

## Success without College

Jason Fertig

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My first exposure to the notion of a bubble in higher education came when I read George Leef’s “The Overselling of Higher Education” in the Spring 2006 *Academic Questions*.<sup>1</sup> At the time, Leef, along with Richard Vedder in *Going Broke by Degree: Why College Costs Too Much* (AEI Press, 2004), were among the few sounding the alarm that higher education was on a path to unsustainability. Yet, like the proverbial frog in the boiling water that realizes too late he is being cooked to death, I didn’t realize that the stove was just heating up.

Fast forward to 2011. It has become fashionable to take a swing at the college piñata. The last year alone has produced such books as Andrew Hacker and Claudia Dreifus’s *Higher Education? How Colleges Are Wasting Our Money and Failing Our Kids—and What We Can Do About It* (Times Books), Mark Taylor’s *Crisis on Campus: A Bold Plan for Reforming Our Colleges and Universities* (Knopf), and Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa’s *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (University of Chicago Press). Complaining certainly feels good, yet every book, article, op-ed, and blog post has diminishing returns to scale, because firm sides have already been taken in the “Is there a higher education bubble?” debate. Whether a bubble exists or not, at some point, I want intelligent people not only focusing on the problems in higher education, but also identifying solutions.

<sup>1</sup>George C. Leef, “The Overselling of Higher Education,” *Academic Questions* 19, no. 2 (Spring 2006): 17–34.

**Jason Fertig** is assistant professor of management at the University of Southern Indiana, Evansville, IN 47712, [jfertig@usi.edu](mailto:jfertig@usi.edu). He has written for the National Association of Scholars, the John W. Pope Center for Higher Education Policy, and the Phi Beta Cons blog at *National Review Online*.

One broad-based solution that critics like Charles Murray favor to the problem of too many students going on to college is to direct more young people into relevant job-training and certificate programs. Murray's argument, articulated in *Real Education: Four Simple Truths for Bringing America's Schools Back to Reality* (Three Rivers Press, 2009), is based on the belief that not all students possess the ability to succeed in genuine college-level study, and therefore such students should pursue other career avenues suited to their specific aptitudes.

This notion of achieving success without a college degree has received support from the media as well. However, this support tends to focus on famous people who made it big with limited schooling. Their stories have taken on mythical proportions. Let's consider some of the examples.

### **The Techie**

William Henry Gates III was raised in an upper-middle-class, competitive family in Seattle, Washington. Even as a young child, Gates was drawn to reading, particularly non fiction. His appetite for knowledge was so great that even as a preteen, he found that school offered him little challenge. As a teenager, Gates excelled in his Seattle prep school, and he proudly scored 1590 on his SATs. But his activities outside of the high school classroom drove his rise to success; Gates and friend Paul Allen spent much of their free time creating computer programs such as a tic-tac-toe simulator and a traffic pattern monitor. The latter program earned Gates \$20,000.

Despite his desire to start his own company, and with some coaxing from his parents, Gates reluctantly enrolled in Harvard in 1973. Just as in high school, Gates spent more time in front of a computer than in class. Eventually, the entrepreneurial bug overtook Gates, and he left Harvard to join Allen at Honeywell in 1974—his first stop on the way to becoming one of the richest men in the world.

Today, billionaire Bill Gates is a household name due to his ubiquitous Microsoft products as well as his renowned philanthropy.

### **The Jock**

Kobe Bean Bryant, son of ex-NBA player Joe "Jellybean" Bryant, spent the early part of his life in Italy where his father played for an Italian

professional basketball league. A natural athlete, Bryant excelled in sports like soccer and, of course, basketball. Upon returning to the United States in his teens, Bryant was a main factor in Pennsylvania's Lower Merion High School's four consecutive state basketball championships.

With the ability to speak Italian and Spanish, Bryant flouts the "dumb jock" stereotype. He scored 1080 on the SAT, which, while not record-breaking, alerted recruiting colleges that Bryant was more than capable of maintaining academic eligibility. While he could have attended Duke and played for legendary coach Mike Krzyzewski, Bryant decided to enter the NBA draft at age seventeen.

Despite well-publicized charges of sexual assault that were ultimately dropped—the accuser decided not to testify in criminal court, and Bryant settled a civil suit out of court—Bryant is a five-time NBA champion with the Los Angeles Lakers, a thirteen-time All-Star, a former league MVP, a former Slam Dunk contest champion, and the recipient of an annual salary of around \$25,000,000.

## The Scribe

Ray Douglas Bradbury was born in 1920 in Waukegan, Illinois. In his youth, he spent many hours devouring books at the local library. After bouncing around between Tucson and Waukegan as his father pursued employment opportunities, the Bradbury family eventually settled down in Los Angeles. Bradbury immersed himself in various styles of writing. While today, people with such aptitude would seek to study English in college, young Ray Bradbury decided otherwise. As he told the *New York Times* in 2009:

Libraries raised me. I don't believe in colleges and universities. I believe in libraries because most students don't have any money. When I graduated from high school, it was during the Depression and we had no money. I couldn't go to college, so I went to the library three days a week for 10 years.<sup>2</sup>

This was not a one-time assertion uttered by Bradbury as he reflected on his then eighty-eight years of life. For instance, in an interview on the

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<sup>2</sup>Jennifer Steinhauer, "A Literary Legend Fights for a Local Library," *New York Times*, June 19, 2009.

audiobook version of his perhaps most-famous work, *Fahrenheit 451*, Bradbury said:

I was going to start being educated in drama and writing, and then I thought to myself, “Why am I doing this?” And the answer was girls of course. And I thought to myself, “Well, that’s very nice, but what has that got to do with writing? Nothing, huh? And if you’re not careful, you’re gonna ruin your life.”

So I made the big decision. I stayed on the street corner [selling newspapers]. I made \$10 a week. And I went to the library and educated myself. I spent two or three days a week in the library for the next ten years and graduated from the library when I was 28.

Well, they had at the university up north in California heard about this a couple years ago and during my lecture they came up on the stage and handed me a diploma graduating me from the library. Isn’t that beautiful?<sup>3</sup>

Bradbury, who was married to his late wife for over fifty years and is the father of four daughters, remains one of America’s most celebrated writers of fantasy fiction. Many of his written works have been adapted for radio, television, and film. Among many other honors and awards, Bradbury received the National Medal of Arts, presented by President George W. Bush in 2004 and a special citation from the Pulitzer board in 2007 “for his distinguished, prolific, and deeply influential career as an unmatched author of science fiction and fantasy.”<sup>4</sup>

## The Loudmouth

Glenn Edward Lee Beck grew up in a small town in Washington State. Before Beck was ten years old he developed a keen interest in all things radio. While children his age were playing games, Beck entered and won a guest DJ spot in a contest run by a local AM radio station. Two years later, at the age of thirteen, Beck landed a weekend-based job at a Seattle FM station, to which he commuted via an hour-plus bus ride.

<sup>3</sup>Cited in Ashley Thorne, “Taking Books for Granted,” National Association of Scholars, April 19, 2011, [http://www.nas.org/polArticles.cfm?doc\\_id=1933](http://www.nas.org/polArticles.cfm?doc_id=1933).

<sup>4</sup>The Pulitzer Prizes, “The 2007 Pulitzer Prize Winners Special Awards and Citations,” <http://www.pulitzer.org/citation/2007-Special-Awards-and-Citations>.

Beck's teenage home life was the antithesis of his early radio career. His parents divorced around the time he won his first radio gig. He lived with his mother until her tragic death from drowning while boating on Puget Sound in 1979. Beck and his sister then moved in with his father until he finished high school in 1982. At that point, Beck decided to skip college and acquire radio experience in various cities across the United States. At age twenty-one he was garnering \$70,000 a year, a salary that many college graduates only dream of earning for their first job. Today, the entrepreneurial Beck is a successful radio and television personality. He has also reached number one on the New York Times Best Seller List as the author of nonfiction and fiction alike. While Beck has more than his fair share of critics, and is constantly beset by personal demons and public controversies, he is a millionaire many times over.

### The Outliers

I could write similar mini-bios for many pages about such successful individuals as Rachael Ray (celebrity chef), Shakira (pop artist), Harry Truman (U.S. president), and Cornelius Vanderbilt (nineteenth-century shipping and railroad entrepreneur), just to name a few. While these stories make great features in the weekend *Wall Street Journal*, they do little to affect popular opinion about the pertinence of college to professional success, because the people discussed above are perceived as outliers.

There *are* ordinary folks who achieved success without going to college. When I asked readers of *National Review Online* for examples, I received thirty-one replies in five days describing such people as a pest control company owner, a freelance musician, and a software developer—individuals unknown to the general public.<sup>5</sup> Many of their stories are inspiring. Here are some excerpts:

- Though we have four years of college between us (2 years each), neither my husband nor I have a college degree. Yet, we are living what most would call “the good life.” My husband is making a mid-six-figure salary, which

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<sup>5</sup>Jason Fertig, “Wanted: Stories of Successful People Without College Degrees,” *National Review Online*, *Phi Beta Cons*, March 17, 2011, <http://www.nationalreview.com/phi-beta-cons/262430/wanted-stories-successful-people-without-college-degrees-jason-fertig>.

allows me to stay at home with our four children. We have two current-model paid-for vehicles, a large home, and no debt except for a small mortgage. We have a very comfortable life. None of it has anything to do with what we learned in college.

We dropped out of college after our sophomore year and got married. He started out doing software installation at Intel (working for a contractor) and I taught music lessons. He made his way to his current position by working hard, keeping current with new technology, taking initiative and being indispensable to his employers. I was able to discontinue the music lessons by the time our first child was born and to pursue my own area of interest. Today, my husband manages a software development group in a well-known company, and though I currently choose to work only occasionally outside the home, I am recognized as an expert in my chosen field. Everything we have and know comes by the grace of God and through the knowledge and education we've pursued on our own.

We see the value of a college degree for a few select fields. Our children all know that we consider the apprenticeship model at least as valuable, if not more, than a college degree.

- I spent 13 years in the Navy aboard submarines, where I learned to operate nuclear reactors.

Now, as a civilian, my family and I live a comfortable middle-class life. I make enough working at a nuclear power plant for my wife to stay at home—as she wishes—to raise our 2 children. Haven't finished college yet... For my own kids, if they show the temperament and ability for college, I'll be happy to steer them in that direction; but I'd be just as happy if my children obtained a trade or followed my footsteps and served their country while learning a trade. Our nation only needs so many salespersons or engineers.

- My younger brother graduated from high school, became a union carpenter, and was noticed when he saved the large construction company \$5 million by noticing an error in the blueprint. He now runs multi-million dollar construction jobs with profit and loss responsibilities. He took one college course, but makes six figures plus bonuses.

In order for regular individuals to choose an alternative path to college, they need to be better informed about realistic, available career paths instead of

those sensationalized by the media. Ironically, one of the interesting byproducts of the “Joe the Plumber” debate that took place at the tail-end of the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign is that for at least a period of time, plumbing was presented in the media as a high-earning career option as opposed to a menial occupation at which effete elites snub their noses.

### College “Kids”

Similar to success stories of people without college degrees are the lists of non-degree career options found in cyberspace, but their usefulness is questionable. A Google search for “jobs that do not require a college degree,” for example, returns lists on CNN.com or Career Builder that include transportation manager, forest fire fighting and prevention supervisor, and real estate broker, all which have reported salaries of at least \$50,000. The trouble with using these lists as antidotes for overselling higher education is that they are most useful when presented to individuals seriously considering their career options. The majority of students enrolling in college are typical eighteen-year-old high school graduates who are thinking more about living out the “Animal House” fantasy than about their career development.

Any serious attempt to get some young people to decide to pass on college for their own benefit has to begin by asking eighteen-year-olds to make more mature decisions than our current culture thinks they should make. When Larry King interviewed Kobe Bryant about his decision to enter the NBA Draft after high school, King asked, “What was the hardest part about being eighteen and playing in the league with adults?”<sup>6</sup> My thought was, eighteen-year-olds are adults, Mr. King, even if they are less wise than their elders. Anyone who can legally drive a car, vote in a presidential election, or serve in the military should be treated as a young man or woman, not as a “college kid.”

Kay Hymowitz’s *Manning Up: How the Rise of Women Has Turned Men into Boys* (Basic Books, 2011) describes the evolution of a cultural, pre-adult stage of development that consists of twenty- to forty-year-old men who act out their adolescence for as long as possible. Today it is even acceptable for

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<sup>6</sup>“CNN Larry King Live,” transcript, January 6, 2005, *CNN.com*, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/050106/lk1.01.html>. Mr. Bryant responded to Mr. King’s questions thus: “Well, I feel the team chemistry was the hardest thing, for me, anyway. Now, it’s a different era. Teams are substantially younger than they were. So you have teams now with guys who are 27, 26, 25. Whereas back then, when I came to the NBA, it was 29, 30, 31, 32. And I was 17, 17, 18, so I didn’t have anything in common with the guys, there was not much to talk about. So it was a little difficult.”

twenty-somethings to move back home with parents after college. Many live at home well into their thirties. Popular movies among Gen Yers and Millennials include *Billy Madison* (1995), *Grandma's Boy* (2006), *The Hangover* (2009), and *Get Him to the Greek* (2010), which focus on “grown” men with the maturity level of boys. Culturally, we’ve shifted to the point where we celebrate and reward the irresponsible and immature lifestyle of today’s supposed young adults. Rutgers University even paid *Jersey Shore* reality TV star Nicole “Snooki” Polizzi more money—\$32,000—to speak to students this past spring than it paid its commencement speaker, Nobel and Pulitzer-prizewinning author Toni Morrison.<sup>7</sup>

### Bottom-Up Solutions

Making the case that fewer people should attend college is one thing, actually getting greater numbers to opt out of higher education voluntarily is much more challenging.

Proactive measures that address the higher education bubble will likely start from the “bottom-up.” While it’s not as sexy, some bright students are starting post-secondary education at a community college because it offers a lower-cost route to discovering what they want to do with their lives. Community colleges have the added bonus of employing many faculty who like to teach and are not distracted by the “publish or perish” game.

For other young people, putting off traditional college for a year or so in order to mature can be just as valuable. Many professors can attest to the vast difference between traditional-age students and students who begin college after having spent time working, volunteering, or serving in the military. Harvard’s office of admissions even includes an article on its website that supports students who want to defer admission instead of starting college when they are not ready.

From the industry vantage point, PayPal founder and entrepreneur Peter Thiel is getting into the alternative education game by presenting a different path to a few of the brightest young minds. In a January 20, 2011, interview with the *National Review*, Thiel sharply criticized the current state of higher education:

I estimate that 70 to 80 percent of the colleges in the U.S. are not generating a positive return on investment. Even at the top universities,

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<sup>7</sup>“Snooki of ‘Jersey Shore’ gets \$2K more than author Toni Morrison to appear at Rutgers,” March 31, 2011, *NJ.com*, [http://www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2011/03/snooki\\_of\\_jersey\\_shore\\_gets\\_2k.html](http://www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2011/03/snooki_of_jersey_shore_gets_2k.html).



it may be positive in some sense—but the counterfactual question is, how well would their students have done had they not gone to college? Are they really just selecting for talented people who would have done well anyway? Or are you actually educating them? That’s the kind of question that isn’t analyzed very carefully.<sup>8</sup>

Thiel has also put his money where his mouth is. He created the “20 Under 20 Thiel Fellowship,” which offers \$100,000 grants to young people who want to push entrepreneurial ideas forward rather than prolong their adolescence at college.

Goldman Sachs’s “10,000 Small Businesses” initiative is also based on this bottom-up philosophy. Goldman is donating \$500 million to help advance small business owners with business education, mentorships, and networking opportunities. Rather than sending owners to the swankiest ivory towers to take classes on generic business theories, Goldman Sachs is partnering with local community colleges, which are more effective in addressing the specific business needs of each participant’s locality.

### **Call to Action**

Every successful alternative to college is a crack in the foundation of contemporary higher education. Thus far, colleges and universities have been fairly unresponsive to the onslaught of criticism leveled at them. Even as the empirical evidence that refutes the gospel-like wage premium of the college degree mounts, enrollments do not appear to be decreasing. Hence, I call upon those whose words carry weight—shift your energies away from proving the existence of the bubble to advocating solutions to the problem.

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<sup>8</sup>Matthew Shaffer, “Back to the Future with Peter Thiel,” *National Review Online*, January 20, 2011, <http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/257531/back-future-peter-thiel-interview?page=1>.