



# Is a Master's Degree the New Bachelor's Degree?

BY LAURIE BICK

THE NUMBER OF MASTER'S DEGREES conferred by U.S. institutions has risen dramatically since 1980. According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics, 303,000 master's degrees were conferred in 1980. Flash forward to 2012, and the figure rose to 754,000. While the number of bachelor's degrees conferred since 1980 has risen as well, the bachelor's 48 percent increase falls short of the master's dramatic rise of 60 percent.

Debra W. Stewart, former president of the Council of Graduate Schools, stated in *The New York Times* that nearly two Americans out of 25 who are age 25 or older now hold a master's degree, which is roughly the same proportion of those who held bachelor's degrees or higher in 1960.

Meanwhile, Fast Company reports that a recent, nationwide online survey conducted by CareerBuilder shows that more than 27 percent of employers are recruiting master's degree holders for positions that previously only required a bachelor's degree. Similarly, 37 percent of employers are hiring college graduates for positions that in the past only required a high school diploma.

These and other data lead many to believe that the master's degree has replaced the bachelor's degree as the recognized benchmark of employability.

Why? Employers who took part in the CareerBuilder survey (more than 2,300 hiring and human resource managers in industries spanning the private sector) cite the following reasons:

- Today's jobs require an increased level of specialized knowledge and skillsets that a bachelor's degree does not typically provide.
- Advanced education makes a clear, positive impact on productivity, communication skills and innovation.
- Filtering applicants by education level provides a simple sorting system for hirers who are flooded with résumés from job seekers.

The idea that a master's degree is becoming the new standard can be hard to swallow at a time when basic higher education is difficult for many families and individuals to afford. However, greater focus through specialized courses of study make advanced degrees as desirable for improving operations and running a business as they are for enhancing individual employment options and earning potential.

According to Dr. Stewart, master's degrees are more desirable to students and have become more valuable to employers because they are evolving into more relevant, specific and utilitarian degrees. No longer built to be generalist programs with broad scopes like public policy or administration, even the revered M.B.A. is often viewed as too generalized. Today's higher education now offers master's degrees in targeted and growing segments and aligns them with particular disciplines, such as cybersecurity, which is in high demand for business, nonprofit and government information systems.

Adding to the professional sheen of a master's degree is the growth of certificate programs that allow students to specialize even further. For example, a student completing a master's in cybersecurity may also include the additional credits for a certificate in digital forensics or digital evidence discovery, investigative disciplines in information systems technology that can, among other things, help to identify how malicious hacks are constructed – and, because the code each hacker writes produces a certain “signature,” by whom. This combined master's degree with certificate is highly valued by business, nonprofits and government agencies alike. Graduating students are assured of excellent employment prospects, and many advanced degree graduates assume executive and leadership roles.

If you are thinking of specializing your education with an advanced degree, here are some things to consider:

## Guide to Education

**Practicality:** Will your master's program provide you with usable skills that employers value? Look for an institution that offers work-integrated learning opportunities, such as internships with area employers, which often lead directly into employment in your chosen field.

**Flexibility:** Many graduate students must continue working while attending school. Does the master's program you are considering offer online, evening or weekend courses? Are accelerated classes available? Answers to these questions will help you to keep your current job while furthering your education.

**Affordability:** Will your master's program fit your budget? Are financial aid options available? Consider the return on investment of your master's program. Be sure your increased earning potential will outweigh the cost of your advanced degree.

A Local Leader in Master's Level Education: Wilmington University (WilmU) offers 70+ master's degree programs in business, technology, education, health professions, social and behavioral sciences, and more. A local leader in advanced education, in recent years WilmU has conferred more than 60% of the master's degrees in the state of Delaware. Wilmington University is a leader in affordability, convenience, flexibility in higher education with a focus on the adult learner.

To learn more, attend the WilmU graduate studies fair on Wednesday, November 14, from 4:30 to 7:00 p.m., at the Wilson Graduate Center in New Castle, or at the university's Dover and Georgetown locations. To see the variety of graduate degrees offered, visit [www.wilmu.edu/academics](http://www.wilmu.edu/academics). ■



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