

Evaluate Your Interview Skills

It is a natural story for any recession economy: People enroll in distance education institutions to augment their skills in hopes of finding a new job (or keeping their current one). Unfortunately, some potential students are taken advantage of by diploma and degree mills: After spending their hard-earned money, they are left with a certificate from an unaccredited institution that isn't worth much more than the paper it's printed on. All it takes is one or two disgruntled students and an overzealous "on-your-side" reporter to start a trend of stories hoping to expose online institutions as frauds.

The media is going to be training their spotlights on online institutions, particularly institutions offering career training. DETC institutions may face media inquiries from reporters hoping for an expose, so now more than ever it's important to learn some rules, tips, and tricks for being interviewed (and understand how to use them effectively). Using this exercise, you can evaluate your current interview skills, and determine where you have the potential to improve.

Instructions

With a partner, take turns interviewing each other using the background information, facts, and sample questions on the following page. Choose one person to be the school president, and one to be the reporter. Spend 2-3 minutes conducting the mock interview, then switch roles and conduct the interview again. Remember, the facts may not provide all the answers to the reporter's questions.

Practice Interview Materials

Background:

You are the president of Chalifoux University, a distance-education institution founded in 1985 (Chalifoux U. has been accredited with DETC since 1993, and your last review was in 2008).

Several of your students are upset with their inability to find a job after graduation, and one student has contacted a local “on-your-side” consumer advocacy reporter claiming his credits won’t transfer, he can’t find a job, and his degree is basically worthless. The reporter interviewed the student, looked at your institution’s Web site, and now is contacting you for an interview.

Facts about Chalifoux University:

1. Chalifoux University was founded in 1985 and first accredited with DETC in 1993.
2. The University currently enrolls 7,000 students in 3 different degree-granting programs.
3. Chalifoux U. offers an online job bank students can browse, as well as a career services department that can offer resume and cover letter critique via e-mail or IM chat.
4. Students enrolling or using the career services department are not promised a job, but the University does assist them where possible.

Sample Questions:

- 1) How long has your institution been in operation?
- 2) The Chalifoux University Web site mentions your institution is accredited with the Distance Education and Training Council, a national accrediting association recognized by the Department of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation. In basic terms, what does that accreditation mean to students?
- 3) The DETC is a national accrediting association, correct? Is that accreditation the same as what a brick-and-mortar school—say, University of Florida—would have? To put it another way: Are students with degrees from Chalifoux U. getting an education equal to students at a traditional university?
- 4) If the education and accreditation is equal, why does Chalifoux U. have so many students who have problems getting their credits transferred to other schools?
- 5) How does Chalifoux University help its graduates find a job? How many people has Chalifoux U. successfully placed this year?

Colleges Play the Name Game

Many colleges are switching names to attract students, but are some schools profiting from confusion?

By Kim Clark, US News & World Report
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As the competition for paying students heats up, hundreds of colleges are revamping their names to make themselves sound more attractive.

A recent study found that more than 530 of the approximately 3,000 mainstream colleges and universities have at least tinkered with their names since 1996. And the name changes have been picking up the pace in the past year or so, says the study's author, James M. Owston, a dean at Mountain State University. What's more, as marketing has become more sophisticated—while regulations have remained lax—some colleges are picking new names that attempt to attract students by creating impressions that, in some cases, don't entirely match the college's reality.

Waves of college name changes are nothing new. In past decades, scores of “junior” colleges have opted for the grown-up “community” (though that word, too, might soon be dumped by schools hoping to avoid comparison to NBC's new sitcom *Community*). Some schools, such as Beaver College, have rebranded themselves to names with more academic implications, such as Arcadia University. Many former women's colleges have been changing their names to reflect their new coed status: The Mississippi University for Women, for instance, is currently attempting to change its name to Reneau University. And, of course, large donations have sparked many name changes over the years. This year, for example, Chapman University College became Brandman University after a \$10 million gift from a foundation started by the late Saul Brandman.

But many of the recent name changes seem to be more about marketing, says Ray Brown, who heads institutional research for Westminster College in Fulton, Mo., and makes a hobby of tracking college name changes. Owston notes that about 200 “colleges” have upgraded to “universities” to reflect the addition of graduate programs but also because it sounds more prestigious. “It's almost like peer pressure,” he says. Schools called colleges “feel left behind if they're not ‘universities.’”

Owston's research shows that simple name changes, on average, don't result in big boosts in enrollment or revenues. But those that pick winning names, make substantive changes to live up to their new identities, and market aggressively have reaped bonanzas, he says.

The Missouri University of Science and Technology says it has enjoyed rising enrollment since it switched from the University of Missouri-Rolla on Jan. 1, 2008. Other schools can document even bigger gains. After losing a public vote for a \$250 million bond issue in 2006, the leaders of the North Harris Montgomery Community College District, which serves the Houston area, changed their system's name to Lone Star College in 2007. Soon after, voters approved a \$420 million bond issue.

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And enrollment has been rising by double-digit percentages lately, says Chancellor Richard Carpenter. “We know it had an impact on the polls It gave us a classier look and feel,” he says. Another sign of success: “Our T-shirts are wildly popular,” he says.

Of course, perceptions can be unpredictable, leading to contradictory trends. Some public colleges are choosing names that make them sound like expensive private schools, while some private colleges are choosing names that give off the aura of long-established public schools. When the private College of West Virginia changed its name to Mountain State University in 2001, school officials told Owston—who was then writing his dissertation on school name changes—that they hoped some applicants might mistakenly think it was a state school, he says. “People tend to revere state colleges because they’ve been around for a long time,” Owston says.

The 2002 adoption of the name American Public University System for a new division of the American Military University might cause a little confusion, concedes Wallace Boston, who is CEO of the private, for-profit institution.

“Most people think public means state-supported,” Boston says. School founder James Etter chose the word public because he wanted to target potential students who were teachers and other public servants, Boston says. In addition, he wanted to convey the idea that the school was open to the public, because applicants need only a GED to be admitted. APUS prices its \$750-a-piece online courses (which are fully accredited) to compete with those offered by state-supported schools.

Many schools have surprising leeway in what they can call themselves. The federal government has only general rules that a business name can’t be misleading or improperly imply a relationship with the federal government. Each state has different rules concerning school names, but most let schools have free rein. In West Virginia, for example, accredited private colleges “can do what they want to do,” says Bruce Walker, general counsel of West Virginia’s Higher Education Policy Committee.

Some unaccredited online colleges are using the regulatory vacuum to create legitimate-sounding college names, says Alan Contreras, administrator of Oregon’s Office of Degree Authorization. The state’s Web site lists unaccredited diploma mills using names like Concordia, Trinity, or Oxford that sow confusion with legitimate universities and cannot be used as credentials in Oregon. “There is nothing we can do to prevent entities like that from offering degrees to our residents. The only law we have makes it illegal for someone to use such a credential in Oregon.” Ten other states have similar laws, Contreras says.

Even when state regulators do crack down, deceptively named schools can pop up elsewhere. In 2005, Pennsylvania’s attorney general sued the University of Berkley, whose diplomas could be mistaken for those from the University of California-Berkeley. But in a 2007 settlement, the operation agreed only not to do business with any Pennsylvania residents. Its Web site still offers everyone else lots of credit for “life experience” and a Ph.D. for less than \$5,000.

“So many institutions are moving online, and marketing nationally, it is very difficult for individual states. We end up running into constitutional issues,” explains Nils Frederiksen, a spokesman for the Pennsylvania prosecutor.