

DENVER AND THE WEST

Westwood College placed on state probation

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The Denver Post

The Denver Post

Posted: 12/15/2010 01:00:00 AM MST

Westwood College's Colorado campuses were placed on probation Tuesday by state officials who say they worry the school still has unresolved problems with national accreditors regarding recruitment tactics and student achievement.

Colorado higher education officials also said that for-profit Westwood College should disclose its problems to current and incoming students and — until it does so — it will remain on state probation.

"When you're in a free market, you need full information," said commissioner Patricia Pacey, who voted in favor of probation Tuesday at a Commission on Higher Education meeting. "There are people who are purchasing this education, and they need the right information to make an informed decision."

In a notice Thursday, the Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges said it remained concerned that Westwood is bogged down with legal problems in multiple states and needs to meet benchmarks for student achievement and graduates finding jobs.

The college issued a statement after the commission's 7-2 vote Tuesday, saying it has a "long history of providing education and career skills for thousands of students and graduates."

"We are continuing to work with our accreditation agencies to ensure compliance with all standards and clear up any confusion or questions that may exist," the statement said.

Officials in Texas and Wisconsin have shut down Westwood's online programs there. Texas higher education officials also have ordered the school to stop operating brick-and-mortar campuses in the state.

Westwood is appealing the Texas decision.

Student complaints usually center on dishonest recruiting and misrepresentation of tuition costs.

Former students have alleged in lawsuits and to state regulators that admissions representatives promised them high-paying jobs after graduation and were not upfront about how much programs cost.

Denver-based Westwood operates 17 campuses in seven states. About 1,150 students are enrolled in Colorado.

In October, the Colorado Commission on Higher Education held off on action against Westwood, saying it wanted to hear more from the national accreditors who put the school on probation over the summer.

But commissioners said Tuesday they felt putting the college on state probation was the right thing to do, even though Westwood has argued that probationary status — ill-defined in state law — will hurt current students.

State probation basically means "a yellow light," Pacey said.

Colorado Department of Higher Education executive director Rico Munn called it "a consumer protection."

"If they lose their accreditation status, the commission may revoke their authorization to operate," Munn said.

The Colorado attorney general's office also is investigating dozens of complaints from former and current Westwood students.

A Westwood College representative said Tuesday that it had disclosed national accreditation problems to current and incoming students and will now tell everyone about the state action because "it's the right thing to do."

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