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The Need for a Knowledge and Skills Audit of State Government Jobs

By Byron Schlomach and Vance Fried

Many state job descriptions appear to require more educational background from applicants to apply and gain a job than is necessary to provide the knowledge and skills the job truly requires. This credential inflation is a ubiquitous problem in the nation, and not just in government. Credential inflation blocks employment opportunities for those who have gained knowledge and skills without having obtained costly college degrees. It also increases the cost of government because it limits the pool of potential applicants. The State of Oklahoma should carry out a comprehensive review of state jobs' knowledge and skills requirements to insure that educational requirements for these jobs are not excessive. Instead of automatically defaulting to a bachelor's degree requirement, the state

should identify the specific knowledge and skills needed for a given job.

The Credential Inflation Problem

The United States is an over-credentialed society in which 36 percent of workers with college degrees are in jobs that do not require college preparation.¹ A study by the Harvard Business School found that 67 percent of production supervisor job postings asked for a college degree when only 16 percent of employed production supervisors had such a qualification.² One reason for this is the over-selling of college degrees. Family, peer, and community expectations push many towards college to obtain an unneeded, and sometimes unwanted, degree. Government guaranteed loans also encourage college attendance by making college seem more affordable than it truly is. Yet another problem is that the high school diploma is an increasingly meaningless credential,³ so a college degree often seems necessary as a way for employers to differentiate wheat from chaff.

The traditional argument to students in favor of getting a college degree is that as of 2013, 25 to 32 year olds with college degrees earned an average \$17,500 more per year than those with only high school degrees.⁴ However, this fails to account for the cost side of the college equation, which

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includes several years of lost income, as well as several years of fees and book costs. It also fails to account for the impact of the glut of college-degreed workers displacing workers without college degrees in skilled jobs that pay well, but that do not truly require college degrees.

Employers are using a college degree as an initial screening mechanism in hiring, even when the jobs could be done just as well by those without college credentials.⁵ The college degree is a crude proxy for maturity, good work habits, and persistence. This currently works because of the glut of people with college degrees in non-technical fields. Private employers can afford to use college degrees for applicant screening because the cost of doing so is foisted on taxpayers at all levels of government and families who spend copiously on college educations.

Partly due to a paucity of college-degreed individuals with certain skills, some private sector employers are moving away from college degrees to micro-credentials. The tech industry is an example, with several certifications helping to qualify people for jobs in high demand.⁶ Google, Apple, and IBM are among companies the job-search site, Glassdoor, has identified as no longer requiring college degrees from job applicants.⁷ Some companies are offering highly-specialized and quick-to-evolve nano-degrees, which give learners flexibility to focus on the precise skills they need for the job they are seeking right now.⁸

Credential Inflation in Oklahoma Government

Credential inflation is an issue when it comes to hiring Oklahoma government employees. It has four negative effects. First, when degrees are demanded merely to narrow the applicant pool, it effectively forces people to gain degrees with minimal productive value. Second, the high costs of knowledge and skills education are wasted when individuals perform tasks that do not require the knowledge and skills they have been trained to use. Third, those who have the knowledge and skills to perform a job, but not a college degree, lose out on a good job opportunity. Finally, the cost of government goes up because taxpayers are paying a wage adequate to attract college-degreed applicants when college-degree level knowledge and skills are not necessary to perform the job.

A quick perusal of job listings at the state level reveals that required education levels often match job characteristics pretty well; but it is also common to see college degrees listed as minimum requirements for jobs with knowledge and skills requirements that can be gained without a college degree.

One example is “Resource Coordinator” with the

Department of Education. This job involves coordinating services for certain infants, toddlers, and their families. A bachelor’s degree is strictly required although the requisite knowledge and skills for the job could have been gained in a myriad of ways. While there is little reason to believe that someone fresh out of high school would be qualified, there is every reason to believe that other life and educational experiences could qualify someone to do an excellent job in the position.

Another example is “Network Administrator” in the Administrative Office of the Courts. This job involves helping manage a computer network. It requires a bachelor’s degree OR 8 years of experience. Apparently, a tech certification or an associate’s degree with 6 years of experience will not do, at least not according to the posted specifications. On the other hand, this “lesser” level of experience does qualify one for an “Information Security Administrator” position, although the listed background requirements, nonetheless, reflect a preference for a bachelor’s degree.

Positions requiring computer-related technical knowledge and skills, such as “Data Governance Manager” in the Department of Health and “Data Conversion Specialist” in the Department of Corrections commonly require bachelor’s degrees, or express a clear preference for college degrees. Yet, it is increasingly common for information technology workers to gain tech-related knowledge and skills online through rigorous certifications, including CompTIA, Salesforce, and Microsoft Certified Systems Administrator, to name only a few.⁹

Gaining these certifications takes much less time and expense than a college degree program. For example, Udacity’s back-end web developer certification is roughly the equivalent of a six hour college course. Gaining job-relevant knowledge and skills does not require earning a four-year degree. In fact, applicants with the necessary specific certification may be a better match for a job than someone with a bachelor’s degree in information systems.

Four-year college degrees are not necessary to perform basic accounting and clerical work. But a bachelor’s degree is required for “Current Employee Enrollment Specialist” (employee benefits coordinator) and “Accountant I” (basic bookkeeping involving the posting of transactions), positions at the Office of Management and Enterprise Services and Department of Corrections, respectively.

Some post-secondary coursework might be needed for these jobs to be performed well. Given the state of high school preparation, it is understandable that it would be preferred that these jobs be filled with individuals with more preparation in communication and basic computing knowledge and skills. But these knowledge and skill levels

can be gained with a limited number of courses in: **1)** English composition, **2)** basic information technology, **3)** communications, and **4)** basic analytics.

Since we are talking about state government jobs, perhaps courses in U.S. History and American Government should be required. In addition, one or two courses specific to a specialty might be warranted, such as courses in basic accounting or human development. In other words, only one or two semesters of post-secondary education are actually necessary for many state jobs that call for 8 semesters – a full bachelor’s degree – of education. What’s more, many universities produce generalists, so a “qualified” candidate might possess the desired degree in a related field, in spite of having taken few or none of the most relevant courses.

Recommendation

The legislature should require that every unit of state government perform a job knowledge and skills audit for any jobs requiring more than a high school education. This would consist of a review of the knowledge and skills necessary to carry out the specific position to determine if the educational and experience requirements match the knowledge and skills needed to do the job.

The audit would be done with a view toward winnowing excessive minimum education requirements so as to create

more opportunity for those seeking positions and to save taxpayers’ money. However, this is not to say that no state job can require a bachelor’s degree, or more. In fact, skills necessary to perform some state jobs require the holder to have an occupational license, necessitating years of schooling and a graduate degree (e.g. Physician, Clinical Psychologist, or Attorney).

Unless the knowledge and skills that uniquely result from gaining a college degree are key to performing a job, state agencies should not require a degree. Rather, the job description should only require the specific knowledge and skills necessary for that job. In most cases this simply means requiring the applicant to have completed specific college courses that teach relevant knowledge and skills such as English Composition and/or American Government, or to have gained the knowledge and skills through work experience.

If fewer than 20 specific college courses (60 hours) are needed for a job, then the specific courses should be listed as the required education for the position. If more than 20 courses are needed, then it would be permissible to default to a bachelor’s degree requirement in a specific discipline(s). While many existing jobs’ skill levels will continue to require a bachelor’s degree, many others will require a year or less of post-secondary education.

End Notes



- ¹ George Leef, “College Degrees Aren’t Becoming More Valuable -- Their Glut Confines People Without Them To A Shrinking, Low-Pay Sector Of The Market,” *Forbes*, April 21, 2014, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/georgeleef/2014/04/21/college-degrees-arent-becoming-more-valuable-their-glut-confines-people-without-them-to-a-shrinking-low-pay-sector-of-the-market/#31312ffa498e>
- ² Joseph B. Fuller and Manjari Raman, “Dismissed by Degrees: How Degree Inflation Is Undermining U.S. Competitiveness and Hurting America’s Middle Class,” Harvard Business School, Grads of Life and Accenture, October 2017, p. 2, <https://www.hbs.edu/managing-the-future-of-work/Documents/dismissed-by-degrees.pdf>.
- ³ Brandon L. Wright, “Has the High School Diploma Lost All Meaning?” Fordham Institute commentary, December 4, 2017, <https://edexcellence.net/articles/has-the-high-school-diploma-lost-all-meaning>.
- ⁴ Danielle Kurtzleben, “Study: Income Gap Between Young College and High School Grads Widens,” *U.S. News & World Report*, February 11, 2014, <https://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2014/02/11/study-income-gap-between-young-college-and-high-school-grads-widens>.
- ⁵ George Leef, *Forbes*, April 21, 2014.
- ⁶ Ed Tittel and Mary Kyle, “Best Computer Hardware Certifications 2019,” Business News Daily, December 19, 2018, <https://www.businessnewsdaily.com/10759-hardware-certifications.html>.
- ⁷ Courtney Connley, “Google, Apple and 12 Other Companies That No Longer Require Employees to Have a College Degree,” *CNBC Make It*, October 8, 2018, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/08/16/15-companies-that-no-longer-require-employees-to-have-a-college-degree.html>.
- ⁸ See <https://www.udacity.com/>.
- ⁹ StackCommerce, “The 8 Most Coveted Tech Certifications, and How to Earn Them,” *engadget.com*, March 29, 2018, <https://www.engadget.com/2018/03/29/the-8-most-coveted-tech-certifications-and-how-to-earn-them/>.