



Bogus Institutions and Accrediting Bodies

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Introduction

Researching international academic credentials and institutions is a passion of mine. That passion led to the creation of a previous e-book, *Researching International Education Systems and Institutions*, which is updated annually.

While I enjoy researching new (to me) institutions most of the time, I do get frustrated when I can't find the information about an institution's accreditation/recognition. I have a pretty extensive list of both print and electronic publications and a huge repository of archived web pages which generally allows me to identify a recognized institution pretty quickly. However, the sources that I have historically used to try to identify a diploma mill have been scattered and disorganized so it seemed worthwhile to consolidate them to some extent.

I have compiled a list of several other lists of bogus institutions, diploma mills, and accreditation mills. This is far from a complete list, and these are not official lists. There is no single, official list of recognized or unrecognized institutions for use in the U.S.

Please note that many of these institutions or accreditation mills are very similar in name to existing, legitimate, accredited or recognized institutions. The schools on the external lists may have the word college instead of university in their name (or vice versa), hoping that people will get confused. Some of them are identical except for spelling. Sometimes, the only difference between the name of the bogus institution and the real deal is the addition of an extra word, like state. Other times, these bogus institutions simply rearrange the order of the words in the name of a legitimate institution.

It is also important to note that there are many faith-based institutions or accrediting bodies on these lists that may be perfectly legitimate but simply do not hold the equivalent of regional or national accreditation in their home countries. Within the field of international education, there are no standard recommendations regarding theological studies and their accrediting bodies. Many faith-based institutions are not recognized by the Ministry of Education in their home country because of the nature or number of religious courses or because the religion is not the dominant religion of the country. Faith-based institutions may seek only to be accredited by a single faith-based accrediting body specific to their region or religion, or they may seek a more global acceptance of their curriculum. Some seek no accreditation at all while others may form their own accrediting body, often in association with similar religious colleges in their geographic region and from the same religious denomination. It is up to the receiving institution to determine if a particular faith-based institution's accreditation or lack thereof meets their individual needs. Within the U.S., a good source of information about faith-based institutions is *Walston's Guide*, which is listed in the "Further Reading" section at the end.

Also note that these lists of bogus institutions and accrediting bodies are not compiled by Transcript Research. They are also meant to be used purely as a starting point, not as definitive proof that you're dealing with a fraudulent situation. Previous editions of this document included the actual names of the institutions from each of the lists, but we found that to be too problematic since we had not personally researched each institution or accrediting body and could not address questions as to why specific entities were on the respective lists. As a result, this most recent edition of *Bogus Institutions and Accrediting Bodies* merely provides links to the lists created and maintained by others. This document instead focuses more on the broader concepts of accreditation, recognition, and fraud.

We hope you find this useful,

Peggy Bell Hendrickson
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Brief Overview of Accreditation in the U.S.

Before we begin discussing diploma mills, it's a good idea to talk about accreditation/recognition.

Education accreditation in the United States is more complicated than in many other countries because there is not a single authority, it is not governed by law, and it is a voluntary process. In addition, there are several types of accreditation.

U.S. accreditation at all levels of education means simply that the institution meets the minimum standards of the accrediting body. These minimum standards are set by the voluntary accrediting body, not law or a government entity. Accreditation is a continuous review process, requiring renewal and re-accreditation after a set period of time. It refers to the accountability of an institution and the mobility of its credits and degrees.

In the U.S., there is no single source for accreditation which is part of what makes it confusing to newcomers. Elsewhere in the world, accreditation is done at the national level, and since the U.S. has a national Department of Education (DOE), it would be easy to assume that DOE accreditation was the correct requirement for a "good school." However, while the DOE does identify institutions that are accredited, it does not accredit those institutions themselves. The DOE maintains lists of accrediting bodies for the purposes of awarding federal money for education. The Council for Higher Education (CHEA) also identifies recognized accrediting bodies in the U.S. but also does not accredit individual institutions but identifies accrediting associations. There are two main types of accreditation: accreditation of an institution and accreditation of a program.

Institutional accreditation is basically a review of all aspects of a particular higher education institution, from curriculum to finances to qualifications of the teaching staff. At the institutional level, there are also two categories: national and regional. Please note that these two categories are not synonymous. National accreditors are accrediting specialized or special-interest institutions whereas regional accreditors are providing recognition of the degrees and authenticity of the educational process for a particular geographic area. Regionally accredited institutions will generally only accept or recognize coursework or degrees from other regionally-accredited institutions but are unlikely to accept work from a school that only holds national accreditation. It is possible for an institution to have both regional accreditation that validates the quality of academic, educational programs as a whole and national accreditation because it falls into a special-interest category and wants to be linked with like institutions. The next page includes a list of both the six regional accrediting bodies and the different national accrediting agencies.

Accreditation of a program/profession in the U.S. refers to individual programs of study within a given institution rather than the institution as a whole. This generally refers to a program, department, or school within a higher education institution. A single institution of higher education may offer many degree programs that hold program/professional accreditation. Program/professional accreditation is important for licensure, certification, and/or employment in certain fields. The next page includes a link to the DOE and CHEA-approved program accrediting bodies.

Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA): <https://www.chea.org/directories> and <https://www.chea.org/chea-recognized-organizations>

U.S. Department of Education (DOE): Office of Post-secondary Education
<http://www2.ed.gov/admins/finaid/accred/index.html>

List of U.S. Accrediting Bodies

U.S. Regional Accrediting Agencies (2019-2020):

Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) Western Association of Schools and Colleges: <https://accjc.org/>
California, Hawaii, territories of Guam and American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, the Republic of Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia and the Republic of the Marshall Islands

Higher Learning Commission (HLC): <https://www.hlcommission.org/>
Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Wyoming, and federally authorized sovereign nations

Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE): <https://www.msche.org/>
Delaware, District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, US Virgin Islands, Overseas

New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE): <https://www.neche.org/>
Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont, Overseas

Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU): <https://www.nwccu.org>
Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Washington, Overseas

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC):
<http://www.sacscoc.org>
Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Latin America, and Overseas

WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC): <https://www.wscuc.org/>
California, Hawaii, US-affiliated Pacific islands, Pacific basin, east Asia

Faith-related Accrediting Bodies (2019-2020)::

Association for Biblical Higher Education (ABHE)
Association of Advanced Rabbinical and Talmudic Schools (AARTS)
Association of Theological Schools the Commission on Accrediting (ATS)
Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools (TRACS)

Career-related Accrediting Bodies (2019-2020)::

Distance Education and Training Council (DEAC)

Programmatic Accrediting Organizations (2019-2020):

Both CHEA and the DOE also identify approximately 50 specialized accrediting agencies that accredit programs in the Arts and Humanities, Education Training, Legal, Community and Social Services, Personal Care and Services, and Healthcare fields.

These lists and a list of DOE- and CHEA-recognized accrediting organizations can be found online at <https://www.chea.org/chea-usde-recognized-accrediting-organizations> and <https://www.chea.org/chea-recognized-organizations>

Recognition around the World

In most other countries around the world, accreditation as Americans know it doesn't exist. Instead of accreditation, educational institutions are recognized, chartered, licensed, listed, authorized, registered, or validated, depending on the country and its educational system. However, for purposes of the work of international education, government recognition is comparable to regional accreditation in the U.S. Recognition outside the U.S. is generally granted by a government body – often a Ministry of Education – at the national level, state level, or some combination of the two. It is regulated by law, and the government approves the ability to award academic degrees. In the U.S., accreditation ensures a minimal level of quality, but that is a relatively new concept in most other countries. It is often much easier to identify the recognition of a public, state university than private or non-university higher education institutions.

Here are some good starting points for identifying a higher education institution's recognition:

Higher Education Authorities. Transcript Research, 2019.

https://transcriptresearch.com/HEA_2019.pdf

Researching International Educational Systems and Institutions. Transcript Research, 2012.

<http://www.transcriptresearch.com/Research.pdf>

Resources at Your Desk (update to *Researching International Education Systems and Institutions*).

Transcript Research, 2020. http://transcriptresearch.com/TAYD_Resources_Spreadsheet

However, it's the institutions that aren't included in these resources that are often the most problematic. Are they specialized types of institutions such as polytechnics or technical colleges? Are they newer than the most recent publications or available lists? Does the Ministry of Education not have a working website, or do they not list the recognized higher education institutions? Does their published list only include state universities and none of the newer private universities? Does the institution fall under the purview of a different governmental entity such as the Ministry of Health or Agriculture or a branch of the military? Is the institution private? Has there been a name change?

These are just some of the questions that arise when dealing with legitimate higher education institutions that are not readily identifiable.

The purpose of this document, however, is to address those institutions that aren't legitimate at all – diploma mills.

Fraud, Diploma Mills, and Accreditation Mills

Ours is an increasingly credentials-oriented society. Educational credentials lead to not only increased knowledge and understanding but also to better jobs, higher pay, and more prestige.

Many people convince themselves that the piece of paper is the only thing that actually matters rather than the educational foundation that comes with earning diplomas, certificates, degrees, and other educational credentials. As a result, there have always been people willing to forge, alter, or steal these coveted credentials, and there is equally a ready supply of buyers to take them off their hands. The advent of increased printing capabilities and internet anonymity have greatly increased the availability of fake credentials.

For a fascinating look at the industry of fraudulent educational credentials, I highly encourage you to read *Degree Mills: The Billion-Dollar Industry That Has Sold over a Million Fake Diplomas* by Allen Ezell and John Bear, two noted experts on document fraud and diploma mills.

In addition to being on guard against fake documents, though, educators must also be aware of diploma mills. Diploma or degree mills are companies that issue academic credentials – diplomas, certificates, and/or transcripts – for a fee. They simply sell paper without requiring their so-called students to attend courses or take exams. These types of diploma-for-money companies generally operate via flashy websites, toll-free numbers, and post office boxes. Some diploma mills state that they are awarding their credentials on the basis of distance education, but no coursework is ever required. Some of the more insidious diploma mills even have degree verification services, provide fake syllabi for non-existent courses, sell recommendation letters from faculty they don't have, and provide other services that allow the customer to more easily pass off their faked documents as earned credentials.

Recent news coverage of scandals involving politicians, doctors, lawyers, and even teachers who hold diploma mill credentials have made many people more aware of the necessity of accreditation. However, even those who try to do their due diligence have been misled about the newest element of these nefarious business: accreditation mills. Clever operators of diploma mills have invented their own accrediting bodies to add an air of legitimacy to their credentials and to further confuse prospective students who know they need to look for an accredited program but don't know that there are recognized and unrecognized accrediting bodies, much less how to tell the difference. Further muddying the waters, some diploma mills may claim to evaluate a student's work history, professional education, and prior learning and require a student to submit a thesis or dissertation as the basis for their award of the diploma or degree. A great example of this can be found in the *Degree Mills* book mentioned above.

It's important to note that some of the institutions on the lists at the end of this document were accredited but lost their accreditation; make sure you do your research and check the dates of enrollment. In other instances, some of these suspect schools have patterned their names off of legitimate, well-respected institutions but have just changed the order of the name around (University of X compared to X University). Most importantly, though, please do not take this document or these external lists as the end-all, be-all of your decision-making process. The lists we have linked are to help you in your search for further information but are not intended to shut the door on a prospective student, employee, or other new member of your team.

External Lists of Questionable Institutions or Accrediting Agencies

Accredited and Non-Accredited Colleges and Universities. Maine Department of Education, archived. <https://web.archive.org/web/20120722065527/http://www.maine.gov/education/highered/Non-Accredited/non-accredited.htm>

Against the Mills. CIMEA, 2010. <http://www.cimea.it/en/cimea-against-the-mills.aspx>

Be Wary of Nonrecognized Accreditation Agencies. Credential Watch. <http://www.credentialwatch.org/non/agencies.shtml>

Bogus University Directory, TACRAO 2010 by Glen N. Wood. <http://www.credentialconsultants.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Bogus-Institution-List-Glen-Wood-2010.pdf>

Colleges and Universities Not Accredited by CHEA. Michigan Civil Service Commission, 2011, archived. https://web.archive.org/web/20111119233112/https://www.michigan.gov/documents/Non-accreditedSchools_78090_7.pdf

Degree Mills and Distancing Learning Accreditation Reports. GetEducated.com <https://www.geteducated.com/diploma-mill-police/degree-mills-list/>

Fake Accrediting Agencies, 1999. Degree.net, archived. https://web.archive.org/web/20100704064614/http://www.degree.net/accreditation/fake-accrediting-agencies_199911302319.html

Fake Universities and Bogus Degrees – Sweden and the World. Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, 2005, in Swedish. https://www.uhr.se/globalassets/_uhr.se/om-uhr/nyheter/2015/falska-examensbevis-2015-05-23/bluffuniversitet-och-falska-examensbevis.pdf

Fraudulent or Substandard Institution – Institutions Whose Degrees are illegal to Use in Texas. Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. <http://www.thecb.state.tx.us/institutional-resources-programs/private-postsecondary-institutions/resources/>

How to Identify Diploma Mills and Axact Web Sites, and Tools for Your Protection. Allen Ezell, for AACRAO. <https://www.aacrao.org/research-publications/quarterly-journals/college-university-journal/article/c-u-vol.-95-issue-1-winter-2020/how-to-identify-diploma-mills-and-axact-web-sites-and-tools-for-your-protection>

List of Accreditation Agencies Used by Fake Colleges. GetEducated.com. <https://www.geteducated.com/college-degree-mills/204-fake-agencies-for-college-accreditation/>

List of Fake Online High Schools and Fake Online GED Programs. Excel High School. <https://www.excelhighschool.com/blog/list-of-fake-online-high-schools-and-fake-online-ged-programs>

List of Scam Schools – Beware the Scams. Consumer Fraud Reporting. http://www.consumerfraudreporting.org/Education_Degree_Scam_list.php .

List of Schools Linked to Axact. CBC Marketplace, 2017. <https://www.cbc.ca/marketplace/blog/list-of-schools-linked-to-axact>

List of Unaccredited Schools – Is Your School Accredited? Consumer Fraud Reporting. http://www.consumerfraudreporting.org/Education_Degree_Scams_Unaccredited.php

Michigan’s List of Nonaccredited Colleges and Universities, 2005. <https://quackwatch.org/credential/non/mich/>

Unauthorized Schools and Invalid Degrees. Oregon Student Access Commission Office of Degree Authorization, archived.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20130703080406/http://oregonstudentaid.gov/oda-degree-authorization-academic-unauthorized-Invalid.aspx>

Questionable Organizations: An Overview. Quackwatch.

<http://quackwatch.org/04ConsumerEducation/nonrecorg.html#nonaccredited>

Tracking Axact's Websites. New York Times.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/17/world/asia/tracking-axacts-websites.html?action=click&module=RelatedCoverage&pgtype=Article®ion=Footer>

Unrecognized and Fake Agencies for Online College Accreditation. GetEducated.com.

<http://www.geteducated.com/diploma-mills-police/college-degree-mills/204-fake-agencies-for-college-accreditation>

Further Reading

Further reading about diploma mills and bogus institutions:

Academic Fraud and the World's Largest Diploma Mill. Allen Ezell for AACRAO.

<https://www.aacrao.org/research-publications/quarterly-journals/college-university-journal/article/c-u-vol.-94-no.-4-fall-2019/academic-fraud-and-the-world-s-largest-diploma-mill>

Advice and Guidance on Degree Fraud: A Toolkit for Higher Education Providers. Department for Education.

<https://cdn.prospects.ac.uk/2.0.13/pdf/Advice%20and%20Guidance%20on%20Degree%20Fraud%20for%20HE%20Providers.pdf>

Bear's Guide to Earning Degrees by Distance Education, 25th Anniversary Edition by John B. Bear and Mariah P. Bear, Ten Speed Press, 2001.

Checklist: 92 Things Bad and Fake Schools Do to Mislead People. <http://www.degreemills.com/92-red-flags.html>

College Degree Scams. Federal Trade Commission. <https://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0206-college-degree-scams>

Degree Mills: The Billion-Dollar Industry That Has Sold Over a Million Fake Diplomas. Allen Ezell and John Bear, Prometheus Books, 2012.

Degree and Accreditation Mills. Council for Higher Education Accreditation.

<https://www.chea.org/degree-accreditation-mills>

Diploma and Accreditation Mills. European Quality Assurance for Higher Education.

<https://www.eqar.eu/kb/accreditation-mills/>

Diploma and Accreditation Mills: Exposing Academic Credential Abuse. Verifile Accredibase, 2010, archived.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20120315042332/http://www.international.ac.uk/resources/Diploma%20and%20Accreditation%20Mills.pdf>

Diploma and Accreditation Mills: New Trends in Credential Abuse. Verifile Accredibase, 2011.

https://www.esrcheck.com/file/Verifile-Accredibase_Diploma-Mills.pdf

Diploma Mills. Netherlands Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science.

<https://duo.nl/particulier/studying-in-the-netherlands/diploma-mills.jsp>

Diploma Mills and Accreditation. U.S. Department of Education.

<https://www2.ed.gov/students/prep/college/diplomamills/diploma-mills.html>

Diploma Mills and Counterfeit Operations. Allen Ezell for AACRAO.

<https://www.aacrao.org/research-publications/quarterly-journals/college-university-journal/article/c-u-vol.-94-no.-3-summer-2019/diploma-mills-and-counterfeit-operations>

Diploma Mills Deserve Their Own Rankings. Yale News, 2007.

<https://yaledailynews.com/blog/2007/04/05/diploma-mills-deserve-their-own-rankings/>

FRAUDOC: Guide on Diploma Mills and Other Dubious Institutions. CIMEA, 2018.

<http://www.cimea.it/files/fileusers/Guidelines%20on%20Diploma%20Mills.pdf>

LinkedIn Is Filled with Fake Degrees. Vice, 2015.

https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/53dmzk/linkedin-is-filled-with-fake-degrees

An Overview of Fraud and Degree Mills with Updates on the Axact Degree Mill Operation. TAICEP,

2017. <https://www.taicep.org/taiceporgwp/an-overview-of-fraud-and-degree-mills-with-updates-on-the-axact-degree-mill-operation-november-2017-newsletter/>

Policies and Actions of Accreditation and Quality Assurance Bodies to Counter Corruption in Higher Education. Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 2019.

<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED597946.pdf>

Toward Effective Practice: Discouraging Degree Mills in Higher Education. Council for Higher

Education Accreditation, 2009. <https://www.chea.org/chea-unesco-statement-to-discourage-degree-mills-higher-education>