

Diploma-Mill Rise Disturbs Educators

By M. A. FARBER

Educators throughout the country are becoming increasingly concerned about the growing number of unaccredited colleges and universities that are sprouting on the fringes of academe.

Some, though nontraditional, are considered legitimate institutions of higher learning. Others, according to Government officials and educators, are nothing but "diploma mills" — selling sheepskins for a price and demanding little in the way of academic preparation.

Of 3,000 colleges and universities in the United States, 2,700 have met standards for accreditation by responsible private agencies, and some are in the process of applying for ac-

Continued on Page 28, Column 1

The New York Times

Published: July 27, 1972

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Continued From Page 1, Col. 2

creditation.

But of the 300 without accreditation, according to John R. Proffitt, director of the accreditation staff of the Federal Office of Education, 110 are in the category of diploma mills. Within the last decade, the number has tripled, and Florida, Illinois and California have the most.

The Office of Education defines diploma mills as organizations that "award degrees without requiring courses of instruction that all reputable educational institutions require before conferring degrees."

Unaccredited colleges of varying kind and quality are not a new phenomenon. But the issues posed by their existence have re-emerged this month in a series of disclosures by The New York Times of some of their current activities.

Few education officials, including Mr. Proffitt, will identify specific mills for fear of legal action. And some leaders of unaccredited colleges assert that their institutions are academically sound, imaginative and time-saving, particularly for graduate students, and that they have been unfairly impugned.

Officials Are Concerned

Many educators say that lax state laws, plus a popular demand for "quickie" degrees in a society that is highly credential-conscious are responsible for the proliferation of unaccredited colleges and, in some cases, diploma mills.

Government and education officials are worried not only about the mills, which seldom make a real pretense of academic standing, but also about the larger number of unaccredited colleges that may or may not be legitimate.

A case in point is Teachers University, chartered in Florida in 1968.

Kenneth Bobrowsky, a teacher at the Bronx High School of Science, was formally listed with Florida state officials as the president of Teachers University, an unaccredited school that was recently denied a license to continue operating in Miami. But, last week, Mr. Bobrowsky said he was never connected in any way with the university, which he called "a horrible diploma mill working out of a Florida mailbox."

Mrs. Janice Sonnenfeld whose late husband, Jack chartered Teachers University said that the school was a bona fide institution granting doctoral and master's degrees and that Mr. Bobrowsky was indeed affiliated with it. She also said in a telephone interview from her home in Larchmont, N.Y. that some of the 27 violation charges against the university by the Florida Board of Independent Colleges and Universities had no validity.

However, Dr. C. Wayne Freeberg, executive director of the board, disclosed Monday that he had received a letter dated July 18 from Mrs. Sonnenfeld

secretary-treasurer of the university, in which she said the school would not appeal the state's ruling and would terminate its operations.

One charge by board officials was that a certified audit showed no money being paid to the Teachers University faculty in the year ended last December. The university's extensive triennial catalogue for 1970-73 does not identify anyone employed by the institution. Mrs. Sonnenfeld explained that the university's accountant had forgotten to enter faculty salaries for the audit.

Florida officials also said that "the only notion of a campus" presented to them was Mrs. Sonnenfeld's mother's home in Miami Beach. However, Mrs. Sonnenfeld said the institution had no campus at all—only mailing addresses in Miami and New York. And she said she was uncertain whether her mother had a home in Miami Beach.

One institution that has come to the attention of state officials here—many unaccredited colleges, especially in Florida, have New York ties—is Eastern Nebraska Christian College of Valley, Neb.

One holder of a Ph.D. in business administration from Eastern Nebraska, whose degrees are not recognized by the Nebraska Education Department, is Thomas Wolff.

Dr. Wolff said last week, that he was co-director of a counseling center at 850 Seventh Avenue for students enrolled at Eastern Nebraska, Nova University in Florida and the University of Oklahoma.

Connection Is Denied

E. Arthur Winkler, president of Eastern Nebraska, said the center was his institution's "extension" branch. But officials of Nova and Oklahoma Universities said they had never heard of the center or Dr. Wolff.

Dr. Wolff denied last Friday that he had ever been connected with a firm called Height Builders. He said the firm was headed by another Thomas Wolff with the same answering service and address—"Mr. Wolff, not Dr. Wolff." The message to call The New York Times in response to a call to Height Builders last Thursday was "put in my box by mistake," Dr. Wolff said.

However, Allan Lynn, who leases space to Dr. Wolff at 850 Seventh Avenue and also owns the answering service said: "There is only one man named Wolff in the building or on the phone service, and he ran Height Builders. I see him every day. There is no counseling center here or on the switchboard."

Earlier this month, The Times revealed that a number of people—some in responsible academic posts and many treating emotional problems or teaching others how to—were equipped with doctorates from an unaccredited Bible college in Canada. Canadian educational authorities said they would investigate the school, Philathea College.

At the same time, the New York City Consumer Affairs

Department announced it would investigate the Group Relations Ongoing Workshop here to see if GROW's administrators and faculty were making fraudulent use of Ph.D.'s from unaccredited schools, including Philathea.

And, in another development, two orthodox rabbis recently pleaded guilty in Federal Court in Brooklyn to mail-order fraud charges arising from their operation of a fictitious university, Marlowe University. Students of Marlowe paid \$400 to \$500 for degrees they never received.

Unaccredited colleges that do, in fact, exist are divided between profit-making and non-profit institutions. A Florida official said he suspected that one college there was "making close to \$2-million a year," but many officials of unaccredited institutions regard anything like that kind of profit as impossible to achieve.

Dr. Harold Hodgkinson of the University of California at Berkeley, who is a member of the board of advisers and a summer session teacher at unaccredited Walden University in Naples, Fla., said the "income over expenditure" at Walden last year was \$15,000.

\$50 For a Degree

At diploma mills, said Mr. Proffitt, the Federal official, prices for degrees run as low as \$50 and as high, for graduate diplomas, as \$2,500.

Generally, an accredited college or university is one having received final approval from a private accrediting agency recognized by the United States Office of Education, such as the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools or the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.

Accreditation by these agencies certifies, to the satisfaction of most educators, that a nonprofit institution has met established standards in such areas as academic program, finances, management, library facilities and physical plant.

Although a top Federal education official in the nineteen-fifties said that a diploma mill was any institution that "departed significantly from the traditional," many educators are now careful to draw a distinction between unaccredited colleges as a whole and diploma mills. The latter are often correspondence schools or schools that sell degrees without any correspondence over any matter except the price to be paid.

Accreditation Sought

While diploma mills almost always lack accreditation and rarely attempt to gain it, other unaccredited universities—like Walden, which is considering becoming nonprofit—may have applied for accreditation. (The process of acquiring it could take two years or more.)

Dr. Winkler, the head of Eastern Nebraska Christian College, said he had written last month to the North Central Association of Schools and Colleges in Chicago to inquire about accreditation.

But Dr. Norman Burns, executive director of the as-

sociation, said last week that "we have had no inquiry" from the school.

The three agencies that Dr. Winkler said had already bestowed accreditation upon Eastern Nebraska are not recognized by the United States Office of Education. Mr. Proffitt said, noting that one of the agencies, the National Education Accrediting Association, provided a mail-order certificate of accreditation for \$25 or \$50.

Probably the chief penalty that may be suffered by a graduate of an unaccredited college is discovering that his diploma is not accepted by a graduate school or by an employer for purposes of hiring, promotion or raises.

In addition, some states, including New York, will not license professionals such as registered nurses or psychologists if their degrees are from unaccredited institutions. And, from time to time, the New York State Education Department sends college presidents in New York a list of unaccredited colleges that have come to its notice.

In New York, a college must obtain permission to operate from the State Board of Regents. Only three weeks ago the counsel of the State Education Department, Robert D. Stone, ordered Reading University of Opa-Locka, Fla., and Richmond Hill, Queens, to "cease its operations" in New York through The Journal for Special Educators of the Mentally Retarded, also in Richmond Hill.

One requirement for a Ph.D. from Reading is completion of "two semesters of field study programs abroad." The requirement can be met by participation in two three-week European tours at \$775 each, sponsored partly by the journal.

In California, any corporation stating that it has \$50,000 in assets used exclusively for educational purposes can open a university and confer degrees—the assets could be a painting worth \$50,000, used as endowment.

In Florida, until recently, an individual could start a degree-granting college by paying \$37 in fees; no assets were needed.

Educators of nearly all persuasions agree that the recent expansion of nontraditional study programs at many colleges and universities, including some with impeccable reputations, has significantly shaken old notions of how academic quality should be controlled.

College Sues New York

Yet officials of a number of unaccredited institutions insist that their schools are still being unjustly stigmatized by their collegiate brethren. Such, in fact, is their regard for their respectability that unaccredited Laurence University in Sarasota, Fla., is suing the New York State Education Department for allegedly calling it a "degree mill."

"We're not a diploma mill," said Dr. Charles M. Palermo, Laurence's president. "There are a hell of a lot of them," added the 39-year-old former English department chairman at Niagara Community College, "but we're not one of them."

Among its more than 90 doctoral recipients in 1971, the college said, were a teacher in a school for deaf children in Suffolk County, N. Y., a superintendent of a military academy in Kentucky, an employe-relations consultant to the New York State Education Department, a dean of faculty at a Connecticut College and a counselor and psychologist in a California school system.

Dr. Theodore N. Farris, associ-

ate for development and planning at the Bank Street College of Education, called Laurence an "experimental and innovative school that, on the whole, has been successful."

"Everybody who is accepted as a student there has a responsible position in education and the real hang-up is to get them to write an acceptable dissertation," said Dr. Farris, who formerly taught at Laurence.

And, at Walden University, Dr. Hodgkinson stressed that the university demanded high-caliber dissertations of its students. The professor, who has written a major study on "Institutions in Transition" for the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, said that he himself rejected five of nine dissertations he evaluated.

There is, then, no dearth of confidence and no lack of ardor among those who view colleges like Walden as promising and even pioneering ventures—adapted to these times. They believe they are helping to extend educational opportunities to hundreds of people whose jobs or family obligations or financial condition prevent them from obtaining what Bernard L. Turner, Walden's president, termed "that elusive doctorate."