



FEDERAL TRADE COMMISSION
CONSUMER INFORMATION
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College Degree Scams

Looking to improve your chances of being hired or promoted? Earning a degree may be the answer, but not all degrees programs are on the up and up. Though many online schools and distant learning programs are legitimate, there are some organizations that peddle bogus degrees.

A “diploma mill” is a company that offers “degrees” for a flat fee in a short amount of time and requires little to no course work. Degrees awarded through diploma mills are not legitimate, and can cost you more than just your money.

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Signs of a Diploma Mill

No Studies, No Exams, No Interaction

If you’re getting a degree without doing *any* work, chances are you’re dealing with a diploma mill. Legitimate colleges or universities — including online schools — require substantial course work and interaction with professors.

“Get a Degree for Your Experience!”

Diploma mills grant degrees for “work or life experience” alone. Accredited colleges may give a few credits for specific experience relevant to a degree program, but not an entire degree.

Flat Fee

Many diploma mills charge on a per-degree basis. Legitimate colleges charge by the credit, course, or semester — not a flat fee for an entire degree.

No Waiting

Though there are schools that offer accelerated degrees in-person or online, earning a degree still takes some time. If an ad promises that you can earn a degree in a few days, weeks, or even months, it’s probably a diploma mill.

Pushy Advertising Tactics

Some diploma mills push themselves through aggressive sales tactics. Legitimate institutions, including distance learning programs, won’t advertise through spam or pop-ups. They won’t use high-pressure telemarketing calls, either.

Doing Your Homework

It may be difficult to tell the difference between a legitimate school and a diploma mill. Many bogus degree programs have well-designed websites and familiar sounding names in order to seem real. Before you pay any money to an organization that promises a degree for a fee, ask these questions.

Is this School Really Accredited? By Whom?

Although many diploma mills claim to be “accredited,” the credentials are likely from a phony agency. Colleges and universities accredited by legitimate organizations undergo a rigorous review of the quality of their educational programs.

You can search online to see if a school is accredited by a legitimate organization. Here are two reliable sources to check:

- [Database of Accredited Postsecondary Institutions and Programs](#) posted by the U.S. Department of Education
- [Council for Higher Education Accreditation](#) database

There are a small number of legitimate institutions that have not pursued accreditation.

Is this a Sound-Alike, or the Real Thing?

Some diploma mills use names that are very similar to well-known colleges or universities, or use credible-sounding foreign names. Unfortunately, a “dot edu” web address is no guarantee of legitimacy. Though it can be challenging, it’s worth the time to research the legitimacy of the school you are considering.

- Call the registrar of a local college or university and ask if it would accept transfer credits from the school you are thinking about attending
- Contact your [state attorney general's office](#) to make sure the school is operating legally

The Costs of a Fake Degree

Most employers and educational institutions consider it lying if you claim academic credentials that you didn’t earn through actual course work. If you use a so-called “degree” from a diploma mill to apply for a job or promotion, you risk not getting hired, getting fired, and possible prosecution.

Spending money on your education can be a large financial investment. As with any investment, it’s important to consider the value of what you’re paying for. Check out the National Institute of Education Statistics’ [College Navigator](#) to see which accredited degree or certificate program is right for you.

July 2012