended classes for two weeks. I was told that after two weeks Westwood could keep the student's federal financial aid money, even if the student dropped out. It was the start that determined most rewards including salary and promotions. It was all about the numbers. With high numbers, the most successful representatives could earn about three times their starting salary.

But rewards were not the end of the story. If a representative was not meeting their numbers, supervisors would apply constant pressure. If you fell behind in your enrollments or start quotas you'd be expected to make at least 150 calls a day if you didn't want to be harassed and threatened by your supervisor. If my supervisor's monitoring system showed me slowing down on calls for a few minutes, I'd receive an email with a computer screen shot showing my inactivity. When I struggled to enroll students, I received more and more direct coaching. I was told to replicate how various representatives talked about financial aid or generated excitement for a program. The representatives I was told to emulate would exaggerate expected salary data, present misleading tuition information, and fabricate the credentials of faculty members. Of

course, at the same time I was being constantly reminded that my job was on the line if I didn't hit the quotas, whether through hints, blunt statements, or the sudden absence of a co-worker.

Not surprisingly, this type of environment led to abuse. To avoid revealing the full \$75,000 price tag for a bachelor's degree, some representatives would simply lie about the total cost. I overheard representatives say the final cost of the education at Westwood was less than half the actual price. More commonly, representatives would tell students the per term cost of approximately \$4,800 and let the student incorrectly assume there were two or three terms per year, like most traditional colleges. There were actually five terms each year. I also overheard representatives promise that federal grants would cover almost their entire education. They'd make up or cite misleading salary information, leading potential students to believe that they could leave Westwood Online with a job that pays over \$100,000 and at their choice of employer. There simply were no boundaries. The most troubling part about the job was that, to my knowledge, none of these lies were ever discouraged. I worked on two different teams and under three different directors of admissions. Our supervisors recorded every call and listened to many of them, but not once did I witness any supervisor step in to discourage any of the lies or deceptive statements. In fact, lying was often implicitly or explicitly encouraged. The most appalling example was when the assistant director of admissions on my team was presented with a "Best Liar" award at a team celebration.

For months, I was able to convince myself that I wasn't like my supervisors, or any one of the majority of representatives who lied and deceived prospective students and mastered the art of pushing on pain points and emotional triggers to pressure students into attending school, regardless of what was in their best interest. But, eventually, all the coaching I received started working, and I began enrolling more students. I was becoming a better salesman. I was taken off probation. My job was now safe, because, as my supervisor put it, I was "fulfilling my potential." And I continued to convince myself I could work this job ethically.

Sadly, when I started to see how students were treated after enrollment, I became even more disillusioned with the company I worked for. I learned that the lies don't stop at enrollment. The next important thing was to make sure that students didn't drop out – at least during the first 14 days of classes. Fourteen was the magic number. After a student attended for 14 days, the school was allowed to keep any financial aid it received as a result of enrolling that student. I remember one particular student I enrolled named Jeffrey. He was in the Army Reserves. On Jeffrey's 13th day of school, he was called up from the Army Reserves to active duty to serve as a drill sergeant, so he called in to withdraw from school. I spoke to him and determined he was completely unable to attend and succeed in school. I told my director, and she was furious. She ordered me to call him back. I spoke to Jeffrey again for more than an hour and reached the same conclusion. My director then had my assistant director call Jeffrey and, not surprisingly, he reached the same conclusion: Jeffrey was simply unable to go to school with his schedule. But my director still wasn't satisfied. She called him and tried to pressure him for yet another hour. I remember her saying she might even have my executive director call. Jeffrey was just one day away from the deadline, and she wasn't willing to lose the "start" regardless of the fact that it was clearly in his best interest to withdraw before he was on the hook for his federal loans. I was disgusted by such a flagrant disregard for the student and a member of the military.

The more I learned about the school's programs and operations, the more it became clear that it wasn't just a few rogue representatives under pressure lying to students. It was institutional, systematic and often hidden from the representatives themselves, who often didn't realize the information they shared with students was not true. Three examples in particular stand out in my memory.

In training we were told that, from the student's perspective, there was no significant difference between national and regional accreditation. When Westwood announced they had applied for regional accreditation, I started investigating and discovered there was a big difference. Not only was there a higher standard of education for regionally accredited schools, but there was also the huge issue of transferring credits. Since Westwood was not regionally accredited, most traditional schools would not accept the school's credits or allow students to pursue an advanced degree. This meant that most Westwood students would not be able to transfer their credits to other colleges. Yet, for months I worked under the impression there wasn't much difference between regional and national accreditation.

A second falsehood that started in training was the fictitious but impressive sounding credentials of Westwood College's gaming programs. They were the school's most popular programs, the easiest to get students excited about, and the "most prestigious." Representatives often referred to Westwood as the "Harvard" of gaming schools. Virtually every representative, encouraged by supervisors and reinforced by training, would tell students about the endorsements the gaming programs received from respected companies in the industry, the sterling credentials of the faculty, and the promising prospects for a graduate with a gaming degree from Westwood. But as I found out, the endorsements did not exist. The credentials were fabricated, and the prospects were dim for graduates. When I spoke with the career center, which was supposed to help students with job placement, I learned they only had a small staff of two or three, compared to the 200-plus admissions representatives. It didn't seem like the school was equipped to provide the incredible career assistance we had been promising students. Even more disturbing, I was told the two gaming programs had only been around for about three years. And in fact, we didn't have any graduates working for the major gaming companies at all. In reality, we only had *three* students total who had graduated from our gaming programs. I found out that of the three graduates, one had an interview with a gaming company, one was unemployed and the other was working as a truck driver.

One last example where students were often misled had to do with Westwood's internal loan program, which we called "student supplemental financing." It was basically a private loan from the college that we were told not to call a loan. We were told to tell students that if their financial aid didn't cover all their costs, Westwood would step in to "help." Representatives told students all they would have to do to cover the balance was pay \$150 a month while they were in school. However, when I began enrolling more students, a financial aid advisor eventually told me more about the loan. I learned that the monthly payments hardly put a dent in the amount a student owed. It was only a couple of weeks before I left Westwood when I learned students would have to pay an oppressively high interest rate of 12% on what they owed after graduation.

I began to realize that many of the things I accepted and told people on the phone about Westwood were based on falsehoods. I had graduated magna cum laude from my college, and

yet I proved to be embarrassingly naïve, foolish and trusting about the school. I started wondering how a student was supposed to navigate through these tricky waters. How could they be expected to know they were being misled?

I quit my job at Westwood on a Monday morning. I had no plan to quit as I drove to work that day. But I came across a quote by Hannah Arendt that I had slipped under my keyboard months earlier while thinking of one of my supervisors – someone who I thought was a fairly likeable guy but didn't seem to have any sense of morality. As I read that quote about how evil isn't conducted by people who are perverted or sadistic, but by people who are terrifyingly normal, I started admitting things to myself that I'd been avoiding for almost six months. I accepted that I could no longer tell myself that it was possible to work for Westwood and consider myself to be working within any degree of ethical standards. That Monday morning, I walked out of the building and never returned.

When I left I had no expectation or reasonable prospect for finding another job quickly. I didn't really think about that. I just thought about how naïve I was when I applied for the job – hoping to help students make a better future for themselves through college. Instead, I left fearing the students I enrolled would end up with a mountain of debt and little or nothing to show for it.