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MARCH 2, 2011

Facts – Not Invective – Should Drive Conversation About Private Career Colleges & Universities

**By James E. Shane
3/2/2011**

Invective has replaced fact as the currency of modern politics. As a result, public policy is influenced more by headlines than by data. This trend is best exemplified by the debate currently going on in Washington over the way the Federal government should treat career colleges and universities. Our nation is facing significant economic challenges which mandate strong leadership and change to existing business practices in government. However, these changes must contribute to positive outcomes which will contribute to the needs of all American's who depend on government policies, regulations, and entitlements for a better life.

Educational opportunity has and will continue to be the pathway and right of passage for many Americans to seek a higher standard of living. Our nation's educational system is the best in the world and career college and universities are an integral part of our system – for example, in 2008-2009 career colleges and universities represented over 42% (2,804) of the Title IV eligible post secondary institutions (6,667) in the United States. Their contribution has been significant because they have the ability to quickly respond and provide for the educational and training needs of a changing workforce required to respond to the needs of a global economy.

After 28 years of service in the Army and over eleven years working for three different Governors as the Executive Director, Kentucky Commission on Military Affairs, I recently accepted a position as the Director, Military & Veteran Affairs (Sullivan University) - a "for profit" university which has had experience working with the Army providing educational training to our military and veterans for over 30 years. My mission was clear from the University Executive Leadership – “develop programs and relationships that would best serve the educational and training needs of our military, veterans, and family members and ensure that our programs serve their unique needs (i.e. mentoring, counseling, career/educational tracking and placement once their education is completed).

In my short term, I have had discussions with several retired military officers who are working with career colleges and universities; at every turn I find only ethical and professional practices being implemented in providing for the educational/training needs of our military and veteran students. Bottom line – the system is not broken, but as in any sector; education, political, government and others, there will be a small group which casts a bad light on the majority. Strong leadership armed with accurate data and facts are necessary and critical in making the right decisions to transform a system which has historically provided the educational framework for the strongest economy in the world – but when not armed with the right data and information, hasty decision making will only lead us down a path detrimental to the educational well-being of a great nation.

As you know, the Obama Administration's Department of Education is advancing a proposal that would limit Federal funding to career colleges and universities, which are schools that emphasize particular degrees that lead to specific careers. The proposal, called "gainful employment," would impose unrealistic repayment standards on Federal loans to students at these schools and would likely result in the elimination of financial aid for them if it is adopted.

The "gainful employment" proposal has been fueled by reports from the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) as well as news media that have painted the career university system as predatory. This is simply not the case. Many of these reports, including the one from the GAO, were revised after questions were raised about the accuracy of their initial drafts. Nevertheless, many in Congress continue to demagogue this issue, ignoring key facts about the role these schools play in educating those who need them most.

Career colleges and universities historically have served the non-traditional students and when you examine the statistical data, their contribution to educating all of America is clear. This week, a Senate Homeland Security Subcommittee will examine how proprietary schools impact veterans and active duty service members. Given the tone of the press release that announced the hearing, the jury is out on whether the role that career colleges and universities play in educating these Americans will get a fair review.

Student veterans disproportionately benefit from career colleges and universities because these schools provide greater flexibility to those balancing family, work and academic obligations. As a result, they are a more attractive and practical choice. These institutions often design programs that are tailored to veterans and military students, much like Sullivan University which I work with to serve our military and veterans. In fact, they are more than twice as likely (23.9%) as public institutions (9.2%) and over three times as likely as private non-profit institutions (6.8%) to have online programs designed specifically for military students, according to a Sloan Consortium report on online education. Career colleges and universities have a higher percentage of students with military service (6.1 percent) than any other branch of postsecondary education.

Looking across all types of higher education institutions, career schools educate 12.4 percent of undergraduate service member and veteran students. Any hearing that examines how veterans are treated by proprietary colleges must acknowledge these facts and clearly understand the cost-benefit analysis of the contribution the career colleges and universities make to our nation's educational system. Clearly, these schools play an important role in equipping those who have taken up arms on behalf of America with the skills they will need for their post-military careers. At a time when getting a job is as hard as it has ever been, the government, especially the Department of Education needs to proceed with a clear vision and understanding that radical draconian change could make it very difficult on the lower-middle class to pursue a college education or skill needed to meet the demands of high-skilled workforce.

Career colleges and universities play an important role when it comes to helping veterans transition into the civilian workforce. Actions that result in reducing the availability for our military and veterans to our career colleges and universities must be avoided at all costs. It is imperative that the facts and not outside influence dictate Federal policies that oversee career colleges and universities. But more importantly, our career and universities should not be "targeted" and singled out as a separate entity – if educational reform is needed then do a holistic assessment and review the information in the context of what best serves all Americans and our nation.



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