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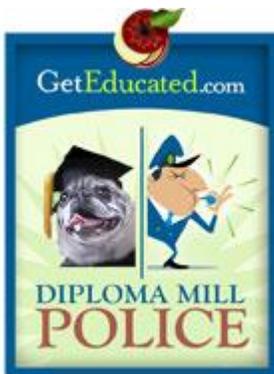
Joyce Lain Kennedy – Tribune Media Syndication – Career Columnist

What's Really Up with Online Study & Degree Mills

DEAR JOYCE: What are degree mills? How do I tell if an online college is real?

Degree mills are run by people who hawk worthless degrees and certificates - such as, "Get a law degree from Harvard by return mail." Today's rash of phony educational documents are mostly being sold online. (Yes, employers usually discover the fakes later if not immediately, and people do get fired for falsifying their educational backgrounds.) Anyone with the cash qualifies for a degree-mill award. Even pets qualify.

Chester is a cute little pug dog in Vermont. His owner, Vicky Phillips, who is one of the nation's leading experts on educational fraud, paid \$499 on the pug's behalf to an online university. As a result, Chester was awarded an MBA (master's degree in business administration).



Chester's alma mater is one of many online universities operating from foreign post office boxes, advertising fast diplomas for a flat fee.

Accreditation? The pug's university says it is accredited by two agencies that, unfortunately for Chester's future outlook, are not recognized as an accrediting agency or association by either the U.S. Department of Education, or by the Council of Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA).

So what? For a number of good reasons, proper accreditation is a very big deal in choosing where you'll study. Accreditation assures you that the institution meets at least minimum established standards of quality.

Proper accreditation isn't foolproof, but without it, you risk an outcome of gaining neither an education nor a usable credential. The issue is complex but here's how to get it straight before sinking into shady educational offers: Visit the CHEA site, chea.org. On the left screen, click on Degree Mills and Accreditation Mills. Although the reading's a bit dry, the information can save

you a world of regret.

So how well did Chester do as a college student? His degree came with a grade point average of 3.19. Had Phillips paid the online university an additional \$100, the pug could have graduated with honors.

Chester's educational whirl is detailed on GetEducated.com, "Pug Dog Gets Online MBA."

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