

**NOT FOR NOVELTY PURPOSES ONLY: FAKE DEGREES,
PHONY TRANSCRIPTS AND VERIFICATION SERVICES**

Do you recall the first time you became aware that fake diplomas and transcripts existed? For many of us, whether we were working at or attending a university, the notion of someone buying, never mind using a fake diploma belongs to another reality I don't know if you can remember when you first learned of this issue – I do. I clearly recall reading a *Time* article published in the early 80s about the FBI investigation into the selling of bogus degrees. I felt so naïve.

The article opened with the story of Sassafra Herbert proudly displaying “her handsome diploma from the American Association of Nutrition and Dietary Consultants.”¹ The article goes on to explain that Sassafra Herbert is an eleven-year-old poodle and that her owner, a New York City physician, bought the diploma for \$50 “to prove a point.” As an exposé, the article addressed, what at the time was described as a multimillion-dollar business; the production of fake diplomas; and what the US Federal Bureau of Investigation’s Operation Diploma Scam (DIPSCAM) was doing to combat these acts of fraud.

In the *Time* article mentioned above, one of the FBI’s special agents was Allen Ezell. Mr. Ezell, who is now manager of corporate security for the Wachovia Corporation, often makes presentations on fraudulent degrees and transcripts to the AACRAO. In the *Time* article and in his presentations, Mr. Ezell, speaks of his involvement in the FBI’s DIPSCAM investigation. For those of you unaware of the DIPSCAM investigation, a turning point, I

¹ “Sending Degrees to the Dogs” Ellie McGrath, *Time*, April 2, 1984, p. 71.

believe, in recognizing and naming the problem universities and colleges face with respect to fake degrees and phony transcript, I want to give you a brief outline of the DIPSCAM investigation.

The FBI's investigation called Operation Diploma Scam (DIPSCAM) took place from 1980 – 1991. These investigations into the diploma mills operating throughout the United States were based in the Charlotte, North Carolina FBI offices and resulted in 39 convictions and closed over 50 purported colleges and universities. However, according to Mr. Ezell, “diploma mills have existed since the inception of colleges and universities, with the earliest recorded to be Richmond College in Jefferson County, Ohio, which was chartered in 1835.”²

In the Winter 2002 edition of “College & University: A Journal of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admission Officers” (Volume 77, Number 3, pp. 39 – 47), Mr. Ezell writes an excellent first-hand account of his involvement in and how the DIPSCAM operation began with a complaint that the president and founder of Southeastern University, Dr. Alfred Jarrett, was selling degrees and transcripts.

Southeastern University occupied the front two bedrooms and the living room of Dr. Jarrett. The eventual downfall of Southeastern University and Dr. Jarrett was that the president sold degrees and transcripts for bachelors, masters and doctoral degrees to FBI agent Ezell and then several degrees and transcripts to FBI agent Ron Rollins. In addition, when asked to verify the degrees of Mr. Ezell and Mr. Rollins to an employer, Dr. Jarrett was more than pleased to do so.

² “Diploma Mills – Past, Present, and the Future.” Otho Allen Ezell Jr. *College & University: A Journal of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admission Officers*, Volume 77, Number 3, p. 40.

When a third FBI agent was brought into the game negotiating a \$5,000 fee for the purchase of a master's degree in theology from Southeastern University, a meeting was arranged for May 4, 1981 with Dr. Jarrett. With a search warrant in hand, the FBI seized all of the student files, correspondence, blank degrees and transcripts and seals from the home offices of Southeastern University. The following morning the FBI agents learned that Dr. Jarrett had committed suicide.

Upon opening the records seized at Southeastern University, the FBI learned that there were 620 "graduates" of this university; 171 of them working at the federal, state and local government levels. Indeed, some of the graduates were high-ranking officials in Washington, DC. This was the beginning of DIPSCAM.

DIPSCAM and the resulting search warrants, arrests, convictions, related prosecutions, and the resulting publicity resulted in a new awareness in the academic and business community of the magnitude of the problem of fake degrees and transcripts being produced by diploma mills.

In technologically simpler times, simpler when we compare the technology of 80's and the technology that is available on a laptop computer, we might have believed that the production of fake diplomas may have been for novelty purposes only. However, the fake diploma, phony transcripts and verification services industry that is available on the Web today can only be viewed as an epidemic that can be felt throughout both industry and our institutions.

So where are we today? From my research on the matter, I believe that there are five principal areas of concern related to diplomas and transcripts. Each of you may have experienced one or more of these areas and some of you might be able to think of a couple more areas. However, for the purposes of this paper I will concentrate on the first three of these five.

1. Unauthorized production of degrees and transcripts from actual universities and colleges
2. Degrees and transcripts for unaccredited universities and colleges
3. Degrees and transcripts based on “life experience” from non-accredited, storefront universities and colleges.
4. Changing the grades on transcripts.
5. Claiming a degree they don't have.

1. Fake degrees and transcripts from actual universities and colleges

a. What's out there

A quick scan of the Google search engine will give you an idea of what sort of problem we are facing. When I first began my research into this matter approximately 14 months ago, a Google search with the parameter “fake degree,” returned a note stating that there are “about 165,000” results to my query; as of the end of March 2004, the same parameter returns with an “about 325,000” results. The same search parameters, using a Yahoo search engine, results in a return of 667,000 Web results. Now we all know that this doesn't mean that there are 325,000 or 667,000 individual Web sites that offer fake degrees, but I think that you get the idea that we're not talking about a small-time operation here.

Fake degrees and phony transcripts from the universities that you and I work in are two of the scariest prospects when I considered this matter. Let me give you some examples.

From the Web site cooldegree.com, I was able to purchase a York University diploma and transcript that stated that I graduated in June 1988 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English, *summa cum laude*.

I paid \$139.00 (US) for the diploma (which the summa cum laude gold sticker), \$20.00 (US) for a transcript and \$29.00 for shipping. The transcript is signed by “Gary P. Cosgrove” – “Registrar” and the diploma is signed by the “Chairman of the Board of Trustees” (sic) and the “President of the University.” My ‘transcript’ lists the courses and grades that got me a degree in English with a 3.8 GPA. I know that I am not the only person to have used this Web site – I have three samples besides mine that come from cooldegree.com. The three other samples have been supplied to me by employers, all American-based, that have called my office to verify an individual’s York degree. An example of a “York” cooldegree.com transcript and diploma arrived in my office mid-April 2003. World Education Services (WES) in Washington, DC contacted my office to verify the degree for an individual who claimed to have a Bachelor of Science in Marketing. This degree was also granted summa cum laude. I know that I shouldn’t be surprised by the audacity of some people, but being a fundamentally honest person, I am always taken aback at what people will do. This individual was using her fake York degree to apply for a job. She had sent the fake diploma and transcript to either the Immigration and Naturalization Services and/or a company at which she was apply for a job, and as is increasingly the policy among US employers, a background check was routinely conducted on her credentials. After contacting my office

and finding that we could not verify that this person had a degree from York, we asked that the diploma and transcript and any other material submitted by the individual be faxed to us. Ms Helen Kim for WES sent us a copy of diploma and a transcript that we immediately identified as from cooldegree.com. Now, for many of us, we've dealt with a situation similar to this in past. But this individual did not stop with simply submitting the fake diploma and transcript. In addition to these phony documents, this individual decided to attempt to further authenticate her submission by including copies York's undergraduate calendar (taken from the Web) describing York's degree requirements, grading scheme and information about course numbering, credit values and academic sessions. Finally, the *piece de resistance* was a letter that she included from our Atkinson Faculty of Liberal and Professional Studies explaining one of the differences between the documentation she supplied and what degree was actually offered by York. Produced on fake Faculty letterhead this individual wrote: "After speaking with Misty Stagg, she informed me that the Immigration and Naturalization Service needs verification of her Degree. When she attended York University through correspondence she received an undergraduate degree. At that time it was referred to Bachelor of Science – Marketing. We now have simplified the title and refer to it as a Bachelor of Administrative Studies (BAS). They require the same curriculum and are accredited 4 years (BAS) Bachelor Degree. I apologize for the earlier misunderstanding regarding the academic policy. Please see attachment of the academic information." There is no signature but the signature line reads "Internet and Correspondence Department, Atkinson Faculty of Liberal and Professional Studies, York University."

Let me read what we wrote to Ms Kim at the World Education Service:

Dear Ms Kim:

Further to our conversation on Friday, May 23rd, please accept this letter as confirmation that the diploma and transcript Ms Stagg sent to you ... are fake.

We are familiar with the style of both the diploma and transcript supplied by Ms Stagg as having come from the www.cooldegree.com Web site. York University's Office of the Counsel has sent a notice to the company supplying these fake degrees and transcripts and we have been successful in having York University removed from their site.

It is also interesting to note that while our grading scheme is on a 9.0 scale as shown under the heading "Grades and Grading Schemes" [in the attached information], which did come from one of our Calendars, the transcript that was issued was done on a 4.0 scale. The letter from the "Internet and Correspondence Department" in the Atkinson Faculty of Liberal and Professional Studies is also a fake ... there is no such department within that Faculty.

Finally, it should be noted that York University has never offered a Bachelor of Science (BSc) degree in Marketing and that our Bachelor of Administrative Studies (BAS) degree has been in existence since the early 1980's.

As you can imagine, Ms Stagg's submission is just the thin-edge-of-the-wedge. Other examples discovered in York University's files between January 2002 and April 2003: 1) a letter from the Executive General Director, International Affairs at the Islamic Azad University looking for a verification of submitted transcripts – a terrible forgery; 2) a final grade report created by a student for his parents. He cut and pasted images from York's Web page to create what, to most parents, would pass as an authentic grade report. Unfortunately, when the student was denied readmission to residences because of his average his father called to find out what the problem was. Actually, the student's attempt was not a bad forgery (tongue-in-cheek) except for the formatting (wrong), the Faculty abbreviation for the Schulich School of Business was listed as BS instead of SB, we do not have an academic decision of "promoted", again, our GPA is out of 9, not 6 as the student

stated and finally, the name of the person listed on the grade report is Linda McMennon – there is no Linda McMennon in the Registrar’s Office; and 3) the production of a York diploma that is take off on the University of Toronto format. This one is actually quite good.

There are, of course, numerous other sites from which individuals can purchase fake degrees and transcripts from actual universities and colleges. Besides cooldegree.com, which all of a sudden, in the last week or so, seems to have shut down; and diplomamakers.com, which has been closed for a while; sites like diplomaville.com – now on hiatus; there are other diploma mill sites such as diplomaservices.com, phonydiplomas.com fakedegreeuk.com and backalleypress.com still in operation and a real threat to our institutions. And just what are they offering? Here’s a quick look at what’s out there:

Exacerbating the issue of purchased fake diplomas and transcripts is the matter of just what an individual can do with today’s technology. I offer as evidence to this statement the following exhibit. (Slide) This is a real York University degree. As you know, I did not attend York University and I certainly did not earn a degree from York. I did, however, have access to a York diploma, as many students do. I asked my son-in-law, who is quite adept at using Photoshop software, to remove the name of the original recipient and replace it with my name. While it does not surprise me that this sort of operation is possible – it is undoubtedly how the operators of many fake degree Web sites are able to provide “replacement” diplomas – but what does surprise me is the ease of performing these operations.

Here are a number of additional examples of my point from the backalleypress.com Web site. What appears to me to be real Ottawa and Carleton diplomas; a very real looking, if not real, University of New Brunswick transcript (including David Hinton's signature); a look-alike University of Manitoba transcript; from other fake degree Web sites: a phony York transcript; and you I was always able to find Ryerson, Concordia (a favourite of these sites), St. Mary's and St. Thomas diplomas. I would hasten to add that fakedegreeuk.com offers the diploma for virtually every university in Canada.

When any unscrupulous person can order a UNB transcript with David Hinton's signature affixed and actual Ottawa and Carleton diplomas, there is need for all of us to begin to worry.

As part of my preparations for this paper I wrote to the Registrars of Ontario universities and asked if they had any really good examples of fake degrees and fraudulent transcripts. I received some very interesting samples from the University of Toronto, the University of Western Ontario and the University of Guelph. In addition, Dr. John Metcalf, the Registrar at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo wrote to tell me about the work he had done to create a WLU diploma. He went to Staples and purchased some heavy bond paper that looked like something a diploma would be printed on, gold seals and then purchased one of those sealers that you can get from mail-order houses and proceeded to create a diploma. John responded to my e-mail by saying that he thought his diploma "looked better than the actual WLU diploma." Hmmm.

b. What can we do?

i. Write

A number of universities have been removed from Web sites such as cooldegree.com and diplomamaker.com by simply having their lawyers write. York University was able to have its name removed from the cooldegree.com Web site after our Office of the University Counsel wrote to the company. According to Ms Harriet Lewis, York's legal counsel, she writes these letters whenever a Web site comes to her attention.

Here is a sample letter that was written by one university's legal counsel office in order to get its transcript images off a Web site. (At the request of the university's counsel, I have not included the name of the diploma site or the name of the university.) (Cease and Desist Letter: Appendix A)

This Web site, formerly based in Laval, Quebec, is no longer available online and thus neither are the images. However, given that images from UNB, Carleton, Ottawa and an image that clearly looks like a University of Manitoba transcript are available online, I would guess that the former Laval-based site has resurrected itself as backalleypress.com.

ii. Talk to each other

When you receive a fake diploma or a fraudulent transcript do you call the Registrar at that institution? I have spoken to Richard Levin (formerly U of M; UOIT), David Hinton (UNB), Henri Wong (Ottawa) about the fact that diplomas and transcripts from their institutions can be found online; I have written to the Registrars at Concordia and St. Thomas University about cooldegree.com. It's important that we inform our colleagues about instances where we have found or received fake diplomas and/or phony transcripts.

iii. Provincial/National Verification

I recently wrote to Mr. Jamie MacKay, the Vice-President of Policy and Analysis at the Council of Ontario Universities about the problems all of us are encountering with fake degrees, fraudulent transcripts and verification services. While he has worked in the field of post-secondary education for many years, he told me that he was not aware of how large a problem this matter had become. As part of our conversation I suggested that perhaps the Council of Ontario Universities might take on the responsibilities of a provincial database something akin to a proposed Australian/New Zealand database.

In March 2002, the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, an association of leaders from the country's national universities, announced a proposal to create a national database that combat fake degrees. In describing their move to battle the ever-expanding number of Web sites offering fake degrees, the a Committee spokesman noted that the group had decided against taking legal action "because it would probably be expensive and might not prevent the same problem from reappearing afterward in another guise."³ The Committee has considered privacy issues and thinks that "the searchable archive would work by simply confirming or denying whether the details it had been given matched those in its store. Employers could verify a number of credentials quickly at a central location, rather than having to send written requests to individual universities."⁴

³ "Australia and New Zealand Consider Database to Combat Fake Degrees." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Tuesday, March 5, 2002.

⁴ Ibid.

I think we must be encouraged by the work of the Australian Department of Education, Science and Training. It has developed a Web presence that allows individuals to report fake degrees operating in the state and territorial jurisdictions. Through its Education Network Australia Web site, individuals can not only report suspicious Web sites to the Department, they can also inquire about the recognition of an Australian institution or an institution representing itself as being from Australia.

In New South Wales, the Department of Education and Training has developed a Web site (www.det.nsw.edu.au/aboutus/higheredu/fakedegrees.htm), and an online brochure at the same site, that help individuals addresses the “growing trade worldwide in counterfeit university degree certificates and academic transcripts...”

In the UK, the Department for Education and Skills is alerting people accessing their Web site of the existence of bogus degrees claiming a link to a recognized UK institution (www.dfes.gov.uk/recognisedukdegrees/bdw.shtml).

While we're on the topic of bogus UK degrees, I want to draw your attention to one particularly amusing example. I've entitled this one, “file this one under ‘you've got to be kidding’”. On the fake degree Web site “fakedegreeuk.com” I came across the following piece. (www.fakedegreeuk.com/bouncedcheque.html). If this were not so pathetic I think it would be funny. In addition, if you explore this site further, you will find a very comprehensive list of British, American, Canadian, Australian and other country parchments available for sale. UK degrees go for 165 pounds; American \$395; Canadian \$510 -- \$915 with transcripts.

2. Degrees and transcripts based on “life experience” from non-accredited universities & colleges (diploma mills)

With the arrival of inexpensive laser printers, scanners, sealers, access to high quality paper stocks, e-mail and, of course, the Internet, the public has seen an explosion in numbers of diploma mills operating with relative impunity throughout the world. John Bear, one of the world’s foremost authorities on diploma mills, estimates that “there are more than 400 diploma mills and fake-degree websites”⁵ operating worldwide, selling people degrees for anywhere between \$39.95 and \$5,000. Bear estimates that the production of fake degrees “has doubled in the past five years to between \$400 million and \$500 million annually.”⁶

I have already mentioned the case of Southeastern University that was closed by the FBI’s DipScam investigation. That was in 1980 and we can ask: has much changed. We will all know that this is a rhetorical question as all of us present deal on a regular basis with the problems and challenges of fake degrees and fraudulent transcripts.

While the FBI’s Operation DipScam ended in the early 90s, there continues to be an interest in this matter within the United States government. Many of you will have received information on or heard of a United States General Accounting Office (GAO) report on the Purchase of Degrees from Diploma Mills. (The GAO is the audit, evaluation and investigative arm of the US Congress.)

⁵ “Degree Duplicity,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, June 10, 2003. Mark Clayton

⁶ *Ibid.*

The GAO, in responding to a request for an investigation by Senator Susan Collins concerning the proliferation of diploma mills, carried out an undercover operation in which they set out to demonstrate how easy it was to purchase a degree from a diploma mill. (www.gao.gov/new.items/d03269r.pdf)

The GAO investigation targeted the degrees-r-us.com Web site. In addition, the investigation would identify individuals who had purchased degrees from diploma mills and, this is the link to government, determine whether these individuals had used their fake degrees to “increase their income, defraud employers, or gain positions of public trust.” ⁷

The investigator in this instance, posing as an individual working in the biology and medical technology field, purchased a Bachelor of Science and a Master of Science degree as well as a one-year verification service from degrees-r-us.com. Both of these degrees were awarded by Lexington University purportedly located in Middletown, NY. The investigator paid \$1,515 to [degrees-r-us](http://degrees-r-us.com) for the “premium package” which included the BSc diploma, transcripts for the degree with a 3.8 GPA, the MSc diploma, a Dean’s List Certificate, the telephone degree verification service and envelopes from Lexington University. As part of the investigation a member of the GAO posed as a potential employer of Ms Collins. The investigation found that “an individual associated with Degrees-R-Us confirmed that Ms. Collins had been aware awarded a bachelor’s and a master’s degree from Lexington University.” ⁸

⁷ United States General Accounting Office, letter (GAO-030269R) from Robert J. Cramer, Managing Director, Office of Special Investigations to Senator Susan M. Collins, November 21, 2002.

⁸ Ibid.

As part of the investigation, the GAO compared a government-sponsored Internet résumé service to a list of unaccredited universities provided by the Oregon State Office of Degree Authorization (ODA) – (www.osac.state.or.us/oda/). At the time of the writing of the GAO report, the ODA’s list identified 43 institutions as diploma mills. That was in 2002. When I presented a similar paper in 2003, the ODA listed 163 such institutions; today the ODA lists 194 institutions as diploma mills.

The GAO received a database of more than 1,200 résumés – it included degrees from 14 of the 43 diploma mills. When the résumés were reviewed the investigators concluded that approximately 200 individuals held “a position of trust and responsibility.” Following an interview of the four individuals the GAO report stated, “... we believe that these individuals intended to use the bogus degrees to benefit financially or defraud employers. In this regard, each résumé listed the degrees, and the individuals disclosed to us that they had purchased the degrees either to enhance their résumé or to be considered for certain positions.”⁹ (There is no mention of what happened to these individuals.)

Following up on the investigation undertaken by Senator Collins – fake degrees have found their way into the US Homeland Security Department.

HSD official accused of using diploma mill

Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, chairman of the Governmental Affairs Committee, is pushing the Homeland Security Department to investigate allegations that a high-ranking department official received academic degrees from a diploma mill.

⁹ Ibid.

Laura Callahan, senior director in the office of Steve Cooper, chief information officer for Homeland Security, apparently received three academic degrees from a diploma mill [Hamilton University], according to an investigation by *Washington Technology and Government Computer News*.¹⁰

Let me give you an example a little closer to home. There was an article recently in *The Globe and Mail* about the buildings housing some of Canada's business schools. I had been told about a quote on classroom space that had been made by our Dean of Business and I was interested in reading the article so that I could get the context of his comments. As I didn't have the paper, I went to the Globe's online search service, and requested articles on "Schulich". While I got the article I was looking for, the advertising banners that came with the search results is what caught my attention. Here's what I appeared with the results of my search (Slide). You will notice that there are two banner ads – one for Penn State's online MBA and the second for a "totally flexible MBA/PhD" from Rushmore University. Rushmore University, according to the Oregon ODA, is a diploma mill. I find it interesting and more than a little disturbing that Canada's national newspaper is accepting advertisements from diploma mills. I can only believe that they do not know that Rushmore is a diploma mill; however, I would think that the business schools would have a vested interest in ensuring that *The Globe and Mail* was apprised of this situation.

For Registrars, I would have thought that the hot water involving diploma mills would have been somewhat less of a threat than from the production of our diplomas and transcripts;

¹⁰ "HSD official accused of using diploma mill," *Washington Technology*, Volume 18, No.5, June 9, 2003. Patience Wait and Wilson Dizzard III

however, according to Monique Chan, Director, Admission Evaluation and Transfer Credit at York University, the University continues to receive a number of diploma-mill transcripts coming out of India. Thus, I believe that education for registrarial professionals is still needed in this area. In addition, if continued professional development is needed for those of us who deal with these documents on a day-to-day basis, and then educating employers and the general public on these non-accredited institutions is sorely needed. Indeed, now that this industry has expanded to accrediting itself, the public is often duped into thinking that these institutions are legitimate enterprises.

Accreditation, for most of us here, is something that is limited to colleges and universities in the United States. The accrediting process that exists in the US certainly assists American schools in more easily deciding from which schools they will accept transfer credit and, for employers, which schools are recognized from state to state by the Department of Education and the Council of Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) (www.chea.org/institutions/index.cfm). However, these authorities do not always abate the confusion for the public and employers. That is, the diploma mill industry certainly has taken up the matter of accreditation with vengeance. Not included on this US Department of Education list are accrediting agencies like:

- European Council for Distance & Open Learning
- The Inter-Collegiate Joint Committee on Academic Standards
- Euro-American Accreditation Agency
- The International Association of Fake Universities
- The Association for Online Academic Excellence

So, do you think you know what you would do if you received documentation from an agency that was not approved by the US Department of Education or the Council of Higher Education Accreditation? Some of our US colleagues – thankfully a small percentage – seem a confused. Three hundred and thirty-five Registrars responded to a survey recently conducted at an AACRAO conference. To the question: Would you accept a degree awarded by an accrediting agency that is not recognized by CHEA or the US Department of Education, one registrar responded “almost never”; 16 said they “might possibly” and 318 answered that they would “never” accept the degree.¹¹

Is there any way to be sure that one knows that they are dealing with a diploma mill? The “Top 10 Signs You May be Dealing with a Diploma Mill” can be found on a number of Web sites discussing this issue. They include:

1. Brochures on Web site loaded with misspellings or grammatical errors.
2. Inordinate focus on titles and long strings of initials following faculty member’s name.
3. “Administrative offices” located in rented mailboxes. Numerical signs, like “No. 231” or “Suite 5000,” can be a giveaway.
4. Tuition paid on a per-degree basis
5. Discounts for enrolling in several degrees at once. (Example, Cambridge State University in Shreveport, LA, offers \$1000 off for students signing up for a BA, MA and PhD.

¹¹ “Accreditation U., Association faces heavy opposition”, *The Las Vegas Weekly*, Kate Silver. From www.lasvegasweekly.com/2001_2/09_20/newsupfront1.html

6. Credits granted for everyday experiences.
7. Degrees can be earned in far less time than a traditional college. For example, Columbia State University – Metairie, LA – advertised a 27-day program.
8. Little or no interaction with professors.
9. A list of accrediting agencies that sounds a little too impressive and/or cite accreditation by organizations not recognized by the US Dept. of Education or CHEA.
10. Overemphasis on affordability and impact a degree will have on job prospects and self-esteem.

3. **Verification Services**

While all of us here understands the importance of verification services, so too do unaccredited institutions and those unscrupulous individuals who produce fake degrees and fraudulent transcripts that bear our names. While in our world of earned degrees and real transcripts, we supply verification services to our colleagues and third parties free of charge, the world of fake degrees and fraudulent transcripts have chosen to take on what do, call themselves registrars and charge a fee for a service meant only to perpetuate a fraud.

This is a relatively new service offered by those companies selling fake diplomas and fraudulent transcripts. The idea is simple enough – provide those individual who have decided to buy a fake diploma and/or transcript with a service that will verify their degree when an employer calls.

I suppose that it would not be a surprise to most of you that a Web site exists that deals purely with providing verification services for fake degrees, fraudulent transcripts and diploma mills. Of course, the site, like the industry it services, is bent on deception. The Web site describes the need for speedy verification services; that the service is available to anyone regardless of where they graduated from; and then the providers of the service hide behind the protection afforded students and their families by quoting 'chapter and verse' from the bible of privacy protection in the US – FERPA (the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act). All of this is meant to lend legitimacy to a service that requires that the person paying the \$149.00 fee (for four verifications or 12 months, whichever comes first) attest to the authenticity of the educational records. What a scam!!

How does the service work? Not surprisingly, all fake degree and diploma mill sites seem to have the same process verifying degrees.

1. The employer or third party wanting to verify the individual's degree is asked to call a toll-free number provided by the holder of the degree.
2. The verifying party is then informed that federal law prohibits verification by telephone or e-mail and that they must fax a copy of the transcript request form to the verification service.
3. Upon receipt of the transcript request form, the verification service will attest to the authenticity of the degree.

And as if having to deal with bogus verification services wasn't enough for employers to deal with, the next phase of pushing the ethical and legal limits of verifying degrees has just surfaced in a March 9, 2004 Reuters article. It seems that those bent on perpetrating a fraud using fake degrees and fraudulent transcripts have decided to attack the student information systems of postsecondary institutions. The Reuters article, entitled "Resume fraud gets slicker and easier" informs its readers that "in an effort to put more credibility into embellishing their resume, some candidates are paying hackers to plug their names into a class list database of a university they claim to have attended."¹²

Now let's consider this for a moment. In the US, a number of universities and colleges have outsourced the degree verification process. Thus, employers doing (or outsourcing this task to individuals or companies whose job it is to do these checks) background checks on potential employees will end up calling American services such as Credentials Inc. (degreechk.com) or the National Student Clearinghouse (studentclearinghouse.org) to check on the legitimacy of the candidate's degree. The catch here is that the universities and colleges supply the legitimate verification services with a list of graduates by downloading this information to the service company. If, as suggested by the Reuter's article, that hackers have been able to place the name of an individual into the university's database, then the university data received by verification services company is dirty and, just with the mere suggestion that hackers might be able to accomplish this feat, places the entire enterprise open to suspicion. If the data held by Credentials Inc. or the National Student Clearinghouse is considered to be unreliable, employers will once again have to turn to the records offices within registrar's offices and

¹² <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/4488908/>

look for the verification of degrees. In turn, the burden of providing proof that alumni have legitimately received their degrees will to a greater and greater degree fall to our offices and tax the limited resources available to us.

4. For Novelty Purposes Only

This is a much less insidious issue for those of us involved in the education enterprise. In researching this piece of the presentation, the more I looked at the fake degrees and fraudulent transcripts from accredited universities and the degrees and transcripts available from diploma mills, I began to wonder exactly who would buy these silly novelty items. I then immediately thought of Clifton Hill in Niagara Falls, Ontario. I don't know if any of you have ever visited "the Falls", but Clifton Hill is a joke among locals. The businesses along this street which leads from the residential area to the Falls is populated by such shops a Wax Museum, two 'Ripley Believe It or Not' museums, the House of Frankenstein and hundreds of souvenir shops. During the summer there are always line-ups to get into these places. BT Barnum lives in Niagara Falls!

As I don't believe that there is any real problem for Registrars here, I want to take just a minute to give you a sample of some of these sites and have a little bit of fun. (Slides)

Conclusion

My purpose in presenting this paper was to hopefully provide you with an idea of some of the challenges we are facing with fake degrees and phony transcripts. I hope that by giving

you a brief look at some of the numerous Web sites that provide unauthorized (re)production of degrees and transcripts from accredited universities & colleges; degrees and transcripts based on “life experience” from non-accredited universities & colleges (diploma mills); degrees and transcripts for non-existent universities & colleges (novelty items) that it might help you become more aware of the difficulties that our clients face everyday. Perhaps, the next time an employer calls you about a fake degree or a phony transcript that they have received and you know it is from a Web site, you can educate the employer on that fact. The next time you receive a fake degree or fraudulent transcript produced by an individual who may or may not have attended your institution you will write and warn him or her of the consequences of his or her actions. And the next time you find out that one of your sister institutions is being featured on one of these Web sites; I hope that you will give the Registrar a call.

Thank you.

Appendix A

Sample Cease and Desist Letter

Dear Sir or Madam:

We are writing regarding a web site at www._____.com/pages/samples.html which contains reference to the (name of the University), together with a picture of a transcript apparently signed on behalf of the (name of the University). The University views this advertisement as a misrepresentation which could result in damage to the University's reputation and to the integrity of the institution's mandate.

This letter is sent to you as notice that should you fail to immediately remove any and all references and illustrations relating directly or indirectly, or intended to relate to, the (name of the University), we will be proceeding to obtain an injunction against (name of the Web site company) and any other remedies that may be appropriately awarded by a court.

Please confirm that you have obliged the foregoing request no later than 7 days from the date of this letter. Thank you in advance for you anticipated cooperation.