

# College Degrees in South Carolina: An Employer's Guide



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This Guide provides basic information to South Carolina employers regarding the nature of college degrees. It covers South Carolina law regarding the use of degrees, how to accurately describe degree needs when advertising for a position, how to evaluate a job applicant's claim of a degree, the growing problem of diploma mill degrees, and related issues.

## What is a degree?

A degree is an academic credential awarded to a student who has completed a specified course of study, typically two years for an associate's degree and four years for a bachelor's degree. Graduate level (master's and doctoral) and professional degrees vary in length.

Degrees are distinguished from other courses of study such as certificate programs (short, specific programs such as seminars) or diploma programs (programs that vary in length, include basic general education courses, but do not yield a degree). The distinctions include the difficulty of coursework; the amount of student effort per credit, the educational attainment required of instructors; and the number of credits required in non-vocational, general education courses, such as liberal arts and sciences. The minimum number of general education credits varies by type of degree and accreditation.

## When should a degree be required for a job?

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

## What is accreditation?

Accreditation is an external evaluative process that helps ensure that colleges meet basic criteria for program operations and quality. Recognized institutional accrediting agencies may be regional (having authority to accredit schools within a given region of the United States) or national (having nationwide accreditation authority over specific types of schools, such as private-career or faith-based schools). Additionally, professional and specialized accrediting bodies are recognized for specific program accreditation.

There are many bogus “accrediting agencies” set up by diploma mills. The U. S. Department of Education hosts a database of federally recognized accrediting associations at <http://www.ed.gov/admins/finaid/accred/index.html>; the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) hosts a database of accrediting organizations it recognizes <http://www.chea.org/Directories/index.asp>.

### **What are religious-exempt degrees?**

About half of U.S. states, including South Carolina, allow certain unaccredited religious degree-granters to issue degrees without state oversight. Some states have significant requirements of such schools, some have none. Such degrees may or may not resemble standard degrees and may or may not meet an employer’s needs. In South Carolina, “religious-exempt” institutions may award degrees if the degree titles are specific to religion or theology.

### **What is a diploma mill (or degree mill)?**

A diploma mill is an institution operating without supervision of a state or professional agency and granting credentials which are either fraudulent or worthless because of the lack of proper standards (Webster’s Third New International Dictionary).

Diploma mills (or degree mills) are substandard or fraudulent “colleges” that offer degrees with little or no serious work. Some are simple frauds, for example, mailboxes to which people send money in exchange for paper that purports to be a college degree. Some claim they grant degrees for “life experience.” Others require some nominal work from the student but do not require the college-level course work that is normally required for a degree. Still others require more than nominal work but it is either not evaluated by qualified individuals or is not evaluated at all.

A precise definition distinguishes between diploma mills (selling fake degrees from real colleges) and degree mills (providing credentials called degrees from fake or substandard colleges (e.g. St. Regis University)). However, you will often see the terms used interchangeably.

### **How can I tell whether an institution is a degree mill?**

Most degree mills have certain characteristics. The Council on Higher Education Accreditation has an excellent overview of the issue at <http://www.chea.org/>.

### **Are all unaccredited colleges degree mills?**

Not all unaccredited colleges are degree mills in the traditional sense of the term. Some unaccredited colleges provide legitimate academic work.

### **Does an ".edu" address mean that a school is legitimate?**

No. Over 200 diploma mills and unaccredited schools have been able to obtain ".edu" extensions 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.

# Evaluating applicant degrees

## **Suggested language for advertising and hiring.**

If you require a traditional academic degree, we suggest that you 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 University of South Carolina, Winthrop University, Spartanburg Technical College, Columbia College, Charleston Southern University, South University, and Furman University are examples of regionally accredited institutions. Foreign equivalents would include such schools as the University of British Columbia, Strathclyde University (Scotland, UK) or Monash University (Australia).

If a degree from a technical school, degree-granting career college, or other school whose programs are more job-specific will work for your needs, we suggest that you include the following statement in recruiting materials:

“Requires an [associate’s, bachelor’s, master’s] degree from an institution accredited by a federally recognized agency or foreign equivalent.”

Institutions such as ITT Technical Institute, Miller-Motte Technical College, and Bob Jones University are examples of such nationally accredited colleges. A list of all South Carolina public, independent, and private colleges and universities that shows their accreditation status is available on the web site of the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education [http://www.che.sc.gov/InfoCntr/Coll\\_Univ.htm](http://www.che.sc.gov/InfoCntr/Coll_Univ.htm).

## **Degrees, Diplomas, and Transcripts**

A degree is the academic credential 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 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 that genuine-looking but false transcripts may also be purchased. Verify with the issuing institution that a transcript is genuine.

## **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. 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 is listed under **Resources**. Very large organizations that hire a significant number of foreign degree holders should consider acquiring some of the specialized American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) publications (see below) on foreign degree evaluations or hiring one or two firms to evaluate such degrees.

## **Some common professional certifications are not degrees.**

Professional certifications such as RN (Registered Nurse) or CPA (Certified Public Accountant) are not degrees. They are professional licenses awarded by a licensing body. Be careful that you do not advertise for a person holding an “RN degree” or the like – there is no such thing. You can, of course, require the license certification.

## **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 CHE’s recommendations regarding the appropriate application of these levels.

### **1. Applicant claim accepted at face value.**

This is acceptable for the positions for which a degree is not required and the person is actually overqualified if a degree-holder.

### **2. Applicant provides copy of diploma.**

Essentially the same as Level 1, with increased likelihood of truthfulness by applicant. If the applicant does not offer a copy, you do not need to ask 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** list in this Guide. NOTE: Some non-U.S. educational systems do no issue transcripts that look like U.S. transcripts.

### **4. Obtain transcript from school.**

This is the **recommended procedure** for all professional or sensitive positions. Any job applicant should be required to have an official transcript. An official transcript is on original transcript paper—typically colored and bearing a watermark and/or 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 that 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.

# Resources

**Higher Education Directory** published by Higher Education Publications (HEP) in Virginia. HEP's web site is <http://www.hepinc.com/>. They may also be contacted at 703-532-2300 or at [info@hepinc.com](mailto:info@hepinc.com). This directory costs about \$80 a year, is very easy to use, and provides all of the basic information that most employers need.

**Accredited Institutions of Postsecondary Education** published by the American Council on Education in cooperation with the Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). It is more comprehensive on some aspects of schools, but is more complicated to use. It has information on nondegree schools and U.S. accredited foreign schools that the other directory does not. Because it comes out only every other year, it tends to be slightly out of date for some contact information. 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**, by Allen Ezell & John Bear, (Prometheus 2005). The best recent overview of fake degree providers and how to spot them. ISBN 1-59102-238-X.

**Accreditation Mills** by Allen Ezell, (AACRAO 2007). AACRAO's newest book is the first publication of its kind to explore the growing influence and threat of accreditation fraud. The author uses his expertise and experiences as an FBI agent to create a comprehensive guide that will prepare you to recognize and expose bogus mills. <http://www.aacrao.org/publications/catalog.cfm>

**Guide to Bogus Institutions and Documents** (AACRAO 2006). An excellent manual describing what to look for in the evaluation of college credentials, foreign and domestic. ISBN 1-57858-072-2  
<http://www.aacrao.org/publications/catalog.cfm>

**The Oregon Office of Degree Authorization (ODA) Web Site** includes a wide variety of information about valid and invalid degrees <<http://www.osac.state.or.us/oda/>>. The site includes links to many other resources including sites in other states, federal and international sites, and a list of over 300 unaccredited degree suppliers. 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.

- **AACRAO:** <http://www.aacrao.org/international/foreignEdCred.cfm> offers a subscription-based foreign college database.
- **National Association of Credential Evaluation Services (NACES) evaluators:** <http://www.naces.org/> Educational Credential Evaluators of Wisconsin, Josef Silny Associates of Florida, and other NACES members are also reliable, and in complex cases we recommend using two evaluators.
- **Non-U.S. evaluators.** The only recommended non-U.S. evaluator (other than national government sources) is HigherEd Consulting of Australia. This firm is especially knowledgeable about Asian and Pacific island institutions. <http://www.higheredconsulting.com.au/links.html>