

DEGREES FOR SALE: THE DIPLOMA MILLS PROBLEM CONTINUES

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In 2010, a study identified 23 individuals on LinkedIn who claimed degrees from Alameda University, a known diploma mill (Prouix, 2010). Just two years later, in a separate study published in 2012, the number catapulted to 2,500 individuals on LinkedIn claiming qualifications from the same institution (Ezell and Bear, 2012). In 2015, in a third study, the number increased again to 4,000 individuals listing credentials from Alameda University (Neifer, 2015). While this trend speaks to the overall growth of the professional networking site, it also draws attention to the alarming growth of degrees issued from diploma mills. And yet, this pattern represents only one among the estimated 5,000 diploma mills that exist today (Ezell, 2015), suggesting that the overall collective number would be exponentially larger. Also, although Alameda University's website is no longer in operation, it is evident on LinkedIn that their degrees continue to be used and cited.

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In this context, diploma mills, also commonly referred to as degree mills, are entities that offer substandard or illegitimate academic degrees for a fee. As such, they are not regarded as true institutions of learning and are not accredited by a recognized authority. These businesses differ from counterfeit operations that issue fraudulent degrees from legitimate universities. Depending on the diploma mill, the cost of a degree



can range from several hundred dollars to several thousand.

Confusion Breeds Opportunity

Despite the dubious locations of many diploma mills, the United States has been established as the most popular site for degree mill operators. Nevertheless, wherever the location may be, their global reach is far and wide. For instance, a diploma mill may operate in one country, present itself as existing in another, and sell credentials to a customer in a third country. The borderless nature of these enterprises makes it easy to escape discovery. Yet, if detected, these entities often simply move to another state or country, particularly small island nations, where there is little oversight of private institutions.

Diploma mills are known to thrive in the U.S. in large part due to existing loopholes in state authorization and regional accreditation. States typically issue degree-granting authorization to educational institutions; however, the standards vary greatly. For this reason, accreditation is viewed as a significant additional authorization, despite being a purely voluntary measure. For example, accreditation is frequently used as a requirement in the provision of financial aid and transfer credit. This division between degree-granting authorization and accreditation, along with the separation between state and federal oversight of education, serves as

a source for much confusion and as a loophole for diploma mills in the U.S.

The rise of alternative forms of education, and the recognition of these various forms, have also added to the confusion. For instance, online degree programs have become commonplace, particularly with advancements in technology. Equally common is awarding credit based on examinations (e.g., CLEP) and recognition of prior learning experiences that take place outside the classroom. Examples include independent study, internships and volunteer work. While credit may be granted for such experiences, entire degrees cannot. Yet, diploma mills confer degrees based solely on life experience. Upon receipt of payment, the customers' life experiences are converted into degree certificates and transcripts showing courses, credits and grades.

Tricks and Gimmicks

Degree mill operators employ many tactics to create an air of legitimacy, such as using names that sound similar to existing reputable universities, producing brochures and websites that closely resemble those of legitimate universities, and using edited photos of university campuses. They often advertise in well-established publications, such as *The Economist*, *Forbes*, and *USA Today*; and create faculty profiles on LinkedIn and other

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sites, using stock photos or images gathered from the Internet. Operators also present their universities as being accredited; however, they do so by creating fraudulent accrediting bodies, known as accreditation mills. To feign legitimacy, accreditation mills often place themselves on lists that they fabricate, which include other known, recognized accreditation authorities. Additionally, they cite recognition of other known, respected schools. Collectively, these strategies shape a false sense of credibility as institutions of learning.

Another popular tool is the Apostille or State Authentication Certificate, frequently issued to accompany the fraudulent diploma and transcript. These certificates serve to authenticate notarized documents to be used abroad. However, like the notarized documents themselves, the stamp and signature of the authenticating office do not attest to the veracity of the contents of the documents. The office would not have the capability to do so, as it typically does not have any ties to the educational authorities that would be able to provide such verification. Yet, the official look of the Apostille and Authentication Certificate contributes to the perception of authenticity, particularly when issued by the U.S. State Department's Office, bearing the signature of the Secretary of State.

The Largest Diploma Mill Operation Known

In May of 2015, *The New York Times* published an exposé, uncovering what is arguably the largest diploma mill operation to date (Walsh, 2015). Axact, a software company in Pakistan, was discovered to be behind more than 370 websites for fraudulent high schools, universities, accreditation bodies, and educational search portals. Using round-the-clock phone agents, it is estimated that Axact generated tens of millions of dollars in revenue each year.

Based on information provided by previous employees, one frequent tactic

for phone operators was to upsell. For example, one might have posed as an American official and advised customers that State Authentication Certificates were required. While the cost to obtain such a certificate is less than \$100, Axact operators would charge up to several thousand dollars for this additional service.

Many of Axact's degrees were sold to residents in the Gulf countries and the U.S. Yet, Axact employees did not target consumers in Pakistan, helping to avoid detection until recently. Prompted by the release of *The New York Times* article, an investigation is now being conducted by Pakistan's Federal Investigation Agency. After several raids, approximately two million blank certificates belonging to various fraudulent high schools and universities were discovered, along with servers containing details of sales made.

Combating Diploma Mills

Despite the mercurial nature of diploma mills, it is of paramount importance that efforts to combat them continue. In the United Kingdom, it is illegal to award and issue British degrees unless authorized to do so. In this way, degree mill operators are targeted and discouraged from selling their wares. Additionally, the Higher Education Degree Datacheck (HEDD) provides a website that allows users to look up recognized degree-granting institutions in the UK, including the former names of educational institutions, with dates of recognition specified, and indications of any subsequent mergers and name changes. The database also furnishes definitive information if an institution is not recognized. When degree mills are uncovered, the HEDD works with enforcement agencies toward their prosecution and closure.

In the state of Texas, the tactics differ somewhat, despite similar objectives. Instead, the consumers of diploma mill qualifications are targeted. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating

Board (THECB) targets consumers of diploma mill qualifications, stating that it is illegal to use fraudulent degrees, whether in spoken or written form, to gain employment, a promotion, or admission into a school. The THECB website also includes a comprehensive list of institutions whose degrees are designated as illegal to use in Texas.

These HEDD and THECB lists are helpful tools to identify substandard institutions and degree mills. When reviewing an applicant's educational background for admission, it is important to confirm that the school is recognized by the proper authorities in the originating country and that it has the authority to grant degrees there. Such measures help safeguard the value of genuine degrees and protect the public from services being provided by individuals who are not appropriately qualified. ■

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