

**What's an academic degree worth? by John Bilorusky, PhD (UC Berkeley, 1972), WISR President**

This question is taking on new and added importance in the face of skyrocketing tuition, even at public colleges and universities, like the University of California and in the California State University system. Private universities, including online colleges and universities generally charge more than public institutions of higher learning. And, news reports abound attesting to the growing student loan debt, along with growing unemployment numbers not only among recent recipients of Bachelor's degrees, but among those with graduate degrees as well.

Quite appropriately, many Federal legislators are concerned with the use of tuition monies obtained from Federal financial aid to support massive advertising campaigns by some of the larger, for profit online degree-granting institutions. Moreover, State legislators are understandably concerned about the misleading claims by some colleges and vocational schools that promise prospective students that after attending their school they will undoubtedly find a well-paying job in their chosen field.

The days of using an academic degree as a surefire and direct route to a secure job may be over, or at least it's worth thinking twice about this scenario.

Furthermore, many prestigious colleges (such as Harvard and MIT) are starting to make their course content available for free, online, to people who wish to learn but not pursue a degree with them. So, should we be paying for degrees? Or, paying for "expert course content"? Or, perhaps opting for a more inexpensive degree process that provides high quality, *personalized* educational coaching, mentoring and guidance?

Since 1975, the Western Institute for Social Research (WISR) has offered State-approved BA, MA and PhD degrees that are not regionally accredited (mostly because of WISR's small size). Over the years, WISR has provided a solid, personalized educational approach where students design their own studies and degree projects, with faculty coaching, support and guidance, but without promises or guarantees about the jobs and salaries that the student can expect to obtain. Yet, WISR continues to enroll successful mature adults who use their studies at WISR to move forward in their own self-defined directions and career paths—to write books, develop innovative community programs, create their own consulting practices and workshops, pursue our MFT program to meet the State's academic requirements for MFT licensure, and still, in some cases, progress further in their chosen jobs or careers.

Invariably, WISR alumni generally feel enthusiastic about the time and energy devoted to their WISR studies and the money spent on their WISR tuition (still a relatively affordable \$625/month, or \$7,500/year) . Each alumnus has a different story to tell, and there are many paths to meaningful work that have been traveled by WISR alumni (go to our website, [www.wisr.edu](http://www.wisr.edu) for many specific examples and more information). A theme that characterizes WISR's approach to the value of education is that WISR faculty consciously help WISR students to pursue studies and degree projects that will build bridges for each student to the next important and meaningful things that they want to do with their lives.