

THE OPINION OF THE COLLEGE ON

Recognition of Academic Degrees or Equivalent Professional Education

**Initiation, Chair responsibility,
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Published in Valuation, vol. 34, no. 1 (January 1989)

In a 1976 Opinion entitled, "Education for Appraisers," the College of Fellows of the American Society of Appraisers (ASA) expressed its concern with educational opportunities available to practitioners and students in the emerging profession of appraising and noted the American Society of Appraisers' long advocacy of a wide-perspective, multidiscipline concept of valuation.

Further, the College noted that "those who receive professional designations from ASA have been required to meet basic academic criteria as a part of the qualifications process; each is required to have 'a degree in engineering, law or business from a recognized institution of learning, or such other education, knowledge or experience as may be determined to be the equivalent of such professional education by the International Board of Examiners.'"

In recent years, nationwide attention has been focused on problems posed by "diploma mills" involving federal prosecutions related to conspiracy and fraud. As a consequence, the College has been requested to examine the premises and procedures that are an integral and sensitive part of the ASA's criteria and program for the professional designation and advancement of its members. Clearly, the effectiveness of the program is directly related to quality and validity norms established for the benefit of the members and the public.

Although the society's criteria have been redefined (the quotation recited above now specifies, "A bachelors degree, or higher degree, from a recognized and fully accredited college or university, or such other education, knowledge or experience as may be deemed to be the equivalent of such professional education by the International Board of Examiners"), the problem remains the same:

- (a) What is a recognized and fully accredited college or university?
- (b) How should a program be administered under the alternative criterion, which permits acceptance of "the equivalent of such professional education?"

To these two questions, it is necessary to add a third:

- (c) What is a "diploma mill?"

Diploma Mills

It is the diploma mill problem that has prompted the society to request clarification (identification, fact areas, viable solutions). The impact of courtroom trials, fraud charges involving the sale of thousands of college degrees (degrees for sale in the range of \$1,200 to \$3,500), guilty pleas, and federal criminal convictions, has made increasingly difficult the work of the International Board of Examiners and other representatives of the society.

The College is of the opinion, shared by professional practitioners, that “diploma mill” is a name generally employed to describe a “school” that sells “degrees” that are unearned and/or illegal. In that context, a degree obtained by such means is of no worth. No professional society should accept—for membership, advancement or other purposes—statements or documents so purchased or otherwise obtained.

Few will disagree with the concept, above-described, which interdicts favorable recognition or acceptance of unearned and/or illegal degrees. However, those who attempt to present documentation of such degrees will allege that the credentials are indeed “legal” and have been “earned” through a variety of media.

Therefore, ASA representatives responsible for evaluating educational qualifications must deal squarely, by definition, understanding and application, with the two major fact areas: “recognized,” “fully accredited” academic institutions and “equivalent” professional education.

Recognized; Fully Accredited

The U.S. academic accrediting system has been called “unique”; it is certainly complex, many-layered, and confusing.

A review of pertinent literature and regulations leads to the conclusion that accreditation of U.S. educational institutions (colleges, universities) is not accomplished by the U.S. Department of Education; it is not the exclusive function of any single governmental body or any public or private group. Rather, a variety of controls are established by the several states, and to this is added compeer evaluation, operating through nationally recognized accrediting agencies, associations and state boards.

There are six regional associations of colleges/universities. The six associations represent: New England (with two commissions), Middle, North Central, Northwestern, Southern, and Western states (two commissions). In other words, eight commissions represent the six regions. The eight commissions are recognized by the Advisory Committee on Accreditation and Institutional Eligibility and are listed by the U.S. Secretary of Education, who is required by statute to publicly identify agencies and associations deemed to be reliable in evaluating the quality of educational training programs.

In addition to these regional bodies, there are a variety of professional and specialized schools/programs receiving accreditation through some 75 nationally recognized agencies and associations (e.g., National Architectural Accrediting Board; American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business; American Medical Associa-

tion; Accreditation Board of Engineering and Technology; and American Bar Association).

The National Center for Education Statistics is responsible (Sec. 406(b), General Provisions Act, 20 USC 1221 e-1) for disseminating information concerning the evaluative results of the work of the accrediting bodies. The center publishes the *Education Directory, Colleges and Universities*, listing more than 3,250 educational institutions in the U.S. and outlying areas (e.g., Guam and the former Canal Zone) that meet the criteria for inclusion in the directory.

The criteria are of utmost significance in understanding the U.S. evaluative system. Institutional inclusion in the directory is based upon the finding that: "(1) They are legally authorized to offer and are offering at least a one-year program of college-level studies leading toward a degree; (2) They have submitted the information required for listing; and (3) They meet one of the following criteria for listing: (A) The institution is accredited at the college level by an agency that has been listed as nationally recognized by Secretary of Education, (B) The institution holds preaccredited status at the college level with a designated nationally recognized accrediting agency, (C) if the institution is public or nonprofit, it has qualified under the 'three-institutional-certification method established by Section 1201 (a)(5)(B) of the Higher Education Act of 1965.' By this method, the Secretary of Education verifies that 'not fewer than three accredited college-level institutions have accepted and do accept an unaccredited institution's credits, upon transfer, as though coming from an institution accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency.'"

At this juncture, a caveat is necessary.

Uncritical acceptance of the criteria upon which inclusion in the *Education Directory, Colleges and Universities* is based would tend to encourage a go-by-the-book attitude in determining "recognized" and "fully accredited" status of educational institutions. However, it is necessary to expand the directory parameters if a conscientious and valid assessment is to be made of educational credentials. Consideration of the profession of law and the multitude of avenues of educational preparation in that field will prove helpful.

A significant number of law schools, non-ABA-approved, offer degrees in law. These schools are in nine states (Alabama, California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Missouri, Nevada, New York, Tennessee) and the District of Columbia. Some non-ABA-approved schools possess excellent academic reputations and are fully accredited by other recognized accredited organizations. However, they do not meet certain ASA requirements because of such factors as dependence on part-time faculty, organizational structure, major income depends on tuition and fees.

California has the largest number of non-ABA-approved institutions. The state is recognized for its outstanding standards, systems, and procedures for law school accreditation outside the ABA system. It is reported that some 65 percent of California law schools are non-ABA-approved; they educate approximately 30 percent of the state's law students. There are 16 ABA-approved law schools; 18 law schools are approved by the California Committee of Bar Examiners but not the ABA; 16 schools possess neither California nor ABA accreditation approval.

Some characteristics that mark non-ABA-approved law schools that are accredited by the California Committee of Bar Examiners: (1) majority of instruction hours concentrated in the evenings; (2) older students involved in mid-life career chang-

es; (3) educational access provided students with nontraditional qualifications; (4) access provided those who have been “under-represented” in the legal profession; (5) faculty composed of practicing attorneys who teach part-time evening sessions; (6) lower tuition costs (by perhaps 30–40 percent); (7) employment referrals because of practicing attorney/faculty relationship to students.

Equivalent Professional Education

The professional designation qualifications criteria described and formally adopted by the society require applicants to meet basic academic standards. These requirements permit documentation of education, knowledge, or experience deemed to be equivalent to levels represented by a degree from a recognized, fully accredited educational institution.

It is the consequent responsibility of the society, on behalf of each applicant for designation/advancement, to analyze all pertinent qualifications data such as work experience, on-the-job training, seminars, workshops, and conferences; to evaluate credits earned in educational institutions and governmental organizations; to weigh the relevance of resumes, records, and transcripts; and to extend recognition for years of professional practice, hours of formal/informal instruction and grades achieved by examination.

All of these evaluative activities, required under the provisions established by the society, are based upon concepts of quality, integrity, and validity.

Summary

The College of Fellows has a mandate to explore fundamental principles and to express the results of such exploration by formal, published Opinions.

In fulfillment of the mandate, it is the Opinion of the College that unearned, illegal “degrees” have neither validity, integrity nor quality and that such degrees, however issued or obtained, should not be accepted by the society for any purposes whatsoever.

Appropriate evaluation of educational criteria can best be achieved through the medium of documentation issued by recognized and fully accredited colleges and universities, together with an alternative evaluation program that recognizes equivalent professional education.