

# Document Forensics: Evaluating and Verifying Nurse Credentials

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The use of fraudulent credentials continues to grow worldwide. The failure to prevent, detect, and eradicate fraudulent credentials in nursing has the potential to jeopardize patient safety and the integrity of the nursing profession. This article describes the process of forensic evaluation to determine whether documents are fraudulent or authentic.

In August 2004, *9/11 and Terrorist Travel*, a 240-page staff report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, was published on the Internet. The authors drew attention to how temporary student visas have been used by terrorists to secure entry into the United States (Kephart, 2005). Certainly, the years since 9/11 have seen a remarkable change in U.S. immigration law and policy as the federal government linked immigration screening and enforcement to national security. Among other matters, the federal government has strengthened the criteria for issuing temporary visas to students (Iyer & Rathod, 2012).

Although most applicants for temporary student visas are not likely to be terrorists, the quest to earn academic credentials has been known to lead to criminal acts, such as falsification and forgery (Van Tor, 1990). Moreover, the use of fraudulent credentials in general is a growing concern domestically and internationally (Adan, 2006; Council of Higher Education Accreditation, 2009; Haddad, 2009; Sheets, 2008; Tobenkin, 2011). An increasing number of documents are being submitted to U.S. agencies from high-risk countries that have some form of political uprising, natural disaster, compromised infrastructure, or adverse socioeconomic conditions. These countries face difficulty maintaining legitimate records, and opportunities for financial and professional advancement in these countries are limited. Such circumstances set the stage for acts of desperation, including attempts to pass fraudulent documents.

Failure to prevent and detect fraudulent credentials in health care can seriously jeopardize patient safety. Boards of nursing (BONs), health care administrators, and colleges of nursing have a responsibility to protect the public by ensuring that only legitimate, qualified individuals are licensed to practice nursing. This article describes the process of forensic evaluation to determine whether documents are fraudulent or authentic.

## Evaluation Process

A significant portion of a credentials evaluation and assessment service is devoted to detecting fraud and preventing unqualified people from becoming practicing health care professionals.

The evaluation process can begin in several ways. An applicant for licensure may seek verification from a credentials evaluation company before submitting documents to the BON or an academic institution. Or an academic institution may want to ensure that the documents submitted by a candidate are authentic. A BON may conduct its own internal evaluation and confer with a credentials evaluation company to clarify information or to confirm that an individual is appropriately credentialed and licensed to work as a nurse. In some cases, an evaluator goes to an academic institution or a BON in the course of verifying documents.

Foreign nurse applicants seeking entry to the United States with the intent of becoming licensed to practice as a registered nurse work with CGFNS International to evaluate and verify their credentials. CGFNS International is a globally recognized credentials evaluation organization authorized by Section 343 of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) to issue VisaScreen® certificates to nurse applicants seeking entry to the United States on an employment visa. Section 343 mandates that a thorough assessment of the nurse's prelicensure education, licensing experiences, and English competency be carried out as a component of the VisaScreen application process (IIRIRA, 1996). CGFNS evaluators analyze an applicant's licensure and education documents to determine the degree of comparability to U.S. qualifications. They also work with BONs and academic institutions in the United States and Canada to verify credentials.

To perform a credentials evaluation, the evaluating company must have up-to-date procedures to keep current with source countries' educational and regulatory systems, to ensure that evaluators have the internal information and knowledge

necessary to assess credentials documents, and to ensure that evaluators are not at risk for participating in fraudulent activity. CGFNS has developed and uses a proprietary database (repository) that includes educational institutions, their accreditations and transcript information, official seal and signature samples, licensure and certification authorities, and official contacts. These data represent information on 189 countries, including the United States and Canada.

### Evaluator Training

The talent and expertise of a qualified evaluation team are essential to detecting fraudulent documents. Evaluators must assume that documents may be fraudulent until proven otherwise.

They need training in research techniques, tools, and methods, focusing on the detection process. There are several electronic instruments designed strictly to detect evidence of fraudulent documents. The electrostatic detection apparatus or “ESDA,” is the most commonly used device for document examinations, visualizing writing impressions such as indentations and erasures via electrostatic charges. The Video Spectral Compactor (VSC) is a digital imaging instrument that uses combinations of light sources and filters under various wavelengths of radiation to examine documents. It is used to discriminate different inks, reveal alterations, visualize security features, and examine characteristics, such as watermarks or fiber disturbances, in documents.

Training also includes communicating effectively with applicants and authorized third parties, documenting all communications, responding to inquiries in a timely manner, and staying abreast of new information around the world, such as school closures and accreditation losses, changes in licensure requirements, and updates to immigration laws and processes.

Evaluators also need to be trained to use available integrated electronic databases and repositories representing a spectrum of countries and their educational systems, programs, accreditation, and regulatory practices, as well as other resources helpful in identifying fraudulent documents. (See Table 1.)

### Document Authenticity and Advanced Technology

Falsification of documents, counterfeit transcripts and licenses, identity fraud, and diploma mills are domestic and international problems. Advanced technology makes sophisticated forgeries possible, and bribery and collusion enable perpetrators to pass off fraudulent documents as official ones.

The use of advancing technology by those who would commit fraud has made forensic examination and capture of fraudulent documents more challenging, but technology also helps forensic examiners identify fraud. An evaluator can study the methods, materials, or machines that created the document and derive key information to help identify the sources, or at

TABLE 1

## Resources for Identifying Fraudulent Documents

Several websites are available that contain helpful information concerning the verification and evaluation of academic and license credentials. The following is a selected list of sites.

### Verification of Academic Institutions

#### International

- AACRAO, International Education Services: <http://ies.aacrao.org/>
- International Association of Universities: [www.unesco.org/iau/onlinedatabases/index.html](http://www.unesco.org/iau/onlinedatabases/index.html)
- [www.education/nic.in/collegedir.asp](http://www.education/nic.in/collegedir.asp)
- Recognised UK Degrees: [www.bis.gov.uk/policies/higher-education/recognised-uk-degrees](http://www.bis.gov.uk/policies/higher-education/recognised-uk-degrees)
- Researching International Education (list of Ministries of Education by country): [www.nafsa.org/uploadedFiles/NAFSA\\_Home/Resource\\_Library\\_Assets/ACE/researching\\_internationalization.pdf?n=3838](http://www.nafsa.org/uploadedFiles/NAFSA_Home/Resource_Library_Assets/ACE/researching_internationalization.pdf?n=3838)
- U.S. Department of State. EducationUSA: [www.educationusa.state.gov](http://www.educationusa.state.gov)

#### Domestic

- ACE Publishing: [pubs@acenet.edu](mailto:pubs@acenet.edu) or (202) 939-9452
- American Council on Education: [www.acenet.edu/AM/Template.CFM](http://www.acenet.edu/AM/Template.CFM)
- Council for Higher Education Accreditation: Database of Institutions and Programs Accredited by Recognized United States Accrediting Organizations: [www.chea.org/search/](http://www.chea.org/search/)
- Oregon Student Access Commission: Office of Degree Authorization: [www.oregonstudentaid.gov/oda.aspx](http://www.oregonstudentaid.gov/oda.aspx)
- U.S. Department of Education: [www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/](http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/)

### Foreign Credential Evaluation Resources

- Association of International Credential Evaluators, Inc: <http://aice.dharman.net/>
- Inter-L listserv (for seeking information from colleagues): <https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/inter-l/info>
- NAFSA: A Guide to Selecting a Foreign Credentials Evaluation Service: <https://www.nafsa.org/findresources/Default.aspx?id=8817>
- NAFSA: Online Guide to Educational Systems Around the World: [www.nafsa.org/Resource\\_Library\\_Assets/Publications\\_Library/Online\\_Guide\\_to\\_Educational\\_Systems\\_Around\\_the\\_World/](http://www.nafsa.org/Resource_Library_Assets/Publications_Library/Online_Guide_to_Educational_Systems_Around_the_World/)
- National Association of Credential Evaluation Services: [www.naces.org](http://www.naces.org)
- U.S. Department of State: EducationUSA: [www.educationusa.state.gov](http://www.educationusa.state.gov)
- World Education Services: [www.wes.org/employers/index.asp](http://www.wes.org/employers/index.asp)

least narrow the possible sources. The ink, paper, writing tools, ribbons, stamps, and seals used to produce the document may

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