

# 16 Big Myths about College and Success in Your Early 20s

If you're exiting high school you're probably being given a lot of advice. You're bombarded with stats about average earnings, degrees, majors, resumes, seizing this time in your life, etc. It's all pretty standard, conventional fare: Go to the best college you can get into, get good grades, major in something with lots of job opportunities, have a nice resume, apply for jobs, get a decent starting salary and a business card.

But what seems like common sense is actually quite a bit of nonsense. It's all built around a narrative, and that narrative is the story of a bunch of averages and aggregates, not you. You have unique goals, interests, abilities, and opportunities. Making decisions about your life based on some 45-year-old's view of macroeconomic trends isn't sensible at all.

All the common advice is stuck in what I call the conveyor belt mindset.

It goes something like this:

You are plopped onto a production line at whatever stage you're supposed to be based on arbitrary things like your age, class, and gender. Then you let the belt do the work. By essentially doing nothing but what you're told, you get handed certificates at each next stage. 18? Unless you did something truly outrageous, here's your diploma. 22? Here's your degree. Degree? Here's your job (or so you're led to believe).

Most people believe this and live it. It's revealed in the kinds of questions we ask strangers. "What grade are you in?" "What's your major?" "What kind of job do you have?" If your answer is not the appropriate one for your age and assumed

station in life, people worry. “I dropped out of school to do X” is cause for concern to almost everybody, no matter what X is. “I’m a sophomore at university Y” is cause for comfort to almost everybody, no matter what you’re actually doing with your time at Y. So long as you’re at your station, no one much cares if you’re productive, happy, successful, fulfilled, or free.

Parents obsessively check their child against a list of averages on everything from height to reading ability to earnings and stress if junior is not “on track.” No one really ever asks who built the track, where it’s going, or whether junior has any interest in arriving there.

Before you do anything else, you’ve got to get off the conveyor belt.

Once you do, you can begin to ask the right questions.

Questions about your unique situation, and how you can build a fulfilling life. It might look nothing like anyone else’s.

It might not even exist yet. You might have to create it.

It might not fit into their prefabricated definitions of success. Who cares. They don’t have to live your life, you do.

So here you are, freestanding and not moved along by the inertia of tradition and the good opinion of others. What to do next? Don’t yet try to answer what you should do.

Instead, figure out what you shouldn’t do. Let’s examine some of the recommendations you’ll be getting and see how they hold up.

Here are a bunch of things you’ve probably heard, and why they might be wrong...

## **“It’s worth it”**

Three really important words: Compared to what?

“Yeah it’s boring and expensive and totally unrelated to the value I want to create in the world, but it’s worth it.” This is one of the most common yet unexamined proclamations about the education-career conveyor belt.

What is it supposed to be worth if it’s not clearly creating value for you? So some chart somewhere shows degree holders earning more money. Compared to what? Compared to non degree holders. That’s irrelevant. The relevant comparison is the money, time, freedom, and fulfillment of a degree holder compared to that same person doing something else instead of getting the degree.

A degree is only worth it for you if all the time, money, and monotony is more valuable than your next best use of those same resources.

Wow. When you realize 4+ years and 5+ figures go in to the average degree, it starts to really seem suspect. What else could you do in that time?

Spend a year traveling the world, a year working for an amazing startup (for free even!), a year reading 100 books and podcasting. That’s just three years and probably \$10k. You’d have a wealth of knowledge, a global network, a great job under your belt, and a story unlike anyone else. All for 2/3 the time and  $\frac{1}{4}$  the cost of sitting in classrooms trying not to fall asleep.

The bar is pretty low. “Worth it” doesn’t exist in a vacuum. It’s got to be compared to the possible alternatives. If you’ve never sat down and made an exhaustive list of all the things you could do with that time, money, and boundless flexibility of that phase of life, then you’re in no position to declare college “worth it.”

# **“It’s free so you can’t turn it down!”**

There ain’t no such thing as a free lunch. If you have a lot of grants or scholarships, or if your parents put aside a college savings fund and will cover tuition it doesn’t mean college is free. The idea that it doesn’t make sense to turn down anything “free” is a good way to end up miserable and shackled to “good deals”.

If something you don’t want or need is on sale buying it doesn’t mean you saved money. Not only that, you spent a lot of time – time that could have been spent doing any number of lucrative, fulfilling, valuable activities. Doing things you don’t value just because others say they’re too good to turn down is a way to put yourself in shackles.

Your freedom and your definition of what’s valuable is too important to subjugate to the perceived value of others.

Turning down “can’t pass!” opportunities to do what resonates with you is the first step to self-directed living.

# **“Only drop out if you have a billion dollar idea”**

I call this the Steve Jobs fallacy. It’s a weird double standard. Stick to the conveyor belt and no one demands wild success from you. They’re proud when you get into college. They’re proud when you get a degree. They’re kind of proud, if they’re still paying attention, when you get a job. They don’t think you’re a failure if you aren’t changing the world with a billion dollar startup. They think you’re awesome for nabbing a \$40k job as a bank teller. Rarely do they ask whether you’re happy or fulfilled or really living a life you want.

Contrast that to the demands placed on a college drop-out. If you drop out and don't become the next Steve Jobs, everyone will say, "See I told you to stay in school!" Even if you're doing something you love and making a good living, a lot of your family and friends will have this nagging sense that you never really reached your potential.

This is baloney. You can build whatever kind of life pleases you. If college doesn't help you become the person you want to be, don't do it. Your choices aren't limited to loser or billionaire status just because you drop or opt out.

**"You're already this far, so it only makes sense to finish."**

This is the sunk cost fallacy. It's the same thing that keeps casinos in business. "I'm already in for \$20, so even though I have a terrible hand I might as well pay another \$10 to stay in."

It's gone. It can never be recovered. You will never get back the money or time you've put in.

This fallacy isn't just for gamblers. It plagues everyone from investors to your friend who makes you wait in an hour long line to see a mediocre movie because, "We've already waited half an hour and I don't want that to be for nothing!"

I hate to break it to your friend, but it was for nothing.

Past expenditures that can't be recovered shouldn't factor in to decisions about the present and future. It doesn't matter that you sunk three and a half years and 50 grand into college. What matters is whether the next six months and ten grand is better spent on college than all other alternatives.

Remove yourself from your prior experience. If you had never spent any time or money on college and someone offered to put you through lectures for a year if you paid upwards of five

figures, would that be your ideal way to spend those resources? If not, don't.

Quitting doesn't make it all for nothing, it makes it all for whatever it is you've gained up to this point. If that wasn't worth it, why would the next semester or year be? Looking only ahead and not behind, what gets you closer to the kind of experiences and life you will enjoy?

## **“Don't burn any bridges. Keep your options open.”**

If you drop out or don't go to school, you may not ever be able to go back! If you turn down the job you hate, you may never be able to get it later! If you choose to take that exciting opportunity you'll close off all those options!

Good.

One of the first steps in your personal emancipation is to realize that the world is full of options and things currently in front of you are not the only from which to choose. But there is a difference between options and opportunities.

Options are theoretical. Opportunities are actual. Options are statistical probabilities. Opportunities are singular, concrete instances. Options can always be added on, and the option set can always grow as an aggregate bundle, so there is no urgency or scarcity in options. Opportunities are temporary and cannot be aggregated. Each is too unique and cannot be replicated.

It's easy to say no to awesome opportunities because they might reduce all the theoretical options. You'll end up, to paraphrase Peter Thiel, totally prepared for nothing in particular.

Keeping doors open is not inherently good. Doing things you

love means reducing other abstract possibilities. Likewise, saying no to things you don't love might mean burned bridges. Again, good.

Stop leaving doors open. Start burning bridges.

Not only do you need to stop looking for so many options, you should begin actively slamming doors to ensure you can never again walk through them.

If you know a door leads you to a life that would make you unhappy shut it.

If you've peeked through a particular portal and seen something that makes you a little dead inside slam the door and burn it behind you. Otherwise you might be tempted to go through it later if someone dangles the right price in front of you. You might be tempted to say yes to something you hate, which might be the saddest of all fates.

I've met a number of young people who spent a summer interning in Washington, DC and told me after the experience that they hate the entire political scene and would never want to become one of those people. Many of these same young people, when the fantasyland of subsidized education comes to a close and the need for a steady job begins to weigh on them, confide things like, "I can't publish that blog post or I would never get hired by policy group X in DC!" They are careful not to burn bridges, "just in case".

But if the bridge takes you someplace you know you don't want to go burning it should be a top priority! There's a reason Odysseus had himself tied to the mast.

How many people live lives they hate because they couldn't say no to the salary? How many wallow in misery because they left the door open too long? How many knew a particular path wouldn't make them happy but they failed to cut off the option and when push came to shove they couldn't say no to the status

or short-term gains in the moment of weakness?

Boldly, definitely choose to do things that make you come alive. If you don't know what they are, simply start by boldly, definitively not doing things that don't. Don't look back, look ahead.

## **“Build your resume”**

GPA, honor rolls, clubs and memberships, etc. etc. There is no end to the list of things you're told to do to pad your resume. Guess what? Your resume hardly matters, and less every day.

What matters is your ability to create value and your ability to prove it to others. Everyone has a resume with general “skills” like Leadership listed. Everyone has a diploma or degree. What does that prove? That you followed the rules long enough to not get kicked out. I guess that's something in the eyes of some people, but it's a pretty thin calling card these days.

[Forget about building your resume.](#) Build yourself. Focus on doing things that help you become who you want to be, not just add bullets to a static list of what you've done. Do things that make you better. Do things that create value. Build a brand and narrative to signal it.

An interesting and deep network and a set of experiences and real skills with tangible outcomes will top a piece of parchment. Build product not paper.

## **“Follow the rules”**

There's this idea that if you just hunker down and follow the rules, you'll be rewarded. That's true while in school, but the real world doesn't care much for rules.



Fundamentally, all school rewards following rules above all else. Entrepreneurs – those who find new, better, faster, easier ways of getting results – are called cheaters or troublemakers in the school setting.

But outside of the classroom value creation is rewarded, and the most valuable innovations are often the ones that break all the rules.

Forget the rules. Solve problems in new ways. Don't wait your turn, seize opportunities and test ideas now.

## **“Pick a good major. Pick a growing industry”**

Sure, if you're going to major in something I guess “good” is better than not-good. But what does that really mean?

This advice is usually given as a way to encourage you to go for the guarantee. Well, I hate to break it to you, but there are no guarantees. No major is going to start spitting jobs and money at you automatically. Furthermore, you need to know if starting salary is even something that matters a lot to you, or if other things matter more.

Anyway, your major doesn't really matter. Outside of fields where it's legally required, what you major in goes from the most important thing in the world to one of the least the minute you step outside the walls of the academy. Your double major doubly so.

Who you are and what you can do matter. And if you're trying to pick based on industry aggregates about job placement, you might have the wrong mindset. The jobs in demand in five or ten or twenty years probably haven't even been invented yet. Entrepreneurship – increasingly valued whether working in a company, starting a venture, or freelancing – cares not about majors.

Instead of worrying about a major, focus on the skills, knowledge, network, experience, and confidence that are transferable across all careers and categories. As you discover what you love and are good at you'll narrow down to more specialization. Until then, stop thinking about majors. Real world opportunities are not so generically and conveniently labelled.

## **“It will be good to have just in case”**

A lot of people readily admit that their schooling is boring, dull, expensive, and not helpful for what they really want to do in life.

But they say, “I’m going to stick with it because it will be good to have, just in case.”

I find this a very odd course of action. If you know your top plan is A, why would you completely neglect it and instead spend all your resources on your plan B or C?

Getting a degree “just in case” comes at the expense of focusing on what you really want to do. Furthermore, your degree won’t magically cover your backside should you fail at plan A anyway. If you know you don’t enjoy it and you don’t even really want whatever opportunities it’s supposed to open up, why do it?

Building a vague, nebulous backup plan with four years and six figures is getting in the way of building the actual life you want to live.

## **“Find companies with job openings**

## **and apply”**

Blasting resumes to generic job postings isn't likely to result in the career of your dreams. The beauty is, every company is hiring all the time. They just need to see the value.

Focus on companies or projects or industries or people you want to work with, not official job titles or descriptions on a jobs board. When you've ID'd things that look really fascinating to you, do something valuable for them. Build a website, do a study of their competitors, create a prototype. Go to them and show them how much you love what they do, what you've done to help them, and tell them you want to do more.

All the best jobs are not being advertised. They are being created by ambitious, tenacious people who are committed to providing value.

## **“Get qualified and certified so you can do X”**

Just start doing it now.

## **“Get a good starting salary”**

Get a good starting experience. A few thousand dollars may seem like a lot in the prestige or daily expenses column when you're young, but in the grand scheme it's peanuts compared to the value of what you spend your time on and who you become.

Go for the best, most amazing opportunities you can, whether they pay a dime upfront or not. It won't take long to discover that, when you're doing things that resonate with you, you're valuable and able to make money at it.

Otherwise one day you might end up with a high paying job you

hate and no skills you can take elsewhere.

## **“Get something with your degree”**

After you get a degree there's a feeling of desperation that, now that you've sunk all that money and time, you'd better use that degree for something that requires it.

This is a load of nonsense and likely to hem you in to a life you're unhappy with.

By all means, if you have an engineering degree and you love engineering, you should start doing it! But if you've got a fancy degree that applies to nothing in particular, or applies to something you don't really enjoy, stop feeling pressure to “use” your degree.

I know young people who have turned down opportunities they really wanted to take for no other reason than that, “I could have gotten that without this expensive degree”. Well that's a bummer, but don't let the mistakes of your past shackle you to more mistakes in the future.

Don't be a slave to what you once thought you wanted. Do what you want to do now, regardless of what your degree says.

## **“Make your parents proud”**

This one will drive you mad. Don't worry about your parents. Make yourself proud.

The thing is, nearly all parents really just want you to be happy. They simply lack the imagination to conceive of paths to happiness other than the few they know about like doctor, lawyer, or Fortune 500 middle manager.

If you fully and genuinely – without bitterness – go after what you want and they see you happy, they will come around

more often than not. If not, too bad. It's your life and you've got to wake up with yourself every day. Be who you want to be.

## **“Earn and invest your money”**

Maybe. But when you're young what little cash you have isn't all that valuable compared to the energy, creativity, and potential you have.

Focus less on investing money into a retirement plan answerable to forces totally out of your control and hoping it will magically make you rich when you're old. Focus more on investing yourself into people, experiences, and skills that you have the ability to change and that can compound quickly.

Invest in yourself. Invest in things that make you more valuable. You are a better investment than the stock market. But don't mistake spending money on yourself for investing in yourself. Don't let the common narrative or sticker price be confused with value. It's entirely possible that a \$20 book on marketing will yield more return on investment than a \$60,000 degree.

## **“Get a job with a good future”**

Just get in the door with that first job and ride the company into the sunset with annual cost of living increases, right? Wrong.

This is an extension of the education conveyor belt mindset into the world of careers, and it's not really even possible anymore, if it ever was desirable.

YOU are your future. Not your job or the company you happen to get paid by. They won't do the heavy lifting in providing you money, opportunity, and fulfillment. You have to. You may get paid by one or many companies at any time, you may

freelance, you may start a business. In all of these, YOU are the company, "Me, Inc."

Your future is in your hands and can't be outsourced to any institution, educational or professional.

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