

## CLAIMS ABOUT LA'JAMES NEED TO BE INVESTIGATED

EDITORIAL WRITING

Iowa is the place to be if you own a cosmetology school.

The state requires 2,100 hours of education and training to obtain a license to work as a cosmetologist. That's more than twice what some other states require. That requirement guarantees schools have student laborers for months to provide haircuts and facials to customers. Money flows in from multiple directions: students, the U.S. Department of Education and customers. But government provides little oversight of schools.

Iowa is not the place to be if you're a cosmetology student.

They spend months in school cutting and coloring hair, giving manicures and waxing eyebrows for no pay. They frequently graduate with thousands of dollars in student loan debt and work in an industry where the median wage is less than \$11 per hour. (Cosmetology school owners take issue with this federal wage calculation because it doesn't account for many cosmetologists whose annual wage is reduced because they work parttime.) Though Iowa licensed about 1,000 new cosmetologists last year, there were only a few hundred new jobs, federal statistics show.

As The Des Moines Register's editorial board has previously written, parents and school counselors should steer young people toward other options in higher education, including nonprofit community colleges. State lawmakers should reduce the number of hours required for a cosmetology license and end the taxpayer-funded grants students can receive to attend these schools.

And Iowa Attorney General Tom Miller should open an investigation into La'James International College, an Iowa-based cosmetology school with seven campuses, including five in this state. (The school is not affiliated with the Original La James College in Mason City.)

Since first publishing an editorial on cosmetology



March, the Register's editorial board has received

several complaints about the school from current and former students. Though Iowa has 27 cosmetology schools, La'James was the only one that was the subject of readers' complaints. Over the past few years, complaints have been filed with the attorney general, Iowa College Student Aid Commission and the Better Business Bureau. Some allege serious offenses, including the school not abiding by laws pertaining to refunding money to students who drop out.

No state entity can provide current, comprehensive information about the school's practices. The Iowa Board of Cosmetology Arts and Sciences, which licenses the school, is prohibited by Iowa law from providing any public information about complaints. The Virginia-based organization that accredits the school would not answer specific questions about

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La'James.

The quality and cost of higher education affects Iowa families, students and the taxpayers who frequently help pay for that education. President Barack Obama, Sen. Tom Harkin, numerous state attorneys general and others have raised concerns about for-profit colleges. Most of their focus has been on four-year institutions.

More attention must be paid to the practices at for-profit schools offering shorter, specialized education programs.

This includes cosmetology school programs that can cost students as much as \$30,000. The schools tend to attract young women from low-income families eligible for taxpayer-financed education grants.

Someone must look out for these Iowans who are simply trying to attain an education and state license to work.

Among the concerns expressed by Iowans about La'James:

Leigh Ann Jordan was enrolled at the Fort Dodge campus before transferring to another school. She told the attorney general the school is "declaring the entire two-year program as one class" and didn't refund the money she was entitled to. She also had to pay a \$1,300 "cancellation fee" when she withdrew.

Dawn Pendry started classes at La'James in 2010. She complained about not having an instructor, not being able to get answers about student aid and said students near graduation are "afraid to do a man's haircut because they have not received the training."

Tanya Youda enrolled in La'James, left and then returned. Though she had already paid \$1,500 for a "kit," containing curling irons, shears and other essentials, the school told her she needed to pay \$500 for a new one.

Bev Letze said her daughter Jennifer enrolled in La'James in 2010. The girl died in a car accident the month before classes began. Letze asked the school to refund the enrollment fee, but it didn't do so.

Danielle Lanus got serious about quitting a few months into her classes when she was told she needed to buy new and different textbooks than the ones she had already purchased. Her complaint to the attorney

general includes supporting documents, copies of correspondence with the school and a photocopy of an Iowa Code section, which she said the school is violating. A school representative told her because she had completed "just over 60 percent of the program," she was liable for the entire cost. She then received a letter from La'James telling her she owed more than \$6,300.

Corby Oliver was already licensed as a massage therapist when she returned to La'James in 2011 for her cosmetology degree. She says the school told her she would receive 350 hours of credit toward the 2,100 hours required for cosmetology. "At first they gave me 150 hours, then took them away. I kept pressuring them to look at the hours. When they finally did several months later, they said I should have said something earlier," said Oliver.

She says she never got credit for any of the hours. Now that Oliver has graduated and owes \$20,000 in student loans, she remains confounded by practices at the school.

"I've gotten my tax statement from La'James and there are transactions showing the school gave me money, but I never received it."

Angelica Blecher, who graduated last year, said everything started out fine when she was first enrolled, but "by the time it went to hell it was too late to drop or transfer." She is working at Great Clips in Des Moines and says she owes more than \$40,000 in student and parent education loans.

A handful of current students also contacted the Register's editorial board to express frustration and confusion about the school, but they did not want their names used because they feared retaliation, including being relegated to the receptionist desk for hours.

Iowa's government forces people who want to be cosmetologists to spend thousands of dollars and months attending a beauty school to secure a state license to work. That government provides essentially no oversight of the schools and little help when students are wronged.

It's the perfect arrangement if you are a for-profit beauty school but not so much if you are a student. It is time for government to look out for students.