

TILTING AT DIPLOMA MILLS:
A DISCUSSION OF SPURIOUS DEGREES AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

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No worthy cause or mission is without its adversaries, and legitimate online distance education is no exception. While recent years have brought great improvements in the technology and growth of online learning, there is still plenty of work to be done to improve its funding and public perception. And the dishonest, misleading, and ever-growing world of diploma mills can be a great hindrance to the achievement of these worthy goals.

This paper discusses the increasing prevalence of online diploma and degree mills, the implications they have on legitimate distance education, and what measures are being taken to minimize their negative influence.

There are a number of reasons why I am interested in this issue. The first is that I hold a tremendous amount of respect and reverence for higher education. It is impossible to imagine how many peoples' lives have been dedicated to making knowledge available to the world through college and university programs. The ability to learn from these efforts contributes greatly to the happiness and success of individuals and serves as a foundation to thriving economies and communities. The thought of deceitful and greedy individuals bastardizing these treasured values in order to obtain a sullied profit is alarming and frustrating. It requires the attention and action of those that can make an effort to minimize its prevalence.

I am also interested in this issue because it holds vast implications to literally millions of people. Diploma mills have the potential to affect the lives of consumers, employers, students, legitimate educators, accreditation organizations, and legislators in significant ways. And it is directly linked to my future career goals of working in education as an instructional designer and professor.

Definition of a Diploma Mill

A number of scholars have offered different definitions of diploma mills. Simonson describes a diploma mill as having “no classroom, untrained or nonexistent faculties, and unqualified administrators with profit as their primary motivation” (Simonson, 2009). Contreras & Gollin have gone so far as to make a distinction between diploma and degree mills, describing a degree mill as a place that “provides a ‘real’ degree from a fake college” and a diploma mill as a place that “provides a fake degree from a real college” (Contreras & Gollin, 2009).

The Higher Education Opportunity Act offers perhaps the most detailed definition of a diploma mill, referring to it as an entity that charges for a degree, diploma, or certificate “that may be used to represent to the general public that the individual possessing [it] has completed a program of postsecondary education or training.” It also notes that a diploma mill requires these individuals “to complete little or no education or coursework to obtain” the degree, and that the entity “lacks accreditation by an accrediting agency or association that is recognized [by] institutions of higher education” (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

All of these definitions can best be summed up Piña’s assertion that “a diploma mill is commonly recognized as an entity that will award a degree for substandard academic work” (Piña, 2010). This is the definition I will be using for the purposes of this paper.

How Diploma Mills Work

Unscrupulous philanthropists have been peddling phony degrees since at least the late 19th century. In 1880, the New York Times reported on the death of “the notorious

Dr. John Buchanan, who for several years has been engaged in the manufacture and sale of bogus medical diplomas in this city.” The article also mentioned that “in 1872 bogus diploma business was thoroughly exposed” (New York Times, 1880).

Buchanan sold his fraudulent degrees by mail, which was essentially how diploma mills operated until they took off on the internet. In 2004 there were over 400 diploma mills and 300 counterfeit diploma sites online, amounting to over \$500 million in yearly revenue (Armour, 2003).

How come these fraudulent operations make so much money without being detected or prosecuted? It is because they are run by very clever people. Websites advertising these fake schools can be very convincing, featuring images of beautiful campuses and descriptions of knowledgeable, prestigious faculty.

I visited the website of Glendale University, which proclaimed itself to be a “flexible method for earning Associate’s, Bachelor’s, Master’s, and Doctorate level degrees.” The site was put together well, featuring smiling students, lengthy descriptions of coursework, and even a school store where you could buy hats, mugs and t-shirts featuring the Glendale University seal. The cost to get a degree at this so-called university? From \$475 for an Associate’s Degree to \$599 for a Phd. Students can receive their “graduation packages” in as little as ten days, consisting of two diplomas, transcripts that can be backdated, a letter of recommendation, a “degree verification letter” signed by the “dean” of the university, and an ID card (Glendale University, 2007). It is all, of course, completely worthless.

Or is it?

The problem with degrees issued by places like Glendale University is that they can be of worth, in that they can deceive employers into thinking a prospective employee has a legitimate education. Some diploma mills, including Glendale, are eventually up front with their customers about the fact that they are simply providing the unsavory service of making it look like buyers have a legitimate education (Lagorio, 2006). Buyers have to acknowledge this when purchasing a degree, so the diploma mill is cleared of illegal activity.

But what about accreditation? Legitimate accreditation commissions, of course, will have nothing to do with diploma mills. As Simonson notes, these commissions' "primary emphasis is on program quality, to protect the public from diploma mills" (Simonson, 2009). But diploma mill operators endeavor to get around this problem as well by inventing their own phony accreditation agencies. Glendale boasted that it was "proud to be fully accredited by the National Distance Learning Accreditation Council," which turned out to be nothing than a semi-polished website with a laundry list of both legitimate higher education organizations and diploma mills (Glendale University, 2007). Glendale University was one of the first listed, and one of three that featured an actual link to its website (National Distance Learning Accreditation Council, 2007).

Implications of Diploma Mill Prevalence

The prevalence of diploma mills like Glendale impact a variety of stakeholders, including consumers, legislators, employers, students, and legitimate distance educators. Consumers have plenty of reasons to be alarmed by the prevalence of diploma mills. The thought of a colleague receiving a raise or promotion with a worthless degree is

frustrating. The thought of a professional putting others' lives in danger with fake credentials is frightening. Armour reports that employees boasting credentials from diploma mills have been employed as sex-abuse counselors, college vice presidents, child psychologists, athletic coaches and engineers (Armour, 2003). There have also been news reports of so-called doctors that have been discovered to hold bogus degrees and face malpractice and manslaughter charges (Armour, 2003, & Leung, 2004).

Perhaps the most well-known piece of recent news about a professional boasting a bogus degree scandal involving former Department of Homeland Security executive Laura Callahan, who was dismissed from her position after it was discovered that her bachelor's master's, and doctorate degrees were all earned in a single year from a diploma mill being run out of an old Motel 6 in Evanston, Wyoming. Callahan had been working as a computer scientist for the federal government for 15 years with only an Associate's Degree of real education (Leung, 2004). As a result of the scandal, the Government Accounting Office conducted a probe that revealed that "more than 1,200 résumés on a government Internet site listed degrees that actually came from mills" (Armour, 2003). This can only increase the public's uncertainty in its leaders when trust in government is already dangerously low.

Employers also need to be concerned about the pervasiveness of diploma mills. "Only 40% of companies regularly verify degrees earned," reports Armour. "And even then they might miss diploma mills" (Armour, 2003). Not only are employers in danger of hiring someone that is less-qualified than he or she claims to be, they also risk becoming entangled in lawsuits and loss of credibility if the truth of an employee's lack of qualifications becomes known.

Students also need to be wary of diploma mills. Not all bearers of bogus degrees boast of their education with knowledge of its illegitimacy; there are plenty that are lured in by spam letters and banner ads promoting quick degrees at a low cost. Students need to be aware that there are hundreds of sites that offer worthless degrees and need to know how to sniff them out. The Better Business Bureau lists a number of red flags students should watch for to avoid diploma mills including advertisements for degrees (1) that can be earned in a short amount of time, (2) that include a list of accrediting agencies that “sounds a little too impressive,” (3) that “place unrealistic emphasis on offering college credits for . . . real world experience,” (4) that have limited interaction with professors, (5) that bear names similar to reputable institutions, or (6) whose addresses are PO. Box numbers (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). This is valuable information that every student should be aware of.

Legitimate distance educators also have great cause to be concerned with diploma mills, because they can negatively affect others’ views of online learning. “Many in traditional education worry about the quality of distance education,” Simonson writes. “Some have called distance education institutions diploma mills, especially those that are profit-generating” (Simonson, 2009).

Piña goes so far as to say that many of the problems proponents of distance education face today “are related directly to the fact that much of the general public, our legislators, and many within academia itself, continue to have difficulty distinguishing between . . . legitimate distance education and . . . diploma mills.” He goes on to say that the results of this confusion have brought a lack of consistent academic standards, a

confusing accreditation system, and questions about whether or not life experience should be converted into college credit (Piña, 2009).

The Legal Situation

So are legislators taking action against this souring of the field of education? In some states, yes. Armour reports that “some states . . . are passing laws making it a crime punishable by jail time to use fake degrees for landing a job or raise (Armour, 2003). But it is tricky work. Diploma mill operators are smart, and make sure that their operations, while unethical, are still technically legal. Logorio reports that “diploma mills have become savvy enough not to deceive customers” because “such deceit would be a violation of the Federal Trade Commission Act.” Instead, they are open about their operations, and simply act as “the instrument for others to become involved in deceptive practices” (Lagorio, 2006). Diploma mills also tend to extend their offices and employees across state and country lines, which further complicates the ability to prosecute culprits (Contreras & Gollin, 2009).

The state of Oregon seems to be the state taking the most legal action to thwart the efforts of diploma mills. In 1999, it was one of only two states that made the use of diploma mill credentials illegal. There are now ten. (Contreras & Gollin, 2009). Oregon’s Office of Degree Authorization also keeps a list of known diploma mills (Lagorio, 2006).

But the day diploma mills will be completely illegal is still far away. How can students, employers, and consumers be protected from them in the meantime? Contreras & Gollin suggest “a parallel approach [of] buttress[ing] the quality of information that is available to prospective employers concerning legitimate universities and the credentials

they issue” (Contreras & Gollin, 2009). Recent news stories and exposés of a handful of diplomas are a step in that direction, but there is still a long way to go.

Conclusion

The prevalence of diploma mills will have a definite impact on my personal and professional goals. I plan on working as an instructional designer and then a professor. If diploma mills continue to be the nuisance they are today, they will continue to give distance education a bad name in some circles. There is also the possibility that one of my colleagues may be “getting ahead in the workplace,” so to speak, with the use of diploma mill credentials. I may even have to report to a supervisor whose academic qualifications are not what he or she claims there are. These are legitimate concerns, and I plan on doing all I can to make sure that the truth of diploma mills is known to all I come in contact with.

If the dishonest, damaging effects of diploma mills are going to be truly and permanently done away with, I believe the first step lies in making the public known about them. Not only that they exist, but how they work, and the serious consequences they can have on consumers, employees, employers, students, and legitimate educators. If the public is armed with this knowledge, we can help convince legislators to make the operation of diploma mills illegal, to make it illegal to boast unaccredited diplomas in more than just ten states, and to help make accreditation practices more regulated and universal.

Education is important. It is sacred. We must not let it be adulterated by those that are more interested in making dirty money. It is up to us to put a swift and permanent stop to such shameless dissipation.

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