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18 August 2011

### DISPOSITION MEMORANDUM

**SUBJECT:** (U) Unaccredited Degree: Project Manager

**CASE:** 2011-10154-IG

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#### ISSUES UNDER INVESTIGATION:

1. (U//~~FOUO~~) Based on a 2008 United States Secret Service investigation that identified an Agency contractor as possessing a degree from a known diploma mill, the Office of Inspector General (OIG) initiated a proactive investigation on 5 August 2008 into Agency staff claiming degrees from non-accredited institutions. OIG matched a list of unaccredited institutions against Agency BIO information to identify any individuals who had provided degree evidence to Human Resources.<sup>1,2</sup> One of the individuals identified, [redacted] claimed a master's degree from [redacted], an unaccredited institution, on his Agency BIO.

2. (U//~~FOUO~~) OIG reviewed the claims made by [redacted] regarding his degree and the associated education to determine if there were false statements or improper use of an unaccredited degree, and if there was an improper reimbursement for the degree by the Agency.

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<sup>1</sup> (U//~~FOUO~~) The term unaccredited refers to the recognition and acceptability of a degree for use in federal employment as recognized by the Office of Personnel Management. Unaccredited degrees cannot be used to meet the qualifications for federal positions that require a degree. The complete definitions of accreditation are included in the Appendix.

<sup>2</sup> (U//~~FOUO~~) The Agency biographical profile (Agency BIO) is the mechanism for tracking information on individuals who officially declare their education to the Agency by providing proof of attendance. The Agency BIO is made available to hiring managers and used directly in staffing decisions. Only staff employees and former employees were covered by this review because there is no central database on contractor educational records.

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**INVESTIGATIVE EFFORTS:**

3. (U//~~FOUO~~) OIG reviewed [redacted] security file for any degree claims.

4. (U//~~FOUO~~) OIG reviewed [redacted] Official Personnel Folder (OPF) and online Agency BIO.

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5. (U//~~FOUO~~) OIG interviewed [redacted] on 9 October 2008, regarding his unaccredited degree.

6. (U//~~FOUO~~) OIG obtained and reviewed [redacted] internal job applications and resumes for positions that he held at the Agency as well as his Performance Appraisal Reports.

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7. (U//~~FOUO~~) OIG reviewed Agency regulations and relevant laws related to the allegations.

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**RESULTS:**

8. (U//~~FOUO~~) [redacted] holds a bachelor's degree from [redacted]

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[redacted] also holds a master of science (MS) "degree" in [redacted] from [redacted] that he received in [redacted]

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[redacted]

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10. (U) [redacted] provides bachelor's, master's, and doctoral "degrees" through "life experience."

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[Redacted]

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13. (U) [Redacted] claims accreditation by [Redacted]

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[Redacted]

Both

of these are accreditation mills, and neither is approved by the US Department of Education (DoE). [Redacted] was never accredited by the US DoE.<sup>4</sup>

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14. (U//~~FOUO~~) During an interview with OIG on 18 September 2008, [Redacted] stated that he did not receive tuition reimbursement from the Agency. [Redacted]

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[Redacted] added that when he first checked into [Redacted] he was told by the individual at [Redacted] whom he contacted that it was fully accredited.

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15. (U//~~FOUO~~) [Redacted] told OIG that upon receiving his master's

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degree from [Redacted] he went online [Redacted] and updated his Agency BIO profile. He stated that he also reported his degree to [Redacted] via e mail. [Redacted] also stated that his degree from [Redacted] was listed on his resume.

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<sup>4</sup> (U//~~FOUO~~) According to Title 20 U.S.C. § 1099b (Recognition of accrediting agency or association), the Secretary of Education is responsible for recognizing accrediting bodies, which in turn recognize institutions.

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16. (U//~~FOUO~~) On a SPHS dated [redacted] listed an MS from [redacted] in [redacted] attended [redacted] received on [redacted]

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17. (U//~~FOUO~~) During [redacted] routine background investigation on [redacted] he told an Office of Security (OS) investigator that he had received his master's degree in [redacted] from [redacted]

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[redacted] an online university, in [redacted]. The investigator conducting the re-investigation found that [redacted] did not have a physical address, and when the investigator searched for [redacted] on the internet, the investigator discovered that [redacted] was linked to diploma mills and reportedly not credible. The OS investigator did not confront [redacted] over the degree issues at the time of the re-investigation.

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18. (U//~~FOUO~~) [redacted] told OIG that he had consulted the Better Business Bureau (BBB) about [redacted] in 2005. According to [redacted] he received information about [redacted] from the BBB prior to enrolling and felt better about his choice to attend [redacted] but he did not elaborate on what specifically he had received. He said, after submitting his prior course credits and work experiences, he was shocked to receive a transcript and diploma three weeks later with 10 classes that he allegedly completed. He contends that, at the time, he thought that could not be right. OIG verified the status of [redacted] with the BBB and confirmed that the BBB report on [redacted] cites the institution as not accredited, [redacted]

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19. (U//~~FOUO~~) [redacted] said that about one year after receiving the degree, he did additional research on the [redacted] degree. He said he checked with the BBB again, and [redacted] was cited as disreputable. [redacted] contended that he did additional research and discovered that [redacted]

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accreditation was revoked by the DoE in 2008. [redacted] explained that the organization that allegedly accredited [redacted] is now defunct and found to not be legitimate.<sup>5</sup>

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20. (U//~~FOUO~~) On his PAR, rating period [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted] cited that he received an MS degree in [redacted] during the reporting period. He wrote that he graduated with honors, but the narrative was worded in an ambiguous manner and never mentioned where he completed his master's degree:

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[redacted]

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21. (U//~~FOUO~~) When interviewed by OIG in 2008, [redacted] stated that his promotion in [redacted] was due to his work product, not his degree from [redacted]. He stated that his supervisors knew about his degree from [redacted] and he believed that he listed earning a master's degree as one of his objectives in his PAR.

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22. (U//~~FOUO~~) In his PAR for the rating period of [redacted] [redacted] states that he earned two Exceptional Performance Awards (EPAs). It was during this reporting period that [redacted] claimed to have earned his master's degree in [redacted] with no school listed. [redacted] supervisor, [redacted] specifically cited [redacted] completion of his master's degree while managing two busy branches as an "exceptional effort" and gave him the highest rating on his PAR for "Personal and Professional Development."

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23. (U//~~FOUO~~) [redacted] specifically acknowledged in his OIG interview that, when he received his degree three weeks after applying, he realized it was a bad purchase and that it was "worthless." [redacted] cooperated with investigators and agreed to remove the degree from his resume.

<sup>5</sup> (U) [redacted] did not source his statement that he discovered the accreditation was revoked, and it is not accurate. [redacted] was never accredited by the US Department of Education, and therefore was not subject to having its accreditation status revoked.

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**DISPOSITION:**

24. (U//~~FOUO~~)

[Redacted]

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reported that he had

a degree on his PAR, and it was present on his Agency BIO between [Redacted] where it would have been used in consideration for obtaining one position. [Redacted] acknowledged his "degree" was "worthless" and cooperated with OIG. [Redacted] voluntarily removed his "degree" from his Agency BIO following his OIG interview. Based on the currently available information, no disciplinary action or further investigation is recommended.

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[Redacted]

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Special Agent

[Redacted]

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Supervisory Special Agent

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