

Academic and Credential Fraud and Abuse Must Stop

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A very alarming and destructive trend is taking place within chiropractic and other health care professions, and it demands our immediate attention. An escalating number of professionals seem to want to put more letters after their name in an attempt to gain more credibility and attract new patients. This includes a literal alphabet soup of "quasi" credentials. The most alarming situation occurs when individuals use bogus, nonaccredited, Internet-only, graduate and terminal credentials or degrees such as MS, PhD, MD and ND. Many of these are obtained from various Web-based diploma mills and nonaccredited correspondence institutions. These institutions have not met the rigid standards of self and independent review to attain accreditation by federally recognized regional and/or specialty accreditation bodies that legitimately accredit such programs. The curriculum and infrastructure of these institutions simply do not meet acceptable criteria to grant such degrees legitimately.

The Attorney General's office of the home state of one of the largest such institutions has now made it illegal for this institution to accept students from within its own state. However, the AG's office does not have the authority to stop this institution's Internet business with out-of-state residents. Some other states have now made it illegal to use degrees from these types of Internet-only, nonaccredited institutions, and some states (including Oregon, Maine, Michigan and Texas) specifically list many of these institutions by name.

Degrees from these institutions do not qualify the graduate to attain any state registration, certification or licensure to practice nutrition or naturopathic medicine in states where it is required. By comparison, regionally accredited graduate programs in nutrition and [Council on Naturopathic Medicine](#) (CNME)-accredited naturopathic medicine program graduates are eligible.

The entrance requirements and the length and rigor of the curriculum are simply not comparable at these nonaccredited Internet-only institutions compared to regionally and specialty-accredited institutions. For example, the naturopathic programs at Internet-based institutions contain little to no content in physical examination, laboratory medicine or differential diagnosis and have no supervised internship or clinical experience component, yet they graduate students and instruct them that is acceptable to use the title "Doctor."

Nonaccredited, substandard degrees granted by such institutions cheapen the degrees and credentials of those who have attained them legitimately, misleads the public into believing they are following the advice of a legitimately trained individual, and causes confusion in the minds of regulators and lawmakers, which has inhibited the progress and advancement of evidence-based integrative and complementary health care in the United States. In my opinion, these institutions are propagating academic fraud at the expense of their unenlightened students and public safety.

Please do not confuse legitimate online programs offered by regionally accredited, real brick-and-mortar universities with Internet-only, nonaccredited institutions. When evaluating an online program, verify that the program is licensed by the Department of Higher Education of the home

state of the institution and that the institution maintains regional accreditation by a federally recognized organization. (See table) These programs offer a convenient, quality-controlled and legitimate way for working professionals to attain further degrees and credentials without resorting to a questionable diploma mill.

While many Internet-based institutions claim accreditation they are not legitimately accredited by any federally recognized accrediting body. From the Web site FAQ of one of these institutions:

What is your accreditation?

_____ is accredited by the [American Association of Drugless Practitioners](#) and the [American Naturopathic Medical Accreditation Board](#). These are private, professional associations that offer accreditation in naturopathy and other areas of natural health. Both are private accrediting associations designed to meet the needs of nontraditional education and are not affiliated with any government agency.

The accreditation bodies listed in this example are not federally recognized. However, they are often used to claim "accreditation" to prospective students who inquire but do not understand the complexity of academic accreditation in the United States. A comprehensive explanation of academic accreditation in the U.S. is available at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/School_accreditation.

While it may seem that I am picking on these Internet-only, nonaccredited institutions, the reason I am focusing on them is that they are by far the biggest reason for this current trend of fraudulent credentials. However, the real problem may be the individuals who should know better, but seemingly sacrifice their professional integrity by taking the easy way out and settling for these questionable credentials and degrees in the first place.

Maybe this is typical of our modern "I want it now" culture, but does that make it right? What finally made me take action and write this article was an advertisement in this publication for one of these nonaccredited diploma mills. I urge DC and others to not allow promotion of these types of degrees and credentials in our professional publications or elsewhere, as it chips away at our collective professional integrity.

If we do not police ourselves, the government eventually will. The public is clearly at risk, particularly from those who complete these programs and use these degrees, but do not possess primary clinical training to fall back on. I strongly suggest that doctors of chiropractic proudly stand on their DC degree and their clinical experience, or obtain a legitimate and accredited PhD, MD or ND if they desire. Otherwise, using dubious and quasi-degrees does more to harm than help the practitioner's personal and professional reputation with patients and colleagues; it puts the individual in legal jeopardy should something go wrong while using these credentials, and cheapens the entire profession in the process.

Federally Recognized Regional Accreditors of Colleges and Universities (U.S.)

North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, The Higher Learning Commission: Accredits degree-granting institutions of higher education in Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota, West Virginia, Wisconsin and Wyoming, including schools of the Navajo Nation, and programs offered via distance education within these institutions.
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Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Higher Education: Accredits institutions of higher education in Delaware, the District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, including distance-education programs offered at those institutions.

New England Association of Schools and Colleges, Commission on Institutions of Higher Education: Accredits institutions of higher education in Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont that award bachelor's, master's and/or doctoral degrees, and associate degree-granting institutions in those states that include degrees in liberal arts or general studies among their offerings, including programs offered via distance education within these institutions.

Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities: Accredits post-secondary educational institutions in Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah and Washington and programs offered via distance education within these institutions.

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges: Accredits degree-granting institutions of higher education in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia, including distance-education programs offered at those institutions.

Western Association of Schools and Colleges, Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities: Accredits senior colleges and universities in California, Hawaii, the United States territories of Guam and American Samoa, the Republic of Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands and the Republic of the Marshall Islands, including distance-education programs offered at those institutions.

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