



## **MEMORANDUM**

# **VETERAN AND SERVICEMEMBER COMPLAINTS ABOUT MISCONDUCT AND ILLEGAL PRACTICES AT TRIDENT UNIVERSITY**

July 2018

Trident University International, or TUI, advertises that a Trident degree will allow one to “[g]o further than you thought possible” and “increase your career opportunities to make a better life for you and your family.”<sup>1</sup> Trident also claims that it is “committed to your success, and offers you comprehensive support services to help guide every step of your online learning journey.”<sup>2</sup> Further, the “fully online institution” says it is “designed for adult learners, veterans, and military students,” and that its “learning model, paired with a diverse student body, helps bring the real world into the classroom and enriches the learning process for both the military and civilian student.”<sup>3</sup>

Forty-six military-connected students, however, have submitted complaints to Veterans Education Success (VES) about various issues they allegedly experienced with Trident. In one way or another, those complaints indicate that Trident does not necessarily live up to its claims about its university. This document describes and organizes those complaints by the types of harm they raise and provides context and background information.

### **Comparison of Complaints Received by VES to Complaints Received by VA**

Although the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has recorded only 11 closed complaints against Trident University in its GI Bill Comparison Tool, VA may be prematurely closing cases or not recognizing the concerns raised by student complaints.

The chart below compares the closed complaints VA has against Trident and the complaints received by VES.

	<b>Complaints received by VA</b>	<b>Complaints received by VES*4</b>	<b>VA %</b>	<b>VES %</b>
<b>Totals</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>46</b>	-	-
Quality of Education	7	22	64%	48%
Financial Issues	6	21	55%	46%
Accreditation	2	17	18%	37%
Post-Grad Job Opportunities	3	14	27%	30%
Student Loans	3	10	27%	22%
Transfer of Credits	2	6	18%	13%
Release of Transcripts	1	6	9%	13%
Recruiting / Marketing	1	5	9%	11%

<sup>1</sup> Trident University International, [https://go.trident.edu/tn-google?utm\\_source=Adwords&utm\\_campaign=Brand-Trident\\_University-TN-EX&utm\\_content=258933484240&utm\\_term=trident%20university&utm\\_keymatch=e&utm\\_adposition=1t1&utm\\_phone=1-833-428-3070&ckm\\_campaign\\_id=3461&ckm\\_key=n83x0Yka0Pw&cid=701E000000BxnM&gclid=EA1aIQobChMI-quL6IqI3AIVhriCh0L2QDYEAAYASAAEgL2DfD\\_BwE](https://go.trident.edu/tn-google?utm_source=Adwords&utm_campaign=Brand-Trident_University-TN-EX&utm_content=258933484240&utm_term=trident%20university&utm_keymatch=e&utm_adposition=1t1&utm_phone=1-833-428-3070&ckm_campaign_id=3461&ckm_key=n83x0Yka0Pw&cid=701E000000BxnM&gclid=EA1aIQobChMI-quL6IqI3AIVhriCh0L2QDYEAAYASAAEgL2DfD_BwE) (last visited July 5, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> Note: Many student complaints spanned across multiple categories.

Change in Degree Plan/Req's		5	--	11%
Grade Policy		4	--	9%
Other/Unspecified Complaint	1	3	9%	7%
Refund Issues	2	2	18%	4%

Although the number of complaints that VA has recorded is small, they generally mirror the types of complaint received by VES. For example, most of the complaints that VES has received, and most of the complaints that VA has recorded, concern either financial issues or quality of education at Trident.

**Student Complaints**

**Financial Issues/Student Loans**

Two interrelated complaint categories—financial issues and student loans—were cited a total of 31 times by students who filed complaints with VES.

Financial issues involve costs, tuition, and fees. Most of the Trident student loan complaints appear to involve the handling of funds to cover tuition and fee charges or the need to take out loans because, contrary to what students were told, their education benefits did not cover institutional charges. For example, student A.M. said that Trident “continuously mislead [*sic*] me about how much money I owed and also what my student loan money was used to pay for.”

Meanwhile, student L.M. reports, “I never received any financial statements of how anything was applied to my financial aid to billing and cost. I asked for on [*sic*] statement and got it but have never received anything from them. I was transferred in from [another university] when it closed and had more trouble with the financial aid department than I can count. I don't understand their billing system at all and there was a lot of back talking when they tried to explain it to me. Nothing was ever simple, I still think looking at everything they kept more than they were suppose [*sic*] to.”

**Quality of Education**

One of the two most common complaints VES has received from Trident students concerns the quality of education at the school. One student, R.S., who studied in a health care-related program at Trident, complained that the curriculum was “outdated and behind the time.” He continued, “[w]e were studying things from 2003 in 2012.” Another student, T.H, said he “was told that the Accounting program was similar to that of any other 4 year college.” Yet, she “quickly realized that WAS NOT the case. My daughter is attending a 4 year college and the difference in class work was amazing. The class work she is doing is far and beyond that was being required at Trident University.”

Other students made similar complaints. Student E.K. said, “I was recruited by Trident University and told that my education would be on part [sic] with all other colleges.” E.K. does not believe that was true. Student T.S. said “[t]he majority of my work that was graded had no robust feedback and with every class the feedback was generic cut and paste.” Student A.S. said, “I don't feel like the education I received from either school will help me and it seems that they just wanted to fill the seats and receive my GI bill money.”

### Post-Graduation Job Placement and Employment Assistance

Ten complaints that VES has received about Trident concern difficulty or complete inability to find a job post-graduation. Some also complain that Trident provided them with no help in finding work, despite recruiting promises that such assistance would be provided.

According to former student M.H., she went to Trident to get a Bachelor's degree in Information Technology Management, yet is working in a temp job as an administrative assistant. She said, “my degree is nothing but a piece of paper to hang on the wall if I wanted to, as it has not helped open any doors for me and it has not improved my chances of gainful employment.” Said former student E.K., “It took me two years to find a job, and it is basically as a secretary. I have an MBA that no one really accepts as real.” Former student V.B. said she left Trident with over \$36,000 in loan debt yet she “can't get a job in the field of anything remotely related.” She went on to explain, “[w]ith my husband being active duty I already have a hard enough time finding a job each time we pcs. Thought getting my degree it would make things easier, all it did was make finances harder.”

Former student J.C. told VES, “I have also interviewed for jobs and most of them have never heard of TUI where I completed my Masters program and don't appear to give me much thought of my degree.” Said one former student, J.P., “I finished my degree in 2012, and I still haven't gotten a job pertaining to the degree I have. A lot of employers haven't even heard of Trident University, and I have been forced to enroll in another degree program at another school [that's] more reputable, in order to get people to recognize my education.”

Meanwhile, another former student, R.L., who served in the military for twenty years and used his Department of Defense Tuition Assistance benefits to earn a Master's Degree from Trident, told VES that he has found it very difficult to find a suitable job with his Trident degree. Moreover, according to R.L., despite recruiting promises from Trident, the school offered him no post-graduation employment assistance. He was only able to find work after obtaining another Master's degree from a different university, using his GI Bill benefits.

Finally, student J.H. reported to VES, “I utilized my entire GI Bill to obtain my Bachelors Degree as well as my Masters Degree from Trident University International. Since I have received my degree I have applied for several Project Management positions with no interviews at all. Along with my degrees I have over 13 years Information Technology experience, so I would assume if the degree was what was advertised I should be able to utilize it for something. I

am currently at the same level of employment that I was before I had a degree at all. Now I have no more GI Bill and will likely need to incur student loan debt to obtain a degree that an employer will consider viable enough to gain employment.”

### Change in Degree Plan/Requirements

Changes in a student’s program of study is a category of complaints by students who report being lured in with the promise of a specific degree program but who are later switched into a different program. Although only five students have made this sort of complaint about Trident, two students provided very similar such complaints about doctoral programs at Trident.

One of those students, S.S., said, “I made it through a doctoral program to only get to the PhD dissertation phase and have my progress derailed by the school. The PhD program coordinator changed 3 times. Each time they did the new one had their own program methods that everyone was expected to change too even though we had been in an approved program already. I never heard from them during this period as even my wife noticed except when they wanted money for the next session. I went 6 sessions paying thousands of dollars each [session] and they still did not finalize my dissertation committee. I finally withdrew because there were 2 sessions left before they were going to say i reached my max sessions and would be dropped.”

The other student, P.P., said, “I began the PhD BA Program in 2007, completed all core courses and was done with them in 2014, with only the dissertation phase and publishing of my dissertation to go. Well, due to chairs that were simply not helpful and dragged the program on (a total of three now), things went way longer than they should have. In fact, despite my quick turn-around of product requirements to the university, the responses were either vague or there was simply a lack of interest by the chair in actually giving me the time I needed/deserved in order to complete the tasks. . . . It has been well over two years for the dissertation phase and I’m up to \$12,000.00 in debt and it JUST NOW got approved with conditions. I would argue that, despite my actions, it will drag on yet another three to four months. This is simply not acceptable and somebody should be held accountable for it.”

### Accreditation

Trident University has been regionally accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges Senior Colleges and University Commission (WASCUC) since 2005. In 2011, WASCUC issued Trident a Show-Cause Order and then subsequently placed the school on probation for failing to meet certain standards regarding defining and achieving educational objectives.<sup>5</sup> In 2013, WASCUC removed the school from probation.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See Letter from Ralph A. Wolff, WASCUC President, to Lucille Sansing, Trident University International President, (March 11, 2013), *available at* <https://www.trident.edu/news-and-events/news-march-11-2013/>.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

Some students have complained to VES about issues concerning Trident's accreditation. One such student, S.M., wrote, "They never said that they we're not accredited for their Public Health program and they do not meet military standards as they advertise to be for military. I am now having to get a degree in public health using loans so I can meet military standards." Said E.M., "Trident's accreditation was under investigation while I attended. I'd spent a lot of money going there and am now worried my degree won't be good on the outside." Another student, R.L. said, "I feel they lied about the accreditation to make it seem they were legitimate." Student C.F., said, "Trident University was shut down as a result of not following guideline for their accreditation. We were told there was no issues with their [sic] accreditation even though classes were added to the degree plans already signed up for. As a result most if not all are not transferrable [sic]. So I have wasted a good portion of my GI Bill."

Meanwhile, former student E.K. said, "When I got my degree from Trident University, they said that my degree would be accepted and that they have full accreditation...come to find out that it did not."

#### Transfer of Credits

Six students also complained that credits from Trident classes are not recognized elsewhere. Some indicate that they were told otherwise by Trident officials. For example, student M.Z. complained that DeVry University, another for-profit school, did not recognize the credits she earned at Trident when she transferred to DeVry. "Yet," she said, "I was told I would be given credit for them." Another student, L.H., described credit transfers at Trident as "suspect." Meanwhile, student T.S. complained that Trident would not accept credits from the same degree program at another school.