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## The Most Valuable Degree in Development

Larry F. Johnston, PhD

**F**or many years I've been asked, generally by younger staff at client organizations or by people attending my seminars who are contemplating a career in the field of development, "What's the most valuable degree I could get?" It's a great question, and one that used to trigger a range of provisional answers.

Because the field of development now comprises more than 50 distinct disciplines, it's clear that the most valuable academic degree for some people could be in any of these disciplines. That said, however, for years my typical responses would have included a bachelor's or master's in marketing, public relations, communications, or advertising. Or an MBA, perhaps ideally with a specialization in nonprofit leadership and management.

And, because I'm persuaded that the core discipline of marketing -- and thus development, a specialized form of marketing -- is psychology, I've noted that a degree in psychology certainly could be helpful.

But some years back, after prolonged reflection, I changed my mind. I then settled on what I feel is the most important if not the most valuable degree bar none. And the good news is that almost anyone can get this degree. Better yet, it requires no major financial outlays for tuition. No time on campus. No evening courses or intensive residential sessions. Just mindfulness.

The answer I now give is "an M.A." That's a "Master of Appreciation."

Why? Because I've come to be increasingly mindful of a profound truth expressed by William James, the "Father of American psychology":

**"The deepest principle of human nature  
is a craving to be appreciated."**

Perhaps nowhere is this truth communicated more powerfully than in a moving story told by Barbara Glanz. In her wonderful little book, *The Simple Truths of Appreciation*, she shares one of her favorite quotes from Albert Schweitzer:

***"Sometimes our light goes out but it is blown into flame again by an encounter with another human being. Each of us owes the deepest thanks to those who have rekindled this inner light."***

She tells how in sharing this with audiences she then asks people to shut their eyes and think of someone who, at some point in their journey, has rekindled their inner light. She then asks them to write down the name of the person and to commit to their own act of appreciation by letting that person know in the next 72 hours that he or she was thought of.

One man shared his recollection of an eighth-grade teacher who was everyone's favorite and who had really made a difference in all their lives. He planned to track her down and let Barbara know the outcome.

A couple of months later she received a call from him. He was so choked up he could barely make it through the story. After writing to his teacher, the following week he received this letter:

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*Dear John,*

*You will never know how much your letter meant to me. I am 83 years old and am living alone in one room. My friends are all gone. My family's gone. I taught for 50 years and yours is the first "thank you" letter I have ever received from a student. Sometimes I wonder what I did with my life. I will read and reread your letter until the day I die.*

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Although my sentiments and convictions regarding an "attitude of gratitude" -- and the importance of appreciation not just for donors, staff, board members and volunteers, but for people in countless other domains of human interaction -- had been maturing for decades, reading this letter nailed it for me. It reminded me of the awesome power of appreciation to touch and transform lives. And it "sealed the deal" in my thinking about the most important or most valuable degrees. Not only in development, but perhaps in life.

So, if you're thinking about pursuing a degree for a career in development, let me urge you to become a Master of Appreciation. The truth be told, I know of none better.

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If you feel your development engine or organization might benefit from a check-up or tune-up, contact me at [larry.johnston@mcconkey-johnston.com](mailto:larry.johnston@mcconkey-johnston.com) or call or text me at 303.638.1827 for a complimentary consultation. We've been helping nonprofits of all sizes for 40+ years to grow and excel and would welcome the opportunity to explore how we might help you and your organization. [www.mcconkey-johnston.com](http://www.mcconkey-johnston.com)