FOR-PROFIT SCHOOLS
Experiences of Undercover Students Enrolled in Online Classes at Selected Colleges

What GAO Found
During the course of undercover testing, GAO documented its observations related to enrollment, cost, financial aid, course structure, substandard student performance, withdrawal, and exit counseling. Overall, GAO observed that 8 of the 15 colleges appeared to follow existing policies related to academic dishonesty, exit counseling, and course grading standards. At the 7 remaining colleges, GAO found mixed results. For example, one or more staff at these colleges appeared to act in conflict with school policies regarding academic dishonesty or course grading standards, or federal regulations pertaining to exit counseling for student loans, while other staff acted consistent with such policies.

Enrollment: GAO attempted to enroll its students using fictitious evidence of high-school graduation—either a home-school diploma or a diploma from a closed high school—at all 15 colleges and successfully enrolled in 12. Two declined GAO’s request for enrollment based on insufficient proof of high-school graduation. Another allowed GAO’s student to begin class, but rescinded acceptance after 1 week, citing lack of high-school accreditation.

Cost and Financial Aid: GAO’s students took 31 classes in total at an average cost of $1,287 per class. These costs included such items as tuition, books, and technology fees. All 12 students were eligible for federal student aid, but only 10 actually received disbursements; the other students were expelled without receiving disbursements. We did not observe that a college collected federal student aid funds after the withdrawal date of any of our students (that was not fully refunded immediately).

Course Structure: GAO’s students were enrolled in introductory classes, such as Introduction to Computer Software and Learning Strategies and Techniques. Courses ranged in length from 4 to 11 weeks, and students took from one to four courses concurrently. Courses generally consisted of online discussion forum postings; writing assignments; multiple-choice quizzes and exams; and skills exercises, such as keyboarding tests or computer exercises.

Substandard Academic Performance: GAO’s students engaged in substandard academic performance by using one or more of the following tactics: failure to attend class, failure to submit assignments, submission of objectively incorrect assignments, submission of unresponsive assignments, and plagiarism. At 6 colleges, instructors acted in a manner consistent with school policies in this area, and in some cases attempted to contact students to provide help outside of class. One or more instructors at 2 colleges repeatedly noted that the students were submitting plagiarized work, but no action was taken to remove the student. One or more instructors at the 4 remaining colleges did not adhere to grading standards. For example, one student submitted photos of celebrities and political figures in lieu of essay question responses but still earned a passing grade.

Withdrawal and Exit Counseling: Three of GAO’s students were expelled for performance or nonattendance. Eight of the 9 students withdrew from their respective colleges without incident. At the remaining school, GAO’s request to withdraw was never acknowledged and the student was eventually expelled for nonattendance. 3 students did not receive federally mandated exit counseling, advising students of repayment options and the consequences of default.