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## How to Start Your Career in Comedy: A Guide for College Students

BY NICOLE DIEKER NOVEMBER 10, 2014

So you want to work in comedy when you grow up? First of all, I'm really glad you've started reading Splitsider. You already know the first step of building a comedy career: *learn as much as you can about the industry.*

Second of all, are you reading this during class? Because you should seriously be paying attention to

your professor, underpaid adjunct faculty member, and/or TA. The article will still be waiting when class is over.

If you want a career in comedy, you're probably wondering what you can do to get from Point A: Where You Are Now, No Comedy Career, to Point B: Amazing Comedy Career, Life Dreams Achieved. You've got a lot of other people who are working towards the same goal, and they are going to be both your collaborators and your competition.

More importantly, you'll also be competing against *yourself*: are you going to create a YouTube video today, or are you going to spend all day watching other people's YouTube videos and playing *Dragon Age: Inquisition*? Are you going to seek out the best collaborators and team members you can find? A lot of what happens in a comedy career depends on opportunity, but a lot also depends on you.

So here's a short guide to help you as you pursue your comedy career. I reached out to Daniel Gurewitch, writer at *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*; Shannon O'Neill, Artistic Director at the *Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre*; DC Pierson, author and member of *Derrick Comedy*; and *Saturday Night Live* writer Sarah Schneider, and have the best of their advice for today's college students.

Before we get started, it's important to note that just because I'm giving you advice on your comedy career doesn't mean that you should stop doing your

biochemistry homework. Don't go running to your professors saying that Splitsider told you that the most important thing you can do in college is join a sketch comedy group, so that's why you didn't turn in your essay on symbolism in postmodern literature. (Pro tip: it's *all* symbolism.)

After all, as Shannon O'Neill said: "Any of the information that you learn in college you'll probably be able to use at some point as a comedian."

Now, on to the advice.

### **1. It's Never Too Late**

Daniel Gurewitch knew he was interested in comedy in high school. "I used to add jokes into all of my history papers. And I just realized you can draw a pretty straight line from that to where I am now, writing for *Last Week Tonight*."

So Gurewitch started his college career at **Syracuse University** with the idea that he was preparing himself for a career in comedy: "I did improv and standup throughout college, and was a TV and film major with a focus on screenwriting. So, I was fairly certain that I wanted to get into comedy, even though it didn't seem like an attainable goal at the time."

As soon as he graduated, he got a receptionist job at CollegeHumor, and the rest is history (plus jokes).

Shannon O'Neill, on the other hand, went to **Millersville University** in Millersville, Pennsylvania to become an elementary special ed teacher. However, the degree didn't feel right to her, and she switched to

a communications/broadcasting major. “I loved comedy growing up, but I didn’t think of it as something that I would necessarily pursue until college.”

Sarah Schneider didn’t consider a career in comedy until the very end of her college career at **Wake Forest University**: “That decision didn’t really come until the end of college, when I was hired to write a comedy book. Up until then comedy had been more of a hobby, and when I got that job it was like, oh, I can earn a living doing this? Great! This is super fun! But in high school my aspirations were theatrical and literary. I wanted to act and write novels.”

In fact, you don’t even have to go to college at all to have a career in comedy. DC Pierson went to **NYU**, but he was quick to state that not everybody has to follow that path: “It’s criminal to tell anyone they have to go to a particular school or go to college at all if they want to work in comedy. It’s a cliché, but it’s true: no one is ever going to ask to look at your degree. I feel really nauseous at the very idea of telling somebody to go to college or *not* to go to college, it’s a super-high-stakes expensive decision.”

So whether you’re a freshman, a senior, a super-senior, or you’re not actually in college and you’re reading this piece anyway, remember: it’s never too late to start your comedy career. You don’t have to be a Dan Gurewitch to make it happen. As Schneider put it: “I’ve always wished I was one of those people who

knew what they wanted to do at like 5 years old and planned their whole lives to achieve those goals, but that was never me.”

## **2. Get Into Extracurriculars**

“Everything I learned about what I currently do I learned from an extra-curricular,” Schneider told me over email, adding “Joining my college sketch group, **The Lifting Banshees**, was the most important thing I ever did.”

Pierson echoes this idea: “I encourage you to get involved in whatever sketch or improv or standup situation is going on, or if there’s isn’t one, or the one that there is bloated or sexist or racist or just plain *bad*, I encourage you to start your own. College sketch and improv is an awesome, awesome time, and I owe my life and career to the people I met while doing it.”

“I don’t really get nostalgic for any aspects of college except that one,” Gurewitch adds, “doing improv in a basement somewhere, purely for the love of it and no other reason.”

It’s one of the great ironies of college that most of the important stuff happens outside of the classroom. Comedy sketch groups are one of those examples. Instead of having to fulfill the conditions of some assignment that nobody ever sees, you’ll be able to create whatever you want and share it in front of a real audience. It’s one of the best ways to test your ideas and build your skills.

But let’s say you’re in college and you’re a senior and

you're looking around and thinking "why didn't I think to get into a sketch group!" Or maybe you're a first-year student and you wanted to start a comedy club but there wasn't any student funding and the people in student government are totally cliquish and they won't let first-years do anything new. It's still okay.

Remember Advice Point Number 1: *It's never too late.* After all, O'Neill wasn't involved in any sketch groups or comedy extra-curriculars as a college student, and she still found her way to a comedy career. "I was part of the campus television station, and then I had one friend who was super funny and also into comedy, so we hung out a lot and wrote stuff together."

This brings us to the next important piece of advice.

### **3. Find Your Collaborators**

In many ways, you're paying \$50,000 a year or more to go to college not necessarily to get access to professors and courses, but to get access to that one moldy basement where they let students put on shows—and to get access to the other students who want to put on shows too.

(I don't mean *that* kind of access. Get your minds out of the gutters.)

Why are collaborators important? As Gurewitch explains: "It's important first because they'll challenge you and make you better, and second, because that network of friends you create will eventually help you get actual work."

DC Pierson, for example, met Donald Glover, Dominic

Dierkes, Dan Eckman, and Meggie McFadden through his work in the NYU and UCB sketch comedy communities. They formed Derrick Comedy while Pierson was still in school and began putting videos on YouTube. “By the time I graduated we had determined we wanted to take the money we’d made from advertising on our videos, touring and merchandise to make a movie. We started shooting it a year after I finished school.”

This movie became *Mystery Team*, which Splitsider believes **deserves cult classic status**. If you haven’t seen it, make a point to find it, first because it’s hilarious and second because it’s a great example of what a team of good collaborators can do.

And, as always: *it’s not too late*. You can even find your collaborators and hone your skills outside of college, as O’Neill did. “I wanted to try improv because I went and saw Second City when I was in college, and I was all *well, I want to try that*, because I was a big SNL fan. So I asked somebody I worked with where I could take an improv class, and they told me to go to the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre, and that was what I did. I took my first improv class in June 2000.”

Fourteen years later, she’s UCBT’s Artistic Director. When you’re in the right place with the right collaborators, anything can happen.

#### **4. Remember Your ABCs: Always Be Creating**

What’s the most important advice for college students

who want to work in comedy? Gurewitch put it this way: “The main career advice I try to give people that are just starting out is this: constantly be creating, and constantly surround yourself with likeminded people who are doing the same.”

“Just start creating,” Schneider told me. “Write all the time, perform all the time. Take classes if they are available to you, and join sketch groups and improv teams if your college has them. Hone your comedic sense.”

Gurewitch continues: “College is an incredible safe space where you can experiment and fail without any real consequences, so if you have any interest in writing or performing comedy, you should absolutely be doing it in college.”

“Of course, trying weird stuff and fucking around are two different things,” Pierson notes. “If you’re the kind of person that would be inclined to read this, it probably goes without saying, but you have to commit. And it’s the coolest kind of committing you can do, because all you’re doing is committing to trying your best to have an awesome show for no reason other than to feel like you had an awesome show.”

So creating — always creating — is one of the best things you can do to start a comedy career. It’s also important to know how to create a balance. As O’Neill advises: “I think it’s good to see what kind of comedy is out there, but if the only thing you do is absorb comedy, you’re just going to weaken your comedy

itself. You have to experience life and do other things besides comedy. Enjoy that college education.”

Let’s finish off with one more piece of advice from each of our comedians:

Daniel Gurewitch: “Write a screenplay: no offense but it’s probably going to be terrible (mine sure was), so get it out of the way early and learn from it.”

Shannon O’Neill: “If you audition for an improv group and don’t get in, start your own group.”

Sarah Schneider: “Create a website for yourself and include everything you are the most proud of.”

DC Pierson: “To borrow one of the folk-wisdom UCB by-laws: Don’t Be A Dick.”

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