DON'T GET THE WRONG IDEA

A look at common misconceptions, myths, and realities for students.
The Human Restoration Project is devoted to recognizing that students and teachers are human beings, and schools need to bring this to light. Every person matters, and has varying passions, traits, and skills - and are not merely a vessel for absorbing content knowledge. Our work is focused on three core statements:

- Passion is the core of education: what someone loves should be the focus of their lives. Their unyielding goal must be found, developed, and catered to.

- Creativity is a literacy: all innovations are a result of creativity. Schools must express a system that reaches out to the heart of a student’s imagination.

- Conforming of educational standards needs to end: our standards are rooted in the 1800s. There needs to be a movement that embraces local, speciality education that serves every student’s capabilities and desires.

*“Night Mist.” Jackson Pollock (1945). Pollock’s technique of the “drip method,” where he intensely splattered paint on canvas, represented chaos, massive expression, and lack of control.*

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Proponents: Matt Laughlin
Many voices are always telling you what to do:

- “You must go to college to be successful!”
- “These jobs are what’s going to pay well, look how many openings there are!”
- “You should do what makes you happy.”
- “You’re such a successful person.”

Most people have your best intentions in mind. There are plenty of myths that have misinformed and mischaracterized the narrative of one’s life. We can’t assume anything - today’s world is much different than even a decade ago. We don’t want to misjudge using overarching statements, but this resource is an acknowledgement of the lost or unsure in life.

We wrote this with a massive concern that students are being led down false pathways. It’s not that there’s a dark conspiracy for misleading youth (although there certainly is for some.) Entire industries base themselves on ideas that most take for granted: how to ace the SAT, the top ranked universities, what jobs are “hot right now”, how to find true happiness. Much of this information is inaccurate and takes false assumptions.

In this guide, *Don’t Get the Wrong Idea*, we’ll present facts, research, and our personal opinions on five major portions of your life going forward. Each is chronologically positioned:

- **Don’t Fit In? It’s Fine**: How popularity, being “cool”, and other clique-labelling ultimately matters little.
- **The Ultimate False Positive**: Standardized Testing: The dangers of our testing system and how they’re not a measurement of your value.
- **A Crossroads**: On details concerning the college admissions process should work and the options you have.
- **“Career Ready”**: An explanation of our current job market and what positions one should pursue.
- **All That Really Matters**: A look at defining “being successful” and “happiness” for oneself.

We’ll raise critical questions on each, such as:

- What if the SAT/ACT ultimately don’t matter at all?
- Did you know that many colleges are de-emphasizing and even not accepting standardized test scores?
- Is college even worth it? If so, what colleges are?
- Are STEM jobs actually growing? How come so many STEM majors are not obtaining jobs in their field?
- Why is everyone seeking happiness but not finding it?

We don’t claim to have all the right answers, but we do know what’s not working. Facts, data, and statistics back up all the claims we’re attempting to make. That being said, please ensure that you’re getting the full picture. Research counterclaims, browse books, and search alternative information online and decide for yourself. These are huge life-changing concepts we’re talking about, it’s no small endeavor!
introduction
“Ship with Butterfly Sails” Salvador Dali (1937). Each butterfly has a unique identity to carry everyone forward on a newfound journey.

Consider this

The *U.S. News & World Report* is widely regarded as the premiere college ranking organization. When one sees “Ranked #3 in Engineering” plastered on a college billboard, it likely is the work of *U.S. News*. However, these rankings don’t incorporate quality of instruction, experiences provided for students, job placement indicators, or general well-being.

“You can’t run away from who you are, but what you can do is run toward who you want to be.” - Jason Reynolds
One of the greatest fears of a student is not fitting in. It goes without being said that being labelled as weird, quiet, annoying, different, and other ostracizing terms can be debilitating. Being bullied, not being able to enjoy group projects, not having somewhere to sit at lunch, are just a fraction of this experience.

And although well meant, a school’s attempts to promote a cohesive, loving culture are typically not abided by.

To be honest, research isn’t on the outcast’s side. In *Popular: The Power of Likeability in a Status-Obsessed World*, Mitch Prinstein comments on his research,

“Popular children tend to grow up to have greater academic success and stronger interpersonal relationships, and to make more money in their jobs years later, while those who were not popular are at much greater risk for substance abuse, obesity, anxiety, depression, problems at work, criminal behavior, injury, illness, and even suicide. We now also understand that popularity changes the wiring of our brains in ways that affect our social perceptions, our emotions, and how our bodies respond to stress.”

Surely, this isn’t the entire story. Of course those who are rich, popular, and status-obsessed struggle with depression and ill-belonging - many constantly search for these desires and still cannot find what makes them happy. However, on average those who feel undesired or as “failures” - dating back to their schooling experience - tend to not cope as well later in life.

Interestingly enough, feeling popular (or not) in school has lifelong implications. The confidence and acceptance that you feel when your brain is developing the most (early childhood through adolescence) has a profound impact on your behavior later in life ([Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006](#)). Even though some adults may deemphasize or frankly - not remember - many of their experiences in school, research suggests that our personality traits are highly dependent on these experiences ([Persico, Postlewaite, & Silverman, 2004](#), [Addis et al., 2009](#)). And, the addition of social media has only exacerbated this process.

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don’t fit in? it’s fine.
“Composition.” Lee Krasner (1949). Lee’s technique aimed at expressing her inner-self through “controlled chaos.”
All things considered, you may be wondering what the solution is for this problem. There’s four major suggestions we think you should consider:

**Popularity and Behavior Feed Off Themselves**
It tends to be that students who are truly popular - not divisive (e.g. *Mean Girls*) - are more kind, caring, considerate, funny, and easy to talk to - they’re cool. Students who are unpopular are awkward, quiet, socially anxious, look/act different, and/or mean. Indeed, people who see themselves as outcasts gravitate toward recognizable groups to fit in (which tend to embrace alienation): goths, emos, nerds. There isn’t inherently anything wrong with this - people should find others who make them happy.

That being said, research does stipulate that those who consistently feel popular or unpopular feed off their building emotions (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006, Rosen et al., 2012). Even though you shouldn’t internalize that only you are at fault for acting a certain way, it is true that many unpopular people “double down” in their positions by embracing what people don’t like about them. In fact, students who take the opportunity to be more open and kind to others, even when faced with adversity, tend to feel better about themselves and attract more status (Newcomb, Bukowski, & Pattee, 1993). And, even though status isn’t everything - it goes without being said that it feels good to be around others who support you. It’s easy to get caught in a trap of negativity when you’re not fitting in - which often leads to you fitting in less. Furthermore, if you are someone who is popular - being genuinely kind and considerate to those you feel are “different” than yourself goes a long way.

**Embrace Your Differences**
We just mentioned that some embrace their niche - they find others who are also deemed “different” and make their own community. Luckily, this might be the best case scenario for young adults. If you feel loved and accepted by your friends, perceived popularity has virtually no effect on your outcome (McElhaney, 2008). In addition, “popular” students - despite the advantages they’re beholden to - have much higher rates of substance abuse and tend to gravitate toward
unsafe sexual activity even after high school (Mayeux, Sandstrom, & Cillessen, 2008).

And take all of these statistics with some reservation. Research is split, and some studies show that there is basically no link to one’s popularity but rather their aspirations. As long as you feel you can achieve and aren’t limited by what others say, you’ll be just as successful in whatever endeavor you want to tackle (Zax & Ress, 2002).

**Perceived Popularity is Much Different than Actual Popularity**

Many students think they’re popular (or others are) but the reality is much different. Shockingly, most students who are popular don’t even know it. Embracing one’s popularity and “acting popular” is actually averse to being popular. As in, acting like you’re better than other people or have higher status will not make you liked by a majority of people. However, those who genuinely are liked by most (e.g. are popular) don’t flaunt or acknowledge their position (Parkhurst & Hopmeyer, 1998).

The best indicator of true popularity is being kind and trustworthy, not dominant or stuck-up. When surveyed, most middle-school students believed that dominant,

**Consider this**

Researchers Jennifer Parkhurst and Andrea Hopmeyer conducted a study on 727 middle school students. They asked students to vote on who was popular at their school as well as who they would enjoy being around and hanging out with.

The results showcased two overwhelming data points: students who were seen as popular were dominant, aggressive, and stuck-up. Most students did not want to be around them. Vice-versa, students who weren’t seen as popular were viewed as kinder and more likely to be hung out with.

These data points reflect perceived popularity vs. sociometric popularity (peer liking). Therefore, to be truly popular, one wouldn’t acknowledge or take on the title of a “popular person” (Parkhurst & Hopmeyer, 1998).
stuck-up students were, by-far, the popular students at the school. Nonetheless, these students were actually some of the least accepted by their peers. Therefore, our perception of what “popular” is must be defined accordingly. Sometimes, the “popular group” is actually reminiscent of the “outcast” niche groups, except instead of uniting together with common (hopefully good) intentions, they’re aimed at preying on others.

**Don’t Be Afraid to Seek Out New Opportunities**
Fitting in is not limited to your social life. Many learners struggle in traditional school environments, but don’t realize other options are available. Although not every community will have access to alternative schools, there will be at least one other option.

Students hesitate choosing these schools because of many myths: do only weird people go there? Can I still get into college? Will I learn anything at all? Of course, these beliefs are unfounded - almost all educational institutions are rooted in deep philosophical ideals. If you’re going to learn better someplace else, why limit yourself?

Being surrounded by peers that understand you, that aren’t pitted against each other in classic standardized tests, and are encouraged to explore the world will be a drastic change from sitting in rows and talking at lockers. Most alternative schools have more loving, cohesive communities.

In fact, attending an alternative school tends to improve your chances of getting into college. There is no statistical data that encompasses all alternative schools, but most place an emphasis on crafting a unique narrative that increases your chances at acceptance. Ironically, most believe that class rank and GPA are vitally important, but students who attend schools that don’t grade actually have an advantage. Instead of GPA hindering you, it simply isn’t calculated - which places more of an emphasis on your achievements.

It’s worth seeing if you’re getting the education you deserve. Consider searching for what options exist. If traditional school is making you miserable - or you feel like you could achieve more elsewhere - why limit yourself? Admittedly, there is a price barrier to most opportunities, but funding options are commonplace. Be sure to seek out what programs exist.
Montessori: Based on the research of Maria Montessori, these schools tend to feature a teacher who acts as a “guide” as many students work on what they desire. Classrooms are grouped by age, for example 12-14, where students are free to collaborate on personal projects or some required curricula by their teacher. An emphasis is placed on real-life skill building such as taking care of the household (classroom).

Waldorf (Steiner): Rudolf Steiner believed many of the same ideals as Montessori, featuring age groupings and a focus on guiding, rather than forcing students to learn. Waldorf schools are more structured and typically a teacher leads the classroom, but much more of emphasis is placed on the arts than most schools.

Sudbury (Democratic): Sudbury schools have no required curriculum or standardization, students are nearly entirely in control – usually even being able to vote on the removal of staff. There are no traditional classrooms or courses. Students tend to work on whatever they’re interested in at a given moment, either by themselves or in a group (it’s up to them!)

Self-Directed Learning Centers: Almost the same as Sudbury schools, this “catch-all” term is used for any school that primarily focuses on students choosing what to do for themselves. All SDLCs will have slightly different policies on the degree to which students can operate on their own, some allowing students the same near 100% autonomy as Sudbury.

Online/Virtual: A variety of online schooling options exist, but primarily virtual schools are focused on remedial work. Usually, students are encouraged (or forced) to memorize high amounts of content and quickly pass exams. Sometimes, coursework is loaded as fast as one credit a month. However, this is a solid way for students to quickly graduate from school or make-up lost credits.

PBL (Project-Based Learning)/Design Thinking: Most schools will not feature this terminology in their name, but their labelled philosophy emphasizes “design thinking”: having students create and build projects to solve problems. Some of these schools will feature a more traditional curriculum delivered through hands-on work, while others are almost entirely build on student-led projects.

Many more exist, and some schools will have their own style that blends across many techniques.
The first SAT college admissions test was given in 1926, which was an adaptation of IQ testing. Invented by Dr. Carl Brigham (who also invented the Advanced Placement program), the SAT was meant to measure one’s innate ability. Despite common belief, the IQ test - as well as the SAT - was never meant to measure how high someone scored on a scale. Instead, both tests were aimed at setting a threshold to determine mental deficiencies - which was set very low.

In fact, one of the initial college presidents to implement the SAT, James Conant of Harvard University, explicitly said that those who performed well on the test, “would be no better than anybody else.” Even though Conant had adapted the SAT for scholarship purposes, which went against the initial formulation of testing, he did not want any special treatment for those who performed well.

Later, things changed. Conant wanted to expand the program. Instead of just using the SAT for a few college scholarships, he wanted it to change American society. Conant wanted a pure meritocracy - a group of highly intelligent, talented people (those who, according to him, performed well on the SAT) - to replace the ruling class of the United States. Instead of rich families of power, the SAT would be the “leveling tool” for the masses.

Of course, this is the exact opposite of what occurred. Not only is the SAT a glorified IQ test that doesn’t represent intelligence, it is highly favored toward those with the means to train for it. Don’t you find it odd that an “SAT boot camp” class that costs hundreds of dollars can prepare you to be “intelligent” and perform well? Those who have the economic means can ensure a giant advantage in standardized testing (Lemann, 2000).

So, what is the actual purpose of the SAT? It is telling that The College Board, owner of the SAT, renamed the “Scholastic Aptitude Test” to simply the “SAT” - as they could not prove the test measured “aptitude.” It should be simple to realize: the measurement of one day’s work on random vocabulary words, some step-by-step math programs, and ludicrously mundane topics is not a predictor of life success. A much stronger prediction are high school grades - which typically factor in creativity, motivation, and grit (Strauss, 2012).
"Follow your Dreams, Cancelled." Banksy. Is it still possible to do what you want when so many roadblocks are in the way?
“Standardized testing has swelled and mutated, like a creature in one of those old horror movies, to the point that it now threatens to swallow our schools whole.” - Alfie Kohn

The ACT falls into the same conundrum. Although students who perform well on the SAT and ACT tend to have more successful college careers - this coincides with those who have the supports for expensive test preparation program. Correlation is not the same as causation: although this narrow definition of success correlates with high test achievers, it is likely not the cause of these people achieving. Even then, the correlation is barely recognizable (Hiss & Franks, 2014).

Quite frankly, there’s so much research backing the inaccuracies and errors in standardized testing, it’s hard to fathom why they’re still being used. That is until you learn about the industry itself. Consider this: the “non-profit” College Board controls the SAT and AP Test, as well as all official guidebooks to prepare. In 2014, The College Board reported earning $750 million in revenue (Meserve, 2014).

What about the elephant in the room? If SAT and ACT testing ultimately does not measure intelligence and are not-so-great at predicting success, is it possible to avoid them? The answer is a resounding “yes.” Unbeknownst to many, colleges around the world are de-emphasizing and discrediting standardized tests.

Fairtest.org has compiled a list of over 1000 of these schools and have showcased an increasing number removing the testing barrier altogether. In fact, standardized testing in general hampers your learning. Why not opt out entirely?

To emphasize the irrelevance of standardized testing, here’s an abbreviated list of research which support these claims:

The Case Against the SAT. James Crouse & Dale Trusheim. 1988.
- Outlines the state of the SAT and the myths surrounding its indicators.

- Demonstrates ethnic and gender disparities in standardized testing data.

- Highlights how high-stakes testing has led to decreased student outcomes and motivation across the board.
Standardized testing has swelled and mutated, like a creature in one of those old horror movies, to the point that it now threatens to swallow our schools whole.” - Alfie Kohn

**A Case Study: Do High School GPA/SAT Scores Predict the Performance of Freshmen Engineering Students?** Tarek Abdel-Salam, Paul Kauffmann, & Keith Williamson. 2005.
- Finds little correlation between SAT scores and college performance.

- Explains how standardized testing has led to a negative testing culture which is hurting educational opportunity.

- Questions the validity on correlation of SAT testing and success, as well as frames GPA as a major predictor for college success.

- Results from Australia which shows the negative impact of standardized testing, which is adapted from US testing culture.

- Showcases how curriculum is being lost due to the overemphasis on testing.

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Consider this
Dr. Carl Brigham used SAT and IQ data to support his beliefs of eugenics - that all non-Nordic races were inferior. This belief was widespread during the time period and of course, the SAT featured questions that specifically culturally favored caucasian Americans. Even today, minority students perform, on average, worse on the SAT. This is due to a variety of problems: stereotype threats where one wants to disprove their inequity, racially-biased vocabulary and context, and greater systemic issues in the education system (**Woollen, n.d.**).
Consider this

Not only is student testing controlled through large, multi-million profit organizations, but so is teaching training. The Praxis, which is required in most teaching certification programs, is administered by ETS. ETS also controls the GRE (for graduate schools), HiSET (an alternative high school program), TOEFL (an English-language test), and TOEIC (an English-language certification).

“The one size fits all approach of standardized testing is convenient but lazy.”
- James Dyson
Attending college is, without a doubt, one of the largest decisions someone will make in life - let alone as a teenager. Bookstores feature rows of guides on the “Best Ranked Colleges in the United States!”, with a plethora of options on beating the college admissions program. In this section, we’ll break down three myths:

1. You Should Judge Colleges Based on their Rankings
2. It’s Incredibly Important That You Meet and Exceed College Admissions Checklists
3. College is Necessary

**Myth #1: You Should Judge Colleges Based on their Rankings**

Read the fine print on almost any college rank - whether it be a book at the store or in the lobby at a university, and you’ll likely find “by the U.S. News & World Report.” This magazine company started assigning rankings from hospitals - to states - to colleges in the 1970s ([U.S. News & World Report, 2013](https://www.usnews.com)). There is no government regulation or expertly assigned opinion to these rankings—they’re simply a magazine company.

However, colleges compete fanatically to obtain a top slot; it looks good to be “#1” in something. And most students seek out schools that obtain these high rankings. This wouldn’t be a problem if these rankings had any bearing on the quality of education provided. The following are all the criteria for the 2017 college rankings formula:

- 22.5%: Graduation and Retention Rates, with an emphasis on first-year retention
- 22.5%: Peer-Assessment Surveys and High School Counselor Ratings
- 20%: Faculty Resources, with an emphasis on faculty compensation and class size
- 12.5%: Student Selectivity (SAT/ACT scores, acceptance rate, class rank)
- 10%: Financial resources
- 5%: Alumni Giving
- 7.5%: Graduation Rate Performance, with an emphasis on Pell Grants awarded and STEM degrees given

For [students] it was the next box in a series that they were dutifully checking over the course of their lives. - F. Bruni
Consider this
One way to drastically increase the “Financial Resources” ranking is to build massive structures such as new student unions or athletics facilities. Although having access to these resources is beneficial, there is no expressed indicator of money spent for instructional purposes.

This “semi-complex” ratio is what determines a school’s national rank. Disturbingly, much of this is manipulated. Mostly every sophomore and junior in high school will receive 10s to 100s of college interest letters, encouraging one to apply. This is not because a school is necessarily interested—they want as many people to apply as possible (it will improve their Student Selectivity rank!) What about faculty-to-staff ratio? Well, that’s easy: include graduate students and administrative staff as “teachers.” These are just a few small examples that colleges egregiously influence rankings.

In addition, one of the two largest influencers (22.5%) is “Graduation and Retention Rates”, which has little to do with the actual success of students after leaving college. In fact, the majority of students do not leave college directly to a career in their field, let alone requiring a college degree (Abel & Deitz, 2013). In addition, most universities have implemented “Freshman Forgiveness” programs—which allow students to stay enrolled even if failing one or more classes. Although this may be a desirable program, it is nevertheless to simply boost a ranking.

Equally as valuable at 22.5% are “Peer-Assessment Surveys and High School Counselor Ratings.” Peer-assessment surveys are given to “peer schools” of the university: e.g. other administrators and deans, who simply rank each other. High school counselors are also included, but are frankly hard to analyze: their responses are only used for “National Universities” and “National Liberal Arts Colleges” (large-scale schools) and those schools who receive less than 10 responses receive no ranking. (Note: only 7% of counselors submit rankings).

That’s all probably difficult to follow. It seems like very little of this deals with what matters. What’s concerning is what does this have to do with my education? Look at what’s left out of the rankings:

- Job placement after college
- Current student satisfaction
- Quality of instruction
- Lecture hall class sizes
- Class experiences offered (e.g. field experience, Socratic discussion)
- Availability of tutoring, student help services
- Opportunities for growth & development (e.g. internships, study abroad programs)
Arguably, every single facet of why someone would want to attend college is left out of the ranking system. Does that mean that these colleges are bad? No, not necessarily—however, there is no evidence to support the quality of the college either way. That being said, because of the status symbol of U.S. News and World Report, many colleges who don’t restrict as many students by their SAT scores, for example, will look much worse on paper—even if they may offer way more opportunities for their students.

This is unimaginably concerning. Students, parents, teachers, schools—our society—is being misguided. The U.S. News and World Report has almost a monopoly on the destiny of students’ lives. Given this myth, the next question would be: “Well, what is a good college to attend then?”

There’s many solutions, some of which are:

1. Tour the university and ask probing questions from the list above: about what percentage of classes are lecture based? Is there any quantitative data on how many students obtain jobs after college? Are there placement programs during or after university for authentic experience?

Consider this

In 2011, NACAC (National Association for College Admission Counseling) surveyed its members on US News & World Report rankings. In summary, members concluded that college choice is up to the individual, and rankings should factor little to not at all. Many were opposed to any usage of the report due to its various inaccuracies (NACAC, 2011.)
2. Ask actual students at the university about their experiences. Try to avoid the people on the tour (nothing against them, but there’s probably a bias there!) Seek out the student union or online communities (e.g. Reddit)—especially at smaller, more unknown schools.

3. Apply to a college, attend, then don’t be afraid to transfer. Change is scary, but there’s usually not much burden to transfer early in one’s college career. Keep searching until you find the experience you want.

The largest action you can take is to reject the myth. Don’t be pulled in by impressive rankings and the culture that surrounds them. People might say, “it’s a great school!” – but what’s that based on, how much they present their U.S. News Data? Is that the public’s perception? This dangerous self-fulfilling prophecy of school prestige is important to avoid.

**Myth #2: It’s Incredibly Important That You Meet and Exceed College Admissions Checklists**

If you have some time to spare, consider watching *Losing Ourselves*—a documentary by a high school senior named Rachel Wolfe. It highlights an issue facing many high schoolers: what is the point of everything you’re doing? Students are in a rat race to meet every single admissions protocol: are their standardized test scores high enough? What about their class rank and GPA? Do they have enough experience helping others? Do their community service hours exceed expectations?

By constantly chasing the next step, you are being programmed into always searching for what someone else wants, rather than what you want. What is the point of a college education if you don’t spend ample time discovering your passions and interests before hand? Why spend four years of your life trying to prove what someone else wants?

Deep down, it appears as if most college-bound students have no idea what they want to do. Sure, they might have a simple answer: a veterinarian, sports medicine major, “help others.” However, have you shadowed any of these careers? Do you actually know what they do? Where are you getting these options?
“City of the Woods.”
Landon Mackenzie (2012).
Mackenzie coinsides the brain’s neuromappings which maps a grandeous journey.
Choosing one’s journey in life is complex and it will change drastically over time—one decision made entering college will not solidify a career. However, that doesn’t mean no attention should be paid to this decision. In our obsession of getting into college, we forget why we’re attending college in the first-place: to achieve even more of an education—for yourself, to inquiry into passions and improve at your interests. If we lose sight of those along the way, then we’re simply wading along. As Yale professor William Deresiewicz writes in *Excellent Sheep*, “I went off to college like a sleepwalker, like a zombie. College was a blank. College was the ‘next thing.’ You went to college, you studied something, and afterward you went on to the next next thing, most probably some kind of graduate school. Up ahead were vaguely understood objectives: status, wealth, getting to the top—in a word, ‘success.’ As for where you went to school, that was all about bragging rights, so of course you chose the most prestigious place that let you in. What it meant to actually get an education, and why you might want one—how it could help you acquire a self, or develop an independent mind, or find your way in the world—all this was off the table.”

Given what’s been said about college rankings, the actual admission to college is relatively irrelevant. Most “change-makers” in our society don’t come from “Ivy League” prestigious backgrounds: they attend random universities in the United States or abroad. Put best by Frank Bruni in *Where You Go Is Not Who You’ll Be*, “Your control over the outcome [of getting into a specific college] is very, very limited, and that outcome says nothing definitive about your talent or potential. To lose sight of that is to buy into, and essentially endorse, a game that’s spun wildly out of control,” adding, “the media’s focus on such a limited number of acceptable outcomes, coupled with its attention to minutely detailed instructions for achieving them, suggests that life yields to meticulous recipes. That’s a comforting thought but a fraudulent one.”

In fact, many successful people when asked, “how did you do it?”—respond with wildly long stories of happenstance, random side jobs, people they happened to meet, and being in the right place at the right time. There’s no formula for success and success is defined by you. To think that a certain track will make you successful—such as getting into a very specific college—is unrealistic and ultimately will lead to disappointment.

Also, the anxiety based on getting into college is unfounded. In a recent *Brookings* study, 76% of students stated they were accepted into their first-choice college. Colleges want you to attend (*after all, you’re worth a lot of money!* Application rates are decreasing and many smaller schools need to massively recruit students to stay afloat (*Daugherty, 2017*). Furthermore, most public schools offer easily transferable programs from community colleges—which have even higher acceptance rates.

At the end of the day, you just need to be yourself. Overemphasizing the importance of college admissions will make you miss your high school years. Ironically, many of the life experiences you’ll have avoiding the college admissions process will likely make you more successful. You’ll find things you love to do, lifelong authentic friendships, and will be more true to yourself—all of which will contribute to a meaningful life.

**Myth #3: College is Necessary**

Whatever your post high-school plans are, it must involve some form of secondary education. Whether that be a certification from a trade school, a college program, an internship, pushing yourself in the workforce, or a self-directed approach, there is no denying that education and experience is needed beyond high school to compete in today’s world. Considering this fact, you can be successful and not attend college.

Now, this doesn’t mean college isn’t worth it. At many times, people reference Steve Jobs or Bill Gates—college dropouts—as shining exemplars of the meaninglessness of a college education. The commonality between these successful individuals is that they were willing to seek knowledge out for themselves—they often felt stifled by their classes and instead wanted to study and have experiences on their own time.

You need to be true to yourself. Some people want a traditional college experience where they’re taught in a similar manner to high school. However, they will likely accrue a massive debt as a result. Some will excel in trade programs and obtain just as much income (if not more) as their counterparts, but they likely won’t have the same opportunities a college campus would provide. And some may simply start a business, or start building a portfolio, or take free courses online. It’s all up to you.
The common purveyor of successful people is not a college degree. What matters is passion and dedication. To find what you truly want to do, embrace it, and push hard to make it happen. Successful people—at least as it’s traditionally defined via wealth and popularity—are a dime a dozen among college-dropouts and non-attendees: Ellen Degeneres, Russell Simmons, Michael Dell, Rachael Ray, Paul Allen, Dave Thomas, Oprah Winfrey, John Mackey, Ty Warner, Elizabeth Holmes, Arash Ferdowsi. A simple Google search will put you in touch with 100s of these people.

Although data may correlate by finding those who attend college go on to make more money, this ignores the underlying cause someone doesn’t attend college. Not to make too broad of an over-assumption, but many choosing not to attend are not doing so to pursue a self-directed education, rather they’re facing life dilemmas, hardship, or simply uninterested in a more well-paying path.

Increasingly, employers are no longer just looking for degree holders either. Many technology and arts companies, in particular, care more about your portfolio than where your degree is from. In fact, experience across the board is vastly more important than your education (Larson, 2016). Business owners constantly clamor on social media about avoiding college, taking gap years, and pursuing opportunities for yourself—they want creative, original people, not those who take the well-trodden path.

But don’t get the wrong idea—success is what you make of it. There’s millions of people who are happy with their lives who did not attend college. Success could be defined as emotional well-being, starting a family, creating something, practicing your passion—but we’ll talk more about this in section 5.
Thinking about a career, a field where you’ll spend a huge amount of time and effort, is a giant undertaking while in school. To a certain extent though, it’s necessary - especially if college is in your future plans. After all, you’re expected to spend ten thousand dollars or more to be trained in a certain field. Therefore, many students ask: “what career should I choose?” or “what jobs are in demand?” It makes sense, you want to have a successful, paying career.

However, this uncertainty is mischaracterized by job reports. We’re told constantly that STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) fields are growing rapidly. But, did you know that the unemployment rate of information technology graduates is twice that of theater majors? (Cappelli, 2013) There’s a few reasons why this occurs, which we’ll break down:

- A College Major Isn’t All You Need to be Successful
- Passion is More Important than Career Statistics
- The Future Is Unknown

**A College Major Isn’t All You Need to be Successful**

In section 3, we explained how going to college does not necessarily correlate with success. Given this, it is also not true that if one obtains a college degree, they’ll instantly achieve a job. Numerous studies have found that college students are unemployed or “underemployed” (they’re not in jobs based on their qualifications) (Abel, Deitz, & Su 2014). Why is this the case?

You’d imagine that college would ensure employment, especially the skills needed to get a job. However, experience is valued much more than education alone. College is, without a doubt, a fantastic opportunity for many young adults to explore their interests and be exposed to those in a variety of backgrounds. That being said, this isn’t an explicit part of the college curriculum. At its core, college is scheduling a bunch of classes, attending them, studying, and passing a test. It’s all the other things that tend to make someone grow as a human being:

- Being free from adults and making decisions for yourself.
- Making friends with many people of different cultures.

“It is never too late to be what you might have been. - G. Eliot

“career ready”
“Detroit Industry.” Diego Rivera. 1933. Rivera was contracted to paint a series of murals representing Detroit’s culture, heavily emphasizing the importance (and plight of) the auto industry.
- Scheduling your own time and doing what you want to do.
- Framing the world from a new point of view: your own.
- Attending social events and exploring the world.

This is the reason why many successful people drop out of college - they've grown as individuals by being on a campus, networking, and learning about the world, but they've exhausted their need for coursework.

The largest issue facing college students is what their purpose is. Most high school students have no idea what they want to do with their lives - they state, “I'll worry about that in college!” Even then, most college students have no idea. There's no specific formula for discovering oneself, but committing to a major is a giant decision - and many graduate with no passion for what they're doing.

Our obsession with preparing for the “next step” is constant. In middle school, teachers say how you'll need this information in high school. In high school, teachers say how you'll need it in college. In college, they'll say how you need it in the workforce. In the workforce, they'll say you'll learn it on the job. We prepare for jobs as we're young adults, our “real jobs” when we’re adults, and retirement soon after. There's little attention being paid to if we're happy and fulfilled right now.

In fact, 60 to 70% of college graduates are not sure which jobs best line up with their academic background and interests. It’s not uncommon for college students to second-guess their majors, but ultimately “stick with it” because they’re fearful of the additional costs. After all, at what point during high school (or even college) did you truly figure out your passions? Even then, what if you thought you loved something, but after learning more you're not so sure? (Williams, 2017)

### Passion is More Important Than Career Statistics

A correlation exists between those unemployed and those who aren’t passionate about their chosen path. Why would someone commit all of their time, energy, and heart into something they don’t love? Disturbingly, many high school students choose majors on jobs that are “in demand” at the time - conflating the desire for easy employment with happiness. Usually, students will state, “I just want to have a stable job, that will make me happy.” However, this usually isn’t the case: a career is a place where you spend a significant fraction of your life - it needs to be something that energizes you (Williams, 2017).

Nine out of ten people between 21 and 65 out of a survey of 3,000, said they regretted rushing their career and didn’t know what to do. They chose majors at random because they were “running out of time.” And 69% said their parents tried to influence their career or university choice (Hunter, 2017). Schools provide very little time for you to discover your passions, but it’s so important that you find what you love to do.

Furthermore, careers that are “in-demand” don’t line up with reality. Despite projections that STEM jobs are the fastest growing career field - which they are - unemployment in STEM fields are at their highest level. Despite more and more people majoring in STEM, the unemployment level has risen (BLS, 2015). This is not because too many people are graduating with a degree and oversaturating the market. In fact, there's still many jobs available. The problem is many of these graduates don’t have the experience or desire to take on these jobs. They’re not critical thinkers, they’re not creative, or they simply don’t want to pursue STEM-related jobs. Many people choose a STEM major as seemingly every media outlet advertises how you’ll have the best career prospects (Ashford, 2017). Nonetheless, choosing a career based off economics and not heartfelt desires isn’t that exciting. You only live once - dedicating your life to something purely based off numbers isn’t going to push you to succeed.
“Smart City” via IoT Agenda. “Smart Cities” which are connected through various applications that monitor health, climate, transportation, and crime will unlock an entirely new field of data analyst jobs.

Figure 2. The number of potential STEM workers (immigrant and native) vastly exceeds the number of STEM jobs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total workers in STEM jobs</th>
<th>Total with STEM degrees*</th>
<th>STEM degree holders not working in a STEM job*</th>
<th>Workers in STEM jobs without STEM degrees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Public-use files of the 2012 American Community Survey. STEM employment is confined to those with a bachelor’s degree or higher employed in a STEM field.

* Includes 1.8 million with STEM degrees unemployed, out of the labor market, and under age 65.
Consider this

*Preparing for a job primarily based on its rising employability is misguided. If it aligns with your passion, great! If not, focus on what will make you happy. In fact, the jobs of tomorrow are difficult to even prepare for without an overwhelming interest in the area. As far as we know, it’s something like:

Ethical Sourcing Officer: Ensures that ethics of the company are being practiced.
Edge Computing: Decentralizes data centers by connecting hardware points.
Fitness Commitment Counselor: Utilizes technology to ensure others stay in shape.
Cyber City Analyst: Looks at city “smart data” to see if healthy protocols are utilized.
Genomic Portfolio Director: Drives companies that are using genome-data.
Digital Tailor: Takes measurements and data from customer’s bodys.
Personal Memory Curator: Delivers virtual environments for aging residents (Stillman, n.d.)

*As scarily-dystopian as some of these careers sound, it’s worthwhile to mention that it’s hard to comprehend that these will exist. Similarly, imagine how a career in designing virtual reality would sound to someone from 1960?

“Space Colony.” Shigeru Komatsuzaki, 1980. Artists have always attempted to predict the future, with mixed results - we have no idea what the future truly holds.
Education is the passport for the future, for tomorrow belongs to those who prepare for it today.  
- Malcolm X

Earlier, we mentioned that theater majors are less unemployed than IT majors (Cappelli, 2013). This isn’t because there’s a growing field in theater, in-fact it’s practically flatlined or declining. It’s because theater isn’t advertised as a growing field - people aren’t majoring in it for jobs - and those who do major in theater are passionate about it. Those who are passionate tend to push themselves further, and therefore they’re knowledgeable, creative, and perfectly suited for taking the limited number of theater positions. This isn’t the case with IT, where many enter the field for promises of a job, but lack the passion that employers are looking for.

Therefore, our plea is that you spend time for yourself. Look at everything you love to do, read books about random topics, connect with volunteer organizations, and keep searching for something that will give you purpose. Don’t feel rushed - take a gap year, take time to explore the world around you and seek out answers. With great risk comes great rewards, and those who slow down and truly think about the decisions that they’re making tend to reap achievement.

The Future is Unknown

Despite education’s best attempt at “preparing you for the future” - we really have no idea what’s going to happen next. The jobs of tomorrow are impossible to predict, and although we can try - there’s no concrete skills that will guarantee anything. However, there are traits that will always be warranted, sometimes referred to as “soft skills”:
- Creativity
- Leadership
- Dedication
- Empathy
- Resolve
- Willingness to fail / try new things
- Communicative
- ...and many more

These “soft skills” are important no matter what field you go into, and it’s possible for anyone to bolster them. Simply stated, to improve “soft skills” - the best thing to do is create. Whether that be writing a story, to joining an improv. group, to campaigning to solve a community problem, creating something out of nothing will grow any skill. These are the talents that all employers are looking for (World Economic Forum, 2016).
32
“career ready”
Consider this

We want to emphasize searching for what’s out there. Many don’t choose careers because they think their goals are unrealistic or there’s not something for them - but the career pool is vast. Sometimes you just need to be exposed - a variety of careers exist that never have before. Did you know that CD Projekt RED, a video game developer and publisher, employs one-hundred “Quest Designers”, who plan and implement storylines into their games? There’s no college degree required and an emphasis is placed on knowledge of game editors.

“There is no future in any job. The future lies in the man who holds the job.”
- George W. Crane
The quintessential statement that everyone tells students is, “do what makes you happy.” Sometimes this is nestled with other subtext:
- Meet honor roll
- Obtain high standardized test scores
- Go to (a prestigious) college
- Get a well-paying job

Although this is meant with good intention, there is no correlation between happiness, success, and schooling. Yes, there is evidence that people who do well in school are more likely to go to college or obtain a well paying, academia-required job - however, none of these events define anything.

**Happiness and success are what you make it.**

Perhaps happiness is having a lot of free time to read books? Or starting a family? Or living with a pet out in a log cabin? Maybe success is being able to run a triathlon or volunteering to help others? In our constant pursuit of happiness and success, no one is slowing down to reflect on what those terms mean. If we constantly feel success will come if we do the next thing, we’ll never end up reaching it.

We’re obsessed with being happy. In fact, the entire self-help industry is practically built on secret ways to garner happiness. This is ironic, given that depression rates are growing each year, especially among teenagers ([Weinberger et al., 2017](#)). Perhaps we’re overindulging in finding happiness. Happiness is the little things that you enjoy - that you spend your time doing - that you share with others. Of course, it is perfectly acceptable to not be happy. It’s normal to experience a wide-array of emotions.

Just like there’s no secret formula to success, there’s no formula for happiness. And success through fame and fortune doesn’t bring on this emotion. People are always shocked when popular, multimillionaire celebrities are clinically depressed or worse, take their own lives. We must recognize that feelings aren’t to be chased - they’re for reflecting in the moment. We make decisions based off how we feel (and want to feel better) - but there’s no guidebook or goal setting that will instantaneously promise anything.
“La Promenade.” Marc Chagall (1918). Chagall’s works tended to promote a focus on love and happiness.
We’re obsessed with thinking we’re in control of being happy. In *America the Anxious: How Our Pursuit of Happiness is Creating a Nation of Nervous Wrecks*, Ruth Whippman states,

“The financial success of the happiness industry relies heavily on the idea that circumstances matter little, that we are in complete control of our own mental state and can simply choose to upgrade it at will.

On the face of it, this is a seductive, even inspirational, promise. But it doesn’t take long to realize that the flip side of this logic is that, if I am not happy, then it is All My Own Fault.”

Therefore, any statement such as “if you go to college, you’ll have much more of a chance at being successful!” or “you need to make honor roll!” or “once you get a well-paying job, you’ll be set and be happy!” is nonsense. Every major decision is yours to make. Part of living this lifestyle is ensuring you take all suggestions with a grain of salt. You’ll constantly be assaulted with headline titles such as “Want to Be Happier and Healthier? Then Go to College” or “The Impact of Top Universities on Your Future Success” Nonetheless, any critical thought put into these articles quickly dismantles their arguments - many assumptions are made about the college process and what success is.

All things considered, the moral of the story is there is no answer. There’s no way to provide a trajectory or resources to make someone happy or successful, outside of stating that you control your own destiny (and much of that quest features misinformed opinions). Arm yourself with knowledge and critically think about the world around you - search for answers beyond mainstream thought - and craft your own story.

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“Yellow-Red-Blue.” Wassily Kandinsky (1925). Kandinsky wanted to express vibrant, raw emotion through all of his work.