

An Essex Company Grades Online Degree Programs

SEVEN DAYS

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Vicky Phillips' pug Chester Ludow, "earned" his MBA Online in a degree mill sting designed by Phillips' to help educate the public on accreditation

When John Barone was hired as superintendent of the Milton Town School District in January 2011, school officials were so wowed by his credentials that he was the only one of 18 applicants interviewed by the school board. As board member Jim Lyons told the [Milton Independent](#) at the time of Barone's hiring, "I think he's just what our town needs."*

What set Barone head and shoulders above the other candidates for the job? It may have been his 20-plus years of educational work experience, including five years as principal of Colchester Middle School and three as assistant superintendent at Barre Supervisory Union.

The academic degrees Barone cited on his résumé probably helped, too. They included bachelor's and master's degrees from Castleton State College and a doctorate in educational administration — summa cum laude, no less — from [Woodfield University](#).

Evidently, no one on the school board or 15-member search committee bothered to vet Barone's academic accomplishments. If they had, they might have discovered that Woodfield University isn't accredited by any agency recognized by the U.S. Department of Education or the Council for Higher Education Accreditation. In fact, the Better Business Bureau gives Woodfield University an F rating based on 16 factors, including 48 complaints filed against the business, 34 of which are still outstanding with the consumer watchdog agency.

Woodfield University gets an even worse evaluation from [GetEducated.com](#), an Essex Junction-based company that ranks and rates more than 3,800 online college degree programs based on their affordability and credibility. GetEducated.com describes Woodfield as a "degree mill," or a phony university that sells college degrees and transcripts rather than a legitimate education. Like most degree and diploma mills, Woodfield offers instant credentials online and over the phone with no prerequisites other than a valid credit card and claims of "life experience."

GetEducated.com was founded in 1989 by CEO Vicky Phillips. A psychologist and career counselor by training, Phillips designed and directed the first online counseling center for adult distance learners for AOL/Electronic University Network.

At the time Phillips launched her business, few Americans owned personal computers, took online classes or had even heard of the internet. Only three online MBA programs existed. Today, her company tracks 397 of them in the U.S. alone.

When asked about Woodfield University, Phillips says it "doesn't ring a bell," though she isn't surprised. As she points out, there are now hundreds, if not thousands, of degree mills plying their trade on the internet. The demand for fake academic credentials has exploded in recent years, she says, fueled in part by the global recession, highly

competitive job markets and double-digit inflation in higher-ed costs, which have outpaced even those of health care.

"Educational fraud is a billion-dollar-a-year industry worldwide," Phillips says. "It is *huge*, because having educational credentials controls your life earnings and, increasingly, your job mobility and entry into professions."

According to GetEducated.com's [diploma mill police](#) — the site's second-most-popular link after its "best online colleges" recommendations — Woodfield is one of 20 known degree mills operated by the [Organization for Global Learning Education](#), owned by Pakistani businessman Salem Kureshi. In August 2012, a U.S. district court in Michigan ordered Kureshi and his codefendants to pay \$22.7 million in damages to settle federal racketeering charges for selling more than 30,000 fake college degrees and high school equivalency diplomas.

When reached by phone, Barone doesn't deny that he obtained his doctorate from Woodfield. But he claims it took him at least three years of work in his spare time, taking online courses, submitting "tons of writing" and assembling his research portfolio, then defending it via Skype. That said, Barone admits he received "some course credit" for his years of employment as an educator.

In the past month, Barone has removed any reference to Woodfield University (though not to the doctorate itself) from the [school district's website](#), owing to what he calls "a falling out" with the company.

"I have since learned that ... they have become nothing more than a diploma mill, where they're just randomly handing out diplomas left and right," he says. "As soon as I found that out, I told them that I don't want to be associated with a fraudulent university."

It should be noted that Barone's other degrees, from Castleton State, are legitimate.

Barone isn't the first Vermont official found to have a degree of dubious distinction. As the [Valley News reported in October 2006](#), Joe Anthony of Chelsea, an Orange County assistant judge, claimed to hold bachelor's and master's degrees in criminal justice management from Hamilton College. In fact, Anthony obtained his degrees from Hamilton *University* of Wyoming, a notorious diploma mill investigated by the U.S. Government Accountability Office for selling phony degrees to federal employees.

A search of [LinkedIn](#), the business-oriented online social network, turns up at least 130 other people who tout degrees from Woodfield University. They include the president and CEO of an aerospace engineering firm in Orlando, Fla.; a fire protection designer in Columbus, Ohio; a submarine engineer in the United Arab Emirates; and a psychologist in Omaha, Neb., "specializing in anxiety, panic attacks and agoraphobia."

Phillips says it's incredibly easy for professionals to burnish their résumés or curricula vitae online because, as she discovered, most degree mills don't even verify the education or employment backgrounds on which their clients' degrees are purportedly based.

In June 2009, Phillips obtained a master's of business administration from Rochville University for [Chester Ludlow](#) — her pug dog. Phillips simply typed him up a résumé that claimed Chester had graduated from St. Johnsbury Academy and had life experience as a "food taster." About a week after Phillips paid his tuition, Chester received his MBA via express mail from the United Arab Emirates. Rochville even included a card with a toll-free number that potential employers could call to "verify" Chester's degree, coursework and GPA.

"He has a transcript and a diploma that looks better than mine, with a gold seal," Phillips says. "He did great in finance, but I never saw him crack a book."

Phillips notes that about 40 percent of the calls and emails GetEducated.com receives about degree mills come from people who want to know whether they can be arrested or fired for obtaining such a degree. Many inquire which mills have the most realistic-sounding credentials, so they won't get caught. In other words, she says, such degree seekers often know they're doing something unethical, if not illegal, and do it anyway.

Phillips, whose staff members survey, rank and rate online degree programs based on objective measurements such as cost, reputation and student satisfaction, says that any institution that offers course credit and grades based on life experience is immediately suspect. She acknowledges that a few legitimate schools, including Thomas Edison State College in New Jersey and Charter Oak State College in Connecticut, help older adults document their careers and military experience for academic purposes. But she emphasizes that those schools are accredited by recognized agencies — not faux-accreditation mills owned and operated by the degree mill itself.

Woodfield University claims its online degrees are accredited by the "renowned" Universal Accreditation Agency for Online Education, but the UAAOE is not listed on the U.S. Department of Education's website of recognized accrediting agencies.

In fact, bogus accreditation is just one component of the degree mills' increasingly sophisticated scams. Contacted recently by this reporter, Woodfield University offered for sale not just the same doctorate as Barone's but nine other supporting documents. They included two transcripts, four "verification letters," one "certificate of distinction," one "certificate of membership," one "award of excellence" and — on my request — a summa cum laude-qualifying 3.8 GPA. All of these materials were offered without any request to verify the caller's (my) academic credentials or past employment.

A company rep said that the degree would arrive within 15 days after Woodfield received its payment of a \$750 "doctorate degree fee," plus an additional "attestation fee" of \$549. (No degree was purchased or received.) The rep also noted that a copy of the doctorate would be sent to the U.S. Department of State to be "endorsed" for overseas employment.

"This is all part of the scam," Phillips explains. Because these businesses can't claim legitimate accreditations, she says, they typically use other, official-sounding words such as "certification," "endorsement," "notarization" and "authentication" to make them appear credible. As she puts it, "It's the classic shell game: 'Look over here!'"

The scams are so lucrative, she adds, because in most states, including Vermont, it's legal to cite academic credentials that don't come from a legitimately accredited institution. Granted, in Vermont, school superintendents aren't required to hold a doctorate — and Barone emphasizes that he didn't use his to qualify for his superintendent's license.

What does the Milton Town School Board say about Barone's dubious degree? Board chair Mary Knight says board members first learned of it back in April, when a local attorney representing a disgruntled former employee brought the issue to their attention. According to Knight, once Barone explained his experiences with Woodfield, "We were satisfied with his response.

"We felt he was qualified, and still feel he's qualified," she adds, "so that's as far as it's gone." Knight does admit, however, that the board never asked to see Barone's dissertation or research portfolio.

"I don't feel like I did anything wrong," Barone says. "I worked with this college, sent them a large amount of money and submitted the work. I feel like I earned the degree.

"Having said that," he adds, "I'm a licensed superintendent with a doctorate hanging on the wall from an unaccredited institution ... Maybe somebody learns from my experience."

The original print version of this article was headlined "BA or Total BS?"

*Correction 09/04/14: An earlier version of this story stated Milton Town School Superintendent John Barone was the only one of 18 candidates interviewed by the 15-member search committee. In fact, he was the only candidate interviewed by the Milton Town School Board.

Tags: [Education](#), [degree](#), [college](#), [credentials](#), [online university](#), [education](#), [Back to School](#)