

Gap year: Time off, with a plan



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After high school, Matt Hendren needed a break. “I’d had a really full academic year,” he says. “I was a little burned out and not so eager to get to the next academic step. I knew that I wanted to go to school, but I wasn’t fired up about it just then.”

So Hendren deferred his admission to the University of North Carolina and spent 2 years working for City Year Boston, an AmeriCorps-funded program. The experience, he says, helped to reinvigorate him and get him excited about returning to school.

People like Hendren take time off from school or other endeavors for different reasons—and at different points in their lives. This transitional period is often called a “gap year.” A gap year allows people to step off the usual educational or career path and reassess their future. And according to people who’ve taken a gap year, the time away can be well worth it.

This article can help you decide whether to take a gap year and how to make the most of your time off. The next few pages describe what a gap year is, including its pros and cons. Another section has tips for planning a successful year off. Suggestions for more information begin on page 31.

To gap—or not to gap?

“Gap year” often refers to postponing continued study after high school. It can also be a break during or after college or graduate school—or at almost any other time. The practice is common in the United Kingdom and other countries and increasingly familiar in the United States.

Although termed a gap year, the time period can be longer or shorter than 12 months. The concept of a gap year is flexible in other ways, too. “Gap year is a state of mind,” says college career counselor Marianne Green. “It’s a way of choosing an



activity and using that experience in a way that is helpful for the future.” Just about anything, from working on a dude ranch to working in a local store, can be turned into an interesting gap-year experience, says Green: “What’s important is the attitude that you have.”

Some gap years are unforeseen. A student graduating from college might, for example, have difficulty getting a full-time position in his or her field of study. Or family obligations might prevent someone from attending college. Other gap years are more deliberately chosen.

Regardless of the circumstances leading to it, says Green, a gap year should be an intentional undertaking. “It’s not a default,” she says. “The bottom line is that maybe you didn’t get into law school or maybe the job in an accounting firm fell through. But you can consciously choose to make your time off the very best experience you can.”

Pros and cons of a gap

A gap year can be a rewarding experience; however, it is not without potential drawbacks. Learning about the pros and cons can help in the decision-making process.

Discussing the possibility of a gap year with school counselors, family, and friends is helpful when considering the implications of taking time off. But in the end, the decisions about how to time an education or career belong to the person taking—or not taking—a year off.

Pros. There are many benefits to taking time off. A gap year can provide experiences that help people gain insight about themselves and their goals. It can give students a break from the pressures associated with academics, resulting in renewed enthusiasm for their studies when they return to school. And it can offer young people real-world understanding of their classroom-based learning.

For some students, a gap year helps to prepare them for future studies. “I feel so much more ready for college now than when I first graduated,” says high school graduate Macauley O’Connor, who spent last year in Japan and China on a gap year arranged by the Center for Interim Programs. “I learned more about, and I have a better perspective on, myself and the world.”

Taking time off before going to school also provides a chance to earn money for tuition and other expenses—in fact, more than 80 colleges and universities now offer grants to students who defer their studies to participate in AmeriCorps—and can help people decide what they want to do. Sarah Kohut, for example, traveled and worked after earning an undergraduate degree, using her time off to earn a little money as she considered her career options. After job shadowing and working in a preschool and in retail, she returned to graduate school to study counseling in higher education. “I’m so glad I did it,” she says of

her gap. “I needed the time to figure things out.”

Kohut’s career plans—and the students she will eventually counsel—benefit from the time she took to consider her own goals. That may be a common result, according to an independent study of 300 gap-year participants between 1997 and 2006. “Long-term, students who took gap years overwhelmingly were satisfied with their jobs,” says Karl Haigler, one of the authors of the study. Gap-year participants’ sources of job satisfaction, he says, were most often driven by their ability to help others.

Hendren, for one, is glad he spent his gap that way. “The value of doing service work is very important,” he says. “And, at age 18, knowing that your contribution to the world can be meaningful—that’s something that a lot of folks don’t get.”

Cons. Gap years also have drawbacks. Postponing school or work takes people off of a more traditional path, and it’s sometimes challenging to get back on. If not carefully planned, a gap year might seem too unstructured, and people can become frustrated if they feel that they aren’t putting their time to good use.

Once students get out of the routine of academics, returning to school can be difficult. A June 2005 study by the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics found that students who delayed enrolling in college were less likely to earn a postsecondary credential than those who went directly from high school to college.

However, the Department of Education study included all students who didn’t go directly to college; it did not examine the experiences of gap-year students who elect to temporarily postpone college and have a specific plan for that time. Haigler’s study, although smaller by comparison, specifically considers that group. And his study found that the majority of students who take an intentional, planned gap year return to school to continue their studies.





But even those who do return to complete their education point to some of the challenges that arise. “It’s difficult to readjust to being at school because you’ve been on your own, doing something that has an impact,” says Hendren. “You’re not exactly in the same place as everyone else.”

You also might not be in the same place as your peers when competing for future educational or career opportunities. Although many colleges and employers look favorably on a well-structured gap year, others may take issue with the break in continuity. Gap-year participants should be prepared to answer questions from school representatives and prospective employers about what they did during their gap year and how their experiences influenced them.

Taking a gap year isn’t for everyone. People who aren’t fully committed to their reasons for taking a gap year might not be happy with the experience. For example, students shouldn’t pursue a gap year simply to procrastinate applying to schools or because someone else thinks it’s a good idea. A year is

a long time, so carefully choosing activities is essential.

Planning a gap year

Experts say that the most important part of a successful gap year is to have a plan. The more people look into their options and understand the consequences—good and bad—of taking a gap year, the happier they are with the outcome.

“Preparation is critical to having a good gap year,” says career counselor Green. Those who have taken a gap year agree. Kohut, for example, started her gap years not knowing exactly what she was going to do and acknowledges that she could have done a better job of planning beforehand.

Before deciding to take time off, it’s helpful to think about what to do prior to leaving school, expenses associated with a gap year, and activities and goals for the time off.

Tasks before leaving school. Potential gap-year participants who are still in school should do several things to ease their post-gap return.



If students plan to pursue an undergraduate or graduate education, ideally they should apply to schools, be accepted, and then ask for a 1-year deferment, experts say. This is especially true at the undergraduate level, where many schools allow or even encourage students to defer their admission. Students who have been awarded scholarships and defer admission are often allowed to retain them after a gap. Each school sets its own deferral policies; students should familiarize themselves with the rules at the ones that interest them.

Students are also advised to get references and take school admissions tests—such as the SAT or the GRE—before leaving school. Gap-year participants usually have less access to high school or college guidance offices that help with school applications, career or educational counseling, and job placements, so consider visiting these offices before leaving campus.

Expenses. It is also important to look into the costs associated with time off. Costs

can include not only living expenses but also health insurance premiums, because coverage usually is not available through parents' plans for adult dependents who are no longer students. To mitigate the risks associated with this loss of insurance, temporary insurance is available. But this option is usually expensive.

Working full or part time is one way to earn money for gap-year travel and other activities, and many jobs provide insurance and other benefits. Service programs might offer a stipend and pay for housing, education, and other costs, but participants often must learn to get by with less than they are accustomed to. Some businesses and consultants specialize in arranging gap years, but many of the programs require payment to cover participants' expenses—which may include transportation, lodging, and food—that add to the cost of taking time off.

Activities and goals. Although some people might view the gap year as an escape from a structured environment, the better organized a gap year is, the better the experience promises to be. Start getting organized by determining the types of activities to be pursued and the overall goals for the time off.

For example, a recent college graduate might work with a volunteer teaching organization to test his skills, and consider his potential, as a teacher. Or a high school graduate might travel and work in restaurants, taking a break from her schooling to get hands-on experience useful for deciding whether to study hospitality management in college.

People often do more than one activity during their gap year; for example, they might travel for several weeks and then get a job or they might participate in a service program while taking a class in an area of interest. Some gap-year participants do different activities during the fall and spring, breaking up their time like a college semester, sometimes with another activity during the summer and winter breaks.

Popular options for gap-year activities include travel or cultural immersion, volunteering, public service work, and full- or part-time jobs or internships. Service

organizations, such as AmeriCorps, are a good source to begin research. The AmeriCorps Web site, for example, allows people to search for programs by area of interest and State. (For a list of other organizations that offer possible gap-year experiences, see the box on pages 32–33.)

Almost anything can make a gap year rewarding, say experts, so long as the time is well planned. What is important is that the chosen activity or activities be of interest and benefit the gap-year participant in some way. Each person’s experience will differ.

Likewise, the sources of satisfaction will vary. For some, it’s the sense of accomplishment they get from following a different path. “The best part,” says Kohut of her 2-year break between undergraduate and graduate school, “is being able to say that I did it. I went out there on my own, kind of against the grain, and I made it.”

More information

Students should visit their school’s career guidance office to find out more about gap years and possible gap-year activities. Public

libraries have books about travel, internships, careers, and other subjects that might be helpful to people considering what to do during their time off. And One-Stop Career Centers have information on short-term job, service, and internship opportunities. Find a center near you by visiting www.servicelocator.org or calling toll free, 1 (877) 348–0502 or TTY 1 (877) 348–0501.

Career seekers sometimes take a gap year to help them determine the type of work they’re interested in doing. You can explore career options without taking a gap year—or even if you decide to take time off—by using the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* or *Occupational Outlook Quarterly*, available online at www.bls.gov/ooq and www.bls.gov/ooq, respectively. The *Handbook* provides nearly 300 occupational descriptions, along with detailed working conditions, earnings, and job outlook information. The *Quarterly* explores work and careers through a variety of topics.



Creating the perfect gap year: Locating gap-year activities

Deciding what to do during a gap year requires identifying your interests and checking into available options. The Web sites listed below offer a place to start. They are not, however, the only sources of gap-year information. For example, faith-based groups might have service or volunteer opportunities. Many employers offer internships and jobs. And you can learn more about positions overseas in the article “Working abroad: Finding international internships and entry-level jobs” in the fall 2006 issue of the *Quarterly*, online at www.bls.gov/ooq/2006/fall/art01.pdf.

Finances associated with gap-year activities vary. Many domestic service programs offer a living stipend, health insurance, and an educational award of up to \$4,725. Some provide housing or other benefits as well. International service opportunities can offer similar forms of assistance. Volunteer work is typically self-funded, while jobs, fellowships, and internships are often paid positions. And organizations that help plan a gap year usually charge a fee for their services, so be sure to look into their reputation.

This list is based, in part, on material originally published by the University of Delaware’s Bank of America Career Center. Used with permission.

General resources

Idealist

www.idealist.org

ServeNet

www.servenet.org

Domestic service

AmeriCorps State and National

www.americorps.org

AmeriCorps Vista

www.americorps.org/vista

AmeriCorps NCCC

www.americorps.org/nccc

Public Allies

www.publicallies.org

Teach for America

www.teachforamerica.org

City Year

www.cityyear.org

International service

Peace Corps

www.peacecorps.gov

United Nations Volunteers

www.unv.org

Volunteer

Serve.gov

www.serve.gov

Global Volunteer Network

www.volunteer.org.nz

Peacework Development Fund

www.peacework.org

Projects Abroad

www.projects-abroad.org

Global Service Corps

www.globalservicecorps.org

United Planet

www.unitedplanet.org

Jobs, fellowships, and internships

Studentjobs.gov

The Student Conservation Association

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

The Washington Center

CORO Fellows in Public Affairs

Washington Semester Programs

The Red Cross

www.studentjobs.gov

www.thesca.org

www.fws.gov

www.twc.edu

www.coro.org

www.american.edu/washingtonsemester

www.redcross.org

Odd/Adventure jobs

Back Door Jobs

Cool Works

Outdoor Adventure Jobs

Fun Jobs

www.backdoorjobs.com

www.coolworks.com

www.oapn.net

www.funjobs.com

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