

Uncollege

by Wes Beach

A few days before I sat down to rewrite this section (in January of 1998), I finished reading a powerful book about eating disorders written by a 23-year-old woman who never finished high school and does not have a college degree. John Steinbeck dropped out of Stanford and went on to win the Nobel Prize. The University of Virginia owns an important collection of American literature that was donated by a successful businessman who left college and never went back for his degree. Peter Jennings, news anchor for ABC; John Major, the former prime minister of England; Ansel Adams, world renowned photographer; Carrie Fisher, actress and author; actress Kelly McGillis; Louis L'Amour, author of adventure novels and winner of Congressional medals; Olympic gymnast Mary Lou Retton; and Walt Disney all left high school before graduating (Adams left elementary school). And don't feel that you have to become famous to matter, either. There are millions of people leading productive and fulfilling lives who are photographers, electricians, salespeople, musicians, telephone installers, business owners and any of a number of other things who do not have a lot of formal education. I believe that doing anything well, however modest, adds as much to our society as is possible. "Think of the joy and satisfaction that one can derive from the simple act of planting flowers, cooking a meal, writing a poem, solving a problem, painting a picture, dressing with flair, or doing your job to the best of your abilities. Creativity brings us to life, and by using our creativity we help bring the world into being."

(Joan Borysenko and Miroslav Borysenko, in [The Power of the Mind to Heal](#).)

At least two BHS graduates are now professional athletes. Others are working, and a few have started their own businesses. Several have embarked on extended travel odysseys. A few have gone to private business and vocational schools. A number of people have entered the military, but shifting military policies have reduced (but not eliminated) opportunities here.

There are so many ways to make your way in the world that I can't begin to tell you specifically how to get started. Here are some general ideas:

Finding people to support you

Don't be afraid to contact people, even complete strangers, to find opportunities for yourself. One day when I was visiting Open Studios, I heard a glass blower talk of how he had learned technique over many years, and how he had taught his young apprentice everything he knew in a year. Since then I have suggested to several people that, if they're interested in an apprenticeship in some art form, they could call all the listed artists in the Open Studios catalog and inquire about becoming an apprentice. I've asked a few artists about this possibility, and they have all been at least somewhat interested. No matter what you're interested in—accounting, flying airplanes, working in politics, plumbing—use the phone book, the Internet, personal contacts, random encounters, libraries, university catalogs, etc., to find people you can talk with who work in the field you're interested in. Not everyone will have the time or the interest to spend time answering your questions, but many people will. I've had very good luck corresponding with authors whose books I've liked a lot. In two instances that I happen to know about (I'm sure there are others I don't know about), former students found a mentor (one in architecture, one in writing and illustrating children's books) by contacting authors of books.

Jumping in

What often works is just to plunge into something you're interested in and see where it leads. I know one person who graduated from high school with very high grades in college preparatory classes, but who didn't want to continue with formal education. What he wanted to do was travel around the world. So he worked to save up some money, then he took off. He went entirely around the world, spending an extended time in India studying with a spiritual teacher. He wound up on Bali, where he looked around and decided that he could sell various items that were produced there at other places. One thing led to another, and he now owns a women's clothing store in Santa Cruz County and a factory on Bali that produces much of the merchandise he sells. He has taken a few classes at Cabrillo College to learn some specific skills like accounting, but mostly he has learned his business on his own. He travels a great deal in order to oversee what goes on in his factory, and he runs a thriving business. He could have predicted none of this when he left for his around-the-world trip.

I know this story because my wife bought her wedding dress in this man's store. While I was waiting for her to try dresses on, I got to talking with the owner; this led to my offering to take him to lunch so I could pick his brain. He readily agreed. People are very often approachable and willing to share their experiences and their knowledge with you.

"You U"

In an article in the San Francisco Examiner (January 4, 1998), Marty Nemko, who has a Ph.D. from UC Berkeley, wrote that he could have learned what he needed to know in a much more effective way and in a much shorter period of time. He wrote:

Yes, people with degrees earn more in their lifetime than people without them—but that is simply because colleges attract the brightest and most ambitious students. You could lock them in a closet for four years and they'd still earn more. If you're a motivated adult, there often is a better approach. I call this "You University." At You U, you decide what you want to learn and then design a plan to learn it. One of my clients, Phillip, wanted to learn how to create partnerships between corporations and schools. Instead of going back for a largely misfitting master's in education or business, he did a You U "master's."

First he searched the Internet for articles on business-education partnerships, then he interviewed people at corporations who were involved in them. One suggested things he should read and that he should attend an upcoming conference on school/business partnerships. He attended sessions, spoke with other experts and found out about an on-target newsletter and an Internet discussion group on partnerships. He visited corporations that had model programs.

Now imagine you are an employer looking for someone to develop a program with the schools. Would you rather hire someone who has a master's in education or someone who, like Phillip, attended You U? Right. Phillip got hired as a school liaison by Pacific Bell.

Whatever you decide to do with the next part of your life, I believe deeply, as I've said on your transcript, that it's your recognition of your genuine interests and talents, and your confidence, optimism and sense of autonomy that will carry you where you want to go.

Alternative Schools and Training/Certificate Programs

If you'd like some specific suggestions about schools and programs that might help in getting on with your life without college, here are a couple of books that could prove useful.

- But What If I Don't Want to Go to College? A Guide to Success Through Alternative Education, by Harlow G. Unger. This book provides useful general guidance, a look at specific kinds of schools and some thoughts about choosing a school and career. The detailed lists in the appendices of jobs and job categories may tell you about possibilities you didn't know existed.

Here's a bit of what Unger says at the beginning of his book:

[T]here are only two good reasons for going to a four-year college or university: a deep desire to study traditional academic subjects (literature, history, philosophy, languages, science, and so on) or a deep commitment to career goals that can only be reached with a university education (law, medicine, engineering, and similar professions).

So if you're one of the millions of Americans who really don't want to or need to go to a university, and your talents and career goals are in areas not requiring a university degree, by all means consider alternative career education. Alternative education can open thousands of career opportunities in the arts, crafts, science and health care, sports, skilled trades, manufacturing, construction, travel, banking and finance and even in your own business—and there's no need to spend thousands of dollars and four precious years at a university if you don't really need to or want to....

[I]n 1996...[t]he median income for full-time workers with a bachelor's degree was \$716 a week, or about \$37,200 a year. In the same year, about 9.3 million workers without four-year college degrees earned \$700 or more a week. In a few occupations...more than 10 percent of the workers without college degrees earned more than \$800 a week.... In addition to high wages, there are also more than ample job openings right now for eager, motivated workers without four-year college degrees. Indeed, of the 20 fastest growing occupations, according to the Labor Department, only four require a bachelor's degree or higher. Most...are occupations for which the required training is available in career-education programs at good high schools, two-year community and junior colleges and technical institutes.

- You're Certifiable: The Alternative Career Guide to More Than 700 Certificate Programs, Trade Schools, and Job Opportunities, by Lee & Joel Naftali. The title explains what the book is about. The authors write, "Alternative career options have increased exponentially in the past decades—from art appraisal to violin-making to equine therapy to life coaching to glassblowing to holistic healing." Programs listed in this book fall into these categories:

- Animals
- Art and Design
- Bodywork and Physical Health
- Consulting and Counseling
- Craft and Trade

Food and Drink
Herbal and Alternative Medicine
Media
Metaphysical Healing
Outdoors and Active Therapy

Wes Beach directs Beach High School, which offers teenagers the freedom to pursue their authentic interests and develop their natural talents outside of a traditional high school. Wes has been doing this kind of work in one form or another for over 20 years. Prior to working independently, he had 32 years' experience in grades K-14 in public and private schools as a teacher and alternative education program director.

The website for Beach High School is: <http://members.cruzio.com/~beachhi/home.html>