

Year by Gap Year

An Argument to Encourage the Trend

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### Abstract

The trend of taking a gap year in between high school and college has become increasingly popular in the United States in recent years. Rather than graduating high school in the spring and starting college in the fall, growing numbers of young adults are budgeting themselves a year to work, travel, volunteer, or engage in some other form of unconventional learning. Despite the many benefits gap years are proven to afford to youth and the fact that Britain has long encouraged the practice, the gap year, like any other emerging trend, has critics. This essay will offer insight into the pros of taking a gap year and put to rest the arguments against it. Additionally, the essay will offer up a plan to move forward by improving programs, educating the public about gap year plans, and overall making a gap year a plausible option for graduating high school seniors.

Keywords: students, college, independence, education, gap year

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### An Argument to Encourage the Trend

Every fall, masses of students enter college energized by the endless possibilities of their futures. They're part of a generation that has been told even the sky is no limit to their potential. They can be rocket scientists, or movie stars, or future presidents. In individualistic cultures that encourage young people to be anything, it seems strange that they should be pushed into the prescribed path of a four-year college education. This makes a belief in the absence of limitations somewhat of a fallacy. Success is still contingent upon conformity to social norms; however, a growing number of freethinking youths are modifying their post-high school education by adding in what has been coined a "gap year." Rather than heading straight off to college in the fall, these young adults take a year off from formal education to take on a new type of learning which comes solely through first-hand experience. During this year off, "gappers" may spend time in the work force, pursue a suppressed passion, or most popularly, volunteer in a foreign country. The trend of taking a gap year is still fairly new to the U.S., and while some fads do well to fizzle out after a while, this would be a good one to keep around.

### **History**

The practice of taking a gap year has been traced back to what was once called "The Grand Tour." Beginning in the late 1600s, it was common practice for well-to-do British aristocrats to spend some time traveling and exploring towards the end of their teen years (O'Shea, 2011, pp. 565 – 566). This trend fell out of favor less than 200 years later, but was eventually replaced by an organized gap year industry. Now, instead of rounding up a few horses and servants and traveling wherever the wind blows, gappers are likely to buy a pre-

planned gap year package through a specialized gap year agency. The oldest of such firms was established in the UK in 1967 (O'Shea, 2011, p. 567). All in all, 47 years is not long, but in comparison to the United States, which only took real notice of this practice in the last decade, Britain has quite a head start. It is estimated that each year 250,000 Brits travel to 200 countries through 800 organizations to take part in the gap year experience (O'Shea, 2011, p. 566). In staggering comparison is the mere 3600 estimated US gappers. This figure is according to a recent survey of 300,000 first time freshmen at four-year colleges and universities conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles (Shellenbarger, 2010, pp. 1-2). Stanford University also reports small but steady numbers; on average 20-30 students defer admission to this gap-advocating university each year (Frederick, 2012, p. 1). Since 2009, Stanford has offered a full-ride international volunteering gap year program helping to lead other major institutions in developing their own formal deferment policies (O'Shea, 2011, p. 566). Amherst College, MIT, the University of North Carolina, and Tufts University have all created their own variation on Princeton's policy (Hoder, 2014, p. 1; Loftus, 2014, p. 1; Shellenbarger, 2010, p. 2). It seems these modernizations have made a real impact on bringing the gap year into mainstream awareness. From 2012-2013, the American Gap Association saw a 27% increase in enrollment and from 2006-2010, the number of gap year fairs held nationwide nearly quadrupled to a current count of 30 (Loftus, 2014, p. 1; Shellenbarger, 2010, p. 2). While the number of young people taking the gap year route has increased in the United States in recent years, the ratio of students taking an interest to the students actually choosing to take a year off is small. In the UK, the benefits of a gap year have been proven through long-sustained tradition, but the trend is still trying to make a name for itself in America. Lack of reputation can account for the small number of students actually

committing to it. If gap years weren't falsely presented as an uncommon option for a select few rich kids, perhaps more youth would reap their benefits.

### **Activities**

A gap year can be spent in a number of ways, the most popular of which are traveling, volunteering, and working to save up for college. Some gappers take internships, focus on a passion in the arts, or develop their entrepreneurial skills through building or expanding a business. The latter was the case for George Burges who used his year off to grow the app business he started while in high school (Frederick, 2012, p. 2). Also choosing to focus her time on a single effort was Olympian Rachel Flatt who postponed her college experience to focus on figure-skating (Frederick, 2012, p. 2). Another option is the one taken by current Stanford student Caroline Hodges who chose to diversify her experiences during the year. Hodges apprenticed at an organic farm in Connecticut, interned at the Palo Alto daily news, volunteered and traveled in South America, and finished her year off as a counselor at a summer camp for social and environmental justice (Frederick, 2012, p. 1). Others like Jules Arsenault of Bethel, Maine work for half the year raising funds to pursue interests during the second half (Hoder, 2014, p. 2). Even though they all pursued different experiences, every one of these gappers ended their year feeling accomplished and full of new knowledge. It didn't even matter that they started the year off for different reasons.

### **Reasons**

Some gappers take time to satisfy their wanderlust, others want real world experience outside their sheltered homes (Purnell, n.d.), and still others are trying to escape from conflict at home (O'Shea, 2011, p. 568). Some gappers are taking time to stabilize their financial situation

and/or academic goals, some are holding out for a better college (Purnell, n.d.), and others are just looking for a little fun (Hoder, 2014, p. 2). Perhaps the rarest reason cited in the US is the fulfillment of required military service. This is only a reason for international students from countries such as Singapore or Israel (Frederick, 2012, p. 1). The most common, according to Karl Haigler and Rae Nelson, authors of *The Gap Year Advantage*, are to find out more about oneself and to recover from academic burnout (Loftus, 2014, p. 2; Shellenbarger, 2010, p. 2). Self-discovery is a central conflict of young adult life which even Henry David Thoreau believed should be contemplated through a break from social pressures which distract people from their true selves. High on the list of pressures for high school seniors is making grades in order to be accepted into a top-rate college. This pressure understandably causes burnout which takes away the zeal for learning. No matter the reason or path, there are benefits to be had from taking this unconventional learning opportunity.

### **Refutation**

Today, a gap year is an affordable opportunity for personal development as well as the development of skills for college and the job market. Evolution of the gap year has turned its 17<sup>th</sup> century reputation as a rich man's vacation into a modern reputation as a possible and meritorious option for any high school graduate regardless of socioeconomic standing. Even some elite colleges traditionally attended by only the wealthy offer scholarships for incoming students hoping to take a gap year. Such schools include Princeton, the University of North Carolina, and Tufts University (Hoder, 2014, p.1). These prestigious institutions, famous for their rigorous and effective academic programs, are putting forth real effort to support gap years. At Tufts, the gap year program is called "1+4", meaning one year off is added before the traditional four years to make up the complete bachelor's degree experience. Other non-

collegiate organizations also offer scholarships to gappers. AmeriCorps, City Year, and WWOOF-USA are all volunteer organizations intended to provide opportunities for youth to volunteer. These groups pay for room and board in exchange for volunteer service (Hoder, 2014, p. 2). City Year even pays a salary, and at the end of a volunteer's period of service, provides a hefty \$5000 scholarship toward their collegiate studies (Shellenbarger, 2010, p. 3). Even if service isn't the path that interests a prospective gapper, other affordable options can be found. For example First Abroad is a business focused on travel rather than service which offers gap year packages as low as \$879 (Loftus, 2014, p. 3). It is true that some gap year programs cost more than \$30,000, making them equivalent, in some cases, to an extra year of college; however, the expensive programs make up just part of the options (Hoder, 2014, p. 1). Just because they are available doesn't mean those are the programs people are required to choose and if interest in gap years continues on its path of exponential growth, even more options will materialize.

More important than the upfront cost of taking a gap year is the potential cost of not taking it. The amount of self-discovery which gap years facilitate can be enough to cause even the most decided students to change direction in college. Monika Lutz of Boulder, Colorado spent time working with solar energy in India during her gap year. Upon returning, she noted, "If I hadn't gone on a gap year, I might have spent four years and \$200,000 on tuition to end up in that same country and find out the same thing... I'm not ready. I can't dedicate my life to this yet" (as cited in Shellenbarger, 2010, pg. 1). Those who oppose gap years argue that taking a year off causes people to fall behind in the job market (Dickson, n.d.). Graduating at 23 instead of 22 won't make that big of a difference, however, to a person who graduated with a degree they don't love. Ms. Lutz wasn't the only student to change her major after taking a gap year.

For her and those like her, discovering early what they considered the “right major”, was invaluable.

Not only do gap years facilitate choosing the “right major”, but they provide the necessary challenges for youth to develop marketable job skills. According to a recent poll by Northeastern University, 9 of 10 business leaders don’t believe college graduates are ready to enter the job market (Selingo, 2014, pg. 1). The main purpose of college is to prepare students for future career success, and if the institution is not meeting its goals, the institution needs to reform. Implementing a collegiate gap year program would be just the ticket. Time has already shown that all gappers, whether it be from working for pay, doing service work, or disciplining themselves to plan their year off, develop a work ethic to apply to their future careers (O’Shea, 2011, p. 572).

The personal development which gap year supporters speak of is many-faceted, but is in essence divided into two categories: development as a citizen and development as an individual. The first is most evident in gappers who travel internationally as they develop a sense of global citizenship. For Caroline Hodges, this was a very humbling experience. “I would meet people who had no idea what it meant that I was from California, or that I was going to Stanford next year, or that I was taking a year off ,” she said (as cited in Frederick, 2012, p. 2). Upon returning to their home country, people also report a greater sense of patriotism and appreciation for their own country (O’Shea, 2011, p. 571) as well as greater involvement in the community (O’Shea, 2011, p. 569). This is possible because they now have a reliable and real base to compare their “norms” to. Through objective questioning of another culture, answers must be found to justify one’s own culture as well. Interestingly, instead of backing one type of culture and condemning all others, gap years actually foster greater tolerance and sensitivity to other views (O’Shea,

2011, p. 571). Even without leaving their hometown, a gapper will develop a great base for comparison by being in the real world. This type of comparison is also the key to developing as an individual. Many gappers report increased self-efficacy (O'Shea, 2011, p.569). They feel more confident and able to make decisions. Reportedly, taking time to think about and set personal goals has clarified personal views for many takers of gap years (O'Shea, 2011, p. 571). According to an empirical analysis by Joseph O'Shea (2011) of Oxford University's Department of Education, the most common change in values is a decrease in materialism (p. 570). Best of all, the type of development undergone (gaining a global perspective, becoming an appreciative and productive citizen, increasing critical and objective thinking skills) is the type of development a liberal arts education seeks to bring out in students. Perhaps colleges have just been going about it wrong.

All of the development undergone during a gap year can be summed up as "maturing". This is what many educators are saying of students who deferred their enrollment in order to take a gap year; they are more mature, engaged, and ready to move forward (Hoder, 2014, p. 1). According to Robert Clagett, former senior admissions officer at Harvard, there is also a general increase in GPAs. Clagett's findings show that gappers earn GPAs an average of .15 - .2 points higher than their non-gap peers (Hoder, 2014, p. 2; Loftus, 2014, p. 2). This is due to higher motivation, an Australian study of 2502 students which was published in the *Journal of Educational Psychology* in August of 2010 asserts (Shellenbarger, 2010, p. 2). Taking time away from the classroom renews the excitement for learning which "burnout" took away (Hoder, 2014, p. 2). Ben Parker of Glencoe, Illinois is a perfect example. As a senior in high school, Parker quit his lacrosse team and let his grades slip. Citing burnout as his reason, he took a gap year. Upon entering the University of Iowa in 2009, Parker earned his best grades ever, joined

the mock trial team, and even became editor of a campus literary magazine (Shellenbarger, 2010, p. 2). Parker is part of the 90% of gappers who, according to research, do return to college after their year off (Loftus, 2014, p. 3; Shellenbarger, 2010, p. 3). Failure to go on to college after taking time off and failure to get back into the traditional academic routine are some of the biggest concerns cited by parents, but they need not worry as nearly all students can easily pick up where they left off (Purnell, n.d.).

For those students who have more trouble with this, perhaps the only problem is their support system, or lack thereof. A major argument against gap years is that diving back into the academic routine is harder after taking a year off. Hardest of all is relating to peers who did not take a gap year (O'Shea, 2011, p. 572). According to interviews by Joseph O'Shea (2011), students who travelled abroad on their year off found it harder to adjust after coming back home than after leaving (p. 572). This is the magnitude of the positive change brought about by gap years. Though some feel unconnected to peers who didn't take a gap year, they have also inadvertently joined the brotherhood of those who did. There is a whole subculture of veteran gappers who seem to understand each other just because of a shared experience. Even if they spent their years off in completely different ways, there is a sense of alliance. If gap years were the norm, there would be a whole generation of this comradery. Through shared experience, relationships would be enhanced and become more meaningful. However, this doesn't answer the problem of gappers losing peer support, access to guidance counselors, and certain scholarships (Purnell, n.d.). Obviously, there is need for change. Students should have the same access to these things that traditional students do rather than being penalized for taking a gap year. While the gap is a chance to focus on the self, it is not a journey to embark on alone.

Gap years in and of themselves are wonderful things. They provide the necessary environment for students to both recharge and mature. However, forcing students (or even “forcibly encouraging” them) to take a gap year will do no good. Personal motivation is the entire reason. As Barmak Nassirian associate executive director of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, points out, “If you’re going to loiter around the margins of life for a year, you may be better off in the classroom” (as cited in Shellenbarger, 2010, p. 2).

Equally fruitless is signing up motivated, eager-to-learn prospective gappers for programs that won’t give them the full positive experience. Therefore, the only problems with gap years are not with the element itself, but with the lack of expertise around it. Gap year *processes* are just underdeveloped in the United States. Plans have not been fully laid out to perfect them. But with time - time and vision - this can change. There are some guidelines presented by gap year advocates and veteran gappers to help people make the most of their year:

### **Guidelines**

Most important is to stay motivated. Coming out of the high school world where teachers will hound students if they don’t turn papers in on time can be difficult because there is no longer the same type of accountability. Young adults must learn to be accountable to themselves, but attentive mentors can reiterate this.

Another guideline is to apply for admission before starting the gap year, but defer enrollment (Hoder, 2014, p. 1). Acceptance guarantees that gappers have something productive to come back to after a year’s time. It also quiets parents’ fears that their children won’t ever get a college education.

Also, gappers should have a structured plan (Hoder, 2014, p. 1). Lacking this could seriously reduce the amount of satisfaction one feels after their year. The gap is not intended to be filled with laziness and potato chips; it is a non-scholastic learning opportunity.

Any opportunity chosen should be paid for, at least in part, by the gapper (Hoder, 2014, p. 1). This will teach both discipline and fiscal responsibility. Putting in time and effort for a scholarship would fall under this category just like handing over cash as these are both common ways students pay for college anyway. Treating a gap year as part of the college experience and adding it to the normal bachelor's degree program would be an effective solution.

If the gap year experience chosen is a package through an organization, rather than self-planned, students should talk to people who worked or travelled with the organization in prior years (Shellenbarger, 2010, p. 3). No one can give a more honest review than someone with firsthand experience. This won't be a problem in the future *if* programs are improved, structure implemented, and credibility established, but until that point, prospective gappers should do their research.

Additionally, gappers need to remember to keep their minds open (O'Shea, 2011, p. 568). The picture in their head of how their gap year will turn out probably won't line up with the reality. This doesn't mean the year will be any less wonderful; it's just impossible to imagine a new concept with perfect accuracy right off the bat. But that's the case with life too. Learning this is part of growing up.

The processes surrounding gap years are still being established and so is public information about them. Taking a formal gap year isn't even an option for many American youth simply because they can't choose what's not available. Just as the programs need to be

improved, the people need to be informed. Students can't be expected to take a gap year if they've never even heard of it. Recently, even the students who consider it are more likely to back out than to go through with the program because the information they have about gap years seems vague. It seems vague because it's uncommon. Their parents and communities don't have anecdotes to tell or experiences to report to help them make the decision. This won't be a problem if the trend grows to involve more people (we have seen this in Britain), but colleges, who know the benefits of a gap year, should be at the head of the effort. These institutions have the credibility to create amazing programs and the mailing lists to advocate the option to masses of people.

The time between high school and college is one of rapid changes and maturation. It is the perfect time to take a gap year, but that option needs to be made attainable. Programs need to be improved, options need to be expanded, colleges need to get involved, and information needs to be spread so that whether or not a gap year is the right choice for an individual, it will be a plausible option and they will have the necessary tools to decide. Choosing the next step to take, whether that be a gap year or not, is an adult-style decision that yields many consequences. This more mature style of thinking is exactly what real world experience is supposed to cultivate. It will develop eventually no matter how the first year after high school is spent. Young adult life is all about growing up, but the gap year method has been shown to dramatically aid the process.

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