



The City of New York
Department of Investigation

ROSE GILL HEARN
COMMISSIONER

80 MAIDEN LANE
NEW YORK, NY 10038
212-825-5900

Release #: 5-2007
nyc.gov/doi

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 31, 2007

CONTACT: EMILY GEST/DIANE STRUZZI
(212) 825-5931

**DOI FINDS 14 FDNY MEMBERS SUBMITTED BOGUS DEGREES
TRYING TO EARN PROMOTIONS OR APPOINTMENTS**
—Three officers were promoted based on the phony degrees—

ROSE GILL HEARN, Commissioner of the New York City Department of Investigation (DOI), announced today that 14 members of the New York City Fire Department (FDNY) purchased bogus diplomas on the Internet and submitted them to the FDNY in an attempt to meet educational requirements to earn promotions to the ranks of Deputy Chief, Battalion Chief and Captain, and, in one case, to be appointed as a probationary firefighter. The Report found that the “degrees” were bought online from an entity that called itself “St. Regis University” (St. Regis), or one of its affiliates, whose operators have now been charged in a federal criminal case with the sale of phony academic credentials. The “degrees” were not based on any coursework and, in some cases, were backdated so the FDNY members could comply with the necessary FDNY educational requirements in order to be hired or promoted. Some FDNY personnel even obtained manufactured transcripts from St. Regis that represented fake “grades” supposedly earned for specific courses.

The dubious nature of these “diplomas” was obvious. The “degrees” submitted by these FDNY members gave them credit for courses they never attended, in topics they never studied, and were signed by the non-existent “Dean” and “Provost.” In one case, an FDNY member paid about \$600 to receive a “bachelor of business administration in business management” from “Hartland University,” later admitting to DOI investigators that he enrolled in no coursework to obtain his degree. According to the “transcript,” he received a grade of A- for a course in “Business Law,” and told DOI that while he took no such course he spoke frequently with his neighbor who was a lawyer. In another case, a FDNY member was awarded a “bachelor of business administration in fire science,” but he too took no courses or tests. He earned a grade of B+ for the course “Wildland Fire Management.” While he took no such course and had no such experience, he maintained that the credits were justified because he had “read books on the subject in the past.”

The investigation revealed that St. Regis’ website described itself as an “online distance learning institution,” operating out of the Republic of Liberia and accredited by the “Liberian Ministry of Education,” with “various affiliates and satellites throughout the world.” However, the individuals operating “St. Regis” were indicted last year on charges of conspiring to commit wire and mail fraud and money laundering connected to their Internet diploma business. The Indictment said that St. Regis was in the business of selling fraudulent academic credentials; had “satellites” that were only post office boxes at locations in the United States; had no legitimate faculty members or academic curriculum; and was not recognized by the U.S. Department of Education. The cases are pending in U.S. District Court in the Eastern District of the State of Washington.

DOI Commissioner Rose Gill Hearn said, “By submitting bogus degrees these individuals undermined the hard work of those who legitimately earned their degrees, and they compromised the credibility of the promotion process in the FDNY. The Fire Department accepted some of the worthless diplomas, obtained from an Internet diploma mill, because the Department did not take sufficient steps to verify their authenticity. Fortunately, the Fire Department has now improved the efforts with which they verify degrees.”

The DOI investigation concluded that the 14 FDNY members violated Fire Department regulations, which require candidates for hiring or promotion to submit proof of college credits from an accredited institution. The Report recommends improvements to the FDNY policies and procedures regarding verification of educational requirements for promotions and appointments, by urging the FDNY to create a written directive regarding its degree-verification process, and for that process to be proactive in researching credits and degrees submitted to them. The FDNY should accept nothing less than a verification that the degree is a legitimate one from an accredited institution. Less than that, including self-serving representations and evaluations that are not actual verifications, should not be accepted. The burden should be on the candidate to verify his or her degree. DOI also recommends that if the FDNY does decide to accept a degree of an uncertain origin, it make direct contact with the educational institution via letter to confirm the student earned a degree from the institution and that it is accredited. Moreover, DOI recommends that the FDNY provide information and counseling to members on the many ways and places where legitimate and worthwhile course credits may be obtained with which to achieve promotions.

DOI investigators learned that Battalion Chief Daniel O’Gara had previously submitted a bogus “baccalaureate degree” in order to be promoted to the rank of Battalion Chief. In an effort to determine if other FDNY personnel had submitted similar bogus degrees, DOI investigators searched all FDNY uniformed promotion files dating back to 2002, interviewed FDNY personnel and reviewed FDNY records and regulations. DOI also obtained and reviewed a list of all individuals who bought degrees from St. Regis or one of its affiliates and cross-checked the names with those of New York City employees in the payroll management system. The investigation found that the only City employees who purchased the phony degrees were FDNY members.

In addition to O’Gara, DOI found that 13 other individuals obtained purported degrees from either St. Regis or one of its “affiliates,” in some cases based on the recommendation of O’Gara. The other individuals are: Battalion Chief John Polly, Battalion Chief Gary Esposito, Deputy Chief Paul Ferro, Deputy Chief Richard Howe, Captain Lawrence Sloan, Captain Donald Brown, Captain Martin Cass, Captain Mark Barra, Captain Edward O’Donnell, Captain Thomas Fitzgerald, Lieutenant Ralph Talarico, Lieutenant Matthew Zitz and Firefighter Mark Thalheimer.

Investigators determined the FDNY accepted bogus St. Regis degrees in 2002 from O’Gara, Howe and Ferro. The following year, the FDNY became suspicious about the legitimacy of the degrees. Thereafter, the FDNY then did not accept St. Regis degrees submitted by Brown, Cass, Barra, Esposito, Fitzgerald, O’Donnell, Polly, Sloan, Talarico, Thalheimer and Zitz.

According to the Report, many of the 14 Department members stated that they felt their “diplomas,” purchased from the now-defunct website for a few hundred dollars each, were justified based on their “life experience.” This investigation found that the FDNY’s practice of accepting degrees that are based on “life-experience,” is ill-advised and wrought with legitimacy issues exposed in this investigation. To be clear, this is distinct from the FDNY’s program of providing PONSİ credits to its members for work-related courses taken at the Fire Academy and at various other training programs in the Department.

The investigation was conducted by DOI’s Office of the Inspector General for the Fire Department.

DOI is one of the oldest law-enforcement agencies in the country. The agency investigates and refers for prosecution City employees and contractors engaged in corrupt or fraudulent activities or unethical conduct. Investigations may involve any agency, officer, elected official or employee of the City, as well as those who do business with or receive benefits from the City.

***Get the worms out of the Big Apple.
To report someone ripping off the city, call DOI at (212) 825-5959.***