



## **Josh Boldt**

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# The Ph.D. Needs CPR



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*Also today on the future of higher ed: Sarah Kendzior asks what it means to [promise affordable education](#) to middle-class students.*

Does anyone balk at a surgeon who expects a job after medical school? How about a dentist? If medical doctors were struggling to find work, would we blame them and tell them to quit whining about the poor job market?

Probably not. Society respects medical doctors—venerates them, even. Spending one's 20s and 30s in medical residency is lauded as honorable and wise. It's an act of sacrifice that deserves to be rewarded after graduation, which is why no one raises an eyebrow at the (appropriately) high salaries awarded to these professionals. Doctors sacrifice some of their productive years

in exchange for a good job and a good salary later. That's the unspoken agreement and no one seems to have a problem with it.

So why is the conversation so different with regard to the doctor of philosophy? These students undergo the same kind of apprenticeship and mentoring phase. They sacrifice their 20s and 30s in poor-paying graduate assistantships and adjunct professor positions while they learn their craft, just as medical doctors do (and they usually earn far less money during this training than a medical resident earns).

Ph.D. students and medical students both go through similar apprenticeships, they both graduate with the same title, and they both commit themselves to helping others and to advancing society. So why does America tend to venerate one type of doctor and disparage the other?

Partly because the medical profession is tangible, physical. If you can give a flu shot or perform a heart bypass, your value is palpable. Not only that, but market scarcity in the medical field presents a clear and present danger to the country. A medical doctor's value derives not just much from what she *can* do, but from what she could *not* do if she were to choose so: If she withheld her skills, there would be serious repercussions for society. To an extent, we respect doctors because we *have* to—because their knowledge is scarce and because it's vital to our survival.

Well, I happen to believe—as do most other people in academe—that the knowledge held by a Ph.D. is also scarce and vital to our survival. Most Ph.D. holders are at the cutting edge of intellectual exchange. They conduct research that could change the way humans think.

The problem is no one else believes that. No one outside of academe thinks the doctor of philosophy is as valuable as the doctor of medicine. The medical profession has done a better job of demonstrating its value to society than has the academy. It has done a better job of proving why it's important and why its members should be respected. It has done a better job of creating a market that depends on its doctors' willingness to deliver services.

And then there's academe, where the attitude has traditionally been: We know we're important, you know we're important, let's leave it at that. This posture of insularity has worked for a few centuries, but the culture is changing. It's no longer good enough just to sacrifice for the sake of knowledge itself. Now we have to prove why that knowledge is important. We have to make the case for our relevance.

Let's be honest. Academics have never really been great at proving their relevance. They've never really had to be. In the past, the value of a college degree was understood by society.

Colleges were the gatekeepers of that coveted degree. That, in and of itself, was enough to prove that those who work in academe shouldn't be messed with. The credential we bestowed spoke for us.

But times are changing. The degree isn't what it used to be. Going to college is no longer an automatic decision, but instead “deserves the scrutiny an individual would give to any risky investment,” as [a 2013 report](#) from [three university researchers](#) suggested.

We've read about the educational startups that salivate at the thought of stealing market share from colleges' longstanding stronghold on education. They are knocking on the doors of higher ed, anxiously waiting to introduce the market efficiencies and rapid innovation that universities currently resist. At this point, the leash which restrains these startups is made of mere threads.

The final barrier to the collapse of the current system is the accreditation process. Students pay colleges money; colleges award students a degree. The accreditation system confers value on that degree. It states that a college degree has an exchange value in the marketplace.

As of now, only accredited universities are allowed to reward their students with that exchange value. But if the accreditation system is bypassed—and [recent trends](#) suggest it soon will be—then colleges will lose a major battle in the war to prove their relevance to society.

When this happens, the doctor of philosophy will be knocked even further down the ladder of market respect. If anyone with specialized knowledge can offer a course at an educational startup, then what is the point of earning a Ph.D.? If the Ph.D is the Rodney Dangerfield of the U.S. economy now, just wait til no career exists that actually requires the terminal degree. Talk about irrelevant.

But there is a way to save the dignity of the degree and to restore prestige to the quest for higher learning. We need to carve out spaces in the marketplace for which an advanced degree is an asset, even a prerequisite. I'll give you a hint: Teaching as an adjunct is not one of those spaces. That career has been so thoroughly devalued by the current system that earning a Ph.D. in order to do it is a complete joke. And that's probably not going to get better.

No, the savior lies in the alt-ac, the so-called [alternate-academic career track](#). In jobs outside of the academy (or at least outside of the professoriate) that require advanced writing and research skills, but do not necessarily involve teaching. By continuing to train people to become professors, academe is making itself irrelevant. We're creating job seekers for an ancient civilization.

If we can pivot and refocus the Ph.D. degree on other career paths, we can make it relevant again. We can create new market niches that require terminal degrees, thereby re-energizing the higher education economy and revitalizing the degree.

As long as we keep training people for obsolete careers, the doctor of philosophy will never command the same respect as the doctor of medicine.

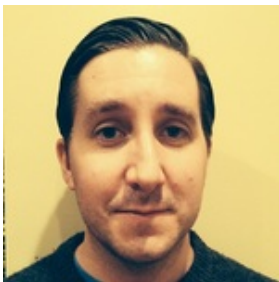
*[Original image:](#) Wikipedia user Rama.*

**Correction (February 20, 4:29 p.m.):** An earlier version of this piece erroneously attributed a report calling college "a risky investment" to College Summit, a nonprofit group. That report was written by three university researchers. We regret the error.

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