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WEEKEND

opportunity's calling.



will you answer?

for students who want a piece of the AI craze, putting off college may be their only chance.

// BY TANISH DOSHI

Rohan Radhakeeson had 12 hours notice. He received an email informing him that he had an interview at 9 a.m. the next morning on a fateful evening in late February 2025. He and his co-founder stumbled through the interview and afterwards thought to themselves, "Holy shit, we messed that up." But then, that night, Radhakeeson got the call he had been hoping for.

He got ready for first-year formal in a daze and told his girlfriend the news at the event. Three days later, his co-founder left campus. A week after that, Radhakeeson packed up his dorm and got on a one-way flight to San Francisco. He was leaving Yale indefinitely to build an AI startup.

"It was like one of the most fast-paced changes I've ever experienced in my life," he told me over the phone from San Francisco, where he's now building Capacitive, a startup that helps enterprises build custom AI agents.

Radhakeeson, originally in the class of 2028, had spent high school working toward Yale. He was recruited to row crew and committed because he was drawn to the team's culture and the school's finance pipeline. "Your whole life revolves around college when you're in high school," he said. "That's kind of the way I was."

He and his co-founder Kevin Treehan, also originally class of 2028, were high school friends who started talking about startup ideas the second they arrived at Yale. They applied to Y Combinator, informally known as YC, a prestigious startup accelerator that gives early-stage technology companies funding, mentorship and a powerful network. They didn't get in the first time. Then, YC added a winter round of applications, and the pair applied again, mostly on a whim. "I did not think we were going to get in and I was going to, you know, drop out," Radhakeeson said.

YC gives accepted students $500,000 on the condition that they leave school and move to San Francisco. "If it didn't come with that 500K check, I don't know if I would make that decision to leave Yale," Rohan says. He has friends who have raised over a million dollars for AI startups even without participating in accelerators. "How available the capital is is really what helps people make that decision to drop out."

But the money alone doesn't explain the urgency. In San Francisco, Rohan has watched AI move at a breakneck speed, calling the rate of technological advancement "absolutely insane." The first idea he and Treehan pitched to YC — essentially Grammarly for code — became obsolete when a different company incorporated similar features. So they pivoted. Capacitive is the manifestation of that pivot, and it aims to function as a "single pane of glass" through which workers can safely deploy and integrate multiple platforms like Salesforce, Slack and Notion to improve efficiency. Their current model, launched in May, already has competitors.

The pressure Rohan felt to move fast isn't unique. The infrastructure surrounding college dropouts has never been more developed. The Thiel Fellowship gives students $200,000 to leave school and build "new things." The Palantir Meritocracy Fellowship offers high school seniors funding to delay college and work at the company. Ironically, as programs that pay students to drop out have grown in size and popularity, their admissions processes have begun to look more and more like college applications. YC recently introduced YC Early Decision, a program in which students apply early, get accepted and funded immediately, but are not obligated to drop out. They can instead commit to joining at any point during college or right after graduation.

Certain tech leaders increasingly suggest that traditional four-year degrees are a waste of time. Elon Musk has regularly argued that "you don't need college to learn stuff." Peter Thiel, founder of the Thiel Fellowship and Palantir, has called college "a bubble" and argued that "we have a society where successful people are encouraged to go to college. But it's a mistake to think that that's what makes people successful." In fact, Thiel came to Yale just over a year ago to argue that point at a YPU event.

Radhakeeson doesn't sound like he fully subscribes to this criticism of higher education. Yale has been supportive of his decision. He's on an indefinite leave of absence — officially two years, although his dean told him he could take more time if needed. He can return whenever he wants.

He says he misses Yale. He misses the community, especially that of the crew team and the Yale Undergraduate Consulting Group. He misses a particularly interesting statistics class he was taking. He wears Yale merch around San Francisco, where other Yalies often come up to him. "I still tie myself back to Yale very closely."

But his life in San Francisco is very distinct from the life he had in college. His one-bedroom apartment is nicer than his fifth-floor Lawrance Hall room, but he's almost never in it. He no longer wakes up at 5:30 a.m. to go to practice. He doesn't go to classes, club meetings or dining hall dinners.

Instead, morning and night, he works. He stays up to 2 a.m. taking calls and pulls "incredibly heinous" all-nighters during fundraising week. He builds his company, rarely going out to explore the city he lives in.

He wishes he was more in touch with his friends from Yale, but it's clear that his work comes first.

"At the end of the day, for me, I dropped out to come build this, and that's my biggest and sole priority at the moment," Radhakeeson said. "So I have to just stay true to that."

Radhakeeson hasn't rejected what Yale offers. He was proud to be a Yale student, has visited three times since dropping out and clearly believes in the University's mission. But he's made a bet that what's happening in AI right now can't wait four years. Or even one more semester.

Radhakeeson visited New Haven the weekend after we talked. He ate in the Silliman dining hall and saw friends who now lead the clubs he left behind, who are taking the classes he dropped. Then he flew back to San Francisco.

Radhakeeson "can't comment" on whether or not he'll come back to Yale. He says he's 100 percent committed to the work he's doing now — everything hinges on Capacitive. In the hectic and unpredictable world of AI startups, almost nothing is certain. The only thing that's definitively in his future is work.

Lots of it.

Contact **TANISH DOSHI** *at tanish.doshi@yale.edu.*