

Laissez faire education gives more freedom

Degree requirements stifle individuality

By Allen Hancock

It's time to completely abolish the degree system in higher education. Why eliminate the pinnacle of our studies? By eliminating the degree, the student, rather than the institution, would have the responsibility and freedom to dictate the parameters of education.

Commentary

I shall begin by addressing the concerns of those who would prefer to maintain the degree system. First, supporters of the status quo say that without degrees, businesses would have no way of comparing the qualifications of applicants for a position.

But degrees do not provide an objective basis for adequate comparison. A biology degree from one school may have distinctly different requirements than a biology degree from another school. (Anyone who has had to transfer to another school knows this all too well). The liberal arts component of degrees also varies from one school to another.

Furthermore, degrees do not indicate the quality of education. Degrees do not distinguish A students from C students, do not indicate how well a student integrates the teachings from different courses, and degrees do not indicate if the student has retained what he or she has learned years earlier.

Second, advocates of degrees suggest that employers could not tell if a potential employee had adequate training. Eliminating degrees, though, does not mean we would eliminate transcripts, resumes or interviews. People seeking employment would have to refine their written and oral communication skills to convince personnel agents that they possess the appropriate background rather

than relying on the artifice of a degree. The individual would also have greater opportunity to express other desirable characteristics such as motivation, creativity, sense of humor, punctuality or emotional stability.

Similarly, the employer would have to refine their hiring criteria to include these important — but often overlooked — human characteristics. The result: Businesses would select candidates that more closely meet their needs, saving them money in the long run. People looking for employment would quickly learn what particular characteristics they need to compete in the job market, and employers would quickly learn to not hire people on the basis of a slick interview.

Third, some opponents of laissez faire education contend that students would have no motivation to learn anything beyond the knowledge needed for a particular job. This argument harshly underestimates human nature. If for no other reason, students would want to take a wide range of courses because employers would quickly recognize that their best workers have a broad base of knowledge.

Students could also spread the liberal arts component of their education over many years, which would diversify student demographics and make the cost of education more manageable. Perhaps students would even enjoy rather than dread these courses without the pressure of requirements.

In any case, the value of education to both the individual and to society transcends training for employment. Education should stimulate our intellect to ask ourselves the questions that give us perspective and make life more meaningful. With these motives, heuristics would lead students to evaluate

the reasons for taking courses rather than complacently attending courses without questioning why.

Now I shall assert the advantages of eliminating degrees. By changing the educational system in this manner, we could tailor our own education. For example, a woman aspires to design resorts to make them appealing to visitors. Should she pursue a degree in architecture? Design? Leisure studies? Psychology? Any one of these programs would require her to take a number of unnecessary courses at the expense of more appropriate courses and opportunities.

Without degrees, students could easily take clusters of courses from different departments or different institutions that compliment each other for their own specific needs. This would encourage students to develop an interdisciplinary perspective. The current system discourages the kind of innovation education because it requires immense stamina for a student to jump all the hurdles of bureaucracy to receive a self-designed degree.

Similarly, students who have not narrowed their interests and students who decide to change fields would not lose their investment of coursework necessary to satisfy degree requirements. Of course faculty would still advise students who

need a more concrete framework of courses and extracurricular activities to pursue their career.

Presently, people without degrees have little stature compared to those who do, regardless of their educational background. A person with only one health class left to graduate, for example, has essentially no credentials in the eyes of society and employers. This causes students to blindly work toward earning a degree rather than paying attention to the process of education. Without degrees, a person's merits, achievements, and personal characteristics would dictate stature. The focus of schooling would respectfully return to education.

Finally, degrees simply add to the bureaucratic structure of education. Individuals need to

become educationally autonomous. Would you let the owner of a restaurant tell you what you should eat for your best good? Would you want the government to tell you what career you must pursue? Of course not. Then why let an administration tell students what they need for their education? People should have charge of their own education.

Higher education has many virtues and a number of problems. Let us take a step toward solving some of those problems by revoking the concept of degrees.

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