

Diploma Mills: A Historical Foundation

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Abstract

In the context of the digital age, this paper discusses the issue of diploma mills, which are fraudulent institutions that grant unearned academic degrees for a fee. The study traces the history of diploma mills back to John Cook Bennett's early practice of awarding degrees based on untested hypotheses of experience rather than curriculum-based learning. It provides a thorough understanding of the operation and classification of these institutions, emphasizing the importance of financial gain and social prestige as key motivators for their continued existence. The paper goes on to investigate the impact of these fraudulent activities on the credibility of higher education, labor markets, and public safety in various industries. Additionally, it describes the typical traits and critical thinking techniques of diploma mills, emphasizing naming conventions, unconventional curricula, quantity over quality methods, and structural flaws. The presentation of notable diploma mill examples and the industries in which they operate serves to highlight the size and complexity of the issue. The paper highlights the significant drawbacks, such as deception, lack of recognition, and the breeding of mediocrity, while acknowledging the potential benefits of honorary degrees as a positive offshoot of the diploma mill concept. In its final section, the paper makes a plea to decision-makers in government, higher education, and business to work together and raise awareness to preserve the credibility and value of educational credentials.

Keywords: Diploma mills, For-profit, certificate, fake, degree, educational institution

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1. Introduction

The digital age has undoubtedly provided numerous benefits in the field of education. However, these benefits are accompanied by complex challenges, one of which is the proliferation of diploma mills (Ezell & Bear, 2005). Diploma mills, also known as degree mills, are fraudulent organizations that grant unearned academic degrees for a fee. These institutions are frequently unaccredited and lack recognized educational oversight, undermining their degrees' credibility and value (Toma, 2020).

The term "diploma mill" refers to the practice of awarding degrees or certificates to individuals without their possessing the requisite theoretical knowledge or alleged technical expertise found in formal educational environments. To gain money, diploma mills were established (Angulo, 2016). Additionally, it may be said that those who run fake schools and buy and sell diplomas are more concerned with money than legitimacy (Eaton & Carmichael, 2023). A diploma mill is any establishment that grants applicants bogus academic degrees and diplomas without first requiring them to meet the entrance requirements for an accredited college or university. These degrees or diplomas are typically awarded based on the payment of fees or work experience rather than on actual education or learning.

Traditional diploma mills are organizations, businesses, or people that provide several degrees in a variety of fields of study to candidates with minimal, insufficient, or substandard preparation. These institutions award diplomas to recipients who don't meet their academic requirements or those of other recognized institutions even when they don't. Therefore, diplomas, certificates, and degrees may become more common.

Diploma mills have grown in popularity over the years, capitalizing on the growing global demand for higher education credentials. They have thrived by taking advantage of lax accreditation processes in various jurisdictions, which has been aided by the rise of online learning (Contreras, 2012). According to estimates, the global scale of the diploma mills problem is in the billions of dollars, highlighting the gravity of the situation (Bear & Ezell, 2009). The spread of diploma mills presents serious problems for the educational system. They undermine confidence in higher education, devalue real academic accomplishments, and make it harder for employers to verify credentials (Leslie, 2015). As a result, diploma mills can affect labor markets because hiring managers might unintentionally choose unqualified candidates with fake degrees over those with real credentials (Brown, 2004). This may pose a serious risk to public safety in industries like engineering or healthcare where specialized knowledge is essential (Columbaro & Monaghan, 2009).

2. Definitions of Diploma Mills by Different Authors

A business or group that presents itself as a postsecondary educational institution and awards people with fake academic credentials, such as degrees, diplomas, and certificates, is known as a "diploma mill" (Kanmodi, 2020).

This definition makes it clear that diploma mills only concern postsecondary education, and therefore secondary schools cannot be considered to be credential mills.

In essence, according to Stewart and Spille (1988), a diploma mill is a person or business that sells or awards degrees without needing a sufficient academic background or postsecondary-level academic achievement. A degree that would otherwise be impossible to obtain due to a lack of prerequisites from postsecondary level schooling or proof of an academic assessment leading to the award is what Stewart and Spille define as being awarded by a mill. Similarly, Kayyali, (2022), observed that postsecondary institutions which award fraudulent degrees for a fee represents a diploma mill. These institutions are also referred to as 'for-profit institutions' (Connell, 2016). They are profit-driven in their activities, and this is evident in every facet of the institution.

A diploma mill is a business that offers a fraudulent degree from an actual, accredited university (Contreras & Golin, 2009). Despite the fact that the notion of a diploma mill is universal, the name degree mill is used to describe it if the certificate provided is a degree, whereas diploma mill can be used if the certificate awarded is less than a degree, according to the description given above.

Given that the activity is unrelated to the fundamental academic outcome of knowledge production that underpins the establishment of college education, the selling of educational rights and privileges such as certificates and degrees has undoubtedly alluring financial feasibility. It is a result of the idea that universities are for-profit businesses with students as customers and education as a product (Balaram P. 2005). According to this description, rather than being an intellectual phenomenon, the phenomenon is a business phenomenon.

Evolution of Diploma Mills

According to Thelin (2011), the concept of diploma mills emanated from John Cook Bennett's practice of conferring degree on people based on the untested hypothesis that experience is equal to or better than curriculum-based learning. That hypothesis was drawn from his own personal experience of being granted a state licence to practice medicine upon his claim of apprenticeship with his uncle. However, he had no defined methodology for measuring experience of would-be awardee except the ability to pay cash or kind 'donations.'

Connell (2016) claims that "the development of the technological innovation age toward the end of the 18th century included Robert Fulton's steam engine in 1807 and Eli Whitney's cotton gin in 1794." These developments heralded the start of an Industrial Revolution that would fundamentally alter the American labor market. For-profit schools looking to grow had a chance to fill a void left by parochial schools who were unable to meet the demands of the standard curriculum models of the time due to the demand for a larger and better-trained labor force (Connell, 2016).

The first notable large-scale for-profit institutions were established during this so-called "pioneer period," which spanned the 1820s through the 1850s, most notably the R. Montgomery Bartlett-based Bartlett school network in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Cincinnati between 1834 and 1838. During this initial phase, which was defined by the "establishment of the early business colleges by individual entrepreneurs," penmanship, mathematics, and bookkeeping were perfected, establishing a "basic curriculum" on which the new work force was to be taught (Connell, 2016).

The push for 'for-profit schools' was provided by the industrial revolution. Initially, schools were not dispensing diplomas/degrees with the intention of imparting any value to students; rather, they were profiting from training because of the perceived high demand for a specific skill set at the time. Diploma mills nowadays are arguably offshoots of such early for-profit educational organizations that completed the last steps of granting diplomas/degrees with little or no training.

After the pioneer age ended in the 1850s, an era of organization began and lasted until the 1890s. Around this time, for-profit institutions actively and effectively altered their curricula to emphasize "teaching students how to use new technologies, such as the typewriter and telegraph," granting for-profits a "virtual monopoly on business education." (Connell, 2016).

Rationale Behind Diploma Mills

Generating funds is one of the main drivers of diploma mills. When these institutions demand hefty prices for their degrees or diplomas, it generates enormous profits without offering any genuine education or academic value. This significant profit keeps diploma mills operating and fuels them.

It is impossible to overstate the importance of having postsecondary education academic credentials; these credentials are necessary for a competitive advantage in the labor market. Kanmodi (2019; Kanmodi, 2020). Because they don't want to put in the time or effort that reputable schools take, many people are enticed to diploma mills because they may quickly and inexpensively gain academic certificates. A need for credentials may be sparked by a variety of motives, such as a desire to better one's career or social standing.

Insufficient public knowledge is another factor contributing to the existence of diploma mills. Many customers may not completely understand the consequences of getting a degree or credential from an unaccredited institution or may not be aware of the concept of diploma mills. This ignorance might encourage

the operation of diploma mills and help them remain in business.

Furthermore, the social status connected to a college degree and certificate is another factor that makes diploma mills successful. If they know they will move up the social ladder after receiving the certificate, people who want prestige may decide to forgo caution and pursue the degree at any cost.

Likewise, diploma mills are common in nations or areas where regulation over higher education institutions is lacking and certification agencies are ineffective or corrupt. Diploma mills can operate uncontrolled because to a lack of oversight, loose limitations or standards, and laws that may be disregarded, making it challenging for people to recognize and steer clear of them.

Inexperienced students might be recruited by diploma mills by taking advantage of cultural differences or a disregard for academic standards. For instance, a diploma mill operating abroad can deceive unwary students by advertising degrees from famous colleges in the United States or Europe while actually having no affiliation with those colleges.

Classifications of Diploma Mills

The classification of diploma mills varies among academics. Connell (2016) asserts that certain classifications were based on institutional objectives and others were carried out by the Education Committee of the States (ECS).

The division of institutions into two groups based on their purposes was career connector institutions and credential institutions. The institutions connected to the industrial age are the career connector institutes. They are institutions with a vocational focus, where degrees are awarded in accordance with evidence of apprenticeship. A good illustration of this is Bennett, who earned his medical degree after serving an apprenticeship at his uncle's practice. Degrees are awarded in certificate institutes only once financial commitments have been met.

The rating given by the Education Committee of the States (ECS) was three. supersystems, distance education, and business colleges. These divisions were created in response to requirements. Enterprise colleges are those started by a person or a family to meet local requirements, whereas supersystems are multi-state and multi-campus institutions built to serve the interests of its owners. Online institutions are created without any physical infrastructure in order to address needs that are both global and virtual.

Features of Diploma Mills

The buying of degrees without ever having taken a class is a frequent practice among diploma mills. The National School of Osteopathy was not visited by Smith, who instead paid \$150 for a diploma (Jordan, 2014). After relocating to Ohio, John Cook Bennet claimed to have trained as a physician's apprentice under his uncle there (Thelin, 2011). John Cook Bennett awarded degrees for fees ranging from \$10 to \$25 as the chancellor of Christian College of Albany. Some more traits of degree mills include the following:

The following are regarded as additional characteristics of diploma mills:

6.1 Naming Convention

Numerous nomenclatures have been used to describe this occurrence. The many diploma mills' respective owners have chosen the names for each one. Some of them are still referred to as traditional colleges and universities, but over time, their names have changed to include, but not be limited to, writing schools, merchant academies, commercial colleges, business schools, career centers, proprietary universities, technical institutes, and for-profits. The year 2016 (Stewart and Spille).

6.2 Non Standard Curriculum

If they have a curriculum, it differs regularly from that of conventional universities. Because they provide shorter study periods and credentials can be achieved without attending any classes, diploma mills provide little to no academic fulfillment. Jordan, 2014

6.3 Quantity versus Quality

At one questionable institution, where one student celebrates the distinction of having completed the university's largest dissertation on record, quality appears to be the exception rather than the rule. A student who spent two months recording episodes of the television program "Sesame Street" without analysing them was given a PhD. If there are any degree requirements, they are frequently vague and limited. In addition, degrees may be awarded retroactively and dissertations with grammatical and spelling mistakes are acceptable (Stewart and Spille, 2016).

6.4 Structural Deficiencies

In contrast to conventional learning institutions, this type of higher education institution lacks either a clear framework or a typical structure. These frameworks take the form of admission standards, onboarding policies, curricula, philosophies, and, frequently, purpose and mission statements (Jordan, 2014).

6.5 Forged degrees and/or certificates

The diplomas may be fakes of real ones issued by legitimate colleges or universities or they may bear the name of the granting institution. Diploma mills may operate properly or illegally in accordance with state and federal

regulations. Spille and Stewart (2016).

Diploma mills provide degrees based on learning experiences or payments to specific campaigns or causes rather than using credits, as is the case at regular academic institutions, which measure learning results. (Thelin, 2011).

Operation of Diploma Mills

Diploma mills accepted a lowering of quality, entrance standards, and graduation credits as a means of filling seats and generating more cash through expanded enrollment accessibility and lower running costs.

Diploma mills operate by skillfully employing cutting-edge techniques to persuade students interested in higher education to enroll in their fraudulent academic programs. Some of these methods include creating fake scholarship websites, academic domains (such as ".edu"), obtaining accreditation from fictional accrediting organizations, and promoting their academic programs via email, SMS, and social networking websites. In 2020, Kanmodi.

It is impossible to ignore the intentionality of these groups' goals, as noted by Eaton and Carmichael (2023). Diploma mills exist to make money, and defrauding people is their main method of doing so. There are several instances of good and honorable people who have been taken advantage of by dishonest educational institutions who knowingly defraud impressionable students out of their money by offering worthless certificates and flimsy assurances of a better life. Throughout the last few centuries, these occurrences in the United States have affected hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people.

Advertising is extremely important in the diploma mill sector. Their adverts can be seen in a variety of journals. Its Hard-hitting and meticulous advertising is essential for success. A diploma mill will vanish if it is unable to market its offerings. They might be printed in reputable newspapers, frequently next to adverts for established organizations Spille and Stewart (1988).

Nowadays, the typical target is an adult who feels constrained personally or professionally due to a lack of credentials. The main lure is typically the awarding of credit for "life experience". The assumption made by applicants—which is generally accurate—is that such a review will lead to the issuance of nearly all of the credits necessary for the degree sought. College or advanced degree reputation may also be emphasized. Stewart and Spille (1988).

Its success depends on aggressive, well focused advertising without which a degree mill will shut down.

Examples of Diploma Mills by Institution and Field

Since most schools that use credential mills do so covertly, it is difficult to give chronological examples of them. The majority of diploma milling historically occurred in a traditional academic institution, despite the fact that some academic institutions are formally classified as diploma mills.

Credential mills first appeared in medical colleges, with Christian College—founded by Dr. John C. Bennett—being the first known example. It was "proposed in 1617 as part of a revenue-generating scheme for the cash-strapped Virginia Company" (Connell, 2016). The National School of Osteopathy (NSO) was established in Baxter Springs, Kansas, by Elmer and Helen Barber, who graduated from the American School of Osteopathy's class of 1895. The second osteopathy institution in America was called the National institution of Osteopathy (NSO). The Barbers did not only lack the credentials and real-world experience required to start a medical school, but they also did not adhere to the osteopathic philosophy or curriculum. Jordan, 2014.

3. Discerning Diploma Mills' Strategies

Verifying a higher education institution's reliability and legitimacy is essential. According to the proverb "if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is," if the process of enrolling in a certain school and earning a certificate seems too good to be true, caution should be used. Weigh the alternatives to the "too good" option to find out why. One can be spending less on expensive tears.

The sort of facilities can be revealed by a tour, particularly if it is a diploma mill. A diploma mill, as a business, typically lacks a campus, laboratories, staff, and curriculum (Thelin, 2011).

It can be lifesaving to exercise due diligence and verify all the facts at one's disposal. Dates pertaining to the school's receipt of its operating license, commencement of operations, first group of graduates, accreditation details, and the accrediting organizations are all crucial pieces of information. Additionally, researching the alumni, finding out what the alumni base is doing, and scanning reviews for questionable and argumentative comments can be eye-opening. (Kanmodi, 2020).

4. Benefit from Diploma Mills

Due to John Cook Bennett's alleged involvement in diploma milling in the late 19th century, the honorary degree—an academic degree for which prerequisites have been waived for the recipient but solely awarded for the honors as a higher institutional norm—was created. Colleges considered the financial advantages of John

Bennett's diploma selling and decided to pursue a similar step, which culminated in the prestigious giving of honorary degrees in honor of deserving benefactors and the patronized political class in America (Thelin, 2011).

5. Disadvantages of Diploma Mills

There are numerous drawbacks to this occurrence, varying from deceit to lack of acknowledgement and encouraging mediocrity. Due to the quality mortgage, some people have credentials that are unrepresentable, while others are unable to defend what they have. As a result, background checks are performed by labor employers to confirm the validity of certifications (Connell, 2016).

Anyone who obtains a degree or certification from a diploma mill may be subject to legal repercussions if they attempt to present their fictitious credentials. This may involve claims of fraud or dishonesty, which could have serious legal and reputational repercussions. Diploma mills may be subject to legal action; for instance, the Barbers evaded license revocation by the whisksers, but the court gave them \$100,000 in damages (Jordan, 2014).

6. Conclusion

The integrity and quality of education are seriously threatened by diploma mills, and their effects extend far beyond the academic world. To address this issue, policymakers, academic institutions, and employers must work together. The validity and worth of educational credentials can only be maintained through concerted efforts and increased awareness. A widespread and endemic part of the global education ecosystem is the diploma mill, a type of academic fraud. It's an educational system that offers academic services and products in exchange for monetary gain. The enormous financial benefit, nearly insatiable demand for higher education, prestige associated with a college education, and short time of study all contribute to its sustainability. Verifying facts on colleges and universities will help to avoid falling victim to diploma mill fraud, especially for those with active advertising campaigns.

Even though diploma mill is defined within the milieu of tertiary/higher educational institutions, similar trends are being perceived in lower schools and we hope to investigate similar presentations in developing countries. A model that could assist applicants in being able to determine if an institution is tending towards being a diploma mill or not is being proposed for development as part of our future work.

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