

## ON THE COST OF AN EDUCATION

*By David A. Watson, Ph.D.*

There I was, rushing in late, or nearly so, for yet another School Board meeting (a worthy topic for another day), with the discussion having just turned to personnel matters. As I perused the listings of resignations, leaves, and hires, the degree held by one new employee fairly leaped off the page at me. Excitement quickly gave way to apprehension, as I realized that this recently awarded Ph.D. had come from a notorious diploma mill. What is a diploma mill? Follow me.

Diploma mills, simply put, are fraudulent entities established to tap into the exigencies of the job market, to provide a quick fix for a lack of lettered credentials. Perhaps most importantly, they are not accredited by any of a handful of recognized bodies that assess institutions of higher learning. Their ads are ubiquitous in magazines, on the web, and in junk e-mails flooding the Internet daily. Degrees, at any level and of any type, can be obtained for money alone. Why would anyone simply purchase an academic degree? According to Dr. John Bear (who got a real doctorate at Michigan State University), an expert on diploma mills and author of Bear's Guide to Earning Degrees by Distance Education (now in its' 14<sup>th</sup> edition) there are a variety of explanations. In some cases, individuals who are not native speakers of English are simply confused by the wording of the ads. These "institutions" may offer credit for life experience (a perfectly acceptable strategy for accredited schools, when used in moderation and as part of a comprehensive degree program), which may serve to legitimize the degree in the eyes of the buyer. In other instances, however, the person knows very well that what he or she is doing is purchasing a degree. It was once axiomatic that a high school diploma brought success in life; later (and until recently, in fact) a college degree conferred cachet. No longer. To truly rise through the ranks, the price of admission is now a graduate degree. Becoming Chief of Police, Captain of the Fire Department, or a senior executive or military officer all now require (directly or indirectly) additional coursework.

The problem is widespread. Dr. Bear estimates that bogus degrees constitute at least a \$200 million dollar per year industry, with individual “schools” in some documented cases bringing in tens of millions of dollars per year. In one egregious instance (the infamous Columbia State University) the proprietors may well have grossed upwards of \$70 million dollars in their best year. There are roughly 500 such fake universities thought to be operating at present, representing an increase of more than 200 in just the past few years; the largest of these may award as many as 500 doctoral degrees per month. University Business magazine calls them “...a serious economic force in America.” Consider the Columbia State case. Ronald Pellar made millions running this and other diploma mills until very recently from his yacht in Mexico. The university’s brochure featured the image of a fine castle much like one might find on the campuses of any number of excellent American institutions; in fact, The Chronicle of Higher Education identified the building as Lyndhurst, a 19<sup>th</sup> century mansion located in Tarrytown, NY.

Who then is harmed by this fraud? We all are, and especially legitimate schools with hardworking students who actually earn their degrees through study and sacrifice. Moreover, institutions specializing in the still young area of distance education are disproportionately affected, since it is they who face the greatest challenge in distinguishing themselves from the scam artists. We should all be concerned that U.S. higher education, long recognized as the best in the world, is being given a black eye by this skirting of convention. Between 1979 and 1992, the FBI ran DIPSCAM, yet shut down only a small fraction of the diploma mills in operation (and since the early 1990’s this “industry” has made a tremendous comeback). This has been attributed to lax enforcement by several states, and in some cases outright indifference. Indeed, for one diploma mill it was determined that many of its customers were federal employees, with the Departments of Defense and Education being prominently represented. Even one-time

presidential candidate Senator Joseph Bidden was discovered not to have actually earned a degree he claimed.

Without being specific, I can say that to be paid commensurate with a particular educational level, most public school districts require proof that a degree was earned from an accredited institution. The “university” from which the questionable degree originated in my opening discussion was clearly not accredited. This brings me to the major caution mentioned repeated by John Bear and others. Namely, that purchasing a baseless degree, and then including it on a resume or vitae, constitutes a ticking time bomb that could go off at any time. Perhaps the old maxim we all learned in Kindergarten applies here as well; honesty really is the best policy, whether on the playground or in the boardroom.