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# Test-prep company faces dubious doppelganger

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A test preparation company is being accused of defrauding law school hopefuls around the country, including some from UF, by purporting to be another LSAT preparation company that bears an identical name.

Houston-based company Test Masters boasts to have improved student SAT scores since 1991, but the company only began offering LSAT preparation in 2002.

The other TestMasters company, which is based in Santa Monica, Calif., has also been in operation since 1991 but offers only LSAT courses.

Sharon Naim, the Santa Monica-based company's in-house counselor, said many students have mistakenly enrolled in the Houston company's courses because it controls the domain name testmasters.com. She added that in another effort to confuse students, the Houston company sometimes spells its title as a single word, like the Santa Monica company.

In addition to accusations from students that they have been deceived by the Houston business' name and were denied refunds from the company, there are other allegations surfacing that the company's instruction is either substandard or completely nonexistent.

Former University of Pennsylvania student Gina Ciraldo said she was eager to enroll in an LSAT preparation course after graduating, so she signed up for a Test Masters class in her hometown of Miami that was offered by the Houston-based company.

Later, Ciraldo said, the course was abruptly canceled due to what Test Masters said was a lack of sufficient enrollment. However, Ciraldo said that the Houston-based Test Masters actually cancels the majority of its courses before sessions begin.

"It makes it seem like [Test Masters is] offering their course everywhere, even though they don't actually have teachers in these places," she said.

Ciraldo said Test Masters offered her the chance to enroll in a Houston LSAT course, so she agreed to fly from Florida to Texas every weekend for a month in order to take the class.

The reason she traveled for the class is because of the Santa Monica-based company's reputation, she said. Its founder completed the LSAT perfectly 12 times and holds the record for the most perfect scores.

However, upon attending course sessions in Houston, Ciraldo and other classmates noticed that the preparation material was inadequate and the instructor didn't seem knowledgeable about the LSAT at all.

Naim said the Houston Test Masters business routinely deceives students into believing they are enrolling in the California company's courses.

"I don't think [the Houston-based Test Masters has] prepared more than 100 students," she said. "They don't even require that their instructors take a real LSAT."

Naim said that the Santa Monica preparation company is very popular at UF and that she's received about three calls from UF students who accidentally signed up for the Houston-based company's course, only to learn that it would never be offered.

"To my knowledge, they've never actually offered (a course in Gainesville)," said Pam Black, an instructor for the Santa Monica-based TestMasters who teaches in both Gainesville and Tallahassee.

She added that many of her students come to her class warning of fraud within the Houston-based company.

A spokesman for Houston's Test Masters, who asked to remain anonymous, said that the only reason Test Masters cancels its courses is due to enrollment of fewer than six students, and that course cancellations are widely practiced within the test-preparation industry.

"[Allowing courses to take place without sufficient enrollment is] not profitable. This isn't a charity," he said, adding that 95 percent of the courses offered by Test Masters eventually occur as scheduled.

Naim refuted the spokesman's claim, stating student testimonies prove that the majority of Test Masters courses never take place.

Additionally, a clause within the company's student agreement, which is required to be signed at least 10 days before a course's commencement, states that students are ineligible for refunds if they take legal action against Test Masters.

Another waiver students must sign requires them to acknowledge that Test Masters is not operated by other companies including Robin Singh Educational Services, which owns the Santa Monica-based TestMasters.

The Santa Monica company plans to take its case to the U.S. Supreme Court.