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Report of Investigation

FILE NO: 21-0005-I

DATE: 10/20/2021

SUBJECT: Unaccredited University (Diploma Mill) Degree

STATUS: Final

INVESTIGATOR: P.P.

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File

Executive Summary

The City of Albuquerque (City) Office of the Inspector General (OIG) received an anonymous complaint from a citizen stating that a newly hired City employee (E-1) has an unaccredited "Diploma Mill"¹ degree that is not legitimate for his bachelors (Undergraduate) degree. The unaccredited degree is from Madison University (MU), which is similar to an accredited university, James Madison University. The City employee also has a Master's Degree from the University of Phoenix, which required a bachelor's degree to participate in the Master's program.

Our investigation found that although E-1's bachelor's degree is from an unaccredited college, E-1's master's degree was legitimately obtained from an accredited college. An error by the University of Phoenix's admissions person who entered James Madison University (accredited), allowed E-1 to be accepted into the master's program and earn the degree. MU credits were also accepted for E-1's associate degree.

The Job Description for the position states that education and experience directly related to the minimum requirements may be interchangeable on a year to year basis. HR records indicate that E-1 has 15 years of relevant work experience and that no experience was substituted for education.

No evidence was found during the investigation that would indicate E-1 attempted to deceive the City during the application and hiring process, nor was there evidence that E-1 attempted to deceive the University of Phoenix during the admissions process.

During the investigation, the following issues were identified, to include:

- HR does not have any written policies or procedures regarding the hiring process.
- HR did not validate if the degrees were from accredited institutions

The OIG is recommending the following:

1. Written policies and procedures should be created governing the hiring process to include proper validation of degrees to ensure they are from accredited institutions.
2. Human Resources should require every chosen candidate for a job to provide official hard copy transcripts that are verified for accreditation prior to employment.

¹ <https://www2.ed.gov/students/prep/college/diplomamills/diploma-mills.html>

The dictionary defines a diploma mill as: An institution of higher education operating without supervision of a state or professional agency and granting diplomas which are either fraudulent or because of the lack of proper standards worthless. - *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*

Introduction

The mission of the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) is to promote a culture of integrity, accountability, and transparency throughout the City of Albuquerque (City) in order to safeguard and preserve the public trust. An anonymous complaint was received by the OIG that expressed concerns regarding a newly hired City employee, E-1. The complainant stated that E-1 has an unaccredited "Diploma Mill" degree that is not legitimate for his bachelors (undergraduate) degree. The unaccredited degree is from Madison University, which has a similar name to an accredited university, James Madison University. The City employee also received a Master's degree from the University of Phoenix, which required a bachelor's degree in order to participate in their Master's program.

Scope and Methodology

The OIG's investigation focused on determining whether E-1's degrees submitted in the application were from accredited universities and whether E-1's intent was to deceive the City. The methodology will consist of:

- Review of pertinent documents as they relate to the hiring of E-1;
- Review of relevant City Ordinances, Standard Operating Procedures (SOP's) and City policies and procedures;
- Review of university websites and related social media sites;
- Contact pertinent university staff;
- Interview with relevant City employees.

Investigation

E-1's electronic copies of transcripts were reviewed and stated the following:

- September 2002 – Bachelor in Science
- August 2004 – Associate in Arts
- November 2007 – Master in Business Administration

Madison University

Madison University (MU) is a distance learning University that offers online degrees. From online research, in 2006 MU charged a fee of \$3,700 for a Bachelor's degree. MU's website states that it holds accreditation from The World Association of Universities and Colleges (WAUC). MU's website states that WAUC is a private accrediting body not listed with any government agency or the U.S. Department of Education and is not designed to meet the needs of students intending to use Federal Funds.

The following was taken from MU's website²:

The U.S. Department of Education states; accreditation does not provide automatic acceptance by an institution of credit earned at another institution, nor does it give assurance of acceptance of graduates by employers. Acceptance of students or graduates is always the prerogative of the receiving institution or employer. For these reasons, besides ascertaining the accredited status of a school or program, students should take additional measures to determine, prior to enrollment, whether or not their educational goals will be met through attendance at a particular institution. It is the responsibility of each student to determine, prior to registration at Madison University, that their degree program or studies, meet admission, employment, or transfer requirements.

Madison University's degree programs are not designed to meet any particular state or national licensing or credentialing laws, or to meet any requirements established by any private, independent professional associations. If licensing is the objective of a degree program, students are advised to check the requirements of their particular states, school districts, professional associations and agencies for specific licensing protocol.

The OIG contacted the University of New Mexico admissions office to see if they considered Madison University to be an accredited university. The admissions representative stated that the University of New Mexico does not consider MU to be accredited.

The OIG also contacted the University of Phoenix, Director of Grievances and Appeals and asked them if they considered Madison University to be an accredited university. The University of Phoenix, Director of Grievances and Appeals stated that generally they would not accept transfer credits from an institution accredited by WAUC. To surmise, the University of Phoenix would not consider MU to be accredited.

The OIG found a news report from the WLBT3 news station in Jackson Mississippi, dated August 10, 2006 that read:³

College students will soon be hitting the books. The goal, diplomas and good jobs. But others may cheat. Some opt out for the "easy degree" churned out by illegal diploma mills. Officials with the Institution of Higher Learning say Mississippi is a mecca for these "degrees of suspicion."

A college diploma, it represents hard work, academic achievement. Adrea Nelson is looking forward to getting out of college and into the work force. "I'll be graduating in May, it seems like it will all pay off." It takes time and money for students to get a sheepskin these days like Adrea, a senior at Ole Miss. Adrea said, "Most employers probably look for a college degree especially in the field I'm trying to get into." but there are ways to get around taking all those college credits. And some folks are getting fleeced with phony Ph.D.'s and lesser degrees. Affordable online Bachelors' Master's and Doctorate degrees, you simply need sufficient life experiences to get the diploma. Even more astounding this reporter received an e-mail from a viewer. It states that within a few days you could be a college graduate. So dial now. We did.

² http://www.madisonu.com/OLD_MU/accreditation.html

³ <https://www.wlbt.com/story/5266042/three-on-your-side-investigates-mississippi-diploma-mills/>

*One higher education official told WLBT they don't have a grasp of just how big this multi-million dollar world of diploma mills is in Mississippi. **Non-approved entities operating in Mississippi according to the Mississippi Commission on College Accreditation include the following.***

*American University of Hawaii in Clinton, Gulfport; American World University of MS, Inc. in Pascagoula; Bienville University of Mississippi in Woodville; Cambridge State University, Inc. in Jackson; Columbus University in Picayune; Lacrosse University, Inc. in Bay St. Louis; **Madison University in Gulfport**; Novus University International, Inc. in Diamondhead, Slidell, LA and University of Central Europe (Global Headquarters-Mississippi) in Pascagoula.*

We tracked down Cambridge State University, Incorporated. It operates out of Jackson there's a phone number but you won't find an address.

Oregon's official degree authorization website cites Mississippi for having the worst college oversight law in the country, allowing any private business to issue degrees with no state approval. It warns that degrees issued by unaccredited private colleges in Alabama, Idaho, Mississippi or Wyoming should be evaluated with great caution. As Adrea realizes, "I don't think any legitimate employer would accept this one over a real college degree." Students and employers are warned, do your homework and don't get fleeced.

College professor's, even employees working in upper echelon corporations have bought and used these phony credentials on resumes. Wlbt contacted the Institutions of Higher Learning for comment. The IHL tells us a tougher law went into effect July 1st making it easier to go after non-approved degree businesses cropping up in the state. It reads in part, all colleges and universities not already authorized to grant degrees to students graduating from their courses must be approved by the commission in order to grant diplomas of graduation or degrees. The provisions of this section shall not apply to private commercial schools and colleges.

Human Resources Manager (HR-1) Interview

HR-1 was informed of the allegation and asked if there were any policies or procedures regarding the hiring process. HR-1 stated that they do not currently have a written policy but that they are working on a hiring policy based on an OIG investigation and recommendation done two to three years ago. They are currently working on a hiring policy that would include verifying degrees.

HR-1 stated that many job descriptions have requirements and that some do not. Some have interchangeables where experience can count towards education. Years of experience may be used where education is preferred. HR-1 stated that central HR is no longer involved in the process, a new process was implemented on May 2021. The new process places responsibility with HR coordinators in departments who address HR matters including hiring and those coordinators will seek guidance from central HR if they have questions.

University of Phoenix - Director of Grievances and Appeals Interview

The OIG spoke with the Director of Grievances and Appeals for the University of Phoenix to get an understanding of E-1's application process at the University of Phoenix. According to the

Director, in 2006 when E-1 applied, the University of Phoenix had approximately half a million students enrolled. E-1's application accurately reflected his undergraduate education including a bachelor's degree from Madison University. The entry-level Admissions person for the University of Phoenix accidentally entered James Madison University (accredited) into the automated system. Due to the error, E-1 was automatically accepted. Upon receipt of official transcripts, E-1's file was matriculated through a separate University of Phoenix workflow and there was a missed opportunity to identify the Admissions entry error. E-1 did go through an appeal process to have some courses accepted which was approved by the academic department of the University of Phoenix.

The Director stated that the error should have been caught and if it was E-1 would not have been accepted based on Madison University undergraduate credentials. E-1 was admitted by mistake, via human error. The Director stated that at no time was E-1 untruthful. The Director stated that E-1 was accepted and was a good student who completed the program.

E-1 Interview

The OIG spoke with E-1 and made him aware of the allegation. E-1 was surprised about the complaint. E-1 stated that at a previous job when he was a warden, Corrections Corporations of America contracted with MU to have employees go through MU's degree program. E-1 stated that many employees went through the program. E-1 stated it took about a year to a year and a half to complete. When asked if he knew if MU was unaccredited, E-1 stated no.

Conclusion

Our investigation found that although E-1's bachelor's degree is from an unaccredited college, E-1's master's degree was legitimately obtained from an accredited college. An error by the University of Phoenix's admissions person who entered James Madison University (accredited), allowed E-1 to be accepted into the master's program and earn the degree. MU credits were also accepted for E-1's associate degree.

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1. Written policies and procedures should be created governing the hiring process to include proper validation of degrees to ensure they are from accredited institutions.

HRD Response:

The Human Resources Department (HRD) appreciates this recommendation and would like to report that we are in the process of finalizing an Administrative Instruction (AI) that highlights the hiring process and most importantly formally documents the department's existing practices. There are policies and procedures that may not have been formalized in form and may have been applied inconsistently across the departments, or have some gaps that need to be clarified; however, such policies and procedures do exist in substance. The 2021 Hiring Reform Initiative allowed the department to improve on existing processes and document them; processes that are documented range from creating job advertisements to creating scoring plans for positions. HRD staff met with departments to review these processes during the hiring reform initiative to train them and receive feedback. The current processes are housed on the city's SharePoint site on the e-web for HR Coordinators. Our goal is to have the official AI in place by December 1, 2021. We are currently updating the DRAFT AI to include process improvements identified through the 2021 Hiring Reform Initiative that concluded on September 1, 2021. Once the AI is in place, the plan is to train the stakeholders including HRD staff, Department Directors, Deputy Directors, departmental HR Coordinators, etc.

2. Human Resources should require every chosen candidate for a job to provide official hard copy transcripts that are verified for accreditation prior to employment.

HRD Response:

The HRD appreciates this recommendation and will incorporate language in the hiring process similar to this in regards to obtaining and verifying transcripts prior to employment.