

Testimony

**Christopher Neiweem
Iraqi Freedom Veteran**

**Before the
Subcommittee on Defense**

Committee on Appropriations

United States Senate

June 12, 2013

Chairman Durbin, Ranking Member Cochran, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for providing me the opportunity to share my insights and experience as a former student veteran and for-profit university recruiter. I am a U.S. Army veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom. I also benefited from using the Post 9/11 GI Bill to complete graduate study at the University of Illinois at Springfield. In my experience, the Tuition Assistance (TA) benefit is valuable to service members because the cost of schooling is covered, allowing them to focus on selecting an academic program. I was a military recruiter (admissions adviser) at DeVry University Online from February 2008-August 2009, and left the for-profit industry because I felt the company's managing principles no longer provided an understanding of military student's needs using Tuition Assistance.

In general, service members may find an online program an attractive option because of their limited ability to attend a residential program or because of the accelerated format. But as I saw it in operation, the for-profit recruiting practices were aggressive and focused far more on the bottom line profits than on the military student.

In short, the biggest problems I experienced were:

- The DeVry business culture which emphasized hasty enrollment over individual military student needs
- The management strategy to have recruiters contacting military leads purporting to be "military advisers" when they were really sales professionals
- Recruiters being pressured to enroll military students who had already failed to pass an admissions test once or expressed verbal reservation about their readiness for post-secondary study; and

-Management not allowing recruiters to encourage military students serving in combat zones to take off an academic session (some serving in locations such as Iraq) because of a concern they would not resume their academic program with DeVry in the future.

Targeting Military Students

In my experience as an employee of a for-profit school, there was a strong emphasis on recruiting military students because TA would cover the cost of the program. In fact, the managers to whom I reported referred to TA as the “military gravy train”. In contrast, one of the most challenging aspects to enrolling a civilian student applicant in an online program is convincing them the cost is worth the degree. Service members are less difficult to enroll because the recruiters (known as admissions advisers) do not need to overcome what the industry calls “financial objections”, or concerns about the cost. Recruiters are trained to focus on the benefit and enroll military students as quickly as possible. Military students are easily identified before the initial phone contact by lead databases such as Oracle, which conduct brief questionnaires as to whether a student is currently serving. The admissions process for a military student using TA can be completed in as quick as 1-week. Students must apply, complete a basic admissions exam online, and get their TA signed and approved. The recruiting sessions during my tenure in the industry were 8 weeks long. This promoted a very fast-paced recruiting cycle where management expected aggressive deadlines for enrollment. The recruiters with operational military backgrounds like me were routinely able to build trust and rapport with TA users. This resulted in strong sales profits for the school and high military enrollment numbers. Recruiters who were contacting civilian leads were starting on average 8 students per 8-week recruiting cycle, whereas some former military recruiters were starting on average 15. “Starts” is the for-profit term for when a student begins class. The average cost of an accelerated 3-year bachelor’s degree program online was \$60,000. The benefit of being enrolled in an online program provided convenience for many students. This was a rewarding way for me to advise fellow service members of their benefits. I was satisfied in the work I was doing until the internal management strategy began to part ways with supporting the military students I was working with.

Internal Management Strategy

In 2009, the leaders at DeVry began to significantly increase the expectations for recruiters who were former military members and increased the number of military leads we were assigned. They formed a special team that I was assigned to that was to specifically recruit military students while non-military recruiters were left to traditional non-military leads. The management strategy meetings that followed in the coming weeks were aimed at pressuring my team to increase our TA user start rate, while ignoring our concerns for service members. To illustrate, some military students were serving in hazardous locations such as Kuwait, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Germany and due to troop movements or relocations found it difficult to complete homework after the duty day ended. My colleagues and I, assigned to this military sales team, would routinely support the students need to “sit out” a session and return to class at a future date. I thought it would be untenable to suggest a military student try to fit class into their schedule while their unit transferred locations in places such as Iraq. From a soldier’s perspective, serving in a war zone like Iraq can require a significant amount of emotional energy

and studying can become difficult. Management scolded me insisting “DoD does not pay your paycheck anymore, we do and we must remain competitive”. I certainly understood the need to be competitive and know some military students that benefited and succeeded in online programs, but I couldn’t accept the stern rebuke I received for encouraging some students to temporarily suspend class to serve our country in hazardous areas. The management relied heavily on the military recruiters, they often praised our sales numbers while promoting their internal mantra of (pardon my French) “get asses in classes”. I left the company when I felt I was being pressured to produce a metric over a quality relationship with the military students I was charged to enroll. I had been in their boots at one time and I would expect the same reinforcement from them if I was balancing, for example, active duty requirements overseas with my academic studies.

Military Culture Training Lacking

The seeming lack of concern at DeVry with the service members had actually been evident early on. Recruiters were given a 2-week training session on the degree programs the school offered and charged us with promoting. However, training on military culture was cursory. Training was not conducted to give recruiters a robust picture of the stressors a service member may deal with while trying to attend school. There was no description provided of the military rank structure, no illustration of daily military life, or awareness of mental health stressors they may experience due to separation from family or PTSD, as is the case of for some OIF/OEF veterans serving in combat. Ironically, training on the TA benefit was extensive. The recruiters were trained to identify the proper forms that needed to be filled out and on occasion would even call Commanders of units to expedite their signature so TA users could be cleared for class quickly. Had the emphasis on understanding military culture matched the aggressiveness of the recruitment strategy to get TA approved as quickly as possible, I may have stayed in the industry. However, I was not comfortable putting a sales report ahead of making sure each military student was enrolled in the proper program and at the right time.

In my experience as a veteran and college graduate, many non-military recruiters had a hard time relating with their military students, many of whom had to balance the stressors of military life with their adjustment to meet the demands of higher education. Additionally, some recruiters that contacted military leads would say they were calling from the department of “military admissions”, in a ploy to develop a rapport with the student. This was simply a fictional tactic to make the military service member think the recruiter was in the military. Though my team was comprised of former military recruiters, we were all part of the same team and a military admissions department did not exist at the company. The special military sales team I worked on reported this concern to senior management to be assured it “deeply concerned” them and they would address it. I doubt these matters were addressed as the same leaders that offered assurances were the same ones reminding us DoD no longer paid our salary.

Emphasis of TA Benefit over TA User

In my experience, the for-profit school numbers and performance were the drivers. Each week recruiters had to report their progress on a sales report. These reports do not contain the names of students, their backgrounds, their selected program, or personal details, only a number. These numbers are listed on graphs with such business performance metrics as: Applied, Tested, Cleared, Registered, Start Date. This was the nature of the industry and these reports drive the forecasting projections for the profit margin. Because students using TA are more quickly cleared for class, it makes these reports look strong and managers become even more ambitious to hit their “targets”. The earnings of mid-level managers, known as Assistant Directors of Admissions, were based on their team’s performance. When I began seeing the TA benefit and sales reports trumping the concerns I had voiced to management, I left the industry. For example, some military students failed the basic admissions test, a key step in the admissions process designed to show the readiness of the applicant for post-secondary study. The management response was to send them online study links, have them seek a “study buddy” and take the test again as quickly as possible. Additionally, even after I explained that some of my military TA approved students were not going to start their classes for the current academic session because of active duty military requirements, they asked if I could “do something to keep them in”. I was not comfortable convincing a service member to put education ahead of operational requirements after they already cited their inability to handle class workloads while serving in theatre. The TA benefit was the focus of the recruiting strategy, while understanding unique military student needs were often ignored.

In conclusion, I believe online education is a good option for some military students using the TA benefit. I understand there are non-profit online options, like the gentleman here today from University of Maryland’s online campus. However, I do have concerns about how for-profit colleges are targeting military students. I hope my experiences I have shared this morning are helpful for the Committee’s work on this subject and I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.