



Why I'm telling some of my students not to go to college

BY JILLIAN GORDON April 15, 2015 at 1:23 PM EDT



Demonstrators in 2012 burn their student loan bills on the Hollywood Walk of Fame to protest the rising cost of higher education. Getting an education is important, but is college right for everyone? Photo by David McNew/Getty Images

Editor's Note: This month, thousands of students across the country will receive college admission letters and will have to make their decision on which college or university to attend. But teacher Jillian Gordon argues that this decision could be the first step on an expensive, illogical path for many students, not all of whom will need a four-year degree or benefit from a college environment.

As the flowers start to bloom and it begins to look a little greener outside, many teachers are feeling the weight of winter stress lifting off of them. But the opposite is happening to high school seniors

across the country who are in the midst of making a tough decision: where, and if, they should go to college.

I teach agricultural science, an elective course at my school. I am lucky that the students in my room walk in each day because they made the choice to be there, and for the most part, this allows me to connect with these students in a way that is more difficult in the core class environment. I get to know them, their families and their siblings. Because of this connection, it is really important for me to talk to my students about their plans for after graduation.



I tell many of my students not to go to a four-year college. Many of you are gasping at this point, I'm sure. But with student loan debt reaching an all-time high of \$1.2 trillion (surpassing credit card debt), and little research to support that the investment is worth it, I am cheating my student by not encouraging them to make the best choice for themselves. And a four-year degree is not always synonymous with "best choice."

A bachelor's degree is not a piece of paper that says "You're a success!" just as the lack of one doesn't say "You're a failure!"

There is an epidemic of college students across the country choosing majors at four-year universities that do not lead to a viable career path after graduation. The "underemployment rate" for young college graduates is [44 percent](#).

What does that mean? Almost half of the recent graduates in the United States are employed in positions that do not require a college degree.

A few years ago, I worked closely with a student who very much wanted to be a reporter. She was passionate about it, and spoke about her dreams with wide eyes and a contagious smile. The issue? This student's writing was subpar at best, and her talents, while immense, were not shown through her academic ability. She simply did not have the grades to make it through four more years of college.

Guilty of it myself, I watched as all of her teachers smiled at her and encouraged her to follow her dreams, no one having the courage to push in her a direction that was more logical for her to take. We smiled and watched as she dropped out of college and moved back home with no back-up plan in

place. I had to learn the hard way that sometimes it's our jobs as teachers to tell students no, otherwise life will do it for them — and life is rarely ready to catch them when they fall.

We are doing a disservice to our students. We are assuming all students need the same thing: that they need to go to college. When we know that it may not be the best choice for them, we are cheating them of reality and a worthy, challenging education simply because they are the textbook version of a “good student.” We do not have the courage to tell them no, so instead, we let the much harsher voice of life do it for us.

Many may argue that getting a four-year college degree is the key to achieving the American dream and the only path to upward mobility in terms of economic prosperity.

But when my students can go to a two-year technical school for about \$20,000, receive an associate degree in welding technology and reliably earn a wage of up to \$59,000 (some specialties, like underwater welding, can command up to \$90,000 and more, with experience), I find the idea of a four-year university, where students graduate with an average of [\\$30,000](#) in loan debt, the least logical path of upward economic mobility.

For some of my students, a four-year university is by far the best option for them. But this isn't the case for all students, and we need to stop pretending it is. A bachelor's degree is not a piece of paper that says “You're a success!” just as the lack of one doesn't say “You're a failure!” As educators, it's time to stop pushing all of our students to go to college, and instead push them towards the path that is right for them.

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