



# Guidance for Adjudicating Bogus or Inflated Education Credentials

*Working for America*

UNITED STATES OFFICE OF PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT

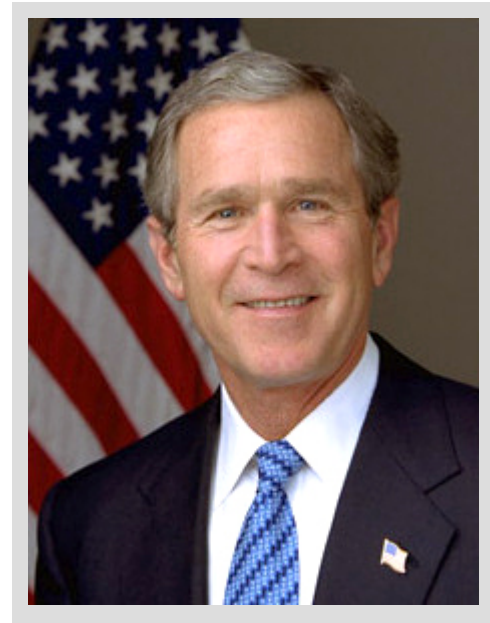


# Message from the President

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“As we promote good character, we must also advance excellence in education and set high standards for all of our students.”

- ***George W. Bush***



# Message from the Director



“Our position is clear, Diploma Mills may not be used to qualify for Federal jobs or salaries; you may not send employees to Diploma Mills for degree training or for any other form of education; you may not reimburse employees for tuition associated with these schools; and you may not use your authority to repay student loans if the degree is from a Diploma Mill.”

**- Kay Coles James**

# Categories of Higher Education

- Conventional/Accredited
- Non-Accredited/Pending Accreditation
- Non-Accredited/Other
- Non-Qualifying



# Activities

- Student Loan Repayment
- Academic Degree Training Program
- Tuition Reimbursement or Employee Training
- Position Qualification Requirements [including Student Educational Employment Programs (SEEP)]



# Conventional/Accredited

- Degree-granting schools that are accredited by accrediting institutions recognized by the U.S. Department of Education (DoED)
- Can be considered for all activities:
  - Student Loan Repayment
  - Academic Degree Training Program
  - Tuition Reimbursement/Employee Training
  - Position Qualification Requirements, including SEEP



# Non-Accredited/Pending Accreditation

- Not accredited by an accrediting institution recognized by DoED, but offer a curriculum for advanced learning AND are in the process of seeking accreditation or have received “pre-accreditation” and “candidate for accreditation” status
- Can be considered for:
  - Tuition Reimbursement or Employee Training
  - Position Qualification Requirements (but not SEEP)



# Non-Accredited/Other

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- Schools with traditional curriculums but chose not to seek accreditation
- Foreign institutions with comparable courses of study
- Cannot evaluate these programs





# Non-Accredited/Other (continued)

- Only used for:
  - Tuition Reimbursement or Employee Training with caveat that supervisor must determine that the program meets the training needs of the individual and the agency before approving training



# Non-Qualifying

- Non-traditional schools that are not accredited by institutions recognized by DoED and may be awarded degrees or certificates with little or no course work
- Degrees based largely on life experience or cash payments



# Non-Qualifying (continued)

- Includes Diploma Mills and organizations that sell counterfeit degrees
- There is no place in Federal employment for “degrees” from these institutions – qualifications, training, tuition reimbursement



Information taken from OPM Director James' Memo dated May 13, 2004.		<i>Categories of Higher Education</i>			
		Conventional/ Accredited	Non-Accredited/ Pending Accreditation	Non- Accredited/ Other	Non- Qualifying
<i>Activity</i>	Student Loan Repayment	Yes	No	No	No
	Academic Degree Training Program	Yes	No	No	No
	Position Qualification Requirements (including Student Educational Employment Programs (SEEP)	Yes	Yes (No for SEEP)	No	No
	Tuition Reimbursement/ Employee Training	Yes	Yes	Yes	No



# Definition

## *Diploma Mills*

are not accredited by an appropriate authority subject to oversight by the Secretary, U.S. Department of Education and generally involve payment of a fee in exchange for a degree, without any significant academic requirements.



# Evolution of Diploma Mills

**1980s** – unsophisticated, tabloid ads

**1990s** –free school video, 800 numbers, accepting credit cards, “virtual tour” on Internet

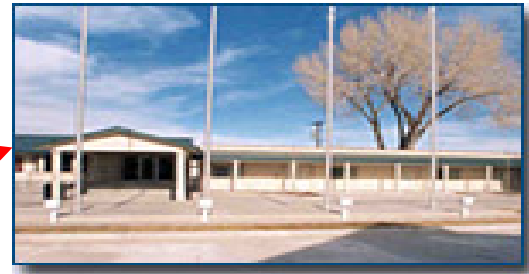
**2000-present**

- “Accreditation” highlighted in advertisements
- “.edu” in school’s web address
- United Kingdom and British Commonwealths are bases of world-wide Diploma Mill operations
- Accreditation by Liberia, but located elsewhere



# Types of Diploma Mills

- No school exists
- “Traveling Salesman” school
- Physical office
- “School-type” facility
- “Virtual University”
  - Domestic
  - Offshore (Caribbean)
  - Foreign



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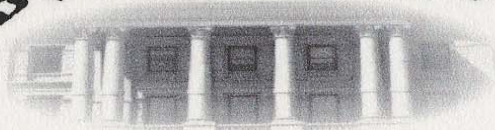
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# Senator Susan M. Collins (R-Maine)

## Lexington University



*Know all men by these presents:  
The Board of Trustees of Lexington University, upon the recommendation  
of the President and Faculty, have conferred upon*

**Susan M. Collins**

*the degree of*

**Master of Science**

**Medical Technology**


*with all the rights privileges and honors pertaining thereto.  
In testimony thereof we have affixed our signatures and the seal of the  
University this tenth day of June, in the year of our Lord,  
one thousand nine hundred and eighty eight.*



*Miller Redding*  
President of the Board of Trustees

*Joseph Carter*  
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# Bogus Accrediting Institutions

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# Degree Replacement Services

- Replace a “lost” diploma or certificate
- No proof of degree or attendance required to obtain replacement
- Examples:
  - [www.diplomasforless.com](http://www.diplomasforless.com)
  - [www.diplomaville.com](http://www.diplomaville.com)
  - [www.diplomaservices.com](http://www.diplomaservices.com)
  - [www.diplomaone.com](http://www.diplomaone.com)



# Diploma Mills

- Causes damage by misunderstanding
- Devalues earned degrees (look-a-likes and sound-a-likes)
- Confuses the public
- Defrauds “students”
- Deceives employers, customers, clients, patients, etc.
- Lowers prestige abroad



# WARNING

“Education” from Diploma Mills cannot be considered for:

- Student Loan Repayment
- Academic Degree Training Program
- Tuition Reimbursement or Employee Training
- Position Qualification Requirements





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# How Do I Detect a Diploma Mill?

UNITED STATES OFFICE OF PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT





# Red Flags

- No High School diploma or GED, but application shows advanced degree
- No undergraduate degree claimed, but applicant shows graduate or doctorate degree
- Graduate or doctorate received before the lower degree
- Multiple degrees received in same year
- Unfamiliar school name



# Additional Red Flags

- Same or similar name to legitimate school, but located in a different state
- Application/Resume shows full time employment during period of college attendance, particularly if college and employment were in different locations
- Education claims are different on application resume
- Red Flags – see attachments



# Verifying Education

- Use **credible** sources to verify degrees and accrediting institutions
  - *Internet Sources*
    - [www.ed.gov](http://www.ed.gov)- U.S. Department of Education
    - [www.opm.gov/qualifications](http://www.opm.gov/qualifications) - reference section
    - <http://www.chea.org>- Council for Higher Education Accreditation
    - [http://www.osac.state.or.us/oda/diploma\\_mill.html](http://www.osac.state.or.us/oda/diploma_mill.html)- Oregon Student Assistance Commission, Office of Degree Authorization
    - <http://www.aacrao.org/>- American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers'



# Additional Verification Resources

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- *Reference Books and Material*
  - *Bears' Guide to Earning Degrees by Distance Learning*
  - *2004 Higher Education Directory*
  - *Accredited Institutions of Postsecondary Education*
  - FBI-Identified Bogus Educational Institutions
  - Call OPM's Suitability Adjudications Branch (SAB)



# Agency Education Verification


- Research the Internet
- Attempt to contact school
- Request a Reimbursable Suitability Investigation (RSI) from OPM
- Ask the individual for proof of the degree and the school's accreditation



# OPM Education Verification

- OPM verifies the most recent or highest degree claimed in BI and NACI products.
- If degree is not verified or is a suspected diploma mill:
  - characterized as an 05D.
  - Referred internally to SAB for suitability review and possible adjudication.
- OPM coordinates the adjudication with the agency.





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# How does OPM or the agency adjudicate fraudulent degree claims?



# Competitive Service

- 5 CFR 731.202(b)(2), Criminal or dishonest conduct
- 5 CFR 731.202(b)(3), Material, intentional false statement or deception or fraud in examination or appointment





# Competitive Service (continued)

When does OPM use 5 CFR 731(b)(3)  
Material, intentional false statement or  
deception or fraud in examination or  
appointment?

- Application or appointment forms
- Interviews/examinations
- Investigative data forms
- Personnel Subject Interview (PRSI)



# Material and Intentional

- To be disqualifying under 5 CFR 731, the false statement must be both material **and** intentional.
- A “material” statement is one that is “capable of influencing, or has a natural tendency to affect, an official decision.”



# Material and Intentional (continued)

- “Official decisions” include determining whether an individual:
  - Meets the qualifications requirements for the position
  - Is eligible for a special hiring program (Outstanding Scholar) or appointment at a higher grade level
  - Is a better candidate over other qualified candidates
  - Is hired over other applicants



# Material and Intentional (continued)

- To prove “intent” need to determine if the individual knew the school was a Diploma Mill.
- “I didn’t know it was a Diploma Mill.”
  - “Reasonable person” approach
  - Red Flags



# Competitive Service

When does OPM or the agency use 5 CFR 731.202(b)(2), Criminal or dishonest conduct?

- Falsification is intentional but not material to the position.
- Appointment not subject to investigation:
  - promotions, reinvestigations, excepted service, etc.
- Non-Federal job applications – contractors, NAF positions, private sector employment, etc.



# Excepted Service

The following reasons may disqualify an individual:

- 5 CFR 302.203(a)(2), Criminal, infamous, dishonest, immoral, or notoriously disgraceful conduct.
- 5 CFR 302.203(a)(3), Intentional false statement or deception or fraud in examination or appointment.



# Security

## Security clearance criteria

### E.O. 12968, Guideline E, Personal Conduct:

- Deliberate omission, concealment, or falsification of relevant and material facts from any personnel security questionnaires, etc.
- Deliberately providing false or misleading information concerning relevant and material matters to an investigator, etc.



# Suitability Referrals

Examining or agency personnel offices should refer applications for competitive service positions to OPM–SAB for adjudication involving:

- Material, intentional false statement or deception or fraud in examination or appointment
  - Example: Applicant claims education from a known diploma mill school or claims education he did not obtain.

*Information about the Suitability Referral process can be found on our website, [www.OPM.gov/extra/investigate](http://www.OPM.gov/extra/investigate)*





# OPM Actions

- OPM-SAB can take the following suitability actions:
  - Debar for period up to 3 years
  - Direct removal
  - Cancel pending applications or eligibilities



# Agency Actions

- The appropriate corrective action depends on whether the individual intentionally falsified the form and is qualified for the position.
- Actions range from not hiring, reassignment, change to lower grade, or removal.
- OPM recommends not hiring or removal when intentional falsification is established.
- At a minimum, the individual should be told not to claim the degree in the future.



# Additional Considerations

- Individuals who knowingly claim a bogus degree gain an unfair advantage over others.
- When the person holds a security clearance or responsible position, should the person continue to hold the clearance or remain employed even if the bogus degree was not material to the initial employment decision?
- Under 18 USC 1001, a false statement on any part of the application may be punished by fine or imprisonment.



# Merit Systems Principles

- Federal employees must:
  - “maintain high standards of integrity, conduct, and concern for the public interest.”
- Circumventing competitive hiring procedures violates the Merit Systems Principle to:
  - “select and advance only (a) qualified individuals, (b) solely on their relative ability, and (c) after fair and open competition that assures equal opportunity.”



# Contact Information

For more information, visit us on the web at

[www.OPM.gov](http://www.OPM.gov)

[www.OPM.gov/extra/investigate](http://www.OPM.gov/extra/investigate)

OPM-FIPC-SAB

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