

## ***U.S. Officials Sport Fake Degrees***

By Ryan Singel, WIRED NEWS ~ May 13, 2004

**Abstract:** More than 400 government employees, including many high-ranking officials, received fake degrees from diploma mills, according to congressional investigators. The findings spur calls for better means to vet academic credentials:

**SOURCE:** <http://www.wired.com/news/politics/0,1283,63436,00.html>

At least 28 high-ranking government officials, including three managers responsible for emergency operations at nuclear facilities, have fake degrees from so-called diploma mills, according to a government report issued Tuesday.

The General Accounting Office, Congress' investigative arm, told a Senate committee Wednesday that it found 463 government employees who received degrees from three unaccredited schools: Kennedy-Western University, California Coast University and Pacific Western University.

The investigation, which was prompted by a request from Senate Governmental Affairs Committee Chair Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine), found that these schools -- which charge a flat fee for a degree -- received at least \$170,000 in government tuition-reimbursement funds.

The GAO noted that although it was able to identify 28 high-level employees from eight different agencies who had degree-mill diplomas, "this number is believed to be an understatement."

The <<http://govt-aff.senate.gov/files/051104cramer8490.pdf>>report (PDF) singled out three National Nuclear Security Administration employees who have top-secret security clearances and "emergency operations responsibilities."

One bought a degree from known diploma mill LaSalle University in Louisiana (not the legitimate LaSalle University in Pennsylvania). Another held a degree from the unaccredited Chadwick University, while the third received a Ph.D. in engineering administration from the unaccredited Columbia Pacific University in 1985, though he completed his class work at the fully accredited George Washington University.

Differences between diploma mills and legitimate though unaccredited schools are not easily defined. The worst diploma mills simply sell diplomas and fake transcripts, typically for a fee of \$1,000 or more. But unaccredited schools range from legitimate distance-learning programs that include course work, tests and teacher feedback to "schools" that grant degrees solely based on life and work experience. Somewhere in between are schools that give substantial credit for life experience but require some course work, such as submitting book reports.

California officials shut down Columbia Pacific University, which was based in Marin County, California, in 1999, but California considers degrees awarded by the school before 1997 valid.

On Tuesday, during the first of two days of hearings before the Governmental Affairs Committee, Collins said the investigation calls into question the trustworthiness and character of these employees.

"We have clear evidence that tax dollars are being wasted on bogus degrees from unaccredited institutions that the federal government does not even recognize. It is also cause for great concern that federal officials who hold high-ranking positions, and security clearances in some instances, have degrees from diploma mills," Collins said. "It calls into question their qualifications and abilities to do their jobs."

Paul DeSaulniers, a senior special agent at the GAO, told the committee that high-level employees with fake degrees could also be vulnerable to blackmail.

The most recent high-profile diploma-mill scandal came in June 2003 when the Homeland Security Department put Laura Callahan, an associate deputy in the Chief Information Office, on paid administrative leave, pending an investigation into whether the Hamilton University bachelor's, master's and Ph.D. degrees listed on her resume were legitimate.

Hamilton University is a Wyoming-based diploma mill that claims to be accredited by the <http://www.acpcu.org/>American Council of Private Colleges and Universities, an organization that shares the same server as the diploma mill and seems only to accredit that school.

Callahan has since resigned, according to the GAO report.

Robert J. Cramer, managing director of the GAO's Office of Special Investigations, told the committee that it has referred each case it found to the respective agencies' inspector general's office. However, a spokeswoman for the Energy Department's inspector general's office, which has authority over the National Nuclear Security Administration, said the office had not yet received a referral from the GAO, though it was aware of the hearings.

Experts estimate there are hundreds of diploma mills that sell fake diplomas from fake schools, or fake diplomas from real schools, and rake in hundreds of millions of dollars each year.

**There are more than 30 online diploma mills offering MBAs alone, according to Vicky Phillips, CEO of <http://geteducated.com> GetEducated.com, an educational website devoted to distance learning that does not take advertising from diploma mills.**

**"It is so easy to pass with a fake degree because very few employers check accreditation. Human-resources employees often do not know the right questions to ask about accreditation," Phillips said. "Some people get fake degrees because the chance of getting caught is small and if they do get caught, the repercussions are small, since they can claim they did not know the school was not legitimate."**

**Diploma mills have been around for decades and gained legitimacy by advertising in prestigious publications, such as Fortune and USA Today, according to Phillips.**

The Internet has only fueled the industry, according to Alan Contreras, who heads the <http://www.osac.state.or.us/oda>Office of Degree Authorization in Oregon, one of only four states where it's illegal to use unapproved degrees as credentials.

"The Internet, with the ease of advertising via e-mail and the ease of putting up a website, makes it easy to make yourself look like a college when you are not," Contreras told the Senate committee Tuesday.

Diploma mills and unaccredited schools also advertise on legitimate websites, luring students who are looking for a legitimate degree through a correspondence course.

Some never even know they got a degree that will not be accepted by other colleges or potential employers.

**But others clearly intend to just buy a credential to further their career or feed their ego, according to Phillips.**

The Governmental Affairs committee held its second hearing Wednesday morning, in which officials from the Department of Education and the Office of Personnel Management testified about efforts to better vet federal employees' credentials and to create a centralized, online list of accredited schools.

The task is complicated since the federal government does not accredit schools; it simply recognizes legitimate accreditors. Furthermore, simply listing all the schools those groups accredit could lead some to think that legitimate, but unaccredited, schools (such as Bob Jones University) are frauds.