What is a “diploma mill”?

A “diploma mill” or “degree mill” is an organization or individual that
- produces and sells diplomas, degrees, transcripts, or other academic records that are
  meant to give the impression of academic achievement, but really represent little or no study.
Such credentials are “bogus” – “fakes” that give a false impression of educational achievement.
- Worthless documents from bodies that are not real, or not recognized, educational institutions
- Fraudulent misrepresentations of documents issued by legitimate institutions

Why is diploma mill fraud a problem?

Why is confirming the status of questionable institutions important?

- Ethical Reasons: Admission based on unexamined documents supports and rewards fraud. This devalues legitimate education and marks the higher education institution (HEI) as an easy target for fraudulent activity.
- Legal Reasons: By not reviewing documents carefully, the HEI could be violating the law. In most countries, being a part of a legal system that regulates credentials gives HEIs legal obligations.
- Practical Reasons: When it becomes known that a HEI supports fraud, its reputation suffers, and honest students stay away. Fraud is expensive; it takes resources away from honest applicants, and the process of trying to “fix” a problem case, or rebuild an entire reputation, wastes resources.

What is the solution? Be PROACTIVE. Be prepared for FRAUD!

- Take fraud seriously.
- Educate yourself and your colleagues. Learn how to identify, collect and effectively use reliable sources of information. Do not rely on “lists”; learn how to analyze and research documents to confirm their legitimacy.
- Establish a standard approach to reviewing and evaluating documents.
- Include a verification procedure in every case. The level of research needed to confirm the documentation can vary from case to case, but every institution and document should be confirmed.
- Establish policies on fraud and inform your applicants of the consequences of presenting bogus documents.
- Share information with your colleagues. We must work together to be a part of the solution!

How do diploma mills operate? Look for the “red flags”.

Diploma mills operate in many of the same ways that other fraud operations work – by imitating legitimate activity. They try to make themselves look “real”, but there are some things to watch out for:

- Name: The “institution” has a “distinguished” or “traditional” sounding name, or a name similar to a well-known or legitimate institution.
- Physical location: The “university” has a Web site but there is no evidence, or there is conflicting information, about its actual physical address. It uses “edu”, “ac”, or “uk” in the URL, giving the impression of being a US or British institution. The only way to contact the “university” is by emailing your contact information.
- Recognition: The Web site includes false, misleading or meaningless claims of “accreditation”, “recognition”, “affiliation”, “membership”, or other types of status that are meant to give the impression of legitimacy, but really mean nothing in the legitimate higher education community.
- Speedy degrees: The amount of time required to get the “degree” is suspiciously fast. A large amount of credit, or the whole “degree”, is based on “life experience” only: “send us your CV and receive a degree”.
- Costs: The Web site shows a “lump sum” cost for the “degree” and “transcripts”. Specific courses, grades, majors, etc. can be “bought”. There are special “deals” or discounts if one “buys now”.
- Sample documents: Samples of diplomas and transcripts are shown on the Web site.
- Groups of diploma mills: Several “university” Web sites may operate from the same computer. You can do a “who is” search to find the IP (Internet Protocol) address and owner of the Web site, then search for Web sites with the same IP address.
Diploma mills EXPLOIT issues of recognition and accreditation.

Some ways include claiming:
- That “accreditation” or “recognition” is not needed, not important, too “subjective” or otherwise “not appropriate”, not in line with the institution’s mission or philosophy, etc..
- “Accreditation” from an unapproved or bogus accreditor.
- To be “accredited” by an entity whose name sounds very similar to that of a legitimate accrediting body.
- To be “authorized” or “recognized by” or “affiliated with” an entity that has no authority in the sphere of education.
- To be “authorized” or “recognized” in a foreign country by a body that has no authority in the sphere of education (or is not recognized by the body that does have authority), or in a country/entity that has no legitimate body for supervising education or supervising higher education. Examples: “National Board of Education” in Liberia, a bogus entity; “Hutt River Province” in Australia; “Seborga” in Italy; cantons of Switzerland that have no higher education; several Caribbean islands; some Pacific islands.

What makes a higher education institution or degree “legitimate”?
How do you confirm the status of the institution?

A. In the United States - Accreditation:
- A non-governmental, voluntary, peer-review process, and a standard for recognition of credits and degrees.
  - Regional or national accreditation – of the institution as a whole
  - Professional or program accreditation – of programs of study offered by regionally-accredited institutions
- The process of legally establishing an educational institution is regulated by law in each state. However, having legal permission to operate is NOT equivalent to being “accredited”.
- Accrediting associations are reviewed and approved by the US Department of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). The accreditation status of an institution or program of study can easily be verified by contacting CHEA or the US Department of Education.
- In general, regionally-accredited institutions only accept degrees and credits from other regionally-accredited institutions. This is why “appearing” to be “regionally accredited” is important to diploma mills.

Resources:

B. In Many Other Countries – Government Recognition:
- In most countries, education is regulated by national or regional law and governments are responsible for the establishment, funding, operation, administration and supervision of educational institutions. Public institutions, as well as private institutions that have the same legal standing as public institutions, are officially “recognized”.

Recent Developments: Bogus “Services” Have Expanded
Some diploma mills now also offer:
- US high school diploma / high school equivalency credentials
- Degree and transcript verification services
- Foreign credential evaluation services, if the diploma mill claims to be a “foreign” institution
- Apostille services, if the diploma mill claims to be a “foreign” institution

Electronic Tools for Researching “Red Flags”
- The entity’s Web site – pay attention to the “red flags”
- IP “who is” search to identify the owner of the Web site - [www.samspade.org](http://www.samspade.org), [www.whois.org](http://www.whois.org), [www.whois.sc](http://www.whois.sc)
- Location: USA Reverse address search - [www.reverseaddress.com](http://www.reverseaddress.com); US reverse telephone number search – [www.reversephonedirectory.com](http://www.reversephonedirectory.com); UK Royal Mail Web site - [http://www.royalmail.com/portal/rm/home](http://www.royalmail.com/portal/rm/home); Satellite maps (Google Earth)
- Accreditation / recognition - Check resources listed above; cross-reference using official/reliable sources
- “Play the game” yourself – respond to spam, show interest in obtaining a degree, collect and document the information you receive
Diploma Mill Resources and References

From the United States:


Degree Mills: The Billion-Dollar Industry that has Sold over a Million Fake Diplomas by Alan Ezell and John Bear Prometheus Books, 2005 – www.degree mills.com

Accreditation Mills by Allen Ezell, AACRAO C & U Journal, Summer 2005 –
http://www.aacrao.org/publications/candu/index.cfm

Information Resources Concerning Unaccredited Degree-Granting Institutions, compilation by Prof. George Gollin, University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, of various resources including news items and public legal documents: http://web.hep.uiuc.edu/home/g-gollin/pigeons/

Unconventional University Diplomas from Online Vendors or Fraud, Corruption and Scandal: Buying a Ph.D., by Prof. George Gollin, University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, August 2003. Overview of how diploma mills operate - http://www.hep.uiuc.edu/home/g-gollin/diploma_mills.pdf


The Bears’ Guides published by Ten Speed Press. These guides list many “fake”, “substandard” and “dubious” institutions and their equally questionable accreditors. Available from the publisher - http://www.tenspeed.com and many commercial booksellers. Older editions are sometimes available through used book Web sites.


Council for Higher Education Accreditation, USA – www.chea.org


A Case Study in Foreign Degree (Dis)approval by Alan Contreras, International Higher Education, Summer 2003, Center for Higher Education, Boston College: http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/soe/cihe/newsletter/News32/text004.htm


How Reliable is National Approval of University Degrees? by Alan Contreras, International Higher Education, Fall 2002 – http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/soe/cihe/newsletter/News29/text005.htm

From Other Countries:

Netherlands: Centre for Information on Diploma Mills - http://www.diplomamills.nl/index_engels.htm


Italy: Italy’s Internet Dottore's Risk Jail: http://www.thea.co.uk/search/story.aspx?story_id=2024571
Three Gentlemen of London: The “University Degree Program”

Some other “University Degree Program” names:
Ashford, Bedford, Brentwick, Carrington, Devon, Devonshire, Dorchester, Dunham, Glencullen, Harrington, Lafayette, Landford, Northfield, Palmers Green, Parkhurst, Parkwood, Ravenhurst, San Moritz, Shaftesbury, Shelbourne, Shepperton, Stafford, Strassford, Suffield, Thornewood, Switzerland (U. of Switz.), Walsh, Westbourne, Western Ohio, Westhampton, Wexford, Wiltshire, Xavier

To Confirm the Status of Recognized UK Institutions:
“UK Recognised Degrees” - http://www.dfes.gov.uk/recognisedukdegrees/
Hands-On Admissions: Diploma Mills
Ann M. Koenig, AACRAO International Education Services, USA
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Belford University: Do You See Any ‘Red Flags’?

www.belforduniversity.org

Inside Belford University

Overview

Belford University is one of the leading online universities catering to the educational needs of thousands of working adults and students through its comprehensive life skills experience degree program.

Accredited by the International Accreditation Agency for Online Universities (IAAOU) and the Universal Council for Online Education Accreditation (UCSEA), Belford University's online campus offers a diverse range of majors leading to life experience degrees. You can now get recognition for your lifelong learning without attending classes and taking tests. All the majors we offer are frequently reviewed, and new majors are continually being added to expand the range of professional fields we serve.

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Hands-On Admissions: Diploma Mills
Ann M. Koenig, AACRAO International Education Services, USA
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“St. Regis University”
When “Government Recognition” Is Not What It Appears to Be
Indictments accuse eight of running diploma mills

Spokane operation allegedly told thousands of fraudulent degrees

Bill Martin
Staff writer
October 6, 2005

For the first time in the United States, federal investigators in Spokane have obtained indictments against eight people accused of operating Internet-based diploma mills, making millions by selling bogus college degrees and "defrauding countless worldwide.

The 40-page indictment accuses the eight of conspiring to commit wire and mail fraud during the past six years as they operated out of businesses in Mead and Hillyard, and a Post Falls office complex.

Accused are Randal and Darsee Ellen B requirement and her husband, Steven Karl Bardon, both of Colbert, also were indicted for conspiracy to launder more than $1 million they collected from selling bog阿森 degrees.

The indictment alleges that during the past six years the Spokane-based operation sold "thousands of degrees," using various diploma mills including Saint Regis University, Robertstown University, James Monroe University and Trinity Christian School.

The indictment also seeks criminal forfeiture of the Bardon's late-model Jaguar, their home and acreage at 3127 E. River Glen.
About the Presenter

Ms. Ann M. Koenig

Southwest Regional Director, Credential Evaluation Services
AACRAO International Education Services, USA

Ann M. Koenig has worked with AACRAO International Education Services since 2002. Over the last 18 years she has worked in three private foreign credential evaluation services in the United States, and held positions in admissions, student records management and academic advising at Cardinal Stritch University (Milwaukee, Wisconsin), the University of Maryland University College program in Schwäbisch Gmünd, Germany, Golden Gate University (San Francisco), and the University of California, Berkeley.


As a specialist in the regions of east/central Europe and Eurasia, Ms. Koenig is writing the chapter on the educational system of Uzbekistan for an upcoming AACRAO volume on the educational systems of Central Asia.

Ms. Koenig has given numerous presentations on topics related to educational systems, credential evaluation, best practices, document fraud and diploma mills. She works with an international group of researchers from the education, government, security and consumer protection sectors who informally call themselves “the fraud busters” and give presentations and workshops at AACRAO, NAFSA, EAIE and many other conferences. The new AACRAO Guide to Bogus institutions and Documents features articles written by Ms. Koenig and her “fraud buster” colleagues.

AACRAO, the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, was established in 1910 as a non-governmental, non-profit professional membership association. Today it represents more than 9000 individuals working in the areas of enrollment and student records management, from about 2300 institutions in the United States and over 35 other countries. AACRAO International Education Services support the international admissions and student record management work of higher education institutions, through research and publication, training programs, foreign credential evaluation services, and consulting services.

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