

The Alternate Route: Uncommon Pathways to Higher Education



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According to an October 2018 survey from the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), only 69% of 2018 high school graduates ages 16 to 24 were enrolled in colleges or universities. Many high school graduates are uncertain if college is right for them, and instead enter the workforce or enlist in the military. For others, community college offers an affordable trial period as students evaluate whether higher education is right for them. Even some high school seniors who graduate with a college

acceptance in hand discover that their clear-cut career path isn't so well-defined as they change majors, discover new careers, or decide college isn't right for them.

If you are considering an alternate pathway, remember you're not alone. The stories below provide a few examples of how successful professionals took a nontraditional academic path.



Na'ilah Amaru

The Military Pathway

"My one piece of advice is to remember that everyone travels their own journey: Do not compare your timeline to anyone else's. You are exactly where you're supposed to be. Compare your own journey to where you were and to where you want to be."

At the end of high school I did not know what I wanted to do with my life. I was not ready for college, but I knew it was something I eventually wanted to do. An Army recruiter came to my high school and basically said if I gave four years of my life to Uncle Sam then they would pay for my college tuition.

At the time it seemed like a great opportunity for me to gain work experience and develop new skills before investing time and money into pursuing a degree. At 18 I didn't really know anything, but I knew enough to know that I wasn't prepared to go into college full time, so the military gave me space to work and earn some life experience while I figured it out.

I enrolled in college classes at night while I served on active duty and by the end of my four year enlistment, I had a better understanding of my academic interests and my career path outside of the military. When I left the Army, I enrolled the very next semester as a full-time student.

While I began as a journalism major because of my love of writing, I took all political science and criminal justice courses in my first semester and realized I was definitely my element. My interests had expanded and I changed my majors. When I left the military I was in a completely different place mentally than I had been in high school. My new mission was to become a college graduate. Due to my military background, I was more focused and disciplined in my studies and completed my undergraduate degrees in a year and a half by carrying heavy course loads with the goal of graduating early.

My one piece of advice is to remember that everyone travels their own journey: Do not compare your timeline to anyone else's. You are exactly where you're supposed to be. Compare your own journey to where you were and to where you want to be.



Dr. Sabina Brennan

The Work-First Pathway

"I would say to anyone who is thinking about returning to school: Don't underestimate the value of life experience."
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My father worked in life insurance and he wanted one of his kids to work at his

company. I worked there for 15 years. I got married in my 20s and had my babies in my 20s. To be honest, I was less than satisfied with my job, and I felt as a parent I wanted my kids to do something they loved.

I had always wanted to act. I had a drama school for a couple years and I started getting work as an actor. I started working on a soap on TV and did that for about 150 episodes. In parallel, I was working with one of my sons, helping him with his studying and I thought, "I kind of like this." There was a bit of a hiatus after I finished my soap role, and I thought, "Maybe I'll do a night course in psychology." When I went to inquire about it they said that day was the closing of their applications for mature students for a full-time undergraduate course. I got in. Initially, I thought I would be able to do acting and school but I got so drawn into school. I just loved it, I loved being an undergrad. I just ate the books up.

I was 42 by that point and my eldest son was well on his way to finishing school himself. I was very nervous going in and I hadn't been to school in almost 24 years. In my final year [of my undergrad] I got a scholarship to do my Ph.D., and when I actually did my Ph.D., I completed it at the same school my son was studying as an undergrad.

I would say to anyone who is thinking about returning to school: Don't underestimate the value of life experience. And to be honest, navigating life, raising children, getting a mortgage, holding down a job, that's far more challenging than an undergrad degree because you have to figure stuff out, whereas something like an undergrad degree at a university, there is something to be studied, there's exams to be passed, there are answers to questions.

I do think it is key if you're considering going back to university late that you pick a subject that really fascinates you. That's the most important thing. Pick your subject because you love it and it fascinates you.



Kyle Kuhn

The Community College Pathway

“Taking time off really helped me. I grew over those two years: I had never really done well in school before and I kind of hated being there and when I came back, I just had a new perspective.”

I ended up going to college right out of high school and I earned a general associate of arts degree. I wanted to keep things open because I had no idea what I wanted to do. I made sure the degree was a direct transfer and that most colleges would take all the credits. Afterwards I took two years off from school and worked at Home Depot. I still did not know what I wanted to do and I think I was done with school for a little bit.

While I was getting my AA, I hoped that I would take a class and something would just spark my interest, but nothing did. When I returned to school and attended Central Washington University, I entered their business school for accounting. I soon realized I did not want to be an accountant, in part because I've never been good at math. So I withdrew my second quarter and took career tests. The results suggested journalism and writing positions and I thought, "That sounds way more fun." I just went straight through after I changed my major, I was definitely trying to finish as quickly as I could.

Taking time off really helped me. I grew over those two years: I had never really done well in school before and I kind of hated being there and when I came back, I just had a new perspective. For the first time ever I actually did well academically.

This was the right path for me. The perspective I gained from those two years off was

really helpful. If I had been rushed to directly into a four year program, I might have failed out.

I was a bit older than most of my classmates, but I found that helpful. I knew why I was there and I wanted to be there and I was able to focus and get my work done.

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