GUIDANCE ON DIPLOMA MILLS

(From: http://www2.ed.gov/students/prep/college/ diplomamills/index.html and other cited sources.)

What is a diploma mill?

- The Higher Education Opportunity Act defines a diploma mill as follows: The term `diploma mill' means an entity that--
  (A)(i) offers, for a fee, degrees, diplomas, or certificates, that may be used to represent to the general public that the individual possessing such a degree, diploma, or certificate has completed a program of postsecondary education or training; and (ii) requires such individual to complete little or no education or coursework to obtain such degree, diploma, or certificate; and
  (B) lacks accreditation by an accrediting agency or association that is recognized as an accrediting agency or association of institutions of higher education (as such term is defined in section 102) by--(i) the Secretary pursuant to subpart 2 of part H of title IV; or (ii) a Federal agency, State government, or other organization or association that recognizes accrediting agencies or associations.

- The dictionary defines a diploma mill as:
  An institution of higher education operating without supervision of a state or professional agency and granting diplomas which are either fraudulent or because of the lack of proper standards worthless. - Webster's Third New International Dictionary

Diploma mills require little, if any, academic work in order to earn a degree. Degrees from diploma mills are sometimes based on life experience alone or a level of academic work that is far below what an accredited postsecondary institution would require. Diploma mills can require little or no work but the result is the same, a degree that has no value and is meaningless.

With the increase in the availability of earning degrees online there has been an increase in diploma mills. Diploma mills often use the Internet to market their programs. Diploma mills often promise degrees for a fee in a few short days or months. It is important to note, however, that not all online degree programs are diploma mills. Determining the difference requires research.

The Better Business Bureau suggests you watch for the following features and regard them as red flags when considering whether or not a school may be a diploma mill.

- Degrees that can be earned in less time than at an accredited postsecondary institution, an example would be earning a Bachelor's degree in a few months.
- A list of accrediting agencies that sounds a little too impressive. Often, these schools will list accreditation by organizations that are not recognized by the U.S. Department of Education. These schools will also imply official approval by mentioning state registration or licensing.
- Offers that place unrealistic emphasis on offering college credits for lifetime or real world experience.
- Tuition paid on a per-degree basis, or discounts for enrolling in multiple degree programs. Accredited institutions charge by credit hours, course, or semester.
- Little or no interaction with professors.
• Names that are similar to well known reputable universities.
• Addresses that are box numbers or suites. That campus may very well be a mail drop box or someone's attic.

DIPLOMA MILLS AND ACCREDITATION

The logical place to start when making a determination on whether a school is or is not a diploma mill is to examine its accreditation. Accreditation in the United States is a voluntary, nongovernmental process, in which an institution and its programs are evaluated against standards for measuring quality. Any institution can claim to be accredited. It is important that if you are unsure about a school's accreditation or its accrediting body, it's important that you do your homework.

ACCREDITED INSTITUTIONS VS UNACCREDITED INSTITUTIONS

Accredited institutions have agreed to have their institution and its programs reviewed to determine the quality of education and training being provided. If an institution is accredited by a recognized agency, its teachers, coursework, and facilities, equipment, and supplies are reviewed on a routine basis to ensure students receive a quality education and get what they pay for. Attending an accredited institution is often a requirement for employment and can be helpful later on if you want to transfer academic credits to another institution.

Unaccredited institutions are not reviewed against a set of standards to determine the quality of their education and training. This does not necessarily mean that an unaccredited institution is of poor quality, but earning a degree from an unaccredited institution may create problems for students down the road. Some employers, institutions, and licensing boards only recognize degrees earned from institutions accredited by an accrediting agency recognized by the U.S. Department of Education. In some states, it can be illegal to use a degree from an institution that is not accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency, unless approved by the state licensing agency.

ACCREDITED POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTIONS AND PROGRAMS

The U.S. Department of Education has published the "positive list" of schools that are accredited by accrediting agencies recognized by the Secretary of Education. The list can be found at http://ope.edu.gov/accreditation.

Note: This is a list of postsecondary institutions and programs that have chosen to be accredited by accrediting agencies recognized by the U.S. Secretary of Education. One of the reasons that institutions seek accreditation is so that their students are eligible to receive federal student aid or other federal benefits. The database does not include postsecondary educational institutions and programs that elect not to seek accreditation but nevertheless may provide a quality postsecondary education. The positive list is simply one source of information; you may need to consult other sources if an institution does not appear on the positive list.
The U.S. Department of Education does not have the authority to accredit private or public elementary or secondary schools, and the Department does not recognize accrediting bodies for the accreditation of private or public elementary and secondary schools. However, the U.S. Department of Education does recognize accrediting bodies for the accreditation of institutions of higher (postsecondary) education. If an accrediting body which is recognized by the Department for higher education also accredits elementary and secondary schools, the Department's recognition applies only to the agency's accreditation of postsecondary institutions.

Accreditation, and the requirement of accreditation, for elementary and secondary schools is regulated by the States with wide variation in its application. In Mississippi, all public schools and some private schools are accredited by the MS Commission on School Accreditation. Their website is here: http://www.mde.k12.ms.us/accred/accred.html. Please note, however, that schools that do not receive federal or state funds may choose not to be accredited by the state.

7 Warning Signs That an Online High School Is a Diploma Mill
(From: http://besthighschoolsonline.com/beware-of-online-high-school-diploma-mills/)

The following list contains common warning signs that an online high school might be a diploma mill.
• The school’s website has no contact information and only displays a P.O. Box number
• The school is not accredited by one of the six regional accrediting bodies or by the DETC
• No one has heard of the school, or the school's name is suspiciously similar to that of a renowned school
• The school has multiple negative reviews from former or current students
• The school awards diplomas to anyone and everyone instantly or in a very short time
• There are no deans, directors, and professors listed on the school's website
• The school’s admission process consists of nothing more than submitting your credit card details

ACREDITING AGENCIES RECOGNIZED BY THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

The Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education recognizes select accrediting agencies as reliable authorities regarding the quality of education or training offered by the institutions or programs they accredit. Accreditation by a recognized accrediting agency is part of the requirements for institutions to participate in federal student aid programs.

Accrediting agencies recognized by the Secretary meet certain criteria, the institutions accredited by those agencies meet standards that address the quality of an institution and its programs. An accrediting agency that meets the Department’s criteria for recognition is determined to be a reliable authority in measuring the quality of education or training provided by the institutions it accredits in the United States and its territories. Agencies that meet these criteria are placed on the Department's List of Nationally Recognized Accrediting Agencies, which can be found at http://www2.ed.gov/admins/finaid/accred/accreditation_pg6.html#NationallyRecognized.
UNRECOGNIZED ACCREDITING AGENCIES

Unrecognized accrediting agencies have not had their accreditation standards reviewed by the U.S. Department of Education. There are a variety of reasons why an agency is unrecognized, some agencies may be working towards recognition with the Secretary and others may not meet the criteria for recognition.

An unrecognized accrediting agency should be viewed with caution until its reputation can be determined. Although these accrediting agencies are unrecognized, it does not mean that they do not have high standards of quality. Likewise, because the Secretary does not recognize an accrediting agency does not mean that the institutions accredited by that agency do not provide a quality education.

FAKE ACCREDITING AGENCIES

Diploma mills often claim accreditation by a fake accrediting agency to attract more students to their degree programs and make them seem more legitimate. Because diploma mills aren't accredited by a nationally recognized agency, you will not find the institution's accrediting agency on the U.S. Department of Education's List of Nationally Recognized Accrediting Agencies.

Tip: Use the above references to check that the institution has been accredited by a nationally recognized agency. Those accrediting agencies recognized by the U.S. Department of Education are recognized for purposes of obtaining federal dollars.

The fake accrediting agency is just for show; it offers its accreditation for a fee without an in-depth review of the school's programs or teachers. These accrediting agencies do not ensure that students receive a quality education. Often, the fake accrediting agency has simply conducted a business deal with an institution without investigating the institution in any manner.

These fake accrediting agencies may adopt names that are similar to other well known accrediting agencies, and sprinkle legitimate institutions in its list of accredited members. They may even use all the right sounding words in their marketing materials to describe their accrediting standards and review processes. When actually, those accrediting standards and procedures are never put to use and the accreditation is meaningless.

Tip: Do not allow these agencies and institutions to mislead you. Remember it isn't enough to know that an institution is accredited; you need to find out as much as you can about the accrediting agency.

FOREIGN INSTITUTIONS AND DIPLOMA MILLS

There is an important distinction between foreign institutions and agencies that accredit foreign institutions. The U.S. Department of Education does not recognize foreign accrediting agencies, however, accrediting agencies that have been recognized by the Secretary of Education may accredit foreign institutions. There are also foreign institutions that market their degrees in the United States, and foreign education ministries may recognize these institutions.
Tip: Look out for foreign diploma mills selling their degrees in this country.
Some of these foreign diploma mills claim to have approval from the education ministry of their country to offer degrees, when, in reality, they're operating without the knowledge of the country. Often foreign diploma mills will use the name of the foreign education ministry in their marketing material to make them seem more legitimate. The institution is trying to make students incorrectly believe that its programs have been reviewed and meet some level of quality.

Earning a degree from a foreign institution that is not accredited by a nationally recognized agency can be problematic. To learn more about the issues and problems that may arise from pursuing an unaccredited degree, read over the frequently asked questions found at this site: http://www.degree.net/guides/accreditation_faqs.html.

FOREIGN CREDENTIAL EVALUATION

Often a student will be required, by another educational institution or place of employment, to have their foreign educational credits evaluated in order to determine the comparability between those credits or degree to those received from an accredited U.S. institution. In these instances, a useful service is provided by private services that evaluate degrees from foreign institutions. Not all U.S. institutions, employers, and licensing authorities perform evaluations of non-U.S. diplomas, credits, or qualifications. In many cases this work is delegated to private credential evaluation services, the evaluations provided by these services are then recognized as valid by the necessary entities. Private credential evaluation services will evaluate a foreign degree for comparability to a U.S. degree. Caution: Like fake accrediting agencies, there are also fake credential evaluation services. These organizations work on behalf of diploma mills to ensure that degrees from these schools are determined to be comparable to a degree that is received from an accredited U.S. institution.

The U.S. Network for Education Information (USNEI), a Department of Education-administered Web site and public-private partnership provides a list of possible credential evaluation services. More information can be found at http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ous/international/usnei/us/edlite-visitus-forrecog.html.

It is important to understand that the U.S. federal government does not recommend or endorse any individual credential evaluation service or group of services, and does not conduct evaluations. The resource links provided here are solely for information purposes and to help in locating potential evaluators.

COLLEGE CREDIT FOR LIFE EXPERIENCE

Although many legitimate institutions give academic credit for life and work experiences, beware of institutions that offer college credit and degrees based on life experience, with little or no documentation of prior learning. These institutions do not use valid methods to determine the amount of credit to be awarded. There are many employers, institutions and licensing boards that will question the legitimacy of credit and degrees earned in this way, these organizations will only recognize degrees earned from institutions accredited by an accrediting agency recognized by the U.S. Department of Education.
Legitimate institutions offering credit for life or work experiences may use any combination of the following methods to determine how much credit is given: standardized tests, prior learning portfolio, oral exams, past college credit, and professional certification. The amount of credit awarded will vary from institution to institution. At legitimate institutions credit is awarded only if the work experience is equivalent to what would have been taught in a college level course.

**.EDU INTERNET ADDRESS**

Today, most educational institutions are recognized on the Web by their .edu Internet addresses. However, not all institutions that use an .edu as a part of their Internet address are legitimate institutions. Before the U.S. Department of Commerce created its current, strict requirements, some questionable institutions were approved to use an .edu. The current requirements allow only colleges and institutions accredited by an agency recognized by the U.S. Department of Education to use the .edu, however, some more suspect institutions have maintained the .edu addresses.

**Beware:** Institutions that were approved to use an .edu before the new requirements were put in place may still be using the .edu as part of their Internet address. This means there may be some illegitimate institutions out there with an .edu.

**RESOURCES AT A GLANCE**

U.S. Department of Education - A list of all postsecondary institutions that are accredited by agencies recognized by the Secretary of Education.  


National Association of State Administrators and Supervisors of Private Schools - Provides contact information for state licensing agencies as well as links to many of them.  
[www.nasasps.com](http://www.nasasps.com)

Degree.net - Simple questions to ask about accreditation about earning unaccredited degrees.  
[www.degree.net/guides/accreditation_faqs.html](http://www.degree.net/guides/accreditation_faqs.html)

Oregon Student Assistance Commission - Overview of diploma mills and a list of unaccredited colleges and some diploma mills.  
[www.osac.state.or.us/oda/diploma_mill.html](http://www.osac.state.or.us/oda/diploma_mill.html)

Michigan's list of unaccredited colleges and universities (PDF).  

If you still have doubts, contact your Better Business Bureau or state attorney general's office to make sure the school is operating legally in a state and to see if anyone has filed a complaint.