

Is College the Only Path to Success?



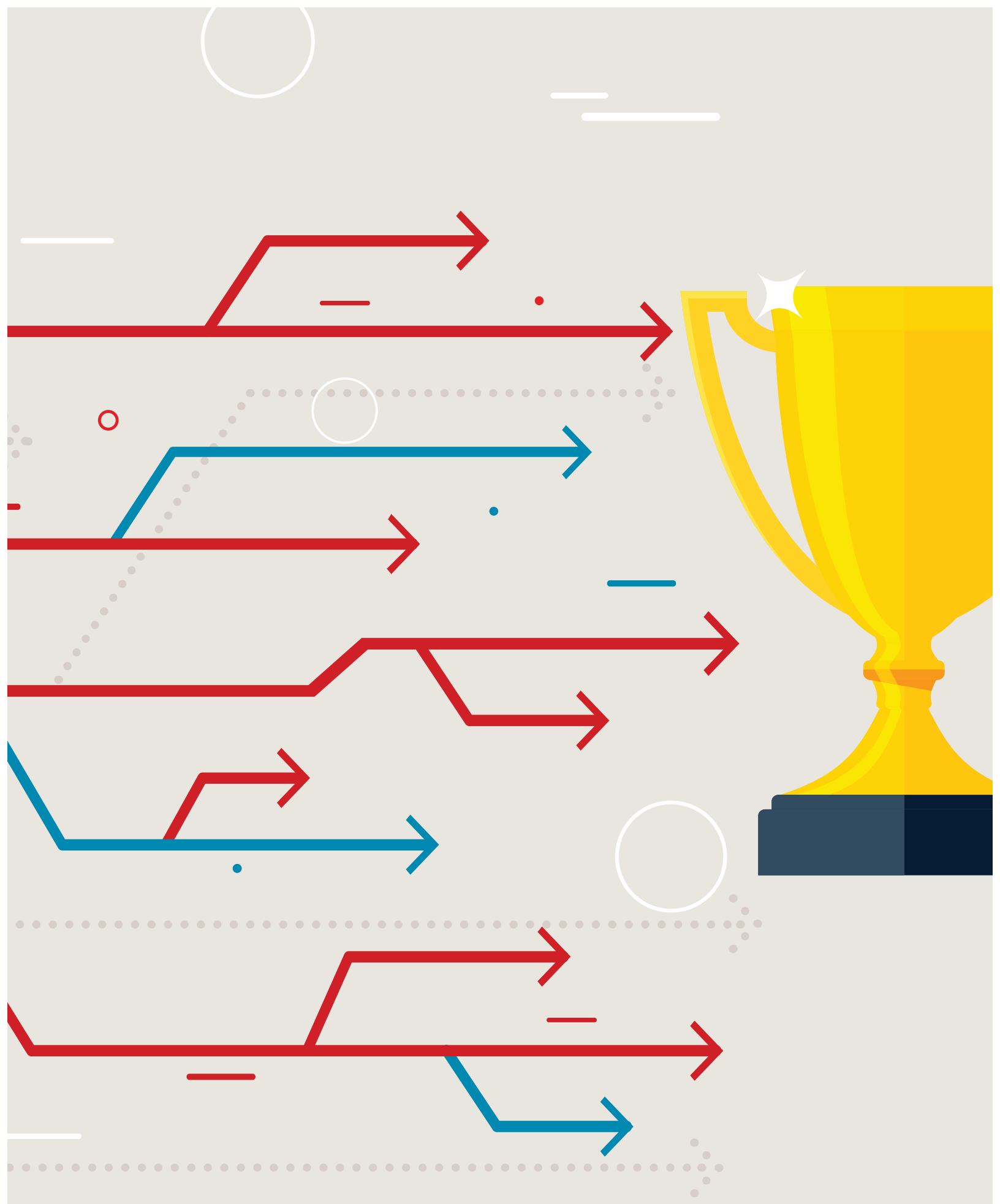
by Rick Fiery, MBA

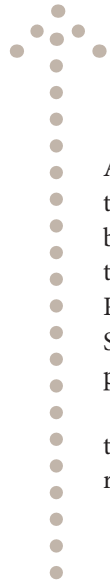
WITH A COMPLEX WEB OF SCHOOLS AND UNIVERSITIES, we are one of the most educated societies in history. Culturally and educationally, we are focused on getting our children to graduate from college, and the more prestigious the college the better.

If you are a parent of a child with ADHD, dyslexia, or learning disabilities, you understand the hard work and dedication both of you had to put into each academic school year: overcoming procrastination, breaking large projects into manageable chunks, attending numerous check-ins and parent-teacher meetings, pretending not to be affected by peer comparisons, medication and behavioral management, IEP and 504 meetings, standardized testing accommodations (or lack thereof), and finally, the challenging college application and acceptance process.

College can be a dangerous venture for students with learning challenges. When they don't fulfill the college dream, their self-image suffers. Many parents of young adults in their twenties and thirties wish they could have a do-over. Let's face it: Asking 17-year-olds with ADHD or LD to decide on a career after they have just survived the difficult experience of high school borders on—well, you know.... Many are just coming up for air and have not had the opportunity to think deeply about their future.

SHUTTERSTOCK





Success in a career, whether or not a young adult has ADHD or LD, requires focus on something about which the person is truly passionate. Combining passion and a brilliant mind can result in huge success, helping to create the type of game changers we all hear about—people like Richard Branson, Charles Schwab, and David Neeleman. Some young adults need to hit the pause button before proceeding to college.

Are there options available? *Yes!* Gap year and alternative programs do exist and can prove invaluable for the right young adult. Let's explore some of these options.

GAP YEAR PROGRAMS

Gap year programs are popular for high school graduates who need a break from the rigidity of academia. Many young adults with ADHD or LD have not had the opportunity to mature as quickly as their peers.

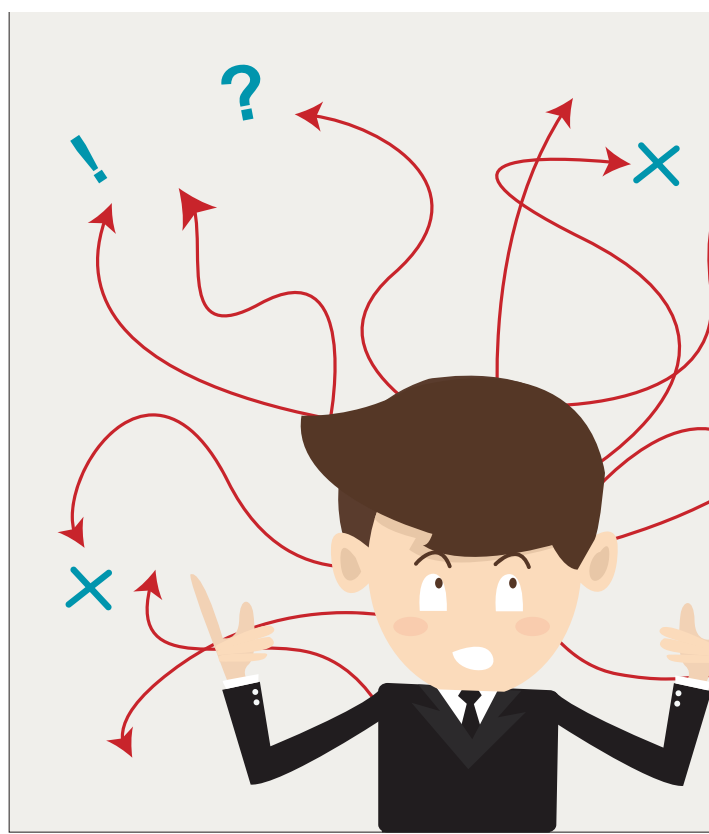
The idea of leaving home to attend college can be downright terrifying.

A gap year can allow them to take the first step toward adulthood by establishing separation from the family and giving them the space to start thinking clearly about *their* future in a nonacademic environment.

Many different programs exist that cover nearly all fields you can imagine. Some focus on travel and experiences; some focus on learning. And there are even programs available for young adults with learning differences.

The right gap year program for young adults with ADHD or LD should really focus on passion discovery. What excites her? What would get him up every morning? What will capture the power of that ability to hyperfocus and excel? After they discover those areas of passion, exploring and gaining exposure to career choices that match can enlighten them and reignite the spark snuffed out in academia.

After completing an appropriate gap year program, young adults are in a much better position to make an educated decision about their life trajectory. They have a much better chance of picking the right major at the right college, thus increasing the chance of completing college in four years instead of the extended stints that many with ADHD or LD seem to take. Or, they may decide that college is not the best choice and look at other options.



COLLEGE ALTERNATIVES

There are traditional careers available that do not require a college degree. Clerical or technical jobs, manufacturing, and many others are in high demand. Trade schools and certificate programs are available for those with interests in specific fields. These options can give young adults a good start down a career path. Information technology and medical programs come to mind.

This route might spark interest in a career path that does require a degree. But when the desire to achieve is high, and some maturity and independence have been realized, a college degree may be a more attainable goal.

But what about opportunities for those who think and learn differently, who have so much to offer the world, but don't see college in their immediate future? Are there options where they can learn in their own way?

Located in Massachusetts, InventiveLabs is one such alternative. It is a unique research lab and business incubator built to leverage the creativity of young adults who need to follow a different path. Creative, out-of-the-box, alternative thinkers are guided by mentors who have successfully navigated the entrepreneurial ropes. There these individuals have the opportunity to achieve their full potential.

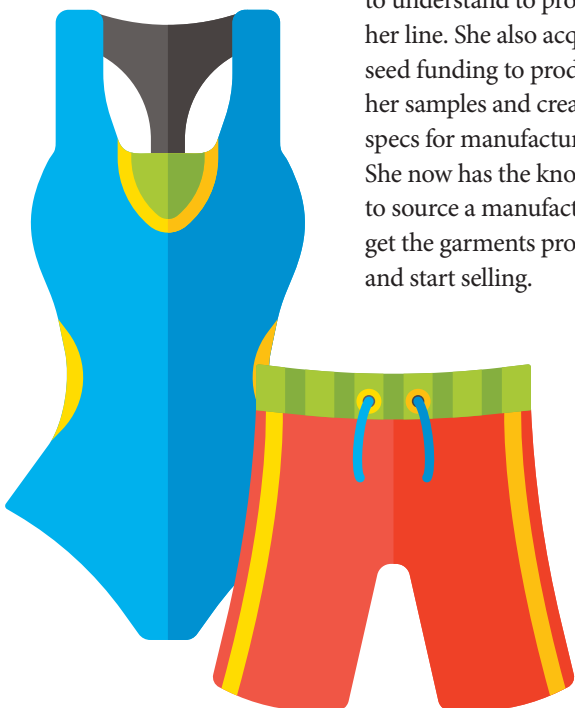
No-holds-barred brainstorming is encouraged. Structure and accountability are discreetly woven into an entrepreneurial track. Guidance is provided on how to create a business plan, build prototypes, source and present to investors and to price, market, and sell a product or service. The goal is to allow the attendees, who are known as Inventives, to discover their passions and pursue them so they can make a living doing what they love.

**Success in a career, whether or not
a young adult has ADHD or LD, requires focus
on something about which the person is truly passionate.**

Last November, I made the case for what I describe as “necessary brilliance” in a TEDx talk at TEDxAmoskeagMillyard. Speaking to everyone who has a family member with ADHD or LD, it is a message of hope and potential that describes some of the key learnings from this unique facility.

Here are two examples of young entrepreneurs who decided to start their own companies as opposed to pursuing a college degree.

New fashion label. Rebecca, an Australian who was looking for ways out of a dead-end job, finished a one-year internship program at InventiveLabs, where she focused on her passion for fashion design and entrepreneurship. She acquired the tools to launch a new label in beachwear fashion. Mentors helped her identify and work with industry contacts in order to learn the industry. They educated her on the business concepts she would need to understand to produce her line. She also acquired seed funding to produce her samples and create her specs for manufacturing. She now has the knowledge to source a manufacturer, get the garments produced, and start selling.



New app design company. Three young men, none of whom had made it through college, created a new company, Hyperappative—you have to love the name! They met at the same business incubator for people with learning differences, quickly realized they have complimentary skill sets, and came up with a bunch of ideas. One idea rose to the top, but they can’t disclose what it is yet—it is first to market and unique. They were concerned because they didn’t have money, but they learned all the elements of creating a pitch deck and a very detailed business presentation. The team practiced their pitch many times to various audience types where they were prepped with possible investor questions. Then they presented to investors in Washington, DC. They stood their ground for over an hour, and raised nearly \$270K from investors, friends, and family members excited by their idea.

THE OPTIONS ARE REAL

It is difficult for parents and graduates to resist the almost overwhelming gravitational pull of attending college right away. But true alternatives do exist. As parents and mentors, we need to consider the alternative options that can follow the high school gauntlet. Challenges may loom ahead, but this is when young adults can finally truly blossom, unconstrained by the expectations of an academic infrastructure that does not understand their necessary brilliance. 🎧

Rick Fiery, MBA, began his career as a civil engineer but moved to the computer-aided design industry. He received his MBA from the Wharton School of Business. After several successful startups, his research led to the idea to form InventiveLabs (inventivelabs.org) in collaboration with Tom Bergeron.