How Online Diploma Mills Hurt e-Learning

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The increasing ease and scalability of online development and transaction has made the creation and offering of online learning more cost efficient and readily available. It has also facilitated the proliferation of diploma or degree mills -- those operations that award „degrees” for little or no academic work. This paper highlights the different ways in which online diploma mills hurt the reputation of legitimate e-learning and hurt students, faculty, employers, job seekers and society.

Throughout the past decade, e-learning has consistently been the fastest growing sector of higher education. The ability of the Internet to serve as an efficient, economical and ubiquitous delivery system for instruction has facilitated the development of tens of thousands of online courses and hundreds of online degree and certificate programs. Recent studies have confirmed that learning outcomes of online students are equivalent -- and in some cases may be superior -- to those of face-to-face students. Many college and university websites feature testimonies of graduates whose jobs, illnesses, military service or family situations would have precluded a college education, if not for e-learning.

The increasing ease and scalability of online development and transaction has made the creation and offering of online learning more cost efficient and readily available. It has also facilitated the proliferation of diploma or degree mills -- those operations that award „degrees” for little or no academic work. Current estimates are that over 300 active diploma mills constitute a billion-dollar industry.

Using attractive web sites and promises of entire degrees based on life experience, unaccredited schools and diploma mills market themselves as „virtual universities” or „distance degree completion programs” and compete with legitimate accredited and recognized colleges and universities for students. „Degree replacement services” provide exact reproductions of Ph.D.
M.D. diplomas from any university in the U.S. to anyone who will write a check -- no questions asked.

Publicized cases of government officials, political candidates, college presidents, school administrators, teachers and professors with fraudulent “distance learning” degrees cause many to question the legitimacy of all distance learning, thus adding fuel to the critics’ fire. Tragically, institutions of higher learning -- even those actively engaged in distance learning -- have failed to address the problem of this threat to legitimate distance learning.

What is a Diploma Mill?

A common answer to this question is that there is no standard definition for a diploma or degree mill. However, an examination of available definitions by federal and state agencies paints a fairly consistent picture as to what constitutes a diploma mill. For example, the U. S. General Accounting Office has defined diploma mills as “businesses that sell bogus academic degrees based upon life or other experience, or substandard or negligible academic work.” The Oregon Office of Degree Authorization, a leading player in the fight against diploma mills, has published that „Diploma mills (or degree mills) are substandard or fraudulent ‘colleges that offer potential students degrees with little or no serious work.” The recently renewed Higher Education Opportunity Act provides a definition of diploma mills that includes three characteristics: 1) A degree, diploma or certificate representing the completion of a program of postsecondary education is offered for a fee; 2) the individual is required to complete little or no education or coursework; 3) the entity lacks accreditation by a recognized accrediting agency.

The challenge for defining a particular institution as a diploma mill is that there is often little consistency between higher education institutions (or even within programs in the same institution) as to what constitutes substandard academic work. Accrediting bodies have historically focused upon input measures -- such as faculty degrees, library collections and physical plant structures -- rather than output measures like student achievement or

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6 A. Ezell, J. Bear, Degree mills: The billion dollar industry that has sold over a million fake diplomas, Prometheus, Amherst, NY 2005; M. Santovec, Diploma mills hurt distance education’s image, „Distance Education Report” 2006, no. 10(1).
8 S.M. Collins, Bogus degrees and unmet expectations: Are taxpayer dollars subsidizing diploma mills?, Government Printing Office, Washington 2004 [hearings before the Committee on Governmental Affairs, United States Senate].
11 A. Ezell, J. Bear, Degree mills: The billion dollar industry that has sold over a million fake diplomas, Prometheus, Amherst, NY 2005; M. Santovec, Diploma mills hurt distance education’s image, „Distance Education Report” 2006, no. 10(1).
employability of graduates\textsuperscript{12}. Another problem is that many diploma mills create their own accreditation mills, in order to accredit themselves or other fraudulent schools\textsuperscript{13}. Hiring managers often cannot distinguish between legitimate and bogus forms of accreditation\textsuperscript{14}. A further confounding factor is the fact that not all unaccredited schools are necessarily diploma mills\textsuperscript{15}.

Given these challenges, how does one determine whether a given school could be classified as a diploma mill? Ezell and Bear provide a useful list of 92 fraudulent practices engaged in by diploma mills\textsuperscript{16}. The U.S. Department of Education has established a diploma mill information website (www.ed.gov/students/prep/college/diplomamills/) and a website that lists recognized accrediting agencies (www.ed.gov/admins/finaid/accred/accreditation_pg6.html).

**Hurting Legitimate e-Learning**

Decades of research studies have shown no significant difference between traditional and technology delivered instruction\textsuperscript{17}. However, a recent meta-analysis by the U.S. Department of Education indicates that students in online or blended learning environments are now outperforming those in traditional face-to-face classes\textsuperscript{18}. There is no body of research that demonstrates the inferiority of online learning; nevertheless, opinion polls show than many continue to view online learning as inferior to learning in a face-to-face setting\textsuperscript{19}. Vernon Ehlers, a U.S. Congressman, publicly voiced suspicion of online learning and stated that opportunities are rife within distance education institutions to act just like diploma mills\textsuperscript{20}. David Noble’s book, *Digital Diploma Mills*\textsuperscript{21} makes his position very clear: all distance learning programs are diploma mills.

In the summer of 2004, the Chronicle of Higher Education ran an issue dedicated to the problem of diploma mills in U.S. higher education\textsuperscript{22}. While the Chronicle articles did not overtly call e-learning into question, Simonson observed that the implications were clear. Institutions with no

\textsuperscript{12} A.A. Piña, *Online diploma mills: Why distance educators need to be concerned*, presented at the Conference on Distance Teaching and Learning, Madison, WI 2005.


\textsuperscript{14} R.C. Douglas, *The accreditation of degree-granting institutions and its role in the utility of college degrees in the workplace*, „Dissertation Abstracts International“ 2003, no. 64 06A.

\textsuperscript{15} S.M. Collins, op.cit.

\textsuperscript{16} A. Ezell, J. Bear, *Degree mills: The billion dollar industry that has sold over a million fake diplomas*, Prometheus, Amherst, NY 2005.

\textsuperscript{17} A.A. Piña, Distance learning and the institution: foundations, importance and implementation, VDM Publishing, Saarbrucken, Germany 2008; T.L. Russell, *The no significant difference phenomenon (5th ed.*), Montgomery, International Distance Education Certification Center, 2001.


\textsuperscript{19} D. Shieh, *Professors regard online instructor as less effective than classroom learning*, „Chronicle of Higher Education“ 2009, no. 55.


campuses, with no faculty or only part-timers, with questionable accreditation, and with major Web promotions, are some of the characteristics of diploma mills. Unfortunately, this list reminds many of distance education institutions, too...Why should those in distance education be concerned about diploma mills, anyway? A careful reading of the June 25 Chronicle gives the reader cause to reflect. One wonders if the editors of the Chronicle were taking a not-too-subtle jab at the growing field of distance education.23

Hurt Students

During uncertain economic times, as people pursue avenues to make themselves more employable or more promotable, it is common to see increases in post-secondary education enrollments.24 The large expenditure of time and money required for a college degree can be a major barrier to potential students. Diploma mill operators seek to take advantage of student desperation and naivety by promising easy and cheap degrees.25 While it is true that many people who purchase degrees from diploma mills do so with full knowledge of the bogus nature of the degree, it is also true that diploma mills fool a number of people who may be looking for convenient and inexpensive ways to complete their degrees.26

The awarding of college credit by means of prior learning assessment portfolio, credit by examination and recommendations from the American Council on Education, is a commonplace occurrence at thousands of legitimate accredited colleges and universities. Those who may have heard of legitimate prior learning assessment at their local university could be confused (and enticed) by e-mail solicitations, banner advertisements on websites or ads in otherwise legitimate publications offering to „let us award you the degree that you may have already earned” through „work and life experience” with „no class attendance required”.27

International students who are eager to have the prestige of a „more portable” degree from a U.S. college or university are particularly easy and lucrative targets for diploma mills.28 By taking advantage of many international students’ lack of command of the English language and lack of knowledge of the U.S. system of higher education, a diploma mill operator can fool students into thinking that they are attending the online learning program of a legitimate American university.29 Collins found that these operations devalue education by deliberately making it difficult to distinguish between a legitimate and a sham degree. Many diploma mills, for example, use names that are close to those of well-known institutions. Thus, Columbia State

25 M. Santovec, Diploma mills hurt distance education’s image, „Distance Education Report” 2006, no. 10(1).
27 A.A. Piña, Online diploma mills: Why distance educators need to be concerned, presented at the Conference on Distance Teaching and Learning, Madison, WI 2005.
29 A.A. Piña, op.cit.
Attempts to help students through government regulation have often had the effect of hurting students who were pursuing their education legitimately via distance learning. An example of this occurred in 1992, when the U. S. Congress passed what became known as the „50-percent rule”, which forbade students of institutions that offered more than 50 percent of their courses online from receiving Title IV federal funding. The law was intended to slow the proliferation of diploma mills. However, the subsequent regional accreditation of virtual universities, such as Walden, Capella and Jones International, demonstrated that the 50-percent rule inflicted collateral damage upon legitimate distance learners. The law was repealed in 2006.

Hurting Faculty

Many faculty seek opportunities to teach as online adjunct instructors for other institutions, either because they wish to augment their salaries or because their own institutions do not offer online classes. Institutions often recruit adjunct faculty by soliciting curriculum vitae at conferences, conventions, listservs and by direct e-mail solicitation. Diploma mills use the same methods to recruit their „faculty” and use the information to create lists of impressively credentialed faculty who are usually unaware that their names and reputations are being used (and harmed) to promote a bogus school.

Hurting Employers

Potential employers can be lured into hiring unqualified candidates who display phony „degrees” on their resumes and job applications and provide the employers with falsified „transcripts” of courses that were never taken. Since employers usually take college transcripts and copies of diplomas at face value, rather than contacting numerous educational institutions to verify their candidates’ academic records, the chances of a fake diploma being caught appear slim.

Studying the role of accreditation on the actions of hiring directors, Douglas found that most were unable to distinguish between legitimate universities and diploma mills with legitimate sounding names. The hiring directors were also unaware of the existence of different types of academic accreditation and of the existence of bogus accreditation mills. In a U.S. Senate
report on diploma mills, Senator Susan Collins remarked that diploma mills are unfair to potential employers, whether in the public or private sector, who might assume that a bogus degree actually reflects mastery of materials needed to perform a particular job.\(^\text{37}\)

**Hurting Those with Real Degrees**

In the same Senate report, U.S. Senator Joseph Lieberman summed up the effect of diploma mills on the workforce: Phony degrees from phony schools are unfair to honest people who work hard for their degrees and on their jobs and they also can be unfair to those who seek them and are deceived by their value. No job applicant should be denied a position; no employee denied a promotion, because a competitor has presented false qualifications.\(^\text{38}\)

**Hurting Society**

One of the outcomes of the U.S. Senate hearings was the revelation that hundreds of federal government employees had received unaccredited and diploma mill degrees that were paid for by taxpayer funds. Senator Lieberman observed that, the public interest may be at risk here, as well, when public employees are on the job without the educational credentials needed to do their jobs.\(^\text{39}\) Senator Collins, calling the situation „inexcusable waste” added if a job is critical to public safety or involves significant responsibility, then a bogus degree can do tangible and substantial harm.\(^\text{40}\) Ezell and Bear documented over 80 cases of college presidents and professors, school teachers, principals and superintendents, business executives and political candidates whose jobs were lost or careers were ruined when their phony credentials were exposed.\(^\text{41}\) Even more insidious were the divorces, illnesses and loss of lives due to people who were practicing medicine or psychiatry with phony MD or PhD degrees.

**What Can Be Done?**

Other than occasional articles in the Chronicle of Higher Education, the threat of diploma mills has been largely ignored by most colleges and universities.\(^\text{42}\) While many institutions of higher education fret over competition by accredited for-profit universities, such as University of

\(^{37}\) S.M. Collins, op.cit., p. 3.
\(^{38}\) J.I. Lieberman, Bogus degrees and unmet expectations: Are taxpayer dollars subsidizing diploma mills? Government Printing Office, Washington 2004, p. 33 [hearings before the Committee on Governmental Affairs, United States Senate].
\(^{39}\) Ibidem.
\(^{40}\) S.M. Collins, Bogus degrees and unmet expectations: Are taxpayer dollars subsidizing diploma mills?. Government Printing Office, Washington 2004, p. 4 [hearings before the Committee on Governmental Affairs, United States Senate].
\(^{41}\) A. Ezell, J. Bear, Degree mills: The billion dollar industry that has sold over a million fake diplomas, Prometheus, Amherst, NY 2005.
\(^{42}\) J. Eaton, S. Uvalic-Trumbik, Degree mills: The impact on students and society, „International Higher Education” 2008, no. 53; M. Santovec, Diploma mills hurt distance education’s image, „Distance Education Report” 2006, no. 10(1).
Phoenix, they are unaware that diploma mills are doing a far more lucrative business and are siphoning away students from legitimate e-learning programs.\textsuperscript{43}

Contreras, Ezell and Bear urge educators to support legislation to make the sale and use of fake degrees illegal. Oregon, North Dakota, Illinois, Indiana & New Jersey have criminalized the use of fake degrees. However, nearly every other state has no laws prohibiting the use of diploma mill degrees as credentials\textsuperscript{44}. In North Dakota, for example, manufacturing a fake degree is a felony, punishable by up to five years in jail and $5,000 fine. Using a fake degree to get a job, promotion or college admission is a misdemeanor, with up to one year in jail and a $1,000 fine\textsuperscript{45}.

While many colleges and universities employ faculty who may possess an unaccredited degree, Ezell and Bear (2005), found that a simple Internet search listed several people with degrees from well-known diploma mills among the faculty rosters at legitimate regionally accredited colleges and universities. Those at higher education institutions need to be better at policing their own.

Finally, Simonson states that distance education leaders should be concerned about diploma mills and should combat their threat by setting a high bar of quality for legitimate distance learning: The concept of distance education is a new idea for most. It is an approach not understood by many and, because of its rapid growth, is easily criticized by some. Distance educators could ignore their critics or attempt to discredit them. However, a different tactic would better serve the field. The critics of distance education should be invited to examine curricula, to scrutinize courses, and even to test students. Institutions that offer education at a distance should seek the most rigorous and demanding of accreditation. There is no need for ‘alternative accreditation’ if distance education courses, programs, and institutions are of the highest quality\textsuperscript{46}.

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\textsuperscript{45} W. Potter, \textit{States try to crack down on diploma mills}, „Chronicle of Higher Education” 2003, no. 50 (17).

\textsuperscript{46} M. Simonson, \textit{Diploma mills and distance education}, „The Quarterly Review of Distance Education” 2004, no. 5(3) p. 8.
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