

Gap Year:

A “Year On” Instead of a “Year Off”

For the majority of high school seniors, here’s how it goes: graduate and pack up at the end of the summer to begin college life. The problem is that many of these kids are not ready for college, yet they go because that’s what one does, right? Not necessarily. The relatively new concept of taking a gap year has become a viable option.

Many people are not aware of the benefits of a gap year. A gap year, is a break in academic pursuits between high school and college. Gap years allow students to take time away from the traditional classroom to explore and learn new things in nontraditional ways. A gap year is something all high school seniors should consider; as not all incoming freshman should go to college right after high school.

A gap year is not the conventional path after high school, and in the past it has not even been presented as an option. Due to the lack of awareness because of its uncertain value and societal stigma, many students do not question going straight from high school to college. If given the opportunity students would find that a gap year is not just time off from schoolwork and a year off of life, but rather a “year on” to explore new and transformative experiences, such as travel and volunteer work.

A gap year provides a path to help a student return to academics with new perspectives and maturity, thus making college a more meaningful experience. Contrary to some misconceptions, a gap year isn’t just one of sitting on the couch, but rather an opportunity for students to foster intellectual and personal growth.

Recently, gap years have become more acceptable and popular in modern culture. According to the American Gap Association, an organization for gap year students and programs that is recognized by the US Department of Justice and the Federal Trade Commission, studies have shown that fewer than one percent of college-admitted freshmen take a gap year. However, the numbers have been climbing. Currently, about 30,000 to 40,000 students opt to take the break annually. These studies indicate parents have a lot of influence in this decision.

A greater proportion of gappers have parents with higher levels of education than students with parents without a college degree. 81% of gappers have at least one parent with a Bachelor’s degree, correlating with greater understanding of the decision to take a gap year (5).

Let’s go back two generations to when my grandparents were eighteen. Back then, a college education was less common. However, my parents’ generation saw a big climb in college attendance. This was due to the increasing complexity of society and the recognition that a college degree would result in higher paying jobs and more successful careers. My parents and their parents fully accepted this premise, and college immediately after high school was inevitable for those who qualified. Now, my generation, whose parents went to college, find their parents open to discussing gap years. First generation college goers are pushed more by their parents to go directly to college. Their parents cannot see delaying what they believe is the only path to the American Dream.

In *The Gap Year Gain*, W. Kent Barnds, the executive vice president of enrollment, communication & planning at Augustana College, states another reason more people are taking gap years may be because of the example set by Malia Obama, who decided to take a year off before attending Harvard, and now the whole country is talking about the modern day gap year.



skydiving in New Zealand while on my gap year

Barnds also says that although there is no “archetypal beneficiary of taking a gap year,” there has been a consensus as to the reasons and the profiles of students that are more apt to take one and see immediate results. 1) “The Worker” who had high standardized test scores and a high GPA, 2) “The Meaning Seeker” who had high scores, yet a lower GPA, 3) “The Pragmatist” who doesn’t want to waste time or money on college until having a greater focus and knowledge on his/her choice of study, 4) “The Strugler” the one who struggles with success in traditional schooling models, and 5) “The Floater” the less engaged and less mature student (45). These students will matriculate into college the following year, but will spend the time away from traditional academia to volunteer, mature, travel, recharge after an academic burnout, or experience accelerated personal growth. Joseph O’Shea, an expert in the field/study of gap years, discusses in the *Gap Year: How Delaying College Changes People in Ways the World Needs*, how some use the “gap year as a rite of passage into adulthood” (32). A gap year is the perfect drawing board to create a new image and narrative for prospective students. Research and personal experience shows gap years can make all the difference.

In my first attempt at a college experience, it took five minutes to look around the unfamiliar terrain, have my eyes fill to the brim with tears, and blurt out with decided resignation “I’m not ready.” That year I decided not to go to college, yet.

In the weeks to come, I organized a cohesive and stimulating adventure for myself. I spent numerous hours making PowerPoints to prove to my skeptical parents that I had not just thrown my life or my future away, but rather established an alternative path-one that I hoped would ultimately help me flourish. What had constituted my life up until that life-changing decision was pure dedication to my studies: flashcards, straight A’s, and my nose notoriously known for being stuck in a book. During my senior year, I was completely worn down from the academic rigor. The idea of taking a gap year was refreshing and enticing. When I arrived on campus, it was crystal clear that I needed a gap year to recharge.

Although away from the classroom, my “year off” was nothing short of a “year on.” I was fortunate enough to be able to travel to Fiji and New Zealand. I volunteered in Suva, and immersed myself in new cultures. I went skydiving, and pushed myself in ways I did not think possible. Home after the trip, I interned as a client sales associate with a parents magazine, and even made some money to put away for college. At the end of my gap year, my parents and I looked back in amazement at how far I had come. Over the course of the year I had developed better communication/people skills, learned more about the world and people around me, and had a greater focus on what I intended to study. Refueled and ready for college, I now had a tool belt of preparedness and many stories to share with my classmates.

It seems daunting going from high school to college into the real world, where you are responsible to other people and for paying your own expenses. If you are fortunate enough to take a gap year, why would you pass on the opportunity to see the world? A survey conducted by the American Gap Association showed that 85% of the gappers wanted to indulge their desire to travel the world and experience new cultures (7). But it’s not all indulgence. Gappers have much to learn in the process, including navigating unfamiliar environments and managing their finances and daily routines. This helps them develop independence and self-reliance. Without the safety net of their families, living in a totally new place is a huge adjustment with an immediate impact. They become more confident and self-reliant. In addition, by interacting with new people and being in unfamiliar environments, students tend to become more adaptable and adventurous. These things give students a leg up in the real world, beyond those concepts learned in the classroom. In *Some Students Headed to College Take a Gap Year First*, Chris Teare agrees that going abroad really makes you look within, and adds, “with self-knowledge comes empathy and tolerance for other ideas.” This makes for a more well-rounded person. These eye-opening experiences correlate to gappers being more civically engaged. O’Shea discusses that by connecting with others around the world they learn to see from another’s perspective, and thus gain a greater concern for the welfare of others (137). This is another example of a meaningful growth outside the classroom.

Living abroad also provides a solution to a “negative” aspect people associate with a gap year. Parents are concerned that time away from cumulative disciplines such as math or a language can hinder a student’s ability to master them (Teare). However, those who live with a host family find increased potential for developing and mastering their foreign language skills. Another example is volunteering as a teacher, which enables them to practice/retain their academic skills, and perhaps even earn credits for college. If the option to travel is financially impractical for a student, one can also participate in similar meaningful activities at home, among them work and community service.

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Volunteering / teaching abroad on gap year



It doesn't have to cost a fortune. During a gap year students can earn money and explore new courses of study and career choices. These activities are not only productive, but allow students to build up their resumes before they hit the books. Gap year students are often more desirable employees and interns, as they have had considerable hands-on experience working before college. The American Gap Association concluded that 86% of gappers were satisfied or very satisfied with their jobs (15). From this, it seems that their gap year experiences were very useful in helping them select a field of study and career direction.

This is also highlighted in the article, *The Value of the Gap Year in the Facilitation of Career Adaptability*. Authors Rabie and Naidoo, experts in the field of education, attest to the fact that these activities provide students with a “valuable period of self-reflection and integration, where individuals gain life experience and a variety of skills, experiment with autonomy, experience personal growth, consolidate their sense of identity and provide exposure to numerous occupational and social contexts” (153). The gap year deepens their ability to learn and understand material in the context of the real world experiences beyond formal classroom instruction.

Many dubious parents of the gap year worry about their child not returning to college after the break. The article, *Delaying College to Fill in the Gaps* by Sue Shellenbarger, cites Haigler, debunks this misconception: 90% of those who took a gap year returned to college within a year. In the study, *Should students have a gap year? Motivation and performance factors relevant to time out after completing school*, Andrew Martin validates that gap years positively predict academic motivation. Martin also reports that the higher motivation does not just pertain to academics in college. There is also an increase of motivation in the form of “adaptive behavior” such as planning, task management, and persistence - more than students who did not take a Gap Year” (562).

Coetzee and Bester’s (cited in Rabie and Naidoo, 151) study shows gappers demonstrated increased punctuality and ability to make important decisions independently, and that a gap year appeared to have the biggest impact on the academic performance of low-achieving students. All of these experiences have a real positive impact, a real turnaround for “The Floaters” and “The Workers” and their academic burn outs the year prior. Teare’s research affirms that “60% of gap year participants said the experience influenced or confirmed their choice of major.” With a more focused path it is no surprise that the median time of graduation for gappers was 3.75 years, and with a much lower transfer rate. This refutes the common misconception that taking a gap year leaves one behind one’s peers. As we can see here, it is quite the opposite. The American Gap Association also concludes that gap year students’ grades were skewed higher than non-gappers’ grades. The report includes a methodology to track Gap Year students’ performance, designed by Bob Claggett, former Dean of Admissions at Middlebury College. It finds that “Gap Year students almost always overperformed academically in college, usually to a statistically significant degree. Most importantly, the positive effect of taking a Gap Year was demonstrated to endure over all four years” (17).

With all this being said, high school advisors should mention gap years in their post high school recommendations. Gap fairs, a circuit of events that promote reputable Gap Year organizations, are becoming more popular nationwide. Some Ivy Leagues, such as Harvard, have long encouraged the gap year. Marlyn E. McGrath, Director of Admissions, William Fitzsimmons, Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid, Harvard College, and Charles Ducey Adjunct Lecturer in Psychology, Harvard Graduate School of Education expand on how gap years have helped their students. They state that “most [of their gappers] feel that its full value can never be measured and will pay dividends the rest of their lives.” According to Shellenbarger, an estimated 5% of four-year colleges and universities have formal policies allowing students to defer admission, up sharply from a few years ago. More colleges and universities are endorsing the gap year and adopting formal policies allowing and encouraging students to defer.

There should be less stigma attached to “taking a year off” from the linear education model we follow. There is no one “right way” for everyone, and we can’t identify the time we perceive to be “learning time” as happening solely in the classroom.

A gap year provides for the time to revitalize your mind, access new ways of learning, and ignite a greater curiosity and appreciation of the world beyond one’s doorstep. It offers the opportunity to independently devise ways to better organize time and set priorities. A structured gap year results in greater personal growth and learning experiences, that gives the college bound student a significant advantage. My gap year has served as an enlightened gateway to my academic pursuits and life’s challenges. //

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