

Talent's Three Degrees of Separation

Howard E. Males

Research Pros, Inc.

In the film, *Wall Street*, broker Bud Fox describes talent as the product of “years of genetics, a Yale education and the right tailor.” We cannot know precisely what Bud thought he understood about genes and jeans. We can, however, definitively state that it does not require three college degrees to reliably identify top talent. In fact, the world learned in April 2007 what our past research on certain professions has demonstrated for years -- sometimes a baccalaureate, although required, is not essential.

The last class admitted under the direction of former MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) admission's dean Marilee Jones is on course to graduate in 2011. Rest assured that this MIT class will be actively recruited by employers across the globe for its performance and promise. However, this year's incoming class learned that, nearly three decades earlier, the (now former) dean of admissions had falsified her credentials to gain employment. The person who had directed the processes for admission for many thousands of students had, in fact, been less than honest about her own academic background.

Puffery in resumes abounds; sadly, lying on applications is also a fact of life. MIT's revelation made business headlines for two reasons: 1) it occurred at one of America's premier educational institutions with storied and powerful linkages to science and commerce; 2) this deliberate misrepresentation of credentials was coupled with a career of high performance and productivity that spanned decades. As long as we insist that academic pedigree pairs with talent, this can happen anywhere.

Most reports focused on Ms. Jones' adept deception, upon her well-received writings and interviews with the business press, and on her public apology. Ms. Jones had been a vocal advocate for teens to be themselves and resist parental and teacher engineering of their lives, resumes and college applications. By many accounts, she was a top talent playing in the competitive world of recruiting, counseling and admissions.

Ms. Jones' dismissal was swift. University officials assured the school community and the world that students were evaluated and granted entrance by teams of professors, reviewers and committees. Both the process for admission and the production of highly trained minds retain integrity. Nevertheless, the school's Chancellor noted the irony that their point person for overseeing the review of resumes and qualifications had falsified her own background.

This story is both ironic and enlightening. Ms. Jones' entry job at MIT as an administrative assistant did not require a college degree. Her prowess in selecting and guiding talent exceeded what was formally required to achieve a

career trajectory in admissions – only the lack of several degrees separated her from her dream. With the addition of three (apparently unearned) degrees, her passion for work and brute talent made it possible to ascend the university ladder. For work purposes, it seems, Ms. Jones and Bud Fox paid great attention to how talent in their respective professions was ***perceived and hired***.

As a matter of career, Ms. Jones proffered that less stress in life and on resume building, coupled with a greater emphasis on visioning what pleases, are key components to realizing (and ultimately spotting) talent. With her three degrees in mind (although not necessarily in hand), Ms. Jones set about practicing and preaching her philosophy. She was promoted and ultimately held the position of Dean of Admissions for about a decade. For quite some time, her high performance in identifying and nurturing talent ruled: talent trumped diplomas, even within the context of a prestigious academic institution.

The case of Ms. Jones illustrates that the ability to expertly identify and cultivate talent transcends academic degrees. One can do great work in the talent space, absent formal credentials. Talent spotting is very much a soft skill...one that Ms. Jones had in high doses, and if our past research is correct, a skill she developed well before college age. As her career advanced, however, her talent outdistanced her formal qualifications and the required credentials for her job. In time, her soft skills faced the hard reality of truth.

In the beginning, Ms. Jones and Bud Fox shared similarities in their career-building notions about the power of three. In the end, both suffered career-interrupting fates when they chose to combine their respective and formidable talents with an ethical breach. But, the MIT case is real and sad on so many levels. Until our understanding of talent advances more systematically, the complex relationship between talent and academic degrees will remain a challenge to unravel. Even Bud Fox could not live up to his own fiction – the film reveals he went to New York University and not to Yale.

Howard E. Males, PhD is CEO of Research Pros, Inc.

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