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## Is school cheating students?

**By Emily Heffter**

*Times consumer-affairs Reporter*

In the eight years that Judy McKinney was attending the Court Reporting Institute in North Seattle, the state investigated her school three times. But she didn't know about it.

Neither did other students attending the Court Reporting Institute. A state analysis found that only 6 percent of CRI students graduate. One percent become court reporters.

In 1999 and 2003, the school was forced to refund some students' tuition because a state agency found that the school used deceptive practices. In 2001 and 2003, the school promised to change the way it operated, but a 2005 investigation found that the same problems were still there.

Meanwhile, McKinney took out nearly \$28,500 in loans to pay for school. After eight years of school, her transcription still isn't fast enough or accurate enough to pass the state's test to become a court reporter.

Now the state Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board, which oversees some vocational and technical schools, is trying to shut down the school after a fourth investigation concluded last summer that it had not improved. The school appealed, and a hearing is set for September.

While the appeal is pending, the school is allowed to continue enrolling students.

Several former students complained to the state, saying they had enrolled at the school on the promise of a career within 30 months and are now ashamed that they have nothing to show for their time and money. They say the state Workforce Board should have told students that the school was being investigated.

CRI's Director of Education, Mike Gergis, referred questions to the president, Alen Janisch, who did not return numerous messages left for him on his cellphone and at his office. He responded to a message left at his home only to say not to call his home again.

In their response to the state investigations and student complaints, CRI administrators said they made it clear when students enrolled that it sometimes take longer than 30 months to complete the program. They said they tried to help students who were falling behind — even tutoring them privately.



ELLEN M. BANNER / THE SEATTLE TIMES  
Tina Willis types on an electric stenewriter and watches what she types on the computer screen in her Everett home. Willis is a former student of the Court Reporting Institute.



MARK HARRISON / THE SEATTLE TIMES  
Former student Valerie Factor stayed at the Court Reporting Institute for two years and racked up \$24,000 in tuition costs.

## **Too few finish program**

For state investigator Peggy Rudolph, it came down to the school's minuscule graduation rate.

"I determined, in my judgment, that with a completion rate as low as theirs, the program just wasn't adequate," she said.

The Court Reporting Institute has been licensed in Washington since 1988 and has campuses in Tacoma, San Diego and Boise, Idaho. It also offers computer training and sales and marketing classes, according to its Web site.

Court reporters transcribe depositions or courtroom testimony using a machine with 24 keys that spells words phonetically. The average court-reporting program takes 33 months to complete, according to the National Court Reporting Institute, and the average salary for a court reporter is \$61,000 a year.

Green River Community College offers a less-expensive degree in court reporting, but CRI persuades students to enroll by saying its program is faster, according to the state's findings.

CRI charges progressively less for tuition every year students are enrolled. The first academic year was about \$8,000 in 2003. The second and third year each cost about \$6,000; the fourth year cost nearly \$4,000; and subsequent years were about \$3,000. In addition, students paid fees, rented equipment and bought books.

Admissions agents disclose their graduation rate, as they are required to. They say students are making so much money working by the time they get to the end of their classes that the school can't persuade them to come back and graduate, former students said.

The state doesn't spend a lot of time "out in the field" checking up on schools, Rudolph said, and the board relies largely on complaints to determine whether a school has improved. It resists shutting down a school because that affects so many students.

All the state's findings about the school are public, Rudolph said.

"It's not our agency's practice to just proactively publish the results of an investigation," she said. "It's just not something we've ever done."

A spokeswoman for the board said it is looking into posting some information on the agency's Web site.

## **Complaints cite unqualified teachers**

In more than a dozen complaints to the state Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board, former CRI students described underqualified instructors and old equipment at the school.

The students said they were left on their own to learn to type in court-reporter shorthand and had to work off of taped dictations so garbled that they often couldn't understand the words. Computers didn't work and classes were taught by lab assistants — current students who weren't court reporters, according to the complaints and state rulings.

In their responses to the state, CRI administrators say they describe their program to prospective students as "self-paced." Students charged with leading classes always worked under a qualified instructor, they said.

Former student Valerie Factor stayed for two years and racked up \$24,000 in tuition costs. She left, she said, when she realized that she wasn't learning enough to help her get a court-reporting job.

"I couldn't even be a court reporter's assistant at this point," Factor said. "I don't even know enough about it to give you examples of what I don't know."

She returned to doing massage therapy but says she's still interested in finding another career. She's nervous about choosing a school, though.

### **Hard to quit**

Factor left relatively soon, compared with other former students, some of whom stayed six years or longer.

Some former students say that by the time they realized there were problems with the school, they had invested so much time and money that they thought they should stick it out. Some say they were so beaten down by failure that they didn't have the confidence to quit. Others were so far in debt that they couldn't afford to drop out because they would have to start paying back their loans.

At one point, McKinney said, she was so ashamed of still taking classes that she lied to her grown children about it.

"By the time you realized what happened, you've put too much of your time and your life into it," she said. "You have to make it work."

Most of the students at the school relied on loans. If students said they wanted to quit, administrators talked them into taking a leave of absence — funded by student loans.

Tina Willis rolled old student-loan debt into new loans when she enrolled at CRI. When she dropped out six years later, she owed \$70,000 in student loans. She enrolled in an online course she says is teaching her much more.

At 49, Eileen Horst should be saving for her retirement. Instead, she's making student-loan payments of \$352 a month for the six-plus years she spent at CRI. She finally dropped out and found a job doing closed-captioning, which uses some of the same skills as court reporting. She makes about \$32,000 a year.

"I would have loved to have known [about the state's investigations] because my gut feeling told me something was not right," Horst said. "But I'm not a quitter, and I was determined to get this education."

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