

A matter of degree

Last week, U.S. Olympic Committee President Sandra Baldwin resigned after admitting she misrepresented her educational achievements in her official biography. She claimed she had a doctoral degree when she actually never had earned one.

This was one of several recently reported incidents in which someone misrepresented their educational achievements – and not necessarily because it was a job requirement, but to enhance their image.

I do not understand the motivation that would drive someone to claim to have a degree that he or she did not earn. When did the letters preceding or following a name become more valuable than the name itself? After all, what is a degree really worth? What does a degree really tell you about a person?

Degrees don't tell you anything about a person's intelligence.

Some people who hold higher degrees believe these degrees provide public certification of their superior intelligence. These are the people who make certain that "Dr." precedes their name or "Ph.D." follows it in every type of correspondence, including thank-you notes for birthday presents.

When these people encounter an intelligent person without a degree, it surprises them. How could a person be intelligent and not hold a degree? These folks don't understand that many people of high intelligence hold no degrees. And many people of questionable intelligence hold high degrees. In fact, I have met too many Ph.Ds.



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who seem to have had the common sense educated right out of them. It scares me. Which is why I have chosen *not* to pursue a higher degree at this point.

Degrees also don't tell you anything about a person's competence. Would you have more confidence in an auto mechanic with a master's degree in Automotive Theory or one with a dozen technical certificates hanging on the wall of

his shop? This is the reason "certification" is so important these days. Certification is not about classes on a transcript – it's about demonstrated skills. For example, in many health careers, such as nursing, simply attaining the appropriate degree(s) is not enough. You still have to pass a certification or licensing exam to verify you have the necessary skills. With your health – and even your life – at stake, would you have it any other way?

Finally, degrees don't tell you about character.

In the world of work – and elsewhere – does anything matter more than character and personal integrity? Obviously, competence matters at work, but I don't think it matters more than

character. Was the fall of Enron related to a lack of competence or a deficiency in some folks' ability to define right from wrong? I think it was the latter.

Integrity has one little problem: there is no way to certify it. A person's degree tells you nothing about his or her character. Likewise, certifications of technical competence are meaningless here. How do you identify integrity in a person, other than based upon your own experiences with them and the demonstration of consistency and honesty over time? It's not something you can list on a resume and verify with a phone call.

Please don't misunderstand my perspective. I don't think higher education is completely meaningless. My sister is currently in the middle of doctoral studies in genetics, and she is learning information and engaged in a level of research that she would not be able to find anywhere other than a university offering that level of coursework.

I also understand that in some fields, such as education, specific degrees serve as entry-level job requirements or as prerequisites to advancement. Some of my best friends at the community college where I work hold doctoral degrees (and I don't hold it against them).

I just think that those degrees often don't mean as much as people would like to believe. They don't prove to anyone that you are intelligent or competent or honest. People will make their own judgments about these things, in spite of, not because of, the degrees you do or do not hold.

And because of that, it's not something worth lying about.