

DETECTING FRAUDULENT ACADEMIC CREDENTIALS

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Presented by

Susan Byram
Assistant Director of Graduate and International Admissions
University of Arkansas
sbyram@uark.edu
Tel: 479-575-6469
Fax: 479-575-5055

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The Five Most Common Types of Non-Official and Illegitimate Documents:

1. **Forged** or altered documents – Official, legitimate documents that have been altered in some way (usually by omissions, additions, or changes)
2. **Fabricated** (counterfeit) documents – documents fabricated to represent official documents from real or non-existent institutions (including use of letterheads).
3. **Inside jobs** – these are special cases because the documents are actually produced by institutional employees, usually for a fee; inside jobs are virtually impossible to detect upon initial review.
4. **Creative translations** – “Translations” of foreign-language documents that are not just inaccurate but systematically misleading, tantamount to fabrication.
5. **Degree or Diploma Mill Products** – The products of degree/diploma mills are not in themselves fabrications, but the academic study they purport to represent certainly is.

What is an authentic academic credential? The definition adopted by the Michigan Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers is as follows:

An official transcript is one that has been received directly from the issuing institution. It must bear the college seal, date, and an appropriate signature. Transcripts received that do not meet these requirements should not be considered official and should be routinely rejected for any permanent use.

Clues:

- ✓ An **application is submitted at the last possible moment** and there is little time left for a close inspection of documents;
- ✓ **Discrepancies/inconsistencies noted in the application for admission;**
- ✓ Evidence of **corrected personal data** (birth date, gender);
- ✓ **Document is poorly copied** and there is evidence of white-out, burn-marks, erasures, corrections;
- ✓ **Interrupted/obliterated lines** where information is generally typed or printed;
- ✓ **Missing pictures** in diplomas or professional identification cards;

- ✓ **Partial seals** on the surface of superimposed pictures not on the document surface;
- ✓ The **type is inconsistent** throughout the document because subjects have been added or grades changed. In some cases, crude alterations have been made in longhand, or lines may have been typed in at a slight angle to the computer generated originals;
- ✓ **Irregular spacing** between words or letters, or insufficient space for the text;
- ✓ **Questionable paper quality**, texture, size (regular or legal), coloration.
- ✓ **Ink color and quality**;
- ✓ **Inappropriate or outdated signatures**;
- ✓ **Incorrect seals/emblems, colors, shapes**;
- ✓ A record stamped 'not to be released to student' or 'confidential' is submitted to you by a student;
- ✓ **Applicant has lost the original of his/her record**;
- ✓ Applicant claims to have graduated from an institution but can provide only a letter indicating completion of program;
- ✓ Although the applicant had taken external examinations, the **certificates have been lost and all he/she has left is a statement of attendance or graduation from the school**;
- ✓ You know the educational system to be different from US system, yet the **transcript appears to be very American**, giving subjects, grades and credit hours in US terms;
- ✓ **Grade certificates prepared in a language other than the official language of the country where the document originated.** Many countries are currently using official transcripts in English: Japan, Taiwan, Korea, Philippines, Thailand, Canada (except Quebec), Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Egypt, Israel, Oman, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and India.
- ✓ **Names may have been substituted.** Typically, a person will type his/her name on a sheet of paper, cut it out and paste it across a copy of an original, which he/she then photocopies; the substitution of names will rarely appear on an original;
- ✓ **Grades listed may be absurdly high**, or the number of course hours claimed to have been carried per semester an improbable load;
- ✓ **Numerical aberrations:** credits do not add up and the overall grade point averages are a mathematical impossibility;
- ✓ **Use of unprofessional language**, poor grammar, misspellings;
- ✓ **The application is unusually late**, making verification difficult, or is accompanied by a long letter from an impressive office—usually located in the U.S.—which may be attempting to lend an aura of officialdom to otherwise unacceptable documents.

Rule #1

DO NOT BE RUSHED INTO ACCEPTING A CREDENTIAL ABOUT WHICH YOU HAVE RESERVATIONS.

Rule#2

FOR EVERY COPY OF A DOCUMENT THERE HAS TO HAVE BEEN AN ORIGINAL.

I. Methodology for reviewing academic records

- **Every photocopy must have an original**, request to see it even if, eventually, you have to return it to the applicant.
- **Know the educational system you are working with.**
- **Compare biographical data** (date of birth, name, sex) on all documents to make sure everything belongs to the person whose application you are reviewing.
- **Review the self-reported educational data** with the documents received to determine whether anything is missing. Request any missing information or documentation using the **academic terminology used in the country**. If you use your own terminology (e.g. transcript) you may get a manufactured document.
- **Does the institution exist and did it exist at the time of the award?**
Confirm the existence of the institution through reference sources such as the commonly used books International Handbook of Universities, the Commonwealth Universities Yearbook, AACRAO and NAFSA series, Ministries of Education websites. If the institution is not listed there, you may call the appropriate foreign consulate or embassy, either in New York City or Washington D.C., and obtain information from the educational or cultural officer. Large international organizations such as EducationUSA, the Institute for International Education or AMIDEAST also might have information.
- **Find out if the duration** (three to four years, etc) **or structure** (annual, semester, etc) **of the program has changed**. This information can be found on institutional websites.

- Become familiar with the **appearance of credentials** that you receive most frequently, making sure that the document you are reviewing conforms to previously reviewed documents from the same country, in the same time period, and reflects what your resources indicate they would look like.
- Check for **consistency in type face**; if the diploma is a preprinted document, the name of the applicant and his/her grades are variables which must be written in the same script. If there are discrepancies, either the name or the grades may have been changed.
- Check the **date of birth** against date of graduation to ascertain that the student was old enough to have graduated.
- Verify whether the **institution offers the degree program** that is reflected on the records. If the diploma is on a business school letterhead, do not take it for granted that they offered pharmacy or engineering. Remember that, in most foreign countries, institutions are more specialized and do not necessarily offer as many disciplines as U.S. universities.
- **Check the envelope.** Does it have a stamp or seal of the university? A return address? Was it mailed from the country of issuance?
- **Request originals** and, at the same time, send copies of what was submitted to you to the institution which issued the credentials requesting that they verify its authenticity. Inquiries should be addressed to the office of the person that signed the credential in question and *not to any particular individual*.
- Even though a student is **transferring from another U.S. school**, always request to see his foreign credentials. Do not rely on someone else's verification of authenticity.
- **Request originals** and, at the same time, send copies of what was submitted to you to the institution which issued the credentials requesting that they verify its authenticity. Inquiries should be addressed to the office of the person that signed the credential in question and *not to any particular individual*.
- If accepting documents from countries not diplomatically related to the U.S., such as Cuba, have the applicant sign a form declaring that the information contained in the papers is true and ask that the signature be notarized. This is more of a deterrent than you think.

- **Be cautious of applications submitted just before deadlines**, making verification almost impossible. As the saying goes, “Someone else’s lack of planning does not constitute your emergency.”

II. Poor Translations

- All translations must be accompanied by the document in the original language.
- The name of the institution and of the diploma must be in the original language. Never accept ‘bachelor of science’ or ‘master of arts’ or any U.S. educational nomenclature on a translation as the true rendition of the original. Italian universities issue laurea, the French, the licence and South Americans the titulo, etc... None should be translated or it would be impossible to establish an academic equivalency. Institution names should also be in the original language.
- Require the translation to be word-for word literal, as some translators will take it upon themselves to “interpret” various terms.

III. Fabricated (counterfeit) documents

- Be able to recognize whether a document is commercially printed, photocopied, printed (dot matrix, ink jet, laser)
- A color printer will use pixels, tiny dots of four colors (black, pink yellow, cyan)
- A color copier will leave a white edge around the document
- Was the technology available when the document was printed?
- Are there security elements on the document? Watermarks, UV, fine lines which when copied make a new pattern appear?
- Anything and everything is available on the internet today!
 1. Degree and transcript in the name of your institution – on security paper, with hologram and other security features
 2. Envelopes bearing return address, logo of university
 3. Registrar’s Office rubber stamps and metal seals
 4. A toll free number for degree verification
 5. A third party transcript records archive service with degree verification

Check out www.nd-center.com

IV. Fake Universities

The existence of an institution is the first thing that must be determined when evaluating a credential.

Fake universities often have one or more of the following features:

- The institution either claims to be accredited by an unrecognized organization or plays down the significance of accreditation.
- The name of the institution is remarkably similar to that of a genuine university.
- The institution often changes address.
- The name of the institution is invented or misleading.
- The institution lacks a physical address and can only be contacted by email or fax.
- Enrollment requirements are minimal.
- The institution emphasizes on its website that it is not a fake university.
- Information about fees refers to degree certificates and not tuition fees.
- Degrees are based purely on vocational experience.
- Degree requirements are minimal and degrees are awarded within a brief period.
- Illustrations of the degree certificates are published on the institution's website.
- The logos of recognized credit card companies are shown on the institutions website.
- Degree documents can be pre-dated.

*What questions should I ask to determine whether a **degree** provider is a mill?*

- ✓ Can degrees be purchased?
- ✓ Is there a claim of accreditation when there is no evidence of this status?
- ✓ Is there a claim of accreditation from a questionable accrediting organization?
- ✓ Does the operation lack state or federal licensure or authority to operate?
- ✓ Is little if any attendance required of students, either online or in class?
- ✓ Are few assignments required for students to earn credits?

- ✓ Is a very short period of time required to earn a degree?
- ✓ Are degrees available based solely on experience or resumé review?
- ✓ Are there few requirements for graduation?
- ✓ Does the operation fail to provide any information about a campus or business location or address and provides only a post office box?
- ✓ Does the operation fail to provide a list of its faculty and their qualifications?
- ✓ Does the operation have a name similar to other well-known colleges and universities?
- ✓ Does the operation make claims in its publications for which there is no evidence?

Source: Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2005 (available at: <http://www.chea.org/degremills/default.htm>)

*How can I determine if an **accrediting organization** may be a “mill”?*

- Does the operation allow accredited status to be purchased?
- Does the operation publish lists of institutions or programs they claim to have accredited without those institutions and programs knowing that they are listed or have been accredited?
- Does the operation claim that it is recognized (by, for example, USDE) when it is not?
- Are few if any standards for quality published by the operation?
- Is a very short period of time required to achieve accredited status?
- Are accreditation reviews routinely confined to submitting documents and do not include site visits or interviews of key personnel by the accrediting organization?
- Is ‘permanent’ accreditation granted without any requirement for subsequent periodic review, either by an external body or by the organization itself?
- Does the operation use organizational names similar to recognized accrediting organizations?
- Does the operation make claims in its publications for which there is no evidence?

Source: Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2005 (available at: <http://www.chea.org/degremills/default.htm>)

V. Notifying the applicant of verified fraud

- Never make any interpretative assumption. Hold strictly to the facts.
- If fraud is proven
 - notify the applicant using the same language you received in the reply
 - state the sanctions taken, if any

Fraudulent Document Resources

Verification of academic institutions:

International:

- <http://www.unesco.org/iau/onlinebases/index.html>
- <http://education.nic.in/collegedir/collegedir.asp>
- List of recognized universities from the United Kingdom:
<http://www.bis.gov.uk/policies/higher-education/recognised-uk-degrees>
- List of Ministries of Education by country: *Researching International Education Systems and Institutions*. Peggy Bell Hendrickson, M.A., Transcript Research Inc. 2008
http://www.nafsa.org/uploadedFiles/NAFSA_Home/Resource_Library_Assets/ACE/researching_internationalization.pdf?n=3838
- U.S. Department of State EducationUSA advisors
<http://www.educationusa.state.gov/>

Domestic:

- 2011 Accredited Institutions of Postsecondary Education. American council on Education. Member price \$85.49 Non-member price \$94.99
http://www.acenet.edu/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Programs_and_Services&ContentID=41344
ACE Publishing at pubs@acenet.edu or (202)939-9452
- American Council on Education website:
<http://www2.acenet.edu/resources/memberdirectory/>
- Council for Higher Education Accreditation: Database of Institutions and Programs Accredited by Recognized United States Accrediting Organizations:
<http://www.chea.org/search/>
- Department of Education website:
<http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ous/international/usnei/us/edlite-org-us.html>

- Accreditation in the U.S.:
http://www2.ed.gov/admins/finaid/accred/accreditation_pg6.html#NationallyRecognized
- Oregon Office of Degree Authorization:
http://www.osac.state.or.us/oda/diploma_mill.html

Foreign Credential Evaluation Resources

A comprehensive overview of publications available for international credential evaluation by country that is available on-line: *Researching International Education Systems and Institutions*. Peggy Bell Hendrickson, M.A., Transcript Research Inc. 2008
http://www.nafsa.org/uploadedFiles/NAFSA_Home/Resource_Library_Assets/ACE/researching_internationalization.pdf?n=3838

On-line Guide to Educational Systems Around the World
http://www.nafsa.org/publication.sec/epublications/online_guide_to/

U.S. Department of State EducationUSA <http://www.educationusa.state.gov/>

Foreign Credential Evaluation Services

A Guide to Selecting a Foreign Credentials Evaluation Service. NAFSA Resource Library. www.nafsa.org/resourcelibrary/default.aspx?id=8817

National Association of Credential Evaluation Services www.naces.org

Association of International Credential Evaluators, Inc. www.aice-eval.org/

For employers: <http://www.wes.org/employers/index.asp>

The "Inter-L" listserv for seeking information from colleagues:
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/inter-l/>