

# Westech College abruptly shuts down, leaving students scrambling for refunds and answers

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Westech College, a for-profit trade school whose three campuses are in Southern California, has suddenly closed, citing money problems.

Students showing up for class Monday at Westech locations in Fontana, Moreno Valley and Victorville found locked doors and a notice saying the school was forced to shut down because of recent financial issues.

Stunned students said they're worried about getting tuition money back and making sure their credits will transfer to other schools.

Westech offered career programs including drafting and design, heating and air conditioning, fitness training, veterinary assistance and medical office administration.

The California Bureau for Private Postsecondary Education sent representatives to the area Monday to help students obtain transcripts and financial aid documentation, bureau spokeswoman Jennifer Iida said.

When a school closes, students have the right to request a refund from the school, to have student loans discharged, to request tuition reimbursement from the Student Tuition Recovery Fund and to transfer to another school, the bureau said in an email to students.

To request a loan discharge, students should contact their loan servicers — and if unsure who the servicers are, they should contact the [National Student Loan Data System](#), the bureau said. An application for the Student Tuition Recovery fund is available [on the bureau's website](#).

### **A change in cash flow**

Westech's recent financial troubles seem to involve a change in the way the U.S. Department of Education let the school access money for students' financial aid.

Usually, a school can draw down federal funds before disbursing that aid to the students. But in December, the Education Department sent Westech's president a letter saying the school would have to give out its own money and then apply for reimbursement from the government.

The Education Department made this change as a result of "serious findings of noncompliance ... including the failure to pay refunds," it said in a Dec. 16 letter to Westech College President Barry Malecki. The letter also cited "complaints that indicate lack of financial and administrative capability" at the school, although it did not give details.

"The issue, as I understood it, was [Westech] just didn't have the cash to continue operations" after the change, said Michale McComis, executive director of the Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges, which evaluates schools to help the federal government determine eligibility for federal financial aid programs.

That was not the school's first run-in with the Education Department.

In 2014, the department conducted a review of Westech to determine its compliance with regulations related to Title IV programs. (Title IV is the section of the Higher Education Act that authorizes the major federal financial aid programs.)

The review found several areas of noncompliance, including a lack of verification of students' FAFSA information, missing or inadequate loan counseling, failure to credit a student's account with a balance from federal funds paid out, and failure to publish required information about financial assistance.

According to a 2015 letter from the Education Department, though, Westech resolved the issues and did not have to take further action.

Previously, the department had denied the school's Fitness Training Program from eligibility for federal student aid and cited several findings of noncompliance in a 2013 audit. Both resulted in significant liabilities owed to the government, the Education Department wrote, but Westech made written assurances that it had a satisfactory repayment plan, and the program was reinstated.

## **‘It’s just awful’**

Alex Argueta, 21, of Riverside had been working a warehouse job when he decided about a year ago to go back to school and work toward a better career. He signed up at Westech’s Moreno Valley campus, which offered night classes and the computer systems technician program he was interested in. He said that he borrowed nearly \$10,000 from family to pay the tuition and that he finished his classwork about three weeks ago — though he still hasn’t received his diploma.

On Saturday, he heard rumors that Westech might be closing, but he figured it was an April Fool’s joke. Then, on Sunday, his teacher called to say workers with moving vans appeared to be emptying out the campus. He rushed over and saw them himself.

"It's ridiculous. It's just awful," he said.

At the Bureau of Private Postsecondary Education’s workshop in Riverside on Monday afternoon

At the Bureau of Private Postsecondary Education’s workshop in Riverside on Monday afternoon, Argueta said officials couldn’t tell him for certain whether he would receive his diploma.

Earlier, at the Moreno Valley campus, large signs on two sides of the building announced that the school was "Now enrolling," but the doors were locked and the buildings appeared empty of any students or staff. The lobby, which could be seen through glass doors, was littered with fitness equipment, office supplies and a folding table.

There were no signs on the building announcing the school's closure or advising of any next steps.

Westech's website and Twitter and Facebook accounts had no details about the closure as of Monday afternoon, and the school could not be reached for comment.