

Washington TECHNOLOGY

HSD official obtained Ph.D. from diploma mill

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A high-ranking career official in the Homeland Security Department apparently obtained her doctorate from a Wyoming diploma mill.

Laura L. Callahan, now senior director in the office of department CIO Steven Cooper, states on her professional biography that she “holds a Ph.D. in Computer Information Systems from Hamilton University.” Callahan, who is also president of the Association for Federal IRM and a member of the CIO Council, is commonly called by the title “Dr.”

Callahan’s resume says she began her civil service career in 1984. Before joining HSD, she was deputy CIO at the Labor Department.

[Hamilton University](#), according to an Internet search, is located in Evanston, Wyo. It is affiliated with and supported by [Faith in the Order of Nature Fellowship Church](#), also in Evanston. The state of Wyoming does not license Hamilton because it claims a religious exemption. [Oregon](#) has identified Hamilton University as a diploma mill unaccredited by any organization recognized by the U.S. Department of Education.

Callahan could not be reached for comment after repeated calls to her office. Michelle Petrovich, a department spokeswoman, said Friday afternoon, “We have no reason at this time not to believe Laura Callahan’s credentials, and we will look into the matter.” On Monday, officials were continuing their investigation, she said.

The department's CIO, Steve Cooper, also did not return repeated calls seeking comment.

Diploma mills and their potential for fraud were the subject of an inquiry by the General Accounting Office at the request of Sen. Susan M. Collins (R-Maine), who now chairs the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee. In a November 2002 report, GAO described how it purchased bachelor’s and master’s degrees in Collins’ name from Degrees-R-Us of Las Vegas. It referred the matter to the Federal Trade Commission. An aide to Collins on Monday said the senator would have a comment later in the week.

Andrew O’Connell of GAO’s Office of Special Investigations said of any government employee who purchases a fake diploma, “There’s no doubt in our mind that it’s a scam on the government.”

A search of accredited institutions turned up four colleges and universities with the name Hamilton, in addition to Hamilton University: Hamilton College in Clinton, N.Y.; Hamilton College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa; Hamilton Technical College in Davenport, Iowa; and Suwannee-Hamilton Technical Center in Live Oak, Fla. None of the four awards doctoral degrees.

In its printed materials, Hamilton University lists the National Park Service among organizations that employ its degree-holders, or that reimbursed employees who obtained Hamilton degrees.

Hamilton’s material said it provides degrees to individuals who state that their life and work experiences give them qualifications comparable to those of persons who complete academic courses and theses or dissertations to obtain degrees. The bulk of communications between Hamilton and its customers is via e-mails, faxes and postal mail. Calls to Hamilton go to a voice-mail system.

“They bought an old motel and took it apart and furnished it with stucco. It’s very nice,” said Connie Morris, executive assistant at the Evanston, Wyo., Chamber of Commerce. “They are members of the Chamber. They have two or three employees.”

The Oregon Office of Degree Authorization quotes Webster’s Third New International Dictionary on the definition

of a diploma mill: 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.

According to a spokesman for the Office of Personnel Management, the penalties for providing false or misleading information, including submitting false academic credentials, include termination or other serious disciplinary actions.

“There is no regulation that addresses diploma mills. You are talking about falsification of academic credentials,” the OPM spokesman said.

Lawrence Lorber, a partner with the Washington law firm Proskauer Rose LLP who specializes in labor and employment law, spoke with a reporter about circumstances matching Callahan’s claim to a Ph.D., though he specifically asked not to be told of the person or federal departments involved.

“There is something called resume fraud, which this would be considered,” Lorber said. “It’s what it sounds like—not the embellishment, but a fraudulent addition that indicates a job or degree.”

It is the accreditation of the program—or lack thereof—that becomes important, Lorber said. “By listing it [on your resume] you are creating the presumption that it’s from an accredited, recognized institution.”

Hamilton University’s enrollment application and enrollment invitation spell out the simple requirements for students who wish to obtain a Ph.D.

- \$3,600, payable up front by bank draft or personal check only. Hamilton does not accept credit cards.
- Completing one course at home on “personal, business and professional ethics.” Hamilton provides the course workbook, and the student must complete the open-book examination that is included. The school’s materials state the course and test require an average of five to eight hours to complete.
- Writing one paper relevant to the area in which the Ph.D. is being sought. The minimum length for the paper is 2,000 words, or roughly four pages, and will “be referred to as a dissertation,” the materials say.

In return, Hamilton promises to deliver “an official diploma in a leather bound holder... of the highest possible quality and carry[ing] the official raised seal of the university.” The organization promises that the “diplomas granted by Hamilton University do not reflect how the degree requirements were met (traditionally or externally).”

Because prospective employers often want to verify a candidate’s education, Hamilton also promises to provide verification of degrees, once the person provides authorization to release the information.

In this case, for instance, when asked via e-mail to verify Callahan’s Ph.D., the registrar’s office of Hamilton University replied, “All requests for degree verification must be made in writing and must be accompanied by an authorization signed by the graduate.”

But Hamilton promises that when it provides transcripts, they will look like real transcripts, even providing numbers, titles and grades for courses the student did not take, because their requirement was waived due to life or work experience. The transcripts will not say the courses were waived, and the grade average shown for an entire transcript will be based on the grades for the at-home test and the dissertation.

A person identifying himself as Dr. R.G. Marn, faculty adviser, said the institution’s privacy policies prevented it from releasing records. He declined to comment on whether Hamilton University is a diploma mill.

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