

Key Concepts:

gap year

apprenticeship

certification

self-employment

Chapter 12

College Isn't Right for Everyone – Despite What “Everyone” Says

In earlier chapters, we explored which college option might represent the best investment for you based on your academic and financial capital. Yet, that discussion might lead you to believe that some form of the traditional four-year bachelor's degree is the path everyone should take. In August 2010, President Obama explained the urgency behind his goal to raise the nation's college graduation rate to 60 percent within 10 years, saying: “The single most important thing we can do is to make sure we've got a world-class education system for everybody. That is a prerequisite for prosperity.” Although we would tend to agree with the President that access to education beyond high school is critical to the nation's overall prosperity, we differ with his implication that a traditional, four-year college degree is the right path for practically everyone.

Truth be told, large numbers of students each year head off to college even though they probably shouldn't be there – at least not right away. Some lack the skills; some lack the time and money; some lack the desire. If you fall into any one of those categories, you should think carefully before you decide to “go with the flow” to college because people – parents, teachers, reporters, politicians, even the President – keep telling you that's what you should do.

Lacking the aptitude, the resources or the desire to go to college can dramatically affect your likelihood of making it to graduation. *As we have said before, if you are going to go to college, you have to finish – you have to get that degree – in order for you to see a return on your college investment. Otherwise, you’re largely wasting your time and your money.*

We know that’s a shocking statement – especially given the importance of education for your individual prosperity, as well as the nation’s long-term competitiveness. Those stories warning of U.S. workers losing ground to better-educated ones in other parts of the world are true. If you as a worker and we as a nation are going to maintain a comfortable standard of living, then advanced education and skill development will be central to that goal. But notice that we have repeatedly said *education*. College is one path to the education you’ll need to compete in the 21st century global marketplace, but *it isn’t the only one*. For many students, college (right now) is the wrong path. The obvious evidence of that is how many students go but don’t graduate.

If you are one of those students who questions whether college is the right path for you, first give yourself credit for sizing up your own circumstances and resisting the “everybody’s doing it” logic. However, you should assume that to get the life you want, some sort of additional education or hands-on training will be necessary. Here are some alternative strategies that might make sense for someone who wants to consider something other than the traditional college path after high school.