

Why Your High School Senior Should Take a Gap Year

The growing trend of taking a year off between high school and college can be a benefit if done right

At the end of each school year, more than a million high school seniors across the country commit to attend college. But a growing number of them aren't going to set foot on campus in the fall, electing instead for a gap year—a trend that is leaving some parents feeling anxious and uncertain.

Many educators tout taking a gap year, saying that kids who step off the academic treadmill after high school to work, travel, volunteer or explore other interests are more mature when they arrive at college and more engaged in their education going forward.



With this in mind, a handful of colleges—Princeton and the University of North Carolina, among them—offer scholarships and fellowships to incoming freshmen who take a gap year. Harvard has long encouraged the practice. And in February, Tufts University launched its 1+4 bridge program, which, starting in fall 2015, will offer gap-year opportunities for national and international service regardless of a student's ability to pay. Meanwhile, organizations that promote a gap year, including the American Gap Association and USA Gap Fairs, are expanding rapidly.

Still, the idea of a gap year can be frightening for parents—especially for those who have carefully cultivated a cradle-to-college track for their children. Many fear that once their son or daughter veers away from a formal education, they won't go back.

“As parents this is not what you expect,” says Abbe Levin, whose 18-year-old son, Jules Arsenault, attends a small college-preparatory school in Bethel, Maine. “When you have a kid who is not showing interest, or even curiosity about college, that is a tough place to be.”

In the end, though, Levin and her husband came around to accept Jules's decision to take a gap year—and, in so doing, they wound up following three guidelines that experts say are crucial to ensuring a successful experience.

First, they had Jules apply to college—and then defer enrollment—so that he knows he has something solid waiting for him at the end of his hiatus. For him, that's a spot at Roosevelt University in Chicago.

Second, they've made sure that Jules has a structured plan—and isn't just sitting on the couch, playing video games and thinking about what he'll do next. And third, they've made sure that he has skin in the game, helping to fund his own gap-year plans.

Formal gap year programs can cost as much as \$30,000. But there are many low-cost options, including volunteering for a program such as AmeriCorps, City Year or WWOOF-USA, all of which pay for room and board. Other kids work for a while in order to fund a six-month gap-year program or travel abroad.

This is exactly what Jules is doing. Starting next month, he'll be washing dishes on Monhegan Island in Maine, a tourist destination a boat ride away from his hometown of Boothbay. He'll work through early October before traveling to Southeast Asia.

"At first I wanted a year off because I thought it was going to be fun," Jules says. "But now I realize that it will give me time to figure out what I want to do. I didn't want to go to college and not know what I want to study, or get a degree just to have one. With what college costs these days, I wanted to get a degree in something that would be useful to me."

Levin credits Jules's high school college counselor for reminding her "that every kid has their own timeline," and for encouraging her to "let Jules take the lead." She also bluntly told Levin that if she pushed her son to head straight to college, it could backfire.

"As parents we raise our kids to think for themselves, to be creative, to follow their own path," Levin says. "But then suddenly, starting in their junior year, we are asking them to go along this very prescribed path that might not be right for them. Now I feel like when he does go to college, he'll really be ready."

Studies suggest that Levin is right. Robert Claggett, who served as a senior admissions officer at Harvard and is also the former dean of admissions at Middlebury College, has found that those who delay a year before starting college have GPAs that, on a 4.0 scale, are 0.15 to 0.2 higher than otherwise would be expected.

"What we saw was startling," says Claggett, now the director of college counseling at St. Stephens Episcopal, a college preparatory school in Austin, Texas. "The prevailing wisdom is that kids are going to lose their hard-earned study skills if they take a gap year. The opposite is true."

While taking a gap year is not right for everyone, Claggett believes that many college-bound kids could benefit from taking time off—particularly those who are burnt out from years of piling on honors and AP classes, tutors, test prep, community-service projects, varsity sports, piano lessons and other extracurricular activities.

A gap year is a chance for kids to take a breath and do something that doesn't require them to ask, "How will this look on my college application?" he says. "To just do something for the pure love of doing it."

Corinne Monaco, 23, was certainly ready to take a breath after she graduated in 2009 from ICE Institute for Collaborative Education, an academically rigorous public school in New York.

"I was always one of those kids who liked school and was looking forward to going to college," Monaco says. "But by the end of second semester senior year it became clear that I needed a break. I was exhausted. I didn't have the energy to dive right back into school."

Monaco worked part-time for the better part of a year for an environmental education, arts and advocacy organization. She then spent a few months traveling across the country.

When she finally got to college, she was genuinely excited to be back in the classroom again. Says Monaco, who will graduate on Saturday from Pitzer College with a dual degree in art and environmental analysis: "Taking a gap year was the best decision I ever made."