

Independence Days: My Perfect Imperfect Gap Year

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Summary: "More colleges in the United States are encouraging applicants to consider a 'bridge' year before enrolling, and many independent programs and some campuses—like Florida State University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Princeton and Tufts—even offer fellowships and financial aid. Ethan Knight, the executive director at the American Gap Association, still sees the need for greater support to encourage a more diverse set of students to participate....Mr. Knight pointed to gap-year opportunities that could be valuable, such as traveling abroad to learn languages that the State Department views as critical. But federal grants are contingent on receiving college credit, making them unavailable to anyone taking a year off school." (*New York Times (Online)*) The author supports taking a "gap year" before beginning college and shares his own experiences with taking a year off to work and travel.

Midway through a lackluster freshman year at the University of San Diego, I called my parents and told them I planned to leave school after the spring semester. They took the news pretty well considering they had just shelled out more than \$50,000 in tuition and living expenses at one of the ritziest private universities in the country, a university where the gym bears the name of the dietitian Jenny Craig and some dorms feature an ocean view. Here, you could easily graduate unaware that 1 in 10 students at surrounding California State universities is estimated to be homeless.

I listened to my father's objections as I walked to the west edge of campus, passing the university's big, whitewashed buildings, its meditation garden and its infinity pool, before I reached a spot where I could see San Diego's entire Mission Bay and, beyond that, the Pacific.

"If you leave now," my father said, "you'll never go back."

He asked me to get permission from the school so I could return after a year, and I agreed. This made my departure a gap year — something I hadn't considered up to that point. A lot of other Americans hadn't either, until the White House announced that President Obama's

oldest daughter, Malia, would take one before attending Harvard next fall.

In coverage of Malia's decision, conservative and liberal media alike called out the perceived elitism of gap years: "Malia Obama Taking a Gap Year Is the Ultimate Sign of Luxury" read the The New York Post headline. "Malia Obama's 'Gap Year' Is Part of a Growing (and Expensive) Trend," said The New York Times. Slate posed the question "Gap Years for Everyone?" — speculating that "a low-income student who spends a year working to save up money would probably just call the experience 'life.'" Commenters on Twitter further demonstrated negativity:

My public school teacher husband & I agree a #gapyear isn't for average folks. Unless you're rich & well-connected, don't delay college. — Nadra Nittle (@NadraKareem) May 1, 2016

The idea that gap years are inherently elitist may be due to the potentially high cost of travel and of independent programs, which offer a structured experience — typically of adventure, service and more or less education — that can cost upward of \$20,000. But that criticism cuts against the realities most students already face — that is, average in-state tuition and fees of \$8,940, or \$28,308 at private colleges, according to the College Board. When factoring in room, board and other expenses, this would mean spending about \$100,000 over five years at public colleges and more than double that at private ones.

After five years, only 53 percent of students at public colleges have graduated. The remaining students will have racked up absurdly high expenses on the way to earning, or not earning, a degree. For them, regardless of what socio-economic background they come from, time away from campus seems prudent.

I certainly wasn't alone in failing to think carefully before committing to college. I sometimes took three trips a day to the beach with other students. By second semester, most of my friends were less concerned with final exams than with finding the coolest house the fewest steps from the beach to live in the following year. And I would have been too, if I had stayed. I was already failing at least one class. And although my grades were not poor enough to be asked to leave school, I had lost the motivation to do anything but fulfill the minimum course requirements. I felt guilty for wasting so much money and I couldn't see doing the same thing for three more years.

Although I appreciated my parents' support, I also recognized the extent to which it had become detrimental. Their attempts to eliminate any possibility of real failure had guaranteed its own kind of failure. Financial dependence had enabled me to make a major life decision, the decision to go to college, without taking personal ownership of it.

I had managed to avoid thinking about why a degree mattered to me or how I hoped it would enrich my life. When applying to colleges, I had put down whatever fluff my high school counselors suggested for my admissions essays and was accepted by a few schools whose campus scenery had attracted me far more than the course offerings.

A gap year presented itself as a chance to claim the independence that formalized education had not encouraged. It was an opportunity to discover a sense of purpose outside of school, to prompt some thinking on those questions before graduating. Without classes and the path to a degree as a crutch that gave structure to my days, I'd be forced to create a structure of my own.

But my father wasn't convinced that a gap year was the right decision. He let me know that if I left school, I wouldn't receive any financial support. At the time, I viewed this as a threat. Now I see it as a first step toward allowing me the freedom I needed.

I knew this wasn't an easy concession for him. The dependence that many parents encourage — throughout college and even after their children leave home — is now commonplace. In her book "Parenting to a Degree," the sociologist Laura T. Hamilton documents cases in which a parent comes to the rescue with homework help or buys a daughter clothes so she fits in better with her sorority sisters.

What's often lost in these stories — and the predictable rants on the negative effects of helicopter parenting — is the question of what responsibility children have, as they get older, to put an end to patterns of dependency.

It was difficult making a clean break from those patterns to figure out what I wanted to do for the unstructured year ahead. Most of the information I found on gap years was written for parents, by parents. It seemed to miss the point, at least the point as I saw it: to loosen the parental grip so that students can develop an educational framework of their own.

While working summer jobs to save money, I found an internship at Surfer magazine in Orange County and reported for duty in late August. I slept in my car the first two nights and rinsed off in the ocean before work until I found an affordable place to rent, and because the internship was unpaid, a job at a gluten-free store where I could work evenings.

As I quickly learned, a food store that defines itself by what it doesn't have tends to attract a high-maintenance clientele. I took turns providing customers with my faux-expertise and stocking shelves, which I did with a recent college graduate who could not find employment that put his degree to good use and with a woman who claimed to hate the taste of water so much that she drank only juice.

This wasn't the kind of job I wanted to hold for the rest of my working days. Showing up at the store after a day at Surfer, where the editors had some level of engagement with the tasks at hand, prompted career reflection like never before. It was refreshing, after a school year filled with so much apathy, to meet people who seemed to actually care about their work.

At the same time, entering the work force made the burden of assuming debt — and my own privileged ability to attend college free of loans — visible in ways that continuing on in school would have never allowed. I came to realize what it meant to take a college education for granted.

Aside from opportunities for unpaid internships, I found few low-cost options for learning experiences during my gap year. According to the nonprofit American Gap Association, about 1 percent of students in the United States take gap years. By contrast, in Australia and certain European countries, gap years are encouraged as part of the educational process; 17 percent of students in the United Kingdom participate in a gap year, according to one study by its department of education.

More colleges in the United States are encouraging applicants to consider a "bridge" year before enrolling, and many independent programs and some campuses — like Florida State University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Princeton and Tufts — even offer fellowships and financial aid.

Ethan Knight, the executive director at the American Gap Association, still sees the need for greater support to encourage a more diverse set of students to participate. "You can get access to Pell funding to go to beauty school," he said. "There's certainly as much learning to be had in a gap year as there is in beauty school. So why shouldn't students be able to earn access to Pell and other government grants for certain gap year experiences?"

Mr. Knight pointed to gap-year opportunities that could be valuable, such as traveling abroad to learn languages that the State Department views as critical. But federal grants are contingent on receiving college credit, making them unavailable to anyone taking a year off school.

In its own way, my limited options became a rewarding educational challenge. In the winter, I moved to Puerto Rico, scrubbed dishes in a locally owned hotel restaurant for \$5 an hour, found a used car for \$450, and shared a one-bedroom for \$400 a month. I ate leftovers off dirty dishes in the restaurant. I cleaned the deep fryers, the maggot-infested garbage bins and the vomit left in the bathrooms by hard-partying East Coast vacationers.

All the other employees at the restaurant spoke in Spanish, and I was perceived as dumb for not speaking fluently. I'd seen the same thing happen at home to co-workers whose first language was not English, although it had never fully registered until our roles were reversed. Experiencing these humiliations was a lot easier knowing I had the freedom to leave at any time. Still, it poked holes in my comfort with, and blindness to, some of the inequalities I had grown up with, making them harder to ignore when I left the restaurant behind.

And I did leave the restaurant behind, as soon as I had saved enough money to travel for a few months. I bought a plane ticket to Indonesia, rented a motorbike there, and traveled island to island by ferry. The trip was not without its mishaps. To name a few: I was bitten by a monkey; got in a motorbike accident; lost a good amount of skin on my hands, chest, back, legs and feet in numerous brushes with coral while surfing; got a raging ear infection surfing too close to a polluted river mouth after it rained.

I did not want my parents to worry, and so I took care to avoid mentioning these hiccups in sporadic calls and emails home from Bali, Lombok, Sumbawa, Java and Sumatra. What I did mention to my parents, much to their satisfaction, was that I actually looked forward

to returning to college in the fall. Time free from the obligations of schoolwork had enabled me to realize my passion for writing, and to apply this to an English major, where I would discover the most formative classes and professors of my education.

With this newfound interest I experienced many of the benefits that gap years are said to provide: Studies show that students who take time off before graduating increase their grade-point averages, drink less when in college, and go on to find more fulfilling career paths. It also helped me graduate in only two and a half more years — one semester behind where I should have if I'd stayed in school. After graduating, too, I found satisfying work (for a few years, editing a surf magazine).

Looking back, though, it would be hard to identify anything from that year as a formula for success. But that was exactly the point. I stocked shelves, scrubbed dishes, did an unpaid internship and traveled. My performance in school did improve afterward, but if I'd thought about chasing those results, or recommended those experiences to others, there's just no way the same benefits would follow.

While there's certainly a place for making those kinds of calculations, a gap year was about removing those expectations, at least temporarily. It was a time when education ceased to be an act of dependence, an act of fulfilling my parents' wishes. Only then could the act of graduating from college become a move toward independence. Only then could I make space for education to have value of its own.

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