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## Diploma scams victim-free until someone is hurt

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It must be football that lends a common scheme so much notoriety. University High School, after all, represents a mere splash of fraud amid a tsunami of academic fakery.

Hundreds of thousands of educators, politicians, government bureaucrats, corporate execs, even medical doctors strut around with credentials purchased from phantom schools existing only in cyberspace or an office front or a mail drop.

"This fake degree and credential thing is huge," said education writer John Bear. Just how huge is suggested by the title of the book Bear and former FBI agent Allen Ezell published this year: *Degree Mills, The Billion Dollar Industry That Has Sold Over A Million Fake Diplomas*.

And it's multiplying like porno spam. Yet no one pays much attention unless a scandal erupts over inflated credentials of a political candidate or public official. Last month, Ireland's science minister was caught with a dodgy degree from a notorious California-based diploma mill. **Last year, the Congressional Accounting Office reported 28 high-level federal officials have degrees from sham universities.**

### LESSER AFFRONT

Down on South Dixie Highway, University High only sells school boys diplomas and a nice GPA for \$399 -- not quite as grave an affront as those Homeland Security officials discovered with fake diplomas last year. Or the 740 South Florida educators recently implicated in the Moving On Toward Education scheme. But University High grads are high school football players who need degrees and grades to qualify for an athletic scholarships. At least 11 major universities have played along with the ruse. Still, this seems insignificant compared with scams that provide, for a price, high school dropouts with medical degrees.

But this scandal dredged up a name quite familiar to the authors of *Degree Mills*. In fact, Stanley J. Simmons' exploits are chronicled on page 43 of their book. Simmons founded and ran University High until he sold the school last year.

Ezell, now head of corporate security for Wachovia Corp., busted this same Stan Simmons in 1987 for mail fraud. At the time, Ezell ran the FBI's Operation Dipscam -- short for diploma scam. Working undercover, Ezell added 10 bachelor degrees, 19 master degrees, four Ph.Ds and two medical degrees to his résumé. "I was Dr. Doctor."

Ezell shut down 25 fake schools and indicted 22 operators, including our man Stan. Simmons pleaded guilty after telling a federal judge how he acted as a broker for fake universities based in Arizona. Working out of Miami, Simmons had specialized in peddling fake degrees to impostor academics in Central and South America.

Simmons' full-service scam even offered a "university jewelry department" selling fake class rings along with diplomas. He also ran a high school operation, Community High School, in Miami, Ezell said.

### PERCEIVED AS HARMLESS

So it was like old times for Ezell and Bear with Stanley J. Simmons entangled in yet another academic scandal. But lately state and federal officials have only a vague interest in diploma mills. "It's seen as a white-collar, victimless crime," said Ezell, who knows better. "They think there's no victim. No blood."

**But each impostor displaces someone with honest credentials. And there is blood. Bear testified as an expert witness in the 2002 manslaughter trial of a North Carolina diploma mill doctor, whose bungled practice led to the death of an eight-year-old patient.**

Last week, Ezell casually demonstrated the problem for a reporter, running the names of diploma mills through Google. Up popped the name of three doctors practicing in Pinellas County.

Maybe public officials are so reluctant to pursue the legion of fake docs, therapists, professors, teachers, bureaucrats and politicians because, well, their own résumés are suspect.

Poor Stan, who liked to list himself as a Ph.D, was just ahead of his time. Or should that be Dr. Stan?