

More Graduates Push Pause, See Benefits of Pre-College 'Gap Year'

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Summary: "It's college acceptance season, but some students are choosing another path—a gap year that for some means travel, overseas classes or just working to raise tuition money and figure out what they want to study in college....There are no centralized statistics on how many American students take gap years, but the number of gap year programs has been climbing, indicating significant growth."
(Portland Press Herald) This article reports that a growing number of U.S. students are delaying their college education by taking a 'gap year' before entering college.

Staff Writer

• It's college acceptance season, but some students are choosing another path—a gap year that for some means travel, overseas classes or just working to raise tuition money and figure out what they want to study in college. (May 1 is college acceptance deadline)

Connecticut College was ready to enroll Nick Boulos after he graduated from high school in Portland, but before he headed to southern New England for his freshman year, Boulos put the brakes on and spent a year in France.

He says the academic hiatus, known as a "gap year," delivered more than he expected.

"I saw, experienced and learned so much more than I could have ever dreamed to," Boulos said. "Not only this, but it also served as a time for me to mature, see a little bit more of the real world, and really understand the big picture of what life is by seeing so many different cultures and points of view on certain topics."

College acceptance season is well underway, and fall deposits are due at most colleges by May 1. But a growing number of students like Boulos are taking a gap year that can mean travel, overseas service projects or just working to raise tuition money and figure out what

they want to study in college.

The University of Maine in Orono and the University of Southern Maine, the two largest public universities in the state, allow incoming freshmen who have paid a \$150 deposit to defer for up to a year. They must simply write an email or letter requesting the deferment.

But policies vary: The 234,000-student University of California system generally does not allow deferments, and instead encourages students to apply again the following year.

At UMaine, which has about 11,000 students, there are usually about 100 incoming freshmen who ask for a deferment, said Joel Wincowski, vice president of enrollment management.

"There's a variety of reasons students take a year off. A lot of them want to travel before entering. Some are the opposite—they need to earn additional money to pay for college," Wincowski said.

Greater Recognition of Benefits

There are no centralized statistics on how many American students take gap years, but the number of gap year programs has been climbing, indicating significant growth. USA Gap Year Fairs, a 10-year-old company, said it had representatives from more than 80 gap year programs at fairs in 20 states last year—and more than 5,000 interested students and families in attendance.

"In the United States we're seeing strong growth," said Joe O'Shea, author of "Gap Year: How Delaying College Changes People in Ways the World Needs" and president of the board of the American Gap Association. "There are new programs all the time."

Taking some time off after high school and before starting college isn't a new concept, but it only became formalized in the 1960s with a handful of sponsored, structured programs that place students in a local home and set them up with either classes or service projects, frequently with on-site support from the sponsor.

It can also be an inoculation against typical problems for college students: stress, high dropout rates, apathy and burnout, O'Shea said. He pointed to one program, Global Citizen Year, as an example of the new model of gap year, where students have financial support to pursue experiential learning.

"High school graduates are entering college under-prepared, families are questioning their return on investment, and colleges are facing growing concerns about relevance," according to the program's materials. "The standard educational path--focused on memorization, testing and college admissions--often stifles the most important learning. As the stakes get higher and the competition fiercer, ambitious students are scrambling for goals they don't have time to question. In short, school is interfering with kids' real education."

Today, all of the Ivy League schools have gap year policies, and some actively encourage taking a gap year.

On the admissions page of Harvard's website, a message extols the advantages of taking time off to avoid burnout.

"Perhaps the best way of all to get the full benefit of a 'time-off' is to postpone entrance to college for a year," the admissions director writes. "For nearly 40 years, Harvard has recommended this option, indeed proposing it in the letter of admission. Normally a total of about 80 to 110 students defer college until the next year. The results have been uniformly positive."

On Sunday, the White House announced that President Obama's daughter Malia will take a gap year before attending Harvard in the fall of 2017.

Boulos, the Portland student heading to Connecticut College, said needing "a breather" was partly the reason behind his gap year program, which was organized through Portland's Council on International Educational Exchange.

"I was burned out from high school," he said. "I always knew that I wanted to continue on to college and further my education, but I felt like I needed a break before I dive into college."

Chloe Williams, a 2015 Waynflete graduate, was just 17 when she got on a plane to spend six months in Chile as part of a CIEE gap year program.

"Though I was excited, nervous, interested, and a little scared before, it was not until I hugged my dad goodbye that I actualized the fact that I was leaving everything I had ever known behind me," Williams wrote in her blog. Months later, she reflected on what she had learned. "This type of travel is new and unfamiliar, but it's beyond interesting. Every little activity I do with my family, no matter how small, is showing an interesting part of their culture--and I am living it. Living this culture is the traveling, and the touristy activities are strung along through my time here, wrapping it up as the best traveling experience I could have ever dreamed of."

Many Design Own Gap Experience

Matt Redman, who oversees the gap year program at CIEE, said demand is so high that the educational exchange is expanding its gap year program beyond traditional travel and culture experiences to include service projects, internships and other structured learning programs.

"Five years ago, it was exclusively just the tip-top students looking to strengthen their college applications or take some kind of pause and get some experience before a very rigorous college experience. Now it's broadened to students--even some current first-year college students--who realize they wanted to do something else," Redman said.

O'Shea and Redman both emphasized that the gap year experience helps students grow personally, particularly if they are enrolled in a program that is structured and includes time for reflection on what they are experiencing.

"It's a big win for students to be able to take that time and think about what they want to do," said Redman, who took a gap year himself 20 years ago to focus on competitive skiing. "I did tremendously better my freshman year. I was more productive. I was able to focus better. Those lessons still benefit me today."

Despite the rise in formal gap year programs, O'Shea estimates that about 70 percent of gap year students are just doing it on their own—working, volunteering, traveling or some combination of activities.

"They just design it themselves: Live here for 'x' months, work there, try this. They're self-designing their own education," he said.

Generally speaking, taking a gap year used to be more informal—think hostels and Eurail passes—and is far more common overseas, O'Shea said. The first structured programs showed up in the 1960s, but it's only been in the past decade that they have become more mainstream.

Importantly, colleges and universities are accommodating gap year students. Two public universities, the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill and Florida State University, even offer financial aid to help students pay for a gap year. It's good for the schools, O'Shea said, because the gap year students tend to be highly motivated, resilient and curious. It gives them a chance to "breathe" before starting school, but it also gives them the opportunity to figure out who they are.

"These students are very eager to grow and develop and take on adult roles," he said. "It's very much about becoming an adult."

It can also be a good option for students who have been under pressure to achieve and get into college, but aren't sure what they want to study.

"They want the opportunity to live and to grow outside of traditional education. This helps them grow in new ways and that's very attractive to many students," said O'Shea, who is also director of Florida State University's Center for Undergraduate Research and Academic Engagement.

"The best kind of gap years are the ones that challenge your assumptions of yourself and the world around you," he said.

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