

Life-Experience Credit Versus "Diploma Mill"

The April 2004 issue of *RESPIRATORY CARE* contained a comprehensive review of the role of education technologies and distance learning in respiratory care education.¹ In the section about online teaching in respiratory care Dr Hopper quoted a statement that I made in an article previously published in *RESPIRATORY CARE*. In my article I recommended that advanced respiratory care programs should have mechanisms to grant degree credit for prior educational course work and life experience.² Dr Hopper's response was:

I vehemently disagree, as that states the 'diploma mill' approach in exact language. Institutions that have too eagerly embraced distance learning often seem to extend this to acceptance of all manner of dubious short cuts and fast tracks toward advanced degrees.¹

Granting degree credit for learning not earned through traditional classroom teaching stirs controversy, yet traditional institutions of higher learning have engaged in this practice for years. In the 1970s the practice of granting credit by examination and programs for granting credit for prior learning expanded.³ Evidence of continued support for this practice is the 2001 joint statement by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, American Council on Education, and Council for Higher Education Accreditation. Their joint statement on the transfer and award of credits includes the recommendation that credit policies should include knowledge earned in extra-institutional settings.³

The practice of granting credit for prior learning stems from research in adult education, which recognized the need for traditional education systems

to serve "nontraditional" learners.³ Years ago, almost all college students began college with daytime courses, as full-time students, immediately after completing high school, and thus each student entered with similar knowledge and skills. Now many adults enter or return to college after years of experience in the work force. These older students come to college with life experience that may be equivalent to or extend beyond the knowledge covered in a particular course. Rather than require them to take courses that teach content they already possess, institutions can assess the student's life and work experience and grant degree credit if appropriate. Students who apply for life-experience credit must provide sufficient evidence that their experience produced the same knowledge and/or skills taught in the course. In addition, students pay a fee to cover the expenses of evaluating an application for life-experience credit.

Equating life-experience credit with a "diploma mill" is incorrect. Spille and Steward defined "diploma mill" as "... a person or an organization selling degrees or awarding degrees without an appropriate academic base and without requiring a sufficient degree of postsecondary-level academic achievement."⁵ The key difference between granting life-experience credit and a diploma mill lies within the rigor of the evaluation process. The primary mission of a diploma mill is to grant degrees in exchange for a fee, so diploma mills do not require students to provide strong evidence of prior learning before granting degree credit and usually do not charge a fee for the evaluation process.

So how do you tell the difference between a diploma mill and a legitimate institution that grants life-experience credit? Legitimate institutions

hold an accreditation from a recognized accreditation agency. In 1996 the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) was formed to assure academic quality and accountability in accrediting agencies, and CHEA maintains a frequently updated Web site of approved accreditation agencies.⁶ Although many diploma mills cite an "accredited" status, their accreditation agencies do not meet the CHEA standards.

Dr Hopper pointed out that many institutions that offer distance learning also offer the possibility of obtaining life-experience credit. Many nontraditional students seek out degree programs that offer distance learning, because they need flexible timing and/or location of courses, and it is the nontraditional student who has the potential to have earned experiential knowledge, so it is not surprising that many institutions that offer distance learning also offer life-experience credit. Life-experience credit should not be viewed as inappropriate—as long as the institution's assessment of the student's experience is comprehensive and academically rigorous.

I share Dr Hopper's concern about the damage that diploma mills can do to both individuals and the respiratory care profession. Spille and Steward⁵ identified several types of diploma mill victims, including the unsuspecting individuals who think they are dealing with legitimate degree-granting institutions, and employers and consumers who receive services from diploma-mill graduates who lack the appropriate knowledge and skills. Spille and Steward go on to say that inappropriate granting of life-experience credit by diploma mills can damage the public's perception of life-experience credit, even if the credit is granted by

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a legitimate and academically respectable institution.⁵

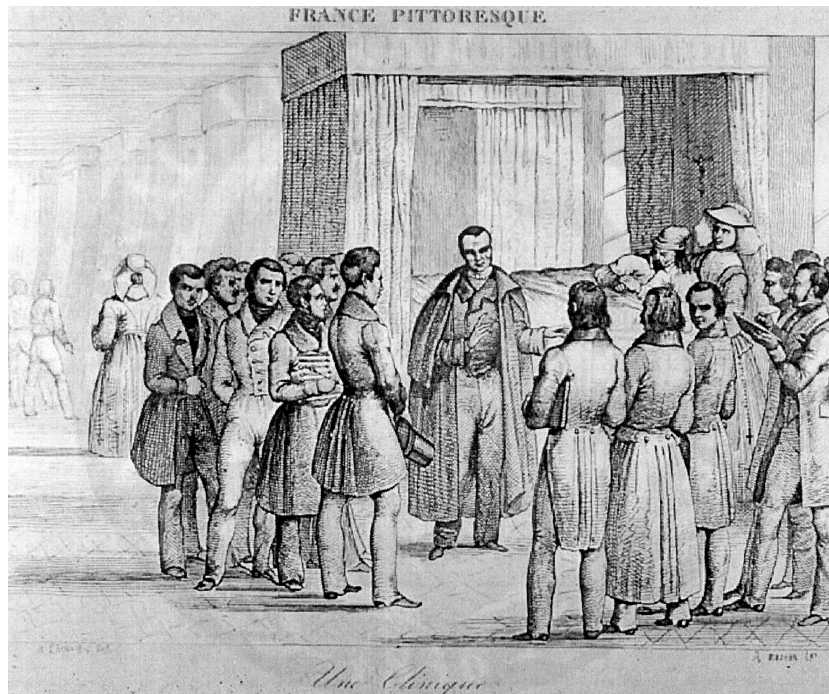
In summary, RESPIRATORY CARE readers should understand that receiving credit for prior learning is not the equivalent of a diploma mill education. It is difficult to earn life-experience credit from institutions that have CHEA-recognized accreditation, because such institutions award credit only after rigorous evaluation of the experience for which the student seeks credit. Thus, readers should not dismiss the quality of an advanced degree program because the program offers life-experience credit. The

appropriate criterion for assessing a program's quality is whether it is approved by an accreditation agency recognized by CHEA.

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Interior view of a hospital ward: A physician is addressing a group of students at a patient's bedside. A. Maillon, from Alexandre Lacauchie, *Une Clinique*, France 1833-1846? Courtesy National Library of Medicine