College is a Waste of Time

Dale Stephens

Editor’s note:
Dale J. Stephens is a 19-year-old entrepreneur leading UnCollege, a social movement supporting self-directed higher education and building RadMatter, a platform to demonstrate talent. He is among the first recipients of the Thiel Fellowship, an initiative by venture capitalist and PayPal co-founder Peter Thiel that gives 20 entrepreneurs under 20 years old $100,000 to fund their projects.

(CNN) — I have been awarded a golden ticket to the heart of Silicon Valley: the Thiel Fellowship. The catch? For two years, I cannot be enrolled as a full-time student at an academic institution. For me, that’s not an issue; I believe higher education is broken.

I left college two months ago because it rewards conformity rather than independence, competition rather than collaboration, regurgitation rather than learning and theory rather than application. Our creativity, innovation and curiosity are schooled out of us.

Failure is punished instead of seen as a learning opportunity. We think of college as a stepping-stone to success rather than a means to gain knowledge. College fails to empower us with the skills necessary to become productive members of today’s global entrepreneurial economy.

College is expensive. The College Board Policy Center found that the cost of public university tuition is about 3.6 times higher today than it was 30 years ago, adjusted for inflation. In the book “ Academically Adrift,” sociology professors Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa say that 36% of college graduates showed no improvement in critical thinking, complex reasoning or writing after four years of college. Student loan debt in the United States, unforgivable in the case of bankruptcy, outpaced credit card debt in 2010 and will top $1 trillion in 2011.

Fortunately there are productive alternatives to college. Becoming the next Mark Zuckerberg or mastering the phrase “Would you like fries with that?” are not the only options.

The success of people who never completed or attended college makes us question whether what we need to learn is taught in school. Learning by doing — in life, not classrooms — is the best way to turn constant iteration into true innovation. We can be productive members of society without submitting to academic or cor-
porate institutions. We are the disruptive generation creating the “free agent economy” built by entrepreneurs, creatives, consultants and small businesses envisioned by Daniel Pink in his book, “A Whole New Mind: Why Right Brainers Will Rule the Future.”

We must encourage young people to consider paths outside college. That’s why I’m leading UnCollege: a social movement empowering individuals to take their education beyond the classroom. Imagine if millions of my peers copying their professors’ words verbatim started problem-solving in the real world. Imagine if we started our own companies, our own projects and our own organizations. Imagine if we went back to learning as practiced in French salons, gathering to discuss, challenge and support each other in improving the human condition.

A major function of college is to signal to potential employers that one is qualified to work. The Internet is replacing this signaling function. Employers are recruiting on LinkedIn, Facebook, StackOverflow and Behance. People are hiring on Twitter, selling their skills on Google, and creating personal portfolios to showcase their talent. Because we can document our accomplishments, and have them socially validated with tools such as LinkedIn Recommendations, we can turn experiences into opportunity. As more and more people graduate from college, employers are unable to discriminate among job seekers based on a college degree and can instead hire employees based on their talents.

Of course, some people want a formal education. I do not think everyone should leave college, but I challenge my peers to consider the opportunity cost of going to class. If you want to be a doctor, going to medical school is a wise choice. I do not recommend keeping cadavers in your garage. On the other hand, what else could you do during your next 50-minute class? How many e-mails could you answer? How many lines of code could you write?

Some might argue that college dropouts will sit in their parents’ basements playing Halo 2, doing Jell-O shots and smoking pot. These are valid but irrelevant concerns, for the people who indulge in drugs and alcohol do so before, during and after college. It’s not a question of authorities; it’s a question of priorities. We who take our education outside and beyond the classroom understand how actions build a better world. We will change the world regardless of the letters after our names.

The opinions expressed in this commentary are solely those of Dale Stephens.