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# Measuring the Immeasurable Benefits of a 'Gap Year'

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*Enjoy yourself, re-energize and broaden cultural horizons while building self-confidence and gaining emotional maturity*

In both the UK and in Europe, taking a 'Gap Year' between High School and University is common practice; in the UK over 10% of students choose to take a gap year before University. The concept of a 'Gap Year' or 'Interim Year' has also, in recent years, become increasingly popular in the United States and Canada. Instead of heading straight to college after high school graduation, students take a sabbatical year that allows them to pursue personal interests. This year out allows them to travel, volunteer, take a job, perform community service, pursue a study interest or take up an internship. Indeed, a well-structured gap year can incorporate many varied and exciting experiences. It is also a great opportunity to recharge batteries, gain valuable insight, and return home revitalised, energised and well-prepared for the demands of academia, college life and all that follows.

Although there is no national data on the trend in the US, college admissions officers and high school counsellors say they have noticed more students opting for a year off. In the past, deviations from the conventional journey through academia were seen by admissions officers and employers as a sign of unreliability or a lack of commitment. Nowadays, the same behaviour is perceived as an important part of the maturing process and is recognised and rewarded by many college admissions officers. Matt McGann from MIT admissions has stated that "No one ever regrets taking a 'Gap Year,' but plenty of people regret not having taken one."

The US Department of Education reports that more than 30% of college freshmen do not return for their sophomore year. Colleges are well aware of the problem and are therefore keen to enrol students who actively choose higher education and who have gained valuable experiences both within the classroom and beyond it. Indeed, Harvard actively encourages admitted students to defer their enrolment in order to "spend time in a meaningful way" and each year between 50 and 70 Harvard students take an interim year prior to beginning their studies.

At Yale, applicants have always been allowed to defer for a year, and 20 to 40 Yale applicants defer annually. Although Yale has never taken steps to encourage time out, Margit Dahl, director of Yale's undergraduate admissions, states, "We think it is a great idea and we would love it to grow." Harvard Dean of Admissions, William Fitzsimmons, notes that "Many students speak of their time away as a 'life-altering' experience or a 'turning-point,' and most feel that its full value can never be measured." He also points out that "Time out can promote discovery of one's own passions."

Some parents and students are concerned that the gap year participant may not return to college after taking time out. In my experience, students invariably return to college after a well-structured gap year. Indeed, a recent study by Karl Haigler shows that the majority of gap year students will return to college to continue their studies. Nonetheless, it is important that a gap year is carefully planned. A recent review of gap year options, by economist Elka Maria Torpey, noted that "If not carefully planned, a gap year might seem too unstructured, and people can become frustrated if they don't feel that they are putting their time to good use."

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One danger can be that students get out of the habit of doing academic work, and find the return to college a shock to the system. Personally, I feel it is helpful if 'gappers' take some classes during their time out. The studies undertaken during a gap year do not necessarily have to relate to the chosen college program. However, keeping up good study habits, developing skills as self-motivated learners and taking classes that interest and engage them will pay dividends when a student returns to college. Moreover, they find the opportunity to challenge themselves in different disciplines to be a valuable way to broaden academic horizons.

The better planned a gap year is, the more positive the experience is likely to be. Experts say that planning is the key to a successful and enjoyable year. Although this is a period of 'time-out' for the student, it is important to organise a balanced range of activities and create a clear structure for the year. This can be done when a student thinks carefully about his or her aims and about what activities he or she enjoys. Clear goals can then be set and activities organised accordingly. A student's aims may be quite general, such as wanting to meet people from different cultures or trying a range of new activities, or more specific, such as learning a second language, helping those less fortunate than themselves or acquiring a new practical skill. Whatever the student's aims, the chosen activities should be of interest and should benefit them in some way. Each young person's gap year experience should be individual to them.

One should bear in mind that college admissions officers and potential future employers will be interested to learn about what a student did during his or her gap year. As well as being a period of 'time out,' it is also important for a student to consider what he or she would like to experience and achieve during the gap year. A study by Birkbeck College in the UK found that employers were particularly interested to hear about the 'soft skills'—such as communication, teamwork and leadership—that students pick up whilst travelling, volunteering and working. A well-structured gap year could help the résumé to stand out from others and give the student something interesting and out of the ordinary to talk about in an interview.

There is a wide range of gap year options available and it is advisable to participate in a variety of activities over the course of a year. For example, a recent student spent a semester studying Marine Biology in Oxford and then travelled to Africa to volunteer with a research team studying basking sharks.

If plans fall through unexpectedly or a student changes his or her mind for some reason, it is often possible to join a program at short notice. Some volunteer programs will take participants up to a week prior to departure; programs offering individually-tailored courses are able to take students at any time throughout the year. Nonetheless, whatever program or project is chosen, it should naturally be researched carefully before any commitment to take part is made.

For many, this is the first experience of living away from home and of living within a different culture and ideally students should be well-supported in making this transition. Nonetheless, immersing oneself in a different culture and overcoming the challenges that this can present invariably instils a sense of accomplishment and an increased self-confidence and maturity. It is rewarding to program organisers to witness the personal growth and, where relevant, academic maturity that each student achieves during their gap year experience.

For those who choose a study element as part of their gap year, the result is often a renaissance in terms of the excitement for learning and knowledge that they acquire. This is often a consequence of learning for its own sake and at their own pace, in areas that inspire them, after years of having to meet deadlines, pursue rigid syllabi and acquire grades. As a recent student told us, "Before I attended I was uninspired and not at all excited to study, let alone apply myself to anything of interest. Yet somehow, throughout my stay in Oxford, I began to change, developed a desire to learn, and finally I started to go out of my way to ask questions. I feel that what was truly remarkable was the passion that I felt for learning and the love that came with it".

A well-planned gap year will have clear aims and goals, but it will also be an exciting, challenging, fun and, at its best, surprising experience. It should provide opportunities for reflection, personal growth and socialising with people from different backgrounds, as well as opportunities for study and development as an effective learner. In our increasingly competitive and globalised world, emotional maturity, self-confidence and broad cultural horizons have become valuable commodities that are not always learnt in school or college. The gap year presents the perfect opportunity not only to enjoy oneself, recharge batteries and re-energise, but also to gain these highly sought-after attributes.

