



# PROTECTING EDUCATION CONSUMERS

RCW:28B.85

## HOW WE PROTECT CONSUMERS

1

Ensure degree-granting institutions meet specific standards of operation as determined in law and rule.

2

Investigate substandard operations and consider student complaints against authorized institutions.

3

Provide copies of student transcripts for closed institutions.

4

Investigate institutions operating illegally in the state and provide consumers with information on diploma mills.

## ENSURE DEGREE-GRANTING INSTITUTIONS MEET SET OPERATION STANDARDS

Any new Washington-based school or out-of-state institution wishing to operate as a degree-granting institution in the state must seek authorization from the Student Achievement Council or be found exempt from authorization requirements as found in statute and rule. Operation is defined as having a physical presence in



Washington State. This can include anything from a campus, a Washington mailing address, a phone number, advertising and recruiting in a manner that specifically targets residents of the state, or offering distance learning degree programs that include required field placements which take place in Washington.

Authorization is dependent on an institution's financial stability, institutional infrastructure, business practices, academic programs, faculty and staff qualifications, student services, accreditation, and recruitment materials. Authorization is program and site specific. The Student Achievement Council reviews each institution, program, and teaching site every two years.

Institutions approved through the State Authorization Reciprocity Agreement (SARA) are not subject to authorization.

SARA-approved institutions may advertise, recruit, and offer field placements in Washington, provided the state in which they are based is SARA-approved and their sole activities fall within the SARA guidelines. SARA schools must however comply with the requirements of professional licensing boards. A list of SARA-approved institutions can be found at: <http://nc-sara.org/>

## ABOUT THE COUNCIL

The Washington Student Achievement Council is a nine-member council and cabinet-level state agency that provides strategic planning, oversight, and advocacy to support increased student success and higher levels of educational attainment in Washington.

## ATTAINMENT GOALS

Washington State has two educational attainment goals:

1. All adults in Washington, ages 25-44, will have a high school diploma or equivalent.
2. At least 70 percent of Washington adults, ages 25-44, will have a postsecondary credential.

## PROGRAM CONTACT

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## STUDENT TRANSCRIPTS FOR CLOSED SCHOOLS

The Student Achievement Council has the authority to take possession of student transcripts from a degree-granting institution that closes, should the transcripts be deemed in danger of destruction. Schools may also voluntarily deposit transcripts with WSAC. WSAC maintains these records in perpetuity and provides copies of the transcripts upon the student's request. Only records provided to WSAC by the school at the time of its closure are available. A list of the schools for which the WSAC holds records may be found on the WSAC website.

## INVESTIGATE SUBSTANDARD OPERATIONS AND STUDENT COMPLAINTS

The Student Achievement Council safeguards consumers by ensuring authorized schools meet minimum standards related to academic quality and financial ability; protecting Washington consumers from substandard, fraudulent, or deceptive activities by authorized schools; and investigating student complaints to determine if an institution is in violation of the Degree-Granting Institutions Act.



Students who believe they have lost tuition and fees as the result of unfair business practices by institutions may outline their concerns and send them to the Student Achievement Council. Unfair business practice is defined in statute as any violation of the requirements found in chapter or rule for degree-granting schools. For example, misrepresenting faculty qualifications or making false claims in a college catalog is an unfair business practice.

## ILLEGAL INSTITUTIONS AND DIPLOMA MILLS

### Investigative Authority:

The Student Achievement Council may investigate degree-granting institutions believed to be operating in Washington State without authorization. Agency staff may also investigate institutions believed to be issuing false academic credentials in Washington. Should it be determined that an institution is operating illegally in the state, staff will contact the institution in an effort to bring it into compliance or ensure it that it ceases such activity in the state.

### False Academic Credentials:

Issuing or using a false academic credential in Washington State is considered a crime. Individuals granting or offering to grant a false academic credential may be subject to a Class C felony, carrying a fine of up to \$10,000 and up to five years in prison.

### Diploma Mills:

A "diploma mill" or "degree mill" is generally defined as a substandard or fraudulent college that provides degrees to students who do little or no college-level work. Some diploma mills are outright frauds, sending a diploma to any applicant who pays a fee. Others may require applicants to take a small number of classes or document their work or life experience for credit.



The WSAC website provides consumers with some warning signs as to whether a school may be a diploma mill.

The Student Achievement Council conducts these activities in conformity with the Degree-Granting Institutions Act and the corresponding regulation (WAC 250-61).