

Lawsuit Probes College's Study-Abroad Program Billing Practices

By Carina Zaragoza

A lawsuit against a Massachusetts college was filed last month. The lawsuit alleges the college charges students in its study-abroad program full tuition and room and board even though the program costs thousands of dollars less. The lawsuit claims the college pockets the difference.

The lawsuit was brought by the family of a student who traveled to and lived in South Africa. The family paid the entire cost of attendance, which totaled \$21,000 including room and board, though the student did not utilize campus facilities and despite the study-abroad program costing \$4,439 less. This billing practice, and the question of where the overpayment goes, is at the center of the lawsuit. The lawsuit alleges charging full tuition during a study-abroad semester is a deceptive practice.

Colleges and universities across the country offer study-abroad programs, and their billing practices vary. Some schools charge room and board, such as the school named in the lawsuit. Others do not charge room and board, but full tuition is still required. Some schools allow families to pay for the study-abroad program directly, thus bypassing the school altogether. However, some schools may not accept credit for the semester abroad if payment is made in this manner, a practice that many critics of schools' study-abroad billing practices deem to be punitive.

The popularity of study-abroad programs has skyrocketed in recent years. Nearly a quarter-million students participated in study-abroad programs in the past year. Study-abroad programs have the potential to become profitable, both for study-abroad program providers and the schools that contract them. The potential for unregulated profits is under scrutiny.

The Forum on Education Abroad announced a code of ethics for study-abroad programs and released *The Standards of Good Practice for Education Abroad*. Created in 2001, the Forum on Education Abroad's mission is "to meet the needs of the education abroad profession" and specifically to "improve education abroad programs to benefit the students that participate in them." The code of ethics, however, does not address pricing or costs or propose regulation of colleges' study-abroad billing practices.

Colleges and universities and study-abroad programs have come under fire in the past few months. Recently, the New York Attorney General's Office opened an investigation into the study-abroad programs offered at universities and colleges around the country. Fifteen institutions were subpoenaed as well as several study-abroad program providers. The investigation seeks to determine whether school officials are being offered incentives in exchange for preference of certain

study-abroad programs. Now, Connecticut's attorney general has begun to look into study-abroad programs.

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