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## ONE YEAR OF 'COLLEGE' WITH NO DEGREE, BUT NO DEBT AND A JOB AT THE END

*New schools tout themselves as alternatives to college in the digital age, but they lack the traditional benefits of a postsecondary education*

By Douglas Belkin  
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As a high-school senior in Hampton, Va., Aidan Cary applied last year to prestigious universities like Dartmouth, Vanderbilt and the University of Virginia.

Then he clicked on the website for a one-year-old school called MissionU and quickly decided that's where he wanted to go.

Mr. Cary, 19 years old, is enrolled in a one-year, data-science program. He studies between 40 and 50 hours a week, visits high-tech, Bay Area companies as part of his education, and will pay the San Francisco-based school a percentage of his income for three years after he graduates.

This new type of postsecondary education is proving a hit: The school says it has received more than 10,000 applications for 50 spots.

"I think people feel backed into a corner by the cost of college," Mr. Cary said. "They've been waiting for something like this so when it finally came around they could instantly see the value proposition."

MissionU, which enrolled its first class in September, is part of new breed of institutions that bill themselves as college alternatives for the digital age. The schools – whose admission rates hover in the single digits – comparable to the Ivy League, according to the schools – offer a debt-free way to attain skills in hot areas and guaranteed apprenticeships with high-tech companies. Together those create a pipeline to well-paying high-tech jobs.

What they lack is an accredited degree, the longtime entry ticket to a professional career, and the traditional trappings of college including a full liberal arts education. While alternative colleges can teach a person how to work, they don't teach their students why they are working, said Gardner Campbell, an English professor at Virginia Commonwealth University. Without that context, graduates of these programs run the risk of becoming well-paid drones, he said.

Many politicians are pushing the attractiveness of college alternatives like vocational schools, amid rising debt and concerns about the value of a college degree. The enrollment pressures are creating winners and losers among traditional four-year colleges.

The precursor to alternative colleges were coding boot camps which started to show up in 2011. They teach students software engineering skills and draw mostly college graduates or college dropouts. In 2017 there were at least 95 schools in dozens of cities that produced 22,949 graduates, said Liz Eggleston, co-founder of Course Report, based in New York,

which tracks the industry. They cost an average of \$11,000, last 14 weeks and place graduates in jobs with average starting salaries of nearly \$71,000 a year.

A new breed of longer programs such as MissionU has begun to pop up. In California the Holberton School and the "42" program recently opened, and in Indianapolis the Kenzie Academy has begun its second class. While they remain focused on digital skills, they also add a smattering of general education courses – in areas like problem solving and teamwork – and market themselves as college alternatives.

"The degree is dead. You need experience," says the website for Praxis, a five-year-old digital school based in South Carolina.

Praxis teaches students an array of digital and soft skills – such as communications – for six months before finding them an apprenticeship with a startup company, mostly in technology. The program costs \$11,000 and is designed to be covered by the wages earned during the apprenticeship.

Just 11 percent of Praxis students who apply are accepted and about 200 students have graduated, said Isaac Morehouse, the company's founder. Nearly all found jobs afterward, he said. "We're a screen for employers," he said.

ClickUp, a two-year-old project management software company in San Francisco with nearly 50 employees, has worked with five Praxis graduates. They have all been strong, productive apprentices at the company, said Chris Cunningham, ClickUp's president of client success.

Mr. Cunningham said he often likes Praxis graduates better than college graduates because they are hungrier and more adaptable.

"A lot of the kids out of college have pretty high expectations and what they've learned is just behind the curve, what they're teaching is not the same as what is going on in the real world," Mr. Cunningham said. "Especially in marketing, they're looking at campaigns that are 10 years old."

Mission U founder Adam Braun said students formally meet once a week and take most of their classes online. About half are traditional college aged, the rest are older. Students pay nothing up front. After they graduate and they've found a job paying at least \$50,000 they pay 15 percent of their income for three years.

In his essay to Mission U, Mr. Cary, who said he scored in the top 5 percent of the country on his SAT and graduated in the top 10 percent of his high school class, created a cost-benefit analysis comparing the price of four years at a traditional college with a one-year degree from Mission U.

He figured he would come out ahead by about \$250,000 if he went to MissionU. Mr. Carey's sister recently graduated from a private Midwest college with a double major in anthropology and political science and about \$35,000 in debt, he said.

"There is definitely a cloud of fear hanging over her because of her student debt," he said. "She didn't want me to have that."

Mr. Cary is in the process of applying for work as a data scientist. He hopes to start work this summer.