

Ten Things Every College Student Should Do *Before Graduation* in the Age of AI

A field guide to the concrete, self-directed moves that separate students who get hired from students who just got a degree.

The Rules Changed. Most Advice Didn't.

You are the first generation of students building a career while the job market you're aiming for is being rewritten in real time — before you've even graduated.

Employers can no longer tell two candidates apart by GPA or a polished cover letter alone — AI can produce both for almost anyone. What still separates candidates is **real, self-directed evidence**: a project you finished because you wanted to, a skill you can demonstrate under pressure, a habit of using AI well instead of just using it. Most of that evidence is built **outside your required coursework**, and most of it is available to you for free, starting this week.

This guide distills ten of the most concrete, highest-leverage moves from *College in the Age of AI* into a single checklist. Nothing here requires a new major, a transfer, or a semester off. Each one is something you can start on your own schedule — and each one is something a hiring manager, a grad program, or a future co-founder will actually notice.

70–80%

of jobs are filled through referrals and networks, not cold applications — see Item 8

6

durable human skills AI still can't replicate — and every major can build them — see Item 5

12

specific habits separate an AI power user from an average one — see Item 2

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Read all ten once. Then pick two to actually start this month — each item includes one "Do This Before You Graduate" action, not just something to think about.

WHAT'S INSIDE

01 Build your hidden AI curriculum

02 Become an AI power user

03 Use AI to learn better, not just faster

04 Build a portfolio employers can't ignore

05 Audit your six durable human skills

06 Make your resume honest & AI-proof

07 Rehearse for the AI-era interview

08 Let AI power your networking, not replace it

09 Test one entrepreneurial idea

10 Train for jobs that don't exist yet

01

Build Your Hidden AI Curriculum

The most valuable class you take this year might not be a class at all.

Some of the best AI learning available to you never touches your transcript: free courses like MIT OpenCourseWare or DeepLearning.AI's Machine Learning Specialization, project-first programs like Fast.ai, a weekend hackathon, or a self-directed project built over winter break. None of it is assigned, none of it is graded, and that's exactly why employers notice it — a self-directed project tells them you go looking for hard problems when nobody is making you.

Not every credential carries equal weight. Programs built with real hiring-team input — Google Career Certificates, Microsoft's AI-900, AWS Certified AI Practitioner — signal something specific. A certificate you clicked through in an afternoon doesn't.

DO THIS Pick **one free course** and **one self-directed project** to finish this term — something with no syllabus and no grade attached.

02

Become an AI Power User

The gap isn't who uses AI. It's who uses it well.

Power users share specific habits: they treat the first answer as a draft, not a verdict, and ask what's weakest about it. They give real context instead of vague questions — pasting actual notes, not asking in the abstract. They use AI as a devil's advocate before submitting anything, asking it to argue the other side. And they verify every fact, number, and quotation outside the tool, since a confident AI answer isn't the same as a correct one.

The most important habit may be the least AI-related: before any exam, presentation, or interview that requires you to perform without help, run a full practice round with no AI at all. If it goes badly, you've found a gap while it's still safe to fix.

DO THIS Pick **three of these habits** and use them deliberately this week, starting with "treat the first answer as a draft."

03

Use AI to Learn Better, Not Just Finish Faster

Asking for a summary is passive. Asking to be tested is active.

It's tempting to use AI to shortcut studying — but the habits that actually build retention flip that script. Before an exam, ask AI to quiz you with progressively harder follow-up questions instead of summarizing the chapter for you; active recall is one of the best-documented ways to actually retain material, and you'll remember far more of what you got wrong and corrected.

A second high-value habit: after reading something dense, ask AI to explain it simply, then close your notes and explain the concept out loud, in your own words, with no help. If you can't do that, you haven't learned it yet — no matter how clear the explanation sounded.

DO THIS Before your **next exam**, ask AI to quiz you instead of summarize for you — and explain one hard concept out loud from memory.

04

Build a Portfolio Employers Can't Ignore

A transcript proves you finished what was assigned. A portfolio proves what you can actually do.

Hiring managers don't start with polish — they look for initiative: something you built or extended after the grade was already secured. The right format depends on your field: code repositories with a clear written explanation for technical majors, short case studies for business and policy majors, two or three genuinely strong pieces (not ten average ones) for writing and design majors.

Naming your AI use specifically matters more than most students realize. "Used AI to analyze data" tells a hiring manager nothing. Explaining exactly what you asked it to do, where you caught it being wrong, and what you fixed yourself — that's what actually differentiates you.

DO THIS Launch a **one-page portfolio** this month with one real project, described specifically enough that a stranger understands your thinking.

05

Audit Your Six Durable Human Skills

These six resist automation — in every major, not just yours.

Judgment under real uncertainty. Ethical reasoning. Creativity. Emotional intelligence. Communication and persuasion. Leadership and ownership. These are the capabilities that consistently resist automation, and they live inside almost every major — they just aren't always labeled as such on a syllabus.

The point isn't to add a minor for the sake of it. It's to notice where your coursework, clubs, jobs, or teams are already building one of these six — and where you have a real gap worth closing deliberately, rather than by accident.

DO THIS Rate yourself **1–5 on all six skills**. Pick your weakest and find one class, club, or job this year built specifically to strengthen it.

06

Make Your Resume Honest — and AI-Proof

Using AI to draft your resume isn't the red flag. Submitting it unedited is.

Modern applicant tracking systems increasingly read for meaning, not just keywords — which means older tricks like invisible keyword-stuffing can actually hurt you now. What still matters: a clean, single-column format the software can parse correctly, because even strong content is worthless if it can't be read.

Roughly six in ten employers say they specifically reject resumes that read as generic, unedited AI output — while only about one in five reject any AI involvement at all. The standard is the same one this whole guide follows: use AI to draft, then make it specifically, defensibly yours.

DO THIS Rewrite **one bullet point** this week into a specific, honest result you could defend, unscripted, in an interview.

07

Rehearse for the AI-Era Interview

The room is testing something different than it used to.

Interview formats are shifting alongside everything else, and increasingly the goal is to see your judgment in motion, not just hear a rehearsed answer. That means having two or three portfolio stories ready — real projects you can walk through in detail, including what went wrong and what you'd change, not just the polished outcome.

Being able to talk about your AI use honestly and specifically is part of the test now, not a side note. The candidate who can describe exactly what they asked AI to do, and where they caught it being wrong, reads as more capable — not less — than one who avoids the topic entirely.

DO THIS Prepare **three portfolio stories** you can tell in under 90 seconds, each one showing a decision you made — not just a result.

08

Let AI Power Your Networking — Not Replace It

Somewhere between 70 and 80 percent of jobs are filled through referrals and networks, not cold applications.

Referred candidates reach the interview stage at roughly three times the rate of applicants with no connection to the company. Reaching out to someone you don't know can feel awkward — that discomfort is normal, and it's exactly why most students skip it.

AI can shorten the research that makes outreach worth reading — a few minutes summarizing someone's background and recent work turns a generic message into a specific one. But the data is clear on drafting: generic, unedited AI outreach performs meaningfully worse than a real message, while personalized outreach — AI-assisted or not — roughly doubles reply rates.

DO THIS Reach out to **one person** this month — five minutes of AI-assisted research, then a message written and sent by you.

09

Test One Entrepreneurial Idea Before You Graduate

The line between a portfolio piece and a first product is thinner than most students realize.

Campus life quietly hands students real advantages here: a dense community full of visible problems, subsidized labs and software, mentors and competitions, and a lower cost of failure than you'll likely have again. AI now partially offsets the professional experience in coding, design, and marketing that founders used to need years to build.

A class project — a small AI-assisted consultation for a local business, a niche newsletter, a nonprofit tool — can, with modest extra effort, become an actual small business. It requires the same six durable skills from Item 5: judgment, ethical reasoning, creativity, emotional intelligence, communication, and ownership. This was never really two separate skill sets.

DO THIS Take **one class project or side idea** and test it with five real potential users before the semester ends.

10

Train for Jobs That Don't Have Names Yet

You can't out-predict a market that's still being written. You can out-adapt it.

A meaningful share of the roles you'll hold across your career don't exist yet, and won't for years — which makes chasing the "right" major or the "safe" industry a weaker strategy than it looks. The stronger bet is the durable-skill foundation this whole guide has been building: real projects, honest AI fluency, and the six human capabilities AI can't replicate.

Curiosity beats prediction here. Students who stay genuinely curious about how their field is changing — instead of betting everything on how it looks today — are the ones best positioned for whatever it becomes next.

DO THIS Write down **one skill you're building** right now that would still matter even if your entire industry changed.

Your Before-You-Graduate Checklist

All ten, at a glance. Screenshot it, print it, or stick it above your desk.

- ☐ **01 Build your hidden AI curriculum**
One free course + one self-directed project, finished, not just started.

- ☐ **02 Become an AI power user**
Adopt three specific habits — starting with treating the first answer as a draft.

- ☐ **03 Use AI to learn better, not just faster**
Get quizzed before your next exam instead of asking for a summary.

- ☐ **04 Build a portfolio employers can't ignore**
Launch a one-page version with one real, specifically-described project.

- ☐ **05 Audit your six durable human skills**
Rate yourself, then close your weakest gap on purpose.

- ☐ **06 Make your resume honest and AI-proof**
Clean formatting, specific results, edited past the first AI draft.

- ☐ **07 Rehearse for the AI-era interview**
Three 90-second portfolio stories, ready before you need them.

- ☐ **08 Let AI power your networking, not replace it**
Research fast with AI. Write and send the message yourself.

- ☐ **09 Test one entrepreneurial idea**
Five real potential users, before the semester ends.

- ☐ **10 Train for jobs that don't exist yet**
Name one skill you're building that survives industry change.

— *You don't need to do all ten by Friday. You need to start one before the semester ends.*

THIS IS THE STARTING POINT

The Full Playbook Goes Much Further



Michael McGrath & Drew Bossi

College in the Age of AI

A Student's Playbook for Skills, Careers, and the Future of Work

College in the Age of AI

A Student's Playbook for Skills, Careers, and the Future of Work — by Michael E. McGrath & Drew Bossi.

These ten items are drawn from a much deeper playbook: choosing a major that will age well, deciding whether college is still worth the cost, evaluating an AI-ready college, and open letters to colleges and employers on what they owe students in return. Written by a technology strategist and AI author working alongside his grandson, a current undergraduate living all of this in real time.

GET THE BOOK

Read the full playbook

michaelemcgrath.com

KEEP READING

How Technology Is Transforming Our Lives

michaelmccgrath.substack.com

FOLLOW ALONG

Technology Trends newsletter

[linkedin.com/newsletters/advances-in-technology](https://www.linkedin.com/newsletters/advances-in-technology)

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Author of *The Great AI Displacement* and several other books on AI's impact on work and education. Co-founder of PRTM, former CEO of i2 Technologies, and a 19-year college trustee.

Drew Bossi

CO-AUTHOR & CURRENT STUDENT

Undergraduate at Tufts University studying Economics and Finance, and NCAA Division III national champion. Offers a firsthand, on-campus view of how students are actually meeting AI in higher education.

The advantage was never the timing. It was you — starting now, on purpose, instead of waiting for your major to catch up.