

FACT SHEET # 6

Important Questions about “Diploma Mills” and “Accreditation Mills”

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In their quest for higher education and training, students and the public in the United States sometimes encounter “diploma mills”—dubious providers of educational offerings or operations that offer certificates and degrees that are considered bogus. They may also encounter “accreditation mills”—dubious providers of accreditation and quality assurance or operations that offer a certification of quality of institutions that is considered bogus.

Diploma mills and accreditation mills mislead and harm. In the U.S., degrees and certificates from mills may not be acknowledged by other institutions when students seek to transfer or go to graduate school. Employers may not acknowledge degrees and certificates from diploma mills when providing tuition assistance for continuing education. “Accreditation” from an accreditation mill can mislead students and the public about the quality of an institution. In the presence of diploma mills and accreditation mills, students may spend a good deal of money and receive neither an education nor a useable credential.

Internationally, diploma mills and accreditation mills are a disservice to the public in several ways. U.S. diploma mills and accreditation mills that have become items for export cast doubt on the reliability of legitimate degrees and accreditation. Students from outside the U.S. can be vulnerable because they have limited information and experience by which to judge whether or not a U.S. operation is a “mill.” Governments outside the U.S. seeking to learn about accredited status of U.S. operations can be vulnerable as well. Unsuspecting students and governments of other countries may know only that a provider is “American” and not be aware that it is a mill.

There is no single definition of “diploma mill” or of “accreditation mill” in higher education. While a few states have laws or regulations regarding these operations, most do not. Some agencies of the federal government may scrutinize diploma mills or accreditation mills, but this is quite limited to date. In general, diploma mills would not pass the initial screening of accrediting organizations (review for eligibility, candidacy, or initial accreditation) and thus fall outside the purview of these bodies. Similarly, accreditation mills would struggle with the pre-screening for recognition and thus escape this scrutiny as well.*

Identifying diploma mills and accreditation mills is not easy. A number of the features of diploma mills are similar to familiar higher education institutions. A number of the features of accreditation mills are similar to well-known accrediting organizations. Nonetheless, prospective students and the public can look for several indicators that suggest an operation may be a diploma mill or an accreditation mill. *It is the presence of a number of these features taken together that should signal to students and the public that they may, indeed, be dealing with a “mill.”*

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* In the United States, an accrediting organization may seek a review for quality (or “recognition” review) from the federal government through the U.S. Department of Education or privately, through the Council for Higher Education Accreditation. “Recognized” accreditors are those organizations that have successfully undergone an external review of their quality based on the standards of these entities.

A series of questions follows to help determine whether a provider is a diploma mill or an accreditation mill. In each case, if, for example, the answers to a majority of the questions below are “yes,” students and the public should take this as highly suggestive that they may be dealing with a mill. In this circumstance, students and the public may be best served by looking for alternatives for higher education and quality assurance.

DIPLOMA MILLS

If the answers to many of these questions are “yes,” the operation under consideration may be a “mill”:

- Can degrees be purchased?
- Is there a claim of accreditation when there is no evidence of this status?
- Is there a claim of accreditation from a questionable accrediting organization?
- Does the operation lack state or federal licensure or authority to operate?
- Is little if any attendance required of students?
- Are few assignments required for students to earn credits?
- Is a very short period of time required to earn a degree?
- Are degrees available based solely on experience or resume review?
- Are there few requirements for graduation?
- Does the operation charge very high fees as compared with average fees charged by higher education institutions?
- Alternatively, is the fee so low that it does not appear to be related to the cost of providing legitimate education?
- Does the operation fail to provide any information about a campus or business location or address and relies, e.g., only on a post office box?
- Does the operation fail to provide a list of its faculty and their qualifications?
- Does the operation have a name similar to other well-known colleges and universities?
- Does the operation make claims in its publications for which there is no evidence?

ACCREDITATION MILLS

If the answers to many of these questions are “yes,” the operation under consideration may be a “mill”:

- Does the operation allow accredited status to be purchased?
- Does the operation publish lists of institutions or programs they claim to have accredited without institutions and programs knowing that they are listed or have been accredited?
- Are high fees for accreditation required as compared to average fees from accrediting organizations?
- Does the operation claim that it is recognized (by, e.g., USDE or CHEA) when it is not?
- Are few if any standards for quality published by the operation?
- Is a very short period of time required to achieve accredited status?
- Are accreditation reviews routinely confined to submitting documents and do not include site visits or interviews of key personnel by the accrediting organization?
- Is “permanent” accreditation granted without any requirement for subsequent periodic review?
- Does the operation use organizational names similar to recognized accrediting organizations?
- Does the operation make claims in its publications for which there is no evidence?

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