



white paper

# ASSESSING AUTHENTICITY

An Analysis of Questionable Degrees and Diploma Mills

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Diploma mills are a problem that plagues secondary and higher education institutions and subsequently impacts the applicant screening services conducted by consumer reporting agencies. As technology advances and evolves, diploma mills are becoming more industrious and sophisticated. New tactics and strategies are employed on a continual basis to defraud consumers and employers. These tactics involve drawing in consumers with advertisements that offer the opportunity to earn a “degree” fast, with just a “click” or for a negligible fee.<sup>1</sup> In turn, consumer reporting agencies have been incited to review education verification results more closely and carefully.

## WHAT IS A DIPLOMA MILL?

Diploma mills (also known as “degree mills”) are defined by the Higher Education Opportunity Act as “Entities that lack accreditation by a recognized accrediting agency, and offer degrees, diplomas, or certificates that may be used to represent that the individual who possesses the degree, diploma, or certificate has completed a program of postsecondary education or training”.<sup>2</sup> <sup>3</sup> These entities require the

completion of little or no education or coursework to obtain a degree, diploma, or certificate.<sup>4</sup> Instead, diploma mills offer illegitimate academic degrees, diplomas, or certificates for a fee.

Because nationally recognized accrediting agencies do not accredit diploma mills, diploma mills will often be supported by accreditation mills.<sup>5</sup> Accreditation mills are fictitious, illegitimate entities that claim to be an accreditation agency.<sup>6</sup> Accreditation mills offer accreditation to a diploma mill for a fee without reviewing the diploma mills’ program, teachers, or quality of education. Many diploma mills claim to be accredited by the accreditation mill in order to attract students and appear legitimate.

## HOW DIPLOMA MILLS WORK?

Diploma mills are multidimensional and transnational operations. While there are nationally recognized accreditation agencies, a lack of centralized national oversight has allowed diploma mills to thrive in the United States. Additionally, diploma mills often claim to be operating in one country, but actually operate in another. In 2017, the World Education Services found that there were an estimated 2,615 diploma mills in

<sup>1</sup> “The Truth Behind Diploma Mills” Better Business Bureau, Mar. 22, 2018, <https://www.bbb.org/article/news-releases/17303-the-truth-behind-diploma-mills>

<sup>2</sup> The Higher Education Opportunity Act, <https://ifap.ed.gov/dpclatters/attachments/GENo812FPo81oAttachHEOADCCL.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Vertical Screen defines a diploma mill as an organization that is not accredited or recognized by any education governing bodies and for a fee offers illegitimate diplomas without ensuring that students are properly qualified. Diploma mills are not properly vetted for ongoing quality control, regulatory compliance, and are not legally authorized to provide a program of education.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> “Diploma Mills and Accreditation- Diploma Mills” U.S. Department of Education, <https://www2.ed.gov/students/prep/college/diplomamills/diploma-mills.html>

<sup>6</sup> “College Degree Scams” Federal Trade Commission <https://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0206-college-degree-scams>

the world, with 1,008 diploma mills operating in the United States.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the World Education Service estimates 500 fictitious Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) degrees are given out monthly by 400 diploma mills in the United States.<sup>8</sup>

Diploma mills often use aggressive advertising to draw individuals in, charging a flat fee per degree rather than per credit or course as is customary in legitimate institutions. The individual often obtains the degree by completing little or no work. Diploma mills rarely require substantial coursework or exams and offer little to no interaction with professors or teachers.<sup>9</sup>

Diploma mills use technology to employ tactics in order to appear more legitimate to consumers and employers. Often, these entities will create sophisticated websites and send email advertisements. Many diploma mills will offer false transcripts, reference letters by “professors,” student identification cards, and other supporting documents that provide an individual with a sense of the

“college experience.”<sup>10</sup> Some diploma mills will offer verification services for the degrees they confer by providing a number that can be called to “verify” the degree.<sup>11</sup>

In 2005, the federal government was able to stop a prolific diploma mill operated by a couple in Washington.<sup>12</sup> This diploma mill, frequently operating as St. Regis University but also as 120 other fictitious universities, issued more than 10,000 diplomas in 131 countries before being shut down.<sup>13</sup> This diploma mill offered degrees for “life experiences” and in one instance gave an investigator, claiming to be a retired Syrian military officer, three undergraduate and advanced degrees in chemistry and environmental engineering for a fee of \$1,277.<sup>14</sup>

## HOW THESE DEGREES ARE USED?

Individuals often buy degrees from diploma mills to obtain a job, attend college, or attain a promotion or raise.<sup>15</sup> The individuals then report that they earned the degree from the institution listed

and may provide other paperwork from the “school” to verify their attendance. In some cases, the individual may not know that the diploma mill is not a real school and that the diploma is not legitimate. Individuals may be tricked by diploma mills through the use of persuasive advertising and enticed by the ability to easily obtain a degree.

## RESPONSE TO DIPLOMA MILLS

Diploma mills are designed to dupe and defraud individuals and employers. To prevent this, some states including Hawaii, Michigan, Maine, and New Jersey have passed laws that prohibit the issuance or manufacturing of false academic credentials and/or prohibit individuals from knowingly using false academic degrees.<sup>16</sup>

Diploma mills offer degrees not only for undergraduate and advanced degrees but for high school diplomas as well. In recent years, the FTC has worked to stop and prevent diploma mills that have been identified for fraudulent,

<sup>7</sup> “Diploma Mills: 9 Strategies for Tackling One of Higher Education’s Most Wicked Problems” World Education Services, <https://wenr.wes.org/2017/12/diploma-mills-9-strategies-for-tackling-one-of-higher-educations-most-wicked-problems>

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*

<sup>10</sup> [http://users.eecs.northwestern.edu/~jennie/documents/iduggan\\_diploma\\_mills.pdf](http://users.eecs.northwestern.edu/~jennie/documents/iduggan_diploma_mills.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Schemo, Diana Jean “Diploma Mill Concerns Extend Beyond Fraud” Jun. 29, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/29/us/29diploma.html>

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*

<sup>15</sup> “Diploma Mills: 9 Strategies for Tackling One of Higher Education’s Most Wicked Problems” World Education Services, <https://wenr.wes.org/2017/12/diploma-mills-9-strategies-for-tackling-one-of-higher-educations-most-wicked-problems>

<sup>16</sup> Hi Rev Stat §446E et seq.; MCL §390.1601 et seq.; 20-A MRSA §10801-10804; N.J.S.A. 18A:3-15.1et seq.,



deceptive, and unfair business practices.<sup>17</sup> In 2017, two diploma mills settled with the FTC, after the FTC alleged that the entities deceptively claimed that their online “high schools” were accredited.<sup>18</sup>

## SIGNS OF A DIPLOMA MILL

It is important that employers and consumer reporting agencies review and verify an individual’s credentials. Signs of a diploma mill include:

- **The name of the institution sounds similar to another well-known university**  
*Cornwell University instead of Cornell University in New York.*
- **Credit for work or life experiences**  
In contrast to legitimate universities that offer small amounts of academic credit for work experience, diploma mills grant credit based solely on experiences.
- **Minimal to no academic requirements**  
Diploma mills usually do not require tests or assignments and offer little to no interaction with professors.
- **Unusually short length required to earn degree**  
Some diploma mills offer degrees within the span of twenty four hours or within a few weeks. Other diploma mills may offer diplomas with just a few

clicks through a website and a purchase.

- **No physical location of the institution**  
The institution may offer degrees to U.S. citizens but will be located in a foreign county that lacks any system of academic accreditation.
- **Advertised flat fees and low costs**
- **Accredited by illegitimate accreditation mills.**

## WHAT *BUSINESS INFORMATION GROUP* DOES TO ASSIST CLIENTS WITH SCREENING DIPLOMA MILLS

*Business Information Group* works to ensure that an individual’s education credentials originate from an accredited and legitimate degree-granting institution. *Business Information Group* verifies all education verifications via a search of DegreeScan®, a propriety database of confirmed degree mills and accreditation mills. If the database confirms there is a match, it will clearly be indicated in our screening reports that an educational institution reported by the applicant has been identified as a potential diploma mill. *Business Information Group* also confirms that schools are accredited with the U.S. Department of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation. ■

<sup>17</sup> “FTC Shuts Down Diploma Mill Operators” Federal Trade Commission, Jan. 29, 2015, <https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/press-releases/2015/01/ftc-shuts-down-diploma-mill-operators>

<sup>18</sup> “Operators of Online ‘High Schools’ Settle FTC Charges That They Misled Tens of Thousands Consumers with Fake Diplomas” Feb. 10, 2017, <https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/press-releases/2017/02/operators-online-high-schools-settle-ftc-charges-they-misled-tens>