



Should I Drop Out Of College?

A DROPOUT'S PERSPECTIVE



This is my story: I dropped out of school after fifth grade to pursue my own education. Instead of sitting in class, copying notes from a whiteboard, I spent six years working on political campaigns, living in France, and starting my own businesses.

And yet when I turned 18, despite years of unschooling, I still felt that an ivy-covered institution was what should be next. I enrolled at an elite private liberal arts college with high hopes, but any idealism I had quickly vanished. It was apparent that many people weren't there for the right reasons. And at \$42,000 a year, I began to wonder about my reasons for being there as well. I'd gone to college because I assumed I needed a college degree to get a good job. When I realized that wasn't the case, I left.

It was a big decision, but in the end it wasn't a terribly difficult one.

That's because real learning means actively choosing the experiences that have the most value to you. And the conventional college path didn't work for me. It can be a great decision, especially for students who are certain of their interests and career pursuits. But there are other choices, and fortunately there are more of them today than ever before.

So how do you know if you're on the right track? Here are six questions you should be asking.

(Fun fact, though: if you want to become the president of the United States, then, yes, you can leave.) Some people ask the question this way: If you could do anything in this world and be guaranteed to succeed what would it be? Now work backwards from there: what are the steps you need to take in order to get there? Is a college degree really a barrier to entry or is there another way?

Six Crucial Questions You Need to Be Asking

1. What do you want to do?

Sometimes the answer is a single word like “teach” or “write”. However, if you’re pursuing a career in a highly regulated field – say, medicine or architecture or psychiatry – then dropping out is not for you.

Act: Here’s an exercise called future perfect thinking. Imagine yourself at the end of your career. It’s been wildly successful and you’ve reaped the rewards of having made a truly meaningful contribution. Can you pinpoint the crucial decision which led to your achievements? What one thing made the difference? Now switch it up. Imagine your career has left you a desperate, miserable failure. What was the pivotal mistake that led you to ruin?

Read: [Choose Yourself](#) by James Altucher

2. What skills and resources matter the most?

Is there training and preparation that you know you need but you’re not getting right now? How and when will you acquire it? A 2012 study by the National Research Council calls metacognition one of the most critical competencies for young adults to cultivate. It’s the ability to reflect on your learning and make adjustments as necessary. You should also be perfecting skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and self-management – these are minimum requirements for any real job in the 21st century. If you’re not building these proficiencies now, it’s time to make an adjustment. Maybe that means demanding more from your college. Or demanding more from yourself.

Act: Call or text someone you trust and ask them what they consider to be their most valuable skill. Ask them how they acquired it. Tell them the skill you want that you’re trying to sharpen.

Read: [Remedial Genius](#) by Derek Cabrera (or watch his [TED talk](#))

3. What shape is your network in?

Because you’re gonna need it. Your network is your community, and community is one of the most under-recognized, under-valued components of happiness and success. In 2007, an economist named [Nattavudh Powdthavee](#) published [research](#) concluding that the intrinsic rewards of belonging to a supportive community can be worth up to an extra \$130,000 a year in terms of life satisfaction. But a crucial question to ask is “Do some communities confer greater rewards to their members than others?” And more importantly, can you learn how to use social capital to build a community like that?

Act: Polish up your online presence. Use LinkedIn to endorse your friends for their skills. Ask one or two of them to write a short recommendation for your own LinkedIn profile. Get a professional sounding Gmail username and use it to reach out to people doing things you’re interested in.

Read: [The Recession Proof Graduate](#) by Charlie Hoehn & [Never Eat Alone](#) by Keith Ferrazzi

4. Have you taken a hard look at the economics of the decision?

If you’re close to finishing, it might make sense to tough it out and head down the home stretch. If you’ve already invested a ton of time and money, chances are also good that you have some student loans to repay. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), only 46 percent of the Americans who start

college go on to finish. Seventy percent will take out student loans, incurring an average of \$29,400 in debt upon graduation. If you've borrowed heavily to get this far and do not complete college, you'll be left to shoulder the obligation of student loan repayment without the benefit of holding a degree. question to ask is "Do some communities confer greater rewards to their members than others?" And more importantly, can you learn how to use social capital to build a community like that?

Act: Sit down and figure out how many units you have left to complete before you can graduate, how much time that will take, and how much it'll cost you. If you need help, go see your academic advisor, registrar, or financial aid officer.

Read: [Debt-Free U](#) by Zac Bissonnette

5. Can you hack your way into the field you want to work in?

In fields like entrepreneurship, computer science, marketing, international development, art, journalism, and others, your ability to execute is far more important than the name of the place you graduated from. (This is also true for basketball players and violinists and writers and pilots.) In the emerging economy, the question we will all have to answer is "What have you built?" So whether in college or out, you'll need as much practical experience as possible.

Act: Get your elevator speech together. It should tell who you are, what you're creating, and why.

Read: [Recruiting Advice No One Tells You](#) by David Rogier

6. Can you see this time for what it is?

This moment feels excruciating because you sense that there's a lot at stake, but can you see that it's part of a much larger story? In a novel, one chapter leads to the next and in each one, new information is revealed. You are the hero of your own story, and heroes face challenges. The way you get new information is to do something.

Act: Take a step. See what comes into clearer focus.

Read: [The Obstacle is the Way](#) by Ryan Holiday (or watch his [TED talk](#))



This may be the hardest decision you've ever faced. That's okay. But let's be clear: the choice you're contemplating isn't really about dropping out of college. It's about who you will become and the most effective way to become it.

Dale Stephens launched [UnCollege.org](#) to challenge the notion that college is the only path to success. In May 2011, Stephens was selected out of hundreds of individuals around the world as a Thiel Fellow. The Thiel Fellowship recognizes the top change-makers around the world under the age of twenty. He has appeared on CNN, ABC, NPR, CBS, Fox, and TechCrunch and his work has been covered in the New York Times, New York Magazine, Fast Company, and Forbes. He has spoken around the world at events such as TED2012. Dale's first book, [Hacking Your Education](#), was published by Penguin in 2013. For more information about UnCollege and the Gap Year program, go to [www.uncollege.org](#).

