



10 Reasons to get the Degree (or Diploma or Certificate)

by Judy Arnall, BA

When I went to public school, I disliked it enormously. It seemed more like a maze to navigate intense social constructs, avoid bullying, constantly trying to fit in with peers, and mollify the teacher's wrath. It was never thought of as a place of learning. I never fit in very well, but did my best to "get through it."

I didn't think I was going to try university, but when I was 25, I decided to give it an honest go. I didn't have good marks, but in the 80's I got in with a 62% average. What a surprise! University was totally different than high school. The difference was control. I could control what I wore because there was no peer pressure to look a certain way. I could control if I attended or not, what courses to take according to my interests, and what mark I wanted to earn with my efforts. I could drop courses, and take new ones. I could eat in class, smoke outside it (ok, it was the 80's) and go to the bathroom whenever I wanted. I was treated like a customer, not a child. I loved it because I loved learning. I graduated with a 3.4 gpa.

As an unschooling family, I am dismayed to hear from others that post-secondary education is over-rated. It certainly may not be for everyone. And in this day when knowledge can be gained from anywhere, I believe that some rules in university must change, like the ability to challenge courses that learners already have self-taught knowledge in. But I do believe in post-secondary education as one way of many ways to learn and should not be discouraged. Here is why:

1. Our world lives by credentials. We all have varying stages of learning, but everyone needs a benchmark – a standard that recognizes a certain level of knowledge and skills. I want the pilot who is steering the plane I'm sitting on to have a minimum amount of practice landing the plane safely. I want the financial advisor I'm hiring to have some knowledge of expertise to guide me in providing myself a retirement without depending on cat food for meals. I want my son's neurosurgeon to be competent enough in putting his skull plates back together again after surgery so that my son is not brain damaged. I understand that people get their education through various ways, but we do need a standard way of measuring if people have acquired a

level of knowledge and skills necessary for public safety. I'm all for people challenging those standardized measurements whether it is an exam, landing a plane or completing surgery. A degree is one standard measurement. We can get our information anywhere. But we need to prove a level of competency. We may not agree with the importance attached to credentials, but so far our world lives by them, and our job as parents is to prepare our children for the world they will live in.

2. Post-secondary education is now the new high school, due to credential inflation. More and more people are getting education over and above high school graduation, so post-secondary education is becoming the norm. A degree does not make one stand out. If anything, it makes one blend in. Nowadays, people get a degree to be the norm. The Master and Phd degree is now what a Bachelors degree was 30 years ago.
3. A degree may not always be practical knowledge, but the one thing it does show is that the holder has initiative, drive and determination to finish something, throughout all personal, academic and financial obstacles. That is a big deal to prospective employers and can open doors to careers not even related to the degree. Yes, there are many other ways to prove grit, but this is one of many and should not be discounted.
4. Quite a few university professors have worked in the real world. They are the most interesting coaches because they are real. They impart knowledge through their unique experiences, stories, hardships, joys and failures. I agree that not much is learned from a person who translates their knowledge through books and has not truly experienced their field because they have lived in the sheltered ivory towers of academia their whole career. But those professors are few and far between.
5. A degree is a sorting hat. Sad, but true. If two people have equal knowledge and skills to do a job, accountability to one's boss, shareholders, company and the public at large demands that the person with the piece of paper (degree, diploma or certificate) will get the job.
6. Many practical skills are taught in a degree now. Mandatory work co-ops, projects and practicums are ways that learners gain those skills with hand's on experiences. The days of just writing, reading and bookwork are gone. It would be even more personalized if learners can challenge exams if they have the knowledge gained outside the classroom. Many secondary schools offer that option to self-directed learners and it would be nice if the post-secondary institutions would also offer challenges. Even better, if one didn't have to pay an arm and a leg for the assessment of their learning, or for the challenge of qualification confer.
7. A degree costs about \$40k in Canada. This can be offset by loans, scholarships and grants as well as working part time. Research shows that over a lifetime, the average person with a degree makes 1 million dollars more than a person with a high school diploma. That's a pretty good Return On Investment.
8. A degree can be earned while employed. I personally finished a degree in 8 years while working full-time and graduated debt free. It took sacrifices, but it opened doors that would be closed in areas I didn't even know about then. I got a job teaching Mom and Baby classes for our government health organization. They won't hire anyone without a degree. It could be a degree in geology, or engineering, teaching, or basket-weaving, but it had to be a degree.
9. If we truly embrace the philosophy of unschooling, our child determines her learning goals and paths, not us. If she wants to get a degree, are we truly supporting her learning by denigrating

her educational goals? We have to suspend our agenda and support her. That is what self-directed education is all about.

10. Lastly, we parents and caregivers cry when we see our child walk the stage at graduation. They have done the hard work to reach *their* goals and we are so proud to support them in any way we can!

In this age, when many required core high school courses can be attained by writing exams to demonstrate self-directed knowledge, there is no barrier to post-secondary education. Loans, grants, scholarships, and part-time jobs can also help. There are many benefits to post-secondary education. Don't rule them out. When the learner is truly ready, the education will appear.

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