THE STUDENT FOUNDER

How to start your first real business
with no money and no experience

Learn like a student.
Build like a founder.

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STARTED A ROBOTICS COMPANY IN COLLEGE
FORBES 30 UNDER 30 · BACKED BY Y COMBINATOR

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I was standing in a skyscraper elevator in downtown Chicago with blood pooling in my shoes.

The backs of my heels had torn open during the two-mile walk across the city. I could feel the blood soaking through my socks. I didn't have the money for a cab, so I walked.

In a few seconds the doors would open onto the twenty-eighth floor, where a high-profile CEO would decide whether to invest money into a kid three months out of college with a half-built drone and forty-two dollars in the company account. I knew that if I didn't start well, I wouldn't recover from it.

PART I

THE ASYMMETRIC DEGREE

The best of your education happens outside the classroom. As a student, the downside of building something real is close to nothing, and the upside is uncapped. It won't stay that way forever.

BLOOD IN THE SHOES

> *"Far and away the best prize that life offers is the chance to work hard at work worth doing."*
>
> THEODORE ROOSEVELT

Less than a year before that elevator ride, I knew exactly what I was going to be.

I was a student at Davidson College, there on a mix of financial aid and scholarship. I studied economics and Spanish, played on the baseball team, and worked three part-time jobs to cover what the aid didn't.

I came from a single-income family in Virginia. My dad was a music teacher at my high school, and no one in my family came from the startup world.

I had mostly good grades and a straight line toward a management consulting job. I was the prototype of a permissioned student, aimed at that slot because it was what I thought I was supposed to do. It was what the other ambitious students were doing. It was what the career center pointed me toward. I had never stopped to think about whether it was what I actually wanted.

The slot didn't even excite me, yet I chased it anyway.

I had the grades, the scholarship, and the internship shortlist, and I had never once made a stranger pay me for something I made. I wasn't thinking about how I could create value for others. I was fixated on how I could secure the most prestigious job after graduation.

Then I called my scholarship donor.

He had helped build one of the world's top consulting firms, and I was considering interning at that same company that summer. If he recommended me, I was in.

I remember making that call from my dorm room. I was calling to collect a key, the recommendation I thought would unlock the internship. I asked what he thought about me applying.

"Don't do it, Andrew," he said.

I sat there, a little in shock, while he explained. Consulting had become a placeholder for a generation of graduates who didn't know what they wanted. He had watched class after class do the job until they figured out what they really wanted to do. He challenged me to skip that chapter entirely.

Figure out what you actually want to do, he said, and go do it. Now. Not after graduation, and not after "getting some experience."

I had called him for the last piece of a plan I already had. Instead, he handed me a hacksaw.

I thanked him and hung up and sat in that dorm room chair with the question he had given me instead of the key. What did I want to do, underneath what looked right on a resume?

Slowly, the campus started to look different to me. My brain began scanning for problems instead of permissions. I started paying attention to work I had walked past my whole life.

Then I found them. Window washers on a swing stage, a hundred feet up the side of a building, slamming into the glass in high wind. Both hands on the rail. Two men, a bucket, and a hundred feet of air. For weeks afterward I couldn't stop replaying the scene. For the first time I was chasing something that would look wrong on a resume, and I couldn't stop.

We land rockets on barges in the ocean, but every four days, someone in this country dies cleaning a building.

Real estate is the largest asset class on earth, with current estimates putting it at around three hundred and ninety trillion dollars, more than every stock and bond market on the planet combined.

The moment a structure is finished being built, it begins to wear. It has to be cleaned, painted, coated, and maintained, forever. We had built the entire physical world, and we were maintaining it with tools from the nineteenth century.

That was the problem I couldn't put down.

I decided to graduate a full year early, stacking an overloaded course schedule so the hours would be there for the company. I moved my education out of the lecture hall and into a garage.

Two college friends and I spent that summer cleaning houses to learn the industry, pooling what savings we had into pressure washing gear and drone parts. I taught myself to build, badly and then less badly, in hours my classmates were asleep.

FORTY-TWO DOLLARS

The week before all my friends were set to return to campus, we had exactly forty-two dollars in our bank account. The savings from three part-time jobs had already gone into the company, piece by piece.

My friends were going back for senior year. I was staring at a dead prototype and a number that could barely buy a tank of gas. Maybe everyone had been right. Maybe I had traded an internship offer letter for a dead machine and an empty account.

Through a campus competition I'd been paired with a mentor, and his own business had put him in touch with an investor in Chicago. He thought what we were building might matter to that investor, and he made the introduction. We had one call, then a second, and at the end of it the investor told me to fly up and meet him in person.

I checked my account again. Forty-two dollars doesn't buy a flight to Chicago.

I went door knocking around the town of Davidson, looking for houses to wash. Most people didn't answer, and the ones who did said no. By house number twenty, one of my old Spanish professors opened his door. I told him I needed the work. He looked at me for a moment, and then he smiled.

"If you can pitch me your business entirely in Spanish, the job is yours."

So I did, and I'm fairly sure I described the cleaning drone as a robot bird.

But he pointed at his house, and I spent the next several soaked, unglamorous hours pressure washing it from top to bottom. I made five hundred dollars that day, barely enough for a last-second budget flight.

By then a lot of people knew what I was building, because I had told everyone I met. I had asked for introductions I had no business asking for. It was still luck that my mentor knew the right man, but I had worked hard to put myself in a position to get lucky.

I had no margin for a cab or a train, so I walked. Two miles across downtown Chicago in the only pair of uncomfortable dress shoes I owned.

I could feel the blood as I rode the elevator up.

The doors opened and I didn't move.

Should I get off this elevator, or should I ride it back down and go find a corporate job?

I stepped off into a bright, pristine office. I gave my name at the reception desk and tried to stand like someone who belonged there, feeling out of place in my button-down and blazer.

Then he came out, shook my hand, and walked me back through the floor. He seemed to know everyone, and everyone seemed glad to see him.

He didn't know that minutes before I walked in, my laptop had crashed. Dead. My whole pitch was on that machine, and for one long moment on the sidewalk I was certain the trip was over. The slides were saved to Google Drive, so the pitch could still happen. I would just have to lean into the shame of asking him to pull it up on his own screen.

I sat down across from a CEO whose company I wasn't sure I could have gotten an internship at, in clothes that didn't feel like mine, with blood drying in my shoes.

He got the slides up, and I reached for the first one, desperate to start proving myself.

Then he stopped me.

"First I want to learn about you," he said. "I want to hear your story."

I told him my story. I told him about the window washers, the number, and the multi-trillion-dollar asset the world is neglecting.

When he said yes, he said it to me. "Andrew, I believe in you, and I'm betting on you to win."

I can still hear it, because of who it came from. A CEO of that caliber, betting on a kid just out of college with a half-built drone. It was the first yes this company ever got from someone with no connection to my school.

I didn't understand what was happening until much later. He cared about the vision. He cared that people die cleaning buildings. The product barely existed, so his bet was on the founder, on whether this particular person was capable of doing hard things.

The elevator went down and I went through the list I had been keeping since we started. The people who had doubted me, the exact quotes, the rooms they had said them in. And I was smiling.

I was going to keep collecting doubters for the rest of my life. What mattered was the other list, the short one, the people who saw it and said yes.

I stepped off that elevator thinking one thing. *I can do this.*

Walking out, I looked around at the city and felt, for the first time, overwhelmed by opportunity instead of fear. Block after block of glass and steel that somebody would have to clean, coat, and maintain forever.

For months prior, every thought I had was some version of *how do we not die*. On that sidewalk I caught myself thinking about how we could win.

I walked back in silence. Grateful, and at the same time carrying the doubt that doesn't care what just happened in the conference room.

Somewhere on that walk the dried blood on my heels cracked open again. This time the pain didn't seem to bother me as much. I flew home determined to prove him right.

WIN OR LEARN

That forty-two dollars and that walk became a company called Lucid Bots. We build robots that clean, paint, and coat the built

world, because this work punishes the people who do it, and sometimes it kills them.

A prospect who became a customer once drove ten hours through the night and walked in the next morning. I asked him what compelled a drive like that.

He told me about an employee he had recently buried, someone who had lost their life on the job. He never wanted to attend a co-worker's funeral again.

He is who we build for.

Inc. 5000 has named us the fastest-growing robotics manufacturer in the United States. We started with zero companies to learn from, zero investors I could call, and zero clue what I was doing.

Take the corporate offer, they said. Go into consulting. Don't throw away a sure thing to go play with drones in a garage. What does a baseball player know about robotics?

I heard it constantly. And the hardest part was the doubt already living on the inside. I had never soldered a wire in my life, and I didn't know if I could build any of it.

They were right that it was crazy. Crazy or not, somebody was going to build this technology, and no law said it couldn't be me. I didn't need a degree in it or a permission slip. I just had to start, even if I was scared.

For a long time my head was full of what-ifs, and every one of them pointed down. What if it doesn't work? What if I pour in everything I have and still fail? Everyone around me was planting the same ones.

Then one man flipped the question.

Rucker Taylor was my college baseball coach's father, and I respected him as much as I have ever respected anyone. He would affectionately call me "good buddy."

When I sat down and told him what I wanted to build, I braced for the list of reasons it wouldn't work, the same list everyone else recited. Surprisingly, he didn't give it. He looked at me, thought for a moment, and asked me what would happen if it worked.

If.

He was the first person to say the what-if out loud and point it up instead of down. What if it works? What if it turns out even better than you could imagine?

Around that time, my parents asked me how I really felt about all of it, so I told them the truth. The people I was meeting and the lessons I was learning about business and about myself felt worth more than the year of classes I was skipping.

My mom was the one who put it in a sentence. It was kind of like going to get an MBA, she said. Even if the company failed completely, I would learn a lot about business and wouldn't really lose much. If the worst case was an education better than the one in a classroom, then I was either going to win, or I was going to learn.

THE BLUEPRINT

You may not have a scholarship donor to call, but you have a version of that person: a professor, a boss, an alum who answers a cold email.

I built my network by sitting down with operators in Charlotte who had built companies, asking each one something a search engine couldn't tell me, and coming back later with what I'd done about it. The advice costs nothing except the discomfort of asking.

Many said no. But many said yes, and if I didn't ask, the answer was the same as a no.

Having an idea, however early, is what got me in the door. I wasn't one more junior asking to talk about careers. I was the student who thought drones could clean buildings, and that made the people I asked curious enough to say yes.

In the years since, I've worked with hundreds of students who want to build, including two years at Davidson College's Hurt Hub, where aspiring founders and I wore out a table with these conversations. Nearly all of them are searching for the same three things.

- Permission to walk the less conventional path, the kind no dean or professor can grant.
- One person who believes in them before they believe in themselves.
- Proof within reach. We all hear the stories about founders like Michael Dell. What a student needs is somebody who sat in the same classes, ate the same food, and walked the same campus, saying you can do this because I did.

Most of the ones I've sat with had far more talent and drive than they realized, and almost none of them had ever been told the pull they felt was worth exploring.

I'm still in it, still learning, still making mistakes most weeks. I struggled with whether I should write this book at all, because I don't have it figured out, and I don't feel like I've found success yet, whatever success turns out to mean. But I wrote it so you don't have to learn as many lessons the hard way.

You need someone a few steps ahead of you, close enough to remember how the hard parts felt, who can point and say,

watch out for that one, I fell there.

My job, with every student I meet, is to believe in them before they believe in themselves, and to let them borrow my confidence. The rest is practical advice that takes some of the risk out and pulls more learning from it.

I wrote this book to be that voice for the people I'll never get to meet in person. So treat it like a seat at that table. Argue with me in the margins. Most of the chapters ahead are the questions students ask me, in the order they usually ask them, and each of those ends with the homework I'd hand you before our next conversation.

I had no family playbook, no famous last name, no trust fund. What I had was agency, curiosity, and a work ethic. All three were things I could control, and you can too. The rest of what I had, a scholarship and people who took my calls, is listed in the idea chapter.

Your school is the most expensive venture lab you will ever have access to, and the admission fee is already paid.

It comes with a key you don't notice you're holding. Saying "I'm a student" got me past desks that closed to me the week after graduation. Use it while it works.

You get the same choice I got. You can follow the standard script, collect the offers, and wait until your forties to finally do something that feels like yours. Or you can start now, while the price of a wrong guess is one semester.

Pick one problem you keep noticing, find one person who works inside it, and ask them the one question you can't answer from the internet. Then go back and show them what you did with the answer.

I MADE MY DECISION ON THE TWENTY-EIGHTH FLOOR, WHEN RIDING BACK DOWN WAS STILL AN OPTION. NOW THE ELEVATOR IS YOURS, AND THE DOORS ARE OPEN. ARE YOU GOING TO STEP OFF, OR ARE YOU GOING TO RIDE IT BACK DOWN?

THAT WAS CHAPTER ONE

THE REST IS THE MANUAL.

Eleven more chapters, most of them a question students ask: how to find an idea, find the time, find a partner, find customers, build it, close them, get noticed, build a team, and fund it. A Founder's Page you fill in as you go. A 30-day sprint at the back.

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thestudentfounder.com

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