Ways to Make the Gap Year Worthwhile

What are the main reasons that you might decide to take time off prior to entering college, and how can it help you?

The burnout factor can lead to a gap year

Many students have been working so hard for so long to achieve their goal of admission to a selective college or university that once they graduate high school, they are ready for a break. Such is the tenor of Harvard’s approach: take some time to recover, regroup, and recharge and you will be more successful and ready to work again when you arrive on campus.

Other students have gained admission to a school they like, but are emotionally not ready to head off to college. They and/or their parents might decide that a year of maturing socially and personally will help make the transition more successful and enjoyable.

The dollars and sense of deferred admission

Financial reasons can also impact a decision to delay college. Perhaps working for a year and putting away savings will help you afford college and its related expenses. Or maybe you have an older sibling who will finish college in a year and waiting to enroll will help your parents pay for your education. Maybe you missed the prime financial aid application schedule, and reapplying for aid in January will make it more likely that you will gain additional financial support from your college and the government.

Taking a gap year for personal interests

Another major reason to take the year is to pursue strong interests of one kind or another. These might include work again when you arrive on campus.

We have worked with students who have been aiming to sail, ski, skate, or row on a national or Olympic level. Others have desired to attend a studio art, dance, acting, music, or musical theater program at a high level prior to committing to the liberal arts college path. Some students have had a great job offer with a tech firm, a Wall Street internship, a self-owned business, or a magazine. Many students hope to study abroad prior to entering college in order to experience the world and improve their language skills.

Most colleges will approve of a student’s desire to pursue any and all of these kinds of interests. What they do not like to see are students seeking deferred admission in order to sit around at home or spend backpack the world during gap-year travel. They want a plan, and when you write to a college requesting a deferral, you should be able to outline your goals for the semester or year and identify the likely directions you will take.

Deferred admission or a gap year can be the right decision for the right student

Choosing to defer admission, or accepting a college’s offer to enroll midterm or the following fall, can be exciting—and anxiety producing. We believe the time out—the deferral year—prior to entering college can provide you with amazing opportunities for personal growth that will increase the likelihood of your eventual college success.

Plan well, and remember that a full year off equals to 15 months out of a traditional school environment: a summer, two “semesters,” and another summer. Thus, you might want to create a plan that breaks the year into three or four chunks of time, balancing your activities between work, volunteerism, study abroad, pursuing a particular interest, and fun.

Whatever you choose to do, make it count! This is your future and it’s in your hands.

By Howard and Matthew Greene, hosts of two PBS college-planning programs and authors of the Greene’s Guides to Educational Planning series and other books.

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