

Why The Degree is Dying (and Being Replaced by Something Better)

I don't mean that college degrees are less pervasive, but that the usefulness of the degree is dying, and in many cases, it's entirely dead. Most people just don't realize it yet.

What is a degree? It purports to be a bundle of goods – knowledge, network, social experience, and a permission slip to compete for certain jobs. It's only one of these. The permission slip, or credential, intended to signal your ability to employers, is the product. That is the thing being bought and sold. The rest is window dressing.

It's easy enough to prove this. Every other aspect of the college experience could be had for free. Move to a college town and do it all, even attend classes, except you can't get the paper without paying tuition. Everyone does, a clear indication that they're buying the credential and not the other stuff.

A degree signals some minimum level of ability to an employer. At least it used to. It's easier than ever to signal a higher level of ability in other ways, rendering the degree moot. If you have something better than a high-school diploma, your diploma doesn't do much for you. Likewise, if you have something better than a degree, your degree doesn't matter much.

More employers are looking for experience, tangible results, giving test projects and trial periods, and fewer are looking at degrees and static resumes with third-party credentials. Thanks to plunging information costs, your body of work is more demonstrable than ever, which makes an institutional stamp of approval less important than ever. What's worth more, a degree in marketing, or proof you built an online store with great conversion rates, marketing copy, and sales numbers? Will that BA in Communications scream to employers that you have the creativity to create and test marketing campaigns, or the resolve to research, pursue, and track sales leads? Unlikely.

This is a good thing. The dying signal power of a degree has many beneficial outcomes.

It's good for young people. They don't need five years and six figures to get started on a great career, and their path from student to professional is more tailored and interesting. They are not a commodity on a jobs board.

It's good for employers. Identifying, recruiting, and training good employees is far more efficient when project and proof based signals are used over institutional stamps.

It's good for classrooms and genuine intellectuals. Yes, you heard that right. There's a value to classroom learning, but it's currently endured unhappily by most students (and

many professors) as a means to get the paper credential. This unholy marriage of credential and classroom has done damage to both. Learning environments without the (supposedly) magic job ticket are of vastly superior quality. Whether free or paid, online or in person, podcasts, courses, videos, and lectures of all kinds freely chosen by interested learners maintain quality that mandated credentialed classes can't touch.

This last point smashes a pernicious myth perpetrated by some academics. That skipping college is anti-intellectual. Far from it. Self-driven learning has never fared better, and the conflation of desperation for a job ticket with thirst for knowledge is absurd.

The death of the degree is not because of a rise in skilled trades either. That is all well and good for those who want it, but the real revolution comes not when more people choose careers that never involved college, but when people realize that they don't need degrees for most of the jobs they thought did.

It's still a remnant, but more and more bright young people are opting out of the degree mill and instead building a portfolio of projects and getting early professional experience. They are, in essence, becoming their own credential instead of buying one from centralized institution. It's most prominent for those with more "soft" skills, stepping into roles in sales, marketing, and operations. It's most prominent at nimble, fast growing tech startups without big HR bureaucracy.

I have seen dozens of 17, 18, 19, and 20 year olds with no degree gain skills and learn how to prove it, often through apprenticeships or unpaid projects, and land amazing jobs paying more than their peers will earn five years later when they shop their degree around. This isn't fantasy, and it isn't just for rare geniuses.

Were it not for the massive subsidies, artificially cheap credit, and regulatory apparatus favoring degrees, their death would be far more rapid and obvious. Still, the revolution is here. The first movers are already taking advantage of it.