

Not Going to College is a Viable Option

By Lawrence B. Schlack
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- 1 Any retired superintendent who's running around the country telling high school seniors not to go to college had darn well better explain himself or herself. OK, here goes.
- 2 I've seen too many high school graduates who have gone off to college in September but are back home with mom and dad in December. And I've seen those who have made it through the first year but transferred back home to a community college for the second. And there are plenty of those who have stuck it out for a year or two, changing majors, dropping classes, starting over, racking up debt and finally dropping out—with debt but no degree.
- 3 The go-to-college tsunami has given us colleges full of young people who really don't know why they are there or where they are going. They've been told college is their only option and they are using the experience as a very expensive and often futile form of career exploration.
- 4 Status, economics and competition are three powerful forces behind the pressure to attend college that exists today. It's become a status issue. Going to college is first class. Not going to college is second class. High school seniors who can't declare they are college bound are made to feel like failures.
- 5 It's an economic issue. Students are told they will land better jobs and earn more money with a college degree. And it's an international competition issue. There's widespread belief the United States is somehow running behind other nations in producing a competitive workforce and more college degrees will make us more competitive.

Honorable Alternatives

- 6 College, however, is not always the logical next step for high school graduates. There are plenty of honorable and viable choices for the year after high school. The decision not to go to college should not necessarily be viewed in negative terms.
- 7 Europeans use the term "Gap Year." It's the year after secondary education in which the graduate takes time off for travel, work or public service before making a decision whether to go on to higher education.
- 8 Many could profit by simply going to work in a field they want to explore. Here's an example. A sign on the door at my local gas station reads "Assistant Manager Wanted." I ask the manager whether he'd hire an 18-year-old right out of high school. Sure would, he says. Qualifications are honesty in handling money, good customer relations and dependability. Couldn't this be a good career beginning for someone wanting to own or manage a business? Instead of paying tuition you earn money while learning business skills.
- 9 Other honorable non-college choices right out of high school include military service, cultural immersion while working in an overseas country, doing mission work in Central or South America, becoming a nanny, a hospital aide, or teaching English overseas.

Important Questions

- 10 Here are some questions we should ask members of the class of 2007. The answers would help them chart a productive post-graduate path.
- 11 “Senior, can you list your strengths, talents, aptitudes, abilities? Can you name four or five careers you can realistically aspire to? Can you describe where you want to go and what you want to do in life? Do you really need college to get where you want to go?”
- 12 For those who answer, “Yes, I know my strengths and I have a pretty good idea where I want to go in life and I do need college to get there,” college is the right choice. If the answer is, “I’m not really sure what my strengths are or where I want to go in life,” then deferring college is the better choice.
- 13 High school doesn’t always prepare students to answer these important questions. Too many young people graduate without a realistic picture of their own talents and aptitudes and too many don’t have any clear idea of where these strengths might take them in the work world. Better preparation with these questions could result in fewer misguided students going on to college.

Narrow Perspectives

- 14 School leaders—particularly in suburban communities where the go-to-college push is most apparent—should be out in front on this issue. These are the districts that take pride in saying things like “90 percent of our senior class went on to college last year.” They should stand up and be clear that college is not the only path to success in life.
- 15 Best current estimates are that not more than 20 percent of careers in the work world of tomorrow will require a four-year degree. A Penn State professor, Kenneth Gray, goes further, quoting U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics predictions that as few as 12 percent of all jobs will require a B.A. Most of the work world will require a high school diploma and perhaps an additional year or two of training. And that work world will include high-flying non-college graduates such as Dell Computer founder Michael Dell, TV talk show host Larry King and Wendy’s Restaurants founder Dave Thomas.
- 16 Last fall an 8th-grade student in my hometown was quoted in our local newspaper saying, “College is like your life. If you don’t go to college ... you can’t live a successful life.”
- 17 Too many students believe this. School leaders can get out in front and help them see there are many paths to a successful life and college is only one of them.

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