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College must pay student \$2,000

Jury ruling represents partial victory in suit filed after credits wouldn't transfer

DAVID WICKERT; The News Tribune

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Wonder whether your college credits will transfer to another school? Better check for yourself.

That's one lesson from a student's partial victory in a lawsuit against Crown College.

Latesha Gonzalez claimed the Tacoma school led her to believe her credits would transfer to Gonzaga University. The credits, it turned out, won't transfer to Gonzaga or other traditional Washington colleges, which have a different kind of accreditation.

On Tuesday, a Pierce County Superior Court jury found some merit in Gonzalez's claim, ruling that Crown College violated the state Consumer Protection Act. But the jury awarded Gonzalez only \$2,000 in damages and dismissed a claim of fraud that required a finding that the misrepresentation was intentional.

Crown College is a private, for-profit school that offers business administration, paralegal, public administration and criminal justice programs. In court, the school denied that an employee told Gonzalez her credits would transfer to Gonzaga when she enrolled at Crown College in 2001.

Crown's attorney, Grant Kinnear, noted the school's catalog and an admission agreement she later initialed specifically stated it was up to Gonzalez to check for herself whether Crown credits would transfer.

Kinnear also noted that she didn't check with Gonzaga until more than a year after she initially enrolled at Crown. And he said Gonzalez withdrew from Crown several times and re-enrolled even after she learned the credits wouldn't transfer. Gonzalez withdrew from Crown for good in February 2003.

"Is this the behavior of a person who wants to go to Gonzaga?" Kinnear asked the jury in his closing argument. "This was not a person who had a plan that was ruined by Crown College."

Gonzalez's attorney, Karen Lundahl, argued that the school knew of the student's intention to transfer to Gonzaga, knew the credits probably wouldn't transfer and had an obligation to tell her. She said the school misled Gonzalez by intentionally withholding that information.

"If they'd told her the truth she'd have gone to a community college and would have been better served there," Lundahl told the jury.

The jury found Gonzalez might have been misled, but apparently felt there wasn't enough evidence that it was intentional. Although Gonzalez sought damages to cover \$3,465 for a student loan, plus lost wages, travel expenses and compensation for mental anguish, the jury awarded her only \$2,000.

Crown did waive \$3,400 it said Gonzalez owed the school. And Lundahl plans to ask Judge Kathryn Nelson to boost Gonzalez's damage award to \$8,000 and to require Crown to pay her attorney's fees. She also will ask for an injunction requiring Crown to cease what she called deceptive practices.

Gonzalez isn't the only former Crown student who feels ill-treated. Several others have filed a class-action lawsuit, claiming they also were misled about whether their credits would transfer. Those students also claim they were misled about the quality of a Crown education and their job prospects after graduation.

The school denies those claims.

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