Does College Matter?
Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco • 2014 Annual Report
"The foundation of every state is the education of its youth." “Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.” “Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education.” These are but a few of the seemingly innumerable quotes on one of the most commented-upon subjects in human civilization: Education. Diogenes, William Butler Yeats, and Martin Luther King Jr. have ample company in their commentary, and there is good reason: Education is the foundation of modern societies; it is each nation’s investment in its future laid bare.

Few would deny that education opens up worlds of opportunity. From my personal experience, I have seen how education not only arms people with the skills to find success, but opens minds by exposing students to world views and ways of thinking that are different than their own. From an economist’s perspective, I see the irrefutable data that investing in education is crucial to economic success. There is no such thing as a developed economy that does not educate its people universally; it is a prerequisite to prosperity.

The three essays in this report highlight various aspects of education, though they are by no means exhaustive—a full examination of education would take up far more space than allotted here. Instead, we consider three areas of common discussion and debate: That yes, college is still worth it, that education is constantly changing, and that, done right, one’s education should never end.

Education extends beyond formal teaching or the walls of a classroom. The essays in this year’s report are a commendation of all forms of scholarship and praise of lifelong learning. Or, in the words of Abigail Adams, “Learning is not attained by chance, it must be sought for with ardor and attended to with diligence.”
Does College Pay?

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Balancing Passion with Practicality

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In the current job market it's easy to get discouraged and wonder whether the money spent on college will really pay. If you're going to graduate and work for minimum wage, why shell out tuition? And then there are stories of successful people who didn't go to college. Why not take that path?

Behind these extremes are individuals—maybe you—trying to decide if college makes financial sense. Making a good decision requires knowing some basics. Does a college degree translate into higher earnings? Will the extra earnings be enough to pay for your investment? How long will it take to cover the cost? And, do you really need a college degree to climb the economic ladder?
The experience of workers with and without a college degree provides clear answers. The boost to earnings from a college degree is large and persistent. The average college graduate earns enough “extra” to recover the cost of attending most colleges in fewer than 15 years. After that, the earnings advantage remains, leaving the typical college graduate with a significant net return. All of this leads to greater economic opportunities over a lifetime, particularly for people who start out in the bottom half of the income distribution.

The College Earnings Advantage

A simple way to see the economic benefit of a college degree is to compare how much college graduates earn relative to high school graduates. Figure 1 shows the annual earnings premium for college graduates relative to high school graduates from 1968 through 2011, adjusted for inflation and based on data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID). The payoff from a college degree is apparent. Over the past 40 years, the college earnings premium has averaged about $20,300 per year. And while the exact value varies over time, college graduates always earn more. At its lowest point in 1980, the premium was about $15,750 in extra income per year. In 2011, the latest date in our sample, the average worker with a college degree earned about $20,000 more per year than the average high school graduate. These findings are consistent with other studies (see “For Further Reading” at the end of the essay to learn more).

An important point is that a four-year degree is what really matters, rather than having just some higher education. As Figure 1 shows, the premium is much smaller for workers with some college but no four-year degree.

Did the Recession Change Things?

Recent college graduates will tell you, it’s tough out there. The latest recession was especially hard on young people, and college graduates were not immune. Still, the downturn and its aftermath highlight the insurance a college degree provides. College graduates faced unemployment rates about half as high as those for high school graduates. College grads also fared better on pay. Pay cuts were less severe for college grads on average than for other groups. And average hourly earnings point to a faster recovery in salary growth for college graduates than for high school graduates in 2012 and 2013.

“The average college graduate earns enough ‘extra’ to recover the cost of attending most colleges in fewer than 15 years.”
It’s also important to remember that investing in college, like investing in a house or a business, is a long-term prospect. As Figure 2 shows, new college graduates start out earning just a little more ($5,000 to $6,000) than high school graduates. Over time, this earnings gap grows markedly, so that after 15 years it’s over $25,000 per year. This means that comparing the current salaries of recent college graduates with those of people who started working right after high school won’t tell you that much about the future. Things will look much different 10, 20, and 30 years from now when the college investment has had enough time to pay dividends. Whether you launch a career in a boom or a recession, a college degree is an asset that becomes more valuable over the course of your work life.

All told, college offers a lot of financial benefits. It delivers higher earnings year to year, provides some insurance against ups and downs in the economy, and translates into greater prosperity over a lifetime of work. And as the audio interviews accompanying this essay demonstrate, the financial benefits are only part of the story.

Will the Benefits Cover the Costs?
Around many kitchen tables, the discussion isn’t about the value of college, but about how much it costs. In other words, will the benefits justify the expense? The answer is almost always yes. Here’s why.

The cost of college is tuition and fees, plus the lost earnings from forgoing work to attend school. The payoff is the discounted accumulated lifetime earnings difference between college and high school graduates. As the box below, Computing the Return on College, shows a graduate paying $9,000 a year in tuition incurs a total cost of $112,194 (four years of tuition and fees plus forgone earnings). Assuming that same graduate earns the average premium that comes with a college degree, about $20,000 per year, the discounted lifetime benefits would total about $534,000. Subtracting the costs from the benefits yields a net return on college of over $420,000.

Of course, any individual’s return on college depends on the actual costs incurred from attending and the earnings secured after graduation. But for the average person, the calculation is clear: college pays.
How Long Will It Take to Earn Back Your Investment?

It is clear that, over a lifetime, college pays. But how long before the investment is in the black? This too is straightforward to calculate. The “breakeven” year—that is, the year when the accumulated earnings premium from college equals the cost associated with graduating—depends on two things: tuition costs and the college earnings premium. Assume the earnings premium is the average paid each year after graduation, as in Figure 2. Figure 3 shows breakeven years for different amounts of annual tuition, again adjusted for inflation and the changing value of money over time.

According to the data, students paying $9,000 in annual college tuition for four years can break even and begin earning additional returns in nine years. This means that someone who graduates at age 22 and works full-time each year after that will be able to pay for the investment by age 31. From then on, the wage premium that comes with a college degree is extra income that can be spent or saved. It’s important to note that, while $9,000 may not sound like the astronomical tuitions at some prestigious institutions, it covers about 46 percent of annual admissions at public four-year institutions in 2014, according to the College Board (Table 1). And research finds no definitive evidence that higher tuition leads to superior results for all students (see “For Further Reading”).

Of course, the more college costs, the longer it takes to break even. But, as the figure shows, even when tuition reaches $45,000 per year, which covers nearly all public colleges and universities in the U.S., the costs can be recouped in 17 years. For those who graduate at age 22, this means the investment is paid in full before age 40.

To calculate your own breakeven year, use our calculator, “Is College Worth It?”

Is a College Degree Really Necessary?

Every day we hear stories of people who started at the bottom of the economic ladder and rose to the top through determination, hard work, and talent. This mobility is an important part of our culture and contributes to the vitality of the American economy. In most cases, it also requires a college degree.
No matter where a person starts, going to college increases the chances of moving up the economic ladder. Figure 4 shows the percent of people who make it to the top 20 percent of the U.S. household income distribution by where they started and whether they went to college. For those born into households near the bottom of the income distribution, a college degree is the difference in reaching or not reaching the top. Graduates from the bottom 20 percent are over six times as likely to reach the top than those who don’t go to college. The impact is also striking for those born into the second lowest 20 percent; their chances of getting to the top are five times higher with a college degree. Notably, even those born into the very top of the income distribution are more likely to stay there if they have a college degree. Read more about the role of college in economic mobility in Daly and Bengali 2013, and watch a video on the San Francisco Fed’s Economic Education YouTube Channel.

The importance of college is likely to grow in the future. Technology and globalization are making labor markets more competitive. Employers are looking more and more for workers with established skills and credentials. And the well-educated baby boom generation is nearing retirement, which will leave high-skilled positions vacant and increase the demand for college educated workers.

Is College Right for You?

The data tell a compelling story: College is an excellent investment for most people. A college degree comes with higher earnings, some insurance from the ups and downs in the economy, and a path up the economic ladder. In a changing economy, a college degree also provides a strong foundation to build on, whether that means launching a career, starting a business, or pursuing an even higher degree. Without one, success is just harder, at least for most of us.
Computing the Return on College

Deciding whether college is a good investment means weighing the value against the costs of attending.

**Costs:** tuition + fees + forgone earnings while attending school

**Benefits:** accumulated earnings difference between college and high school graduates

Since the costs and benefits accrue at different times, an accurate calculation of the net return needs to adjust for the changing value of money over time by taking the discounted net present value. This way, we can compare values from different times on one scale.

**Formula for Net Present Value (NPV) for an amount in n years, with discount factor i:**

\[
NPV\ year\ n = \frac{Amount}{(1 + i)^n} = \frac{Benefits - Costs}{(1 + i)^n}
\]

**Formula for Net Present Value of many values over n years:** \(NPV\ year\ 0 + NPV\ year\ 1 + NPV\ year\ 2 + \cdots + NPV\ year\ n\)

Here is an example:

Jamie pays $9,000 per year in tuition and fees. If she had not gone to college, she could have worked and earned $19,887 per year, the average earnings of a high school graduate in 2011 based on the Panel Study of Income Dynamics.

Adding these costs together and taking the present discounted value assuming a discount factor of 2%, the total cost of college is $112,194.

\[
Total\ Cost = (9,000 + 19,887) \times (1 + r + r^2 + r^3) = 112,194.
\]

where \(r\) is the percentage of value that remains after each passing year. We calculate \(r\) using the discount factor:

\[
r = \frac{1}{1 + 2\%} = \frac{1}{1.02} = 0.9804
\]

With a college degree, Jamie earns an average of $20,070 more per year over her lifetime than she would have earned had she stopped with a high school degree.

Taking the present discounted value of her college earnings advantage over her 42 years of work (age 23 to 65), she earns a college benefit of $533,988.

\[
Total\ Benefit = (20,070) \times (r^4 + r^5 + \cdots + r^{44} + r^{45}) = 533,988
\]

Putting the two together, Jamie’s net return on college is $421,794.

\[
Net\ Return = 533,988 - 112,194 = 421,794
\]
Adapted from "Is It Still Worth Going to College?" by Leila Bengali and Mary C. Daly, FRBSF Economic Letter 2014-13.

For Further Reading


Daly, Mary C. "Economics in Person: Economic Mobility in the United States."

Leonhardt, David. 2014. "Is College Worth It? Clearly, New Data Says"
Balancing Passion with Practicality

“A new discipline is taking hold on college campuses throughout the U.S. that reaches across majors to combine art with science, innovation with application, and idealism with realism.”

college education is one of the best investments a person can make. But choosing the focus of that investment can be a daunting task. Add to that the pressure of finding a major that will provide a good living, and it’s not hard to understand why this is such a difficult choice.

A new discipline is taking hold on college campuses throughout the U.S. that reaches across majors to combine art with science, innovation with application, and idealism with realism. Growing from just a handful of courses fifteen years ago, entrepreneurship has emerged as one of the fastest growing disciplines in higher education. Located at the intersection of passion and practicality, a course of study in entrepreneurship offers an alternative to settling for an uninspiring major valued in the marketplace, or even skipping college altogether, to pursue a dream.
Throw Out the Textbook

Instead of passing on college, potential entrepreneurs are learning the real-world skills needed to launch a start-up while studying subjects that may help them change the world. Understanding that launching a business is distinctly different from managing one, entrepreneurship educators recognized the need for a very different approach—an experience-based approach—that infuses the dynamism and risk-taking of a start-up into the learning environment.

“We’ve learned much more through experience, good and bad, and by talking to people in the real world rather than just sitting in a classroom,” says Aaron Gagleard, co-founder of Bosse Tools, in discussing how he and Founder Stephen Walden are learning how to take their patented 360-degree shovel handle to market.

Nowhere else on campus is there a more dynamic approach to hands-on learning than in the department that teaches entrepreneurship. A number of experience-based activities and support systems are typically offered to help students acquire the skills they need to launch a new enterprise. Among these are student competitions, dedicated campus development space for incubating start-ups, and role model programs.

Student Competitions

Business plan competitions give student entrepreneurs the chance to put their innovative ideas to the test by creating business plans and presenting their ideas for new ventures. Integrating classroom instruction, teamwork, and original ideas, student teams compete to see which venture has the most promise. Pitch competitions take the business plan idea and eliminate everything but the most essential aspects—the problem and the solution. The pitch is then delivered in a tightly timed and exciting forum where judges, instructors, and peers rate the presentations.

Designed to prepare student entrepreneurs for the real life rigors of selling their ideas, competitions provide a supportive but challenging environment in which to validate ideas and practice effective communication. Often, the top-performing teams are provided seed funding for their projects and the chance to advance to regional and national competitions.

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Development Space

Students around the country are moving their enterprises out of the dorm room and into an entrepreneur-friendly environment with dedicated work space and ample access to faculty support and community mentors. Often referred to as accelerators, hatcheries, or incubators, these entrepreneurship laboratories are provided rent-free to support and encourage student entrepreneurs. Working alongside other teams, students turn their ideas into reality by experimenting with new designs and fabricating prototypes in these environments.

“I could go on about this program; we’re so thankful to the advisors and for the help we’ve received along the way,” says Trever Bostrom, a student enrolled in the new Boise State University Venture College program. “We have access to great mentors, workspace, and training to help us make Vivid Roots a success.” Trever is co-founder of Vivid Roots, a lifestyle apparel company that supports a social mission by donating 20 percent of their gross profits to clean water projects. Trever’s co-founders are Dylan Carlson, Dallas Crum, and Connor Kingsbury.

Role Model Programs

A key strategy endorsed by organizations from the White House to the World Bank is the idea of the entrepreneur role model. For aspiring entrepreneurs, engaging with a successful, established entrepreneur and envisioning themselves as successful has proven time and again to ignite their imaginations. And inspiration is not the only benefit. By working with entrepreneurs in their local communities, the aspiring entrepreneur learns and practices hands-on skills needed to launch and sustain a start-up business.

Divya Nag, a former Stanford University student studying in the Biology department, will tell you that “being at Stanford is unlike being at any other school in the world, in that everyone is always talking about starting companies.” When Divya was a sophomore, she left school to found Stem Cell Theranostics, a bio-tech company that developed a method to convert ordinary skin cells into beating heart cells, creating a “clinical trial in a dish.” While going through the challenging start-up process, “I realized how important it was to have mentors who have done this before, or who are currently in other companies and can shed some light on their [similar] experiences.” Divya went on to found StartX Med, the first nonprofit medical entrepreneurship program for Stanford University scientists.
Get the Ball Rolling

Whether an aspiring entrepreneur wants to hone an elevator pitch, earn a major, or find a specialty for an MBA, education programs in entrepreneurship can be found across the U.S., from the local community college to the most prestigious educational institutions in the country. Schools offer a variety of programs to their entrepreneurial students, often increasing their offerings over time, as the success of these efforts prove the value of investing in future entrepreneurs. There are three general levels of college or university involvement.

Level One: The Basics

At the most basic level, a school may simply offer a few courses in entrepreneurship, including credit and/or non-credit classes, online courses, and certificate programs. The offerings most often are found in the business department and are usually spearheaded by a passionate educator and a supportive administrator.

Fernando Santos, a former graffiti artist who was thinking of starting a business using his own designs, enrolled in one such class at Chabot Community College in Hayward, California. “I signed myself back up to school to further my education,” he says. “I was looking through the catalog, and I saw this entrepreneurship course. I said to myself, ‘This might be good for me; let me try it out.’” Santos went on to start Beast Oakland, a t-shirt company located in Oakland, California.

“My professor Miguel Colon would always tell us that, of the eight businesses he started, it was the ones that failed that taught him the most. And hey, I had six or seven shirt designs that failed before the one that took off, so I relate to that.”

Level Two: A Campus Hub

After offering a few entrepreneurial courses that prove popular and successful, many educational institutions establish an office of entrepreneurship or entrepreneurs’ center, typically housed in the business, engineering, or science school. The center becomes the point of contact for students, faculty, and external partners looking for education, resources, and support. As the campus hub for entrepreneurship educational efforts, the center encourages collaboration across academic departments.
“I always say, business school students want to be entrepreneurs, but may not have a great idea. STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) students have great ideas, but they don’t know anything about business. So a big part of what we do is bring those two populations together,” says Susan Yamada, executive director of the University of Hawaii’s Pacific Asian Center for Entrepreneurship.

The office of entrepreneurship also fosters relationships with established entrepreneurs in the local community and connects students with business and government enterprises. Schools with a program that have grown to Level Two have made a solid commitment to provide student entrepreneurs with the support services needed to organize and grow their budding enterprises.

Level Three: Interdisciplinary Approach

Schools at Level Three, where entrepreneurship principles are infused into a new, combined curriculum, have the most comprehensive programs for would-be entrepreneurs. These schools permit students to pursue a major in the subject of their choice while simultaneously teaching them how to build a business utilizing their particular specialty. This interdisciplinary approach allows students to pursue their passion and a promising career.

Mignon Fogarty, founder of the successful Quick and Dirty Tips podcast network and host of the popular weekly podcast, Grammar Girl, was hired to fill the new chair in Media Entrepreneurship in the Reynolds School of Journalism at the University of Nevada, Reno. She says her job is to "infuse an entrepreneurial mindset" throughout the journalism department and the broader university. "The best way to learn entrepreneurship is to do entrepreneurship," she points out. Fogarty teaches students media entrepreneurship utilizing her own experiences as an English major who launched a successful media company.

Level Three is the most complex and comprehensive model of entrepreneurship education. It fosters a creative mindset and spirit and establishes entrepreneurship education as a core value. Transcending the idea that the subject is only for business students and faculty, schools at Level Three provide opportunities for all would-be entrepreneurs, from engineering to fine arts.

“...schools permit students to pursue a major in the subject of their choice while simultaneously teaching them how to build a business utilizing their particular specialty.”
Level Three programs typically offer student competitions, development space for start-ups, and commercialization programs. At this level, opportunities for learning entrepreneurship are part of a comprehensive suite of university-wide, wrap-around services dedicated to bringing student ideas to market. Both Arizona State University, which continues to nurture Bosse Tools through its Edson Accelerator program, and Stanford University, which hosts StartX Med, are examples of this comprehensive approach.

The Choice
Choosing whether to run with an entrepreneurial idea instead of attending college used to be a dilemma. So was having to choose between majoring in a subject you loved versus a subject likely to land you a good job after college. These tough decisions are not entirely eliminated, but the new discipline of entrepreneurship can help ease the difficulty by combining innovative and engaging options with a college education. Finding a program that fits into the plans of almost any aspiring entrepreneur is an exciting venture in itself, one that turns a difficult decision into an inspiring opportunity.

For Further Reading


The previous two essays have laid out the arguments for investing in education and following new career paths, supported by solid data, research, and interviews. One might expect that, as an economist, I would follow suit with an extended investigation of the return on investment of education, replete with detailed charts and tables, and an alphabet soup of equations. Normally, this would be the case. But for this year’s essay, I decided to take the path less travelled—or, at least, the one less travelled by policy-wonk economists—and offer my own views about the value of education, in the formal sense, certainly, but more importantly, as the foundation of lifelong learning.

Education doesn’t stop at the last final exam. The arc of one’s life, and indeed one’s career, is determined by how we continue to learn. To believe that the course of university study arms us with the tools to fully participate in adult life without constant update is to make a critical mistake. Our formal education prepares us with many mechanisms with which to approach life in the “real world.” Some of these are practical skills, some
are the intellectual preparedness to take on a new job or career, and some appear to have no impact, other than to have offered some diversion during college or high school. But even the lessons that do not appear to have a pragmatic purpose are vital to our success in later life. They teach us to see the world differently and thus view obstacles from several perspectives and approach them from different angles. They’re important because they teach us how to think, not what to memorize. And that is key if we are to push ourselves to continue learning and be open to new ideas.

Even in a profession as seemingly mundane as economics, the field is always changing. I once was speaking to a group that included students of a former professor of mine. I flattered my former teacher that he’d taught me “everything I know” about the day’s topic. He retorted that he hoped that wasn’t true; he’d be alarmed if I’d failed to learn anything new on the subject in the intervening 25 years.

Of course, he was right, and neither I nor any other economist would claim that we’ve learned everything and can give up studying. New models, data, and methods of analysis are constantly emerging. The most skilled economists are those who can adapt to new ideas and new ways of thinking, because no one—not economists, not computer programmers, not teachers—will be doing the exact same job in five years’ time, let alone 30. Indeed, the term “creative destruction”—the idea that progress by its very nature destroys economic structures as innovation makes old models obsolete—was coined by an economist. Like everyone else, we must adapt to the changing world in which we operate.

The groundwork for evolving along with one’s profession is not laid in the rote learning of new technologies or equations, but in the critical thinking imparted by those lessons seemingly unrelated to the practicalities of our chosen trades. Perhaps a physicist doesn’t draw a direct link between her English classes and life in the lab. Maybe a computer programmer fails to find the connection between philosophy and coding. But all learning is a part of our intellectual and professional success. These disciplines, often considered the “soft” studies are anything but, and they foster the ability to think strategically, to parse ideas, and to question embedded hierarchies that make the mind agile enough to not only adapt to technological advances, but also to embrace new thinking.

“Indeed, the term ‘creative destruction’—the idea that progress by its very nature destroys economic structures as innovation makes old models obsolete—was coined by an economist.”
This is not a novel idea. The concept of well-rounded learning harkens back to classical antiquity, when education in seven liberal arts was considered essential for a truly educated mind. Those same subjects were vital to the Medieval founders of the modern university system, who grouped those disciplines under the auspices of the trivium—grammar, logic, and rhetoric, used to sharpen critical-thinking skills—and the quadrivium—arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music, whose foundation was the study of numbers. It was believed that the knowledge of these arts laid the groundwork for all areas of study and the pursuit of each aided in the mastery of the others. This is more than high-minded pedantic philosophy: modern science has borne this theory out again and again. The seven arts were eventually joined by an expanded roster of subjects, but the fundamental theory that a full educational offering strengthens the intellect remained. That’s why, as an economics major, I was expected to take language, history, and science classes, or why the math majors had to fulfill humanities and social sciences requirements.

The message in this is not that one should rush out and take an astronomy class—though that may be beneficial, and undoubtedly fun. As it happens, I did take astronomy classes as a student at Berkeley, and I can attest that they were both beneficial—I learned methods of investigation and ways of thinking that were different from those in my economics and political science classes—and very enjoyable. The point is that the mind is sharpened by education and experiences outside our own spheres of familiarity. The more adaptable we become, the more open we are to new ideas and perspectives. We have the great benefit of living in an incredibly diverse country, populated by people with different cultures, experiences, and backgrounds from our own. To some extent, we are living in our own university. One of the most important aspects of lifelong learning, and one of the greatest benefits of exercising the mind, is that it fosters creativity. As the president of the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco, I would be remiss if I did not point out not only the vast array of industries that call the Twelfth District home, but the central role innovation has played in them, from technology and biotech to agriculture and financial services. Innovation comes from inspiration and invention, but also in combining existing ideas in new and creative ways. Learning about other cultures and societies can foster that kind of creative process, and it is clear to me that the Twelfth District is a hub of innovation in large part because of its diversity, and that we continue to draw talent here for the same reason.

“...it is clear to me that the Twelfth District is a hub of innovation in large part because of its diversity, and that we continue to draw talent here for the same reason.”
The pursuit of lifelong learning takes more than preparedness, more than intellectual curiosity, and more than critical thinking…it also takes willingness and fearlessness. The former Federal Reserve Chair Ben Bernanke once spoke of his own experience leaving academia for public service and noted that once we have settled into our comfort zones, or managed to tick those myriad accomplishments off the to-do list, it’s time to take on new challenges.

He’s right, and in whatever profession we’ve chosen, it is up to us to continue to challenge ourselves and make learning a part of our everyday lives. I would add my own advice that failure is an inevitable part of life and most often a prelude to success. Rome wasn’t built in a day and neither was the iPad, space shuttle, or modern medical treatments. There were countless failures and missteps along the way, and those provided their own form of learning.

In excelling in whatever it is we do, we wade into uncharted waters. But if we’ve done it right, we know that we have been equipped with the ability to navigate our way with the critical thinking gleaned by our education; the adaptation founded on the ability to think differently; the ability not just to learn from mistakes, but to bounce back when we make them; and our willingness to keep learning. All of this is lifelong learning, and none of us can succeed without it.

“...once we have settled into our comfort zones, or managed to tick those myriad accomplishments off the to-do list, it’s time to take on new challenges.”