

# Con

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Abagnale's cancellation of his scheduled Georgia Southwestern appearance came two weeks after he canceled a speech at the University of South Carolina. There, college officials asked him to sign an affidavit attesting to the truthfulness of the speech he would give. He refused.

Dennis Pruitt, director of programs at USC, said Abagnale could have made his speech and collected his \$2,500 fee even without signing the affidavit. If he refused, however, the college would have warned students attending the speech that Abagnale had not promised to tell the truth.

Abagnale said he regarded the affidavit request as "a slap in the face."

The affidavit request at USC came only a few weeks after Abagnale's veracity as a speaker had been seriously questioned in Washington, D.C., at the International Platform Association, a professional speakers' convention.

At the IPA convention, Bill Toney, a criminal justice professor at Stephen F. Austin University in Nacogdoches, Texas, said he and students in his class had investigated claims made by Abagnale in his book and speeches and found no evidence to support them.

For example, Abagnale's claim to have defrauded banks of more than \$2.5 million. Of that, Toney, a former U.S. Border Patrol officer said that U.S. District Court records in Atlanta revealed Abagnale was convicted of passing only "\$700 or \$800 in bad checks."

Toney also said he and his students called representatives of Sears, J.C. Penney, Chase Manhattan Bank and American Airlines to determine if they were collectively paying Abagnale \$10 million a year for crime prevention consultant work. None said they were, Toney said, although Abagnale had made the claim in a speech at several colleges.

"He also claimed to have been a professor of criminal justice at Rice University," Toney said. "Well, Rice doesn't even have a criminal justice program."

Toney said he also wrote Professor Bruce Chadwick, chairman of the Sociology Department at Brigham Young University, to inquire about Abagnale's assertion that he had falsified transcripts and resumes and obtained a teaching job at BYU.

"Professor Chadwick said he had investigated the matter thoroughly and no such thing had ever happened."

Mark Zinder, the Houston agent who booked Abagnale's college speaking engagements, admits he became troubled at the creeping doubts about Abagnale's veracity.

"I myself don't know what's true and what's not," Zinder said. He said that he has not only lost commission money for the 50 or so engagements for which he booked Abagnale in a year, he's lost personal credibility himself.

As for Abagnale, he said Wednesday by telephone that he's not troubled by the assaults on his veracity.

"Controversy has never bothered me," he said. "I've been a controversial figure since I was 16."

Without conceding that he had engaged in deception, Abagnale said that if he had, "Well, then, I'm the world's greatest con man. . . as one gentleman said to me, 'If you didn't do all those things, and you've made all this money you've made in advances, royalties and speaking engagements, then you are in fact the world's greatest con man.'"

As he was talking over the telephone, it was impossible to tell if Abagnale was smiling as he said that.