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2016

### Fake universities are not necessarily a rarity

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## Regional

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# Fake universities are not necessarily a rarity

In 2013 Pixar Animation Studios produced a 3D computer-animated comedy titled “Monsters University.” The release of this commercially and critically successful movie by Walt Disney Pictures was accompanied by a website (monstersuniversity.com). Although obviously fake, that website contained all the typical features of a higher education institution, including links to “Academics,” “Admission,” “Campus Life,” etc. It was the perfect parody of the typical website of a college or university.

Last month the Department of Homeland Security announced that it had arrested numerous people on charges that they had recruited students through the promise of fraudulently obtained visas. This was done thanks to a sting operation in which federal agents created a completely fake university under the name “University of Northern New Jersey.” Some of the federal agents posed as representatives of this bogus university to trap scam recruiters. Among the most daring features of this operation was to have the secretary of higher education of New Jersey to recognize the “university” and have it accredited by the Accrediting Commission of Career Schools and Colleges.

Knowing that most people get information about colleges and universities through the internet, the feds set up an elaborate social-media presence, including an extensive website whose links were taken down once the sting operation was announced. They also set up the typical features you would expect from a university: a mascot “the badgers,” a Latin motto, “Humanus, Scientia, Integritas,” a Facebook page whose chat was led by its made-up president “Dr. Steven Brunetti,” pictures portraying happy

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students, images of the “campus” Dunkin’ Donuts coffee shop and even personal announcements about the death of a relative of a “Prof. Turgeson,” passing along the condolences he (or she) received.

Obviously the feds had some sense of humor by naming the mascot “the badgers,” by including the word “Integritas” (integrity) in their motto, and by naming one of their professors as “Prof. Turgeson,” (derived from Furd Tud, an insult referring to a person who excessively tugs on turds).

On the website was an invitation to prospective students to enroll or talk to fraudulent recruiters. There was even information on how to become a recruiter for the university. This sting operation led to the arrest of 21 people on charges of conspiring to provide more than 1,000 foreign students fraudulently obtained foreign worker and student visas through this fake university. This bogus institution was used as a cover to entice recruiters who took kickbacks for enrolling foreign nationals there, which is a form of visa fraud, and harboring them for profit, both federal felonies. In a different operation five years ago, the feds raided what was called Tri-Valley University for cashing tuition checks and admitting foreign students on visas, but not requiring class attendance.

This leads us to another example of a fake university: “Trump University.” It was established in 2005 by the current Republican frontrunner and has been

widely mentioned by Trump challengers and the media because it faces fraud lawsuits from former students and the New York Attorney General.

According to documents filed by the plaintiffs, students were told (falsely) that the faculty had been hand picked by Trump himself. They were pressed into paying \$35,000 for future three-day retreats that promised to offer an inside look at Trump’s business techniques. Yet, the seminar had nothing to do with any original course materials (most were lifted from other sources on the internet) nor provided business start-up support to the students. University personnel did, according to the complaints, only continue to try to lure the students into buying more seminars.

Complaints like this prompted New York’s attorney general, Eric T. Schneiderman, to sue Trump’s for-profit company in 2013, asserting it had intentionally misled over 5,000 students into paying up to \$35,000 each for seminars and mentorship programs. Because “Trump University” did not qualify for federal financial aid, students paid their tuition out of their own pockets. “Trump University” was renamed the “Trump Entrepreneur Initiative” following a court ruling that declared it an unlicensed educational institution, and finally went out of business. Trump himself faces two class-action civil lawsuits in California related to the fake school.

Unfortunately, there is a long history of institutions in this country pretending to be universities, but that are actually training schools for very few and narrow fields, mostly in business. At some point even corporations began naming their training schools as universities, as is the case with “Burger King University.”

The problem here is several-fold. One is that the use of the term university is largely unregulated and even when regulation exists state or federal authorities only step in when formal complaints of fraud are filed. Another is that the term university gives a sense of respectability and, therefore, can be abused. In most countries the term can only be used after approval from the government following strict rules. Finally, because of the possibilities offered by the internet, anyone can make a “university” appear to be real or much better than it actually is.

The solution to this complex problem has to come from several fronts. One is for both state and federal officials to take a more proactive role in overseeing any institution that calls itself a university or college. In general, no new legislation is needed given that fraud and consumer protection statutes are already on the books. As mentioned in this very column a few weeks ago, the feds have failed at providing easy-to-access, strict measurements of the effectiveness of institutions of higher education. Still, that should not prevent them from being more hands-on in pointing out bogus schools from real ones.

Finally, the general public should become aware of these scams by educating themselves not to rely upon slick websites that can be deceiving, but to check out their promises with sources associated with real colleges and universities who will be able to smell a rat in academic disguise.

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