

## **Grant Bachelor's Degrees by Examination**

Mark Kleiman is a research fellow at Harvard University.  
His essay originally appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*.

Colleges and universities offer their undergraduate students two distinct commodities: an education (or rather the opportunity for one) and a degree. The offer is what antitrust lawyers call a "tie sale": They won't sell you the diploma unless you buy the whole package. As fall approaches and parents dig into their pockets (or apply to their banks) for the \$15,000 a year it now costs to send a child to a "prestige" institution such as the one where I work, it's time to ask why the education-and-degree package shouldn't be unbundled. If a student can achieve on his own, and demonstrate to the faculty, knowledge and competence higher than, say, the median of a school's graduating class, why shouldn't he be able to buy a certificate testifying as much?

Such a certificate--a B.A. by examination--would qualify its holder for employment or for graduate or professional study, without costing him four years of foregone earnings plus the cash price of a small house.

Rather than thinking of this proposal as unbundling credential-granting from education, one might prefer to consider it as substituting a performance standard for a technical-specification standard in the award of degrees.

There are three arguments for such a proposal. First, it would save resources. Second, it would make a valuable credential available to some who cannot now afford it, thus contributing to social mobility. (In addition to those earning their first degrees in this way, B.A.-by-exam programs at high-prestige schools might attract students who feel, often correctly, that their obscure sheepskins are holding them back.)

Third, and more speculatively, it might free high-powered but unconventional high-school graduates to pursue a self-education more useful to them than any pre-packaged education, without shutting themselves out of jobs and advanced-degree programs.

There are two obvious objections. Those who took their B.A.s by examination might miss out on the opportunities college provides for social interaction and other forms of personal and intellectual development. It might also be said that, since no examination could capture the richness of an undergraduate education, B.A.s by exam would have incentives to become, and would in fact be, narrower and shallower than their eight-semester-in-residence counterparts.

The first objection is probably true but not conclusive. Some who would choose the exam route over the regular undergraduate course would probably be wise not to buy the nonacademic attributes of college for four years' income plus \$60,000; others will not, in fact, choose the more expensive option, even if it is the only one offered. To the second objection there are two solutions: high standards and resource-intensive examinations. A process lasting a month and costing \$3,000 to administer and score, testing both general knowledge and competence in a major

field, and involving written, oral and practical components and the preparation of a thesis or the equivalent, should suffice to evaluate the breadth and depth at least as well as the current system does. The interests of the group running an examination program would run parallel with those of the rest of the institution in keeping standards high, and the social and moral pressure to award degrees in borderline cases ought to be much less for exam students than for ordinary undergraduates. By setting standards for examination B.A.s above the median of the eight-semester graduates, an institution could ensure that the exam program raised the average educational level of its degree-holders.

The price to candidates could reflect fully loaded cost plus a substantial contribution to overhead and still look like a bargain. To deal with the unwillingness of potential candidates to gamble several thousand dollars on their chances of success, it might make sense to administer a fairly cheap (\$200) screening test and give anyone who passed a money-back guarantee on the more thorough (and expensive) degree exam. The failure rate could be built into the price, or some insurance company might be willing to administer the screening test and sell failure insurance.

This proposal should not be confused with college credit for "life experience," "urban semesters" or other moves to substitute the pragmatic for the scholarly in undergraduate education. The point is to tie the degree more rather than less tightly to specific academic competence, to certify the result--an educated person--rather than the *process* leading to that result.

If this idea required a consensus in order to be tried out, it would never stand a chance. Fortunately, no such consensus is needed. All it takes is one undeniably first-rate institution willing to break the credential cartel.

---

## TOPIC

Why does Kleiman argue for the idea of awarding bachelor's degrees by examination? To what extent do you agree with Kleiman's contention that it makes sense "to tie the degree [or other certification of success or competence] more rather than less tightly to specific academic competence, to certify the result—an educated person—rather than the *process* leading to that result"? In formulating your answer, you may consider any of the ways in which performance is assessed and certified, and of course you may use specific examples from your personal experience, your observation of others, or any of your reading, including "Grant Bachelor's Degrees by Examination."