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Preface

Provision of phony academic credentials to customers, some of whom are unwitting victims and some willing participants, is a remarkably large, complex industry in the United States. Many of the distributors promote fake universities featuring Web sites for non-existent schools, bogus credential verifying services, and entirely fake accrediting organizations. But others take a simpler route, issuing counterfeit diplomas in the names of genuine schools and leaving the matter of verification in the hands of the customer.

It is difficult to develop a precise measure of the number of fake degrees and diplomas sold by U.S.-based credential mills, but some estimates put the figure in excess of 200,000 per year.¹ (The Council for Higher Education Accreditation [2007a] describes the bogus academic credential business as a \$500 million industry.) This is more than the number of degrees issued by all the colleges and universities in any single state except for New York and California. If we can extrapolate the characteristics of the counterfeit diploma market from what is known about the sales of degrees from fake universities, we can conclude that five per cent of the buyers are federal employees (CHEA 2007a),² while another five percent are state government workers.³ Nearly half the degrees are sold to foreign customers, many from the Middle East, who can use their purchased credentials to apply for visas to enter the United States.⁴

¹ The estimate is imprecise, but reasonable. It is based on an analysis of information from an informant employed by the University Degree Program (by far the largest of all diploma mills), a survey of the frequency of appearance of various known diploma mills in résumés posted to Monster.Com, data presented during 1985 congressional hearings chaired by Rep. Claude Pepper, and information released by the Department of Justice concerning the St. Regis University buyer's list during the course of its prosecution of the mill's alleged operators. All information we have seen is consistent with this astonishingly large figure. Probably half the credentials sold are either master's or doctoral degrees. This figure should be compared with the total number of legitimate master's and doctoral degrees awarded during the 2004-05 school year, 574,618 and 52,631 respectively. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (<http://nces.ed.gov>), colleges and universities in California awarded 309,291 post-secondary degrees that year, while New York schools awarded 240,316 degrees. Texas is third nationally, with 171,298 degrees.

² In addition, see court documents associated with *USA vs. Randock et al.*, filed 10/05/2005 (case no. 2:2005cr00180).

³ See material from Congressman Claude Pepper's 1985 congressional hearings on diploma mills. A description of the hearings can be found in *The New York Times* archives: see "Falsified Degrees Growing Problem," Philip M. Boffey, December 12, 1985. The article is available online here: <<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?sec=health&res=9F00E3DF143BF931A25751C1A963948260>>.

⁴ Court documents associated with *USA vs. Randock et al.*, filed 10/05/2005 (case no. 2:2005cr00180).

Roughly half the credentials are masters and doctoral degrees.⁵ Compare this with the 2.8 million legitimate degrees awarded annually, of which 575,000 are masters and 53,000 are doctoral degrees. It appears that diploma counterfeiters and degree mills sell as many doctoral degrees annually as those awarded by *all legitimate universities in the United States*.⁶

Harm Done, With Frightening Potential

Surely diploma forgers and mills pose threats to public safety. We do not want untrained engineers designing our airliners or untrained physicians running pharmaceutical research programs. Likewise, we certainly do not want our children taught by teachers with purchased credentials. National security issues are significant too—tens of thousands of degrees are sold annually to foreign nationals who can use them to seek U.S. entry visas. In the developing world, where doctors, engineers, and teachers are in desperately short supply, diploma mills' bribery of education officials can interfere with the establishment of legitimate universities. As recent history shows, misery in unstable and failed states overflows national boundaries and spreads through the rest of the world.

Customers with purchased credentials use their documents in professional settings, and go so far as to posture as M.D. degree-holders. There are direct financial burdens on taxpayers that arise from the credential fraud business. One good example is the cost in undeserved salary raises paid to federal employees who have received promotions, thanks to their purchased degrees. The salary of a mid-career federal worker who jumps a full pay grade will increase by more than \$4,000. With roughly 10,000 federal workers purchasing bogus degrees each year, the annual cost to taxpayers of excess salary payments is hundreds of millions of dollars.

Hope for the Future

These are not mom-and-pop businesses. The Saint Regis group, based in Spokane, spread its personnel, mail drops and affiliated “schools” and printing facilities across 18 states and 22 countries (see Appendix D). The only organized federal response to the problem of fake academic credentials was discontinued in 1991, just as the internet-driven boom in credential fraud began, when this book's author (who was running the Federal Bureau of Investigation's “Dipscam” task force) retired from the FBI. But there has been recent progress: the *Diploma Integrity Protection Act of 2007*, submitted to the 110th Congress as House Resolution 773 by Congresswoman Betty McCollum and co-sponsors,⁷ is the

⁵ My estimate is based on an essay of somewhat over 100 University Degree Program customers whose educational credentials were listed on their employer's Web sites.

⁶ Op. cit.: footnote 1.

⁷ <<http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/bdquery/z?d110:h773>>

first piece of federal legislation since the invention of the Internet to confront squarely and directly the problem of diploma mills. We feel it is deserving of strong bipartisan support, and additional co-sponsorship. Perhaps it will move forward.

The Higher Education community has shown interest and support in efforts to stamp out credential fraud. The Council for Higher Education Accreditation, the American Council on Education, the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, the American Association of Community Colleges, the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities, the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges, the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities, and the Association of Community College Trustees are actively supportive of HR 773.⁸ The *Chronicle of Higher Education*, which is read by nearly all university administrators, produced a special edition devoted to diploma mills some time before HR 773 was drafted. A number of universities (including Denver-based Regis University) have sued diploma forgers and mills for trademark and copyright violations; it is clear that the administrations of these schools would be glad to see progress at the federal level.

One of the most important activities in the eradication of academic credential fraud consists of collecting, organizing, and publishing information about it. Increased awareness of the existence and nature of the problem will render it more perilous for unscrupulous individuals to use fake degrees and diplomas for professional gain. Ezell's publications concerning diploma mills, accreditation mills, and now credential forgers, play an important role in this.

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⁸ July 11, 2007 letter from these organizations to Congresswoman Betty McCollum expressing support and urging the House Committee on Education and Labor to schedule hearings on the bill.

Foreword

Although more than twenty years have passed, it is with pride and a great deal of fondness that my professional endeavors and associations in 1985 are reflected upon. At that point, I was halfway through my career as a U.S. Postal Inspector, and was selected to serve as an investigator on the Congressional Subcommittee on Health and Long-Term Care chaired by the late Claude Pepper of Florida. Congressman Pepper had proved a staunch advocate for senior citizens and healthcare related issues. His staff had become aware of an investigation conducted by the Postal Inspection Service regarding the sale of fraudulent medical degrees. This prompted their interest in pursuing the subject of fraudulent credentials and degrees generally, so they requested a Postal Inspector to assist them. Currently serving in Washington, D.C. at the time, I found myself going to Capitol Hill each day where I joined a highly talented and motivated group of subcommittee staff members.

Unlike investigations I conducted as a Postal Inspector, the goal was not to gather evidence leading to charges that would be litigated in court but to determine whether new legislation was needed to solve the problem. Our findings were to be presented at a Congressional Hearing. And how better to demonstrate the problem of fraudulent degrees than to purchase one for the Sub-Committee Chairman, Congressman Pepper? Our plan was to obtain a doctorate in psychology in his name that required no class attendance, exams, or coursework. The organization that offered to help in this way was Vocational Guidance of Columbus, Ohio. Through this firm we learned that for a fee of \$1,780, Congressman Pepper could become “Dr. Pepper,” with a degree awarded by Union University of Los Angeles. We mailed our payment only to be disappointed a few days later when it was returned with the label “Refused.” The reason for the return of our order was that Vocational Guidance had been shut down by an investigation led by then FBI Special Agent Allen Ezell, the now widely-recognized expert on fraudulent degrees. He is, of course, author of this volume.

Undeterred by this development, Union University was approached directly and agreed to consider applicant Pepper for a doctorate degree. However, Union U. required the submission of a list of books the degree applicant had read (44 titles were supplied) and three book reports from that list (each submission was about three pages

in length). A Ph.D. in Psychology was then awarded by Union University on November 30, 1985 and presented to Congressman Pepper at the Subcommittee's Hearing on Fraudulent Credentials held on December 11, 1985. This undertaking provided compelling evidence of how easy it was to obtain a doctorate degree in a field of study (even, as this case illustrates, one with potential clinical applications).

The Subcommittee's hearing also provided an opportunity for me to meet Allen Ezell; and unbeknownst to us at that time, this initial meeting would not be our last. About five years later we again crossed paths, this time in Tampa, Florida. We found each other investigating a local mail order degree operation that called itself University Novelty. Our reunion evolved into a joint agency effort that resulted in the demise of yet another purveyor of fraudulent degrees (although not before I purchased a degree in nuclear science engineering from a leading university, so that I could work in a nuclear power plant—or so I told University Novelty when I ordered it!).

Thereafter, Ezell and I conversed frequently on a variety of topics of mutual concern, although our discussions seemed always to return to the issue of fraudulent degrees. Notwithstanding his other investigative responsibilities, he continued to gather information and intelligence about what was becoming a widespread problem.

Later, even with his government agent days behind him, Ezell continued to monitor the illicit activities in this area to the point where his knowledge was unsurpassed. Thus, when I learned that he co-authored *Degree Mills: The Billion Dollar Industry That Has Sold Over a Million Fake Diplomas* (2005; Prometheus Books), I was delighted to see it published. After reading this informative, engaging volume I felt compelled to encourage administrators in higher education to read it, so I wrote a book review that appeared in the Spring 2005 edition of *College and University Journal*. In particular, I referenced the section of the book that presents evidence of unnamed individuals in a variety of professional positions, including within academia, who have fake degrees. Ezell also went on to publish *Accreditation Mills* in 2007 to illuminate yet another construct of the bogus diploma industry.

Yet despite government enforcement actions, oversight and educational initiatives by AACRAO, and Ezell's ongoing investigative efforts in this area, much work remains to be done. Public revelations, as reported in the *New York Times* on April 27, 2007, that the Dean of Admissions at Massachusetts Institute of Technology had been falsely representing degrees earned, provides recent, high profile support to this argument. And a news report from Agence France-Presse (August 9, 2007) that Korean prosecutors launched an initiative to root out those in the workforce holding fraudulent credentials (many from U.S. institutions) reinforces the worldwide scope of these activities. Clearly, those who prosper from furnishing fictitious degrees, whether by way of counterfeit diplomas or worthless educational programs, must be stopped. And those who

have acquired these bogus credentials to enhance their professional careers (and in doing so, endanger the welfare of individuals and/or society in general in many cases) must be identified.

The good news is that the battle continues; and this book represents Ezell's latest and perhaps most significant contribution to this ongoing campaign. This book is the first to explore all aspects of counterfeiting, printing methods, counterfeit diplomas and transcripts, and Web sites that are selling these bogus documents. He offers his expertise in how to recognize spurious degrees and transcripts and, perhaps most importantly, makes recommendations for preventive steps that can be taken to stem this tide of deceit. It is an essential resource for those who evaluate degrees, diplomas, transcripts and other credentials for educational and employment purposes.

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Introduction

A college degree is a ticket to success and prosperity for many people. Today the college diploma is viewed as the key to economic security. Generally, degree holders earn about 35 percent more than non-degree holders. Those holding college degrees probably have a greater feeling of self-achievement and are more satisfied with their life's work. In fact, many degree mill Web sites use illustrations showing the difference in earnings for college "graduates" versus non-graduates as a sales tool. It stands to reason if the college degree/diploma is the key to the door of success, then many will obtain these documents the easy way—by utilizing counterfeit products.

In 1994, Senator Susan Collins (D-Maine) said, "Diploma Mill credentials devalue the legitimate degrees earned by millions of individuals through hard work, persistence and achievements." Counterfeit diplomas and transcripts have become part of this deception. With the many companies in this business, someone may be able to purchase a diploma and transcript in the name of Sen. Collins' alma mater, St. Lawrence University, along with her magna cum laude honors.

Recently fourteen New York City firefighters were found to have used diplomas and transcripts from the diploma mill St. Regis University in Monrovia, Liberia in order to gain promotions and salary increases (see Appendix D). For anyone who has earned a legitimate degree, the purchase of counterfeit diplomas and transcripts in the names of legitimate schools is outrageous because it brings success without effort, sweat or tears.

The world of counterfeits is extensive—one can buy everything from knock-off watches, perfumes, CDs, DVDs, tires and auto parts to counterfeit prescription drugs. Counterfeits contributed to our current mortgage loan "credit crisis" in the form of fake CPA letters, virtual law firms, enhanced credit scores, and spurious pay stubs and w-2s. The Excused Absence Network allows students and employees to purchase fake doctor and dentist excuse slips, emergency room and medical evaluation certificates, funeral programs, and jury duty summons, all as support documents for absences. It is no surprise then that counterfeit diplomas and transcripts are also available on hundreds of Web sites in various countries, with documents offered in the names of almost every college or university worldwide.

We live in a topsy-turvy world. One minute it's safe to eat or drink a product, the next you are told it is harmful and can cause cancer. We are all familiar with "college rankings" which are used by many students and employers for various reasons. In his *Yale Daily News* article, Michael Seringhaus (2007) writes, "More and more Americans are buying credentials online, but faced with a staggering array of phony schools, how is the aspiring charlatan to choose? Ranking fake schools [counterfeit operations] presents an interesting challenge. Traditional metrics break down rather quickly when applied to an online façade with no faculty, no courses and no fixed address." He then reviewed various sites and presented the "six winners of my very own Best Diploma Mills survey." He described his "most brazen" entity as InstantDegrees.com because of its straightforward approach asserting, "send us your check and we will mail you a degree from a school," the identity of which buyers will only know upon receipt of the documents.

The renowned con man Frank Abagnale says he forged a Columbia University degree in the mid 1960s that he used to support his fictitious teaching credentials. Abagnale was then hired at Brigham Young University as a teaching assistant and taught two six week classes for one semester. Abagnale claimed that in order to teach these classes, he read one chapter ahead of his students.

The explosion in counterfeit diploma and transcript entities directly relates to the introduction of the Internet and its worldwide reach. As Creola Johnson (2006) from Ohio State University writes in *Degrees of Deception*, "The advent of the Internet has opened the door for a record-breaking number of consumers to obtain legitimate online higher education. However, using deceptive practices, unscrupulous individuals have harnessed the power of the Internet and spam mail to provide consumers with an easy way to obtain dubious bachelor's and graduate degrees."

Another factor is that Web sites peddle counterfeit diplomas and transcripts in the names of many legitimate, accredited colleges and universities. With the Internet's inherent globalization comes the ability for these criminals to be anonymous by hiding in the virtual world, adding to their experience of these operations as "cash cows." These factors, along with society's increased emphasis on educational credentials and lack of verification, establish a robust buyer's market in fictitious academic credentials.

According to Gudmund Hernes (2005), "Three groups are interested in keeping (university) standards: Universities themselves and their professors, students who want an education, and employers who want to make sure that what they see in certificates is what they get in qualifications." Hernes provides context regarding the state of our economy and the job market that explains why counterfeit academic credentials proliferate.

The *South Bend Tribune* (2007) summed up the situation aptly in the article, "This Crime is The Real Thing." It warns against trivializing sales done by counterfeit Web sites.

In reality, fake diplomas are no laughing matter. They're illegal—a serious scam perpetrated by buyers and sellers alike. And like just about everything these days, they've gone online, making it oh so convenient for the scamming to continue. Because it's often seen as a victimless, white-collar crime, this illegal activity typically doesn't attract too much attention from officials.

This sort of crime shows no signs of slowing down, with experts noting that the number of counterfeit diploma Web sites—offering degrees in everything from oncology to emergency surgery—has multiplied over the last several years.... Sure, diploma mills [and counterfeit operations] aren't the state's most pressing problems, and there are other issues that take precedence. But those involved in this fraud should be held accountable. And we commend Carter [Steve Carter, Indiana Attorney General] for his efforts to do so.

Officials of Document Security Systems, Inc. (2007), a leader in patented optical deterrent technologies and products that protect against counterfeiting and brand fraud due to unauthorized copying, highlight the damage done by counterfeit activity:

The market for anti-counterfeiting and authentication solutions is rapidly expanding as potential customers increasingly recognize the ongoing cost of forged documents, security breaches and brand theft. Academic institutions suffer losses of revenue and brand value related to "diploma mills" and counterfeit transcripts, which impact the reputation of institutions nationwide. In addition, educators and credentialing associations are continually challenged with exam copying and in maintaining authenticity in books and related materials. It is imperative that educational institutions preserve their reputations and safeguard their students.

Governments are taking notice and action. In an effort to protect its strong national and international reputation, the New South Wales Government, Department of Education and Training has begun to prosecute degree counterfeiters under the NWS Crimes Act 1900, with possible prison penalties.

We live in a deceptive world. Advertising makes false claims with the truth buried in the small print. Corporations inflate sales numbers, falsify expenses and "cook the books." Athletes use steroids and performance-enhancing drugs. Politicians lie about their opponents and their respective positions on the issues. In academics, deceit occurs through high-tech cheating, plagiarism, ghost-written essays, and grade changing. One constant is that everyone is trying to get an edge on the competition. The same is true with counterfeit diplomas and transcripts. These false academic documents deceive others into believing the holders have legitimate academic credentials. Those who buy counterfeit diplomas, establish themselves professionally and are later found to have lied, prompt passionate debate about the value of a college education versus skill sets developed on the job in business.

This sets the stage for *Counterfeit Diplomas and Transcripts*.