



## “Jobless Ph.D. for Hire: Will Teach Students Who Cannot Afford College”

by Thomas F. Bertonneau

### Summary

Permitting Ph.D.s to provide instruction for college credit in independent, off-campus settings would ease the glut of underemployed doctoral degree holders and make higher education much more accessible to poorer students.

*Main text word count: 698*

According to the College Board, a child born today probably will face college costs ranging from \$84,000 for four years at a public university to more than \$205,000 for a degree from a private institution.

What if lawmakers discovered that they had it in their power to vastly reduce the cost of higher education, freeing families to obtain better health care, housing, and transportation—and in many cases actually improve the quality of higher education at the same time?

They do have it in their power. Recently, syndicated columnist George Will noted that the United States is experiencing “a glut of Ph.D.s.” Particularly in the humanities, universities turn out far more doctorates than the system can absorb. What would happen if the doctorate issued, say, by Ann Arbor’s English Department (or any other department in any of the 14 branches of the Michigan public university system) carried with it not only its obvious prestige—but the privilege to teach college-level courses, for credit, in the state of Michigan?

This would be a license merely to do what physicians and lawyers may currently do—hang out a shingle and operate independent, professional businesses. What would happen to higher education in

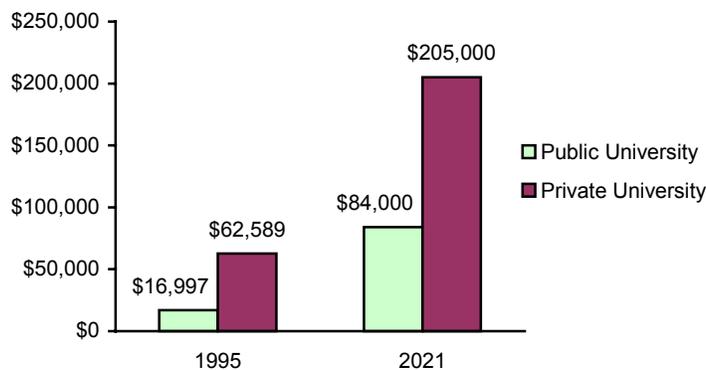
Michigan if anyone with a Ph.D. from an accredited institution could offer for-credit course work in their field of competency?

As the University of Michigan English Department’s description of its doctoral program notes, “the Ph.D. is the basic credential for positions in college and university teaching.” Currently, however, so many holders of humanities doctorates are clamoring for so few academic positions that a job advertisement brings in hundreds of applications. At the same time, as indicated by the appearance of institutions like the Western Governors’ University (an Internet access point

to nearly 500 university-level courses), the demand for higher education is greater than ever.

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### Increasing Costs of a Four-Year Degree



Sources: National Center for Education Statistics, College Board

Allowing individual, credentialed entrepreneurs to provide higher education offers some striking advantages for purchasers of college level courses. For example, educational entrepreneurs would be looking to develop their own clienteles. This would give them a financial incentive to set prices lower—in many cases substantially lower—than those demanded by the state system.

Currently in Michigan, students enrolled in state universities are subsidized by taxpayers. In the case of the educational entrepreneur, however, no such subsidy would be necessary. Individual entrepreneurs would not be using state facilities, so they would not need the subsidy.

Allowing newly minted Ph.D.s to enter independent private practice would immediately create opportunities for greater ethnic and cultural diversity among instructors. Perhaps most importantly, it would also increase diversity in pedagogical approaches, in points of view, and in the number and type of venues where students may acquire credit toward a degree. High standards could be maintained through school accreditation of instructors, by monitoring through professional associations as in the legal and health professions, and through testing of both instructors and students.

Just think of all the advantages for students. The average cost of an undergraduate course in the state universities of Michigan hovers around \$700. What do students get for this amount? Often, if it is a required or lower-division course, they get a graduate student teacher and a seat in a classroom with hundreds of other students. Suppose, however, that the local Yellow Pages feature two or three pages listing for-credit coursework available from private, individual, entrepreneurial teachers? Suppose students notice that the same course is currently being offered by private instructors with Ph.D.s in small group settings at rates of, say, \$350 per course? For half the university's price, they could get a smaller class and a fully qualified teacher. At \$350 per customer, and teaching two classes every semester, an entrepreneurial teacher could earn \$25,000 per year—comparable to the pay received by on-campus adjunct instructors.

It could happen in the near future, if lawmakers in Lansing take to the idea. There is a "glut," as George Will put it, of people who are eager to teach at the college level but who can not find employment in an age of departmental downsizing and politically influenced hiring.

Why not bring these folks together with students frustrated by what they get for their money in the current system?

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