

The Degree Is Doomed

by Michael Staton

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The credential – the degree or certificate – has long been the quintessential value proposition of higher education. Americans have embraced degrees with a fervor generally reserved for bologna or hot dogs. Everyone should have them! Many and often! And their perceived value elsewhere in the world – in Asia in particular – is if anything even higher.

From the evaluator's standpoint, credentials provide signals that allow one to make quick assumptions about a candidate's potential contribution to an organization and their ability to flourish on the job. To a prospective student (or parent), the value lies in assuming these signals will be accepted in employment markets and other times of social evaluation. These signals have long been known to be imperfect, but they were often the only game in town. Thus, a degree from a top university has been seen to contain crucial information about a person's skills, networks, and work habits.

Higher education, however, is in the midst of dramatic, disruptive change. It is, to use the language of innovation theorists and practitioners, being unbundled. (Some more of my thoughts on higher-ed unbundling can be found [here](#).) And with that unbundling, the traditional credential is rapidly losing relevance. The value of paper degrees lies in a common agreement to accept them as a proxy for competence and status, and that agreement is less rock solid than the higher education establishment would like to believe.

The value of paper degrees will inevitably decline when employers or other evaluators avail themselves of more efficient and holistic ways for applicants to demonstrate aptitude and skill. Evaluative information like work samples, personal representations, peer and manager reviews,

shared content, and scores and badges are creating new signals of aptitude and different types of credentials. Education-technology companies EduClipper and Pathbrite, and also general-interest platforms such as Tumblr and WordPress, are used to show online portfolios. Brilliant has built a math-and-physics community that identifies and challenges top young talent. Knack, Pymetrics, and Kalibrr use games and other assessments that measure work-relevant aptitudes and attitudes. HireArt is a supercharged job board that allows applicants to compete in work challenges relevant to job openings. These new platforms are measuring signals of aptitude with a level of granularity and recency never before possible.

There are sites – notably Degreed and Accredible – that adapt existing notions of the credential to a world of online courses and project work. But there are also entire sectors of the innovation economy that are ceasing to rely on traditional credentials and don't even bother with the skeumorph of an adapted degree. Particularly in the Internet's native careers - design and software engineering – communities of practice have emerged that offer signals of types and varieties that we couldn't even imagine five years ago. Designers now show their work on Dribbble or other design posting and review sites. Software engineers now store their code on GitHub, where other software engineers will follow them and evaluate the product of their labor. On these sites, peers not only review each other but interact in ways that build reputations within the community. User profiles contain work samples and provide community generated indicators of status and skill.

In these fields in the innovation economy, traditional credentials are not only unnecessary but sometimes even a liability. A software CEO I spoke with recently said he avoids job candidates with advanced software engineering degrees because they represent an overinvestment in education that brings with it both higher salary demands and hubris. It's a red flag that warns that a candidate is likely to be an expensive, hard-to-work-with diva who will show no loyalty to the company. MBAs have an even more challenged reputation in the innovation economy. Several of the education startups I advise that directly provide programs to students – notably Dev Bootcamp and the Fullbridge Program – recently met with other immersive unaccredited programs to consider whether to jointly develop a new type of credential. Their conclusion: Credentials are so 20th century.

Employers have never before had such easy access to specific and current information pertaining to a candidates' potential. It is truly unprecedented in all of human history. And society will reorganize around it as we wake up to its power. Who stands to benefit from this reorganization is very much in question.

A credential, like any common currency, is valued only because of the collective agreement to assign it value. The value of a college degree has been in question since the Great Recession, but there have yet to emerge clear alternatives for the public to rally the around. There are plenty of contenders, though, and it won't be long before one of them crystalizes the idea for the masses that the traditional degree is increasingly irrelevant in a world with immediate access to evaluative information.

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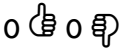
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Patrick DiCenzo 2 years ago

It is troubling to consider the affects of academic inflation on higher education, especially with exorbitant tuition costs at many schools. It seems that MOOC's are playing an increasingly prominent role in preparing individuals for positions and industries that are constantly improving. It is important to ensure that individuals are aware of the vast amount of free educational resources available to them such as edX, Coursera, MIT Open Courseware and many more. Open resources from these websites can be found along with a variety of other open courses, lectures and textbooks at <http://dropkick.co>.

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