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Database Fights Diploma Mills

By [Ryan Singel](#)

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Prospective online-learning students have a new tool to help them decide between a master's that might lead to a promotion and a degree that could get them fired.

The U.S. Department of Education launched a [searchable online database](#) Tuesday that includes the names, addresses and enrollment of all schools accredited by organizations recognized by the federal government.

"People don't look that deeply, and diploma mills already know this stuff."

Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine), the chair of the Government Affairs Committee, applauded the anti-fraud database, which she requested be built in January last year.

"Our investigations have shown that diploma mills not only cheat students of their money by giving them useless degrees, they also end up scamming the federal government and businesses that may hire workers who hold these bogus diplomas," Collins said in a written statement.

Assistant Secretary of Education Sally Stroup called the database an "important tool to combat the growing industry of diploma mills that scam unsuspecting consumers and employers by offering fraudulent degrees."

The agency created the database in response to calls for action from Congress in 2004 following [revelations](#) about high-level government officials holding questionable degrees and concerns that diploma mills are using the internet to deceive would-be students.

"Obviously diplomas become a growing concern as the internet has made it easier for these schools to proliferate," said Education Department spokeswoman Jane Glickman. "The department has no direct way to shut them down, but we want people to know what's a legitimate school and what's not."

The white-list database could be a useful tool for would-be students and prospective employers who do not know how to distinguish between [Hamilton University](#), a diploma mill in Wyoming, and [Hamilton College](#), a small, distinguished and legitimately accredited liberal arts school in New York.

Such a tool could be invaluable for those tempted to judge a school by its website.

For instance, Kansas State University's digital learning program's [website](#) looks to have been designed in 1998, while Almeda University's [public face](#) features roll-over drop-down menus and an online chat feature.

But Kansas State offers legitimate classes, while Almeda University, which is not accredited by a recognized agency, grants degrees based on life experience.

Distinguishing between a legitimate and fake online program is further complicated by intricate licensing and accreditation procedures.

The federal government does not accredit any school; it simply recognizes a number of regional and national organizations that evaluate schools.

However, some states do license schools, such as Wyoming does with Hamilton University.

But using a degree from that school for employment in other states, such as Oregon, New Jersey or North Dakota, could lead to jail time for fraud.

This morass of standards and rules confuses many, especially those who are the first in their family to go to college, according to Vicky Phillips, the CEO of [GetEducated.com](#), an online learning clearinghouse that offers a free [anti-diploma-mill service](#) to the confused.

The new database can be useful, according to Phillips, but she considers it an inadequate response to the size of the problem.

"For the government to say we are solving this by putting out a list of accredited colleges, that's a superficial approach that is in some ways more dangerous since it leaves consumers with a false sense that if they are getting a degree from some place in the database, it's OK," Phillips said. "And it may not even be the same Trinity College, it may not be the University of California at Berkeley, it may be the University of Berkeley.

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