

1 of 1 DOCUMENT

The Times

October 3, 1995, Tuesday

US students say college misled them over link with Oxford

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SECTION: Home news

LENGTH: 1038 words

OXFORD University is threatening legal action against a private college based just outside the city where 15 American students have walked out claiming they were misled into believing they were joining the ancient seat of learning.

The students, who paid up to \$21,000 (Pounds 13,290) in fees, are pursuing legal action of their own in the United States. Several spoke yesterday of their anger at discovering the college had no relationship with the university.

Warnborough College, which is licensed in Canada, recruits overseas students using literature emphasising its location. Its prospectus has an introduction headed "The traditions of Oxford, Oxford University and Warnborough College", which says the institution "maintains independence from the other colleges".

The prospectus adds: "Warnborough College is the leading gateway into Oxford for international students, and the only Oxford college that admits US students directly out of high school. Traditionally excluded from the University, US and other international students at the undergraduate level may now receive the same high level of education formerly reserved for British students."

Only about half of the Americans who enrolled last month for degree courses are still at Warnborough. Ian Schuler, an 18-year-old from Pennsylvania, who intends to see out the year, said: "We all thought we were coming to Oxford University. I was furious at the time, but I have borrowed \$9,000 and I have nowhere else to go."

Mr Schuler said: "We were told we would have use of the Bodleian Library and other university facilities. The library (here) is completely inadequate and there are no laboratories, the bathrooms were disgusting when we got here, and people were sleeping three or four to a room with one dresser and a wardrobe. The conditions have improved, but there are problems transferring back to US universities."

Paul Flather, the university's senior spokesman, said: "We have had a number of difficulties with private colleges over the years, but this is by far the worst case. We have heard from a number of students who feel that they were badly misled."

The university has written to Warnborough demanding its prospectus is withdrawn. Administrators are also planning to issue a warning on the Internet where a number of students appear to have learnt of the college.

Mr Flather said Oxford was taking strenuous steps to stop private colleges passing themselves off as part of the university. "We are anxious to protect students."

Friends Britt Sherman, 17, and Edna McLain, 18, travelled from Illinois to the college, leaving in disgust and heavily out of pocket after less than a week. Ms McLain said the college's representative in Seattle "specifically told me I was going to Oxford University and I would be getting my degree from there".

Ms McLain said she paid \$21,000 in student loans and \$1,000 of her own money, which she is trying to get back. She had hoped to study international law. Ms McLain claimed: "It was on their course listings but on the second day the dean told me they did not have a law programme." Miss Sherman, who was hoping to study archaeology and anthropology, said the facilities were dilapidated and dirty. She has now enrolled at an American university. She added: "The information they gave us was really ambiguous."

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The Attorney-General's office in Washington State said it was suing the college's recruitment office in Seattle. A spokesman said the charges were that the college had "no current authorisation to operate as a degree-granting authority" and that "it misled and deceived a substantial proportion of the public into believing Warnborough is a college in the Oxford University system".

The writ accuses Warnborough's American recruiters of "relying on the worldwide reputation of Oxford University to engage in acts and practices that have a tendency and capacity to deceive potential students into believing that Warnborough is an Oxford University college, when in truth and in fact it is not". It adds: "Warnborough is not licensed or authorised to grant degrees by any state in the United States, the District of Columbia, or the United Kingdom."

The Attorney-General of Washington State issued the writ against the college, its American admissions director, Mark Huck, and college president, Dr Brendon D. Tempest-Mogg.

The dean of Warnborough, Joseph Mansonberger, was unavailable for comment but the financial director, Jason Cronshaw, agreed the college's literature could be misinterpreted and said it would be changed next year.

He said it was the first time American "freshman", who are aged 17, had been targeted and he blamed "social reasons" such as homesickness and culture shock for most of the departures. He said 15 students had left but only two were for educational reasons, leaving 52 at the college.

Mr Cronshaw said: "The problem is that Oxford is an educational city and probably, especially from an American standpoint, not having a full idea what Oxford is, they do jump to conclusions."

He strongly denied any American students had been told they were coming to Oxford University. Although there were pictures of university colleges in the brochure, this was a by-product of illustrating the city, he said.

Mr Cronshaw said: "There are pictures of Oxford, the city, because we make sure our students are part of the city because they need to use facilities, such as the library. It is presented as an independent college operated in the city of Oxford offering degrees based on the American system. We are changing the literature or making it a bit clearer. We are also making sure they come to the college for interview next year."

Mr Cronshaw said the college offered "about 600" courses. He said the buildings were cleaned every day and said there was always at least one adult on the site overnight.

Maeave Sherlock, director of Ukcosa, a body representing overseas' students' interests, said: "This part of the private sector is not regulated."

The college, founded in 1973, is housed in 19th-century Yatscombe Hall, at Boars Hill, three miles out of Oxford.

LOAD-DATE: October 4, 1995

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH