

FTC Consumer Alert

Federal Trade Commission ■ Bureau of Consumer Protection ■ Office of Consumer & Business Education

Diploma Mills: Degrees of Deception

Are you ever tempted by an email or an ad claiming you can “earn a college degree based...on life experience”? Don’t be, say attorneys for the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), America’s consumer protection agency. 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, and awards degrees based solely on life experience.

Most employers and educational institutions consider it lying if you claim academic credentials that you didn’t earn through actual course work. Federal officials say it’s 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. You can use the Internet to check if a school is accredited by a legitimate organization at the database of accredited academic institutions posted by the U.S. Department of Education at www.ope.ed.gov/accreditation or at the Council for Higher Education Accreditation database at www.chea.org/search. (There are a few legitimate institutions that have not pursued accreditation.)

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, either. 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’re 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.

So how can you tell if the institution you’re thinking about is legitimate? 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 aren’t legitimate. If an ad promises that you can earn a degree very quickly, it’s probably a diploma mill.
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- **Click Here To Order Now!** Some diploma mills push themselves through aggressive sales tactics. Accredited colleges don't 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, won't advertise through spam or pop-ups.

The FTC works for the consumer to prevent fraudulent, deceptive, and unfair business practices in the marketplace and to provide information to help consumers spot, stop, and avoid them. To file a complaint or to get free information on consumer issues, visit ftc.gov or call toll-free, 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357); TTY: 1-866-653-4261. The FTC enters Internet, telemarketing, identity theft, and other fraud-related complaints into Consumer Sentinel, a secure, online database available to hundreds of civil and criminal law enforcement agencies in the U.S. and abroad.

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October 2006