

Phony diplomas easily bought

By MARLA JO FISHER
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USA - There's one thing wrong with the diploma from Cal State Fullerton, accompanied by transcripts showing its owner got straight A's: It's a lie.

The records, which look impressive and show the owner earned a master's degree in engineering, were bought by The Orange County Register last month for \$295 off the Internet, to show how easily they can be obtained.

The selling company, which hides behind an anonymous offshore Web address, is one of a growing number of Internet sites where people can buy phony credentials from real schools, including Harvard University, the University of Southern California and some in Orange County. You can even hire a service that claims it will verify a fake degree.

"It's a national phenomenon," said Christine Helwick, general counsel for the California State University system. "Whenever we found someone out there purporting to offer our degrees, we demand they cease and desist."

Experts in the field say resumé fraud is on the rise, along with other ethical breaches in the workplace. As college degrees become mandatory for more jobs, more people go shopping for phony ones.

"I have run into scenarios where companies hired chief engineers that have problems with design issues, where they find out they don't have a diploma," said Philip Barquer, president of HR Alternatives in Newport Beach.

For decades, people have been able to buy fake diplomas from ads in the back of magazines. But the Internet has made the process easier, both for companies that print the fakes to hide their identities, and for buyers to find and order them.

Universities worried about their reputations have hired lawyers to halt the practice. Employers are hiring private-investigation firms to do background checks.

Diploma-mill expert John Bear has estimated that the number of counterfeit-diploma Web sites has doubled, to 300, over the past five years.

An investigation by the federal General Accounting Office in 2002 found hundreds of federal employees with bogus degrees.

The U.S. Army is investigating reports that recruiters told high-school dropouts to buy diplomas and transcripts from a diploma mill so they could qualify to enlist.

Convicted murderer Scott Peterson bought four fake diplomas from an Internet site a few days before he killed his wife, Laci, in December 2002, according to CNN.

Today's sophisticated computer programs, online payment and high-speed airmail mean that it took only two weeks for the diploma and transcripts the Register ordered to arrive in an unmarked package with no return address.

The package was mailed from Oslo, Norway. The Web site, www.diplomaservices.com, is hosted through

an anonymous service based in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines that advertises its clients can pay in cash so no one - not even the host - will know their identity.

"Our client list is private," was the e-mailed response to a query sent to the Web host regarding the owner of the diploma service.

The counterfeit documents the Register received were printed on high-quality paper, with official-looking colored seals and embossing. The transcripts, certifying that the graduate earned A's in engineering classes such as "Advanced Strength of Materials" and "Applied Thermodynamics" were even printed on special "security paper," though not the actual paper Cal State Fullerton uses.

A close comparison of the real and fake documents shows there are differences in look and feel that you wouldn't recognize if you weren't familiar with CSUF.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd think this looked pretty good," said Ephraim Smith, CSUF's vice president for academic affairs, as he compared the two diplomas. "The seal is different and the signatures aren't the same, but someone could be fooled."

Barquer said most employers probably would not bother to check on an authentic-looking diploma and transcript, even though they should.

"It is a concern out there because very few employers are verifying educational background," Barquer said. "Every employment labor attorney tells them they should, that you have to be nuts not to do it, because you need to make sure that person can do the job."

At the site where the Register bought its diploma, the operators promise "the best phony diplomas available." Its "About us" page says that its "novelty diplomas are intended for novelty purposes only."

No one from the site responded to two e-mailed requests for interviews. No phone contact number was provided.

However, when a reporter asked some generic questions about buying a diploma, an e-mail response was sent from a person identified as Benjamin Peterson, promising: "You can show your employer and they'll never doubt that you did indeed attend that school."

The reporter had not asked about using the diploma to deceive.

Look-alike diplomas have been posted on eBay, only to be taken down soon afterward, said Alan Contreras with Oregon's Office of Degree Authorization, a state agency that goes after unaccredited institutions that offer bogus degrees.

But fake transcripts can be found outside the Internet, too.

In Los Angeles County, a Sheriff's Department investigation is under way into fake transcripts that have shown up on five community college campuses, leading officials there to change their policies. Formerly, students were allowed to hand-carry transcripts from one college to another.

The bogus transcripts were first discovered at El Camino College in Torrance, which decided to make the discovery public to thwart fraud on other campuses.

"What alerted one of our counselors initially is that we had a student last summer who was supposedly taking classes at El Camino, L.A. Trade Tech and College of the Canyons, all at the same time, plus doing football practice," El Camino spokeswoman Ann Garten said. "She started thinking, 'How do you get to all three colleges like that?'"

Nine students are being considered for possible expulsion in that case, which may have begun after an

office break-in and thefts of special transcript paper, Garten said.

In California, it's a misdemeanor offense under the state Education Code to print or sell documents falsely purporting to be a degree or diploma. The law also specifies that no one can use the name of California State University without its permission.

Fraud laws make it a criminal offense for people to misrepresent themselves by presenting a fake diploma.

Several states, including Illinois, North Dakota, Indiana and New Jersey, have passed laws with criminal penalties for making or using a fake diploma.

But, to prosecute somebody, you have to catch them.

"It's easier to run away from process (servers) if you're out of the country," CSU attorney Helwick said, explaining why many sites are offshore. "Sometimes they will shut down in response to our letter and then open up again two weeks later."

Meanwhile, business is booming for background-investigation firms.

Barry Nadell, president of Infolink Screening Services in Chatsworth, a company that serves the Angels baseball club, among many others, said his research indicates nearly 8 percent of all applicants they check have lied about their education.

"And those are people who signed up and agreed to have their backgrounds checked," Nadell said, sighing in disbelief.

"It's fraud, you are falsifying your degree. If someone lies on their application, how do you trust them as employees? What else are they going to do?"