

It's a Matter of "Degrees"

...The Right Accreditation is very Important for Candidate Integrity

By Bruce Dingman and Dr. David Gyertson

With the proliferation of so many options for obtaining academic degrees and professional certifications, it is important that the choice of the institution and the implications for candidate credibility, character and effectiveness, be considered carefully.

There are typically numerous factors when one decides to pursue a degree or professional certification. Cost, location, class convenience, quality of the education, student life, spiritual life, recommendations of family or friends, and availability of scholarships are often considered. Appropriate accreditation of the school and the transferability of credits are also very important, much more so than one might initially realize.

If one makes a mistake in choosing a school, the degree might be viewed as questionable in content or quality and potentially not be accepted for course credit or professional validation. Instead of the degree helping one to be considered for a job, it might raise questions about one's wisdom, intentions or credibility.

There is great variance in the quality and validity represented by the degrees granted from institution to institution. Even the organization's accrediting or recognizing a degree and its institution can be confusing. Here are some principles to keep in mind when selecting or evaluating a degree program and the institution offering it.

- Caution should be taken if the degree costs far less than most schools, or there is significant course credits granted for "life experience," or the school website doesn't list its faculty's degrees by institute. If the primary administrators and/or faculty have obtained their degrees from their institution, that also should be a reason for careful evaluation.
- There should be reason for concern if the course credits are not transferable towards a degree at other schools. Quality institutions are recognized by their peers by accepting valid academic credits into their respective institutions.
- The most reliable accreditations typically come via a regional accrediting organization (see below), or from entities like the Association for Biblical Higher Education (www.ABHE.org), and the Association of Theological Schools (www.ATS.org). Recognition by registration with or approval from other organizations or even a specific State corporation commission does not always mean the school has undergone rigorous academic and financial scrutiny.

Almost anyone can establish a university, college or seminary, create a website and name administrators and faculty who seem professional, charge nominal tuition fees and grant degrees. Some of these entities are merely "paper mills" or "diploma mills" wherewith the paying of a fee, and little if any course work, one can obtain an associate's to a doctorate degree diploma. While many such schools have been closed by state attorney generals due to fraud or misrepresentation, individuals may mistakenly allow their "degrees" to remain on their resumes believing that they add weight and credibility.

Many churches wanting their lay people to gain greater knowledge in theology or ministry have started their own schools. But the lack of appropriate and credible accreditation is an issue.



Some schools are making legitimate efforts to give students a quality education but are either small or have few financial resources. Some students can only afford up to \$10,000 a year for school but are unable to spend the \$20,000-50,000 of an accredited institution, so financially such schools are very attractive. On-line education options are growing at an accelerated pace. Once again the questions addressing the credibility, quality and accreditation of the institution need to be asked.

Here are some “red flags” we’ve encountered during the past decade that might help illustrate the point. A CEO of a highly respected organization sought to be a candidate for a search we were doing. In addition to listing his two degrees from state universities, he claimed a PhD from a university in Amber, Alabama. The school’s website was found by a simple “Google” search of its name. The school did not have the traditional “.edu” web listing, like most legitimate schools, but rather a “.com” listing. The school had no accreditation from the regional authority of higher education, nor did it list faculty and the cost for the PhD was less than \$4,000.

How do professional employment decision makers view such degrees and their inclusion in a resume or job application? We surveyed corporate CEOs, several VP-Human Resources, University Presidents and Provosts, and a recruiter friend in the southeast. Here are a few of the responses.

One university president said “We have a faculty member with a valid PhD who also has a bogus degree. We asked him not to list the bogus degree on his credentials (which he agreed to do). My advice to a person with such a degree would be to remove it and NEVER mention it on a vita again. There is an immediate question raised by such a degree as to integrity and ability. Sadly some have done these quick and easy degrees with the assurance that they are acceptable. They wasted their money and time as well.”

Another said “We look for degrees from regionally accredited institutions in the U.S. as well as reputable universities in other countries using appropriate guidelines for evaluating overseas degrees from unfamiliar institutions. It does raise a major red flag when a person has a degree from a U.S. institution that is not regionally accredited. We would not necessarily rule out a person because they had a degree from a for-profit institution. Degrees from ‘diploma mills’ would not be counted as acceptable. The questions raised by a person who includes such a degree on their resume are certainly valid and should be explored.”

A corporate CEO said: “When a seemingly accomplished person puts one of these store bought degrees on a resume, it makes me suspicious. It cheapens their resume and I wonder why they would do it.”

From the recruiter in the Southeast: “In my opinion, anyone who lists a diploma mill degree invalidates their candidacy.”

So, what do we think of the candidate when they list such degrees? We usually conclude their judgment is faulty and, if hired by our client, wonder if they will continue to demonstrate questionable judgment. The inclusion of such credentials may indicate insecurity or the need to enhance status and feed ego in order to garner respect. In reality the opposite happens.

In conclusion, whether you are an employee seeking to enhance your credentials or an employer carefully reviewing resumes for a strategic hire, remember to validate and verify the quality, credibility and accreditation of the institutions presented. In the end, a quality hire may well be a “matter of degrees!”



Accrediting Agencies

- The **Middle States Association of Colleges & Schools** (www.MiddleStates.org) accredits schools in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland and the District of Columbia. It also accredits schools in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.
- The **New England Association of Schools & Colleges** (www.NEASC.org) is the primary accrediting body for schools operating in Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont and Rhode Island.
- **North Central Association of Colleges & Schools** (www.NorthCentralAssociation.org) accredits colleges and universities in most Midwestern states, as well as some states in the American Southwest. Most of this accreditation is carried out by the Higher Learning Commission, as other parts of the organization work with other types of schools.
- **Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities** (www.NWCCU.org) is the primary accrediting organization for universities and colleges in Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah and Washington.
- **Southern Association of Colleges & Schools** (www.SACS.org) is the primary accrediting body for schools in Texas and the southeastern part of the U.S.
- **Western Association of Schools & Colleges** (www.WASCsenior.org) accredits schools in California and Hawaii. It also provides accreditation for schools in several American island territories that are not part of any state.
- **Association of Biblical Higher Education** (www.ABHE.org), typically accredits smaller, less expensive yet quality Christian post-secondary schools
- **Association of Theological Schools** (www.ATS.edu) for schools in the U.S. and Canada focused solely on Christian theological/ministerial training.

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