

Tri-Valley University called 'sham,' accused of immigration fraud

San Jose Mercury News (California)

January 20, 2011 Thursday

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Section: BREAKING; News

Length: 443 words

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Body

PLEASANTON -- A Pleasanton university that catered to mostly online students is being called a sham by federal prosecutors who say the university was a front to illegally provide immigration status to foreign nationals.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents on Wednesday were at the Tri-Valley University campus on Boulder Court in Pleasanton and executed search warrants at three other properties owned by school founder Susan Su, including one in the gated Ruby Hill community.

The complaint, filed by the U.S. District Attorney's Office on Wednesday, claims Su was part of an elaborate scheme to defraud, using false statements and misrepresentations to the Department of Homeland Security.

"Since its inception ... Tri-Valley University has been a sham university, which Su, and others, have used to facilitate foreign nationals in illegally acquiring student immigration status that authorizes them to remain in the United States," the complaint reads.

According to the complaint, Su and Tri-Valley University have made millions of dollars in tuition fees for issuing the visa-related documents, enabling foreign nationals to obtain illegal student immigration status.

Calls to Tri-Valley University were not returned.

ICE began its investigation in May 2010. The institution received its approval to issue visas in February 2009 and had the approval for about 30 students. In May 2009 the school had 11 active students that had received F-1 visas, and 939 by May 2010.

According to the complaint, more than 95 percent of students were from India. For more than half of them, the university reported their address was a single apartment in Sunnyvale. The apartment manager told ICE agents that four university students lived there from June 2007 to August 2009 and none since.

Investigators believe TVU reported that most of its students live at the apartment to conceal they don't live in the state.

For a student to maintain the immigration status, they must show proof they are making reasonable progress toward completing coursework and physically attend classes.

One of the school's professors, who did not want his name used, said Thursday he was shocked by the investigation. He said he taught online courses out of his home since 2009 and he said his experience with the university has been positive.

"I teach high quality courses and my students are good students and that's all I can tell you," he said.

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He said classes were supposed to restart Jan. 10 after winter break, but there was a delay. He said he got an email from Su on Thursday that said classes would begin soon.

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Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: IMMIGRATION (92%); PASSPORTS & VISAS (90%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (90%); STUDENTS & STUDENT LIFE (90%); FRAUD & FINANCIAL CRIME (89%); INVESTIGATIONS (89%); ONLINE SCHOOLS (78%); COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS (78%); COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES (78%); SUITS & CLAIMS (78%); COLLEGE STUDENTS (78%); TEACHING & TEACHERS (78%); DISTANCE LEARNING (78%); PUBLIC PROSECUTORS (78%); FALSE STATEMENTS (78%); SPECIAL INVESTIGATIVE FORCES (78%); FEDERAL INVESTIGATIONS (78%); TUITION FEES (73%); NATIONAL SECURITY (72%); SEARCH WARRANTS (72%); APPROVALS (66%)

Organization: US DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY (57%)

Industry: ONLINE SCHOOLS (78%); COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS (78%); COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES (78%); COLLEGE STUDENTS (78%)

Geographic: UNITED STATES (93%); INDIA (79%)

Load-Date: January 22, 2011