

# Dropping Out of College to Join Facebook: 3 Years Later

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🌐 [http://www.goldsborough.me/life/2020/07/02/09-47-25-dropping\\_out-3\\_years\\_later/](http://www.goldsborough.me/life/2020/07/02/09-47-25-dropping_out-3_years_later/)

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10 Brock Street, London. July 3rd, 2017. I'm in the Facebook London office, in the last few weeks of my internship. I have a meeting with my skip manager. The conversation goes something like this:

**Manager:** Peter, the team likes your work and you've impressed some people.

**Peter:** Nice.

**Manager:** So, what are your plans for after your internship?

**Peter:** Well, I should probably go back to university in Munich and finish my Computer Science degree. After that, I'm not sure.

**Manager:** Ok, well, listen: If you *so happened* not to want to go back to university, it is, *in theory*, possible for me to change your return internship offer into a full time offer instead.

Reading between the lines, this amounted to an offer to join Facebook full time if I wanted to drop out of college. It was an offer – an opportunity – not a request or demand. It was my choice. How did I decide?

## The Story

At this moment in time I was 19, going on 20. I had started a degree in Computer Science at the Technical University of Munich two years prior, in the fall of 2015. In that same fall of 2015, two months into university, I interviewed for a software engineering internship at Google and got it. I did a solid two semesters at TU Munich following that, which I did enjoy, although I spent most of my time in a little room studying. My internship at Google in London followed. I had to take a semester off for this, as the German academic year (October to August) aligns badly with the summer internship schedule run by American tech companies. Because I was already taking a whole semester off and had some time left after Google, I accepted an offer for another internship from Bloomberg, also in London. At the end of my internship at Bloomberg I started interviewing for internships for the next summer (2017) and got an offer from Facebook. Facebook's schedule was not a lot better than Google's, so I pleaded with my university advisor to give me another semester off. "Just one more, that's it." Famous last words. Finally, there we were: July 2017, third consecutive internship, two semesters down at TU Munich. I really was planning to go back to Munich after Facebook, until that fateful conversation I recollected above.

I had to think about this decision of course. I needed to meditate on it and gather opinions from the people I was close with. In hindsight, there is one crucial aspect about the way in which I approached this decision: I treated both options, returning to college after Facebook or dropping out to join

Facebook, as equally viable paths. Each could lead to success in their own way. I believe that many people would not do this. Many would consider returning to college the safe path, the accepted path, the path their parents and society approves of, the one that will lead to great knowledge and ability, the path that results in a distinguished A4 document laid into one's hands by the gatekeepers of societal and professional recognition. In the US you even get a hat. The idea of dropping out to join a company, on the other hand, would undoubtedly leave a certain taste of unease in a lot of people's mouths. It would appear rebellious, unsafe, short-sighted, taking away your own opportunity. Good luck trying to make an objective decision with this kind of baggage attached to one side of the scale.

I really didn't care much for this baggage. I wanted to evaluate these two options analytically, at their face value. So I talked to people. I talked to my parents. I talked to my friends. I talked to my colleagues at Facebook, who were in their careers where I wanted to be one hopeful day. Almost every one of them told me to go for it, told me they wished they had done it themselves a few years ago but simply didn't have the opportunity. One teammate disagreed. He didn't like the idea and he didn't like the fact that Facebook was even offering me this option. However, he did organize a video call with an engineer at Facebook who had never been to college at all, to hear it from the horse's mouth. I remember that video call. The engineer told me that in the end, he got to where he wanted to be. He said that it wasn't always easy and that he sometimes had to fight for people's recognition to prove he wasn't an idiot because he didn't have a degree. However, the biggest thing he lacked was the sense of community shared by alumni of the same school. While two Stanford alumni placed on opposite ends of the Amazon will find each other and create the Stanford Alumni Association of the Amazon rainforest, he didn't belong to any such tribe at all.

As I've talked to more people about this over the years, I've gotten the sense that for many, college isn't really about learning things anyway. My impression is that the biggest value people take away from college is in the people they meet and the experiences they have. College is a place where like-minded, like-aged individuals build a network that often carries long into the later years of their lives. And they have fun. Especially in the US and the UK, colleges are exciting institutions with sports, societies and clubs in addition to the academic curriculum. It is this that the sample of people I've talked to, in hindsight, would not give up if they had the choice I had.

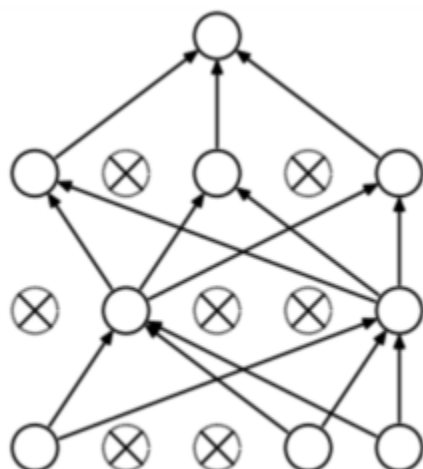
My one year in college was very different. German universities don't really do societies or sports at the scale that American colleges do. In my immediate environment, there wasn't a whole lot of fun. I spent 95% of my time in my room in the sleepy suburb of Garching, studying. Now contrast this with my year in London. I was living in one of the most vibrant cities in the world, working at hot tech companies with quirky multicolored offices, lying upside down on couches feeding myself free food,

having great times with my coworkers. So while most people would be hard-pressed to trade in the happy-jolly-fun times at college with the hardships and stress of their working lives any sooner than absolutely necessary, it was quite the reverse in my case.

Like many people's parents, mine were also not immediately thrilled by the idea of me throwing my college degree out the window and selling my soul to the corporate world. There were arguments. This is natural, because again, most people would not approach the two paths as equally viable. The stigma of not having a college degree sits too deep within the soul of our society. So the initial reaction was "no, definitely you are not doing that". Fortunately, after some time we got down to the cold calculations, the listing of pros and cons. Some important questions were asked and answered. Ultimately, we came to the conclusion that in terms of *useful* knowledge to be gained, job prospects and most importantly happiness, dropping out was the better choice. There were repercussions of course. There would be certain doors that would close. I wouldn't be able to apply for certain visas in certain countries for example. However, we concluded that most importantly, it would not be an irreversible decision. I could always go back to college if that turned out to be really necessary. Dropping out might seem to many as the riskier option compared to staying in university. If you stay in college you'll learn something and you'll get a degree — no risk in that. But I didn't see it that way. I perceived both options as risky. To me, staying in university carried a very high potential opportunity cost. There was a legitimate risk that I would spend another two years learning less and making less progress towards my long term goals of success than if I did drop out. As an ambitious person who was very eager to maximize my potential and didn't have a minute to spare in that pursuit, that outcome seemed worse to me than discovering minor roadblocks later on because I didn't have a degree.

So the decision was made. I told my manager that I wanted a full time offer. A few weeks later I got it and accepted an offer for a full time Software Engineering position at Facebook in Menlo Park, USA. Thus was my brief college career: two years, one actually there and the other on leave doing internships.

# Life As a Dropout



(b) After applying dropout.

While I was confident in my decision to drop out, I certainly had my doubts and fears at the time. I was fearful of how my future colleagues would perceive me and doubtful of whether I'd come to regret my decision for unforeseen reasons.

My coworkers at Facebook didn't seem to care about my background at all however – in a good way. I would come to find that in general, folks there really care about your skills and the results you bring to the table. After a year or so I realized that my fear of professional peers thinking less of me was largely unfounded. I slowly became more open about my educational background. I tried less hard to hide it and didn't really mind select trustees knowing about it. This process was accelerated significantly when I joined a new team in January 2018. This team was led by my old skip manager, the one who had offered me to drop out in the first place. He obviously knew all about how I had ended up here and clearly didn't think it was a bad thing, because in one of our first big team meetings, he let all thirty people in the team know that “Peter had dropped out to join Facebook!” That blew my cover a lot faster than I had planned to give it up. That was likely for the better.

Today, I'm a very open book about my decision. I'll happily let anybody know who wants to know. I'm no longer doubtful of my decision and I'm no longer fearful of what people think of me if they learn of it. I've been successful enough in my position over the past three years that I can say my bet paid off. I don't need to hide anything, from anybody, anymore.

## Hindsight

By all my criteria, my decision to drop out has been a complete success. I want to provide some hindsight, across different domains, of how this bet paid off for me.

# Learning

Software engineering is really a practical field. There's a long list of topics to know about and some theories to have heard of, but after that what differentiates the master software engineer from the apprentice is not 10,000 hours more of theories, but 10,000 hours more of building software in the real world. As such, I'm willing to bet a lot of money that no CS degree on this planet would have taught me as much relevant knowledge and as many relevant skills than I obtained by working in the trenches at Facebook.

In addition, if there's one thing I believe is really lacking in our education system today, it is the notion of mentorship. Any great craftsman in history became a master craftsman by starting as an apprentice of another master craftsman. Because it's how the real world works, the notion of mentorship – more experienced engineers teaching juniors the ropes – is deeply ingrained in any good engineering culture in industry. The reason my learning shot through the roof when I joined Facebook is not just because it became my day-to-day job, but because I was surrounded by engineers who had five, ten, sometimes twenty years more experience than me and who were there to help me and teach me. Mentorship is literally in the job description for senior engineers, it's expected of them and I benefited immensely from it. I can't thank each of the mentors I've had over the years enough.

I have not heard of any undergraduate university program that comes even close to the level of mentorship I received. In college you're mostly surrounded by kids who are just as clueless and have just as much life experience as you. Professors rarely invest in undergrads and rather than graduate students acting as mentors, they usually look down at undergrads in contempt or just pretend they don't exist. Zero knowledge transfer across generations.

Crucially, the knowledge I gained pertains not just to my work. I was surrounded by “full blown” adults with families, mortgages and a multitude of personal experiences. I not only grew professionally, but also matured immensely as a person simply by being around adults rather than kids my age. Downside is that I also have a mortgage now :(

# Happiness

If I were to describe myself during my college years with one word, it would be “intense”. I was driven towards achieving my goals and often neglected everything else in my life: relationships, physical health and mental health. I never gave myself a moment to breathe.

Comparing that to my life as a full time employee, I would say the biggest thing that changed is that a huge amount of pressure fell off my shoulders when I joined Facebook. I was finally working my dream job. Additionally, being full time is a lot less stressful than being an intern. In an internship, you have 12 weeks to impress and that is really not a long time. It's easy to go crazy over wanting to

perform well. Even though Facebook is known to be a very fast-paced and intense work environment, development and evaluation cycles are longer for full time employees. Knowing you will still be employed for the foreseeable future instead of only a few more weeks makes a difference. I got healthier, spent a lot more time outdoors and overall became much happier.

## Career Advancement

If we look at my decision from the perspective of career advancement, I clearly got a lot more out of working in industry than I would have from taking more classes. Instead of three years of knowledge accumulation to get me to the same end result of hopefully working at a company like Facebook, I accumulated three years of valuable work experience at Facebook. While peers in my age group are starting to wave their degrees around to apply for their first job, I got a head start.

Most tech companies today already put out positions requiring “X level of education OR Y years of work experience”, e.g. BSc. in Engineering OR 3 years of relevant work experience. Realistically, the person who spent three years in the industry solving real problems is likely to be a more useful engineer than the person who spent three years *learning how to* solve problems. So a degree might still be worth something on paper, but that worth fades away over time once you’re “in”.

## Should Everybody Drop Out?

Dropping out has worked out pretty well for me, as far as I can tell three years on. I don’t know if this will still hold true in five or ten years, but we can pretend it will and pose an obvious question: should everybody drop out? Are our institutions of higher education obsolete? Would I tell my children to skip college?

## Three Factors

The first thing I want to call out is that there were three *environmental* factors that allowed my success. The first is that my profession is in the tech industry, the second is that I work for an American company and the third is that it’s 2020. If either of the first two factors are not given in somebody else’s situation (the latter, as of this writing, is), the odds of their success are different.

For the first factor, the technology industry has been quite trailblazing in terms of recognizing that the required knowledge for the job need not be obtained exclusively via formal education. Comparing tech to other industries like medicine, law or civil engineering, tech firms are more likely to accept experience as a viable alternative to a college degree. In contrast, a doctor without a medical degree, a lawyer who hasn’t passed the bar exam or a civil engineer with a high school diploma all seem unthinkable.

The second factor is that the United States is much more pragmatic in this respect than other countries I've come across. I grew up in a country where people put their titles in their passports and it's not unthinkable to see "Dipl. Ing. Mag. Dr. Dr. Max Mustermann" on somebody's name tag. It means that Max is very important and *everybody* better know that. From German colleagues I hear that even with German tech companies I'd have a hard time getting a comparable job without a master's degree, despite a couple years at Facebook under my belt. In the end, this is inefficient. Other companies in other countries benefit from the talent denied by firms stubbornly insisting on academic qualifications.

Interestingly, those same countries in Europe that might not hire me today despite my experience are countries that are revered for their *vocational training programs*. Foreign government officials routinely visit Austria and Germany to understand how to replicate the success of their [vocational training model](#). It seems there's an unnecessary, outdated cognitive divide in these countries between encouraging apprenticeship-based education for some sectors but requiring education-by-ploughing-through-courses for other jobs. The US is first to ditch the latter and is [catching up on the former](#).

The last factor is time. Thirty years ago, I believe my story, swapping out Facebook with IBM, Xerox or AT&T, would have been less likely. We could forecast that this means other professions and other countries will follow this trend over time, shifting their focus from academic qualifications as an indicator of professional readiness to practical, pragmatic, skill-based recruiting. Maybe.

## It Starts With You

Realistically, what allowed me to "skip" college for my ends is that I invested heavily in myself outside of my day-to-day education. I took online courses, read books and practiced, practiced, practiced my skills. Autodidactism has a strong case today, but it requires motivation and discipline. It requires you to have a sense of where you need to go and the willingness to put in the work to get there. Knowing where to go itself doesn't come for free. It requires research and a lot more effort compared to somebody else telling you what's important and what you need to know at what point in your education.

As an autodidact, you're steering the boat of your own education through the sea of knowledge. Not everybody wants this and not everybody is ready for this. Many people like being told what the curriculum is. They like it when other people do the thinking about what subjects are important. They like that somebody else comes up with homework exercises that let you practice a skill. They like the whole path to success being drawn up in front of them, with a job guaranteed at the end if they run through the maze in the right way.

For many, this is fine. However, these people should not drop out or skip college. Dropping out means taking your career into your own hands and that's a lot of responsibility. It needs to start with you, being ready for this, as a person.

## Ideally Yes, Realistically No

In *my* ideal world, higher education and its place in our society and minds would look very different from the status quo. There would be better alternatives to the standard cookie-cutter curriculum offered by universities. There would be a much greater emphasis on the practical aspects of education rather than the largely inefficient way in which students are taught today. Autodidactism would be more established and supported and there would be no stigma for not having a college degree. In this world, dropping out would not have been necessary to meet the goals that compelled me to take this step. If it would be necessary, it would be a much more common and socially accepted path.

Realistically, higher education and our society is what it is today and veering off the standard path bears risks. I believe college is the right thing for most people. Not because the college system today is great, but because it's a reasonable, low risk path that will probably work out. As such, I'm in no position to make a blanket statement that everybody should boycott college. It has to be decided on a case by case basis, based on the environmental circumstances, the personal maturity of the person and the risks involved (is your alternative a well paying job or *the streets*?)

## The World Needs More Doers

This was a personal story. It started with a choice. The part in the movie where the protagonist is presented with a mission that he first rejects, but finally agrees to. The red pill, blue pill moment.

The weight of a decision is proportional to the weight of its consequences. My decision had consequences. I got to enjoy the beneficial ones and had to overcome the harder ones. You got a glimpse of the consequences I had to face over the past three years. This was the centerpiece of the story.

Every story concludes with a moral. A lesson that the author hopes can help others along their own path. I gave you a moral you can extract from my story: Dropping out is a viable option if certain environmental factors are given and if you are personally ready to live with the consequences.



Some stories don't just end with a moral, but with a call to action. Mine shall too: The world needs more doers. People who do rather than talk. One thing I respect about anybody who leaves college to start or join a company is that they are saying: "Alright, I'm done talking, I'm ready to *do* now". Of course, you don't need to drop out to be a *doer*. In whatever way we get there, I think that's something we should all strive towards. Talk less. Do more.