



**COLLEGE**  
**WITHOUT**  
**HIGH**  
**SCHOOL**

**A teenager's guide to** skipping high school and going to college



BLAKE BOLES

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## Praise for *College Without High School*

Words fail me. This is the most inspiring, convincing, and practical case for self-directed learning that I've seen in many years. Mr. Boles draws on time management principles from the business world and on his own adventure-packed youth to map out a brilliantly simple way that people can live life to the fullest while also preparing masterfully for admission to college. If you believe, as I do, that our time on earth is a grand gift not to be squandered, then buy this book for all the teenagers you love, and watch as all manner of quests, discoveries, inventions, and miracles emerge.

— Grace Llewellyn, author of *The Teenage Liberation Handbook: how to quit school and get a real life and education* and *Real Lives: Eleven Teenagers Who Don't Go to School Tell Their Own Stories*

This splendid book is intended as a step-by-step guide, but can be read with profit by anyone interested in moral philosophy. Exceptionally clear, insightful, and lively, it will take its place as the definitive work on the subject.

— John Taylor Gatto, author of *Dumbing Us Down, The Underground History of American Education, and Weapons of Mass Instruction*

Boles offers an antidote to the over-scheduled, grade-driven, and sadly uncreative existence of most high-schoolers today. It's time for teens to take control of their own education. Yes, they must learn the basics. Absolutely. But as Boles explains, self-motivated teens can cover those topics efficiently and free up more of their time for further learning. This book is a crucial guide for students and parents interested in replacing the old carrot and stick that's at the heart of today's education system with intrinsic motivation—self-directedness and autonomy that leads to real learning and growth.

— Daniel H. Pink, author of *A Whole New Mind* and *The Adventures Of Johnny Bunko*

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Blake Boles has found the solution for those students who find regular high school oppressive. Outstanding advice! His book is absolutely right on about the many options for success for students who have a little different approach to life and study.

— Donald Asher, author of *Cool Colleges For the Hyper-Intelligent, Self-Directed, Late Blooming, and Just Plain Different*

*College Without High School* is an excellent update to the groundwork provided by John Holt, the Colfaxes, Grace Llewellyn, and other unschoolers. I found it engaging and filled with concrete understanding and useful suggestions for Self Directed Learners of all ages, in or out of school.

— Cafi Cohen, author of *And What About College?: How homeschooling leads to admissions to the best colleges and universities*

*College Without High School* is a fantastic resource for homeschoolers who want to stand out from the rest of the college admissions pack. However, especially for unschoolers and other eclectic learners, it is also an inspirational description for how adventurous self-directed learning can lead to college admission. This is an entertaining workbook, how-to manual, and educational philosophy text that will help teenagers and their families figure out how to get into college without a conventional high school degree.

— Patrick Farenga, co-author of *Teach Your Own: The John Holt Book of Homeschooling*

Blake Boles shares what homeschoolers have known for decades: teens are thriving everywhere without attending school! Blake will inspire you to seize the day and live well now, with every bit of confidence that the doors to college will be wide open to you. I am thrilled to have another messenger trumpet the truth that school is optional. I recommend all parents and educators to acquaint themselves with this information.

— Kenneth Danford, co-founder and executive director of North Star: Self-Directed Learning for Teens







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NEW SOCIETY PUBLISHERS

CATALOGING IN PUBLICATION DATA:

A catalog record for this publication is available  
from the National Library of Canada.

Copyright © 2009 by Blake Boles.  
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Cover design by Diane McIntosh.

Printed in Canada by Friesens.  
First printing July 2009.

Paperback ISBN: 978-0-86571-655-1

Inquiries regarding requests to reprint all or part of *College Without High School*  
should be addressed to New Society Publishers at the address below.

To order directly from the publishers, please call toll-free (North America)  
1-800-567-6772, or order online at [www.newsociety.com](http://www.newsociety.com)

Any other inquiries can be directed by mail to:

New Society Publishers  
P.O. Box 189, Gabriola Island, BC V0R 1X0, Canada  
(250) 247-9737

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*For Ross, Liza, Cooper, Olivia and Ben*





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# Premises and Promises

## Is a Life of Teenage Adventure for You?

Most high schoolers never consider the possibility of life outside the classroom. But that life exists, and it's lived every day by a growing number of non-traditional students: unschoolers.

For an unschooler, each day is a chance for a new adventure. You might find one volunteering on an organic farm in France, bike-riding across state lines with friends, taking pulses as an emergency room intern, making phone calls to favorite authors, crashing a college physics lecture, blogging about graphic design or running a tutoring business. These teens pursue their dreams on a daily basis—and they still get into college.

Emerie Snyder entered New York University's revered Tisch School of Arts without a day of high school on her transcript. Andy Pearson never went to any school but began part-time college courses at the University of Michigan at age 16 (and soon became a full-time student). Charlotte Wagoner studies International Business at Rockhurst, and Shannon Lee Clair writes plays at Princeton—each without four years of high school to their names. Unschooled teens have gained admission to virtually every competitive college in the US. These unschoolers aren't Einstein-like geniuses. They're normal teens who, unsatisfied with school's plan for their future, chose to get an education on their own terms. You can make this choice, too.

Ask yourself if the following premises make sense. If they do, then you might be a closet unschooler, and a life of teenage adventure awaits you.

### **School and Education are *Not* the Same Thing**

School is a place where people go; education is gaining the confidence to follow your dreams. You can succeed in life without school, but you'll fail terribly without an education.

### **You Can Learn More by Going to School Less**

Learning is driven by interest and relevancy, not threats and bribery. If biology fascinates you, you'll learn it quickly. If computer science is relevant to your dreams, then you'll focus on it. The motivational machinery used by schools—constant testing, grading and comparison—discourages learning in curious minds.

### **Getting Into a Top College Does Not Require Full-Time High School**

Getting into a top college *does* require proving that you can handle rigorous academics, structured classroom learning and the other skills that college requires. Unschoolers find alternative paths to proving these points: they enroll in community college classes, use SAT and AP tests to demonstrate proficiency or highlight the intellectual challenges of their self-directed projects (among dozens of other options).

### **Leaving School Does Not Lock You Into a Fast Food Career**

Life is not a pyramid with doctors, lawyers and professors on the top, McDonald's cashiers at the bottom and school the only ladder between. The US is home to countless intelligent and financially successful adults who left the traditional school path. Choosing to leave school is an entrepreneurial move, not a cop-out.

**Life Doesn't Have to Wait Until Age 18**

You're not legally an adult until age 18, but that doesn't mean you have to let school control your life until then. Thirteen-year-old Native Americans patrolled their villages on horseback, and 16-year-old Robin Lee Graham sailed around the world on his boat, *Dove*. You're mentally and physically capable of making important decisions for yourself. If high school feels like a waste of time better spent elsewhere, go elsewhere. Leaving school is legal in all 50 states.

**Adventuring While Your Friends Sit in the Classroom is Neither Unfair nor Irresponsible**

Doing all your college-preparatory schoolwork in six hours a week instead of the normal 40 (and spending the rest of your time adventuring) is not unfair, it's efficient. You're not cheating by cutting out the wasteful baggage that comes with school learning—classroom politics, disruptive social scenes, shuffling around hallways in 50-minute intervals—to instead focus on quality learning experiences. You're being smart.



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## Through the Macroscope

This book will teach you how to live life as an adventuring teen and still go to a top-choice college. If mixing adventure with college prep sounds to you like forcing oil and water together, I understand your skepticism. But it can be done. Paradoxically, I didn't find the key that unlocked both doors until I was in college myself.

My story goes like this: 12 years of diligent service in suburban public school graced me with a seat at UC Berkeley, the top Public Ivy in the US.<sup>1</sup> With high scores in math and the sciences, I entered under the astrophysics major—half inspired by the movie *Contact* (plot summary: Jodie Foster studies stars and discovers extraterrestrial intelligence) and half by the ego-stroking phrase “I study *astrophysics at Berkeley*.”

That swagger took me as far as my third year, at which point I slammed into an intellectual wall: the first semester of quantum mechanics. Quantum taught me that astrophysics looks less like *Contact* and more like endless mathematical derivations—not what I had signed up for. If I really loved astrophysics, I would have sucked up quantum as a necessary speed bump. But I didn't. Instead, I began to see that my choice of studies was driven more by what school rewards (achievement in math and science) than by my inner longings. I plummeted headfirst toward an academic identity crisis.

As I sweated over calculus equations and entertained daydreams of dropping out to teach snowboarding, a friend from a one-unit



elective course handed me a book written by former New York City public school teacher, John Taylor Gatto. This was the first line I read.

I've noticed a fascinating phenomenon in my twenty-five years of teaching: that schools and schooling are increasingly irrelevant to the great enterprises of the planet. No one believes anymore that scientists are trained in science classes or politicians in civics classes or poets in English classes. The truth is that schools don't really teach anything except how to obey orders.<sup>2</sup>

Well, that was something different. Caught by a hook of curiosity, I put number-crunching astrophysics on the back burner for a few weeks and entertained a much deeper line of thought: questioning education from the ground up. Was it possible that my schooling—a training that implicitly promised the good life if one simply followed protocol—had merely taught me to follow protocol itself? Obeying orders had brought me to where I was now: majoring in a field that suddenly felt foreign and unsettling.

Gatto had my attention. I delved deeper. It's a small miracle what an hour on Google and Amazon.com can unearth. Under the surface of the educational mainstream I found brewing a deep and powerful countercultural undercurrent. Not every teen, it appeared, fell into the straightforward categories of high schooler or drug-addicted dropout. Some went to zero-curriculum free schools. Some attended Montessori or Waldorf or Independent Study Charter schools. Some were homeschoolers in the traditional sense of school at home. And some opted instead for the label unschooling: radically independent, self-directed homeschooling.

The unschoolers interested me most. These teens were taking on the college-level responsibility of self-motivated, self-structured learning at age 16 or younger. Beyond this accomplishment, how-

ever, unschoolers seemed intimately dialed into the most important of questions: what shall I do with my life? They appeared to take that question seriously at an age when most of their peers obsessed over clothing or video games. This question was where I was stuck. Could unschooled teens have something to teach me?

Years later I would sit knee-to-knee in a grassy field in Oregon with real-life unschoolers telling me stories about their international exploits, business start-ups, musical tours and college plans, giving me proof beyond doubt that success is possible outside of traditional schooling. But at this moment I faced an uncertain decision: to stay with astrophysics (and society's stick-and-carrot path) or set course for this strange new land of alternative education. Down the first path I saw a life of dutiful scientific research—but a life not fully my own. Down the second path I saw no certain end, only a bright shining light.

I took the plunge. I quit astrophysics and decided to take up Gatto's line of research: investigating the philosophy, psychology, politics and history behind modern schooling. Understandably, Berkeley didn't have a department called "Education History, Psychology, Philosophy, etc.," so I explored the options for designing my own major. Gatekeepers in Interdepartmental Studies argued that I couldn't switch from a hard science to a liberal arts focus this late in the game. I kept pushing, and eventually a sympathetic advisor pointed me toward a nondescript office in a quiet hallway where I found the woman who controlled the Independent Major, Berkeley's hidden design-your-own-major program. I proposed my new major (combining astrophysics and self-designed education studies), asked two professors to sponsor me and within weeks was approved by the university, giving me free rein to pursue my new line of inquiry.

During the next two years I feasted daily on an intellectual smorgasbord, taking both traditional courses and self-paced independent

study courses, volunteering at a local free school, writing an honors thesis, traveling cross-country to interview authors, visiting school start-ups and designing and leading my own course on education theory (called Never Taught to Learn) that other Berkeley students enrolled in for elective credit.

Curiously, as my self-directed workload snowballed, I became freer. In my quantum mechanics phase, I spent 20 hours each week on endless mathematical derivations. Those hours *felt* like work. During my independent major, however, I worked more than 50 hours each week on homework and research, but few of those hours felt like work in quantum physics sense. My new major did not reduce my weekly workload (quite the opposite), but *transformed* it from 20 hours of undesirable *school* work to 50 hours of self-motivating *interest* work. In other words, I discovered that I became incredibly productive when driven by curiosity and self-designed studies. The emotional high from this epiphany rocked me at the core.

I graduated from Berkeley with honors (and a thorough disenchantment with my previous idea of becoming a high school science teacher) and set off on a nomadic career of outdoor education, freelance website design, working summers at a wilderness leadership camp and extensive backpacking. But throughout my work and travels, my thoughts always returned to unschooling and unschoolers. Who were these mysterious adventurers who self-designed their curricula, as I did in college, at ages 13–17? And specifically, how did these unschoolers get into college? College for me was an enlightening and exciting four years; in addition to finding myself through my conversion to alternative education theory from astrophysics, I relished the serious intellectual atmosphere and bustling social life that high school failed to provide. Was it possible, I asked, to combine the best of both worlds: an exciting unschooled teenage life and a meaningful college career? That question was the seed that flowered into this book.

In my research I discovered that two audiences were interested in the college-without-high-school thesis: teens who were currently unschooling and needed advice on how to meet college preparatory standards and frustrated high schoolers who wanted an escape path from school without giving up the option of going to a competitive college. I chose to write for the second (and larger) audience, under the assumption that current unschoolers could easily sift through my discussion of unschooling basics to find the specific tools they need.

After interviewing dozens of college-admitted unschooled teens from across the spectrum—from the Ivy Leagues to state research universities to tiny private schools—I'm happy to report that high school is not mandatory for higher education. You can live a life of teenage adventure and still go to a great college. This book will show you how.



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## Launch Sequence

Leaving school to pursue a self-designed, adventure-filled college preparatory life is both an exciting and terrifying prospect. With the tools in this book, you will chip away piece by piece at the terrifying part until you feel confident that you can live life without high school and not mortgage your future in the process. Here's the launch sequence we'll take to put this dream into orbit.

In *Chapter 1*, you'll radically redefine your purpose as a teen. Raised from a young age with constant schooling, most teens see high school as the singular purpose of their young lives. I'll humbly propose that *adventure*—intense learning experiences designed around your goals and dreams—is a truer purpose. And if you don't know what those goals and dreams are yet, I'll help you discover them.

In *Chapter 2*, you'll learn the basics of how to get into college without high school. Colleges don't care *how* you prepare to handle their workload as long as you *do* prepare. In other words, you can redefine the rules of the college prep game. I'll explain the five college preparatory results—intellectual passion, logical reasoning, background knowledge, leadership and structured academics—and the many ways to prove them on your own schedule.

In *Chapter 3*, you'll dissect your biggest goals (defined in Chapter 1) and examine each piece for its college preparatory potential. By combining college prep with natural passions, your hours of *school* work will shrink and *interest* work will grow dramatically. Throw in a few time management principles typically reserved for CEOs, and

you'll be able to pursue your dreams, prep for college and have free time left over.

In *Chapter 4*, you'll explore the world of adventures made possible for the liberated teen. From international volunteering to self-designed internships to crashing university courses, a world of non-traditional learning awaits you. You'll hear stories from unschoolers who have had these adventures themselves.

In *Chapter 5*, you'll receive the final few tools that will make your journey a success. Conquering the fear of leaving school, the social life question and the logistics of college applications are all on the flight plan.

*If you picked this book up and you're already in college*, check out my guide to uncolleging in the Appendix. Here you'll learn how to apply the principles of unschooling to the college realm.

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## A Note for Parents

Prior to publishing, I sent the manuscript of this book to a half-dozen authors, researchers, students and leaders in the world of unschooling and self-directed education. Kenneth Danford, a former public school teacher and co-founder of *North Star: Self-Directed Learning for Teens* in Hadley, Massachusetts, wrote back: “You don’t describe the role of parents very much. In your stories they seem to be not needed or mostly irrelevant. The implication is that they should mostly stay out of the way.”

Because my careers have always involved working directly with teens, I was at a loss of words in my first draft to address parents on the topic of their child’s unschooling. Ken reminded me that parents are an integral part of any and every education. Though I myself did not unschool as a teen, my parents were incredibly supportive of me and encouraged me to go on many adventures. The attitude that fueled my college turnaround was undoubtedly nourished by the seeds of self-reliance that they planted in my young mind.

What a budding unschooler needs from his or her parents is support. Specifically, they need your encouragement in their self-chosen projects, your guiding advice as they experiment with the world of work and your commitment to letting them make—and learn from—their own mistakes. This is the kind of support that Sir Richard Branson received from his mother when she stopped her car and asked him, at age four, whether he could find his way home from a distance of many miles away—a route unknown to Branson. He said yes, and she let him out of the car.<sup>1</sup> Branson later left high school,



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