Don’t Go To College

Four-year college educations don’t necessarily prepare you for a career. College is expensive, debt is burdensome, and a degree doesn’t come with a guarantee that you’re going to get paid well or even work in your field-of-choice. If I could do it all over again, I’d have gone to trade school and skipped college.

In June of 2005, I graduated from the University of Iowa with a marketing degree in hand and years of experience in college radio. I sought a job in non-commercial radio, which is nearly impossible without real-world experience. Experience is impossible without a job. Other job prospects were bleak. The catch 22 was in effect. To cope, I fled the Midwest for a ski town in Colorado and began life as Red Bull selling ski bum.

My new town – Crested Butte - had a community radio station with a small paid staff as management and volunteers as DJ’s. I volunteered. Eventually the station hired me part-time and later, full-time. After years of chipping away at the career block, I was “King Button Pusher” as Program Director of KBUT—FM.

Radio isn’t all rock ‘n’ roll or NPR. Everything breaks. I couldn’t fix everything. Engineering is complex and highly-specialized work to be performed only by someone with training and a license. Broadcast engineers are few and far between in Western Colorado. For over a decade, KBUT outsourced Jon Banks, LLC, who serviced several dozen small stations on contract.

I’d tag along with Jon to make repairs at transmitter sites - or at least watch. Jon always loved radio and wanted to be on-air, but it didn’t pay enough. Straight out of high school, he enrolled in a 2-year program in broadcast engineering, earned his certificate, started his own company, lived where he wanted, and set his own schedule. He was valuable and in-demand. I was replaceable. It’s a rude awakening to realize your head smashed at the ceiling of your dream job.

Two summers ago, I called Jon about a maintenance visit. It would be his last; he was retiring at the age of 54. He was going to spend time SCUBA diving and volunteering at a community radio station.

The day I turned 33, my salary was less than my age (in thousands). Unlike Jon, I was never going to retire. I had no skills beyond the broadcast booth and the walls of station management. It was time to switch careers or brace myself for a life of financial struggle with little hope for growth.

It’s 2019. I’m in graduate school, which feels like trade school for mid-lifers with newfound career goals. Thousands of dollars of debt are piling up again. In a few years, student loan payments will resume. Employment is not a guarantee.

You don’t get paid a lot to push the buttons, metaphorically or in radio. If you’re not in-demand, you’re replaceable. If I could do it all over again, I’d have gone straight to trade school to learn to make the buttons work. There will always be someone else to push them.