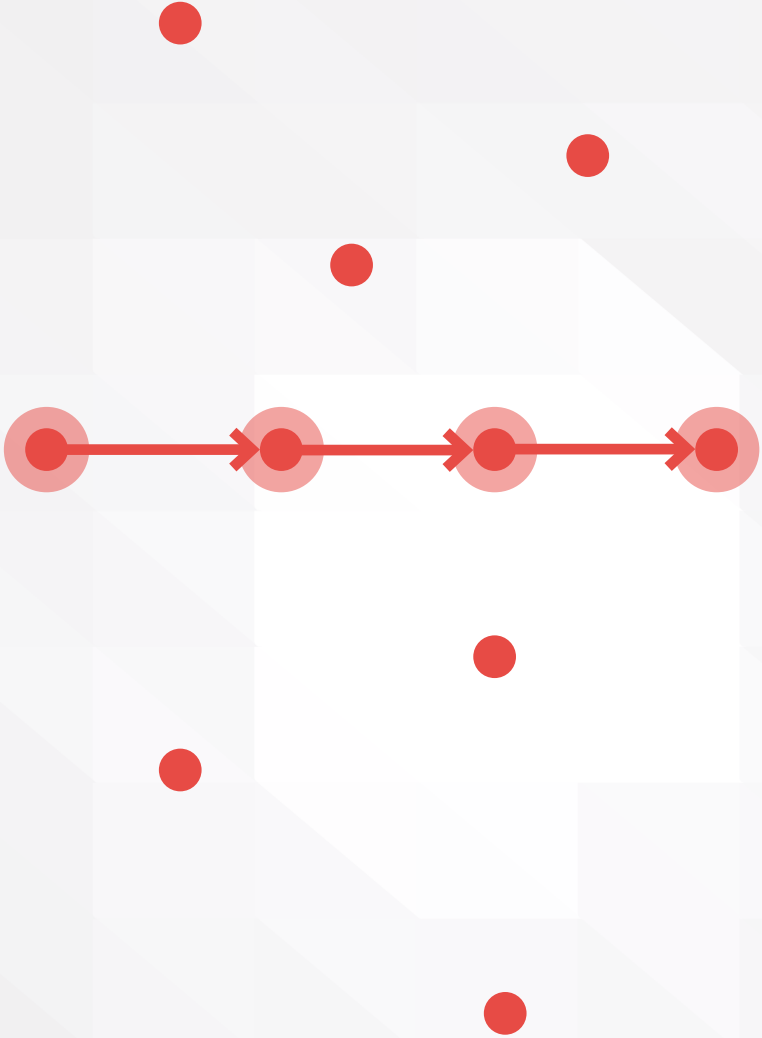# THE FUTURE OF SCHOOL

Here's What
Higher Education
Should Look Like
10 Years From Now

ISAAC MOREHOUSE

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this guide is to help young people find the most direct, exciting, and effective path from where they are to a fulfilling career and life journey.

It's a journey because being fully alive is not a destination at which you arrive, but a state that is perpetual, even as external circumstances change. Most children have it, but it's very hard to maintain as you transition from consumer to consumer-producer. Children rely on those around them to do most of the producing and procuring, and they spend their time learning and playing. Children create, but rarely with the intent or ability to exchange their creations with others, and almost always with resources first obtained by others and given to them. This is normal and natural for a child, but adult humans are meant to produce and exchange to meet their needs, and we're only really fulfilled when we do.

For at least a century, this transition has become increasingly official and institutional, and grown in complexity and absurdity. Many arbitrary phases and benchmarks have been created, and false choices presented: learning or fun, work or play, fulfilling or practical, teacher or student. What ought to be an organic, non-linear, highly individualized transition, much like that of a toddler from crawling to walking, is instead a formal, hierarchical, one-size-fits-all assembly line from student to worker. It's never been a particularly good model, but technological and cultural progress have made it all but obsolete, and more costly than ever to cling to in the face of economic and social realities.

In this guide I begin by briefly laying out the ideal. What is supposed to happen in the transition from consumer to consumer-producer?

What elements are needed? Chapter two describes the current reality, and explores its myriad shortcomings. How did college get tied up with this process, and what role does it have? Chapter three is a brief tale of my personal education and career path where I explore what worked and didn't for me. My experience, like that of many others, may be helpful for drawing basic, broad lessons, but is by no means any kind of archetype or blueprint to follow.

Chapter four examines how social change happens more generally, and how we might apply that insight to changing education and career preparation models. Chapter five explores alternatives to the dominant approach. The final chapter is a list, nothing close to comprehensive, of ways you can take your career and educational journey into your own hands.

It's time to awaken your dreams. That's not meant to be cheesy or fluffy. In fact, it should scare you a bit. Self-honesty about what your dreams are is not easy to come by. After you have it, you are immediately answerable to yourself for why you're not doing the difficult work of pursuing them. The easy route is to cast blame on the conveyor belt you're on through school and work. I intend to show you that the conveyor belt is silly, and all the myths about its necessity can be ignored. That leaves you with no excuses, just self-discovery and hard work in front of you.

Are you ready?

THE IDEAL

There are seven indispensable elements needed to make the transition from child to productive adult:

Confidence - Believing you can work with causal relationships in the world to achieve your ends.
Experience - The only way to gain the confidence to continue building the rest of the attributes.
Universal Skills - Walking, talking, reading, writing, driving, computer skills, basic math, etc.
Knowledge - Basic facts about the world and the way other people operate.
Network - A relational Rolodex of people with a wide range of knowledge and resources.
Abstract Thinking - The ability to see broader patterns, theorize, and draw conclusions.
Special Skills - Knowledge and ability unique to your specific vocation/avocation.

These are in loose chronological order in terms of their acquisition, though they overlap a great deal and many happen continuously and simultaneously. Of course reality is more complex. If you don't like this version, adjust it as you see fit. Still, we can derive from this list the basic content of education, ideally. Let's explore each in a little more detail to understand their nature.

Confidence and experience are so intertwined that we could probably condense them into a single category. These attributes grow so naturally in humans that very little need be done to aid their development. Sadly, many parents, educators, and do-gooders have meddled with the natural development process of curious, exploring

children. Realizing the power of confidence, many well-meaning people have attempted to simply give it, unearned, to children by constantly telling them they can do anything. Not only is this untrue, and obviously so to the child, but it has the complete opposite of the intended effect. Children hear phony self-esteem platitudes about achieving their dreams, meanwhile they struggle to hit the ball or beat the game, and they assume the world is a sham and that fate is the determining factor in their success or failure.

If you step back and watch a very young child you'll see them act entrepreneurially. They dabble and test and seek solutions to wants and needs. The world provides feedback, and after they incorporate realities like gravity, they reach the toy or toss the ball. Confidence is the immediate byproduct of the achievement of these tasks. There is no poster or curriculum or parental trick that can replace the beaming pride of a child who learned how to ride a bike from trying, over and over. In other words, to build the first two attributes on our list an individual simply needs to be free to do what humans instinctively do. These characteristics require continual development throughout all of life, so the process of new ventures and skinned knees should continue.

It is in the realm of universal skills and knowledge that schooling typically comes into the picture. Every human needs the tools to interact with others, and a shared set of basic facts. From motor and language skills to writing and grammar to arithmetic to using Google, if we are to be producers and exchange with others we need a universal tool kit with which to acquire more specialized skills and knowledge. I will address more in depth ways to acquire basic knowledge and skill, suffice to say here I have come to believe that like confidence, they are quite naturally developed with no external prodding, and experience is the best teacher. It seems to me that the rewards basic skill and knowledge bring are sufficient motivation for

humans, without being forced into standardized processes meant to impart them.

The final three elements are those most associated with higher education. A young person equipped with fundamental tools and knowledge is ready to gain advanced thinking and skills that set them apart. It is at this point that individuals begin to diverge dramatically from their peers as they specialize. (I do not wish to assume too much uniformity in the earlier stages of education, but it is definitely true that higher education is by necessity more individualized). When it comes to a network, abstract thinking, and specialized skills, they each require different methods of acquisition.

Networking can be done no other way than being immersed in the world of other humans. The market, social institutions and organizations, and culture must be engaged. Niches and groups with whom a person clicks must be discovered, and those connections cultivated. Thankfully what once was captive to the happenstance of time, geography, and language can now also happen virtually and instantaneously across the globe.

Abstract thinking is very difficult to obtain without the aid of other thinkers, writers, and teachers. Philosophy and the diverse sciences that spring out of thinking with method are not easily won, and a community of similar seekers is a crucial element to cultivating the life of the mind at a high level. A mere wandering and curious brain is not sufficient to really do abstract thinking well. Conscious effort, discipline, relentless drive, and access and exposure to a broad range of thinkers and ideas are all necessary. Not everyone has the time or interest necessary to pursue this kind of intellectual life. It is largely for this reason that colleges originally formed - to aid this higher learning process for those who could afford it and were so inclined. Again, technological progress has dramatically improved access to

resources needed to develop abstract thinking.

Finally specialized skills, which range from oratory to auto body repair to cooking to computer programming to financial analysis and everything in between. A combination of experience, ideally alongside someone with greater skill, and theory, ideally from someone with greater knowledge, produce specialized skill. The former category, abstract thinking, is a specialized skill for those who will become professional abstract thinkers (authors, speakers, teachers and other intellectuals), but you could also spot a less general form of abstract thinking in any other specialized skill. The bricklayer has a mix of architecture theory and practice. Specialized skills, like basic skills, are tools, but they are tools of a specific variety or trade, and their value comes from the fact that they are anything but universal.

The development of special skills is easier than the discovery of what special skills one wants to develop. There is a high opportunity cost to gaining these skills, so it's important to find out what really makes you come alive before you head too far down a particular path.

Now that we know the elements for success, let's examine what this process typically looks like today and see how effective or ineffective it may be.
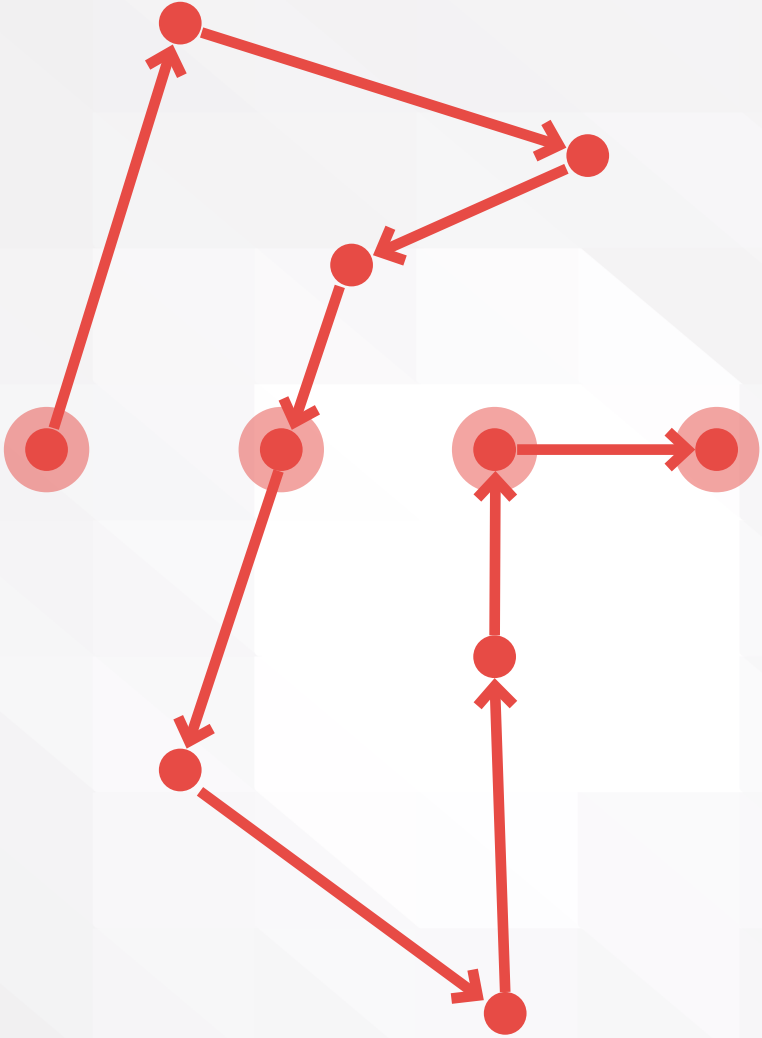
THE REALITY

College is the dominant path for young people seeking to get into a productive career and fulfilling life. Many who take this path do it without a clear idea what they hope to gain, or what elements they need to achieve success. This kind of thoughtless, meandering approach is incredibly costly and increasingly ineffective. The old yarn that, whatever else you do, go to college and you'll have a better life, turns out to be false, and at times dangerously so.

There are myriad and complex reasons why college is not the educational and career panacea it's made out to be. It begins with problems in pre-college education. As previously mentioned, school is intended to provide universal basic skills and knowledge. In its quest to do so, it has become so regimented and programmed that it has shut out genuine confidence gained by experience. It has made learning a tedious chore of rote memorization, and divorced it from the real world of value to the learner. Even with the obsessive focus on basic skills and knowledge, these are often so narrowly defined and politically managed to please all the right constituencies that very little comes of the effort to impart them.

Schools are bad and getting worse at delivering the basics, even by their own somewhat dubious definition of what counts as important. It hardly bears mentioning that K-12 schooling is virtually useless when it comes to building a valuable and diverse network, or getting specialized skills or abstract thinking. Though in fairness it makes little effort to provide these, as college is supposed to pick up at that point.

As a consequence of the uniformly poor educational experiences of most young people, colleges inherit students who are not ready

with a tool kit of sound thinking and basic learning skills. Professors cannot begin on the task of teaching abstract thinking or specialized skills because the students don't have basic reading, writing, or thinking sufficient to handle the necessary material. Understandably, college has moved down the educational chain and become what earlier phases of education are supposed to be; places that provide the most rudimentary skills and knowledge. College is the new high school.

One result of the downgrade in what colleges teach is that university education has become a baseline indicator of tools needed for career success. If employers want someone who can read, write, and do basic math, anything less than a college degree is just too risky. The information cost of finding good employees is high, and any kind of broad, quick signal that says "this person need not be considered" makes the task less costly. A cyclical relationship has evolved, where the profusion of degrees makes them an easy baseline requirement for businesses, and the demand for degreed employees drives more and more young people to universities, driving the price up faster than any other good or service in the market while the quality is unchanged or even lowered. Of course the degree arms race would not be possible without the web of subsidized loans and other government interventions that permeate the higher education guild.

Wealth has increased over the past several decades, and college as a consumption good has become more affordable. Going into debt for houses, education, vacations, or any number of things has become more possible and acceptable. Labor laws and occupational licensing cartels have made working or starting a business a rare option for young people, and the number of professional associations making degrees a legal barrier to entry has grown. Due to the failure of the K–12 system at imparting basic skills and all manner of other regulatory interventions, college is now seen as a necessity, and

governments have subsidized it so much that the price is out of reach and the value declining. Intervention leading to further intervention only exacerbating the problem.

The higher education establishment is well developed and decades of taxpayer money have created powerful lobbies and vested interests. They don't want change. They want more students paying higher tuition. The financial incentives offered students, and the easy signal offered employers, are enough to perpetuate the bubble for a while, but clear thinking by prudent purchasers of education might long ago have started producing alternatives. Another key ingredient has kept this inefficient *status quo* in place far beyond its usefulness: belief.

The powerful propaganda kids are pummeled with from birth is that college is of inestimable value. You go to college, you're set. If not, good luck flipping burgers. College is the only way to have a decent job. The only way to become a normal adult. The only way to gain broader social experience, or develop a network, or meet a spouse, or become enlightened. (Nevermind that most of these things are explicitly prevented in the K-12 system.) Don't worry about the cost in dollars or opportunities forgone, just do it and you'll be on your way to the American dream. Where institutional incentives leave off, cultural narrative picks up the slack, and the 'everyone must go to college' myth carries on.

The system is bound for correction, and we see it happening all around. Just step back a moment and unbundle all the things that college is supposed to be. Graduates are walking away with little more basic skill and knowledge than they came in with. They're more mature, but mostly because most 22 year olds are more mature than most 18 year olds. The networks developed at college tend to be primarily a smallish group of peers. Look around the typical college classroom and ask whether the people at those desks are going to be

valuable connections down the road. Outside a few top Ivy League programs, it's a crap shoot. Abstract or philosophical thinking is the exception, not the rule among graduates, and there is little time or scope to develop specialized skills outside of a few disciplines like the physical sciences. Possibly the greatest non-financial cost is four or more years spent *not* gaining experience working.

College is often touted as a time where young people can discover what they want to do. I do not discount the immense value of such self-discovery, but I submit that it is almost impossible to discover whether or not you want to be a marketing expert by reading a few textbooks and hearing a few lectures, compared to spending even just a few months working alongside a marketing expert in an enterprise. Being sheltered from commercial life for half a decade, and taught mostly by people who fear or mistrust the market, is an odd way to prepare for a life of fulfilling production and exchange.

At one time, higher education was almost the only way to gain abstract thinking skills and high level knowledge. In recent years, it has become almost the only way to obtain a signal of your employability. But that world is changing. Access to the best minds in the world is free and ubiquitous with the advent of online education. More and more employers - and the most interesting and dynamic - are ignoring degrees as a hiring criteria, and looking for those who distinguish themselves.

Furthermore, entrepreneurial behavior is fast becoming more highly valued, whether you want to actually start a business or work within an existing enterprise. The qualities that make an entrepreneur turn out to be the very things the education system beats down or screens out. The traditional model rewards conformity, sticking to someone else's plan, and complying with preset rules, but the market is rewarding mold-breakers. Something's gotta give.
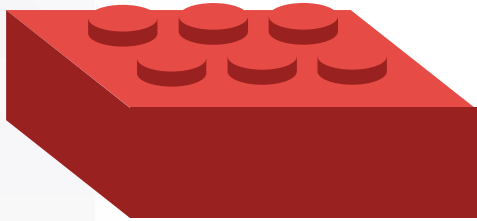
MY STORY

I was homeschooled, but in practice, that meant playing Legos most of the time. My mom used to wish she had created a more structured learning environment and curriculum. I'm glad she didn't. At the time, I thought I was probably embarrassingly behind my peers in "normal school", but I didn't much care. We (my siblings and I) always had lots of chores to do, and I had paid jobs from age ten or earlier (weekly then daily paper routes, golf course, grocery store, construction...). I had no interest in any kind of intellectual life until I was about sixteen. Up until then, it was sports, Legos, earning money, playing guitar, and whatever I had to do to get decent grades in my few homeschool classes or textbooks.

When I was 15, I attended a small private school for my sophomore year in high school. I enjoyed the sports and made some friends, but after years of loose homeschooling, it felt stiflingly prefabricated. I don't think I took homework home with me the entire year, since so many classes required almost no attention, I'd do homework right there at my desk. The whole thing seemed artificial, and I found it absurd that we all followed the same bells and schedule, like cattle corralled through the halls. I was not too smart for school – plenty of kids there were smarter than me – but too impatient with the lack of individualization. I was also irritated that it severely restricted the hours I could work. I decided to quit.

I'll never forget when I told the choir teacher of my decision to leave and enroll full time in the local community college. I considered him a friend and something of a mentor. He helped awaken my musical interest and gave me opportunities to sing and play that I was not qualified for, something I'm still grateful for. But he just didn't get it. I came in to class after running around outside in a rainstorm with a

few other students and broke the news. He stared, mouth agape with a bewildered, wounded look in his eyes and said, "College!? Isaac, you're not ready for college. You're still a kid who runs barefoot in the rain!" Any doubts I had about my decision vanished then and there. It was a well-meaning plea, but I took it as a challenge. I felt he underestimated me, and that was a great motivator.

I spent the next two years taking a full load of classes, packed into two or three days a week, and working as many hours as I could the other two or three days. I loved it. I could choose the classes I wanted, make my own schedule, and interact with a variety of people much wider than in the private high school, and even more than at the university I later attended. Most of the classes were ok, some bad, some amazing. The best classes I ever had were business and marketing from a crazy, middle-aged, self-proclaimed capitalist fanboy who ran a successful business but taught for fun. It was around this time that I awoke to the world of ideas. It had nothing to do with any of my classes, but for some reason (probably a breakup with a girl) I started picking up books, something I had, with a few early exceptions, hated.

I found myself mesmerized by philosophy, theology, and eventually economics. My job had me travelling across the state and installing phone and computer cables (pre WiFi), and taking on scary amounts of responsibility, mostly making things up as I went. My education, which came almost entirely from books I read on my own and late-night conversations with friends at church, the used bookstore, and coffee shops (which were kind of a new thing in Kalamazoo, MI at the time) was moving at breakneck speed. It was like my whole childhood I was just doing whatever I had to to get by educationally, but the dam broke in my mid-teens and I was in love with the life of the mind. I also had something of an entrepreneurial spirit and helped start a nonprofit and did a lot of international missions work, which at the

time I thought was the best way to make the world a better place.

After community college I continued the work/school split while attending the local, generic, massive state university where I majored in political science and philosophy. I changed majors several times, but finally settled on subjects I most enjoyed and would let me finish as fast as possible. I didn't mind school, but hated the amount of money I had to pay, and just wanted to get the piece of paper that was supposed to be a ticket to a job. Trying to save money, I went two whole semesters without purchasing a single textbook and still got good grades. It seemed like a racket.

With the exception of one professor and one TA, none of my fellow students or faculty really aided my intellectual development in comparison to what I was pursuing on my own and with friends outside of school. I used to walk around an old building downtown and imagine buying and turning it into a real college, where students only bought the items they wanted from the bundle, and where work and classroom were not in competition, but complementary.

Despite never having a single meeting with an advisor, somehow I graduated. At least I assume I did, since they sent me a certificate in the mail. I was 19 and I started a business with my brother. It was something of a failure, with a few high points. We folded it up after just nine months. I spent the next five years as a very young and very poor married guy working in the state legislature, then at a think tank.

I loved ideas, and had come to believe the way to make the world a better place was through political and policy change. But the more I studied and observed the machinations of the political world, the less faith I had in it as an avenue for change. While at the think tank, I took night classes and got a Masters in Economics. It was a

uniquely amazing program, as we used no textbooks but instead read all primary works beginning with Hesiod all the way through Marx and Mises and Friedman. I drove across the state three hours each way, one night a week for a year and a half during the program. By the time I was done, my belief in the inability of politics to improve the world had become firmer. I had little interest in anything besides educating people about the perils of government intervention and the wonders of the market.

My wife and I took a chance on a great job offer running libertarian educational programs in Arlington, VA, a city we knew we didn't want to live long term, but an opportunity we knew we had to seize. The job was amazing. Over my four plus years there I ran fellowships, seminars, mentoring programs, and raised money. I interacted with hundreds of bright students and dozens of successful entrepreneurs. I began to observe troubling trends. So many young people were stacking up degrees and educational accolades, yet wandering aimlessly, insecure and unsure about their career prospects. They had degrees and debt, but couldn't find a job. Many of the smartest decided, since they didn't know what else to do, to go to law school. So many came out the other end with massive debt, no closer to finding a fulfilling career. (If I had a nickel for every lawyer that told me they wished they hadn't done law school...)

Meanwhile, in fundraising I met countless business owners who claimed they were always hiring, even in a supposedly down economy, but couldn't find enough good talent. Something was amiss.

My views on changing the world were shifting too. Education as I thought of it - convincing people to change their worldview - seemed insufficient. I began to observe areas where change happened, it seemed to have a great deal to do with entrepreneurial innovation.

You could spend your life trying to convince people the Post Office is inefficient or immoral, or you could invent FedEx or email. I got the itch to disrupt the status quo as an entrepreneur.

A culmination of desires I had in college and opportunities, skills, connections, and worldviews I'd developed since came together. Cliché as it sounds, I went for a walk on the beach and had an epiphany. A single word, "Praxis", popped into my head. I could almost see it in bold letters floating on the horizon. A relentless flood of ideas filled my mind, and I ran to my car and drove home as fast as I could to type it up. I was going to create an alternative to the university system. Better, faster, cheaper, and more individualized. I wanted to create a new class of entrepreneurial young people. I wanted to seize the best online educational material, organize it, add a powerful credentialing signal, and combine it with work experience at dynamic companies that couldn't afford unproductive interns. I was tired of seeing young people languish and drown in debt. I was tired of seeing business owners struggle to find good workers. I was tired of seeing so many entrepreneurial opportunities and so few people with the confidence to pursue them.

Thus Praxis was born. It's kind of the incorporated version of my philosophy on education.

While living through the various phases, I was only sometimes conscious of these things, but in retrospect I can draw several lessons from my educational and career path:

- Free time is more valuable than planned time.

- Work is more valuable than school.

- Responsibility and ownership at an early age are irreplaceable.

- College is what you make it, but nearly everything good you get from it can be had better and cheaper elsewhere.

- Your education belongs to you, and no institution can give it to you.

- Discovering what you hate is more important than finding out what you love. As long as you're not doing things you hate, you're moving in roughly the right direction.

- Seeing geography as a constraint is a major impediment to your educational and career progress.

- Your personal philosophy and educational and career path should feed each other.

- Wandering and experimenting are great, but not at any price. Meandering through an educational path you'll be paying off for a decade or more is different than dabbling in a free class or internship that will only cost you a few months.

- Don't fear how you compare to your peers.

- If the interest isn't there, don't put energy there. But when it is, go all the way.

- You always get more out of things you choose over things you're made to do. Find ways to have more of the former, and fewer of the latter.

- Work ethic can overcome knowledge deficit, but not the other way around.

- Mentors can be great, but they can also hold you back. Don't take them too seriously.

- If the process isn't fun, you're doing it wrong.

- If the process isn't hard, you're doing it wrong.

- You'll be doing it wrong at least some of the time. That feedback helps you figure out how to do it right.

- Push your imagination to see yourself as capable of great things. Continue to do this.

The few regrets I have for the
path I took boil down to one:

"

*I wish I had more confidence,
and earlier,
about going my own way.*

"

HOW CHANGE HAPPENS

The current higher education model is flawed. If we're serious about changing it, first we need to get serious about understanding how social change happens. Intentions and action are not enough to bring about desired ends. We need an understanding of the causal relationships involved in order to effectively bring about change.

The great truth that flies in the face of civics textbooks and popular myth is that politics is not the source of social change. It's more like the last in a line of indicators of cultural shifts that have already occurred. Politicians and the policies they create only change after the new approach is sufficiently beneficial to the right interests, and sufficiently tolerable to the public at large to help, or at least not harm, political careers. Of course some politicians guess wrong and suffer accordingly, but by and large the political marketplace tends toward preservation of the *status quo* until a new direction is imperative for survival.

An entire, and entirely fascinating, branch of political economy called Public Choice Theory examines the incentives at work in the political marketplace in depth, and I highly encourage anyone attracted to political action to gain a working knowledge of this field. It reveals, in short, that incentives baked into the democratic system create and perpetuate policies that are bad for the public at large, and good for particular concentrated interests. What Public Choice has a difficult time accounting for is the role of changing beliefs. There are countless policies that, based purely on the incentives of various interests, ought to be in place but are not, or vice versa. Some things are simply out of bounds, no matter how much a particular group might benefit and be willing to lobby, because the general public finds them unacceptable.

Contrary to the seemingly ironclad rule of interest driven politics, public beliefs can and do change, and dramatically sometimes, putting parameters around the area within which political actors can ply their trade. Slavery is a striking example. At one point, it would've been hard to get elected, at least in some areas, if you publicly supported abolition. Not too many decades later, it's unthinkable to get elected anywhere if you've ever even joked about supporting slavery. There is certainly a complex relationship between changing economic incentives and public beliefs, but it is undeniable that the about-face on the ethics of slavery was more than a mere shift in power among competing interests. What most of the public found tolerable they now find reprehensible.

Our institutions are formed by incentives, and incentives are constrained by beliefs. That makes the beliefs of the public the ultimate key to change. Smaller changes might occur within the window of things already publicly acceptable, but major change requires a shift in that window. How to change those beliefs? There are two primary drivers, both of which feed each other; ideas and experiences.

Ideas are the raw data that form beliefs. If you accept the idea that minimum wage laws make lower skilled individuals less employable, and you accept the idea that a society with fewer unemployed persons is desirable, then you will have the belief that minimum wage laws are bad. If, on the other hand, you've never really thought about the economics behind minimum wage at all, but your low skilled neighbor lost his job when minimum wage increased, that experience might also cause you to believe minimum wage laws are bad.

I spent a good part of my life focusing entirely on disseminating ideas as a way of changing belief. It was fulfilling and, I think, valuable work. But it wasn't until relatively recently that I began to

understand the immense value of experience as a vital second prong when it comes to changing beliefs and the world.

Consider the difficulty of convincing your mother that the New York City taxi cartel is inefficient or immoral. It requires a great deal of economic theory or philosophizing about rights and coercion. Your mom might have other things she enjoys more than reading books on these subjects. Even if you convince her, her newfound belief will probably barely register among things she cares about. Sure, taxis aren't the greatest. So what? She's never had that bad an experience. Even if a policy change to end the cartel were possible, your mom mighn't pay any attention, or she may be concerned about what the new world without cartels would look like in practice.

Now consider recommending your mom use Uber on her next trip in to Manhattan. She uses it, likes it, and becomes a regular customer. She may be completely ignorant of the current cab cartel and the problems with it, but she's now a believer in an alternative system. If Uber comes under attack from vested interests, she'll defend it. If the chance to end the cartel comes up, she won't fear because she already knows what the world looks like without it. She can't easily be convinced out of her experience.

It is for this reason that dictatorial countries not only ban literature that propagates new ideas, but also goods and services that compete with government monopolies and let people experience something better. The Soviet Union feared blue jeans, jazz, and Marlboro cigarettes as much as free market textbooks.

If we want to break out of the educational rut, it requires new ideas and new experiences. We mustn't only talk about new approaches, we must build alternatives. The best part is, you don't have to wait on anyone. You can take your own path right now, and by so doing not

only improve your life, but serve as an example to others of what's possible outside the *status quo*. Educational entrepreneurs, not just intellectuals, will change the hidebound approach to education. It's already happening.

While policymakers, pundits, professors, and provosts squabble about the future of higher education and jockey to secure their position, entrepreneurs are busy creating and delivering alternatives across the globe. The educational consumer is enjoying new experiences and getting new ideas about education in the process. The old guard can argue any which way they like, but at the end of the day they'll have to prove more valuable to the learner than the myriad new options. All the protections and advantages in the world can't stop competition now. Technology has helped break it wide open.

A BETTER WAY

I once heard of a guy in Canada who played the bagpipes. He developed the skill of making a very particular small metal piece for his bagpipe, because replacements were hard to come by. He was quite adept at this unique skill and did it for other bagpipers as well, though just as an unpaid hobby. He happened across a classified ad seeking someone to make a small metal part for a large airplane manufacturer. He knew nothing about aviation or the construction of planes, but when he read the description and looked into it, the job required remarkably similar techniques to those he'd developed fashioning his bagpipe pieces. He became the supplier of these parts to the company, and made a great living.

There is no way any survey of Canada's human resources could have noticed or quantified this man's ability to produce airplane parts. He didn't even know he possessed it himself until he happened upon the want ad. No preplanned career mapping could have identified the aviation industry as a great fit for the bagpiper. Whatever educational and career path he'd taken had certainly not been geared towards this outcome. It turns out, we know a lot less about what we have of value to others and how we'll use it than we'd like to think. If you're young, chances are good the job you think you're training for won't exist as we know it in a few decades. This makes it incredibly important to get familiar with the trial and error approach to discovering your skills and talents and what the world values. It makes adaptive, entrepreneurial, information gathering behavior a must.

It's probably not a safe or realistic plan to lock in on a specific career and perfectly plot your path. Instead, returning to our seven elements needed for a productive and fulfilling adulthood, think about building each of them up every day, enhancing your human

capital and expanding, rather than limiting, your ability to seize opportunities. You are a firm. Whether you become an employee or not, you must see yourself as your own business. What's the best way for you to gain what you need? What's the best discovery process?

College is a big bundle that offers several of these elements. Increasingly, it claims to offer all of them. But, contrary to the prevailing narrative, there are many other ways to get each. Let's strip it down, unbundle everything, and examine the best approach. The traditional classroom model may prove effective for some things. For others, it may be absurd compared to the alternatives.

CONFIDENCE

No two ways about it, confidence is absolutely crucial to your success in any field. The only way to get it is to do stuff. You'll fail a lot, but you'll also succeed, and every small victory is a source of powerful, genuine confidence that simply cannot be gotten any easier way. No special or expensive plan or program is needed to build your confidence, but rigorous, relentless drive and discipline are imperative.

EXPERIENCE

The kind of experiences that will build confidence and help you accumulate valuable knowledge, build networks, and learn more about your own interests and abilities are virtually unlimited. Get a job, or several jobs. Read books. Blog. Go to events and meet people. Take a class. Teach a class. Maintain a garden. Travel. Early on, the more varied the portfolio of experiences you jump into, the better. With each new experience, you will learn more about what you like, and more importantly, what you don't. Eliminate those from the list. Rinse, repeat. Many people use college as a four year self-discovery program. It's the single most popular experience young people choose to learn

about themselves, build a network, and become adults. But if you consider the characteristics of an experience most likely to help you build your capital, college is a pretty high risk approach. Consider all the other possible ways to socialize, learn about yourself and the world, and get closer to a fulfilling career and life with $100,000 or more and four or more years. You could travel the world, work for five different companies, read a few hundred books, and on and on. In fact, it's hard to even come up with ways to spend that much money that quickly, besides pure short-term pleasures.

Think about areas of fear or insecurity. Look for experiences that will help you overcome them. Think about things that truly make you come alive. Look for experiences that let you do it. Try not to make your choice of any one experience, especially early on, so costly that you *must* succeed at it or be in serious financial or personal trouble. Pick low risk experiences with potentially big upside. You want to fail at a lot of the things you try. The "willing to fail" test is one good way to assess possible experiences. (Compare, for example, the cost of failing to publish a book vs. failing at college.) Look for experiences where even failure, or simply a loss of interest in your part, is likely to result in the accumulation of new skills and the opening of new doors.

UNIVERSAL SKILLS

Basic skills common across all careers and hobbies are relatively easy to come by, but rarely cultivated in a serious way. Things like punctuality, manners, communication skill, and emotional intelligence are not really the subjects of classes, but that doesn't mean they should be taken for granted. Other basic skills like writing, the use of common digital tools, and basic arithmetic are more associated with traditional educational approaches, but it doesn't mean textbooks or lectures are the best way to get them.

The experiences you choose will help you build basic skills. The internet is also a great treasure trove of skills training. Make a list of skills you think are likely to be valuable, find the ones you're not as good at, ask people for feedback, and jump in. Read, write, share some writing publicly, do some public speaking. Make yourself uncomfortable from time to time, but don't obsess too much on improving things you really hate to do. It's valuable to gain mastery of most basic skills, but it's also valuable to learn which skills you'll never be a master at. Become tolerable at those, then try not to put yourself in positions where you need to be a master at them.

KNOWLEDGE

The real source of knowledge is curiosity. Be curious. You needn't pay exorbitant sums to gain knowledge in a wide variety of areas. Again, read, find blogs and podcasts and lectures and interesting people to learn from. Knowledge is more accessible and in more diverse forms than ever before. Find what works for you.

You may decide you want to learn more about cell biology. Maybe classroom learning is an effective method for you, and there is a biology professor at a particular school that you really enjoy. If you have the money and it's worth it, sign up for the class. The traditional educational model is often very effective at conveying knowledge in certain fields. But that doesn't mean you have to purchase the entire, massive college bundle.

One underappreciated method of acquiring knowledge is teaching. If you can find a way to teach, formally or informally, children or adults, on almost any subject whether you know a lot about it or not, you will probably learn more that way than any other. It's a lot of pressure at first, but if you see teachers as guides who simply help find good

questions and places to look, rather than encyclopedias with all the answers memorized, it can be done.

NETWORK

Get out into the world, both digital and analogue, and get to know people! Whether you like it or not, you are a brand. Everything you do or do not publicly share about yourself shapes how you are perceived by others. Think about that. Your reputation is an asset. Social media and in-person interactions are valuable ways to build your brand and a network of people with skill, knowledge, and resources that may be valuable to you.

Be deliberate about your brand, but not phony. The only thing worse than someone who never utilizes the available tools to develop their reputation is the person who does way too much, and too finely tuned. You're human. You have a sense of humor, a bit of a temper, things you're proud of and things you're not. If your public persona is so perfectly whitewashed as to hide any sense of humanity, you're cutting of a lot of potentially wonderful connections and making people wary of you. On the other hand, if all you do is rant about things or people that tick you off and make no effort to maintain any kind of professional decorum, you'll also scare people away.

Real networking rarely happens in artificial environments created to foster it. Artificial environments full of people exactly the same age, career status, or interests, aren't the best bang for buck in terms of building great social or professional relationships. Mix it up with people you're likely to be buying from, selling to, hiring, being hired by, marrying, starting a band with, and so on. Socialization is in great demand by all humans, so there's no reason you need to pay a lot of money or go to great lengths to do it.

ABSTRACT THINKING

As previously mentioned, real abstract thinking is the area that college was originally focused on, and potentially best at. It's harder to gain on your own without knowledgeable discussants to push and challenge you. This does not mean a college classroom is the only place to get it. Far from it. Since most classrooms are today full of students who don't care much for the content and professors who'd rather be doing something else, it can be as hard to gain abstract thinking at a university as anywhere. You might find it there, or in online courses, or coffee shop discussions, or if you're particularly diligent and disciplined, in the solace of your own company.

The key is not to assume that simply being in the presence of paid professionals is sufficient to provide philosophical thinking. You'll have to work harder to become a good theoretical thinker than just about any of the other elements of success. But in the long term, it's the element that separates the good from the great. Someone with mastery of a special and valued skills set can be productive and fulfilled while she's doing her work, but should age or opportunity prohibit it, she might quickly find herself wandering and unhappy with few prospects.

The good life is the examined life. The art of examination is worth learning, whatever you end up doing.

SPECIAL SKILLS

Specialization is the most likely path to material success. If you can identify a skill you enjoy and that others value, master it and make your mastery known, you're probably going to make good money. The key is to not get too siloed too soon. I know people who chose

their educational path entirely based on average starting salary for the profession. They did it and made good money relatively quickly, but eventually they liked it less and less and wanted out. The cost of re-specializing gets higher the longer you go, especially if you focused so much on your special skills that you neglected to develop your confidence and experience in other areas, knowledge, network, and basic skills.

Don't be afraid of specialization. Chances are you'll need it. Just don't lock all your eggs in a single basket too early. It's also entirely possible the best thing for you to specialize in doesn't have a name. I know specialists at persuasion, soundbite communication, empathy, finding unlikely solutions to standard technical problems, and a great many other things. None of them have particularly telling job titles, and none of them could have picked this special skill set from a list ahead of time. It takes all the other elements, trial and error, self-honesty, and feedback from the world around you to work your way into a set of special skills that's both valuable and fulfilling. Once they begin to emerge, cultivate them!

The cultivation may require or include standard training programs or university degrees, but don't assume it must. Even careers that legally require a degree can often be approached from other angles. If you love helping people solve medical problems it does not follow that an M.D. is the only option. If you have abstract thinking skills, I bet you can come up with a dozen other ways to do this. When you have a skill in demand, never assume the dominant distribution mechanism is the best. It very well may be, but you need to discover that rather than taking it on faith.

We've discussed general ideas for gaining the seven key elements for success. Let's say you do a bang-up job of building them all. A major challenge remains. Those who will pay for your services are awash in

information about people offering similar products. How can you cut through the noise and signal your value?

This, and this alone, is the primary reason most people go to college. They need a signal. They need some kind of reasonably trustworthy validation to show trading partners they are worth the time of day. (This signal really only adds value if your goal is to be employed by a business. Degrees do almost nothing for entrepreneurs, as customers care about product more than credentials. Some investors even go out of their way to invest in college droupouts.)

I don't want to undervalue the signalling power of a college degree. It's real. But that value is decreasing, and the cost of a degree is rising. The need for a signal won't vanish, even if degrees vanish as the primary method. You need to think about ways to gain third-party validation for your knowledge, skill, and experience. Build your brand, and add provable endorsements. Classes and tests passed. Quotes from employers or customers or clients. Tangible products created. Published writings. Certifications gained.

This is where the greatest market opportunity exists. As we've seen, all the other elements in the college bundle are pretty easily obtained elsewhere, and often better, faster, and cheaper. But the credential is just beginning to see competition. This is exactly what prompted me to enter the marketplace of educational alternatives. I built Praxis to not only offer entrepreneurial work experience, basic skills training, and a curriculum to build abstract thinking capacity, but a platform to create a portfolio of these accomplishments, all validated by third parties. Professors to examine and certify knowledge of the curriculum. Editors and experts to assess and approve writing and speaking. Business partners to endorse work ethic and skills.

But Praxis is just one among a growing number of alternatives to

the college bundle and its credential. It's up to you to unbundle the whole package, build your own combination, and find a way to signal your value. It's not something that will eventually happen, it is happening already. First movers have big advantages.

WHAT TO DO NOW?

If you had no knowledge of the past – the way education and careers had been done for the last few hundred years – but only knowledge of the present and future, what kind of education would seem appropriate to have a meaningful, productive life?

Considering that here in the US the number of jobs that require simply following rules and repeating well known processes is shrinking, and the most fulfilling careers involve a lot of creativity and self-direction, you'd want to learn to be adaptive, self-motivated, and entrepreneurial.

Considering there is more amazing information available to you than any human in the history of the world has ever had access to – lectures, books, articles, interviews, movies, music... – you'd want to take advantage, dive in, get the best of what's out there in your areas of interest, and engage it with intelligent, interested people.

Considering the social connectivity today, in the physical and digital worlds, and the inability to learn much from weak formal signals like degrees and certifications, you'd want to build a lot of social capital and a wide and deep network of friends and associates. Your knowledge of opportunities and resources depend on your network.

Considering the number of people who have been trained to know about things for 15 or 20 years of formal schooling, and the number of opportunities that require a completely different kind of knowledge,

you'd want a lot of experience doing things, not just stacking up bits of information in the abstract.

Considering the unknown nature of future opportunities and the rapid pace of technological advance, as well as the relatively easy landing for those who try and fail, you'd want a lot of confidence and fearlessness. You'd want to know how to try big things and how to survive when you fail. Confidence comes from doing.

It's this combination of traits and abilities demanded by the present and future that inspired Praxis. The old models of education have their pros and cons, but that doesn't really matter. What matters is you, right here, right now. What do you need to build the kind of life you want?

I believe a new model for education is needed. The good news is, it's more fun and less financially burdensome than the old ways. It's hard though, because it's driven by you. You can't sit back on the conveyor belt and hope to end up in a good place.

LEARN MORE ABOUT PRAXIS

If you want to take the reins and create your own education and if you have any entrepreneurial urges, I encourage you to apply for Praxis. Grab your phone or laptop and check out **www.ThePraxisYear.com** to learn about the intensive 10-month program designed for young people just like you. This program will equip you with a world class network, teach you the skills of entrepreneurship, and give you real world experience in a real job. It just might be the spark you've been looking for.

Whether or not Praxis is a part of your journey, **break the mold.**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Isaac Morehouse is an entrepreneur, thinker, and communicator dedicated to the relentless pursuit of freedom. He is the founder and CEO of Praxis **www.discoverpraxis.com**, an intensive ten-month program combining real world business experience with the best of online education for those who want more than college.

Isaac previously worked at the Institute for Humane Studies where he raised support for the institute's activities, mentored students, and directed educational programs. Prior to IHS, Isaac was at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy where he created and directed Students for a Free Economy. Morehouse loves connecting people and helping them discover and realize their dreams. He's been involved in a number of business and non-profit start-ups, run a taxpayer advocacy group, and once played in a very mediocre band.

Isaac writes, speaks and teaches on entrepreneurship, economics, education, philosophy, freedom, communication skills, how to change the world and an assortment of other topics.

Morehouse lives in lovely Mount Pleasant, SC with his wife and kids. When he's not travelling the country and building his company he can be found smoking cigars, playing guitars, singing, reading, writing, getting angry watching sports teams from his home state of Michigan, or enjoying the beach. You can find him on Facebook or Twitter if you want to know more or strike up a conversation.

Do you have what it takes? Get more information and find out:

www.ThePraxisYear.com

THE FUTURE OF SCHOOL *by* **ISAAC MOREHOUSE**