



Clarion Call

Is the College Degree Obsolete?

One academic suggests that the standard four-year degree is more hindrance than help.

Jul. 8th, 2008

By [George Leef](#)



Computers and cell phones made just a few years ago are already obsolete. The traditional college baccalaureate degree is centuries old. At least one professor thinks it's also obsolete.

The professor in question is Wick Sloane, who teaches at Bunker Hill Community College. He has written a provocative essay that deliberately echoes Thomas Paine's famous 1776 pamphlet "Common Sense." It was published by the Center for College Affordability and Productivity, headed by Richard Vedder, who praises Sloane's original thinking. Sloane is also a frequent contributor to Inside Higher Ed, where he writes the column "[The Devil's Workshop](#)".

"Why don't we eliminate the bachelor's degree? It's only common sense," Sloane begins. The degree, he concludes, does not advance but actually impedes our ability to realize what should be our true goals, namely providing "millions of citizens with the critical thinking and communication skills to sustain a sound economy and a just society."

So far, so good. It's disturbing that there are millions of Americans who are weak when it comes to reading, writing, basic math, and reasoning. (Some of them are college graduates.) I have written about the evidence of our educational failings [here](#).

Sloane offers the opinion that the nation would be very well served if most Americans could pass the AP exams in English Language and Composition and Statistics. The knowledge and thinking power required to do that would be of great benefit to people, and not only with regard to their employment.

But what does that have to do with the claimed obsolescence of the college degree? Sloane's most telling observation is this: "Common sense at this point begs one to acknowledge that the four-year bachelor's degree model, by its very nature, says that there is only one way to learn." What he means is that the way to earn your college degree is to take a number of courses, all taught in pretty much the same traditional way. People are varied, but the college degree is to a large extent a "one-size-fits-all" thing.

Sloane is on to something here. The ideal teacher and instructional setting for Student A to learn physics may be greatly different from Student B, but once they're enrolled in a college, they'll both have to take physics from Professor C – who

might be far from ideal for both of them. The problem is that earning a degree means that you have to buy the bundle of courses (or at least a bundle) the school offers. You wouldn't want to shop for groceries that way.

Furthermore, buying the bundle has become exceedingly expensive. The bachelor's degree model with its traditional four-year, 36 course model, often costs families more than \$20,000 per year at public universities and as much as \$50,000 per year at private universities. Government financial aid helps, but still getting a college degree carries a price tag that severely strains many budgets and is beyond others.

Why not just buy a portion of the bundle? People can buy just a few groceries rather than a full shopping cart, so why not just a few college courses – the ones that seem to be the most useful and well taught? The obsolescence of the college degree is rooted in the fact that it requires a “bundle” purchase in an age when that makes less and less sense.

The reason why students almost always go for the bundle – the degree -- is because so many doors are closed to individuals who don't have one. A lot of businesses have hiring policies that screen out people without degrees and you can't get into most graduate and professional schools unless you have a BA. You could have a terrific level of aptitude and vast knowledge from informal study, *but none of that counts*. The college degree is like turning on a light switch. Until you get it, the rest of the world assumes that you're in the dark.

Because students know that the degree is the object, many of them are fixated on course credits rather than learning. They're spending years of their lives and racking up huge expenses in a quest for a fancy piece of paper attesting only to the fact that they fulfilled the requirements for a degree at College X or University Y.

No, there isn't much common sense in that.

The college degree does not necessarily betoken any mastery of important skills and knowledge. As a student I knew a few years ago said, “People would be amazed if they knew how easy it is to graduate without learning anything.” And yet the degree is widely regarded as essential to a successful life.

Thomas Jefferson, by the way, thought that his university, the University of Virginia, should not offer degrees, but remain simply a place where students could learn what they wanted to learn, spending as much or as little time as they wanted to. Jefferson rightly saw that the degree rather than knowledge would become the object for many students.

Is the degree obsolete? For a great many people, it costs an awful lot and delivers comparatively little value. It has become, as Jefferson feared, an object unto itself with the search for knowledge playing only a minor role (or none at all). As I argued in my paper “[The Overselling of Higher Education](#)” the college degree is now widely used by employers as a screening device, a first-cut method of ruling out people who are regarded as being less reliable and harder to train. Since huge numbers of Americans now have college degrees, many employers feel that they can screen out applicants with only high school educations.

Unfortunately, many who have college degrees are weak in basic knowledge and skills, aren't easy to train, and aren't especially reliable.

Employers have been catching on to this problem. A number of people in the computer software industry established a school, [Neumont University](#), because they found that too few college graduates had the ability to do the work they needed. Students who complete their course of study there are certified as competent in that field. That's far more valuable than obtaining a BA degree that doesn't certify anything and only tells prospective employers that the individual had enough persistence or cunning to accumulate the credits needed to graduate.

We'll probably see more and more educational programs like Neumont's, certifying that the student has mastered particular skills. The traditional degree won't go the way of the slide rule any time soon, but in the long run I think it will, as competition in the marketplace brings to the fore new and more effective ways of delivering education and showing mastery where it really counts. People will find that preferable to buying a huge educational bundle of questionable worth.

Sloane is calling for an educational revolution and suggests that the iPod and MP3 revolution, which allows people to get just the music they want, efficiently and at low prices, might be the model for it. I'm with him.

© 2011 John Locke Foundation, 200 West Morgan St., Raleigh, NC 27601, (919) 828-3876

Web design by DesignHammer, a Raleigh-Durham web design company