

DECEPTION UNIVERSITY

JANUARY 2006

I recently was invited to a steak dinner at the local country club by an individual who stated in his invite he was a "Wealth Management Expert (WME)", "Certified Senior Advisor (CSA)" and "Certified in Long-Term Care (CLTC)." According to the mass-mailed cheaply printed invite, where they misspelled my last name, *"I was now afforded the incredible opportunity because of my unique standing to attend a "free luncheon" where I would be able to hear the man with so many letters after his name speak about my retirement. I swear, one of these days I am going to actually go to one of these ridiculous events and heckle these crooks. Fake financial planning designations are being rolled off the assembly-line by fake colleges and universities by the dozens. At last count there are nearly 100 certifications, few of which are warranted and respected, whereas most are nothing more than sales tools.*

For example, let's take a closer look at the designations from the esteemed individual who sent me the cheap-misspelled invitation. The Wealth Management Expert (WME) was obtained from Kaplan University. In order to obtain such a prestigious designation our expert needed to have a high school diploma, pay tuition of \$595, take seven online lessons, and pass an open-book test online. According to Kaplan the entire "process" should take no longer than a month. Graduates then receive their diploma and their WME designation. I wonder if they get a free toaster with that as well.

The Certified Senior Advisor (CSA) designation is currently one of the most widely abused marketing tools today. This past November, Massachusetts securities regulators filed a 52 page civil suit complaint against Investors Capital Corp., alleging that some of the firms representatives were touting themselves as CSA's holding themselves out to be real financial planners only to induce unsophisticated individuals into buying ultra-high commission equity indexed annuities. The CSA designation is obtained by forking over \$1,200, attending a three day workshop and completing a 150 question exam. You may also skip the workshops and look at the information online. This program is so grueling that they put "gold stars" on all who pass. Once again the CSA gets a shiny, happy diploma. In an interview with the Dow Jones News Service in December 2005, Massachusetts Secretary of the Commonwealth William Galvin states, *"When Language is used to imply a special interest or designation, and it's just another marketing tool, it is a problem, it is a fuzzy feel-good term, but what does it all mean?"* The North American Securities Administrators Association, an organization that represents state securities regulators issued a notice in December urging older Americans "to carefully check the credentials of individuals holding themselves out as senior specialists." In a press release NASAA President Patricia Struck states that individuals use the designation *"to create a false level of comfort among seniors by implying a certain level of training on issues important to the elderly, but the training they receive is nothing more than marketing and selling techniques targeting the elderly,"* and *"the alphabet soup of letters after their names"* can be confusing and deceptive.

Last but certainly not least is the CLTC designation. Step right up, anyone out there who wants to sell long-term-care insurance. For \$1,000 you can attend a two-day master class or take an online course, pass a written exam and you are now a CLTC! Once again a shiny happy diploma is included in the deal.

Creating these ridiculous designations has become a multi-million dollar industry. Anybody can create a website and call themselves a school and hand out bogus designations. I had one individual approach me this past year with a business deal who stated he was a PHD and had it printed on his business card. After a couple of weeks speaking with this man I became skeptical and checked out his *PHD* which turns out he received by donating some money to an online school. In other news I just completed my masters in diaper changing from "Pampers University", with my third child due in March I hope to have my PHD by June. Wish me luck!