

For-profit colleges impact democracy

The for-profit sector of higher education in this country has accumulated a long list of denunciations in its relatively short history. Those admonitions range from low quality education, much higher cost (including when compared with private, non-profit schools), generating a long-time debt burden for their users, deceptive advertising, and stigma when trying to get a job while saying that you graduated from one of those schools.

In their defense, these institutions say that they provide opportunities for people who do not have the minimum qualifications to enter most public institutions or because of their work schedule they can only go to college online. They also claim that because they offer courses online they are “innovators” despite the fact that many public institutions offer online alternatives at much lower costs.

All of these issues have lead to multiple complaints against for-profit schools at the federal and state levels, some of them ending in heavy fines and even closures. The Obama Administration and some state general attorneys tried to tighten regulations on these for-profit institutions to avoid, or at least diminish, their negative

impact on students who pay large fees (most of them subsidized by the federal government) to attend these colleges.

A few days ago, the latest scandal-of-the-week by the Trump Administration has to do directly with these for-profits. As revealed by The New York Times, special teams at the Department of Education that had been investigating widespread abuses by for-profit colleges “have been marginalized, reassigned or instructed to focus on other matters, according to current and former employees,” said the newspaper.

By the end of the Obama administration, teams within the Education Department were looking into advertising, recruitment practices and job placement claims at several institutions, and the investigations had expanded to include numerous lawyers and investigators who were looking into malfeasance. The investigation led to the closure or downsizing of many of these colleges or their parent corporations. Now, under the Trump Administration, those teams have been disbanded, resulting in putting to rest investigations into possibly fraudulent activities at several large for-profit colleges.

Interestingly, top hires

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of Betsy DeVos, the education secretary, had previously worked for many of those institutions that were being scrutinized by the federal government. One of those hires, Julian Schmoke, a former dean at DeVry, one of the largest for-profits, was named as the team’s new supervisor, which resulted in all investigations about DeVry’s past and present actions being stopped.

DeVos, who has worked her entire life to privatize public education in this country, has made many other similar hirings with similar results. Take, for example, Robert S. Eitel, DeVos’s senior counselor, Diane Auer Jones, her senior adviser on postsecondary education, or Carlos G. Muñiz, the DOE’s general counsel. All have ties to for-profit institutions.

Despite all these facts, Elizabeth Hill, a spokesperson for the Education Department, said that the reduction of the groups within the department overseeing the conduct of these institution was due to attrition and that none of the new employees who had previously worked

in the for-profit education industry had influenced the investigative unit’s work within the department.

But what does this really mean beyond a headline in the media?

First, it tells us about the power of lobbyists. One of the most nefarious powers in this country is exercised by the thousands of lobbyists who advocate for the few who have the means to pay professionals to “convince” people in power to support their interests. A number of studies have shown that paying for lobbyist is one of the most profitable investments made by corporations trying to influence legislation and government policies. According to a report published last year by the Huffington Post, all for-profit colleges spend directly, or through their parent corporations, millions of dollars every year to influence people in the U.S. Congress. You might say that lobbying is protected by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution that says, among other things, that “Congress shall make no law...abridging the right

of the people peaceably... to petition the Government for a redress of grievances,” and that there is nothing wrong on that.

But look closer. Between 80 and 90 percent of the revenues from these private, for-profit institutions comes from federal financial aid, which means that you, the taxpayer, are contributing to the financial gains of a few corporate owners. The fact that a large portion of that money is spent contributing to the political campaigns of candidates (on both sides of the aisle), makes things worse.

Then you have the fact that these for-profits behave as predators toward consumers who look desperately for some kind of certificate they can use when seeking employment. In the past, what we had was the government – both at the federal and state levels – to protect consumers from these practices. Between budget reductions toward regulatory agencies and placing their associates in positions of power, these institutions are ensuring that their shareholders are the actual beneficiaries of government policies and taxpayers’ money while the consumer –you, me, and many others- are left without any protection from predatory practices.

Finally, and let’s not

fool ourselves, there is the damage all this causes to a democratic form of government. Democracy is not just a periodic exercise of casting a vote. Democracy is about transparency, freedom of information and accountability.

When the proper balances to make this system work become absent because of lack of government oversight (and that includes Congress), then our form of government becomes corrupt and democracy as a concept becomes diluted.

It is interesting to see that while government spending toward higher education continues to decrease, the current administration does not mind that taxpayers’ money is being diverted for the benefit of a few to the detriment of the public good.

That is why the unchecked power of the for-profit sector of higher education represents a clear and present danger to our democratic values and the well being of the citizens that fall prey to their actions.

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