

Kids skip college, blaze different career paths

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9:22 a.m. EDT April 21, 2013



(Photo: Joshua Anderson for USA TODAY)

Anything but college to try to get a job.

College no longer guarantees success or even a good enough job to pay back student loans. Thanks, but no thanks, some high school grads are starting to say to higher ed. Instead, some are starting their own businesses, working for free at companies to get experience, and flying out to conferences to network.

This comes at a time when unemployment for recent bachelor's recipients was still up to 12.6% as late as 2011, the most recent year available from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, a far cry from 2007's rate of 7.7%. If post-grad unemployment doesn't get much better, this trend could shake the foundations of America's 7,000-plus colleges and universities, which currently take in over \$147 million each year in tuition and fees, according to

the Department of Education.

SAVVY SMALL BUSINESS: [Pave offers alternative to costly college loans \(http://www.usatoday.com/story/money/business/2013/03/04/savvy-small-business-financing-college-millennials/1859569/\)](http://www.usatoday.com/story/money/business/2013/03/04/savvy-small-business-financing-college-millennials/1859569/)

Christopher Dalton is the 20-year-old owner of D Detailing, an auto care business he started in high school. He gave Middle Tennessee State University, based in Murfreesboro, the old college try before leaving after a semester to continue building his business. He says he now makes \$150 an hour doing what he loves, and has nothing but big plans for the future.

"I said, why not take the same money that I'm spending in college and spend it on learning what I want to learn?" says Dalton, who has spent his time since he left school in January running his business and going to conferences to learn how to make it even better. He recently returned from a San Diego conference where he learned how to take dents out of cars, a service he'll now be able to offer at D Detailing. He felt happy about his decision to forgo school after connecting with other ambitious dropouts.

Peter Thiel, billionaire founder of PayPal and entrepreneur extraordinaire, wants more kids to be like Dalton, so much so that he pays 20 kids \$100,000 not to go to college every year. Jonathan Cain, president of the Thiel Foundation, says a college degree no longer makes a résumé unique, and kids' time and money are best spent elsewhere.

That's not the point, says Jeff Selingo, author of forthcoming book *College (Un)Bound*, which argues why college is still important, and comes out in May. "Even if you don't get that first great job, it's the fifth job that matters. You really want an education that's going to get that fifth job, because that's the one that's going to make your career."

Selingo's advice to graduating seniors who might be on the fence about going to college: Go, but don't take on \$100K of debt that you might never pay off. Sure, a college degree doesn't guarantee success like it used to, but most folks who don't have one are even worse off.

Alternatives to college:

- **Learn from the pros.** Instead of teachers and classes, The Mycelium School, founded by Matthew Abrams and launching its first class of 12-14 in September, brings in more than 150 visiting instructors, from designers at Google's Innovation Labs to best-selling authors to serial entrepreneurs, who impart real-world knowledge to participants. Participants get a collective \$45,000 to build a business based around social change, a great way to learn both business savvy and the way communities work, Abrams says. Participants leave with entrepreneurial experience and a supportive network of more than 150 gurus in just about every field from modern dance to venture capital.





Josh Middleman presents at a conference hosted by The Mycelium School. (Photo: Ian Adair)

- **Work for free.** Enstitute will set you up with a two-year mentorship with an entrepreneur in a tech start-up, a digital advertising firm or a non-profit. In addition to the 40-hour-a-week mentorships, program participants get weekly meet-and-greet sessions with business hotshots such as clothing designer Marc Ecko or Bitly chief scientist Hilary Mason. The hope is that after a two-year mentorship, participants will have all the skills, experience and connections they need to make it in the real world. "A lot of academia deals with the abstract and intellectual pontification," says co-founder Kane Sarhan. "My biggest problem with academia is there's no practicality to it whatsoever."
- **Get connected.** Blake Boles started the Zero Tuition College social network because he saw kids who weren't in college struggling to find a community in like-minded people. Members interact based on skills they want to learn and are able to teach. "The clear fact of the matter is that colleges have the monopoly on young adult social life," Boles says.
- **Teach yourself.** UnCollege, lead by Thiel Fellowship recipient Dale Stephens, 21, leads conferences rallying together kids who want to find success without having to go to college. UnCollege's first Gap Year program begins this September and covers everything from sending participants abroad for three months to helping them build their own companies. All the learning though, you've got to do yourself. Stephens says not going to college actually makes you a better learner, more mature, self-reliant, and motivated. Why's that? "This is because in college these things are taken care of and you're simply told what to do," says Stephens, who has never been to college.