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Saying No to College
By ALEX WILLIAMS

BENJAMIN GOERING does not look like Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg, talk like him or inspire the same controversy. But he does apparently think like him.

Two years ago, Mr. Goering was a sophomore at the University of Kansas, studying computer science and philosophy and feeling frustrated in crowded lecture halls where the professors did not even know his name.

"I wanted to make Web experiences," said Mr. Goering, now 22, and create "tools that make the lives of others better."

So in the spring of 2010, Mr. Goering took the same leap as Mr. Zuckerberg: he dropped out of college and moved to San Francisco to make his mark. He got a job as a software engineer at a social-software company, Livefyre, run by a college dropout, where the chief technology officer at the time and a lead engineer were also dropouts. None were sheepish about their lack of a diploma. Rather, they were proud of their real-life lessons on the job.

"Education isn't a four-year program," Mr. Goering said. "It's a mind-set."

The idea that a college diploma is an all-but-mandatory ticket to a successful career is showing fissures. Feeling squeezed by a sagging job market and mounting student debt, a groundswell of university-age heretics are pledging allegiance to new groups like UnCollege, dedicated to "hacking" higher education. Inspired by billionaire role models, and empowered by online college courses, they consider themselves a D.I.Y. vanguard, committed to changing the perception of dropping out from a personal failure to a sensible option, at least for a certain breed of risk-embracing maverick.

Risky? Perhaps. But it worked for the founders of Twitter, Tumblr and a little company known as Apple.

When Mr. Goering was wrestling with his decision, he woke up every morning to a ringtone mash-up that blended electronic tones with snippets of Steve Jobs's 2005 commencement address at Stanford University, in which he advised, "love what you do," "don't settle." Mr. Goering took that as a sign.

"It's inspiring that his dropping out basically had no effect, positive or negative, on the work and company and values he could create," he said of the late Apple co-founder.

In that oft-quoted address, Mr. Jobs called his decision to drop out of Reed College "one of the best decisions I ever made." Mr. Jobs's "think different" approach to

education (backpacking through India, dining with Hare Krishnas) is portrayed in countless hagiographies as evidence of his iconoclastic genius.

Indeed, ambitious young people who consider dropping out of college a smart option have a different set of role models from those in the 1960s, who were basically stuck with the acid-guru Timothy Leary and his “turn on, tune in, drop out” ramblings. Nowadays, popular culture is portraying dropouts as self-made zillionaires whose decision to spurn the “safe” route (academic conformity) is akin to lighting out for the territories to strike gold.

Bill Gates dropped out of college. So did Michael Dell. So did Mr. Zuckerberg, who made the Forbes billionaires list at 23.

Mr. Zuckerberg’s story is familiar to anyone who has seen the 2010 film “The Social Network,” in which Harvard seems little more than a glorified networking party for him. While the other Phi Beta Kappas are trudging through their Aristophanes, his character is hitting the parties, making contacts and making history. The dropout-mogul-as-rock-star meme will get a further boost with coming Steve Jobs biopics, including “Jobs,” starring Ashton Kutcher, and another one in the works written by Aaron Sorkin, who wrote the screenplay for “The Social Network.”

Such attitudes are trickling down to the small screen, too. In a recent episode of the Fox sitcom “The Mindy Project,” Mindy Kaling’s character, a doctor, grills a teenager about his plans for college. “I’m not going to college,” he tells her. “Why should I load up on debt just to binge drink for four years when I could just create an app that nets me all the money I’ll ever need?” Such tales play well in the eyes of millennials, a generation hailed for their entrepreneurial acumen and financial pragmatism. Why pay money if you can make money?

No wonder the swashbuckling Web subculture is suddenly percolating with whiz-kid programmers thinking like “one and done” college hoopsters, who stick around campus only long enough to showcase their skills (and meet National Basketball Association draft requirements) before bolting for pro riches. Tech-start-ups have their own versions of Carmelo Anthony: folks like Jack Dorsey and Evan Williams of Twitter, and Kevin Rose of Digg. (Meanwhile, David Karp of Tumblr dropped out of high school.)

“Here in Silicon Valley, it’s almost a badge of honor,” said Mick Hagen, 28, who dropped out of Princeton in 2006 and moved to San Francisco, where he started Undrip, a mobile app. He is now recruiting from the undergraduate ranks, he said, which is becoming a trend among other tech companies, too. In his view, dropouts are freethinkers, risk-takers. They have not been tainted by groupthink.

“College puts a lot of constraints, a lot of limitations around what you can and can’t do,” Mr. Hagen said. “Some people, they want to stretch their arms, get out and create more, do more.”

Even the staunchest critics of college concede that a diploma is still necessary for many professions — law and medicine, clearly, and in many cases, for a Fortune 500 executive, too. But that’s the point: how many more lawyers and middle managers do we need?

“College is training for managerial work, and the economy doesn’t need that many managers,” said Michael Ellsberg, the author of “The Education of Millionaires: Everything You Won’t Learn In College About How to Be Successful.”

Mr. Ellsberg, 35, graduated from Brown University and spent years trying to translate his expertise in post-colonial critical theory into a paying career. So his book tries to impart real-world skills, like salesmanship and networking, which he argues are crucial as white-collar jobs are being downsized or shipped to Bangalore. The future, he added, belongs to job creators, even if the only job they create is their own.

“I’m not saying you have to be Mark Zuckerberg or Steve Jobs,” Mr. Ellsberg said. “I know people with dog-walking businesses who make six figures.”

Mr. Ellsberg joined a growing chorus of academic dissenters, who have made it fashionable to question the value of a college degree. Last year, an anonymous academic who called himself Professor X, published “In the Basement of the Ivory Tower,” which argued that future police officers and nurses need not be force-fed Shakespeare.

Nikhil Goyal, a 17-year-old high school student in Long Island, published “One Size Does Not Fit All: A Student’s Assessment of School,” contending that some students are better served by ditching lecture halls and treating the world as their classroom. The debate has inspired articles in The Huffington Post and New York magazine.

Perhaps most famously, Peter A. Thiel, the billionaire co-founder of PayPal, in 2010 started his Thiel Fellowship program, which pays students under 20 years old \$100,000 apiece to bag college and pursue their own ventures. “People are being conned into thinking that this credential is the one thing you need to do better in life,” he said on “60 Minutes” last spring, adding, “they typically are worse off, because they have amassed all this debt.”

For such critics, the explosion in student debt is the next subprime crisis. There is now \$1 trillion in outstanding student debt, with \$117 billion tacked on last year alone, according to calculations by the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau. Tuition levels have quadrupled since the early ’80s, according to the Student Body Scholarship Association.

These figures rankle James Altucher, a prominent investor, entrepreneur and pundit who self-published a book called “40 Alternatives to College.” “College presidents

now just arbitrarily think they can raise tuitions,” he said. “So what is happening is, rich people can still afford college, but poor people are borrowing this money and sacrificing their future for a lifetime of debt.”

Such opinions have met considerable headwind. Jacob Weisberg of Slate pounded Mr. Thiel over his “nasty” idea, which he argued is “diverting a generation of young people from the love of knowledge for its own sake and respect for middle-class values.”

Indeed, many educators dismiss the college-is-overrated debate as a dangerous fringe idea, and say the real challenge is that only 56 percent of students who enter a four-year institution finish within six years, according to a recent Harvard study. To them, the statistic represents a crisis, not a sign of progress.

“The reality is, there is not a declining demand for college and university,” said Richard Arum, a New York University sociology professor who co-wrote “Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses.” “There is an increasing demand, and that is not just true for America, but for all the world. Increasingly, you need a diploma to compete for the jobs that are out there.”

The Ivory Tower apostates are undeterred. “I think kids with a five-year head start on equally ambitious peers will be ahead in both education and income,” said Mr. Altucher, who regrets graduating from Cornell. “They could go to a library, read a book a day, take courses online. There are thousands of ways.”

Natalie Warne found one of them. A poised 22-year-old from Chicago, she stepped off the college track after high school to “hack” her education, which to her meant traveling the country to protest atrocities in war-torn Uganda.

It started with a gap-year internship after high school with a charity called Invisible Children, where she acquired experience in public speaking, event coordinating and film editing (she eventually appeared on “Oprah”). Finding satisfaction, she stretched her gap year into two, and two became three. While speaking at a TED conference, she met Dale J. Stephens, the founder of a group called UnCollege that champions “more meaningful” alternatives to college. Her plans for college are off for now.

“Experience has proved to be a far better teacher in my life than any book, classroom or educator,” she said.

UnCollege advocates a D.I.Y. approach to higher education and spreads the message through informational “hackademic camps.” “Hacking,” in the group’s parlance, can involve any manner of self-directed learning: travel, volunteer work, organizing collaborative learning groups with friends. Students who want to avoid \$200,000 in student-loan debt might consider enrolling in a technology boot camp, where you can learn to write code in 8 to 10 weeks for about \$10,000, Mr. Stephens said.

THEY can also nourish their minds from a growing menu of Internet classrooms, including the massive open online courses, or MOOCs, which stream classes from elite universities like Princeton. This guerrilla approach hits home with young people who came of age seeking out valuable content free on Napster and BitTorrent.

Mr. Stephens, a dropout from Hendrix College in Arkansas (he later earned a Thiel Fellowship), started UnCollege less than two years ago, and already its Web site attracts 20,000 unique visitors a month. "I get on scale of 10 to 15 e-mails a day from people who say something along lines of, 'I thought I was the only one out there who thought about education like this, I don't feel crazy anymore,'" he said.

There are other groups, too, like Enstitute, which offers two-year apprenticeships with entrepreneurs in lieu of college, and Zero Tuition College, an online support network for students looking for alternatives.

The goal is not to foment for a mass exodus from the ivy halls, Mr. Stephens said, but to open people's minds to a different set of opportunities.

Sounds nice. But it is not an easy decision for students whose future is on the line. Jean Fan, a high school senior in San Mateo, Calif., is an editor for UnCollege, where she hopes to help inspire students to evolve "from passive to active learners."

Even so, she is busy applying to elite universities right now. She recognizes the irony.

"In terms of grades and test scores, I'm one of the top students at school," said Ms. Fan, 17. "College seemed like the obvious next step."

She added, "Common sense, of course, is highly overrated."