

For-Profit Colleges: Do Your Homework Before You Enroll

Constance Brown wanted to improve her earning potential. When she found a program to train her to become an ultrasound technician, she didn't hesitate.

Brown graduated from that program two years ago. She still hasn't found a job in the field. That's because her program wasn't properly accredited to allow her to sit for her registration exam until she had worked for a year. But most hospitals won't hire techs until they are registered. So she's trapped in a catch-22.

Susan Lehr, vice president of government relations at Florida State College in Jacksonville, says Brown isn't the only graduate with mountains of debt and a worthless degree. "This is a very serious matter," she says.

How can students protect themselves?

* **Check accreditation.** Ask about program accreditation in addition to institutional accreditation. Ask about additional licensing or registration requirements and if the program qualifies students to take any required exams upon graduation. You can check with the Education Department (ope.ed.gov/accreditation) to find out if a school is accredited. Also check with the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (chea.org) to see if a school's accrediting agency is legitimate.

* **Check complaints.** Most state attorney general offices or education departments have consumer divisions that log grievances against educational institutions. A Web search will also turn up news about lawsuits, scams, or accreditation issues. Be sure to find out the name of the school's parent company and search for it, too.

* **Research earning potential.** The Bureau of Labor Statistics (bls.gov) breaks down wage data by specific career and location.

* **Verify stats about graduation, placement, and retention rates.** The National Center for Education Statistics (nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator) is a good place to start.

* **Talk to potential employers.** Ask employers if they are familiar with a program, whether they would hire its graduates, and if they ever have. If employers don't like a particular program, ask if there are other local schools or training that are better.

* **Compare community colleges.** Community colleges and public, nonprofit technical schools often offer programs similar to those of private proprietary schools for a fraction of the cost.

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