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Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, chairman of the Senate's Health, Education, Labor & Pension Committee, wrote an April 2 op-ed in this newspaper that focused entirely on Bridgepoint Education – a locally headquartered, private-sector, higher education institution open to San Diegans and others pursuing a college degree. Harkin attempted to portray Bridgepoint as something it's not, relying on inaccurate data and misleading information to make his point. Now some clarification is necessary.

No matter how hard Harkin and others try to discredit Bridgepoint and private-sector colleges, these institutions are providing millions of Americans the opportunity to advance their education and enter a competitive work force more qualified and better prepared. These institutions, mainly through an online setting, are infusing desperately needed choice and competition into a market once dominated by traditional colleges and universities. Enrollment is growing at Bridgepoint due in large part to its reputation among students.

It makes sense why so many prospective students are considering the advantages offered by Bridgepoint's Ashford University campuses. Among the benefits, affordability is only part of the attraction. Typically, for an Ashford undergraduate student taking a full course load online, the tuition is \$11,700. This is considerably lower than the average annual tuition at most traditional and private-sector schools and even some taxpayer-supported public schools.

Missing from the senator's argument was recognition that, since tuition is relatively low, students typically graduate with less debt, shouldering repayment rates in between those of public and private schools. A degree through Bridgepoint's Ashford University also enhances future income potential. On average, college graduates earn \$1.6 million more over a lifetime than workers with only a high school diploma. They are also less likely to rely on social safety-net programs and pay more in taxes over the course of their careers.

Harkin's characterization that nearly two-thirds of Ashford students drop out without a degree is misleading. If student enrollment is measured from one fall semester to the next, regardless of when they first enrolled, the actual retention rate is 61 percent. Those pursuing a master's degree have an annual retention rate of 79 percent – high by any comparison.

Harkin also targeted Ashford for its one job placement counselor on its Clinton, Iowa, campus. The reality is that Ashford employs one traditional career services coordinator to service its 782 campus-based students, not the school's 78,000 online students. The majority of students are working adults – 74 percent are employed, with an average age of 35 – who have chosen to pursue a degree online. Naturally, the employment services that are needed to serve this population are different from those needed for traditional campus learners.

Ashford's enrollment increase between 2005 and 2010 was rapid, largely the result of a value proposition to students who could not otherwise access traditional college programs. The combination of affordability, accessibility, transferability and heritage has allowed it to consistently meet growing demand.

Most criticism of private-sector education seems to center on the word "profit." Critics consistently ignore the efficiencies achieved by private-sector schools, investments in technology, learning innovations and overall economic contributions. In 2009 alone, Bridgepoint provided more than \$500 million to the San Diego economy. The Clinton, Iowa, campus generated more than \$40 million.

Considering these points, Harkin's Republican counterpart on the Senate committee, Sen. Mike Enzi of Wyoming, was right to condemn a recent oversight hearing focused on Bridgepoint, saying "this persistent focus has led to a disturbing distortion of the facts." I could not agree more.

The educational model pioneered by Bridgepoint and the value created for both students and taxpayers provides an entirely new way of thinking when it comes to higher education. Instead of criticizing Bridgepoint and other private-sector colleges, my hope is that Harkin and those who share his viewpoint will join the effort to create more choice and opportunity within higher education. Of course, ensuring that these institutions remain efficient is a responsibility we all share, but quickly dismissing their credibility based on a distortion of the facts is a disservice to every American committed to securing a brighter future.

Private-sector schools like Ashford University are bringing college within reach for students who cannot access the traditional education system. That's good for anyone interested in earning a degree. It's also good for the economy and our work force. All of which solidifies Bridgepoint's

place as a leader in the higher education community.

*Hunter, R-Alpine, is a member of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce and chairman of the subcommittee on early childhood, elementary and secondary education. He is a member of what is informally known as the "Big 8" on education reform.*