

**United States House of Representatives
House Committee on Oversight and Reform
Subcommittee on Economic and Consumer Policy**

**Hearing Examining For-Profit College Oversight and Student Debt
May 22, 2019**

**Written Testimony of Student
Robert J. (“RJ”) Infusino**

Good afternoon, Chairman and members of the Committee. My name is Robert J. Infusino and I am a former student of the for-profit Illinois Institute of Art in Schaumburg, Illinois. Thank you for inviting me here today.

This is my first visit to Washington, DC. This should be an exciting and happy day, but the truth is I am here because my life has been turned upside down by a school that cared more about making money than looking out for students. My career plans are on hold. I’ve lost thousands of dollars, and I’ve lost faith in the system that is supposed to protect students like me.

The Illinois Institute of Art, formerly owned by a company called Education Management Corporation (EDMC), started recruiting me when I was 15 years old. I had no real understanding of how college worked, or that there was even a difference between for-profit and non-profit colleges. In my senior year of high school I submitted an application to the Illinois Institute of Art and was accepted immediately. I was so excited. I dreamed of being an audio engineer, and they convinced me this was the best path for me to achieve my dreams.

When I toured the school, no one mentioned to me anything about the price. The recruiter showed me classrooms and audio facilities, and then asked about my interests. I told him I was interested in working on video games, so he said they had a course in sound design for video games. Once I was enrolled, I learned there was no such class.

During the recruitment process, and even after, the school kept telling me they would get me an audio engineering job. They said that they had connections in the audio industry and relationships with all these media people. They said they could get me a meaningful internship in the industry that would jumpstart my career. Unfortunately, none of this was the case, and my internship was working in an insurance sales office where no one had any idea how to help me learn about the audio industry. It was a complete waste of time.

In 2017, the school was sold to a new nonprofit owner called the Dream Center. At first, I didn’t know what to think about the news, but then the school started making promises to us about all the exciting benefits we would receive because the school was becoming a nonprofit. We were

told that tuition would go down, we'd get better equipment, and that everything would improve. Unfortunately that also wasn't the case. Not even close.

Starting in 2018, instructors and advisors started leaving, suddenly and without any notice. New instructors would get to class with no idea of what they were supposed to teach. During this period, I didn't understand what was really happening, but I decided to make the best of it and focus on my studies as much as I could.

Then, a few days before returning to school from summer break last year (2018), I checked my email and found messages saying that the Illinois Institute of Art had lost its accreditation, and that it was closing at the end of the year.

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, I have to emphasize that this was one of the worst moments of my life. I felt like the world was coming down around me, like everything I had worked so hard for was falling apart. In those days, I was doing well at school. I felt like I was on the right path. Then I get this information and everything changed.

When I returned to campus, it was chaos. No one knew what was going on. I tried to talk to school officials, but no one would give me honest answers. And then I learned that the school knew about the loss of accreditation nearly six months before they told us about it in the email. They knew, but they didn't tell students. They just kept taking our money, and were even enrolling new students without telling them that the school was not accredited. I was stunned by this. If I had known, I could have transferred to another school instead of wasting my time and money. It is hard to put into words how betrayed I felt and still feel to this day.

I did everything I could to find answers, but no one could tell me anything. My classmates and I had to work this out all by ourselves, and we knew we couldn't trust the Dream Center at this point. And the Department of Education just kept sending us to the same worthless website.

Eventually I came to understand that I basically had two options. Neither was good.

My first option was to stay at the school long enough (even if I didn't want to be there anymore) so that I would be enrolled within the 120-day closed school discharge window. Back in July, when we were actually deciding what to do, no one explained closed school discharges to us, let alone the 120-day requirement. Not the school and not the Department of Education. And because the school did not close until the end of the year, my classmates who withdrew in July and August last year are not eligible for a discharge. They are getting punished for not staying longer after they learned they were defrauded.

Because I chose to remain enrolled while figuring out what to do, I came to learn that I could be eligible for a closed school discharge. This meant that I could have had my federal loans forgiven, but the tens of thousands of dollars my family had already paid out of pocket would be lost forever on top of the credits I worked so hard to earn. And even though I did not feel any closer to a job in the audio industry, I still did not want to give up or start over on my dream of becoming an audio engineer.

My other option was to transfer to another school. At first, the Dream Center tried to push us all into their online programs. But those programs soon got into trouble as well and could not accept us. Because of the accreditation loss, there were few schools I could transfer to, and I knew I'd lose work I'd already completed throughout the year.

After over a month of research and many conversations with friends and family, I decided that a transfer was the least-painful choice. When I searched for schools to transfer to, I found that it was other for-profit colleges that would accept most of my credits. I did not want to make the same mistake twice, but what else was I going to do? I felt trapped. I wanted to finish what I started and I had no better options. So, eyes wide open, I enrolled in another for-profit school where I'm now on track to graduate in March of 2020. If none of this had happened, I would be graduating next month. Instead, I'm spending an extra year in school, a year where I should be making money and advancing in my career. On top of all this, I have had to take on much more student loan debt than I originally planned for or intended to take on.

To add insult to injury, the Dream Center promised me five thousand dollars for tuition after I transferred to my new school. They even signed an agreement guaranteeing that the money would come. But the money did not come, and in March of 2019 the Dream Center emailed me to say that I would not be receiving it.

Now I find myself here, giving testimony before the United States Congress. Along with several of my classmates, I decided to take action by suing the Art Institute and its Dream Center owners. We are represented in our case by the National Student Legal Defense Network, and my attorneys are here with me today.

Back in March, my attorneys wrote a letter to the Department of Education asking that my loans, and those of my fellow students, be discharged. Why should I have to pay for worthless unaccredited classes that I never would have taken if my school had been honest with me? The Department has not even responded to my lawyers, and I don't understand why.

At the beginning, I never would have thought to question or doubt the honesty and intentions of a college. And I always would have thought that the Department of Education was there to help and serve students like me. But I don't have much trust in higher education anymore. I wish this

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weren't true. But it feels like I'm wrong for having wanted to learn, like I am being punished for trying to get an education and follow my dreams. I know there are thousands of other people with stories just like mine, many even worse. On behalf of my fellow classmates, I hope that the Department of Education will step out of the shadows and do what is right for students. And I hope that by sharing my experience with you today, I can help, in some small way, to prevent more people from being hurt like I was. Thank you.