



College Trap?

For military veterans returning to school, for-profit private colleges can look like an attractive alternative to four-year and community colleges. With flexible course schedules and emphasis on online studies, these schools, such as Kaplan Higher Education and the University of Phoenix, have soared in popularity. They now enroll more than 3 million students, about 190,000 of whom are either active duty military or veterans.

Critics, though, charge that some for-profits use deceptive marketing to lure students and overcharge them for degrees. "The student has no idea that they are more likely to wind up with ruined credit than a college degree and a good job," U.S. Sen. Tom Harkin said at a recent hearing about for-profit colleges.

Red flags about these schools first went up last fall, when the Government Accountability Office issued the results of a survey by undercover investigators who applied to 15 for-profit schools. They reported that recruiters for all 15 "made

deceptive or otherwise questionable statements," including pressing applicants to sign binding contracts before discussing financial aid options. Some schools, according to the report, also misinformed applicants about likely salaries. One school even charged more than \$13,900 for certificates in massage therapy and computer-assisted drafting that could be obtained at a local community college for a mere \$520 each.

"Some of our schools make mistakes, just as some traditional schools make mistakes," says Harris Miller, who was until recently president and CEO of the Association of Private Sector Colleges and Universities. And while Miller admits that tuition tends to be higher at for-profits, he touts the higher graduation rates and flexible schedules.

If you're considering taking courses, both Miller and the GAO agree, you must do your research: Talk to other students, look up tuition rates, and decide what you want out of a degree program.

— Neil deMause