The Lure of the Gap Year

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Time of learning and maturing can mean refreshed batteries and prepared students

By Thomas K. Grose

Tens of thousands of newly minted high school graduates will troop to campuses across the country this fall to begin four or more years of collegiate life. But Liz Teixeira de Mattos won't be among them, even though she was accepted by prestigious Vassar College in New York's Hudson Valley. Instead, she should be wrapping up a stay in Greece, where she had arranged to work with dolphins, and getting ready to head to South Africa. There, among other things, she'll pitch in at a game preserve and volunteer at an AIDS orphanage. Later she'll jet to London for a stint as a fashion industry intern. She's also scheduled time to travel around Europe.

But Teixeira de Mattos, 18, of Princeton, N.J., is no slacker. She's a "gapper"--one of a small but growing number of American students who are deciding to take a "gap year" off between high school and what would be their freshman year of college to travel, volunteer, work, study, and otherwise recharge their batteries before getting back on the academic treadmill. "I thought, 'Why not?' There are other ways of learning than sitting in a classroom," says Teixeira de Mattos, who ultimately plans to earn a degree in environmental science.

That's a key point that many educators and other gap-year proponents make as well. They argue that the out-of-classroom experiences of a gap year give students eye-opening life lessons that help them become more mature, more aware of the wider world, and more self-sufficient, traits that will ultimately serve them well once they're on campus. "They develop nonacademic skills and end up better prepared," says Holly Bull, who runs the New Jersey-based Center for Interim Programs, which helps students organize gap years. There's some quantifiable evidence underscoring that claim, too. A study of gap-year freshmen at Skidmore College in New York found they had higher grade point averages than their peers.

That readiness effect is one of the big reasons why the gap-year break--a British invention from the 1960s that has become a popular rite of passage for a large minority of college-bound U.K. students--is appealing to more and more American kids. The British company Gapyear, which offers planning and travel tips for students through its website *www.gapyear.com,* reckons that its American clientele has grown in recent years from nearly nil to around 10 percent. And Bull reports that "inquiries and awareness are way up. Fifteen years ago it wasn't even on the radar screen. Now there are even gap-year fairs in the U.S. That was unheard of a few years ago."

The take-a-break-first concept got a high-profile boost when Princeton University began its own "bridge year" program last fall. Twenty Princeton freshmen spent nine months this past year not in class but instead working in one of several overseas service programs. Among them was Lelabari Giwa-Ojuri of Los Angeles, who worked with nonprofit youth groups in Serbia, including one that provides HIV/AIDS advice to teens. "Just being part of that was really fulfilling for me," she says.

Another 20 students will participate in Princeton's program this year, and the eventual goal is to enroll 100 students a year. Harvard College has for three decades advised incoming freshmen to take a gap year, and each year around 50 to 70 students do so.

Pause that refreshes. One key way a gap year tends to improve students' college performance, proponents argue, is by allowing them to depressurize after some 12 years of hitting the books and taking tests. "A lot of kids are incredibly burned out," Bull says. An essay titled "Time Out or Burn Out for the Next Generation," cowritten by William Fitzsimmons, Harvard's dean of admissions, states that "the pressures on today's students seem far more intense than those placed on previous generations." Advocates say that students who defer school for a year return rejuvenated and more motivated to excel. "It gives students another 15 months of growing-up time. That's a good thing," explains Mike Nicholson, director of undergraduate degrees at Britain's University of Oxford. It certainly worked for Giwa-Ojuri. "I do feel refreshed," she says. "It also reinforced my passion for learning."

Despite the potentially positive effects of taking a gap break, it remains a concept many American families find alien. "It's a hard sell," admits Robert Bardwell, a counselor at Monson High School in Monson, Mass. "For most American students, anything that delays the goal of getting a degree is not good." That may be understandable, as the reality now is that it takes more than six years, on average, for U.S. students to earn a four-year degree. "There's a lot of peer pressure to go straight to college," Bardwell adds. Teixeira de Mattos certainly felt it. "Most of my friends were really shocked. They said, 'Just go to Vassar. Just go.' " But she decided that Vassar wasn't right for her, at least not right now. She plans to apply to other universities during her year off. "I don't want to go to just a good school, but the right school," she says.

Some moms and dads worry that their children will never go to college if they don't go straight out of high school. But Karl Haigler and Rae Nelson, the husband-and-wife team who wrote *The Gap Year Advantage,* say that's largely a myth. They interviewed 280 gappers for their upcoming book, *Gap Year, American Style,* and found that 90 percent of them did go on to college. The fear that gap-year students fall behind or lose their study skills "is rarely justified," the Harvard essay says. Still, for some additional peace of mind, it's recommended that students first get accepted at a university, then request a year's deferral.

Cost can also be a hurdle. Many parents should expect to pony up around $15,000 to $20,000 to cover a student's gap year. Teixeira de Mattos's year will cost between $20,000 and $25,000. That kind of dough is beyond the reach of many folks. There are, however, much cheaper options, including programs that offer room and board or don't require overseas travel. Some even give students a chance to earn money. The state and national programs within AmeriCorps are designed for kids 17 or older. Participants can earn up to $5,350 in stipends that can be used to pay college costs. Moreover, 92 U.S. colleges and universities will match whatever amount a student receives from AmeriCorps.

Structured approach. In Britain, gap students typically work for most of the year to earn enough money to cover the cost of backpacking around various parts of the globe for a few months. American students and their parents usually prefer taking a more organized approach. "They can't just travel in an unstructured way," Bull says. That said, the list of gap-year options available to students is limited only by their imagination, and many, like Teixeira de Mattos, weave together a range of experiences. Bull tells kids, "Do something that draws you." That can, and often does, include some type of service work, as well as internships, learning new skills, and a bit of traveling for fun, too. What isn't a good idea is taking a year off and not doing much of anything. "We don't define a gap year as sitting around for a year on a sofa playing video games," Nelson says.

Oxford's Nicholson says gap years are particularly suited to "self-starters who are highly motivated." But Bull says she believes that almost any student can benefit from a gap year. Giwa-Ojuri agrees: "I think it could be a valuable experience for a variety of students," so long as they're willing to be

challenged and fully understand that their self-imposed hiatus will likely change them--for the better. That's something that Teixeira de Mattos certainly expects. Looking ahead to fall 2011, she says, "I know I will be a different person." And the odds are high she'll be a better student, too.

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