



The Gap Year: It's Not a Vacation

The question I hear most about the gap year is: What is it? Many Americans have never even heard the term, and for others it brings up vague images of backpackers or British royals.

So let's start with my definition: the gap year is a break from formal education in order to become immersed in another culture, to volunteer domestically or abroad, to gain experience and maturity, to improve your skills in a sport, language, the arts, or academics, or take on some combination of any of these things. During a gap year the learning process continues, but in a different format and venue that will inspire and excite a student. In many ways the gap year can be more of a challenge than an academic year. Colleges and employers know that students who have finished a structured gap year are young adults who have direction, maturity, and a unique view of the world.

The gap year is more than just a trend. It is a movement in education that recognizes our global economy, our shrinking borders, and our need for public service. It is a response to our students' need for a year to find purpose in their lives or to their yearning to take a break from achievement for its own sake and awaken their love of learning again.

The gap year movement is driven by colleges, is wholeheartedly embraced by students, and is often reluctantly agreed to by parents. Although they are often the last to get on the gap year bandwagon, parents are often the ones who are most excited about the positive transformation they see in their child after a gap year.

HISTORY OF THE GAP YEAR

The gap year concept is new in the United States and it is still evolving. Of course, the United States is a country with a rich history of adventurers and explorers. The idea of a young adult going on a quest or a journey is a common theme in American literature and in the family histories of many Americans. But the term *gap year*—and the idea of taking a year off between high school and college—is a British invention.

According to the Universities and Colleges Admissions Services in England, 7 percent of all British students deferred admission to their university in 2007 in order to go on a gap year. Many more students simply take a gap year without making any college plans and apply to college after their journey. It is called a “gap year” or a “year out,” and although it sometimes includes meaningful cultural experiences or volunteer work, it doesn’t necessarily have to.

In fact, many British teens use their gap year to visit party destinations such as Ibiza, Spain, and various Greek island hotspots. The American system frowns on this behavior, and trips of this kind are not considered meaningful gap year plans. Colleges do not grant deferrals for a yearlong party; they hope that students will enjoy a break from structured academics but will continue the learning process through self-reflection, learning about other cultures, and finding purpose in their own lives.

As the gap year grows in popularity both in the United States and in England, it will be interesting to see whether the differences in their interpretations of the practice become more pronounced. In fairness to British students, many of them have done remarkable work in communities throughout the world during their gap years. But a

meaningful gap year was not expected of them—it was their choice. In the United States it's quite different: U.S. college admissions officers expect a gap year plan that will allow for fun, but also includes activities with intellectual depth that will help students to grow as people.

OTHER NAMES FOR GAP YEAR

The term *gap year* is used by programs worldwide and has strong name recognition. However, it isn't the best description of what is really going on, since it implies a "gap" in learning. Many educators prefer other terms for the gap year.

Heath Einstein, associate director of college counseling at the Hockaday School in Dallas, Texas, was on a trip with a group of high school guidance counselors and observed about the term *gap year*: "We universally found that term inaccurate as it presupposes a break in one's education. Rather, we felt that the year between high school and college could be a vital cog in a student's education, even though it is not education in the formal sense. Therefore the group sought to rename it as a *foundation year*, indicating that there is a continuum, a natural progression: high school, then a year for foundation, and then college."

Princeton University calls its program for incoming freshmen a *bridge year*. A working group of faculty and administrators who founded the program wrote: "We purposely use the word *bridge* as opposed to *gap* year in order to underscore the value added during this year, rather than its quality as an educational break or vacuum."

The working group's brief on the subject describes the Princeton bridge year as a fully funded nine-month program abroad where students will live in a "safe but unfamiliar cultural context abroad that, by its difference from previous settings, should challenge assumptions, encourage innovative thinking, and foster maturity. It will also provide a time of service, and opportunity for students to think about working with and for others, rather than simply with and for an 'I,' the psychological orientation characteristic of today's intensely competitive pre-college experience."

Whether it is called a gap year, a bridge year, a foundation year, or a postgraduate year, the key elements are that it should be meaningful to the student in some way and that a plan and structure are in place.

WHAT TYPES OF THINGS DO STUDENTS DO ON A GAP YEAR?

The majority of U.S. gap year students today participate in structured programs where they work in a team with like-minded young adults exploring something new. This small community might be traveling across the ocean on a sailing vessel, living in inner-city Chicago working with at-risk youth, or studying the effect of environmental change on coral reefs.

Independent-minded students may choose to craft their gap year outside the realm of structured programs. Some gap year students have gone on personal journeys, spending their time climbing mountains, hiking the Appalachian Trail, starting a nonprofit organization, writing a novel, volunteering on a political campaign, working with a local theater group, or composing their own music.

A gap year can be any of these things, but what is most important is finding a fulfilling opportunity and creating a detailed plan for the year. The array of opportunities available is staggering. This book lists hundreds of structured opportunities, which are organized into the following seven main themes:

- *Volunteer abroad or domestically.* Yes, it helps others, but it also helps you. Get to know a community or an issue firsthand, help community members with their challenges, and become a better person for it. Developing a worldview and an understanding of poverty and other economic issues is important, and this is one incredible way to accomplish that goal.
- *Help the environment or study conservation issues.* Animal lovers and those who are concerned about the environment are thrilled with the experiences they have in this type of program. You can

work domestically with a conservation corps program, travel to Madagascar to study the unique marine life there, or spend your days on a boat following pods of dolphins.

- *Explore your interest in the arts.* The arts and music often get pushed aside at high schools today. If you have a passion for the arts, this can be your opportunity to explore your interests in depth. Gap students can spend a semester making documentary films, joining a British theater troupe, or exploring the studio arts in Florence, Italy.
- *Challenge yourself in the outdoors.* Outward Bound and other outdoor journey organizers offer experiences that build confidence and leadership skills. Seafaring types can sail a tall ship around the world. This is the stuff that dreams are made of, and gappers who have sailed the oceans or climbed mountains often call it the pivotal experience of their lives.
- *Learn about another culture.* Travel to Europe, Israel, or South America and live with a family, study a language, and get to experience another part of the world as an insider.
- *Go on an adventure travel trip.* Those who like to be on the go can join a program that moves the group around the globe. Some programs will visit three continents in three months, and some travel over a smaller region. You usually get the chance to do community service or a homestay to understand the communities visited on a more personal level.
- *Improve your academic skills in a postgraduate year.* Join the senior class at an American or British boarding school in order to improve your grades and standardized test scores. Many students choose this option if they are chronologically young for their class or if they need to develop study skills and responsibility before starting college. It is also a popular option for young men who hope to get Division I sports scholarships. They feel that an extra year of physical and personal growth, along with top athletic competition and exposure to college coaches, will help them to reach their goal.

WHY GO ON A GAP YEAR?

The typical ambitious high school student is on a treadmill, with constant pressure to achieve. She has been evaluated, tested, and prepped since kindergarten. She joined select sports teams, auditioned for orchestras, attended competitive summer programs, and tried to find impressive volunteer placements. Today's high school students have taken standardized tests since they were small children, and they have been ranked and compared to others in their school and throughout the country. The gap year offers a chance to step away from all this competition to explore, to unwind, and to learn without the structure, measures, and pressures of most American academic life.

The reason for going on a gap year varies with each individual. It might be to satisfy his sense of adventure or his yearning to learn by doing, rather than learning exclusively from books. The gap year might be used to explore her passions, to remember how to love learning again, or to see the world. For those who have studied hard, a gap year can be a well-deserved break and a chance to focus on an area of interest in a hands-on way. Students who have struggled academically appreciate a gap year that gives them a chance to find strengths outside of academia or to study in a new environment that will prepare them for success in college.

"I was like a deflated balloon," described a girl who deferred her admission to Dartmouth to pursue a gap year. "I was so bogged down with studying and my high school routine that I wondered if I really had the vigor to go to Dartmouth and start it all over again. I volunteered in Ghana during the fall and in Guatemala in the winter. It changed me in so many ways, but I can tell you that those 'Why am I doing this?' feelings about studying completely disappeared. When I got to Dartmouth, I knew why I was there."



THE BENEFITS OF A GAP YEAR

The list of attributes of a seasoned gapper is considerable: independent, mature, focused, re-energized, and self-directed are some of the traits commonly seen in students who have returned from a gap year. But gap year students themselves are best able to articulate the benefits of the experience.

According to Whitney Roth, now a student at the University of Vermont, “Taking a year off was the best decision I have ever made. I have never once regretted going abroad. I believe that had I gone to college straight out of high school I would not have known what to do with my newfound freedom.”

Whitney spent three months in South America, traveling to three countries with Youth International. The program included backpacking, homestays, and community service. She returned home to work for a few months to earn money for the rest of her journey. Her final destination was Morocco, where she studied Arabic and absorbed the unique culture.

She reflected on her gap year, saying:

I consider myself a mature individual, both before and after going abroad, but traveling prepared me in a way I never thought it would. I know how to live and work with a small group of people harmoniously. I know how to handle stress; I know how to approach problems in an adult manner—calmly and logically. I know how to take care of myself. I know now how to be responsible not only for my own physical health, but for my own mental health as well. I still have a lot to learn as an individual, but traveling gave me the starting block. It gave me a sense of self and an idea of who and what I would like to see myself become. I never would have had this kind of foresight had I gone straight



to college. I recommend it for every graduating senior. It was an experience of a lifetime and a decision that I will never regret making.

Some students talk about the gap year as a journey or a time to explore, find a passion, and return to college ready to pursue that new interest.

Charles Monahan was a young man who always had an idea brewing. “I built a boat when I was a kid,” he explained, “after reading about how canoes were made. I wrote my own mini-newspaper when I was nine; my mom still has the copies. But during high school, I wasn’t doing stuff like that anymore. I wasn’t dreaming—I didn’t have many projects going on—it was just all about school. And when people asked me what I wanted to do for a career someday, I never could answer them. I knew that I wanted to do something big, but I wasn’t sure what.”

Charles took a gap year in China, where he studied the language, interned at a financial company, and did volunteer work. When he returned to college, he requested a roommate from China so that he could keep up with the language.

“My year in China was incredible. It’s such an important country. A lot of big things are going to be happening in China in the coming years. I already have a few projects going with people I met there, and I plan to stay involved with China as much as I can. My gap year in China was the best year I’ve ever had.”

Katie Palermo, who taught in a Kenyan school with Volunteers for Peace, voiced an observation echoed by so many gap year participants. “You never realize how limited your view of the world is until you are able to live and experience a completely different culture and lifestyle,” she says.

The generation that is in high school today is going to need more than a college degree to be successful. Developing a worldview is crucial to being able to thrive and prosper in a global economy. A gap year experience can set you on a path to seeing your world in a different way.



GAP YEAR PROFILE Talia Billig

Talia Billig had a busy and successful high school career, which led to acceptance to Carnegie Mellon University. She was at first ambivalent about the gap year, but then decided to go on the Year Course, a program that allows students to experience Israel while volunteering and studying.

So four days after my arrival in Israel I found my nose to the ground doing twenty pushups for dropping my water bottle. I had chosen to take a gap year, but due to a schedule flaw, I was placed in a program where I completed three months of basic training with Israeli teens in the army.

It was one of those times in life where an accident taught me things that I will never forget. I learned that the entire country relies on eighteen-year-old *kids* in uniform. Kids exactly like me. And the entire country loves and respects their children who are in uniform. They may not agree with the politics, but they love their children. Once, an old Russian immigrant stopped me on the street and called me his “queen of Israel” just because I wore the uniform.

The program challenged me both mentally and physically, in all senses of each word. I learned about discipline, my physical capabilities, and of camaraderie in the deepest sense.

Talia’s gap year gave Talia a new perspective on herself. She had tested herself and emerged feeling stronger and more confident than ever. She had always been an accomplished vocalist, and even though her gap year did not involve music at all, by the end of the journey she knew that she would pursue music at a higher level. Although she had committed to Carnegie Mellon, she cancelled the spot and enrolled at the New School for Jazz and Contemporary Music in New York. She is now majoring in vocal music and happily following her dreams.

THE GAP YEAR AS A RESUME BUILDER

Although the point of the gap year is to get away from the competitive race that American students are always running, one whispered benefit of the experience is that it looks good on a resume. If you go on a gap year, it won't propel you from a third-tier school to an Ivy League college, but it will probably give you a slight edge. This special and unique twist might catch the eye of an admissions officer, as long as your grades are up to their standard. Graduate school admissions committees see the gap year experience in a similarly favorably way.

Corporate recruiters who evaluate the resumes of college seniors often find them very much alike. Those with a gap year experience can really stand out. "Of course, we like to see students who have lived abroad or know a second language," said a recruiter at a major financial services firm in New York, "but we also like to see students who have been self-motivated, who have created learning experiences for themselves, or have challenged themselves. A resume from a senior with a gap year experience can be a huge plus."

Students should never go on a gap year just to boost their resume, of course, but many parents are comforted by the fact that it can have a positive effect on their student's future.

WHY NOW? WHY NOT AFTER COLLEGE?

The jump from high school to college is a significant one, and it comes at a pivotal time in a young person's life. For many students, the transition is not going well. A study by the Council for Aid to Education found that only 42 percent of students entering public colleges graduated at all, and 55 percent of private college students graduated within five years (Council for Aid to Education, 2001). The study cited increased access to college opportunities drawing more students than ever, but high school preparation and university quality are often too weak to ensure success.

College students are taking longer to graduate and in some cases are not graduating at all, because of financial concerns, academic difficulties,

switching majors, light course loads, emotional problems in being away from home and living on their own, and just plain failing to find any compelling reason to stay in college.

With tuition costs as high as they are, the college years are not the time to try to “find yourself.” It is too expensive and too risky to spend your time dabbling. The party culture on many U.S. campuses is so pervasive that it causes many students to become completely engrossed in socializing and drinking. They might regret the time they spent partying, or they may say that it was a necessary part of the maturation process. But imagine how the independence and self-esteem building of a gap year would positively affect the maturity and confidence of those who were likely to be influenced by the college party culture.

“A lot of kids are just here to drink and party,” explained a young woman at an East Coast state university. “It’s kind of sad because they get all stressed and upset about it all the time, yet they keep going back for more. My gap year experience made it different for me. I still go to parties and have fun, but I’m not ruled by it. I have other interests, and I have goals that I can see as real possibilities for myself.”

People of any age can take a gap year by going on a volunteer vacation, learning a new language, or traveling abroad. But the gap year in its most important and life-altering form usually takes place when an eighteen-year-old plans a year of activities that are meaningful to him and sets off on that journey alone, with the support of family and friends.



Gap Year Facts: *Subpar Gap Year Activities*

Although it is true that a gap year can consist of a wide variety of experiences, following are some activities that are generally not considered acceptable gap year plans:

- Staying at home, relaxing with friends
- Taking an extended beach vacation followed by an extended ski vacation

- Procrastinating or using the time to consider what you could do without actually doing anything at all
 - Going on an international trip with no plan and no opportunity to become immersed in another culture. Backpacking has its merits, but traveling as a tourist is not as beneficial as living, working, and learning with people from a different background.
-

WHY THE GAP YEAR IS BENEFICIAL TO STUDENTS TODAY

The life of a typical American teenager is different from teenagers' lives ten years ago. Following are some examples of these differences:

- In no other generation have teenagers been so close to their parents. "Helicopter parents" manage most aspects of their children's lives and are in touch with them by cell phone and e-mail throughout the day. Even teens who don't have such vigilant parents say that they rarely make a decision without input from their parents and have little confidence in their ability to make an independent decision. Some teens have been given little or no responsibility at home.
- High school students are overpressured, overscheduled, and often feel uninspired by traditional academics.
- Boys have fallen behind girls in college and graduate school attendance. Many boys mature later and don't find a purpose or enthusiasm for academics until their late teens. The simple gift of extra time can make all the difference for a boy's future.
- Many students who begin college never finish. The freshman year is the most common dropout point.

All these new factors have made it more common and necessary for kids to take a gap year between high school and college. Five years ago, if you asked a teenager whether she would consider going on a gap year, you

would get a confused look and “What’s a gap year?” But today, it is clearly established in the lexicon of the teen world and in the higher education community. The media is writing about it, people are talking about it, and more and more students are going on a gap year. Colleges have reported a doubling or tripling of the number of accepted students who ask for a deferral in order to pursue a gap year. As students return from their gap year with positive experiences, it encourages the next crop of kids to take the leap.

The next stage of the gap year expansion will be driven by the Obama administration’s initiatives to promote public service. They plan to expand AmeriCorps and offer new and exciting ways for young people to serve their country. They will also offer a \$4,000 tax credit in exchange for one hundred hours of public service per year, which will put the volunteer gap year within reach for many, many more students.

