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A Question of Degrees

EACH WEEK I hear of another person who has used a degree from a diploma mill to qualify for a job. In most states it is perfectly legal to present as a credential a degree that is purchased for a few hundred dollars online or through the mail, and that involves little or no real academic work. Some employers reject such meaningless paper, but many don't check job seekers' credentials, and some don't care if a prospective employee got a legitimate education. Even the U.S. government until recently failed to check where so-called degrees were from.

In many cases the person presenting the overnight credential already has the skills necessary to do a job but can't get hired or promoted until the magic piece of paper is obtained. One of the main reasons that diploma mills like Saint Regis University are so successful in peddling mail-order degrees is that society has come to place a curious reliance on paper credentials, especially in the past 60 years or so. John Keats's 1965 book, *The Sheepskin Psychosis*, was one of the first to point out the phenomenon. In many fields—teaching, for example—it is not possible to advance or get more pay without constantly collecting graduate degrees.

What for? Artificial reliance on degrees does not serve a public interest, and society should stop supporting it. There is a difference between a degree and a skill set, a degree and experience, a degree and good judgment, a degree and a knowledge base. A degree can serve as a proxy for some portion of those desirable characteristics, but it remains no more than a proxy.

The widely held belief that everyone who is worth

anything should go to college is simply wrong. The result of that peculiar notion is that we are awash in degrees that mean less and less, and degree programs that get longer and longer and produce more layers of paper credentials. Neither Adrienne Rich nor W.S. Merwin required an M.F.A. degree to become a fine poet—why do thousands of people today think they need one?

Clifford Adelman, a senior research analyst in the Education Department, and others have correctly noted that there is at least one countervailing trend: professional certification in high-tech fields. In many such fields, having Microsoft-Certified Systems Engineer glued to your forehead outweighs a clutch of degrees. In effect, the technology sector today resembles manufacturing a hundred years ago: Well-paid jobs exist for people with skills, whether or not they have degrees.

College and government leaders concerned with the future of higher education should think very carefully about the purpose of each degree program. If society needs people to learn certain things to do certain jobs, we should provide training for those jobs—but we should not call that training a degree program unless we have a real reason to do so. Having more degrees does not always make a person more qualified.

Academic administrators and policy makers ought to be questioning the nature and value of degrees, instead of simply assuming that more degrees mean a better society. Some of the most basic and important questions are:

- Does society need more degrees? If so, why?
- What is it about a degree that improves the person who earns it, and society as a whole?

■ What does a college need to include in a degree program for it to be meaningful?

■ What do colleges often include now that is not necessary?

Assume for the sake of argument that undergraduate degree programs primarily benefit the individual rather than society, which is my point of view. The programs allow people to learn enough about their society and culture, and about history and possible futures, to understand and appreciate their world, and to make good decisions in their personal lives and as citizens. That should be the core value of a degree program.

BUT THAT IS NOT what most students experience in college today. We have made Walmart our model for higher education, with 30,000 students swirling about in the educational equivalent of a Big Box store, without sufficient structure. Almost any student can get into a Big Box or at least a Wanna-be Big Box, hunker down for a few years, and emerge with something called a degree and at least nominal skills for some parts of the job market. But just what does that degree represent? The keys to freedom? The money spigot?

As Hugh Mercer Curtler said in *Recalling Education* (ISI Books, 2001), "A person is not free . . . simply because he sees before himself a bewildering variety of goods and has money in his pocket; that person is truly free only if he can order that variety and make it less bewildering." It is that greater freedom to understand complexity—the freedom of the truly educated person—that a degree ought to provide.

A colleague in another state called me last year to ask whether Oregon would permit a college to include the name of a corporation in an actual degree title, like an Associate of Applied Science in Microsoft Windows. Oregon does not allow that, although some states do. But why not simply call such training sequences what they are—product-line training that leads to a professional certification—and offer a certificate instead of a degree, or have the corporation do the training?

The answer is simple: money. If a corporation persuades a college to embed product-line training in a program eligible for Title IV financial aid, the college gets a paying student, the student does not have to pay for the training (until loans come due), and the corporation does not have to do the work, spend the money, or repay the loans. What a deal!

Financial aid, however, is also available for all manner of trade schools and certificate programs, where students can learn the skills they need. They don't need degrees.

Is all job-training learning? Certainly. Should all learning be part of a degree program? Of course not. It is time for colleges and policy makers to take a serious look at what we call degrees, and limit them to learning that is truly worthy of a degree.

It is not elitist to suggest that society assign different, appropriate labels to its various educational programs. We do not consider it snobbery to label a physician by calling her an M.D., to identify a lawyer by saying that he has passed the bar exam, or to expect the people who fix our computer networks to be certified to do so. It is no more elitist to suggest that a degree ought to be given only for certain kinds of learning, structured in specific ways to meet a given set of goals.

Am I arguing for fewer degrees? Yes. The term "degree" has been stretched about as far as even the most credulous mind can be expected to grasp. When society stops caring whether degrees are real—46 states have no law prohibiting the use of diploma-mill degrees as credentials—it's time to re-examine whether people really need them. Let's evaluate the labels we give our academic and training credentials and create a meaningful system, rather than simply sending everyone to get degrees, genuine or bogus.

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