June 10, 2015

Dear Ms. Pyle and Mr. Salladay:

I received Monday evening a request for an on-camera interview as part of your Center’s storytelling efforts. On behalf of University of Phoenix and Apollo Education Group, I am willing to answer questions in writing, and on camera with producers from PBS NewsHour or another respected newsroom that practices objective, fact-based journalism, and that actively seeks to root out bias from its higher education reporting. I have no faith that your organization employs such methods or can properly identify bias in its efforts about University of Phoenix. The resulting stories last summer from the open and welcoming effort at University of Phoenix San Diego were evidence enough that your work here is merely the sum of various parts focused on maligning and misrepresenting the University and its work in educating military students. I prefer proper political debate when faced with incomplete, one-sided storytelling constructed with policymaking and political agendas in mind.

University of Phoenix plays an important role in offering career relevant higher education degree and credential programs to active-duty servicemembers, veterans and military families. The University has demonstrated that role to your team, in person. But critical facts and context were omitted by your operation last year for reasons unclear. Interviews with students and faculty that seemed at odds with the experience of one individual in your storytelling were left on the cutting room floor. Documents from state regulators showing the University does not use “unduly aggressive recruiting” were left out of your stories. The University’s active support—alongside Student Veterans of America, Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S., Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA), American Legion and others—for reforms to “rein in bad actors from all sectors of higher education,” all missing from your stories. The University’s subsequent support for the President’s Executive Order 13607 and comprehensive complaint tracking and accountability systems at the federal VA, ignored in your Center’s reports. I could go on—with your omissions, and even my own personal experience debating your employee—but the fact remains that your Center’s stories are not written and produced to fairly represent the University.

Your Center’s inquiry claims to represent taxpayers and purports to use scientific method and analysis, yet its limited—surprisingly narrow scope—leaves unexamined other postsecondary institutions and many complex issues common to journalists covering higher education and veterans’ education benefits. Your employees construct narratives about University of Phoenix that conveniently align with one side of a debate. Your Center’s stories fail to examine—or choose to ignore—whether political partisanship, policy agenda, legal strategy, financial gain, grudge or ideology motivate those who criticize the University.

If the same line of questioning your Center employs in constructing stories about University of Phoenix
were used with those critical of our institution, I would take heart. Sadly, you practice a form of activist storytelling in higher education that is stark in its contrast to real journalism befitting the times and issues. You make great use of the freedom of speech, but not in fairly representing University of Phoenix.

Your Center will weave its stories with the voices of our critics. And I will speak with all the producers, editors and journalists you claim to indemnify for publishing and broadcasting those stories—in hopes of a fulsome reporting of facts and inquiry applied equally without bias.

Be assured, each step I take to vigorously set the record straight will be focused on defending and respecting each one of the hard-working veteran and active-duty military students at University of Phoenix. After risking life and limb defending the very freedom your storytellers enjoy in weaving their false narrative, military students earned the benefits afforded them under the Post 9/11 G.I. Bill., and have chosen to pursue their education at University of Phoenix. They do not deserve the slights, the belittled commentary and demeaning polemic inherent in your Center’s stories. Against steep odds, their hard work, resilience, and educational accomplishments should be celebrated, not questioned. Your storytellers’ use of innuendo and skepticism will second guess the intelligence and choices of our military students, even when these facts are unequivocally clear: University of Phoenix veteran and active-duty students are intelligent, honorable, hard-working men and women who successfully apply the skills they obtained at our institution to contribute to their families, communities, and the nation.

Sincerely,

Mark Brenner
Senior Vice President
Apollo Education Group, Inc. and University of Phoenix

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