

TIME OUT

What You Need to Know About the Gap Year Experience

by Jeremy Neidens

TRADITIONALLY IN AMERICA the trend was to graduate high school, have summer break, and immediately transition straight into the college world. During the 1960s a wave of students with a new mindset started questioning whether they really had to follow tradition and go straight into more schooling. These students were interested in pursuing passions, traveling, volunteering, and giving back to the world. They sought to experience a period of self-discovery and unwind after twelve years of sitting in a classroom. These early pioneers started a movement known now as the “gap year.” Contrary to what some parents might fear, most gap-year students return home to attend college and complete their degree. And students who take a gap year are more likely to complete college than those who go straight from high school to college.

In the United Kingdom, a majority of students take a gap year before starting their college careers. There is a smaller percentage in the United States, but each year gap-year interest and enrollment trends continue to grow. Students are realizing that a year off will be beneficial after their competitive high school experiences. They feel a need to recharge before entering the next level of education. It is also a great opportunity for them to reset their ideas of learning, since college-level learning is so different from high school-level learning.

Australian students were more likely to take a gap year if they had low academic performance and motivation in high school. Yet former “gappers” reported significantly higher motivation in college—in the form of “adaptive behavior” such as planning, task management, and persistence—than students who did not take a gap year. Furthermore, gappers reported a lessened instance of “maladaptive behavior” as a result of their gap year. (See Andrew J. Martin, “Enhancing student motivation and engagement: The effects of a multidimensional intervention,” *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 2008.)

Frequently asked questions about a gap year

- ▶ **What is a gap year?** A gap year is a period of time when students take a break from formal education to travel, volunteer, study, intern, work, perform research, or, any combination of these activities. A gap year can also be called an interim year, deferring college, or taking time out. Students who take a gap are also known as gappers.
- ▶ **When is the best time to take a gap year?** Most students take a gap between the end of high school and the beginning of college. Some take time over summer vacation or even a semester off. Some take time off during college. Others go after college, but before entering graduate school or starting a career.
- ▶ **Does a gap year have to last a whole year?** No; a gap experience can be a single semester or a year or more.
- ▶ **What are the benefits of taking a gap year?** A gap year can help a student:
 - Clarify career interests and goals
 - Develop organizational and life skills
 - Renew passion for college coursework and learning
 - Gain a sense of maturity and self-confidence
 - Discover interests and passions, prior to committing to college or a job
 - Broaden perspective of other cultures, views and global awareness
 - Improve job prospects with employers seeking grads with practical experience
- ▶ **What do US colleges say about taking a gap year?** Leading colleges and universities (notably, Harvard and Princeton) openly support a gap year for admitted freshman, recognizing that by taking a productive year out, students enter college with more maturity and self-confidence and better wisdom and experience to handle the

upcoming challenges. Many universities now allow accepted students to defer entrance one year.

- ▶ **How does a student defer college entrance to take a gap year?** The student would make a formal request in writing after accepting admission. The student should ensure his request demonstrates a well-structured plan with an outline of the goals and benefits he hopes to gain during his gap year. She should discuss why she wants to defer admission, what she hopes to do during the semester or year off, and why she wants to hold her place at the college. These requests are often granted, and students go on to do many exciting things.
- ▶ **Should the student even apply for college first?** Even if the student knows ahead of time that he may want to take a gap year, he should go through the college application process during his senior year, and choose a college. She may then be able to defer admission one year. It is best to contact the college's admissions office directly to ask them if it is included in any of their written admissions policies.
- ▶ **Should a student who wants to take a gap year be concerned that he or she will be older than other students when he or she starts college?** Nowadays students matriculate at different ages. Students will find that many others will have taken a year out as well.
- ▶ **How do students know if a gap year is right for them?** Read the following scenarios and see if any apply. If so, the student may be ready to truly benefit from a gap-year experience.
 - She is not ready for college. Perhaps she lacks self-confidence or has not clearly defined her interests/career options.
 - He has had his fill of academics even before entering college and wants to take a breather so he can arrive on campus refreshed and ready to give her best.
 - She knows why she is going to college, but wants a competitive edge over other students. She wants real-life experience that builds her resume, and makes her more attractive to future employers.
 - He hasn't been able to choose a major and doesn't really know what he is truly passionate about.
 - She hasn't been accepted to the college of her choice and wants to use her gap experience to improve her application and make her more appealing to the school.

Benefits of taking a gap year

The benefits of taking a gap year are many and long-lasting. It is important to remember that gaining life experience is regarded highly by universities and prospective employers. Young adults who experienced a gap year have had the opportunity to problem-solve real-life situations, leave

home and gain independence, mature for another year, become more self-motivated, and have experiences that may help them have a better direction for the career or degree they want to pursue.

Don't be intimidated if your young adult wants to try something different; encourage him or her to do something out of the ordinary. After all, we are all unique human beings and deserve to live life outside the box at times. The options for what a gap year can look like are limitless. 📍

Jeremy Neidens is the director of SOAR's Eagle View Ranch in Wyoming (soarc.org). SOAR—Success Oriented Achievement Realized—provides adventure-based wilderness programs and experiential education for preteens, teens and adults with learning disabilities and ADHD.

