“Oh My Gosh!”

Diploma Debacle Dismays House Ed Subcommittee

Members of the House Education Subcommittee on 21st Century Competitiveness were utterly shocked by the diploma mill problem three witnesses detailed for them on September 23.

In his opening statement, Subcommittee Chair Howard P. “Buck” McKeon (R-Calif.) sought to distinguish diploma mills (which sell “degrees that are fraudulent or worthless”) from “legitimate, credible on-line institutions that operate quality accredited distance learning programs.”

But the measured tone of the hearing, and members’ expressions, changed dramatically with the first witness. Allen Ezell, Jr., a retired FBI agent, testified about his experience with Operation Diploma Scam (DIPSCAM), a series of investigations held from 1980-91 to crack down on diploma mills. During the probe, Ezell and the taskforce obtained 19 federal grand jury indictments, and convicted 21 individuals. Unfortunately, this did not put an end to the scams.

A few days earlier, Ezell said, as he was writing his testimony,

[I] received a call from one Charles Baker..., who introduced himself as a registrar representing Somerset University... He stated they are an “international correspondence diploma program” which has been around since the 1980s. In less than one minute, he found me qualified for my M.B.A. degree (comes with a student identification number, certified transcripts, professor letters of recommendation, [and] verification of degree details) and we agreed on a modest GPA of between 3.5-3.8 (magna cum laude). The date of the degree is of my choice. The entire package will be sent to me within 10-15 days via Federal Express—all for the modest cost of $1,995.

Ezell urged the committee to stamp out diploma mill fraud, which not only confuses and cheats the public, but also lowers the prestige of legitimately earned degrees, both at home and abroad.

“We do not need any new federal statutes” to fight the scams, Ezell said—existing fraud and consumer protection laws are sufficient. However, he recommended that the committee:

• encourage the Department of Education to create and publicize a list of legitimate postsecondary institutions; and

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Federal payments

Robert Cramer, managing director of the Office of Special Investigations at the U.S. Government Accountability Office, described the special problem that diploma mills pose for federal agencies. He said the Homeland Security Act allowed federal agencies for the first time to pay for their employees' academic training, but only at accredited institutions. (This restriction does not apply to non-academic training.)

Cramer was part of a team that investigated federal payments for degrees from diploma mills. It found that bogus degrees could be created and bought with "relative ease." Individual agencies are paying hundreds of thousands of dollars for degrees from unaccredited sources, he said. His team's findings probably underestimate the problem, Cramer added, because agencies are not vigilant in verifying degrees and don't have good data on educational payments.

Accreditation's role

Jean Morse, executive director of the Middles States Commission on Higher Education, testified for the Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions. According to Morse, there are over 300 unaccredited universities in operation, "selling degrees for thousands of dollars, awarding as many as 500 Ph.D.s every month, and earning... $200 million per year." She said accrediting agencies can play an important role in distinguishing reputable but "nontraditional" schools from true diploma mills.

To control diploma mills, Morse recommended:
• a public Web site listing all institutions that have been approved by an accrediting agency recognized by the U.S. Department of Education.
• an FBI taskforce, similar to DIPSCAM.
• state prosecution of diploma mills for fraud.
• higher state licensing standards.

Morse also said that outcome measures by accreditors could help curb fraud and abuse.

This well-attended hearing certainly piqued the interest of the subcommittee members. They were disturbed by the threat to institutions they attended, and by the bilking of taxpayers. The ubiquity, creativity, and speed exemplified by diploma and accreditation mill operators—greatly facilitated by the Internet—hopefully helped them recognize the federal student aid system's vulnerability to con artists and shoddy education. ■

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Voter Registration Redux

NAICU has written a strong rebuttal to last week's Chronicle of Higher Education article, which concluded that 44 percent of private colleges had not complied with a 1998 law requiring them to distribute voter registration forms to students. (See WIR #21.)

House and Senate members of the authorizing committees, who will craft the next Higher Education Act (HEA), also received a letter from NAICU. It exposed the faulty research behind the article, and noted that NAICU led the creation of the National Campus Voter Registration Project in 1996, two years prior to enactment of the federal mandate.

The letter urged members of Congress to visit NAICU's Web site (http://www.naicu.edu/VoteVoice2004/activities.htm) to view a growing list of campus voter registration, education, and get-out-the-vote activities. Examples were provided by more than 450 members who responded to NAICU's lightning survey.

Simultaneously, a letter co-signed by Reps. George Miller (D-Calif.), ranking member of the House Education and Workforce Committee, Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), and eight other Democrats was faxed to NAICU and seven other higher education associations. The letter admonished colleges for not complying with the HEA's voter registration requirements, and urged them to do better.

In response, NAICU requested a meeting with the signers to discuss voter registration and more pressing issues, such as reauthorization. ■

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