

Employer's Guide to College Degrees

For employers who are reviewing prospective employee credentials, here are some tips to help you and those in your office. For employers who offer tuition reimbursement, these items may also help determine the type of education to approve for an employee.

TIP #1 What is a degree?

Oregon law in general requires that a degree offered as a credential be from an accredited institution or an institution that has been approved by the Office of Degree Authorization (ODA). Certain unaccredited degrees may be used in some professions with a disclaimer required by law.

NOTE: A degree should be required for a position when the position requires knowledge, skills, evaluative ability or experience that can be acquired or demonstrated by successful completion of a college degree program, and which cannot otherwise be clearly demonstrated.

TIP #2 What is accreditation?

Accreditation is an external evaluative process that helps ensure that colleges meet basic criteria for program operations and quality. Only accreditation that is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education meets the standard set in Oregon law. See this website for more information on recognized accreditation: <http://www.ed.gov/admins/finaid/accred/index.html>. Some kinds of work (especially licensed professions) require certain kinds of accreditation.

BEWARE: There are many bogus “accreditors” set up by diploma mills. Accreditation by such an entity is not valid under Oregon law.

TIP #3 What are religious-exempt degrees?

About half of U.S. states, including Oregon, allow certain unaccredited religious degree-granters to issue degrees without the usual state oversight. Some states have significant requirements of such schools, some have none. Such degrees issued in Oregon may or may not resemble standard degrees. However, the state does not know whether academic standards are met beyond the initial issuance of exemption.

TIP #4 What is a diploma mill (or degree mill)?

Diploma mills (or degree mills) are substandard or fraudulent “colleges” that offer potential students degrees with little or no serious work.

Most degree mills have certain characteristics. The Council on Higher Education Accreditation has an excellent overview of the issue at <http://www.chea.org/>. The ODA summary can be found at http://www.osac.state.or.us/oda/diploma_mill.html.

Not all unaccredited colleges are degree mills in the traditional sense of the term. Some unaccredited colleges provide legitimate academic work. However, unless these colleges are approved by ODA, degrees from them cannot be used for employment in Oregon without a

disclaimer. A list of Oregon-approved unaccredited colleges can be found on the ODA website under Unaccredited Colleges.

TIP #5 Does an ".edu" Internet address mean that a school is legitimate?

No. Over 200 diploma mills and unaccredited schools have been able to obtain ".edu" extensions to their Internet addresses or websites and EDUCAUSE, which controls that domain, has decided to take no action. An ".edu" extension therefore means nothing regarding a school's quality or legitimacy.

TIP #6 Can you define degrees, diplomas and transcripts?

A *degree* is the academic award that a person earns upon graduation from a degree-granting program; for example, Associate of Applied Science (AAS), Bachelor of Arts (BA) or Master of Business Administration (MBA). A *diploma* is the physical certificate on which the name of the school, the degree or certificate title, and the name of the graduate are printed. A *transcript* is the official form on which the college records courses taken and award of the degree.

Of these, the most important factor for degree validation is the *transcript*. A degree title can be claimed by anyone, and a professional-looking diploma can be purchased from many sources. Only a transcript, provided directly from the institution and properly authenticated, can prove that a person is entitled to claim a degree or use a college diploma.

NOTE: Genuine-looking but false transcripts may also be purchased. Always verify with the issuing institution that a transcript is genuine.

Levels of validation

Employers must make choices about the relative value of time, money, and degree validation when filling a position. Validating a degree takes time and costs money. Most employers spend more time and money validating degrees for high-level or highly sensitive positions than they do for lower level positions. Here are ODA's recommendations regarding the appropriate application of these levels:

- 1) **Applicant claim accepted at face value**
This is acceptable for the lowest level positions for which a degree is not required, and the person is actually overqualified if a degree-holder.
- 2) **Applicant provides copy of diploma**
This category is essentially the same as Level 1, with the increased likelihood of truthfulness by applicant. If a diploma isn't offered, you needn't bother asking for it.
- 3) **Applicant provides transcript showing award of degree**
This is the minimum level of screening for any position that requires a degree. However, as indicated earlier, transcripts can be faked or altered and transcripts delivered by the degree-holder are less secure than those acquired directly from the school. At this validation level, which should be required for all professional and sensitive positions, it is also necessary to determine whether the school exists at all. The transcript should bear the name and address of the school, which can be checked in any directory of U.S. colleges (See **Resources** below).

NOTE: Some non-U.S. educational systems don't issue transcripts that look like U.S. transcripts. See Foreign degrees below.

- 4) **Obtain transcript from school**
This is the ODA-recommended standard for all professional or sensitive positions. Any job applicant should be required to provide an official transcript (that is, one on original transcript paper—typically colored and bearing a watermark and other security features, a signature (sometimes automated) and original seal) mailed directly from the school to the employer. The chances of fraud are significantly reduced through this process. We recommend that employers confirm the transcript is genuine by contacting the school's registrar using a phone number listed for the school in standard college directories. **Do not** use a phone number printed on the transcript or provided by the student; these may lead to false verification services. Transcript verification is considered "directory information" under the federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), and any college should be able to confirm award of a degree.



- 5) **Foreign degrees: if the degree is foreign, use a specialized evaluation service**
Any degree issued under the authority of a foreign country should be validated by a foreign credential evaluation service. This should be done for any validation at level 3 or above. Basic evaluation (simple confirmation that the school exists and offers such degrees) should cost under \$100. Complex evaluations to determine whether the person's degree program includes certain course work are more expensive, usually several hundred dollars. Information about such evaluators can be found below.

TIP #7 How can I evaluate an applicant's degree?

ADVERTISING: If an employer requires a traditional academic degree, ODA suggests that it include the following statement in recruiting materials:

"Requires an [associate's, bachelor's, master's, doctoral] degree from a regionally accredited institution or foreign equivalent."

Institutions such as Oregon State University, the University of Portland, Lewis and Clark, Clackamas Community College, and Northwest Christian University are examples of regionally accredited institutions.

If a degree from a technical school, degree-granting career college, or other school whose programs are more job-specific will be adequate, we suggest that it include the following statement in recruiting materials:

"Requires an [associate's, bachelor's, master's] degree from an institution accredited by a federally recognized accreditor or foreign equivalent."

To allow maximum flexibility in the degrees you will consider, append the phrase *"or an institution approved by the Oregon Office of Degree Authorization."* This would allow use of degrees from a small number of unaccredited institutions that have met ODA standards for degree approval.

NOTE: Licensed professions typically do not allow the use of unaccredited degrees.

Degrees issued by religious-exempt schools are not considered ODA-approved, but Oregon law allows users to claim them with no penalty. If an employer wants to allow use of degrees from unaccredited religious-exempt institutions, include language to that effect.

TIP #8 Use these resources to avoid costly mistakes!

Higher Education Directories

ODA uses and recommends two directories. We use the annual *Higher Education Directory* published by Higher Education Publications (HEP) in Virginia as our basic directory. HEP's website is <http://www.hepinc.com/>. They may also be contacted at 703-532-2300 or at info@hepinc.com. This directory costs about \$90 a year, is very easy to use, and provides all of the basic information that most employers will need. ODA also uses the biennial directory called *Accredited Institutions of Postsecondary Education* published by the American Council on Education in cooperation with the Council on Higher Education Accreditation. It is more comprehensive on some aspects of schools, but is more complicated to use. It has information on non-degree schools and U.S. accredited foreign schools that the other directory does not. It is printed biannually and opposite years the information may not be as current as the HEP directory. It is published by Praeger (Greenwood Publishers), which can be contacted at 203-226-3521. Greenwood's web address is <http://www.greenwood.com/>.

Degree Mills. Allen Ezell & John Bear. 2005 (Prometheus). The best recent overview of fake degree providers and how to spot them. ISBN 1-59102-238-X.

Guide to Bogus Institutions and Documents. 2006 (AACRAO). An excellent manual describing what to look for in evaluation of college credentials, foreign and domestic. ISBN 1-57858-072-2

Very large organizations that are likely to hire a significant number of foreign degree holders should consider acquiring some of the specialized AACRAO publications (see below) on foreign



degree evaluations or hiring one or two firms to evaluate such degrees on a regular basis.

ODA Services

ODA performs degree evaluations on a fee basis. A basic validation of a U.S. degree costs \$50, a foreign degree costs \$75. Other agencies also provide such services. Detailed evaluation of foreign transcripts should be contracted to one of the providers noted below; ODA does not provide such services. ODA charges no fee to determine whether a U.S. college is accredited.

ODA Website

A wide variety of information about degrees, valid and invalid, can be found at ODA's website, <http://www.osac.state.or.us/oda/>. This includes links to many other resources including sites in other states, federal and international sites, and a list of over 400 unaccredited degree suppliers whose degrees either cannot be used in Oregon or require a disclaimer. The unaccredited list is, unfortunately, not exhaustive. It is not possible to develop a complete list of bogus colleges because they change their names often and new ones can be started easily.

Foreign degree evaluation services

Diploma mills are quite creative in establishing their own bogus evaluation services that promote their fake degrees as real. Some of these fakes use names nearly the same as genuine evaluators. Stick to a proven, known evaluator. ODA uses AACRAO or NACES-member evaluators; in complex cases we recommend using two evaluators.

Oregon State Standards

Oregon's standards for degrees are set forth in ORS 348.604 through 348.605. The legal definition of a degree mill in Oregon can be found at ORS 348.594. An unaccredited degree may be utilized with a disclaimer as required in ORS 348.609(2).

AACRAO: <http://www.aacrao.org/international/foreignEdCred.cfm>

NACES evaluators: <http://www.naces.org/>

The **Office of Degree Authorization (ODA)** is a unit of the **Oregon Student Assistance Commission**, a state agency that also provides state-funded and privately-funded scholarships, grants, and college access information. ODA exists in part to ensure that degrees earned and used in Oregon are valid educational credentials.



Office of Degree Authorization
Oregon Student Assistance
Commission
1500 Valley River Drive Suite 100
Eugene OR 97401
(541) 687-7452 fax (541) 687-7419
Information:
<http://www.osac.state.or.us/oda>
Email:
oda@mercury.osac.state.or.us



The Oregon Student Assistance Commission (OSAC) administers a variety of state, federal, and privately funded student financial aid programs, including grants and scholarships, for the benefit of Oregonians attending institutions of postsecondary education. The agency helps over 50,000 Oregon students work toward their educational goals each year.