

# Is This A Good School?

Strategies to help evaluate the quality of postsecondary educational programs and schools.

**Thinking of learning a new job skill or enrolling in a non-traditional degree program?**

**Beware of educational opportunities that sound too good to be true.**

## Is the institution operating legally?

Is the institution accredited?

What does attending a non-regionally accredited college mean?

How do I identify a "diploma mill"?

What if the school offers programs via distance education?

How does the program compare to those offered at other institutions?

Will employers accept the training as preparation for employment?

What preparation do you need for a particular occupation?

Will courses transfer?

Have students filed complaints against the institution?

What should I do on a school visit?

What is the meaning of this promise?

## **Is the institution operating legally?**

State law requires that the SC Commission on Higher Education license most private institutions that operate or solicit in South Carolina. Licensed institutions are required to meet minimal standards and provide accurate and useful information to prospective and current students. The Commission licenses institutions that offer credit bearing courses in addition to schools that offer programs that prepare students for an occupation such as pet groomer, massage therapist, model, nurse assistant, paralegal, tax return preparer, or travel agent.

Some institutions are required to seek approval from other state agencies. These include cosmetology, barbering, truck driving, and real estate schools. South Carolina's public technical colleges and state colleges and universities are exempt from licensure. The following other types of institutions, programs, and courses are also exempt from the Commission's oversight:

- Degree-granting institutions chartered in SC before 1953
- Institutions whose sole purpose is religious or theological
- Recreational and personal development training
- Noncredit employer-sponsored employee-training programs
- Noncredit intensive review test preparation courses

## Is the institution accredited?

Accreditation is a nongovernmental, voluntary, peer evaluation process. To become accredited by an appropriately recognized accrediting agency, institutions and programs must show that they meet certain standards established by the accrediting agency.

“Institutional” accrediting agencies establish standards for the entire institution. “Program” or “specialized” accrediting agencies establish standards that apply to programs, departments, or schools for specific fields of study such as education, nursing, or engineering.



Accreditation does not provide automatic acceptance by an institution of credit earned at another institution, nor does it assure employment of graduates by employers.

The US Department of Education (USDE) reviews and recognizes accrediting agencies. Accreditation by a USDE-recognized accrediting agency is one criterion for institutional eligibility for Federal funds. Another indicator of credibility for accrediting agencies is membership with the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). CHEA is a nongovernmental organization that evaluates and recognizes the work of its member accrediting agencies. Beware of institutions that publish accreditation by an agency that is not recognized by USDE or CHEA.

To find out if an institution has recognized accreditation, get the name of the agency that accredits the institution. Then check the name of the agency on the CHEA <http://www.chea.org/> and USDE <http://www.ed.gov/admins/finaid/accred/index.html> online directories.

## What does attending a non-regionally accredited college mean?

Some career paths and career licensing programs may REQUIRE a regionally accredited college degree. In terms of transfer credits and degree recognition the general rule is that colleges with the same type of accreditation accept each other's courses and degrees as the equivalent of their own. If you attend a non-regionally accredited college, regionally accredited colleges may or may not accept your degree as the equivalent of their own in determining your degree standing and transfer credit status. At this time the majority of regionally accredited online colleges do not accept non-regionally accredited degrees as the equivalent of their own. This fact may impact acceptance of your degree or credential in certain circumstances and for certain careers.



### Diploma Mill Indicators

“Sound-alikes.” Don’t assume that an .edu address is legitimate. Diploma mills use credible-sounding names and web addresses to trap unsuspecting students.

Poorly made Web sites. Look for grammatically incorrect language, ambiguous statements, and questionable images of celebrities and facilities.

Degree-by-life-experience. If the institution promises a degree based on

work or life experience alone, it is likely fake. Legitimate institutions may offer some credit for experience in a specific field, but it is usually limited to a number of credit hours or percentage of the program requirements. Most legitimate colleges adhere to the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning <http://www.cael.org/> standards to determine whether or not students should be awarded credit for learning. Students are usually required to submit to the reviewing institution portfolios documenting prior education, training, and experience and descriptions of what they learned from their experiences.

Charge-per-degree. Diploma mills often charge on a “per-degree basis” or offer discounts for more than one degree. Legitimate colleges usually charge by the credit hour or by the term (semester or quarter).

Accelerated time to earn degree/no classes. An illegitimate institution may guarantee a degree within a short period of time—a few days, weeks, or even a few months—or not require attendance or submission of assignments.

Campus or administrative location. Students should pay close attention when a college fails to provide its location on its Web site or provide contact links. Beware if the organization lists only a post office box or will not disclose its address and receive visitors at its administrative office.

Faculty. Diploma mills fail to provide lists of faculty members with their qualifications. An indication of a legitimate institution is credentials of the faculty have been awarded by institutions that hold recognized accreditation from a variety of colleges and universities.

Aggressive sales tactics. Immediate discounts or “only today” discount deals indicate aggressive sales tactics as do unsolicited e-mails or pop-up ads. Some also advertise in newspapers, magazines, and online.

Diploma Mill Information:

[www.quackwatch.org/04ConsumerEducation/dm0.html](http://www.quackwatch.org/04ConsumerEducation/dm0.html)

<http://www.osac.state.or.us/oda/>

[http://www.chen.org/pdf/fact\\_sheet\\_6\\_diploma\\_mills.pdf](http://www.chen.org/pdf/fact_sheet_6_diploma_mills.pdf)

## **What if the school offers programs via distance education?**

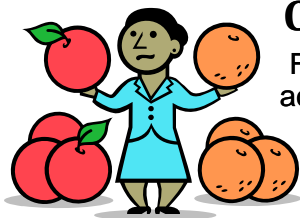
Some schools offer programs or courses at a distance via mail, Internet, or television. Although often convenient, participation in legitimate offerings of this type usually requires self-discipline and an expenditure of time that is similar to or more than that required by classroom offerings. While you may not be able to visit distance education providers, you can still request information about curriculum, faculty, preparation for employment, student success, accreditation, and professional licensure and certification.

Other resources:

[www.electroniccampus.org](http://www.electroniccampus.org)

[www.petersons.com](http://www.petersons.com)

[www.geteducated.com](http://www.geteducated.com)



## Compare programs.

Find out which other schools offer similar programs. Compare accreditation, length, schedule, cost, content, transferability, placement rates, financial aid availability, and other factors that are important to you.

College Affordability and Transparency Center

<http://collegecost.ed.gov/catc/Default.aspx>

College Navigator (US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics) <http://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/>

## Will employers accept the training as preparation for employment?

Call the human resources departments of some organizations in the field you would like to enter. Ask what credentials they look for in prospective employees. Do they recognize certifications from trade schools? If so, which ones? Ask, too, if openings in the field are plentiful. Will they accept a credential from a non-traditional institution? What about one that is earned totally online?



**Deciding on a career?** Consult the Bureau of Labor Statistics *Occupational Outlook Handbook* <http://www.bls.gov/oco/>.

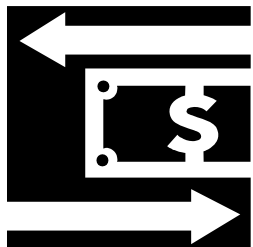
## What preparation do you need for a particular occupation?

Is there a specific educational level required to obtain an entry-level position in the field that you would like to enter? Contact professional licensure agencies or certification organizations and ask what is needed to achieve licensure or certification. Ask if graduates from the institution you are considering are eligible for licensure or certification. Find out how many graduates from the institution applied for licensure or certification and received it. If licensure or certification is required for the field you would like to enter, request the percentage of students who pass their licensing exams and are placed in jobs.



“Licensing” is a term indicating a mandatory procedure imposed by law usually regulated by a governmental agency. “Certification” is granted by organizations that administer tests developed in consultation with authorities in the field. “Certification” and “Certificate” are not interchangeable. There are many occupations for which there are no state licensing, federal licensing, or certification requirements.

## Find out about transferring courses.



If you have taken courses that you would like to transfer to a new program, take a copy of your transcript to the admissions office when you visit. Courses you have taken will not automatically transfer to your new program. The receiving institution will decide whether it will accept any credits in transfer.

If you think you might want to use coursework from the institution you are considering to count toward a program at another institution later, contact institutions and ask the admissions or registrar's office the following:

- ☐ From what kinds of institutions do you regularly accept credits? Do you require regional accreditation or accept courses from institutions that hold national or specialized accreditation?
- ☐ What kind of information is considered when deciding acceptance of credits from other institutions?
- ☐ Have you accepted credits from (school name)?
- ☐ South Carolina's online Transfer and Articulation Center web portal, SC TRAC, (available at [www.sctrac.org](http://www.sctrac.org)) provides comprehensive information about the transfer of college credits between and among South Carolina's public colleges and universities.

## Find out if students have filed complaints against the institution.

The South Carolina Commission on Higher Education accepts complaints about institutions it licenses. A student complaint form is posted on the Commission's web site.

[http://www.che.sc.gov/AcademicAffairs/License/Complaint\\_procedures\\_and\\_form.pdf](http://www.che.sc.gov/AcademicAffairs/License/Complaint_procedures_and_form.pdf)

Other SC agencies or organizations that may provide information regarding complaints are the institution's accrediting agency, your local Better Business Bureau, or the SC Department of Labor, Licensing & Regulation (all area code 803): auctioneer 896-4853, barber 896-4491, cosmetology 896-4568, and real estate 896-4400. Also take a look at the Commission's "Institutions that may be illegally operating" list.

[http://www.che.sc.gov/AcademicAffairs/License/Illegally\\_Operating.pdf](http://www.che.sc.gov/AcademicAffairs/License/Illegally_Operating.pdf)

Students with questions about their federal financial aid may contact the US Department of Education, Federal Student Aid Information Center (FSAIC) 1-800-4-FED-AID (1-800-433-3243)

<http://studentaid.ed.gov/PORTALSWebApp/students/english/contactus.jsp>

## Visit the school

You don't have to sign an application, enrollment agreement, or contract while you are there.

- Get a copy and thoroughly review the school catalog.
- Are equipment and facilities up-to-date? Is equipment similar to equipment that you will be using on the job? Are suitable library resources available to you?
- Sit in on a class or two. Do the instructors seem knowledgeable? Are the students participating? What kind of work are the students doing?
- Ask current students how long they have been in school. Do they like the program? Are they learning what they need to know to get a job? What is their opinion of the instructors? How

much time do they spend studying outside class? What do they like most about the school/program? What do they like least?

- Talk with some instructors in the program you are considering. How long have they been teaching at the school? Do they teach full-time or part-time? What kinds of activities are they involved in that relate to the field of study? What kind of background do they have in the field?

## Promises, Promises

If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Don't take promises about enrollment, financial assistance, graduation, employment/job placement, or expected earnings as the absolute truth.

If the institution advertises that it provides to graduates access to placement services or classes for a given time or "lifetime," consider that "lifetime" may actually be limited by the life of the institution, courses, or programs. Depending on demand, economy, or other circumstances, schools close, discontinue courses within programs, discontinue programs, or change policies. Institutions should not promise jobs at the school or elsewhere!

For more information contact:  
Nonpublic Postsecondary Institution Licensing  
**SC Commission on Higher Education**  
1122 Lady Street, Suite 300  
Columbia, SC 29201  
<http://www.che.sc.gov/>

Phone (803) 737-2260 Fax (803) 737-2297

Licensing staff members:

Renea H. Eshleman, Program Manager

803.737.2281

[reshleman@che.sc.gov](mailto:reshleman@che.sc.gov)

Lane J. Goodwin, Coordinator

803.737.3918

[lgoodwin@che.sc.gov](mailto:lgoodwin@che.sc.gov)

Updated 8/3/2011