For-Profit Colleges on the Hotseat in Congress

Local News

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OLYMPIA, Wash. - A bill newly introduced in the U.S. Senate aims to curb financial aid to for-profit vocational colleges that promise a lot, and charge a lot, for specialized programs that are not accredited, and offer credits that can't be transferred to other schools.

Sandra Schroeder, president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) Washington, says instructors at the state-funded Community Colleges are seeing more students who already went to for-profit schools, not realizing they weren't getting what they thought they were paying for. She explains that the school itself might have been accredited, but not all of its fields of study.

"Some programs, particularly health and medical programs, have to have their own accreditation, and they also have some licensing tests at the end that the students have to pass. And if those programs aren't accredited, not only can the students probably not pass the test, but they may not even be able to take the test."

Schroeder says the Protecting Students from Worthless Degrees Act addresses only one of the concerns about private-sector colleges. A report issued last week by Iowa Senator Tom Harkin levels charges that associate degrees and certificate programs cost about four times as much at for-profit schools as they do at community colleges or public universities.

The for-profit college industry calls Harkin's report "a political attack" and says it "twists the facts." But a 2010 study of 30 for-profit colleges found less than 18 percent of their revenue was spent on instruction, and that recruiters outnumbered career placement staff by ten to one.

Schroeder advises students to do some online research before attending in-person recruiting sessions at any school.

"Everyone wants to improve their lives. And what can happen is, when you're with a good recruiter, they can convince you not only that what they have for you is worth the investment, no matter how high it is, but that you will succeed."

She also thinks the state legislature could do more to require accountability from for-profit colleges.

This month, California became the first to cut state-funded student aid to schools where graduation rates are low and student loan defaults are high.