

Fraudulent Degrees and Credentials

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There seems to be an epidemic of unaccredited sources granting “degrees” and other sorts of quasi-credentials (e.g., certifications and diplomas). Clearly any type of information that could potentially mislead consumers about professional qualifications of, say, a mental health practitioner, merits concern by the public, governmental regulators, and licensees (e.g., psychologists, social workers, marriage and family therapists, and mental health counselors).

Elsewhere, I have addressed the issues relevant to the proliferation of “dubious and bogus credentials” (Woody, 1998; Woody, 2007). In the subsequent years, I submitted various communications to professional sources, such as administrators and prosecuting attorneys aligned with the licensing units in state government. Regrettably, progress has been limited.

What happens with some (particularly non-psychologist) licensees is that, based on appropriately accredited Masters degrees, they obtain licensure; then, once in practice, they “purchase” a degree from an inadequately accredited source, which might be characterized as “degree mill” (Ezell & Bear, 2005) or a “diploma mill” (Stewart & Spille, 1988). Thereafter, by purchasing an inappropriately accredited degree, the legitimate licensee moves on to a route to possible fraudulent misrepresentation.

Within at least some governmental units, I have been told that, whenever there is an application or any other reason to consider the accreditation of a degree, the staff refers to *Accredited Institutions of Postsecondary Education*, a book published annually by the Council of Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) [available at: <http://www.acenet.edu//AM/Template.cfm?Section=Home>]. In discussing “the incompetent

institution,” Koocher and Keith-Spiegel (2007) add: “The CHEA posts considerable helpful information and articles about degree mills and accreditation mills on its Web site (see, e.g., <http://www.chea.org/degremills/frmPaper.htm>)”(p.82).

To set aside a possible ethical issue, it should be noted that the standard on Informal Resolution in the APA code of ethics (2002) states: “When psychologists believe that there may have been an ethical violation by another psychologist, they attempt to resolve the issue by bringing it to the attention of that individual, if an informal resolution appear appropriate and the intervention does not violate any confidentiality rights that may be involved” (p. 1063); and any potentially harmful situation that is not appropriate for informal resolution can be submitted to, among other places, “state licensing boards” (p. 1063). Of course, a non-psychologist licensee may not qualify as “another psychologist,” and the potential contentious response would seeming justify a matter of fact submission to the authoritative government agency.

Without belaboring the issue, it is sufficient to assert that professionalism supports that a Licensed Psychologist should always be scanning for improper practitioners. If anyone emerges “over night” with a new doctorate or seems to have questionable qualifications, the matter should be referred to the appropriate regulatory or law enforcement agency.

If a Licensed Psychologist notices, for example, that a mental health practitioner of any discipline (or anyone else) in the community has acquired a doctorate or holds out questionable credentials of any form, it would potentially be proper to contact the colleague as ask where the degree or credential was obtained. In the alternative, the Licensed Psychologist could simply submit a good faith question about the newly acquired degree or credential to the appropriate regulatory or law enforcement agency.

All professionals licensed to provide mental health services, most of whom are honorable practitioners, should adopt a “watch dog” attitude to safeguard the public from fraudulent misrepresentation of degrees and credentials.

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