

INSIDE HIGHER ED

‘Rampant Plagiarism’ and ‘Patently Deficient’ Online Education

Staff at a Virginia regulator recommend revoking certificate to operate small college catering to international students after an audit uncovered concerns about academic quality.

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March 18, 2019



A small Virginia college that enrolls a predominantly international student population is facing a move by state regulators to seek to shut it down after an audit uncovered academic deficiencies.

The staff of the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia is advancing a recommendation to initiate processes that could lead to the revocation of Virginia International University’s certificate to operate due to concerns uncovered in the audit about academic quality, including concerns about “rampant plagiarism” by students and grade inflation; online classes that are “patently deficient” in terms of quality and content and graduate courses that

are “lacking academic rigor”; and the admission of “large numbers” of students with inadequate English proficiency.

A spokeswoman for SCHEV, the state regulator for higher education in Virginia, said SCHEV’s Academic Affairs Committee will consider the staff recommendation during its meeting today and decide whether to advance it to the full council for a vote Tuesday. The council could pursue a number of possible next steps, including determining no action is necessary, changing VIU's certification status to "conditional," or accepting the recommendation of the staff to initiate the revocation of its certificate to operate.

Officials at Virginia International University did not respond to requests for comment Friday. VIU is accredited by the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools, an accreditor with a troubled past. In December 2016, the Department of Education under then secretary John B. King **revoked ACICS's status** as a federally recognized accreditor, citing as a reason the accreditor's "pervasive noncompliance" with regulatory criteria (the decision came after the collapse of two large for-profit chains overseen by ACICS, Corinthian Colleges and ITT Tech). But in November, Secretary Betsy DeVos **restored ACICS's recognition** with the condition that it demonstrate full compliance with federal criteria within 12 months.

VIU, which is based in Fairfax, Va., and was founded in 1998, appears to exist primarily to enroll international students. According to **enrollment data posted on its website**, VIU enrolled 632 students in 2017-18 -- down from 1,876 two years earlier --- the vast majority of whom, 86 percent, came from outside North America (the data does not specify where in North America students come from). Over the prior five years the percentage of students from North America varied between 1 and 3 percent, with the remainder of the students coming from the rest of the world, primarily Asia.

Although the institution is small, VIU cracks the list of top 100 institutions nationally in terms of the number of students who are participating in the optional practical training program, which enables international students to work during their studies or for up to three years after graduating.

The SCHEV audit of VIU found numerous concerns about the quality of the online courses it reviewed. The report from the audit states that “the single most important factor contributing to the substandard quality of online education at VIU is the institution’s acceptance of international students with an abysmally poor command of the English language. This is especially true for graduate level programs.”

"SCHEV's review of VIU's online course content indicates that the admission of unqualified students is the first of many impediments to a quality online education system," the audit report states. "Unqualified students regularly submit plagiarized or inferior work; faculty turn a blind eye and lower grading standards (perhaps to avoid failing an entire class); and administrators do not effectively monitor the quality of online education being provided. That such substandard course work could continue with no complaints from students, faculty or administrators raises concerns about the purpose of education at VIU."

The SCHEV auditors found “the quality and content of the online education provided by VIU to be patently deficient,” and noted concerns including “limited peer-to-peer and student-faculty interaction; failure of instructors to adhere to standards outlined in course syllabi; rampant plagiarism; graduate level courses lacking academic rigor; online courses that are not comparable in content to those offered in residence; and grade inflation.”

The audit found that these inadequacies “were not limited to one area of study or one instructor. Instead, the low quality of education passing as online education at VIU affects all programs of study on the undergraduate and graduate level.”

Though the audit report focuses on the online education offered by VIU, it states that SCHEV staff believe the "deficiency of the education provided by VIU is not limited to online courses." The report cites a number of reasons for reaching this conclusion, including that the lack of English proficiency among the student population would affect not only online but also face-to-face courses and that the same faculty are teaching online and face-to-face classes. SCHEV's review of more than 60 student transcripts found "no discernible difference" in grades received for online versus face-to-face classes.

SCHEV's scrutiny of VIU has resonances with an earlier audit done by the Virginia regulators of American College of Commerce and Technology, another ACICS-accredited college that catered to international students. Virginia regulators identified such severe problems in their audit of ACCT that they **began moving to shut it down** less than a year after it received initial accreditation from ACICS. ACCT is now defunct, having shut down in 2017. ACICS -- which did not respond to a request for comment for this article -- approved a **three-year renewal** of VIU's accreditation in August. “Should Virginia terminate VIU, it should be a black eye for ACICS, which acted the other way,” said David North, who writes about issues related to international students for the Center for Immigration Studies, a think tank that advocates cutting legal immigration.

Should the council act on the staff's recommendation that it seek the revocation of VIU's certificate to operate, VIU would be entitled to further

administrative steps, including an informal fact-finding conference and a formal hearing before an officer appointed by the Supreme Court of Virginia. After those processes were completed, the matter would return to the council for a final decision.

https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/03/18/staff-virginia-regulator-recommend-revoking-colleges-certificate-operate-due?utm_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm_campaign=2989c255b1-DNU_2019_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1fcbc04421-2989c255b1-198467257&mc_cid=2989c255b1&mc_eid=0c2028f1a2