Why are certificates on the rise and degrees in decline?

Until very recently, certificate programs lived in the shadow of traditional college degree programs. However, notions of what validates an education — and more importantly, what kind of education is most valuable to the individual — have evolved. The key questions, however, are the still the same:

- Which educational path will provide me with the real-world skills and practical knowledge to do my best work?
- Will the credential I earn be recognized and meaningful to an employer?
- Will one program help me earn more money than another?

The answers to these questions will surprise many...

Certificates are gaining in popularity in the education and professional development spheres. According to a June 2012 study published by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, certificates are now the second-most common award in higher education, second only to the undergraduate Bachelor of Arts (B.A.). Now, more than one million certificates are awarded annually, surpassing both associate and master’s degrees.

In 2010, post-secondary certificates made up 22% of awarded credentials, up from just 6% in 1980. In this 30-year period, the number of certificates awarded annually has skyrocketed from 100,000 to one million.

INSIDE THE NUMBERS

The Georgetown study, entitled “Certificates: Gateway to Gainful Employment and College Degrees,” found that certificates are growing in popularity for a number of reasons:

- Certificate programs are affordable; they may cost 10 times less than a graduate degree in the same field.
- More employers are recognizing and actively seeking out certificate holders.
- They typically offer a fast-track path to completion, usually taking less than a year.
- Certificates can command higher salaries when compared with associate or bachelor’s degrees.
- Certificate holders earn 20% more than workers with high school diplomas.

A certificate program can either be an end-goal, or a stepping stone to a master’s or advanced degree.

In short, certificates are the real deal. Online certificate programs are convenient, comparatively affordable, and can get you where you want to go professionally.

THE PROFESSIONAL TIPPING POINT

Certificates are at the center of a national conversation around the “completion agenda.” In the United States, more than half of all students who enroll in post-secondary programs fail to earn a degree or credential within eight years of enrolling.

The Georgetown study projects that by 2018, more than 6 in 10 jobs will require some sort of post-secondary education. So governments, higher-education institutions and employers are encouraging people to complete their studies, to go as far as their talents will take them.

For those with educational records that are “incomplete,” earning a certificate isn’t simply a convenient way to show that you can finish something. It demonstrates that you have specific expertise, and also that you are committed to your professional development and can follow through and execute. Be assured that this is important to hiring managers and employers everywhere.

Many certificate-holders describe reaching a “professional tipping point,” when they reach an educational milestone and career accomplishments begin to take shape. Putting the focused training of your certificate program into practice, getting results, and then being recognized for them is tremendously rewarding, both personally and financially.

When you look at the cost and value of certificate programs, the upsurge in popularity makes perfect sense. Certificates overturn the model that says you have to be in debt for decades to be properly educated. The ideal online certificate program is convenient, cost-effective, and doesn’t compromise on the quality of instruction. In fact, many prefer online programs because they tend to offer a more immersive and engaging experience with the content than can be achieved through in-person classroom delivery. Ultimately, it’s about the value you get from your certificate program.

If it’s cost-effective, doesn’t disrupt your work or personal life, gains you recognition at work, and helps you to develop professionally and move your career forward, it’s tough to argue against the merits of a professional certificate in today’s job marketplace.

—eCornell can help you get the Ivy-league credential you need to grow your career. To see a catalog of Cornell certificate programs, visit the Website www.ecornell.com.