

Protecting Wisconsin Consumers for 75 Years

Diploma mills

Are you ever tempted by an email or an ad claiming you can “earn a college degree based on life experience?” Do not be! Chances are good that the ad is for a “diploma mill,” a company that offers:

- “Degrees” or “certificates” for a flat fee.
- Requires little course work, if any.
- Awards degrees based solely on life experience.

Most employers and educational institutions consider it lying if you claim academic credentials that you did not earn through actual course work. The Bureau of Consumer Protection warns that it is risky behavior. 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 in some cases prosecution.

Diploma mills may claim to be “accredited”

Colleges and universities accredited by legitimate organizations undergo a rigorous review of the quality of their educational programs. Although many diploma mills claim to be

“accredited,” their accreditation is from a bogus, but official sounding agency that they created.

Helpful resources

1. The U.S. Department of Education posts schools on the Internet that are accredited by a legitimate organization at:
ope.ed.gov/accreditation
2. The Wisconsin Educational Approval Board (EAB) is an independent state agency responsible for protecting Wisconsin consumers by regulating and monitoring:
 - For-profit, post-secondary schools.
 - Out-of-state schools.
 - Non-profit colleges and universities.
 - In-state, non-profit institutions incorporated after January 1, 1992.

Contact the EAB to check on their Approved Schools Directory:

(608) 266-1996
www.eab.state.wi.us

3. The National Association of State Administrators and Supervisors of Private Schools provide contact information for state licensing agencies as well as links to many of them.

www.nasasps.org

4. Degree.net offers simple questions to ask about accreditation and earning unaccredited degrees.

www.degree.net

Look out for sound-alikes

Some diploma mills take on names that are very similar to well-known colleges or universities. A “dot edu” Web address is no guarantee of legitimacy. Keep in mind that some diploma mills use credible sounding foreign names. Researching the legitimacy of a foreign school can be a challenge, but is clearly worth the time. If you are having a tough time checking out a particular school, call the registrar of a local college or university and ask if it would accept transfer credits from the school you are considering.

Tell-tale signs

Here are some tell-tale signs of a diploma mill:

- **No studies, no exams – 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 pertinent to a degree program, but not an entire degree.

- **No attendance**

Legitimate colleges or universities, including online schools, require substantial course work.

- **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**

Operations that guarantee a degree in a few days, weeks, or even months are not legitimate. If an ad promises that you can earn a degree very quickly, it is probably a diploma mill.

- **Aggressive tactics**

Some diploma mills push themselves through aggressive sales tactics. Accredited colleges do not use spam or high-pressure telemarketing to market themselves. Some diploma mills also advertise in newspapers, magazines, and on the web.

- **Advertising through spam or pop-ups**

If the school caught your attention through an unsolicited email or pop-up ad, it may be a diploma mill. Legitimate institutions, including distance learning programs, will not advertise through spam or pop-ups.

For more information or to file a complaint, visit our website or contact the Bureau of Consumer Protection.

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(Information taken from the Federal Trade Commission fact sheet “Diploma Mills”)

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