

Navigating a Gap Year

“In the twenty years that I have been a gap year counselor, I have been asked a wide range of questions about how to navigate a gap year. After all, gap years are still relatively new for students in the United States. The following is a comprehensive introduction to what a gap year is, and who should take one. It also highlights the many benefits of taking a gap year and what types of programs are out there for teens.”



HOLLY BULL, EdM is president of the Center for Interim Programs, an independent gap year counseling organization.

by **Holly Bull**

President of the Center for Interim Programs

DEFINING A GAP YEAR

A gap year is time typically taken by students between high school and college, or during college, to explore topics or locations of interest. It does not have to encompass a full year and the reality is that anyone can take gap time at any age.

COMPELLING REASONS TO TAKE A GAP YEAR

Here are nine compelling reasons, among many, for students to pursue a gap year:

Take time to rejuvenate.

After K-12 years of classes, school fatigue is common. Recent statistical research on American gap year students by Karl Haigler and Rae Nelson (authors of *The Gap Year Advantage*) reveals that the most touted reason students chose to take a gap year was that they felt “burned out.” A typical gap year outcome for students is increased energy, enthusiasm, and sense of relevance of the world to the classroom.

Choose/create your life for a year.

A key proactive shift for many gap year students is moving from a mindset of “I have to...I should...I’m supposed to...” to “I choose!” This process of learning how to take an active hand in choosing and owning one’s life and decisions, motivates students in college and beyond.

Find your passion or determine what doesn't interest you.

Sitting in a classroom is not an ideal place to figure out if you want to be a doctor, a journalist, a teacher, etc. Hands-on internships or volunteer work during a gap year can provide a concrete sense of what a particular field is like and whether or not it suits you.

Build self-confidence and independence.

As soon as students step into a gap year, they are instantly more mature. They dive right into unfamiliar territory, are exposed to new experiences and are immediately faced with new challenges. One student I know, who had taken a gap year more than ten years ago, recently told me how his positive experience influences him to this day. He recalls how much it boosted his self-confidence, and the ongoing benefits to him and his film industry career.

Gain skills.

Taking a gap year is resume building. On a practical level, gap year students are building effective resumes before stepping foot onto a college campus. And, for many, in-the-world experience and good recommendations have resulted in job placements down the line.

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Improve chances for college acceptance.

Mary Lou Bates, Dean of Admissions at Skidmore College, noted that gap year freshman at Skidmore generally produce GPA's several percentage points higher than their peers. And quoting from a *Time Magazine* gap year article from Sept 21, 2010, "Robert Clagett, Dean of Admissions at Middlebury, did some number-crunching a few years ago and found that a single gap semester was the strongest predictor of academic success at his school." Most colleges recognize that gap year students are more grown-up and focused, an obvious asset to any campus. For students who may not be happy with their college choices, a gap year also provides an opportunity to reapply with a stronger portfolio in place.

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NAVIGATING A GAP YEAR

Gain a clearer sense of college studies.

Karl Haigler and Rae Nelson's statistics reveal that 60% of students assert that their gap year helped them either determine or affirm a choice of major or course of study. The National Research Center for College and University Admissions estimates that over 50% of students switch majors at least once. A gap year can save considerable time and money because students are less likely to change majors and they therefore avoid following the national average of taking 5-6 years to graduate.

Ease the transition from college to the work world.

A gap year is, in essence, a half step out into the world. It makes the later post college transition into the working world less daunting. It helps students realize that they can handle the world just fine.

Embrace a gap year when one is free to do so!

Parents often laughingly agree that they would love to take gap time, but kids, jobs, pets, and homes make it a tough proposition. For students who are not so tied down, it provides a great way to explore their interests and travel during this unique period of time in their lives.

“There isn't necessarily a perfect program or gap year; as long as students head toward areas of interest and choose solid, safe placements, they will learn no matter what.”

WHO SHOULD TAKE A GAP YEAR

A gap year is for anyone interested in taking one. For high-powered academic students, it can complement their studies with “in-the-world” experiences. A gap year can be particularly helpful and invigorating for students who are unsure about which college to attend or what career focus to take, or simply for students who feel completely depleted and need a break from traditional schooling. It is also the perfect solution for students challenged by classroom learning. Gap year programs allow them to explore interests with a more hands-on approach, which often boosts their excitement about learning again.

TYPES OF GAP YEARS

Gap year programs run the gamut from structured group opportunities with other gap year students, to specific skill-based opportunities, to internships, apprenticeships, or more job-like options. They can involve classroom study, service projects, the arts, music, politics—the sky's the limit! And they are located worldwide. They can be as short as a weekend or as long as a full year, with variations in between.

CHOOSING YOUR GAP YEAR PROGRAM

It helps to first pinpoint general areas of interest (e.g., conservation, kids, business, outdoors, fashion, animals, etc.) as well as geographic locations of interest (where in the world might I like to go?). It is also helpful to consider basic things like being with one's peers or going solo. In general, having a peer group for at least part of a gap year prevents the feeling of being isolated. Degrees of structure and independence, even favorite types of weather, are also worth considering. And focusing on a potential career interest is a very practical way of choosing a program. There isn't necessarily a perfect program or gap year; as long as students head toward areas of interest and choose solid, safe placements, they will learn no matter what.

DETERMINING WHAT IS A GOOD PROGRAM AND ITS SAFETY

It is helpful to find out how long a program has been in existence and if it has a good track record. One of the best ways to learn about a program, aside from speaking with its representatives, is to ask to speak with recent alumni. And a good specific question to ask alumni is, “What was the worst aspect of this program experience?” Some of the larger gap year organizations that offer numerous placements around the world may find it harder to consistently monitor all their programs sites. It is, therefore, especially helpful to communicate with alumni who have attended the specific program/location you are considering.

FINANCING A GAP YEAR

The cost of a gap year can vary tremendously based on the program or combination of programs one chooses. There are low-cost options that provide housing and food for one's labor (e.g., working on farms, with kids, on tall ships), options where one pays for basic housing and food expenses (e.g., service programs), skill-based options with a fee (e.g., filmmaking courses, WEMT certification), and options with an over-arching program fee (e.g., many of the programs that attend gap year fairs). The latter usually provide the most structure and support, with leaders and a group of peers, and are well worth weaving into a gap year if one's budget allows. Students can also work during summers and in between programs to help pay for a gap year. A number of programs offer scholarships or financial aid, so it is always worth inquiring, even if it is not outlined in their material.

I think most parents see the value in life-changing experiences, and how they can enhance self-confidence and independence in their kids. If these experiences can point students toward a more meaningful college program and/or on to a fulfilling career, there is even greater incentive to take part. A well-constructed gap year can offer all of this—and the inspiration to continue to create a life enriched by varied experience.

Holly Bull, EdM, is president of the Center for Interim Programs, an independent gap year counseling organization. Holly took a gap year before and during college and has been counseling students and parents through the gap year process for over twenty years.

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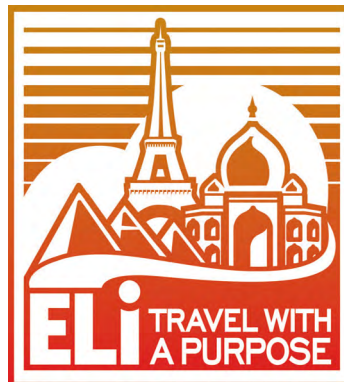
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