

## Chapter 5

# Degree-Free Career Preparation

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Deciding whether you should pursue a degree
  - ▶ Discovering the benefits of You U.
  - ▶ Getting an employer to hire you over someone with more degrees
  - ▶ Mastering the art of keeping current
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*Everyone may tell you the rule is “To do this work, you need a master’s degree . . .” But you want to find out about the exceptions.*

— Richard Bolles, *What Color Is Your Parachute?*

**I**magine how you’d feel knowing you’re an expert who can be counted on to do the job wonderfully. Nothing is more central to career satisfaction.

Of course, key to becoming an expert is good training. This chapter helps you figure out whether you need a degree at all. More often than you may suspect, you can find wiser ways to prepare for your career. This chapter even shows you how to convince an employer to hire you over someone with more degrees. But as good as non-degree training can be, it’s certainly not right for everyone. Ready for a back-for-a-degree stint? Chapter 6 can help.

## *The Bad and the Good about Pursuing a Degree*

Today, many people view a degree as a magic pill. Sometimes it is, and sometimes it isn’t. The following sections will help you decide whether you should take that pill.

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### *Lousy reasons to get a degree*

If you have a good reason, going back for a degree can be a fine idea. Alas, many people don't have a good reason. Here are some classic lousy reasons:

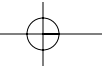


- ✓ **To help decide what career to pursue:** Mistake. Most degree programs expose you to only a fraction of the career options. Far better to choose your career using the approach in Part I of this book.
- ✓ **To postpone looking for a job:** Part III of this book shows you how to land a rewarding job without undue pain. No need to spend years and megabucks to postpone that.
- ✓ **Because you think it will lead to a good job:** Find out whether a degree is absolutely necessary. By informational interviewing, you can find out whether there's more than one way to reach your goal.
- ✓ **To impress friends and family:** Can't you think of less costly and time-consuming ways to do that? How about landing a good job years sooner than if you had gone for a degree?
- ✓ **To feel legitimate:** In many fields, you can more legitimately prepare for your career away from the halls of academe, at what I call *You U.*: a self- and mentor-selected combination of articles, seminars, professional conferences, the Internet, and on-the-job training. Don't commit years of your life and lots of money just to create the illusion of legitimacy — sometimes what a degree mainly provides.
- ✓ **To dazzle employers:** In many fields, your boss is likely to be more impressed with a well-designed *You U.* education than with a diploma that both of you know doesn't mean that you're career competent. Later in this chapter, I show you how to dazzle employers more legitimately.

### *Good reasons to get a degree*

Of course, there are good reasons to pursue a degree:

- ✓ **For your enlightenment.** A degree program can help you become an informed citizen and to experience life more richly.
- ✓ **Some fields absolutely, positively require a degree.** For example, if you want to be a physician, the state isn't going to let you treat patients just because you had a mentor. In fields like engineering, management consulting, investment banking, and at top law firms, employers generally ignore applicants who aren't waving a prestigious diploma.
- ✓ **Your efforts to effect a career change without going back to school have failed.** You hate your current career, so before springing for the big bucks and time for a degree, you've taken seminars and networked in your target field's professional association, sought out mentorships,



read relevant stuff, redone your resume to emphasize your transferable skills, and cold-contacted dozens of potential employers in your target career, yet everyone's telling you that you need a degree.

- ✓ **You need the structure of school.** To design and follow through on a You U. education, you must be a real self-starter, even if you have a mentor. (I show you how to find one later in this chapter.) Many people need the structure of school: Be there from 7 to 9 p.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays; read pages 246 through 384 by next Monday; write a term paper as follows; take the final on December 20, from 2 to 4 p.m.
- ✓ **You want the consistent social contact that comes from meeting from 7 to 9 every Tuesday and Thursday night.**

## *More reasons to save your tuition money*

Many people recognize the drawbacks of getting a degree, yet they insist it's worth the time and money because of what the piece of paper, the diploma, can do for them. Will that be true for you?

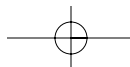


When I think about my 2,000+ degree-holding clients, despite their spending all that time and money on degrees, many feel like imposters in their careers. That's far more psychologically damaging than having acquired competence while lacking only a piece of paper that attests to it. Higher education may be a reasonable way to become a connoisseur of life, but if your goal is to advance your career, in many fields, I've become convinced that higher education is among the most overrated, overpriced products of all.

Yes, people with degrees earn more than people without degrees, but that doesn't mean the degree is the main reason. They earn more mainly because degree seekers, on average, are more able and motivated to begin with. If you locked degree seekers in a closet for four years, they'd likely earn more than people who don't pursue degrees.

True, many employers place want ads that specify a degree. But if you write an application letter like the one I recommend in the later section "Convincing Employers to Hire You without That Degree," many employers will consider you, just as they may consider a candidate who lacks some other job requirement stated in the want ad. Mightn't it be worth trying to land that job without the degree? If it doesn't work, you can go back to school with greater confidence that you really do need that degree.

In her book, *Success Without College*, *New York Times* editor Linda Lee cites a *Newsweek* article by Robert Samuelson that says, even "going to Harvard or Duke won't automatically produce a better job and higher pay. Graduates of these schools generally do well. But they do well because they are talented." The article was titled, "The Worthless Ivy League."



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### Some bad news

The *Phi Delta Kappan*, a prestigious education periodical, provided this discouraging information:

A Rand Corporation report concluded that new doctoral degrees in science and engineering average 25 percent *above* appropriate employment opportunities. A National Science Foundation study found a 41 percent oversupply of PhDs in the supposedly in-demand electrical engineering field and a 33 percent oversupply in civil engineering. Rand charged that universities are oblivious to the job market. . . .

Thousands from other professions face the same situation. Even graduates from America's most prestigious business schools are finding no guarantee of a job. An amazing 16 percent of newly minted MBA

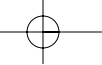
graduates of Stanford University were unable to find jobs. Less prestigious business schools fared even worse: 40 percent of the graduates of Ohio State's business school could not find jobs; the figure for the University of Georgia was 30 percent; for the University of Texas at Austin 24 percent; and for Tulane University 24 percent. Experts project that of the millions of university graduates, only a mere 20 percent will find the well-paying, challenging jobs for which they were trained.

That article was written in 1997. Now, graduate schools admit even more students at the same time as companies are offshoring ever more high-level jobs.

What do you think the following people have in common? Malcolm X, Rush Limbaugh, Barbra Streisand, PBS *NewsHour's* Nina Totenberg, Tom Hanks, Maya Angelou, Ted Turner, Ellen DeGeneres, former Governor Jesse Ventura, IBM founder Thomas Watson, architect Frank Lloyd Wright, former Israeli president David Ben Gurion, Dell Computer founder Michael Dell, Woody Allen, Warren Beatty, Domino's pizza chain founder Tom Monaghan, folksinger Joan Baez, Bill Gates, director Quentin Tarantino, ABC-TV's Peter Jennings, Wendy's founder Dave Thomas, Thomas Edison, Blockbuster Video founder and owner of the Miami Dolphins Wayne Huizenga, William Faulkner, Jane Austen, McDonald's founder Ray Kroc, Oracle founder Larry Ellison, Henry Ford, cosmetics magnate Helena Rubenstein, Ben Franklin, Alexander Graham Bell, Coco Chanel, Walter Cronkite, Walt Disney, Bob Dylan, seven U.S. presidents from Washington to Truman, Leonardo DiCaprio, cookie maker Debbie Fields, Sally Field, Jane Fonda, Buckminster Fuller, Dreamworks co-founder David Geffen, author Alex Haley, Ernest Hemingway, Dustin Hoffman, famed anthropologist Richard Leakey, airplane inventors Wilbur and Orville Wright, Madonna, satirist H. L. Mencken, Martina Navritalova, Rosie O'Donnell, Nathan Pritikin (Pritikin diet), chef Wolfgang Puck, Robert Redford, oil billionaire John D. Rockefeller, Eleanor Roosevelt, NBC mogul David Sarnoff, Apple Computer founder Steve Jobs, and thousands of computer whizzes?

Not one of them has a college degree.

Of course, these people are exceptions, and it may be that only the brilliant or unintelligent can afford to forgo that diploma.



But you need to know one of higher education's dirty secrets. Colleges' Web sites usually trumpet the careers possible with a given major. This information misleads readers into thinking that if they spend the years and money, they'll land one of those careers. Here's the truth: In many fields, as you'll now see, nowhere near enough jobs exist for the number of degree holders.

For example, I was sitting in one of the executive suites in the Time-Life Building, meeting with four editors of one of Time-Warner's major magazines. In the course of conversation, someone said, "It's obscene what these schools of journalism are doing. They're accepting millions of students into their journalism programs knowing full well that 90 percent of them will never make more than McWages from journalism." Everyone nodded.

## *You U. — Often a Better Way*

In more fields than you may think, motivated people can use an approach to career preparation that offers a greater payoff than pursuing a degree. I call it *You University*. At You U., you, perhaps with the help of a mentor you select, decide what you want to learn and then design a plan to learn it (see the following section for more details).

One of my clients, Phillip, wanted to learn how to create partnerships between corporations and schools. Instead of going back for a largely misfitting master's in education or business, he did a You U. "master's." How, you ask? He simply followed these steps:

1. Phillip searched the Net for articles on business-education partnerships.
2. He interviewed, by phone, people at companies involved in those partnerships. One person suggested materials he should read and mentioned an upcoming conference on business-education partnerships.
3. At the conference, our hero attended sessions, spoke with experts, visited the vendor booths, and found out about an on-target newsletter and an Internet discussion group. He also visited corporations with model school programs.

Now, imagine you're a corporate employer looking for someone to develop a program with local schools. Would you rather hire someone with a master's in education, or someone like Phillip, who attended You U.? Good choice. Phillip got hired as a school liaison by a large telecommunications company.

Here's another example: When prominent nature recording artist Jonathon Storm decided to switch from pursuing an architecture degree to becoming a recordist, instead of changing majors, he left school to learn directly from a master. He contacted the nation's leading nature recordist and asked to study personally with him. Today, Jonathon is a master.

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## Part II: Training for That Cool Career



Just look at these differences between degree programs and You U:

- Starting with the basics, in a degree program, you must show up at specified times at that not-so-nearby university — assuming you can get a babysitter and afford the tuition.

In a degree program, you're taught by PhD types, theoreticians often out of touch with the practical knowledge people preparing for a career need most. Worse, you're stuck with whichever professors happen to be at that college.

- In contrast, if you attend You U., you're taught by precisely the right sort of people. Whether you're looking to become a graphic designer, a skyscraper developer, or whatever, you can probably find a master practitioner somewhere in the world willing to mentor you for a fraction of the cost of college tuition. (See the following section for ways to find one.) You can take workshops taught by some of your field's leading practitioners. Searchable, online databases offer plenty of these learning opportunities in every imaginable field.

And if you *are* looking for theoretical knowledge to round out your education, books, audiotapes, and videotapes allow you unlimited access, 24/7, to the world's best theorists. For example, The Teaching Company ([www.teachco.com](http://www.teachco.com)) sells CDs and DVDs of hundreds of liberal arts courses taught by some of the best professors at the most prestigious colleges.

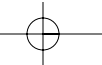
Plus, if you want or need the contact of on-campus college courses, at You U., you're not limited to only one campus. You can find the best professor in your locale for each course. In major cities, you have a number of universities to choose from. (There are many ways to find the good professors. For example, most colleges publish a list of their teaching award winners and/or post the student evaluations of faculty.)



You U. is beyond comparison with regular degree programs, but I do it anyway in Table 5-1. Before heading back for a degree at State U. — let alone Big Bucks Private U. — ask yourself whether the smart choice might not be You U.

**Table 5-1 Degree Program versus You University**

<i>A Degree Program</i>	<i>You U.</i>
A massive amount of information all at one time, when you don't have the opportunity to apply it.	Especially if you learn on the job, you learn what you need when you need it.
Many required courses. Sometimes a course is required mainly because a professor likes to teach it.	Study only what you need and want. Often, get what you need in a fraction of the time it takes to earn a degree.



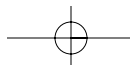
<i><b>A Degree Program</b></i>	<i><b>You U.</b></i>
Get a degree, only to find that you don't remember, let alone use, much of what you were taught. Own a sometimes-valuable piece of paper.	Because you learn what you want, how you want, at the pace you want, often when you have the chance to apply it, you remember much more.
Learn when it's convenient for the professor, like Mondays and Wednesdays from 7 to 10 p.m.	Learn when it's convenient for you.
You are passive. You focus on learning what the professor wants to teach, fearing a low grade if you don't. Many students leave school with poor self-esteem. This is often because of professors who teach material that is of little value outside the classroom yet is difficult, so students feel dumb.	You are empowered. You study what you want, to the level you believe necessary. You U. builds self-reliance and self-confidence. A key part of what makes a career feel good is the sense that you're an expert in your field. In many careers, you're more likely to feel like — and be — an expert with a "degree" from You U.
The material, especially in science or technology, is often obsolete. As long as professors keep cranking out articles in their microniches, many universities care little that they don't update their course material.	You can get up-to-the-minute information: on the Internet, from periodicals, by talking with people in your field, and from seminars offered by your profession's leading practitioners.
Costs range from \$10,000 to more than \$100,000, not to mention the loss of what you could have earned had you not been in a degree program.	Costs are 50 to 90 percent less than in a degree program.

## ***Planning Your You U. Education***

Planning your own education is simpler than you may think, as I show you in the following sections.

### ***Finding a mentor***

Start by finding a mentor who is an expert in your field, someone who can suggest resources, ensure you're covering enough of the bases, and answer your questions. Expect to compensate your mentor with money or by volunteering as her assistant. Sometimes though, people, especially older folks, will mentor you for free. Many people 50-plus want to pass on their wisdom to the next generation.



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Where to find a mentor:

- ✓ Someone in your field whom you already know, like, and respect.
- ✓ At a meeting of your field's professional association. Some such associations have formal mentoring programs.
- ✓ Posting a request for a coach on your field's Internet discussion group.
- ✓ Calling SCORE, the Service Corps of Retired Executives ([www.score.org](http://www.score.org)).
- ✓ The Yellow Pages. Open the Yellow Pages to the appropriate category and dial until you find the right person.
- ✓ Someone who supervises interns. Don't know of anyone? [www.rileyguide.com/intern.html](http://www.rileyguide.com/intern.html) is a portal to databases of internships.
- ✓ That unusual professor with enough practical knowledge to coach you.
- ✓ Post a flyer at the local senior center or an ad in its newsletter.



No need to limit yourself to one mentor; different people provide different expertise and opinions. Besides, you don't want to overtax your mentor.

### *Figuring out what to learn*

When talking with a potential mentor, ask this question: "I'm trying to learn X, Y, and Z, using books, articles, the Internet, CDs, DVDs, and seminars. Any titles you'd particularly recommend?" In addition to asking your mentor(s), you can pose this question to other professionals in the field. Additional ideas can come from

- ✓ A respected member of your professional association
- ✓ Your association's Web site
- ✓ Public, college, or corporate libraries and their librarians

### *Surveying sources of courses*

Consider local colleges' extension programs and regular colleges that focus more on students than on research.

Some people are more satisfied with online classes. As long as you're a self-starter (and not tempted to cheat), they're fast, at-home convenient, and less expensive. They also offer other advantages:





- ✔ With tens of thousands of choices from one-hour quickies to semester-long comprehensives, you can pick an online class on the right topic and in the right length for you. With online classes, you choose what you want instead of what your local university is selling that semester.
- ✔ Before signing up, you can check out an online class's quality more easily than with a live course — many such courses offer a demo. You can check out five courses in an hour without leaving home. The quality of online classes is especially variable. Do check out a course carefully before paying your money.
- ✔ Online classes usually allow you to set your own pace. (That's an advantage and a disadvantage. Procrastinators beware!)
- ✔ Increasingly, online classes are more interactive, often including simulations, demonstrations, and e-mail discussion groups. (You'll want a high-speed Internet connection for video-centric classes.)
- ✔ When a question is asked, *you* get to answer it, without embarrassment, unlike in a live class where only the called-upon student does.
- ✔ You can replay (and fast forward!) video-based classes as often as you like. Try fast-forwarding a live instructor!
- ✔ You can attend class in your slippers.

These resources offer a treasure trove of distance- and in-person learning opportunities:

- ✔ **Peterson's Online Learning** ([www.lifelonglearning.com](http://www.lifelonglearning.com)): A database of credit-bearing distance learning courses offered through universities.
- ✔ **Globewide Network Academy** ([www.gnacademy.org](http://www.gnacademy.org)): A database of 32,000 courses and 6,000 programs.
- ✔ **Distance Education Clearinghouse** ([www.uwex.edu/disted/catalogs.cfm](http://www.uwex.edu/disted/catalogs.cfm)): A portal to directories of distance learning courses and programs.
- ✔ **The Small Business Administration** ([www.sba.gov](http://www.sba.gov)): This federal agency offers many courses for current and aspiring businesspeople.



How'd you like to put a prestigious college's name on your resume after attending class for just a few days and without undergoing a rigorous admissions process? Most designer-label and other colleges allow the public to take in-person or online seminars, workshops, and often, full courses. It's the easiest, fastest route to getting Harvard onto your resume.

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### **I'll bet the house on this: The decline of in-person college for adult students**

I'm convinced that the bricks-and-mortar college's heyday for adult students is over. Increasingly, online learning — getting your knowledge on a just-in-time basis with at-home convenience — puts that 7 to 9 p.m. Tuesday and Thursday, campus-based class to shame. And high-speed Internet brings to your home videos of top teachers augmented by interactive simulations.

I'm even more certain that online classes featuring video lectures from national-star professors will largely replace that backbone of traditional college education: the large lecture class. I'll bet the house that, within a decade, the large in-person lecture class will be as obsolete as the cigar-smoking fad.

### ***Scoping out other learning tools***

Here are additional effective learning techniques you can use in You U.:

- ✔ The book and the article are among the most underrated learning tools. You can often find on-target readings simply by visiting your professional association's Web site, googling for articles, and checking out [amazon.com](http://amazon.com) for books. Using those tools, in just a few minutes, you will have searched millions of books and articles to find the right ones for you. Now tell me that's not cool.
- ✔ Another time-effective learning method is the tutor. For example, rather than taking a course in Java, get a study manual and have a tutor start you off. Then keep a list of questions and problems, and use that as the basis for the next tutoring session. Sources of tutors: your workplace, your professional association or discussion group, community college instructors, and [tutor.com](http://tutor.com).
- ✔ Another practical approach to career training is to buy it as part of a franchise. Look for companies that have a proven system, have been in business at least five years before franchising, have been franchising for at least five years, and have at least ten franchisees. For a searchable database of franchises, see [www.entrepreneur.com/franzone](http://www.entrepreneur.com/franzone).

### ***Convincing Employers to Hire You without That Degree***

Imagine that you're an employer. Do you consider the candidate who wrote the letter in Figure 5-1?

Dear Ms. Hirer,

When you're inundated with applications, it's tempting to weed out those without a prestigious MBA, but I believe I'm worth a look precisely because I don't have any MBA.

I considered getting an MBA, but after talking with a number of MBA holders and examining the courses I would have to take and their relevance (or, too often, lack thereof) to becoming a fine software marketing manager, I concluded that the two full-time years could be more profitably spent.

I contacted directors of marketing at leading Silicon Valley software companies and offered to work for them for no pay in exchange for their mentoring. I figured that was cheap tuition for the on-target learning I would receive. A marketing manager at HP took me on. After three months, I felt I had learned about as much from him as I could, whereupon I made a similar arrangement with a director of marketing at Cisco Systems.

In these apprenticeships, I was deeply involved in a number of projects similar to those mentioned in your ad, specifically Internet marketing and managing a national consumer branding campaign. In addition, I attend American Marketing Association conferences, read the best articles and books recommended by the AMA, and spend much of my commute time listening to relevant books on CD. To get the bigger picture, I even read a couple of books by leading academics.

But now comes the moment of truth. In choosing a self-directed education over a traditional one, I believe I prioritized substance over form. Now the question is: Will you interview me?

I hope that you'll appreciate my having developed an outside-the-box learning plan, that I was assertive enough to make it happen, and persistent enough to see it through to completion without a professor and deadlines forcing me to do so. Perhaps more important, in working at the elbow of top hardware marketing executives, I learned a tremendous amount about how to do the job well.

I recently discussed my You U. education with an MBA holder from Stanford, and he said that I probably learned more of real-world value than he did.

I'm hoping you will call me for an interview, but as any good employee, I won't just passively wait. If I haven't heard from you in a week, I will take the liberty of phoning to follow up.

I enclose samples of the deliverables I produced during my work at HP and Cisco. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Christopher Wah

**Figure 5-1:**  
A letter like this can convince an employer to hire you without a specific degree.

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### Two cool compromises

A certificate program is often a good compromise between You U. and a degree program. For a master list, see [certificates.gradschools.com](http://certificates.gradschools.com).

For blue-collar professions, formal apprenticeships sponsored by a union or state government represent another good option. Lots of supervised

hands-on learning, punctuated by practical, low-cost community college classes — and you earn while you learn. Interested? Check out the federal government's clearinghouse of apprenticeship information: [www.doleta.gov/OA/eta\\_default.cfm](http://www.doleta.gov/OA/eta_default.cfm).

This letter makes clear that the candidate both learned more of practical value than in most graduate programs and, perhaps more important, was a take-charge person — precisely what many employers look for in an employee with an advanced degree.

Would you interview Christopher? Even if other applicants had Ivy League degrees? During a speech, I asked the 300-person audience that question. Almost everyone raised his or her hand. On my radio show, I asked the same question of the associate dean of the U.C. Berkeley Business School, and even he agreed that he'd interview Christopher.

## Engaging in Lifelong Learning



Lifelong learning has become a cliché, and it can sound exhausting — forever upgrading yourself until you retire. But there's an upside. In past generations, after years on the job, many people felt bored — like they had been there, done that. There always have been new things you *can* learn, but now to survive, you probably *must* learn them. Consider staying permanently enrolled in You U. That can mean one or more of the following:

- ✓ Join or form a group of your peers that connects live or electronically, to discuss problems and solutions.
- ✓ Don't let the monthly issues of the magazine from your professional association stack up.
- ✓ Attend at least one professional conference a year.
- ✓ Find one or more mentors. Times have changed. A mentor/protégé relationship used to be a one-at-a-time, time-intensive deal. Today, such a relationship is likely to be more fluid. You call with a question, exchange e-mails on a new development, and occasionally commiserate over a cup of coffee. Ideally, you'll have a few mentor relationships, some in which you're the mentor, others in which you're the protégé.

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