Young Techies Say No to College

By MATT RICHTEL

While his fellow seniors at Tiffin Columbian High School spent last year preparing for college, John-Thomas Gaietto set his eyes on heading straight to the pros. Distracted in school, Mr. Gaietto focused his energy and extracurricular time honing his skills and nurturing his natural gift.

It may sound like the prototypical story of a talented athlete, but this is the story of a computer geek.

Mr. Gaietto, 18, who grew up in Tiffin, Ohio, is not an isolated case. While it is difficult to pin down exact numbers, other computer-adept high school students like him nationwide are deciding to forgo college in favor of entering the red-hot technology field.

Computer jobs are plentiful, pay is solid, and, those choosing to pass on school say, the industry is moving so quickly that four years spent in college will be time spent falling behind.

"Why go learn something I already know?" said Mr. Gaietto.

GOT A JOB Roman Yaker, 17, left, had a summer job worth $40,000 a year.
already know?" said Mr. Gaietto, who works for Stone Computer in Royal Oak, Mo., setting up networks for corporations. "Everyone I know who is getting a four-year degree is behind the times."

The students say skills that had caused them to be labeled as geeks, even outcasts, in high school now bring validation and healthy salaries — sometimes even stock packages — that enable students not long from the prom to earn more than their parents.

"Everyone is giving you the positives of going to college," said Matthew G. Newell, the 20-year-old chief information officer at a startup in Detroit. "But when you look around, what you see are the positives of making $80,000 a year."

In reality, Mr. Newell is making $35,000 a year, but he hopes to hit it big financially if Service Advantage International, the company he helped found that helps corporations track customer service, takes off. Mr. Newell is currently enrolled at Eastern Michigan University, but to accommodate the 50 hours a week he works, he has cut back his class schedule to just seven credits this semester. His theory: college will always be there.

"The university has been around for 150 years," he said "It'll be around for another five if I want to finish my degree."

It is not clear how many students are passing up college to enter the computer field. Generally speaking, the percentage of high school graduates attending college dropped to 63 percent in 1999 from 67 percent in 1997, according to census figures. Steve Hipple, an economist for the Bureau of Labor Statistics, said one of the reasons may be the hot economy and its technology engine.

The computer fields are growing at a torrid pace, according to government figures. In the last decade, there has been a 17 percent annual employment growth among computer systems analysts, a broad category that includes network administrators, Web designers, computer security professionals and computer scientists. That figure compares with an overall employment growth of 1.5 percent annually in the same period.

Salaries in computer-related fields reflect the demand for workers that has accompanied this growth. According to the Census Department's Current Population Survey, the median income in 1999 for computer systems analysts was $1,008 a week and the median income for computer programmers was $898 a week. That compares with an overall median wage of $550 a week, or $29,000 annually.

Still, not everyone is convinced that the lure of attractive salaries in
the high-tech world should be the basis for deciding whether to pass on college. Students who make this decision often face skepticism from teachers and parents.

Diana Coleman, Mr. Gaietto's mother, said she had "mixed emotions" about her son's decision to bypass college. Ms. Coleman, who is 42, started college in 1977 but interrupted her education when she had a family. She went back to college, receiving her degree in 1995, in part to show her son the value of getting an education.

"He has a phenomenal opportunity," Ms. Coleman said of her son's current job, "but I really would have liked to have seen him go to college." Mr. Gaietto's father, Michael J. Gaietto, who never attended college, is more insistent. "If you go up against someone in a job interview who has less experience but a degree, chances are, they'll get the job," he said. "College degrees carry a lot of weight, and when you're young you don't realize it."

Some studies support the contention that it pays in the long run to earn a college degree. A study by the Census Bureau in 1994, the last time the agency looked at the subject, estimated that in 1992, the mean annual earnings for a person with a bachelor's degree was $32,629, compared with $18,737 for a high school graduate and $19,666 for a person with some college but no bachelor's degree.

John-Thomas Gaietto said that he had not given up on the idea of attending college and that he was a few credits short of earning a two-year technical degree. He said that he was earning "between $30,000 and $40,000" a year and that he and a friend had made an offer to buy a three-bedroom house that had an asking price of $136,000.

Mr. Gaietto said he was being rewarded for skills that in high school had made him "stick out like a sore thumb."

"I was always doing something that wasn't involved in class," he said. "I was always doing something with computers."

That sentiment is typical among young people with computer expertise who pass up college. Some say that they were terrible students in high school, bored by the subjects they were being taught, or not particularly well accepted socially, and that they found solace in the technology field, which seems to them to be more of a meritocracy and in which people are less judgmental about how an employee dresses, the music he listens to or even about whether he has an "attitude."

Corey Garnett, 20, who grew up in Lee's Summit, Mo., near Kansas City, and graduated in 1998 with less than a 2.0 grade point average from Lee's Summit High School, said he spent his high school days
hanging out on the Internet and learning about network security.

He worked at an amusement park after school, then spent a semester at Blue River Community College before he concluded that school was not for him and moved to California to look for work in Silicon Valley.

Mr. Garnett works as a junior network administrator at Juniper Networks in Sunnyvale, Calif., helping to set up a research and development lab for engineers building new Internet routers, part of the hardware used to move data on the Internet. He makes about $50,000, he said, and has stock options that were modest to start with but have grown through stock splits to around $350,000.

He is torn about having decided not to attend college. "I think I missed out on not going to college from the maturity level and the social level, the lifelong friends," he said. But he added, "In this field, if you go to college, you're outdated."

Such issues may soon confront Roman Yaker, a 17-year-old high school junior from Birmingham, Ala. At the beginning of the summer, Mr. Yaker took a job at Global Network Privacy, a computer security firm in San Francisco. His job involved setting up secure e-commerce sites at a salary of what would be $40,000 a year if he worked year round.

Mr. Yaker said he was a strong student and well rounded socially, and he said he was still considering attending college. He said he would like to attend the University of California at Berkeley.

But the decision might not be easy. He recently bought his first car, a 1995 Honda Civic, and said he expected significant raises and more lucrative offers if he stayed in the working world.

"I like to work," he said, "and if I go to college, I might be missing out. People say the experience of college is great." Besides, he added, "my parents would do practically anything to get me to attend college."
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