

## Unlike Cheyenne, some places take getting college degrees from online companies seriously

"Online companies."

That is a much more accurate way to refer to these bogus degree-selling outfits that the Cheyenne Herald has written much about.

One of the most frequently repeated and referenced stories done in the Herald to date concerned taxpayers of the city of Cheyenne paying for a master's degree that Cheyenne police chief Bob Fecht bought from an on-line diploma mill. Combined with the mayor's endorsement of the illegitimate degree and support for using taxpayer dollars to buy the worthless piece of paper, few in the city subscribed to the mayor and chief's positions that this was a good use of public funds.

A Cheyenne Herald supporter and reader traveling in Florida recently e-mailed back to us a story regarding a fire commander in Pompano Beach. While the Herald seldom picks up stories from other newspaper or online sources, the two which appear at the right so well describe situations similar to the one in Cheyenne that quoting from them would not do them justice.

The degree purchased by Bob Fecht came from a shopping strip tenant called Lacrosse University. This same seller of degrees had been driven from Louisiana by state regulators and had settled in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, by the time Fecht sent what was effectively city funds to buy his degree in criminal justice.



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### Bogus Degrees: Firefighters Fight for Questionable Bonuses

Source: San Antonio News Online, 8/11/05

Some San Antonio firefighters who got burned for having degrees from questionable colleges are now fighting to keep the extra pay they got from those degrees.

Any San Antonio firefighter who earns a college degree gets paid several hundred dollars more per month. Some firefighters found a short cut by getting online degrees from places like Suffield University and Lacrosse University.

They are known "diploma mills" that do not require graduates to take any classes, instead offering degrees based on "life experience." Of course, they also ask applicants to send them several hundred dollars per degree.

Last year, San Antonio Fire Chief Robert Ojeda wrote a memo to all employees stating that he "does not consider degrees from 'diploma mills' to be legitimate" and ordering all "incentive pay based on those degrees... discontinued."

That was more than a year ago, so News 4 WOAI Trouble Shooter Jeff Coyle wanted to know what happened to the more than \$30,000 firefighters had already received.

"Have any of those guys paid the money back to the fire department?" asked Coyle.

"At this point, no," responded District Chief Carl Wedge. "That was our logical step - to pursue reimbursement of those funds. However, we've had 28 grievances filed."

Twenty-eight firefighters, backed by the San Antonio Firefighters Association, are fighting the chief's decision, claiming they should still get the education bonuses. They say because the chief initially approved the incentive pay for those degrees, they are entitled to it.

Coyle asked union president Chris Steele, "Do you think these are schools where people have legitimately earned the right for additional pay?"

"You know, I couldn't say that, because I didn't do the investigation for the schools," replied Steele. "Of course, our grievances are based on the fact the fire chief determines that. We feel that the fire chief has that responsibility and he assured those individuals that those were degrees that were acceptable for him."

Chief Ojeda calls that "absurd." But this case is now going to arbitration. If the union wins the case, 10 firefighters will have their pay reinstated and another 26 will instantly become eligible for it.

When the fire department renegotiates the collective bargaining agreement with firefighters later this year, it plans to re-write the section regarding incentive pay to protect your tax dollars from paying for degrees that did not require any time inside an actual classroom.

### Fire Chief demotes McCarthy

Source: The Sentry, serving Broward County Florida

Fire Training Commander Robert McCarthy was demoted on Monday to the rank of Lieutenant and according to sources; the union will fight the demotion - big time. The now disgraced and humiliated McCarthy remains a member of the Pompano Fire Department. He is fortunate because other firefighters claim if they did what he did, they would have been suspended and ultimately fired.

The Sentry first broke this story on July 28, 2005 when we discussed fraud and waste in the Fire Department. A lot of ink has been used to bring you the story. City Hall has stonewalled, the Public Information Officer said we had our facts incorrect and BSO investigated the case. Of course we were wrong with everything we printed but in the end, Fire Chief Harry Small demoted McCarthy for his actions.

Repeating the case, as reconstructed from interviews, official records and off the cuff remarks. The story involves arrogance, self-promotion, egotism, bogus credentials, and a desire to unfairly climb the ladder of rank over other qualified firefighters.

On March 14, an announcement of promotional examination for the position of Battalion Chief was posted with the following educational requirements: must have an AS (Associates of Science) degree in Fire Science; upon announcement of the promotional examination for Battalion Chief, the city shall also post a list of computer applications on which the applicant is to be tested and the requirements to achieve a passing grade. The Training Division or its designee shall train and certify each applicant. Each applicant shall be given sixty (60) days from the notice of the promotional examination to pass the computer applications component.

Commander McCarthy submitted his request along with a diploma from Suffield University stating that he had received an Associate of Science degree on March 18, 2004 and Suffield University Student Transcript to meet the educational requirements. Since one of Commander McCarthy's responsibility to verify that each applicant's educational background was valid and meet all requirements, Training Officer Martin Theodore verified Commander McCarthy's background.

Training Officer Theodore researched the accreditation of Suffield University and determined that the U. S. Department of Education and the State Department of Education does not recognize Suffield University as having an acceptable accreditation. Since Suffield University does not possess a recognized accreditation, Commander McCarthy was determined not eligible to take the promotional examination for Battalion Chief.

Upon examining literature on Suffield University's website, it was determined that Suffield University provides various degrees based on previous work experience in the field in which you are seeking a degree. The University required 2 years work/life experience related in your major; 1 year work/life experience related to your major and 30 college credits; or any combination of the above or substantial work/life experience.

The cost of the degree was \$475.00 was obtained in 14 days.

As Commander of the Training Division of the Pompano Beach Fire Department, McCarthy should have, after reviewing Suffield University's literature, questioned the validity of the degree and ascertained from his superiors if an Associate of Science Degree from Suffield University would meet the educational requirements to take the promotional examination for the position of Battalion Chief.

The Broward County Sheriff's Office has a contract with the city of Pompano Beach to be its police department and handle criminal investigations. On June 24, Pompano Beach Fire Chief Harry Small presented information to the detective bureau of BSO that Fire Training Commander McCarthy might have violated Florida State Statutes in reference to making false claims of academic degrees in order to qualify for a promotion examination. Small advised that McCarthy provide questionable documentation that he had received an Associate of Science degree from Suffield University, in which the validity of said degree was in question.

BSO agreed to open an investigation and check Florida State Statute 817.567 - making false claims of academic degrees or title. According to the official file, after a thorough investigation it was concluded On August 9, 2005, that Commander McCarthy did not violate the state statute as he did not falsely make claims, either orally or in writing, to possess an academic degree from an accredited educational institution, which was not indicated in the announcement of promotional examination for the position of Battalion Chief as a requirement of possessing an Associate of Science degree in Fire Science. And since there was no violation of Florida State Statute the case was determined to be UNFOUNDED.

And while the investigation was concluded on August 9, 2005, Chief Small told a reporter from the Sun-Sentinel on July 31, 2005 that the investigation had cleared McCarthy - a full nine days before it was determined by BSO. During that interview, Small then claimed the law regarding making false claims about academic degrees had been ruled unconstitutional. A check with legal counsel at The Sentry showed the law was still on the books and McCarthy was in violation of the state statutes.

When word of McCarthy's demotion was discussed with fellow firefighters, there was a myriad of emotions.

"The search for facts and the truth in this McCarthy saga must have been tedious," said one top-ranking officer. "I'm glad you stuck with the story. I also find it ironic that McCarthy got his comeuppance. ---" ---

During this investigative story I have come to know 15 firefighters and can now call them by their first name. They are honest working, extremely dedicated and very talented people. It was never my intention nor this newspaper's focus to depict either the department of massive wrongdoings. We heard of a case of fraudulent misrepresentation and abuse of the system. It was our intention to ferret out the wrongdoer and see that justice was done. In the process we encountered stonewall after stonewall with the bureaucratic fumbler at city hall. As usual, we were told we were had our facts wrong and there was nothing to the story - just a minor controversy.

As an old editor of mine used to say, "Illegitimi non-carborundum - (Don't let the bastards grind you down)." By JP Bender, Investigative Reporter

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