



Understanding Accreditation of Colleges & Universities Throughout the U.S.

A key part in determining a person's suitability for a position is to verify the legitimacy of their degree. This is why understanding accreditation is so important. Should this be an area you aren't familiar or maybe you just need a refresher, here's how it works.

Per the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), the education records of students are not public record unless used as general directory information. There must be consent to release records containing personal information. However, what is very much public record is the accreditation of schools.

Screening professionals specifically place great importance on determining if a post-secondary college or university granting a degree is accredited. This accreditation must be issued by an accredited organization – Accreditor – that has been recognized by the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) and/or the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). To be "recognized" means that an accrediting body must meet the quality standards of these two respective organizations.

Schools may operate without accreditation, as long as a state grants the authority to operate. The schools that operate without accreditation and without authority are generally known as "diploma mills."

About the USDE and CHEA

The U.S. Department of Education (USDE) does not accredit educational institutions or programs. The Department does provide oversight to the accreditation system. On their site, they publish a database of Accredited Postsecondary Institutions and Programs by Accrediting Agencies, and State Approval Agencies recognized by the U.S. Secretary of Education, available at <https://www.ed.gov/accreditation>. Note that the Secretary of Education's recognition of accrediting agencies is limited by statute to the United States. Although many recognized agencies do accredit institutions outside of the United States because of this limitation, those schools are not included in their database.

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) searchable database includes over 8,200 degree-granting and non-degree granting institutions and more than 44,000 programs that are accredited by the U.S. accrediting organizations that are recognized by either CHEA or USDE. The search function is based on the school name and includes geographical filters. See <https://www.chea.org/directories>.

Each accrediting organization's list of institutions or programs is prefaced by a brief description of the accredited status of the institutions or programs, and the year for which the list is accurate. Some accrediting organizations and their institutions and programs appear in both the CHEA database and the USDE database. Others may appear in one but not both. Whether in CHEA or USDE, accrediting organizations identified in the database have been "recognized."

The Accrediting Bodies

Generally, accrediting entities are of two types:

1. **Regional Accreditors** – Provides accreditation to an entire institution.
2. **Specialized or Program Accreditors** - Provides accreditation to programs, departments or schools that stand alone or may be part of an institution. These accreditors focus on topics such as religion (ABET, for example), teaching (NCATE, for example), or health, social work, music, etc.

About Diploma Mills

Merriam-Webster's online dictionary describes a diploma mill as:

A usually unregulated institution of higher education granting degrees with few or no academic requirements.

A diploma mill issues a paper diploma to a "student" who performs little or no actual study. Some mills offer degrees based on life experiences. Mills operating in the U.S. are not authorized by a state licensing agency or an accrediting body.

There are some diploma mill factories so bold to provide a phone number or email address for students to submit to employers or employment screeners to use for verifications. This contact point leads to a phony registrar's office with a very convincing, fake registrar who will confirm the school's existence.

Identifying Diploma Mills and Unaccredited Schools

If you are a subscriber to BRB's [Public Record Research System](#), your subscription includes over 850 known diploma mills highlighted within the look-up index of the schools and universities section.

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) provides an excellent overview about Degree Mills at <https://www.chea.org/degree-accreditation-mills>.

There is no free, all-encompassing list of diploma mills or unaccredited schools available on the web. A number of states used to provide a list of possible diploma mills particular to their state and have since stopped, most notably due to the continued increase of the list.