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# The Washington Times

## GOP senators may boycott hearing on for-profit schools

*Harkin defends tone of inquiries*

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The Washington Times

6:04 p.m., Monday, April 18, 2011

Next month's Senate hearing on for-profit colleges could be a one-party affair.

Republicans members of the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee last week sent a letter to Sen. Tom Harkin, Iowa Democrat, the committee chairman, protesting his handling of previous hearings on the subject and objecting to what they characterize as a merciless assault by Democrats on for-profit institutions.

Agreeing that skyrocketing tuition rates and the rising number of student-loan defaults are serious concerns, Republicans want Mr. Harkin to focus on finding solutions for all colleges and universities, not just nontraditional ones. If the tentatively scheduled May 10 hearing - the fifth in Mr. Harkin's series - goes on as currently planned, Republicans say they won't show up.

"The need to address these problems does not warrant the biased and unprofessional conduct we have witnessed during the past four hearings," reads a portion of the letter, signed by the 10 Republican HELP committee members. "It is unacceptable and uncharacteristic of the way this committee or this institution has historically conducted its business."

Mr. Harkin quickly responded with a letter of his own, citing "deeply troubling" problems in the for-profit sector of higher education and defending his long-standing focus on it.

"While I understand you may not like some of the findings, there is no basis to suggest the hearings have been anything other than professional and straightforward," he said in his April 14 letter.

A spokeswoman for HELP Committee Democrats said Monday that the May 10 date is not yet set in stone and that witnesses have not been announced.

For-profit institutions have come under increasing fire after an August 2010 report by the Government Accountability Office, which found that 15 randomly selected colleges made "deceptive or otherwise questionable statements" to GAO workers posing as prospective students. For example, the GAO found that one for-profit college encouraged a would-be student not to list \$250,000 in savings on application documents, thus qualifying for government assistance.

Such instances have fueled Mr. Harkin's and other critics' arguments that for-profits, which boast 10 percent to 12 percent of the nation's college-student population, focus exclusively on boosting enrollment statistics and often pocketing taxpayer money from government grants and loans while providing a substandard education and experiencing higher drop-out rates.

But Republicans now dispute the GAO report, calling it "flawed" and citing the fact that the GAO issued an "errata" - a series of revisions - several months later.

While the GAO did adjust its report and conduct an internal review of why the changes were necessary, GAO Managing Director of Public Affairs Chuck Young said Monday that the office stands by the report and insisted that the errata did not change any of its key findings.

Republicans are also questioning the accuracy of statements made by some witnesses Democrats called in previous hearings.

On Aug. 4, a former admissions representative with Westwood College, a for-profit institution with campuses in six states, testified that the college pressured a student to stay enrolled so it could begin collecting tuition, despite the fact that the student had been called up from the Army Reserves to active duty and couldn't attend classes. In addition, a former Westwood student testified that she was misled about how much debt she would rack up while taking classes.

Westwood vehemently disputed those accusations. Internal reviews by college officials found that the August testimony was wildly inaccurate, according to a letter from D.C. law firm Dickstein Shapiro LLP, which represents the college. The letter was addressed to Mr. Harkin and ranking HELP Committee Republican Sen. Michael B. Enzi, Wyoming Republican.

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