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For Credibility, Credentials Count

By: Stephen F. Gambescia , For The Bulletin

Another news story has brought to our attention the casual regard that some professionals, even successful ones, have for divulging false credentials to their prospective employers and the public. This should be disturbing to us.

Marilee Jones, the dean of admissions (of all people) at MIT, has recently resigned after admitting that she had misrepresented on various occasions, including her first entry on the campus, to having earned three degrees from three different colleges. She earned none.

A few years ago, former Philadelphia police officer Francis P. Friel was kept off of the Pennsylvania Gaming Control Board because he admitted to having misrepresented his academic credentials during sworn testimony at an organized crime case. He claimed to have a bachelor's degree and a master's degree. He had neither.

A very popular and community-minded minister was kept from becoming pastor of a large congregation in Philadelphia, a position formerly held by then U.S. Congressman William H. Gray III. Rev. Cean James wrote on his resume, submitted for the position, and used as background material that he had a bachelor's degree from Florida A&M University. He also claimed to have received a graduate degree from Princeton and a graduate degree from the Princeton Theological Seminary. After inquiries were made to these schools, it was learned that Rev. James had not been granted degrees from these universities.

Such exposés are understandably discomfoting when the individuals who misrepresented their credentials have done good work and are held in high regard among their constituents. Jones had 23 years of, we must assume, good service to MIT. Friel had a commendable level of service to the Philadelphia police force and was enthusiastically supported by Gov. Ed Rendell. Rev. James was well liked among members of his church and was publicly complimented for his good work with youth groups.

However, misrepresenting credentials, academic or otherwise, is more than a mere "misstep" and should be taken seriously in any profession - and certainly in the public sector.

Claiming false credentials is an affront to the institutions, agencies, boards and other accrediting agencies whose primary purpose is to validate knowledge and

competencies. Claiming false credentials slights the individuals who invested the time and energy, often years of work, and subjected themselves to objective evaluations.

During the next few weeks hundreds of thousands of individuals will be receiving degrees from the many and varied colleges and universities in this country. These graduates, understandably, will feel a sense of accomplishment. Their parents, family members, friends and faculty will heap praises upon them and be proud of them.

These graduates should carry with them the principle of academic honesty that served them well in the academy. As they transition to the "real world" (or continue on) they will discover that a common code found in professional, business, and trade association ethics is that individuals agree not to misrepresent their knowledge, skills and competencies. They should claim expertise and experience only within their ken, especially when acting in an official capacity and undertaking leadership roles.

The legal system relies heavily on the credibility of expert witnesses and seeks credentials, if only in part, to validate their expertise. Employers ask for certain qualifications for a job because they are in the best position to determine what it takes to efficiently and effectively get a job done for which they are willing to pay. Professionals should be disciplined enough to claim only the credentials and qualifications they rightfully hold - initial and continuing. To claim otherwise breaks the public's trust.

When credentialing frauds are exposed, especially when they involve likeable and formerly reliable individuals, some bring into question the need for the preferred credential in the first place. They may argue that the degrees, certifications and licenses are imperfect and soft predictors of a candidate's ability to serve. They call for higher level and "more meaningful" qualities, such as character and work ethic.

But when one claims credentials that are unearned, is it not fair to say that the individual de facto failed the character test? If an individual is willing to misrepresent something as highly valued in our society as a fully earned college degree, what other information may not be forthcoming? Does such action not call into question the individual's willingness to complete all of the work needed to get the job done? This has to be a fundamental character for the full range of jobs and careers - from the most practical to the most intellectual of pursuits.

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