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LEHIGH VALLEY COLLEGE: AN EXCLUSIVE REPORT



"I'm paying a little mortgage. I guess they were good sales people, and I was a sucker."

DEBORAH SNYDER
Lehigh Valley College graduate

"I'm thinking about a family, but you have to be able to afford them [kids] ... I'm having to start over."

SEAN DALE
Former Lehigh Valley College student who owes \$13,000 in student loans and could not transfer his credits



"We were frequently told that if you have no students, you have no job."

JOHN PHILLIPS
Former Lehigh Valley College instructor on the pressure not to flunk students

School's pursuit of profit leaves students behind

Former Allentown Business School uses hard-sell admission tactics that lead to crushing debt, unfulfilled dreams, some say.

By Sam Kennedy
Of The Morning Call

Telemarketing — that's how enrollment at Lehigh Valley College often begins. Recruiters must make 125 calls and schedule five appointments a day, and enroll 10 applicants a month. Top performers get vacations to the Bahamas. Those who fail to sign up enough applicants are asked to resign.

Many students of LVC, which changed its name from Allentown Business School this year, say they get hooked by slick sales pitches. Once enrolled,

some find reason to doubt the promise of access to jobs and careers. By then, transferring to another school is rarely an option; LVC's credits are no good at most colleges.

Some graduates find themselves either unemployed or in low-paying jobs with little relation to their fields of study. They are overwhelmed by their student loan debt.

Such is the product of an academic institution obsessed with money, according to former LVC faculty. Instructors complain of

COLLEGE PAGE A24

PRICY CREDITS

Lehigh Valley College, which offers associate degrees, is five to seven times more expensive than the area's community colleges, which also offer associate degrees.

Per-credit price compared to area community colleges:

| | |
|------------------------------------|-------------|
| Lehigh Valley College ¹ | \$507-\$625 |
| Northampton Community College | \$94 |
| Lehigh Carbon Community College | \$90 |

Note: Prices for per-credit tuition and major fees based on standard course load of 30 credits per year.

1 — Depending on field of study. Based on the total cost of earning an associate degree, divided by 60 credits, which is the number of credits required to earn an associate degree at most other colleges.

Source: Morning Call research
Larry Printz The Morning Call

Lehigh Valley College is more expensive than the state's public colleges that offer bachelor's degrees and nearly as expensive as some of the region's private four-year schools.

Per-credit price compared to four-year colleges:

| | |
|------------------------------------|-------------|
| Moravian College | \$842 |
| Cedar Crest College | \$721 |
| DeSales University | \$646 |
| Lehigh Valley College ¹ | \$507-\$625 |
| Penn State University | \$347 |
| Kutztown University | \$209 |
| East Stroudsburg University | \$207 |

LEHIGH VALLEY COLLEGE

was willing to sacrifice its academic integrity to make sure students remained enrolled and happy, according to some of the Center Valley institution's former faculty and administrators. The charge is denied by LVC President Virginia Carpenter.

Ed Landrock
The Morning Call



Vatican prepares for papal installation

Ceremony will be watched closely for hints about Benedict.

By Brian Murphy
Of The Associated Press

VATICAN CITY | Security forces went on alert around the Vatican on Saturday and cleared streets for an expected 500,000 pilgrims arriving for

the ceremony to formally install Pope Benedict XVI and offer the pontiff a major chance to set the tone for his papacy.

The open-air Mass in St. Peter's Square planned for today also gives other religious leaders an opportunity to closely assess any new directions in the Vatican.

Christian envoys expected at the ceremony cover a broad range: Orthodox clerics, Angli-

cans, mainstream Protestants and evangelical delegates such as members of the Rev. Billy Graham's association. The list suggests Christian congregations are cautiously extending a hand to Benedict despite lingering suspicions over his interest in closer ties.

In 2000, while serving as the Vatican's chief overseer for doctrine, he issued "Dominus Iesus," a document that upset non-Catholics by fram-

ing salvation from only a Catholic perspective. But Wednesday — a day after his election as pope — Benedict promised to seek greater ties with all Christians and open "sincere dialogue" with other faiths.

But few top Islamic leaders are expected at the Mass. Jewish presence could be complicated by the weeklong Passover holiday, which began

POPE PAGE A3

6 Iraqis arrested in copter downing

Army also seizes bomb-making material during raid in Taji.

By Ashraf Khalil
Special to The Morning Call

BAGHDAD, Iraq | The U.S. Army arrested six Iraqi men Saturday on suspicion of involvement in the downing of a civilian helicopter that left 11 people dead two days earlier.

Acting on tips from residents, soldiers from the 1st Armored Division raided a village near Taji, northwest of Baghdad, the capital. In addition to the six suspects, they also confiscated bomb-making material.

The arrests were a rare bright spot for U.S. and Iraqi forces after more than a week of surging rebel violence. Multiple insurgent attacks around the country Saturday killed at least 10 Iraqis and injured more than 20 others, and the military announced the death of a U.S. soldier.

Col. Clifford Kent, a spokesman for the 3rd Infantry Division, which oversees the 1st Armored Division's troops in Iraq, said residents near Taji provided U.S. troops with "detailed descriptions of the individuals, as well as their vehicles and where they live."

Although there was no evidence found directly linking the men detained to the

IRAQ PAGE A4

Moussaoui penalty debate may divide

Most Americans back execution, but many allies oppose it.

By Pete Yost
Of The Associated Press

WASHINGTON | Now the real trouble begins as the case of Zacarias Moussaoui hurtles toward a conclusion and the life of the admitted terrorist conspirator hangs in the balance.

Next comes the penalty phase in the criminal prosecution of the 36-year-old French citizen, who says the endgame of his flight training for 747 airliners was a strike on the White House, separate from the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

As chilling as Moussaoui's admissions are, international hostility to executions and the need for cooperation in President Bush's fight against terrorism raise an intriguing question: Does the Bush administration really want to put this man to death?

The answer Friday was an unequivocal yes, as prosecutors basked in the glow of a victory that brought deep

MOUSSAOUI PAGE A4



—adv.—
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COLLEGE FROM PAGE A1

Students say admission reps lied to them

pressure from administrators to go easy on poor-performing students so they'll stay in school and continue paying tuition. Former night dean Deserie Harper said she quit LVC because she was expected to soften up tough-grading instructors.

An investigation by The Morning Call has shed light on the business of for-profit education. It included interviews with more than 20 LVC students and graduates and a dozen former LVC faculty and staff, including two deans; documentation from the federal and state education departments; five complaints filed to the state Education Department; and internal LVC documentation acquired by The Morning Call.

Key findings include: Aggressive and sometimes misleading sales tactics are at the center of LVC's recruiting. School officials give prospective students inaccurate or incomplete information.

The college's expensive tuition leads to massive debt. LVC is five to seven times as expensive as local community colleges that offer comparable degrees. LVC students are more likely to be unable to pay back their student loans than students of other colleges in the area.

The college's fixation with the bottom line compromises academic standards, according to students and instructors, who say the school turns a blind eye to failure and cheating.

The college's job placement services fall short of its sales pitch. School officials boast of job placement rates in the 90th percentile. But inadequate placement is a chief complaint among graduates.

Some of the findings mirror allegations against and criticisms of Career Education Corp., LVC's corporate parent, which has become the subject of a dozen lawsuits and investigations by the Justice Department, the Securities and Exchange Commission, the Education Department and the U.S. Postal Service.

Among the claims in a class-action shareholder fraud suit: Career Education routinely exaggerated enrollment and graduation rates; one of the company's schools in Montclair, N.J., graduated students who did not complete required course work; and another school, in the Midwest, boosted enrollment by recruiting special-needs students, as well as "felons, homeless persons and drug addicts."

Like many LVC graduates, Deborah Snyder, 42, of Bethlehem, takes measure of the school and its parent company

in personal terms: "It was not how it was presented to me when I signed my life away." The computer networking student said she had been led to believe she would receive advanced training that would prepare her to pass the test for an industry-required certification. Instead, she said, she was stuck in classes with remedial students and she was nowhere near ready to take the certification test upon graduation.

Today, Snyder owes the government \$21,000 for her LVC student loans. "I'm paying a little mortgage," she said. "I guess they were good sales people, and I was a sucker."

LVC President Virginia Carpenter offered a general defense of her college and its parent. She denied outright many of the claims made by people interviewed for this story. She said she could not comment on specific events she did not witness. She chalked up some of the allegations to "miscommunication."

"My company is very growth oriented, that's no secret," she said. "But I've never been pressured to do anything that I didn't feel was good for our students."

Nor would she pressure her subordinates, she said. "I have to live in this community," she said. "I have to face people."

LVC, with 1,350 students, is like any other college or university in that it is an educational institution that confers degrees — associate degrees — to students.

Founded in 1869, it has gone through many transformations over the years. It has operated under at least five owners and at several locations in the area and had several names before Allentown Business School and Lehigh Valley College. It moved from downtown Allentown to Center Valley in 2003.

For many years it was primarily a secretarial school. It offered courses ranging from bookkeeping to penmanship and ornamental writing. Under the control of Career Education, which bought the school in 1995, LVC added programs, doubled enrollment and raised tuition.

Even critics of the school say many of its instructors are talented and dedicated and many of its students are more than capable. And many students say they are happy with their education.

"It's worth the money I'm paying," said Anthony McCall, 19, of Philadelphia, who estimated his student loan debt at \$30,000. "It's a fast-paced program. I can get a degree in two years instead of four."

Today, graduates are employed throughout the region as nursery school teachers, security guards, medical assistants, legal secretaries and computer technicians. "We're helping a lot of students who wouldn't be successful anywhere else get started in a career," Carpenter said.

But LVC — whose new campus consists of a single three-story, glass-and-brick building that resembles a hospital wing — also is fundamentally different from most other colleges.

It's part of a corporation whose mission is to return a profit to shareholders. Financial pressure manifests itself in questionable behavior, according to students and staff:

A recruiter lured a student interested in criminal justice with the unlikely prospect of a job at the FBI. Administrators overruled an instructor's decision to expel a student for back-to-back plagiarism offenses. Students received passing grades even though they did not attend classes or could barely read and write.

At stake is more than the reputation of one of the region's oldest post-secondary schools at a time when it is trying to recast itself as a traditional college.

While for-profit schools are nothing new, most used to be locally owned and operated. Career Education — a national juggernaut replete with a stock market ticker symbol, quarterly earnings reports and \$1.7 billion in revenues last year — represents the current model.

Today, the for-profit schools represent a powerful industry that is responsible for the education of more students than ever and which annually consumes billions of dollars in taxpayer-subsidized student loans and grants. Indeed, some of Career Education's peers, including ITT Educational Services Inc. and DeVry Inc., also are facing lawsuits and government investigations.

"It got to the point that we were raising questions, and we were told it was none of our business."

DON HEINEY former instructor at Lehigh Valley College

and recruiting tactics

Lehigh Valley College uses the sales tactics of telemarketers and car salesmen.

Recruiters, called admissions representatives, have quotas of 125 calls a day and 10 recruits a month, LVC President Carpenter disclosed in a 2003 letter to the state Education Department in response to a complaint.

The complaint, filed to the state by a former recruiter, described a hostile work environment, where she and her colleagues were given unrealistic goals and were verbally abused. The recruiter, whose name was blacked out, said she was subjected to profane tirades from her superior. She had to use asterisks to quote him:

"I need 30 enrollments this week. If I don't get this number, I will be so far up your ***** it won't be funny." The Education Department closed the complaint without taking action, stating that the allegations did not fall within its purview.

As for the Bahamas trips with which the recruiters are rewarded, Carpenter denied in one of several interviews they are related to quotas. She called them "training meetings." The selection of attendees, she said, is based "on the whole performance of the individual, not the best performance."

Other colleges in the area explicitly forbid quotas and quota-based bonuses in recruiting. Most do not call students unless they are targeting top athletes or other students with special talents. Mainly, they engage in "responsive" marketing. They mail information about their schools to prospective students and then wait for them to apply.

Their behavior is governed by an organization to which they belong, the National Association for College Admission Counseling. LVC is not a member of the association.

"They're under the gun. The pressure is on them all the time," former LVC Dean of Academics Dani Phelps of Bethlehem said of the school's admissions representatives. "If you don't produce, you lose the job ... It's like any other sales job."

Phelps, who is 67, was fired from her job last year and has filed an age-discrimination complaint. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission ruled in her favor in a preliminary review.

Many students recalled being told by admissions representatives that LVC's job-placement rate was in the 90th percentile. The state Education Department reported that LVC told it that 93 percent of its 2002 graduates were employed in a field related to their studies within a year of graduation.

That figure — what the school calls its "success rate" — paints a rosy picture. But what's left unsaid is not so pretty: The school counts a job placement as successful when 20 percent of the position's work is related to the employee's field of study.

The running joke among graduates — denied by school officials — is that the success rate includes computer programming graduates who work at McDonald's and use computer terminals for placing hamburger orders.



Don Heiney



Virginia Carpenter

"We're helping a lot of students who wouldn't be successful anywhere else get started in a career."

VIRGINIA CARPENTER president, Lehigh Valley College

Applicants also are told that their credits can be transferred to other schools. The transferability of credits is a key selling point for two-year schools, which often are a stepping-stone to a bachelor's degree.

But LVC students who decide to transfer find their options limited; Cedar Crest College and DeSales University accept some LVC credits. But LVC credits are no good at other four-year and two-year schools in the area, including Lehigh Carbon Community College, Northampton Community College and state universities such as Kutztown, East Stroudsburg and Penn State.

The reason is accreditation. LVC is not accredited by the agency that oversees other post-secondary academic institutions in this region — the Middle States Commission on Higher Education. Rather, it is accredited by the Accrediting Council for Independent Colleges and Schools, an organization devoted almost exclusively to accrediting for-profit colleges.

Brook Buchanan, 22, of Phoenixville, who in 2001 earned an associate degree in visual communications at LVC and later taught at the school, had hoped to get a bachelor's degree. He found his options limited because so few schools accept LVC credits, and because most that do are expensive for-profit schools.

He enrolled at an art institute in Philadelphia, but soon quit because he could not keep up with the bills. He realized the only schools within his price range were state schools, such as Penn State, where he couldn't transfer his credits. "It bugged me," he said. "I would basically have to start from scratch."

Getting ahold of other facts about LVC could be a challenge for prospective students, too.

Steven Manry, 37, of Hellertown, who worked in the school's information technology department, remembers what admissions representatives told prospective students during tours of the school: that they could get new hard drives for their laptops on request, and that they would have access to 24-hour technical support — neither of which was true.

Manry, who was laid off in January, said he and his co-worker in the IT department didn't dare to correct the representatives.

"You had to watch your job," he explained.

Shannon Morgan, 25, of Bethlehem Township, a current criminal justice student, said her recruiter told her that her degree would qualify her for a job with the FBI — something she has since found out requires a bachelor's degree.

"They told me lies," she said. LVC President Carpenter, who in 1980 got her first job out of college as an Allentown Business School admissions representative, said miscommunication is a common problem in recruiting.

"Sometimes you just say something and the student perceives it differently," she said.

Attention to enrollment does not end with recruiting. School officials work the phones daily to talk would-be dropouts back into class.

After graduating from LVC's

computer networking program, Jay Wilt, 47, of Allentown, landed a job there, first as a computer technician and later as a night school coordinator and instructor. His duties included calling students who had missed back to back classes and persuading them to return.

At the time, he said, he did not fully appreciate the cost of LVC. Because he was a laid-off Bethlehem Steel worker in a federal job-retraining program, the government had paid his tuition.

He said he made 30 to 40 calls a night. He said he still feels guilty about the high-pressure tactics. He remembers one student in particular, a single mother who was struggling to pay the tuition.

"As if her life wasn't hard enough already, now she has all those bills to pay," said Wilt, who was let go by LVC in 2001 in a cost-saving measure and now works in admissions at LCCC. "I should have been telling them to stay at home."

The school even expects deans to call students who have stopped attending classes — a task far outside the normal job description of those at the highest level of higher education.

Some students would hang up. Others would listen. Former night dean Harper, of Tobyhanna, said she would urge them to return, telling the students that the school would help them with their scheduling conflicts and financial aid.

Harper, who has a doctorate in education and now works for a nonprofit group that teaches adults English as a second language, left LVC on good terms in 2002. The administration gave her a clock and a plaque at her going-away party.

"They want you to do anything it takes to bring in students and retain them as long as possible, even if the students can't be successful," she said. "These are things you wouldn't do at any other college."

Expensive tuition, crushing debt

An associate degree from Lehigh Valley College costs between \$30,400 and \$37,500 — compared to \$5,400 at LCCC and \$5,640 at NCC.

On a per-credit basis, it is more expensive than the state's flagship public university, Penn State.

Carpenter, the school president, defended the college's tuition. "We're comparable to other private colleges," she said. "I think that students are getting a very fair value."

LVC's tuition is comparable to some of the region's private institutions, such as Cedar Crest and DeSales. But those schools are in a different category. They are four-year schools that offer advanced degrees. They provide a range of offerings associated with the college experience — such as athletics and other extracurricular activities — that LVC does not. They have higher proportions of faculty with doctorates and master's degrees.

LVC, meanwhile, has the highest student loan default rate of any college in the region, according to the latest available federal Education Department data. About 10 percent of the loans made to LVC students from 2000 to 2002 were in default.

When selling cars, salesmen forestall serious talk of money until customers have gone for the test drive. At LVC, admissions representatives wait until applicants have completed a tour of the school.

Wilt, the former night school coordinator, said the school is deliberately coy about its costs.

"You call ABS and try to get them to disclose their tuition rate," he said. "You cannot pull it out of them."

That's slightly higher than LCCC's and NCC's rates and roughly three times higher than the default rates of private schools with comparable tuition.

LVC's default rate, however, doesn't hurt the school's bottom line. Colleges keep the tuition that has been paid by the government, leaving taxpayers with the bill and students in financial disarray.

The stakes for students are higher than most realize. This country has no statute of limitation on murder — and none on student loans. Unlike credit card debt and mortgages, the burden of repaying student loans cannot be shed in bankruptcy court.

Call it the student loan trap. It's laid at the doorstep of the least sophisticated education consumers; a disproportionately large part of LVC's student population consists of people who are the first in their families to go to college.

Credit histories can be tarnished indefinitely. An unpaid student loan can result in the loss of credit necessary to buy homes and cars later in life.

Holly Jackson, 27, of Bethlehem, said she dropped out of LVC's computer networking program in spring 2003 after having complications with pregnancy. She decided to come back after a school official repeatedly called her on the phone, promising to accommodate her schedule.

"She kept calling me and leaving messages," the working mother recalled. "I told her that I can't do it because I have three children ... Finally, she said, 'Before you say no again, what if I can get you two-and-a-half hours?'" The typical schedule involves five-hour blocks of class time.

Later, Jackson said she was forced back into a five-hour schedule and informed she must take additional classes because the school had changed its requirements for graduation.

If that weren't enough, a collection agency began badgering her for missed payments on a student loan from her first round of schooling. She said the school promised the loan would be deferred upon her re-enrollment.

Like other students interviewed for this story, Jackson did not know exactly how much she had borrowed to attend LVC.

"I should have asked them to spell it out to me, but they rush you so doggone much," she said.

Other schools post their tuition on their Web sites. But the LVC site doesn't contain such information, and recruiters do not quote figures over the phone.

When selling cars, salesmen forestall serious talk of money until customers have gone for the test drive. At LVC, admissions representatives wait until applicants have completed a tour of the school.

Wilt, the former night school coordinator, said the school is deliberately coy about its costs.

"You call ABS and try to get them to disclose their tuition rate," he said. "You cannot pull it out of them."

Compromised academic standards

Four instructors cycled through a computer networking class during a single term, according to a student complaint against Lehigh Valley College filed with the state Education Department in 1997.

The same complaint, which the department closed without taking action after the school refunded tuition, alleged that an instructor gave students the answers to quizzes in advance.

A separate complaint described faulty computer equipment, and instructors who lacked certification for what they were teaching. One instructor relied on open-book exams to ensure passing grades, it said.

This complaint, too, was closed without action by the



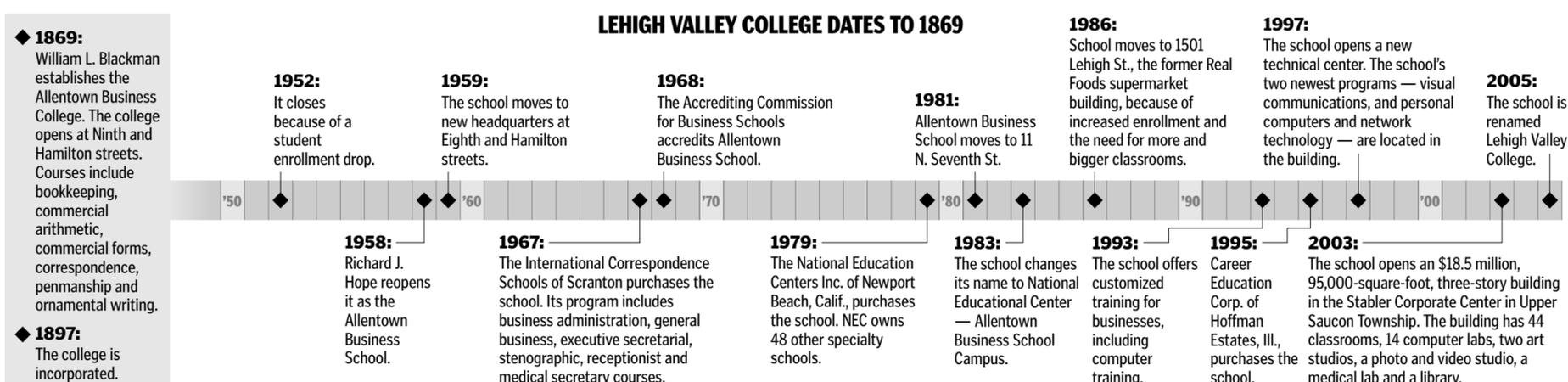
Larry Printz The Morning Call

SEAN DALE of Whitehall Township transferred to Lehigh Carbon Community College, where he participates in a networking class. He was shocked to discover his credits from LVC didn't transfer, as he was led to believe they would.

Ed Landrock The Morning Call

Aggressive marketing

LEHIGH VALLEY COLLEGE DATES TO 1869



Compiled by librarian Laurel Bruce from Morning Call newspaper stories.

Gary Visgaitis The Morning Call

COLLEGE FROM PAGE A24

department. It said instructors are not required by the state to have any certifications, and it found no fault with the curriculum.

The impact on students, apparently, was not a consideration.

"People were coming out of the program without the design skills required by the industry," said former graphics design instructor Jeff Zinggeler of Schnecksville. "The administration couldn't care less about that. It's money, money, money — that's all they care about."

Some students did not belong in a post-secondary school to begin with, according to several instructors and students. Similar claims are made by the shareholder lawsuit against LVC's corporate parent Career Education. One of the company's Midwestern schools recruited special needs students, including at least one who was "completely illiterate," the suit alleges.

"We were frequently told that if you have no students, you have no job," said former LVC economics instructor Jack Phillips of Jim Thorpe.

Once, Phillips said, he expelled a student after his second plagiarism offense, only to find the student back in his class on the order of school administrators.

Carpenter said she didn't have enough information about the incident to comment. "Without knowing the student, it's hard for me to respond to that," she said.

Phillips said he and his colleagues joked that they had a reverse bell curve: Relatively few of his students were mediocre; most did either very well or very poorly. He estimated that in some classes nearly a third of his students were functionally illiterate.

"They couldn't put together a sentence," he said. Carpenter said the college's basic prerequisite is a high school diploma. So, if the functionally illiterate make it into LVC, high schools are to blame for allowing such people to graduate.

That said, she continued, the college does screen its students. The school recently began requiring applicants to take an online standardized test called the AccuPlacer. If they fail the first time, they are allowed to retake it. The school won't say what constitutes a passing score; a spokesman said it was "proprietary information."

The challenge for LVC becomes — as its 54 percent dropout rate in 2002 indicates — keeping its students in school. To do so, some instructors and students say, the school countenances failure.

One former instructor, who requested anonymity to protect his professional reputation, recalled being pressured by administrators to reconsider his decision to flunk part of his class.

"It wasn't black and white," he said. "It was craftily hinted that you have to keep these kids happy."

Former night dean Harper, who quit in 2002, said such pressure was commonplace.

"I had to make sure the evening students were happy — and staying," she said.

Harper said her supervisors made it clear that she would be held responsible for any drop in enrollment.

"It's passive but strong," she said of the pressure. "You know what you have got to do, and you better do it."

Carpenter appeared shocked upon hearing that description of how her school works.

"I don't know where that would come from," she said.

Todd Deiley, 42, of Allentown, who studied computers at LVC, remembered being confounded by the grading at the school.

He described one student

who earned a numerical grade of 37 percent in a computer class yet passed with a D, and another who was admitted to an English II class even though she could hardly read and write.

"It seemed as if the administration was completely motivated by the bottom line," he said. "The instructors were unable to fail the students who weren't up to par."

Earnest and capable students were left wondering about the quality of their education.

A fast pace and hands-on training — that was what LVC admission representatives told Sean Dale, 33, of Whitehall Township, to expect at the school. But after enrolling in the computer networking program, he said, he was shocked.

Students were expected to learn the material on their own, from textbooks, with minimal classroom instruction. Computer use in some classes was limited to automated testing.

After accruing \$13,000 in student loan debt, Dale sought a transfer to Lehigh Carbon Community College.

That's when he learned that LVC's credits were no good there. He said the admissions representatives had told him the school's credits were transferable but neglected to mention that few places actually accept them.

"I'm thinking about a family, but you have to be able to afford them [kids]," he said. "I'm having to start over."

Jessi Muthard, 30, of Whitehall, described computer networking classes that covered material in a perfunctory manner.

"Learning a few commands and scripting does not cover you if your prospective employer asks you to install a UNIX server and administrate it," Muthard, who completed his studies in computer networking in December, said in an e-mail.

"What are you to tell the employer? 'Uh, yeah, I was never taught that in class.' They will provide you with a box and a personal escort to the door," he wrote.

Another student, who requested anonymity so as not to jeopardize access to the school's job placement services, recalled watching 1970s kung-fu movies in a printing and production class.

Some of the former LVC instructors interviewed for this story — Phillips, Zinggeler and Don Heiney of East Allen Township, who taught computer networking — believe they were asked to resign or were fired in part because they complained about the school's failure to conform to normal academic standards.

"I was a thorn in their side," Phillips said.

"It got to the point that we were raising questions, and we

were told it was none of our business," Heiney said.

Carpenter rejected those claims. Additionally, while declining to comment on specific cases, she said the school dismissed some faculty because their credentials no longer met the school's evolving criteria for employment. LVC, which has long operated under Pennsylvania's rules for private schools, successfully completed a multiyear effort to move to the state's higher education division.

Inadequate job placement

Theresa Manieri, 23, of Bechtelsville, was a single mother who worked full time when she enrolled in Lehigh Valley College's visual communications programs. She was hoping to start a new career in advertising. She remembers being told by a recruiter that the school placed virtually all of its graduates into jobs in their chosen fields.

Although Manieri maintained a B average, she did not get a job in her field. Today, she works in retail, as she did before graduating from LVC.

She owes LVC about \$14,000. Her four student loans cost her more than \$200 a month.

"I cope with it. I work a lot so I can pay my bills," she said. "That's what all of us have to do."

Many students go to LVC because they are convinced — partly by school officials who boast of high job placement rates — that it's a sure bet. Yet inadequate job placement services is a frequent complaint by former LVC students.

Two complaints filed with the state Education Department by former students since 1997 accuse the school of exaggerating its job placement services. The department closed both without taking action.

One student, Jonathan Hill of Bethlehem, said the school did little more than forward job advertisements posted on public Web sites. And many of those were for out-of-the-area jobs.

Hill said he had to go back to another school for additional certifications to get a job in his field.

He would eventually write a letter with a list of complaints to the Education Department.

"Someone try to protect any future student that may want to enroll in the school," he urged.

The department responded six months later, concluding LVC had not violated state guidelines because the school made its students, upon enrollment, sign contractual agreements that included the necessary disclaimers.

Dan Feindt, 28, of Doylestown, is back at LVC to earn a second degree, in Web design, because he could not get a job in his field of study.

He earned his first degree in computer networking, racking up \$19,000 in student loan debt. Then he busied tables in a restaurant until the fall, when he was laid off.

Feindt said he has no complaints about the college. He has re-enrolled because he believes the second degree will improve his job prospects.

A former instructor said his visual communications graduates had little chance of landing a job in the field. He requested anonymity because being associated with the school is a liability, he said.

After leaving LVC, he worked at an advertising agency that refused to interview job applicants who had graduated from the school, he said.

Some who do get jobs are disappointed nonetheless. They find the work doesn't meet the expectations created by the school's marketing machine.

After earning an associate degree in computer networking, Harry Reinert of Fogelsville, who said he is over 40, was placed into an inventory job with low pay and no benefits.

Reinert, whose education at LVC was paid for by a federal jobs retraining program after he was laid off from Agere Systems, said he spends his day stuffing laptop computers into cardboard boxes. "Pretty much if you have half a brain, you can do it," he said.

Others remain unemployed long after graduating.

Peter Noga, 39, of Allentown, was unemployed for a year after graduating with an associate degree in visual communications in 1999.

Computer networking student Muthard was still sending out resumes three months after graduating.

"I was naive and duped," he said. "All of my classmates and I now question the quality of our degrees."

It's not uncommon for students and graduates to gripe about their colleges. What's striking about LVC alumni is just how many question whether their degrees have any value with employers.

Deiley, who completed two LVC programs, one in computer networking and the other in computer programming, with a cumulative grade average of 3.72, has yet to land a job in those fields. He works on a factory production line.

"I'm left wondering what my degrees are actually worth," he said in an e-mail.

The big picture

For-profit education companies confound the common

notion of education.

The key difference between the for-profit schools, such as Lehigh Valley College, and other colleges and universities, such as Penn State and Lafayette College, is the proportion of tuition that goes toward education.

At Penn State or Lafayette, for example, the schools spend more on the total cost of education — including everything from campus maintenance to professor salaries — than students pay in tuition. Public subsidies and endowments make up the difference. Although they might be costly, Penn State or Lafayette are essentially altruistic.

Lehigh Valley College, on the other hand, is by definition profit-driven. The school has shareholders to reward, and it does so by maximizing enrollment and spending less on the students' education than it earns from their tuition.

As a subsidiary of a corporation, LVC isn't required to disclose financial information. But, based on the number of students who attend the school and the price of tuition, its annual revenues are around \$20 million.

Such corporate entities have become a big part of the country's education infrastructure. Millions of students have enrolled in their classes. And billions of taxpayer dollars, in the form of student financial aid, have gone into their corporate coffers.

Pennsylvania gave \$37 million in financial aid to students enrolled in its 341 for-profit schools during the 2002-03 school year, according to a report by the state Education Department. That's five times more than the schools paid in state and local taxes.

LVC's corporate parent, Career Education, is one of the nation's largest for-profit education companies. It has 97,000 students on 82 campuses in the United States, Canada, France, the United Kingdom, the United Arab Emirates, and online. More than half of its \$1.7 billion in 2004 revenues came from Title IV funds — that is, grants and loans from the U.S. government.

All of the LVC students interviewed for this story received some form of public assistance. Some did not spend a dime of their own money; their tuition was covered in full by the government's jobs retraining programs.

"Is there a level of dependency on student loans? My answer would be, emphatically, yes," said Barmak Nassirian, associate executive director of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers in Washington, D.C.

Forbes Magazine described



Ed Landrock The Morning Call

STUDENTS AT LVC study in the school's new three-story, glass-and-brick building in Center Valley, where the school moved in 2003.

Career Education as "a company built to swallow Title IV funds in the way a whale gath-ers up plankton."

The strategy is not new. Career Education's founder and chief executive is John M. Larson, who was a top official in the now-defunct Phillips Colleges Inc.

Phillips Colleges was, among other companies, the focus of a Senate investigation in the early 1990s. The subsequent report concluded that the growth of the for-profit education industry was largely responsible for doubling the volume of student loans between 1983 and 1989 and tripling the default rate, to \$2 billion.

The Department of Education banned Phillips Colleges from participating in federal student aid programs and fined it \$107 million. As part of its settlement with the government, the company sold or closed its schools.

Larson's last year with Phillips Colleges was 1993. But he was back in business the following year when he launched Career Education. Under his leadership, Career Education quickly snatched up some of Phillips Colleges' old schools, as well as other for-profit institutions, including LVC.

The recent shareholder suit against Career Education and Larson accuse the company and its leader of, among other things, artificially inflating enrollment and graduation rates to boost stock prices. Larson reaped proceeds of \$22.4 million from the sale of his company's stock during that period, according to the suit.

As Larson personifies, the for-profit education industry has bounced back. And today, it's flexing its muscle as only industry can.

For-profit education companies and student loan lenders gave \$1 million in campaign contributions over a recent one-and-a-half-year period to the 49 members of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, according to a report by The Chronicle of Higher Education. Most of the money went to Republicans.

The kind of high-level government intervention that forced Phillips Colleges out of business in the early 1990s seems highly unlikely today. When reports of alleged abuses by for-profit education companies prompted a congressional hearing in March, the one critic of the for-profit system among the witnesses invited to testify was outnumbered by two industry representatives.

One of the industry representatives argued that what was needed was less government oversight of the for-profit education industry, not more. Committee Chairman John Boehner, R-Ohio, seemed sympathetic to that point of view in his opening statement.

Boehner — the recipient of \$238,000 from for-profits education companies and lenders, according to the Chronicle — complained that the government treats for-profit schools as "second-class citizens."

Students interviewed for this story would argue they're the ones who've gotten a raw deal.

Deborah Snyder, Sean Dale, Theresa Manieri — they were led to believe they would get a high-quality education that would lead to careers in their fields of study. That did not come to pass.

Snyder works in an unrelated field. Manieri is in retail, where she was before attending LVC. Both she and Dale, determined to get ahead, have enrolled at other colleges.

Only the bills are guaranteed. All three will be repaying their LVC student loans for years to come.

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