



CHAPTER 1: THE ACCREDITATION SITUATION

You want more career skills and better pay, but you don't have time for traditional college between your job, family, or other commitments. You see an ad for a distance-learning program on the Internet and it gets you thinking: You could study weeknights after work and complete assignments on the weekend. Maybe even some of your work experience could translate into credit and reduce the number of required courses. Suddenly the degree you wanted seems in reach. So you make the decision to pursue online education. Congratulations!

But wait . . . there are a lot more online colleges than you'd imagined. Your "online college" Internet search generates more than 4 million hits. As you follow the links, you find that each college sounds better than the previous one. Advertisements promise fast results for little money. It sounds too good to be true. And it is.

Accreditation

The goal of accreditation is to ensure that schools provide an education that meets acceptable levels of quality. In the United States, distance degree programs are accredited by a regional accrediting agency (The Distance Education and Training Council) or profession-sponsored accrediting agencies. Only colleges that meet an agency's criteria receive accreditation.

Criteria for Accreditation

Private educational associations got together and decided the criteria of a legitimate educational program. They then developed procedures for evaluating whether colleges are operating at basic levels of quality. The U.S. Department of Education (www.ed.gov) used that to create the following guidelines.

Functions of Accreditation

1. Verifying that an institution or program meets established standards;
2. Assisting prospective students in identifying acceptable institutions;
3. Assisting institutions in determining the acceptability of transfer credits;
4. Helping to identify institutions and programs for the investment of public and private funds;
5. Protecting an institution against harmful internal and external pressures;
6. Creating goals for self-improvement of weaker programs and stimulating a general raising of standards among educational institutions;
7. Involving the faculty and staff comprehensively in institutional evaluation and planning;
8. Establishing criteria for professional certification and licensure and for upgrading courses offering such preparation; and
9. Providing one of several considerations used as a basis for determining eligibility for federal assistance.

However, even with such standards in place, many online colleges operate without, or with falsified, accreditation.

Diploma Mills

Diploma mills have sprung up to meet the increasing demands of students looking for online education with fast results—but they have cut out everything between the “tuition” and the “diploma.” Essentially, a diploma mill “degree” is bought, not earned. Diploma mills are schools that are more interested in taking your money than providing you with a quality education. They pose as institutions of higher education, operate without supervision or accreditation, and grant diplomas that are essentially worthless.

Protecting Yourself

Diploma mills catch your attention with captivating offers. They may make claims like these:

- Get your diploma within days!
- The bachelor’s degree of your choice is available for the flat rate of ____.
- Our university has no tests, classes, or books.
- We are accredited by ABC and XYZ accrediting agencies.
- No students are ever turned away. Everybody graduates!

In 1997, the Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) was formed by the U.S. Congress and Department of Education to provide quality assurance and accreditation for the

nation's educational institutions. On CHEA's Web site (www.chea.org), you can find lots of information to keep you informed about accreditation. CHEA recommends asking questions to ensure your online college is not a diploma mill.

Red Flags

If you answer yes to one or more of these questions, your online college may be a diploma mill.

YES NO

- Can degrees be purchased for a flat fee? (Universities typically charge tuition on a per credit or per course basis—not by flat fee.)
- Does the school claim a list of accreditation that sounds a little too impressive?
- Is class attendance and participation policy lax or nonexistent?
- Are few assignments required for students to earn credits?
- Is a very short period of time (30 days) required to earn a degree?
- Are degrees available based solely on experience or resume review? (Legitimate colleges don't provide degrees based exclusively on career experience. Many schools accept and encourage applying job skills toward course credit, but there is typically a cap on this, such as one year out of a four-year program.)
- Are there few requirements for graduation? Is the only requirement a valid credit card?
- Does the school fail to provide a list of its faculty and their qualifications?
- Does the school have a name similar to other well-known colleges and universities?
- Does the school have a post office box rather than a real physical address? Is that address in a foreign country that lacks any system of academic accreditation?

Based on CHEA's article "Important Questions about Accreditation, Degree Mills and Accreditation Mills" at <http://www.chea.org/degreemills/default.htm>, last modified on 11/9/2005.

Penalties of Falsifying an Education

Applying for a job with a phony degree is punishable as fraud and could include a fine or imprisonment. But false education claims carry penalties for a much broader group than just the "degree" holders. If you look at the degree programs being advertised by diploma mills, you will notice they focus on fields like nursing and mechanical engineering. How would you feel about being a patient in a hospital built and staffed by people without real degrees? Not very safe indeed.

Further Information

The U.S. Department of Education maintains a database of postsecondary institutions and programs accredited by the U.S. Secretary of Education. Search for your school at

<http://www.ope.ed.gov/accreditation>

CHEA maintains its own database of over 7,000 institutions and 17,000 programs recognized by U.S. accrediting organizations. It's a good idea to look for your school in both the USDE and CHEA databases.

<http://www.chea.org>

If you find a degree mill online, report it. The Better Business Bureau records consumer complaints about online degree mills. To see if your college has complaints on file with the BBB, visit:

<http://www.bbb.org>.