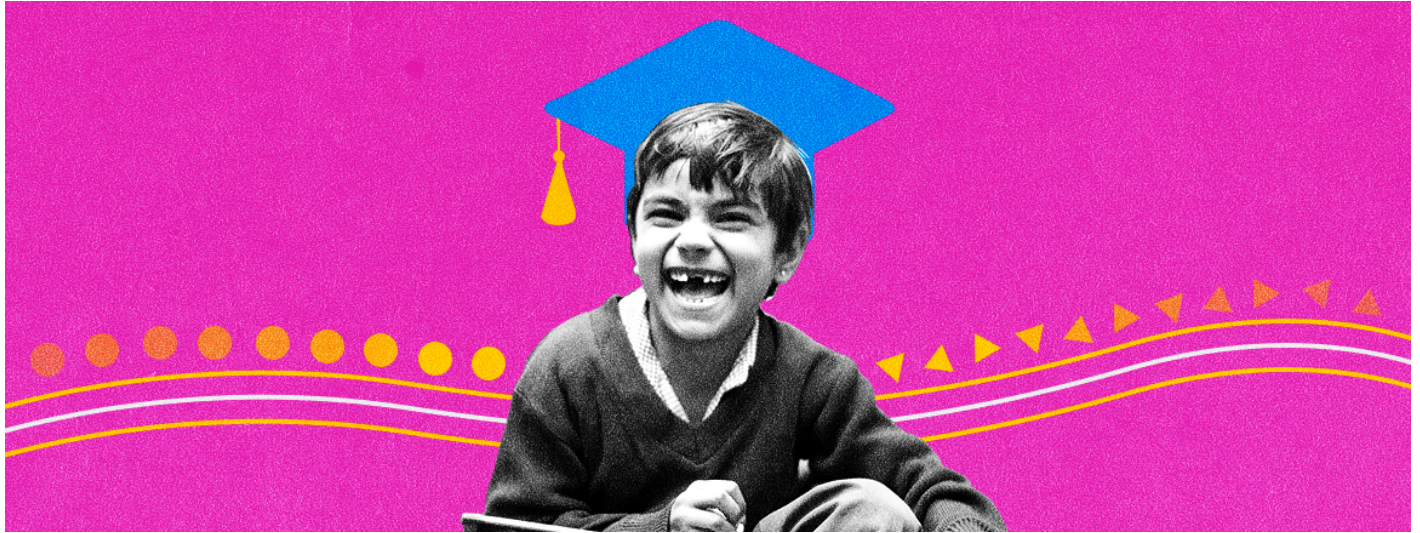


## An alternative to university education



A larger proportion of students than ever attend college in the United States, yet the top colleges have become more and more selective. It's an age of scarcity and an age of plenty. College is also an increasingly more expensive proposition, with tuition alone around [\\$10,000/year at state colleges and over \\$30,000/year at private institutions](#). It's a huge leap of faith; to take on tens of thousands of dollars in debt as a teenager, to study something that may or may not still prove interesting to you four years down the road, let alone relevant in a world where technology "disrupts" industries on a regular basis. This choice doesn't impact the student alone. For many parents, having "boomerang kids" has become the new normal, delaying their retirement so that they may support the (now fully grown) baby birds that have returned to the nest.

Of course, the arguments for attending college are well-worn axioms. College graduates experience significantly lower levels of unemployment; the pay gap between college grads versus those without a four-year degree has risen every year since 1980. Some studies have even shown that the decision not to go to college has an opportunity cost as much as [\\$500,000](#) over the course of a lifetime. When compared to the average debt a student assumes ([now hovering around \\$37,000](#)), the cost becomes negligible.

And there are the less tangible benefits that also play a role in the decision to go to, and stay in, college. There is a pervasive cultural narrative that college is the only way to acceptably enter the middle class, a narrative propagated by higher-ed PR campaigns. Colleges also provide an easy opportunity to socialize and network, a must when personal referrals make you twice as likely to be interviewed and 40% more likely to be hired. College graduates are also [more likely to vote, have better health, and report higher levels of happiness](#) than those who have only a high-school degree. There are also the experiential factors to consider; college can be transformative for some students, allowing them to discover new passions and instilling a life-long love of learning.

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Of course, college is not a magical panacea. Colleges often fail to train students in the real-world skills they will need at professional jobs, with as many as 4 in 10 students graduating without the higher-level reasoning skills required to be successful in white-collar jobs. Even in booming areas such as software programming, college Computer Science curricula have the effect of driving away a lot of potential programmers. As a consequence, the industry then meets its demand for programmers either through immigration or various training programs that are increasingly common in cities like San Francisco and New York.

**We at Zoho don't believe that the only path to success resides in the traditional four (and for many students, six) year degree.** College can measure many things, to be sure, but as an increasing number of companies are starting to find (we're looking at you, Google!), GPA and test scores are poor predictors of long-term success. We understand that all people have to be trained for their jobs, and that most of that training happens (surprise!) on the job. So, we cut out the middle man. Why should we ask students to bet on us and our industry, if we aren't willing to do the same?

**It was out of this realization that Zoho University was born.** We decided that students don't need to take on crippling debt, spend a few years at school, and acquire arbitrary credentials in order to be good at their jobs. Since we are going to have to train them anyway, why not train them at 18 rather than at 22 (or 23, or 24)? We started small, with six students. We put them through a six-month training program that covered the basics they would need to do any job in our company: English, Math and Programming. After they'd completed the program, we placed them in teams across the organization, letting them work as paid interns. 10 years later, those "first six" are still with the company, serving in a variety of positions from software development to systems administrator to project management.

We've learned a lot in 10 years. We've put hundreds of people through our program. At the end of it—students can choose to work with Zoho, or go somewhere else. If they choose to go work somewhere else, they walk away debt-free. If they choose to work with us, the interest has to be mutual—managers in our different teams are still free to choose, or not choose, Zoho University students.

Most of them stay—we have an 80% long-term retention rate. We just accepted our 31st class—so we now have some meaningful samples to compare. We've found that our ZU grads are just as successful in the company as those who went the traditional college route. The biggest difference we see is that by the time the 18 year old ZU grad turns 22, she has four years of industry experience under her belt, something the college grad most definitely lacks.

A decade is a long time in a human life, and a lifetime in tech. As more employers come to see the advantages of this approach, we believe the ZU model will provide a meaningful alternative to conventional college education. The exploding cost of college education, paired with the lack of relevant skills it imparts on students, demands such an alternative. We're confident other smart,

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entrepreneurial companies will follow suit. We're positive that Zoho University will be here 10 years down the road, supplying our workplace, our economy, and our society with students that have no debt but are full of knowledge and experience.