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# THE CHEYENNE HERALD

the local advocacy journal

In depth. Independent. Stories of Local Interest.

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## Diploma mills and Wyoming

Will current DOE / Legislature rid the state of these mills or attract more?

by Dave Featherly

In a meeting held with Trent Blankenship, Wyoming Superintendent of Public Instruction, I was encouraged by much of what he had to say about the Wyoming problem of being the willing home for unaccredited institutions. To call them "schools," is a mischaracterization.

Two Department of Education employees, Jim Mathewson, and my trusty Olympic tape recorder, were also present at this lengthy exchange.

I wanted to get Trent's (employees often called him "Doctor" Blankenship, but I'm not looking for a promotion or raise, so I'll call him Trent) position, as Wyoming's top elected official dealing with education, on why Wyoming is haven to diploma mills, what can or will be done to correct the reputation, and his specific takes on a newly discovered, fledgling diploma mill operating out of a mailbox on Dell Range.

Repeatedly, Trent said the solution to eliminating diploma mills or converting them to legitimate education-providing schools, is accreditation. He quite obviously does not agree with the stated position of Senator Kathryn Sessions, a retired educator. Upon returning from an all-expenses paid trip to Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates, Sessions had a life-bed conversion that accreditation was not an "end-all, be-all" solution. It's funny what a few good meals in a 5-star hotel does to one's thinking.

By the way, an employee present at the meeting, who himself takes these exotic trips to "inspect" foreign campuses, assured me that the DOE did not make travel arrangements for the two legislators who traveled to the faraway countries. I wonder why, while she was over there, she didn't do a better job of increasing our oil supply from the UAE so we wouldn't be paying \$2.15 a gallon for gas now?

I may be missing something but I cannot, for the life of me, understand why traveling to Pakistan, UAE, Guatemala or London, reduces the risks of Wyoming and American citizens from getting scammed by these unaccredited diploma mills. And it is only to these level of places that our state employees travel. If the school is legit, as evidenced by accreditation by a firm recognized by the U.S. Department of Education for that purpose, Wyoming staffers don't have to

**21-2-406. Schools exempted; additional requirements for specified post secondary religious schools.**

(a) This article does not apply to:

(i) Any parochial, church or religious school as defined by W.S. 21-4-101(a)(iv) which is maintained by a church, religious denomination or religious organization comprised of multid denominational members of the same recognized religion, lawfully operating the school or institution pursuant to applicable laws governing its organization, and the school or institution:

(B) Operates only as a post secondary education degree granting institution if post secondary education programs are limited to instruction in the principles of that church, religious denomination or religious organization and the diploma or degree is limited to evidence of completion of these post secondary education programs, subject to the following:

(b) Any post secondary education degree granting institution not accredited by an accreditation association recognized by the United States department of education and which is not exempt under subparagraph (a)(i)(B) of this section shall as required by W.S. 21-2-401(a), obtain a license under this article prior to operating or doing business in this state. The institution may conduct organizational activities and start up preparations before obtaining the license required under W.S. 21-2-401(a), but shall not accept any tuition, application fees or any similar monies from any prospective student before obtaining the license.

travel to their places of business.

Actually, few of the total campuses were visited. Security concerns limited access to the countless Pakistan locations of Preston University and no trip was made to Vietnam to visit the claimed "campuses" in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.

Oddly, campus(es) in London were visited.

Traveling all over the world to visit campuses will tell nothing about the operations in the basement of Mossholders, the basement of the former J.C. Penney, the basement of the Downtown Mini Mall, the second floors of the Majestic Building and Tivoli Building. In fact, the brochure used by the unaccredited American Capital University, which is mole-like at 109 E. 17th, uses a picture of a DOE staffer, which was unknown to him or Trent. Better still, their proclaimed authority to operate as a diploma mill provoked a laugh from Trent Blankenship and his staffers.

American Capital University (ACU) proclaims that it: "... derives its powers through Faith in God and performs its educational services by the authority granted by the State of Wyoming."

God? The State of Wyoming? I'm done being critical of ACU. I don't hesitate taking on weak-kneed mayors and commissioners, but God? I don't think so. One more thing: This "school" uses a picture of the receptionist for the executive suits underground there and calls her their "Office Manager."

Methinks maybe an inspection of that space should have been made before traveling to Guatemala City to learn nothing. Or having someone regularly visit their websites might be informative. (Oh, yes, ACU pulled down their website after the last issue of the Cheyenne Herald.)

But, the boxes on this page don't deal with the shenanigans of the existing cellar dwellers in Cheyenne. We have a new trespasser in our town.

**21-2-401. License required; state board of education to administer and set minimum standards; in-state office required; on site inspections by state department.**

(a) All trade, correspondence, distance education, technical, vocational, business or other private schools, and all degree granting post secondary education institutions not accredited by an accrediting association recognized by the United States department of education, which are located within the state or have their principal place of business out of state but doing business in the state, shall be licensed under this article before operating or doing business in this state.

(b) Any degree granting post secondary education institution not accredited by an accrediting association recognized by the United States department of education, shall prior to operating or doing business in this state, maintain physical facilities as office space which is located in the state either through property owned by the institution or through office space which is subject to a current lease at the time of application. The term of any lease shall be for a minimum of one (1) year from its inception and lease renewal shall be for periods of not less than one (1) year. In addition to W.S. 21-2-402(b)(vi), the institution shall provide the state department a copy of each new lease or lease renewal executed while holding a license under this article. The designated office space shall be staffed on a full-time basis by an employee of the institution. In addition, the institution shall provide the state department with evidence that substantive academic and student service-related activity is conducted at this designated location.

There is a legitimate non-degree granting "school" in Fort Collins known as At Home Professions (AHP). That business has been around about 25 years and is accredited by DETC (a legitimate USDOE recognized accreditation firm) but also is licensed in Wyoming. As a non-degree granting (certificate awarding) institution, AHP does not have to be licensed to operate from here but they chose to duplicate their costs for some reason. Were they told they must? Don't know, couldn't see their file.

It appears that AHP wanted to troll for students for a potential "degree granting" institution they would operate. It would be called McKinley College and it is unaccredited and virtually untraceable at this point because it is just a "thought" of AHP Schools.

But AHP ran an ad in the May issue of Reader's Digest (regional, national, etc., version is unknown at this time), prospecting for students to grant degrees (AAS/AOS). The return address on the form to request information was the UPS store on Dell Range Boulevard in Cheyenne. Why, if this was legitimate and legal in Colorado, didn't AHP have leads mailed to their Fort Collins address?

But, staffers at the Wyoming Department of Education disagree with me. Trent Blankenship may not. He was unavailable for comment after I put two and two together and realized what had happened with this advertising.

Staffers, whose boss wants to rid the state of diploma mills, believe that an unlicensed degree granting institution like a new McKinley College, is allowed, under W.S. 21-2-406(b), to advertise for potential students, using a Wyoming address that is not a physical office or space. It is a mail drop on Dell Range.

The DOE staff attorney would not allow me to review the AHP Schools file to see if there had been an exchange of correspondence - whether a DOE employee authorized what I believe is a violation of law - punishable by fine and jail time.

I was told late Friday (May 16) that an opinion would have to come from the Attorney General's office before I could see any letter in such a file. I did not ask to see financials, SSNs, etc. Just whether a letter addressing advertising by a non-degree granting, Wyoming-licensed, institution, now offering degrees, existed.

(Story concludes on page 8.)

## Diploma mills and Wyoming (conclusion ... from page one)

When meeting with Trent Blankenship and two of his staffers, I said I'd like to talk about this new diploma mill which appeared to be germinating from a local mailbox. I had a copy of a Reader's Digest ad and several pages I'd printed from the new McKinley College website.

There is no question of the linkage between McKinley and AHP Schools. There are several ways to tie them together.

Beyond just the offensive start by using a UPS mailbox, without showing clearly that it wasn't really a physical location, another statement caught my eye - on a website page.

They (actually AHP, because McKinley College is not mentioned in the ad anywhere) said they were "registered" in the state of Wyoming.

There is no such thing.

The Wyoming Department of Education licenses such "private schools," but there is not such thing in the statutes as "registering."

So, this exchange took place at our meeting:

**Dave Featherly:** "Their website for McKinley shows that they're registered in the state of Wyoming ..."

**Trent Blankenship:** "I would love to have a copy of that. They can't say that."

**Staffer:** "Trent, what this is ... there's a little section of the Private School Licensing statute that allows outfits to advertise ahead of time. As long as they make it clear they can't enroll students. So that's what this outfit wanted to do - they wanted to advertise and see what the market would be for post-secondary degree granting type of students. They only advertised in April and, I think, May."

**Trent:** "They are registered with the Wyoming Department of Education?"

**One of them:** "What the hell does that mean?"

It became apparent by the staffer's comments that he was aware of the plan to advertise in advance of licensure and may have even approved it.

Before I get to why I think advertising is not allowed in advance under the statutes, I must say that, if Trent Blankenship is sincere about ridding Wyoming of unaccredited institutions, which I believe he is, he cannot allow statutes to be

liberally and generously interpreted to benefit still another unaccredited diploma mill getting started in Wyoming.

I will ask him to take a position to disavow aiding and abetting the formation of still more unaccredited schools like McKinley College if his purpose is to rid the state of them. I believe he will do that. If he does not, they will proliferate.

My final telephone conversation (I had visited the office three times Friday afternoon) included three DOE staffers and the opinion of the staff attorney, Sylvia Hackl, according to one of the staffers.

The interpretation they had of W.S. 21-2-406(b) is that the language of the statute allows a degree granting institution to advertise (troll, prospect, etc.) for students before they are licensed in Wyoming. The language which gave them comfort was: "**The institution may conduct organizational activities and start-up preparations before obtaining the license required under W.S. 21-2-401(a), but shall not accept any tuition, application fees or any similar monies from any prospective student before obtaining the license.**"

My interpretation is different for two reasons. First, the sentence before the one they rely on says: "**Any post secondary education degree granting institution not accredited by accreditation association recognized by the United States department of education and which is not exempt under subparagraph (a)(i)(B) of this section shall, as required by W.S. 21-2-401(a), obtain a license under this article prior to operating or doing business in this state.**"

Neither AHP Schools nor McKinley College are accredited as a degree granting institution (AHP IS as a non-degree granting institution) and is not exempt as a "religious" school.

Where I part company most with the DOE staffers is that they consider advertising for students to be "organizational activities" or "start-up preparations."

I do not.

Bureaucrats may not understand the private business world or its language. Organizational activities, in my opinion, would be determining what type organization the business will be - sole proprietorship, partnership, LLC, corporation, etc. Start-up preparations would be finding a place to rent, ordering and installing telephone service, internet service, utilities, etc.

I cannot imagine a business operator believing that advertising falls within either of those two areas.

Advertising is doing business. Period.

It is not dissimilar to making sales calls to solicit leads. A successful ad or commercial will generate leads, of which someone will respond with materials or words.

The areas of state statutes having to do with the sections referenced are reprinted in the boxes on page one.

What AHP Schools has done is a misdemeanor under Wyoming statute and is punishable by a fine of not more than one thousand dollars (\$1,000.00) and county jail time of up to six months, or both. Each solicitation is a separate violation.

Will the Attorney General or Department of Education put a stop to the advertising and require surrender of the fruits of the poison tree (their leads)? Doubtful. I believe the Fort Collins company was given a wink and nod, or even a green light, to proceed in the manner they did.

Wouldn't it be interesting to learn now that the office of Trent Blankenship would not provide me copies of correspondence without an opinion from the AG's office but may have permitted yet another diploma mill operation to advertise in what many would, in my opinion, consider a violation of state statute - without the same AG's opinion?

During our conversation with Trent Blankenship, I asked if the State had a policy about tuition reimbursement which would have allowed an employee to get reimbursed for "tuition" paid to a place like Lacrosse University - the home of the bogus master's degree bought and paid for by residents of Cheyenne for Police Chief Bob Fecht. Trent assured me and Jim Mathewson that such a thing could never happen in his department - in the Department of Education. In view of that strong support for what the Cheyenne Herald is trying to do, I asked why his Department didn't publicly support our efforts with a press release in opposition to the WTE, mayor and police chief's support of mail order degrees from unaccredited institutions. We could use the help. Don't hold your breath.

## They did call in the morning

A recent Cheyenne Herald article dealt with a local resident who had lost prescription drug benefits under Medicaid because of the "rules."

She had gone from over \$20,000 payment by Medicaid for prescription drugs to \$600 under Medicare and was shifted from SSI to Social Security at a monthly gain of \$134 cash.

At the time she spoke with the Herald, she had been unable to find a program that would help replace the prescription drugs and medicines she needed for several ailments, including MS, diabetes and heart problems.

Some answers may have come her way. UMC has approached a number of pharmaceutical companies about a program for those in need and it looks like those companies will be able to furnish most of the drugs the local 53-year old woman now lacks.

A Cheyenne Herald reader called and told about a program called RX-Outreach that can be accessed over the internet and which might be able to provide some of the lacking drugs at deep discounts.

So, there may be a silver lining, or at least a partial silver lining, in this story.

Unfortunately, the doctor identified in that earlier story, Dr. John H. Babson, has more recently notified the patient that she needs follow-up blood work but it cannot be scheduled at his office because she has a small outstanding balance - most or all of it due from Medicaid.

Stories abound about people who have to make choices about their food or their medicine. But unless it's their mother or father, friend or family member, many disbelieve that that could be occurring in this land of plenty.

If the United States is willing to buy oil from its enemies, wouldn't it certainly be willing to provide health care and medicine to its citizens? Not always.

People not only fall through the cracks, sometimes they are thrown through the cracks. It is amazing how few referral sources there are for this critical sources. But, a Cheyenne Herald reader came through. And UMC. Thanks to both.

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Tag Sale Details in the store 72-75

**NIGHTLY SPECIALS**  
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Sunday	Chicken Fried Chicken or Chicken Fried Steak (11 oz.)	\$ 8.95
	Served with Mashed Potatoes, Green Beans, Country Gravy, Roll, Soup or Salad	
	Also, Fancy Fried Lobster, 8 oz. Tail *	\$24.95
Monday	16 oz. Porterhouse Pork Chop	\$10.95
Tuesday	St. Louis Style Smoked Ribs, 1/2 Rack	\$ 9.95
Wednesday	Manager's Special - Homestyle Dinner	\$ 9.95
Thursday	Fancy Fried Walleye	\$13.95
Friday and Saturday	Fancy Fried Lobster, 8 oz. Tail *	\$24.95
	* Add 10 oz. Branding Iron Steak for an add'l \$6.00	

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