

The Obsolete Bachelor's Degree?

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May 2018

Abstract

According to the modern media, students graduating with only a Bachelor's degree from a higher education setting are having a difficult time finding employment in today's economy and job market. The research does state that many recent graduates are underemployed or are taking a hiatus after completing their degree due to not being able to find a job. This leads many to believe that the Bachelor's degree is becoming obsolete and forcing students to acquire a Master's degree or other forms of education, such as certifications. This paper looks at possible solutions for students and institutions to take so those students graduating from a higher education setting will be able to acquire a well-paying job after they graduate. The solutions that these parties can explore include internships, partnerships, and professorial sabbaticals. The research also indicates that further research and data is required to see the effects and results of a Bachelor's degree graduate being underemployed.

Keywords: Bachelor's degree, underemployed, employment

Introduction

According to the US Department of Education, students who are graduating from the University of Lynchburg (formerly Lynchburg College) are earning on average \$42,100 a year compared to the national median of \$34,000 a year (College Scorecard, n.d.). This single statistic implies that the college is doing well in providing students with the opportunity and knowledge to obtain well-paying jobs; however, this statistic may be misleading because this average was collected from students who entered the College ten years ago (College Scorecard, n.d.). This statistic does not account for the degree field, where graduates currently work, or how many jobs that former student has had since graduation.

Unemployment in the United States was at its highest level in 2009 at 10% (Bureau of Labor Statistics Data, 2018). Today it is at 4.1% and has been holding steady since 2017 (Bureau of Labor Statistics Data, 2018). Employment is currently at the best it has been in years, yet recent graduates are still having trouble finding jobs related to their major field. The focus of this paper is to research ways to make Bachelor degree students more marketable since earning a Bachelor's degree has become more commonplace in recent decades. As more students receive a Bachelor's degree, the Bachelor's degree may be perceived by some as less valuable and may be forcing students to seek a Master's degree or become permanently underemployed. This paper examines some of the reasons why the degree may be perceived as less helpful and poses possible solutions for four year private institutions to help graduates to become more marketable and secure quality jobs using their degree in a related field of study.

In this paper, the term Bachelor's degree is in reference to a four year degree from a private institution of higher education. The term Master's degree refers to the degree one

acquires after completing additional schooling beyond a Bachelor's degree. The term underemployed is used as meaning those who graduated with a Bachelor's degree but are unable to find work in a degree-related field, thus taking a job in a position that does not require a Bachelor's degree (Robinson, 2013). A well-paying job is defined by a job that pays a living wage where the employee does not have to take a second job. Living wage is defined by the amount of money employees need to pay their bills. Success is measured by students who graduate with a bachelor's degree, enter into the workforce in a related field, and earn at least a living wage from an employer. A sabbatical is when a professor takes a paid leave to travel, study, or conduct research.

This research is important to students and faculty because they need to know how to prepare students for employment once they leave that institution. It is especially important for institutions because graduates who secure jobs in which they utilize their degree help to enhance that institution's reputation and possibly attract prospective students. Institutions need improvement in these areas so that better, more, and relative employment opportunities are readily available to graduates.

Literature Review

The research that will be analyzed from peer reviewed articles includes: 1) the current trends of newly graduated students and 2) steps an institution can take to help students be more employable.

In a study of the workplace relevance of a Bachelor's degree in political science, Robinson (2018) surveyed 220 employers, 201 of whom returned surveys. In this study, 46% of employers stated that the Bachelor's degree is the most highly desired degree followed by the

Master's degree at 31% (Robinson, 2018). Results also indicated that while the Bachelor's degree is desirable, skills learned on the job are more important than the formal education an institution provides (Robinson, 2018). While a degree may be desirable to employers looking at potential employees because of the skills that they acquired while in college, the training they receive after they secure the job is extremely valuable.

Abel, Deitz, and Su (2014), noted that the number of people working in an underemployed setting has increased since the great recession in 2001. Currently, almost one third of all college educated workers have a job where a degree is not necessary (Abel et al., 2014). Looking specifically at the 22 year-old age group, the underemployment rate was approximately 56 percent, which later decreased to 40 percent at age 27, and further lowered to 33 percent by age 30 (Abel et al., 2014). This research indicates that new graduates have a more difficult time finding a job in a related field upon graduation but, over time, they are more likely to be able to secure employment in a related field. However, the fact that one-third of graduates are underemployed by age thirty is still concerning.

The statistics stated above come from the U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the U.S. Department of Labor's Occupational Information Network. These data illustrate that new graduates have a tougher time getting a job in a degree-related field upon graduation. These statistics are not unusual because graduates often take time to transition from college to the workplace, both voluntarily and involuntarily. They also want to find a job that relates to their education. However, what is more unusual is the level of those graduates accepting part-time or low-wage positions (Abel et al., 2014). Institutions of higher education may be key players in increasing the college to work pipeline.

Some institutions have taken positive steps to increase the employability of their students immediately following graduation. Research has identified several steps an institution can take to increase readiness for employment in degree-related fields. Velez and Giner (2015) found internships to be positively viewed by employers, students, and higher education institutions alike. These researchers analyzed 57 peer-reviewed articles published in the last 10 years that articulated the positive effects of the internship experience (Velez & Giner, 2015). A few of the positive effects noted were that internships provided practical experience in the workplace, better social skills, a way into the labor market, higher job satisfaction, and a higher salary (Velez & Giner, 2015).

Boman (2013) conducted a research study with 125 teaching assistants concerning their effectiveness. Boman noted that with proper training, participants were able to have more effective teaching behaviors and lost their fear of public speaking. However, the research found that institutions were not implementing this training at the rate needed to produce successful teachers (Boman, 2013). Practicing the skills required of a teacher's assistant helped to increase students' personal self-efficacy and with the addition of feedback from the professor, significant improvement of their performance was observed (Boman, 2013). This research study suggests that offering programs that reinforce professional skills at the collegiate level can better prepare graduates for the workforce.

Furthermore, Scott-Clayton and Minaya (2014) conducted a study on 14,064 students over seven years who were enrolled in a Federal Work-Study (FWS) program at the collegiate level. Slightly positive effects were noted for those students who participated in FWS in terms of their future employment. Specifically, for those students that would not have found employment

outside of the institution, the impact on future employment increased (Scott-Clayton & Minaya, 2014).

In addition to student opportunities for working on campus, increasing faculty engagement in their field of expertise may have an effect on student employment after graduation. Professors can carry heavy teaching loads and service commitments so sabbaticals can provide an important factor in a faculty member's ability to stay current in their field. Carraher, Crocitto, and Sullivan (2014) supported the need of faculty to take sabbaticals so that they do not burn out and can remain up-to-date academically. These researchers examined research contained in five articles and included over 552 participants. The research included surveys and first person accounts. This research showed that those professors who took a sabbatical had more resources and a better overall sense of well-being at their institution (Carraher et al., 2014). Sabbaticals may benefit students as well as the professors because as the professor gains knowledge, that learning can be conveyed to the student. Unfortunately, in some cases, sabbaticals were found to be used as a reward for past events rather than as a developmental tool (Carraher et al., 2014). However, additional empirical studies are needed to study the effects of the sabbatical on faculty and students (Carraher et al., 2014). When institutions utilize sabbaticals effectively, they may be able to assist the students of that institution by providing current research and information in the fields of study.

All of the research studies described in this paper had small sample sizes, limiting generalizability. With the exception of the Federal Work-Study research, the other research studied fewer than 200 people. These small sample sizes could also affect the results simply because not enough data were provided.

Implications of Policies and Practice

Higher education institutions want their students to be successful, but institutions may not be doing everything in their power to maximize student success (Abel et. al., 2014). Some important weaknesses that have been noted by employers of recent graduates include communication, maturity or independence, critical thinking and analysis, and passion and commitment (Robinson, 2013). After graduation, it is expected that students should have refined all of these traits, but the fact that these are common problems indicates these traits may not be a focus in higher education.

There are several recommendations that can be made for a four year private institution to help students succeed after graduation. Recommendations include requiring internships, instituting partnerships and training programs with local companies, offering Federal Work Study programs, and supporting professors' sabbaticals. These programs may help to develop relevant skills that are used in the workplace but may not be focused upon in the classroom (Robinson, 2013).

Institutions, including the University of Lynchburg, offer internship opportunities but do not require them in all programs (Lynchburg Catalogue, 2017). Encouraging students to have an internship experience can assist that student with employment post graduation. Typically, a higher education institution teaches "theoretical knowledge, but employers demand practical skills and experience" in their workplace (Velez & Giner, 2015, p. 121). An internship is a way for a student to receive practical knowledge and professional practice in the field they are studying. The university also benefits from encouraging internships for their students. The internship enhances the institution's reputation and visibility, becomes a recruitment tool to

attract potential students, provides input for the curriculum, creates ties with the community and business community, and identifies possible fundraising opportunities (Velez & Giner, 2015).

In addition, working with local companies and creating partnership training programs can be a positive way for an institution to gain reputation and prestige but also provide valuable learning experiences for their students. A few examples of this type of partnership training program include fire department live-in-programs for majors in fire sciences or criminal justice, nursing clinicals for nursing programs, and student teaching programs for education programs. These programs are known to help students gain the experience, skills, and self-efficacy to acquire and keep a job while performing in the position successfully (Boman, 2013). With partnership training programs, students may feel less anxiety and gain confidence to communicate in their new job (Boman, 2013).

Another option is Federal Work Study programs where a higher education institution offers paid on-campus jobs to their students. This allows the student to receive job experience in an environment where their bosses will be understanding of their school schedule while still being able to earn money. Federal Work Study “participants were 3.7 percentage points more likely than similar non-working students to be employed after six years” (Scott-Clayton & Minaya, 2014, p. 22). The Federal Work Study program may offer opportunities that have a positive effect on future employment.

Finally, sabbaticals for faculty allow professors to study new or current subjects. They then present their learnings to the faculty, staff, and students in their department. There are several benefits to faculty doing this. One of the most frustrating things that students have to do is learn skills that are no longer being used in their degree-seeking field or profession. The

reason that students are learning these outdated skills is because the professor is not current on modern technologies or how their field has changed. With how quickly technology is changing, sabbaticals are one of the best ways for faculty to stay relevant in their fields of study (Carragher et al., 2014). Encouraging faculty to leave the educational setting of campus and offering them opportunities to pursue research or further learning in the field may help them to avoid burnout, stay up to date, and put the field into perspective. It may also give them the opportunity to change and restructure their programs to better serve the students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, taking a break after earning a Bachelor's degree seems to be a typical thing for graduates to do, but the reasons for this break may vary. Some purposely want to take a break before they seek employments but others may have a difficult time securing employment in a degree-related field. This is a trend that can be seen before, during, and after the great recession and will more than likely continue into the future (Abel et al., 2014). College graduates want to get a job in a degree-related field and may take some time to be underemployed to wait for a job in their field. This break may not be all bad. It can help to put the recent graduate's life in perspective and provide an opportunity to discover what is truly important.

The Bachelor's degree is still highly desired by employers and can be a deciding factor in getting hired (Robinson, 2013). Whether the degree helps graduates once they have secured the position is still unclear and given that so many graduates have difficulty finding employment in their field, it may be that institutions of higher education need to take a more active role in providing opportunities for on-the-job experience. Additionally, further research is needed to see if graduates are content with being underemployed, if they used their degree to get the job that

they are underemployed with, or if they are considered underemployed whether they are still able to use their degree. While being underemployed may be all right with the graduate, it is still a responsibility for higher education institutions to give their students the best chances to receive a quality job in their field. By heeding some of the above recommendations, this success may be realized.

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