
The Diploma Mill Trap

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Abstract

Seeking a post-secondary education within our borders is normally safe, but once outside Canada, the rules change. You can no longer assume, for instance, that education is a clean, honourable enterprise that polices itself. Everyone is on their own, particularly when it comes to private institutions. And nowhere is this more so than in the United States. As a result, unsuspecting, foreign students are easy prey. They are easily tricked into believing that diploma mills are bona fide when in fact they are not. This article alerts counsellors to the problem. It is hoped that they, in turn, will caution students seeking studies abroad.

Résumé

Partir à la recherche d'une éducation post-secondaire à l'intérieur de nos frontières est une tâche normalement sûre. Par contre, une fois à l'extérieur du Canada les règles changent. Vous ne pouvez plus présumer, par exemple, que l'éducation est une entreprise sans tache et honorable qui se maintient elle-même. Chacun établit ses propres règles, particulièrement les institutions privées. Et ce problème semblent grandement prédominer aux États-Unis. Le résultat est que des étudiants qui ne s'y attendent pas deviennent des proies faciles. Ils sont facilement pris à croire que les usines à diplômes sont de bonne foi quand, en réalité, elles ne le sont pas. Cet article alerte les conseillers de ce problème particulier. Il est ainsi espéré, qu'à leur tour, ils vont prévenir les étudiants entrevoyant des études à l'étranger.

Students pursuing post-secondary education should realize that diploma mills operate both within and outside our boundaries. In fact, they have been found in almost every corner of the globe, including, for example, the Dominican Republic (David, 1984), Great Britain (Caudrey, 1985), India (Jones, 1985a), Israel (Jones, 1985c), Japan (Jones, 1984), Mexico (Jones, 1985c), Panama (Jones, 1986), South Africa (Jones, 1985a), United States (Tufts, 1987), and West Germany (Jones, 1985c).

Fortunately at home, most post-secondary institutions are controlled by provincial ministries or departments. Nonetheless, students should consult the *Directory of Canadian Universities 1988-1989* (La Plante, 1988) or the *Canadian Education Association Handbook-Ki-Es-Ki* (Goldsborough, 1990), or both, before they enroll in a *private* post-secondary college or university. If the school is not listed in either document, check with the agency responsible for post-secondary education in that province. If the agency has no data on the institution, beware.¹

Abroad, matters are more complex, especially in nations where private universities flourish and control mechanisms vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. The United States is one such nation.

Today 47 of the 50 states (plus D.C.) have in place some minimum requirements for private degree granting institutions. . . . However, there are loopholes which

are very attractive to diploma mills in some states which do require licensure. For example, California permits some universities to operate under a special provision of its licensure statute, which requires very little in the way of educational quality. (Tufts, 1987, p. 233)

Moreover, three states, Hawaii, Utah and Wyoming, "... place no requirements on private degree granting institutions" (Tufts, 1987, p. 233).

The naïve student, then, is vulnerable. Counsellors must alert students to the problem. Students who seek studies in the United States must understand the term "diploma mill," know how to spot one, understand the terms "authorized" and "accredited," and appreciate the depth of the problem. This article achieves this goal by addressing four questions; namely,

1. What is a diploma mill?
2. What features do these schools have in common?
3. What is the difference between authorization and accreditation?
4. What does the future hold?

Types of Diploma Mills

What is a diploma mill? Basically, there are two types. The first type, and perhaps the most common, is the "briefcase college" (McQuaid, 1984, p. 9). In the United States, their numbers are thought to be in the 400 to 500 range (Spille & Stewart, 1985). As a rule, they operate from either a mailbox, a forwarding service or a telephone answering agency (Tufts, 1987). They offer a full range of degrees from the bachelor's to the doctorate in every imaginable discipline, including medicine (McQuaid, 1984). Some only sell degrees under fictitious names, other sell imitations that resemble degrees from bona fide institutions. As well, some sell phoney transcripts and letters of recommendation (Spille & Stewart, 1985), while others offer class rings, graduation photos and yearbooks (McQuaid, 1984). Whatever, there is little, if any, pretense. Their business is merchandising. Their product is deceit. They simply sell, "... a diploma or degree to a person upon payment of a fee" (Spille & Stewart, 1985, p. 19).

The second type is harder to discern in that they frequently pose as non-traditional institutions (Arnstein, 1982; Caudrey, 1985; Gubser, 1982), that is, as "universities without walls" (Caudrey, 1985, p. 12). An innovative non-traditional college may have no residency requirements and no conventional facilities, but still be accredited by an association that has formal recognition from the Council on Post Secondary Accreditation (COPA). The diploma mill will emulate a legitimate non-traditional program, including accreditation from a phoney agency, yet post standards

that are far less demanding than those ordinarily specified under degree-granting programs at those colleges and universities accredited by COPA-recognized agencies. Such organizations often thrive by advertising themselves as offering programs tailored to meet the unique needs of adult learners.

(Spille & Stewart, 1985, p. 20)

Some of these schools are run as “blatantly exploitive commercial enterprises” while others

are headed by individuals who are honest and well-intentioned but who do not have the background, resources, or competence necessary to organize and administer an institution awarding post-secondary level degrees. The basic program may be respectable enough in its outlines, but sponsored instruction is more than likely to be sleazy and academically unsound.

(Spille & Stewart, 1985, p. 20)

Spotting a Diploma Mill

What features do these schools have in common? Although there are no foolproof mechanisms for identifying a diploma mill, there are some traits that, while perhaps not the exclusive domain of the mills, can, when taken in their totality, help the unsuspecting student. First, many have, “. . . names similar to those of well known, often prestigious institutions” (McQuaid, 1988, p. K4). Examples include:

<i>Diploma Mill</i>	<i>Legitimate Operation</i>
American National University (Jones, 1985a, 1985d)	American University
American Western University (Spille & Stewart, 1985)	American University
Laurence University (Jones, 1985e)	Lawrence University
Montserrat University (Jones, 1985e)	Montserrat College of Art
National College of Arts and Sciences (Spille & Stewart, 1985)	National College National University
North American University (Jones 1985d)	American University
Northwestern College of Applied Science (Spille & Stewart, 1985)	Northwestern College
Pacific College (Jones, 1985e)	Pacific Union College Pacific University
Pacific Northwestern University (Jones, 1985b)	Pacific University
South Eastern University (Jones, 1984, 1985a, 1985b)	Southeastern University

Southern California University
(Jones, 1985c)

St. Paul Seminary
(Spille & Stewart, 1985)

Texas University
(Jones, 1985b, 1985e)

Thomas A. Edison College
(Jones, 1985b, 1985e)

University of East Georgia
(Jones, 1985b, 1985e)

Southern California College
University of Southern California

St. Paul College
St. Paul School of Theology

Texas A & I University
Texas A & M University
Texas College
Texas Southern University
University of Texas

Thomas A. Edison State College

University of Georgia

Second, admission requirements are minimal or non-existent (Stewart & Spille, 1988). Third, credits for "life experience" may comprise all, or most, of their requirements (Tufts, 1987). Credits are given for almost everything imaginable including: former courses of study, military service and administrative experience (Arnstein, 1982). In so doing, they

appeal to the hidden voice in most of us: they will recognize our true merit and will give us credit for it. In practice, that means the receipt of a degree by return mail upon prepayment of a suitable fee. (Arnstein, 1982, p. 551)

Fourth, degrees can be obtained in a relatively short period of time (Dejnozka & Kapel, 1982). For instance, in a two-year span, one undercover agent acquired 16 advanced degrees, including several doctorates of which two were in medicine (McQuaid, 1984). Fifth, residency requirements, if any, may entail

two or three weeks at a regional motel spent in "exchanging invaluable professional ideas", to quote a current brochure. Explains a chief administrator of the Philadelphia school system about his four-week "residential" doctoral program: "The work is there, but it is all concentrated. I was in the pool at 5:00 p.m. daily. but from 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., I was in school. And even around the pool we talked business. It wasn't a vacation". (Gubser, 1982, pp. 21-22)

Sixth, dissertations, "... may take the form of a shallow analysis or descriptions of various aspects of a person's job or current life situation" (Stewart & Spille, 1988, p. 30). In some cases, an autobiography will suffice (Arnstein, 1982). Seventh, tuition is

typically on a per degree basis rather than a per semester, per quarter, or per course basis. For example, a bachelor's degree might cost \$1,000; a master's degree, \$1,800; and a doctoral degree, \$2,200. Frequently, this information is stated on application forms and most or all the payment is expected to be sent in advance. (Stewart & Spille, 1988, p. 33)

Eighth, their catalogue descriptions are exaggerated (Dejnozka & Kapel, 1982; McQuaid, 1988). As well, they stress “flexible,” “holistic,” “self-directed” learning.

They speak of high standards, they emphasize their commitment to learning and the advancement of knowledge, and they often stress that they are innovative and up-to-the-minute. (Arnstein, 1982, p. 551)

Ninth, a copy of the degree may appear in their catalogue or promotional material (Stewart & Spille, 1988). Tenth, documents can be backdated (Stewart & Spille, 1988). Eleventh, officials of the organization are ostentatiously qualified. Each member usually exhibits an exotic array of letters after his or her name (McQuaid, 1988; Stewart & Spille, 1988). Twelfth, the address may contain impressive verbiage like boulevard or promenade, but mail is only received at a post office box (Stewart & Spille, 1988). Thirteenth, campus facilities are substandard or non-existent (Dejnozka & Kapel, 1982) and there is no formal provision for access to non-owned facilities or services (Stewart & Spille, 1988). Fourteenth, the word “authorized” is stressed instead of “accredited.” Some may even mock the term accredited while priding themselves on the fact that they are different; they do not need, or seek, external approval from a professional association, council or board. When accreditation is implied, the accrediting agency is not recognized by COPA (Stewart & Spille, 1988). And last, the success of their graduates is emphasized by providing: (1) a series of personal endorsements, and (2) impressive lists of where their alumni are employed (Stewart & Spille, 1988).

Authorized Versus Accredited

What is the difference between authorization and accreditation? In the United States, unlike Canada, government control over post-secondary education is peripheral. This responsibility is accorded to independent accrediting bodies, associations or agencies. Still, most states, but not all, maintain licensing laws on the books, if not in practice. The law, for example, might permit

anyone to start a college or university by showing net assets of at least \$50,000. Beyond that, about all that (might be) required is the filing of annual affidavits carrying the names and addresses of all persons listed as officers and directors and “full disclosures” of institutional objectives and proposed methods of achieving them. (Spille & Stewart, 1985, p. 18)

If, and when, a school met these requirements, it would be considered authorized. Authorization, then, has a “legal” connotation, not an academic connotation. Authorization does not signal quality, but rather compliance with the law. However,

the laws themselves vary considerably in their effectiveness. Some states have strong, well-enforced laws; others have weak laws with minimal enforcement, and

a few states with strong laws do not provide the personnel or the funds to enforce the laws adequately. (Millard, 1982, p. 32)

Thus, authorization means different things to different people depending on where you reside. And, herein lies the quandary. The inhabitants of one state may know what authorization means in their own jurisdiction, but fail to understand the term in neighbouring states. Many diploma mills operate across state boundaries, however, with the result that caution should be exercised when an organization claims to be authorized.

In contrast, accreditation is concerned with quality control. There are two types of accreditation, namely, institutional (comprehensive) and programmatic (specialized). An institutional accrediting body, be it national or regional, examines the whole organization. It looks not only at course offerings, but also at, "... the student personnel services, financial conditions, and administrative strength" (Harris, 1984, p. 408). Institutional accreditation certifies that the school:

- a) has appropriate purposes;
 - b) has the resources needed to accomplish its purposes;
 - c) can demonstrate that it is accomplishing its purposes;
 - d) gives reasons to believe that it will continue to accomplish its purposes.
- (Harris, 1984, pp. 408-409)

On the other hand, a specialized accrediting body concentrates on a specific program within a college or university.

In a number of fields (e.g., medicine, law, dentistry) graduation from an accredited program in the field is a requirement for receiving a license to practice the profession. Thus specialized accreditation is recognized as providing a basic assurance of the scope and quality of professional or occupational preparation. This focus of specialized accreditation leads to accreditation requirements that are generally sharply directed to the nature of the program, including specific requirements for resources needed to provide a program satisfactory for professional preparation. (Harris, 1984, p. 409)

Although the two types of accreditation are complementary, an accredited institution could offer an unaccredited program. Moreover, many disciplines (e.g., anthropology, English, physics) have no recognized specialized accrediting body (Harris, 1987).

Accreditation is voluntary. An organization could apply for either, or both types of accreditation, but, "Many of the specialized accrediting bodies will consider requests for accreditation reviews only from programs affiliated with institutions holding comprehensive accreditation" (Harris, 1987, p. 444). A school that applied would hold "candidacy status" which, "... means that an institution is progressing toward accreditation, but that does not assure the achievement of accredited status" (Harris, 1987, p. vii). Hence, accreditation is ongoing in that

institutions and programs can be accredited or dropped at any time throughout the year.

Again, caution must be exercised, for as stated earlier, there are phoney accrediting associations just as there are phoney universities. These accreditation mills purport to accredit their own affiliates, although only a "... COPA-recognized accrediting body can be regarded as qualified to conduct evaluations of institutions and/or programs seeking accreditation ..." (Harris, 1984, p. 408). COPA itself is not an accrediting body, but it "... periodically reviews the work of recognized accrediting agencies, determines the appropriateness of existing or proposed accrediting agencies and their activities through its granting of recognition ..." (Harris, 1984, p. 411). This distinction is important because a student could be easily misled by a diploma mill that claims accreditation. If the accrediting body is not sanctioned by COPA, beware! A list of the accrediting groups recognized by COPA is provided for the reader's convenience. The list is divided into three parts: (1) national institutional accrediting bodies, (2) regional institutional accrediting bodies, and (3) specialized accrediting bodies.²

(1) National Institutional Accrediting Bodies

American Association of Bible Colleges
 Association of Independent Colleges and Schools
 Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada
 National Association of Trade and Technical Schools
 National Home Study Council

(2) Regional Institutional Accrediting Bodies

Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools
 New England Association of Schools and Colleges
 North Central Association of Colleges and Schools
 Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges
 Southern Association of Colleges and Schools
 Western Association of Schools and Colleges

(3) Specialized Accrediting Bodies

Allied Health: American Medical Association Committee
 on Allied Health Education and Accreditation
 Architecture: National Architectural Accrediting Board
 Art and Design: National Association of Schools of Art and Design
 Business Administration and Management: American Assembly
 of Collegiate Schools of Business
 Chiropractic Education: The Council of Chiropractic Education
 Construction Education: American Council for Construction Education
 Dentistry and Dental Auxiliary Programs: American Dental Association
 Dietetics: The American Dietetic Association

Engineering: Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology
 Forestry: Society of American Foresters
 Health Services Administration: Accrediting Commission on
 Education for Health Services Administration
 Home Economics: American Home Economics Association
 Interior Design: Foundation for Interior Design Education Research
 Journalism: Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism
 and Mass Communication
 Landscape Architecture: American Society of Landscape Architects
 Law: American Bar Association/Association of American Law Schools
 Librarianship: American Library Association
 Medical Assistant and Medical Laboratory Technician:
 Accrediting Bureau of Health Education Schools
 Medicine: Liaison Committee on Medical Education
 Music: National Association of Schools of Music
 Nurse Anesthesia Education: Council on Accreditation of
 Nurse Anesthesia Education Programs/Schools
 Nursing: National League for Nursing
 Optometry: American Optometric Association
 Osteopathic Medicine: American Osteopathic Association
 Pharmacy: American Council on Pharmaceutical Education
 Physical Therapy: American Physical Therapy Association
 Podiatry: American Podiatry Medical Association
 Psychology: American Psychological Association
 Public Health: Council on Education for Public Health
 Rabbinical and Talmudic Education: Association of Advanced
 Rabbinical and Talmudic Studies
 Rehabilitation Counselling: Council on Rehabilitation Education
 Social Work: Council on Social Work Education
 Speech Pathology and Audiology: American Speech-Language-
 Hearing Association
 Teacher Education: National Council for Accreditation of
 Teacher Education
 Veterinary Medicine: Council on Education American Veterinary
 Medical Association

A Bleak Forecast

What does the future hold? In the United States, arrests are being made (Chairman of the subcommittee on health and long-term care of the select committee on aging house of representatives, 1986; Farrell, 1984; McQuaid, 1984, 1985), but authorities have failed to stamp out the industry. It has become a multi-million dollar trade (David, 1984; Farrell, 1984), one that, unfortunately, appears to be growing, not diminishing

(Farrell, 1984). To date, efforts by law enforcing agencies have been impeded by a lack of resources (Gubser, 1982; Millard, 1982). As well, investigators have

been hampered by officials who hold “nontraditional” degrees or actually operate the very outfits they are expected to regulate—a situation Delaware’s Wilmington News-Journal says is “like asking a priest to referee a Notre Dame football game”. In the case of one southern diploma mill being investigated by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) in cooperation with NBC News, one of the judges of the superior court in which a consumer fraud action might have been brought turned out to be the “president” of the “university” under investigation. (Gubser, 1982, p. 24)

Obviously, it is an uphill battle, one that will not be won in the immediate future. Meanwhile, everyone suffers including, in particular, the students,

society at large; employers who rely on empty credentials; persons who become patients, clients and colleagues of such paper practitioners; and some legitimate, nontraditional “schools without walls” which are victimized by such exploitation. (Chairman of the subcommittee on health and long-term care of the select committee on aging house of representatives, 1986, p. 9)

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Notes

- ¹ Other agencies students might approach include:
 Association of Canadian Community Colleges, 110 Eglinton Ave. West, 2nd Floor, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, M4R 1A3.
 Canadian Society for the Study of Higher Education, 4th Floor, 151 Slater Street, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, K1P 5N1.
 National Union of Students, 126 York St., Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, K1N 5T5.
- ² This list is abridged from Harris (1987, pp. 446-451). The unabridged list contains the names, addresses and telephone numbers of these associations.

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