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By Vanessa Wamsley
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While unemployment creeps back from the brink of catastrophe and the economy takes tentative steps toward recovery, the world of higher education, unfazed and even bolstered by the financial ups and downs of the last decade, welcomes ever-growing numbers of hopeful students into its fold. Educational institutions have met the glut of students seeking a degree with an excessive array of options, especially in the form of online degrees. While such degrees garnered little respect in the past, more students now choose the online route because they prefer the flexibility in scheduling and location. A breakdown of the types of online degrees and well as the pitfalls and dangers of online educational institutions shows that advantageous online options exist alongside risky and even illegitimate options.

Both degrees from online-only schools and low-residency degrees from traditional colleges eliminate the need for geographical consideration when choosing a school. But not all online degrees deserve consideration. Many online universities lack accreditation. According to the U.S. Department of Education's website at www2.ed.gov, accreditation helps ensure that an institution offers a quality education. In the process, the department recognizes certain accrediting agencies (published on their website) as reliable authorities. These agencies in turn recognize certain institutions (published in a searchable database on the website) as reliable providers of higher learning. Students with degrees from unapproved schools and programs face the challenge of convincing employers of the quality of their learning. Additionally, validated schools rarely accept transfer credits from institutions that do not meet the standards. Clearly, an accredited school or program enjoys superior standing, but unaccredited schools use intentionally deceptive language to convince students that their programs receive official recognition. They may boast licensure from an agency unrecognized by the Department of Education or claim to be internationally certified. A quick check on the ed.gov website determines accreditation.

One other distinction among online degrees deserves address: ranking. While some students eschew elite universities as, well, elitist, diplomas from those schools hold far more meaning in the hands of a human resources officer than a degree from a forgettable online school. To be fair, most educational analysts agree that online degrees are gaining respect from employers. A survey conducted by online school Excelsior College found that 83 percent of questioned CEOs and business owners consider an online degree to be as valid as a degree earned on a traditional campus. But the 2013 U.S. News and World Report ranking of the top 1,600 colleges in the country does not list online schools. Their list of top online degrees names only schools that offer traditional on-campus programs as well as online programs. The diplomas from these schools, whether earned online or on-campus, appear the same, eliminating that nagging question of how much respect an online degree really garners. An online program offered by a more traditional school presents fewer risks than a degree from an online school.

As the demand for online options increased, an illegitimate competitor distinct from both traditional universities and online schools entered the field of options. Online degree mills offer fake diplomas in exchange for money but no actual learning. Their websites claim to offer diplomas in recognition of life or work experience at a much lower cost than what a university would charge for the same degree, but in reality, they offer a pretty piece of expensive paper. A little applied common sense helps any student avoid the scam. Again, accreditation checks out easily at ed.gov.

Investing in a degree from an unaccredited online school wastes time and money. On the other hand, a diploma from a traditional university, whether earned online or on campus, holds the weight a student needs to demonstrate her high level of learning to herself or her employers.

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