

# Akron Beacon Journal

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## EDUCATION

# University of Akron pays \$550,000 to 12 students after letting program accreditation lapse

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The University of Akron last week paid \$550,000 to settle a lawsuit with 12 former students whose dual therapy and counseling doctoral program lost one of its two accreditations before they graduated.

The students were in the university's unique dual PhD program that awarded doctorate degrees in both therapy and counseling. But according to the lawsuit, the university allowed the counseling accreditation lapse without seeking protections for students already in the program at the time.

The lawsuit, filed in 2018 in the Summit County Court of Common Pleas, alleged violations of Ohio's Consumer Sales Practices Act. The university, the lawsuit said, had specifically marketed this dual program to prospective students based on the advantages they would have by earning accredited degrees in two related fields.

"When you have a PhD that's accredited in two different fields, obviously your career opportunities are going to be different," the plaintiffs' lead attorney Peter Pattakos said.

Those students came to Akron for that "one-of-a-kind" program, he said.

According to the original lawsuit, "plaintiffs relocated, changed careers, incurred debt, and undertook other life-altering changes for the specific purpose of attaining dually accredited degrees and licensures" in both the counseling and therapy programs, based on how the university marketed the program.

Pattakos said the university misled students through the accreditation process, telling students it was seeking renewal when a decision had been made with the provost at the time not to continue with the dual accreditation program.

"The settlement represents a compromise of disputed claims which have now been resolved," the university said in a statement. "The University considers this matter closed."

A judge in 2021 dismissed the university's motion for summary judgment, with Judge Susan Baker Ross writing it was "clear" the university "took almost no action to minimize the impact of its decision to let" the counseling accreditation from the the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) lapse.

"Defendant appears to repeatedly take a 'well CACREP wouldn't have let me do it anyways even if I had tried' approach," the judge wrote.

The accreditors had suggestions for the program to improve it, the summary judgement states, and "rather than taking said suggestions and responding to CACREP, Defendants hold up these mere suggestions as proof that CACREP would have denied reaccreditation anyways and there was nothing more that could be done."

"Perhaps more egregiously," the judge continued, "Akron U did not make a special request to CACREP to grandfather in existing doctoral students" based on the assumption it would not have been granted, a statement contradicted by a member of the accrediting body who testified the body granted extensions regularly.

Pattakos said the settlement provides some relief for the 12 doctoral students, who were all nearing the end of their programs and had invested years of time and money into the dual PhD program but left with only one accredited degree.

"We're grateful that the university has acknowledged that our clients were wronged here and a settlement of this size is a substantial recognition of the wrong that was done," Pattakos said. "We were grateful that we were able to resolve this with the university."

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