



TIME FOR A GAP YEAR?

As this year's seniors are considering their plans for next year, indications are that more than ever are planning for a gap year.



BY ETHAN KNIGHT

2020 has left students and parents with even more questions about postsecondary plans than usual. And, as usual, they're turning to school counselors for help. As students have navigated 2020 and are now planning for 2021, indications are that more students are considering a gap year. We hope this article will help clarify why a gap year is an option worth highlighting, even while COVID-19 is present.

According to the Gap Year Association (GYA), a gap year is a “semester or year of experiential learning, typically taken after high school and prior to career or postsecondary education, to deepen one’s practical, professional and personal awareness.” Although referred to as a gap “year,” they vary in length. Some can be as few as two months, but more commonly they last for a semester. Occasionally they are a full year or more.

No two gap-year experiences are alike; it's more of a choose-your-own-adventure than a one-size-fits-all. Generally, a good gap year includes a combination of:

Volunteering and/or service: to raise awareness about and understanding of domestic and global challenges and issues.

Career exploration or internship: to connect education with real-world experiences and accelerate into a college major and/or professional life.

Paid work: to earn money and gain financial literacy while testing career options. A gap year doesn't have to cost a lot of money, but we all know humans do better when they invest in their own outcomes a bit.

Free radical: to allow space to explore the unknown while learning more about yourself and the world. This is a caution to not over-structure the gap year.

With the arrival of COVID-19, gap-year programs are increasingly going to an online model or hybrid. However, established programs aren't the only way to pursue a gap year; roughly half of gap-year students build their own gap year using shorter building blocks.

Just to whet your appetite, gap-year students can: serve in schools, build and restore houses, make guitars, work with

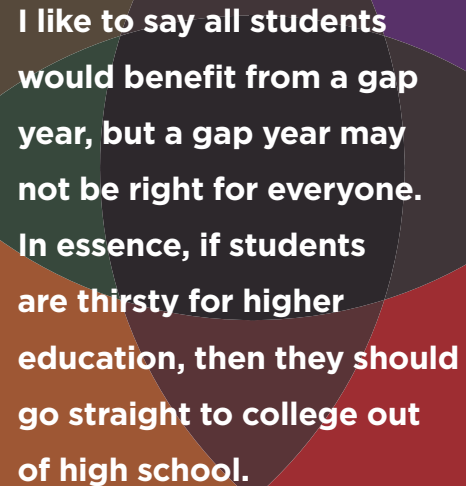
animals, explore careers, pursue virtual internships, participate in conservation service opportunities, develop outdoor and survival skills, get certified to teach English as a foreign language, work on organic farms, learn a new language, conduct scientific research, combat climate change, intern with sports organizations, build cross-cultural awareness and understanding, take part in citizen-science, train sled dogs, learn to cook, learn to code, contribute to social justice initiatives, survey wildlife, create art, make movies, volunteer in a national park and so much more. There are thousands of opportunities.

Gap-Year Benefits

The benefits of gap years have been researched and documented. Here are a few of the highlights:

- Gap-year students do return to college; 90% are back within a year. As a school counselor, you may hear from families who fear their children will get so enticed with life during a gap year, they will never return to college. Research shows gap-year students return, usually with increased motivation to get the most out of their education. The current advice is for students to go ahead and apply to college but then defer their admission. This allows them to use college application resources wisely and to stay on the path to college.
- Gap-year students gain maturity, self-confidence, a sense of purpose, and college- and career-readiness skills as a result of gap-year experiences.
- Gap-year students do well in college. Research shows they have higher GPAs than students who didn't take a gap year, and they graduate in fewer years than their peers who didn't take a gap year.
- Once in careers, 86% are satisfied or very satisfied after a gap-year experience.
- Higher education institutions invest more in students who are passionate about learning and their educational communities, as most gap-year graduates demonstrate.

Like all professionals in education and other fields, those of us in the gap-year



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community are working through different scenarios as COVID-19 realities continue to unfold. First and foremost, of course, is the safety of students, as well as that of the local communities in which the students serve. Here are a few considerations that many in the Gap Year Association membership are actively debating:

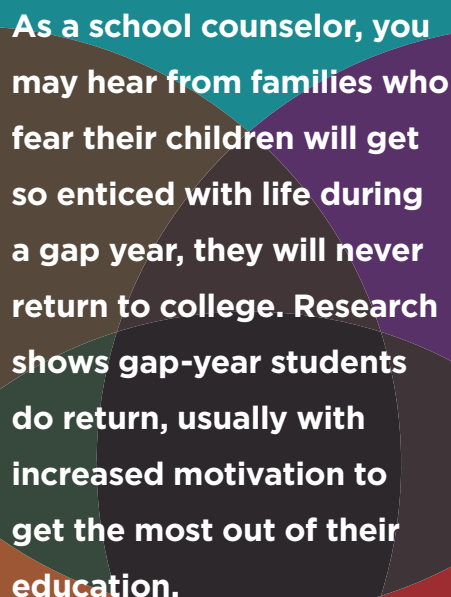
Corona-conscious programming: Gap-year programs have adopted rigorous COVID-19 protocols in line with emerging standards for best practice. We continue to examine, research and adapt these practices.

Domestic programs: Necessity is the mother of invention, and predictably we're seeing a renaissance of students spending their gap year domestically. Not all domestic options are outdoors-oriented, but they are all offering interactive, safety-conscious, educational (and fun) experiences.

International options: There were limited for fall 2020 due to travel restrictions related to COVID-19, but a handful of countries are active in their ability to take students if educationally focused.

Virtual, hybrid and collaborative options: The gap-year community is flexible and adaptable. As in traditional education, programs have developed high-quality, interactive virtual segments.

Availability: Although we're seeing a



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renaissance of gap-year options domestically, most organizations had to reduce their capacity due to COVID-19. Applying earlier is encouraged.

Affordability: Gap years are accessible to every student. Gap years can be built to match any student's interests and opportunity if students are willing to engage in the process and be creative. AmeriCorps is a great option for a paid gap year, with GYA surveys showing increased scholarship opportunities for low-income and BIPOC youth.

Unique to COVID-19: Taking a gap year during COVID-19 isn't for everyone, but those who do will have another year to see how the "new normal" settles in for careers, as well as allow another year for affected family finances to be considered in financial aid.

Tips for Exploring Gap Years

Put it on the initial college list: Giving students "permission" to have the initial conversation can be critical, as most students feel pressure to go straight into postsecondary education, when they may, in fact, yearn for some perspective first. I like to say all students would benefit from a gap year, but a gap year may not be right for everyone. In essence, if students are thirsty for higher education, then they should go straight to college out of high school. But if they're not sure what they want to pursue as a career or are

ungrounded in what that career is, then a gap year can be a great accelerator.

Ask students to define their "why": A good place for all potential gap-year students to start exploring is to determine why taking intentional time off might be the right path for them. What do you enjoy doing that you would like to explore as a possible career? What do you hope to gain, and how would you like to grow? Do you want to contribute to particular core issues or causes?

Interestingly, data increasingly is showing it doesn't matter what type of activity students do on their gap year. Rather, the act of choosing and experimenting in the real world, with some intention, is what produces perspective and subsequently positive results.

Research: The GYA website has numerous resources to help students along the gap-year journey, including: research, a planning guide, a transition guide, searchable databases of programs, information on college deferral policies, information on scholarships and financial aid, listings of gap-year counselors and much more.

As a bit of advice, we strongly encourage students taking no more than 30 minutes on the GYA website to write down activities that are exciting. They should pay less attention to the programs and focus on the activities. This list easily turns into a great roadmap to build a phenomenal and successful gap year.

Partner with a gap-year counselor: There are professional gap-year consultants who have extensive experience planning gap years and are eager to offer support before, during and after a gap year. They have rates that are hourly or by the package and frequently offer free, GYA-approved virtual sessions for high school counselors. GYA is happy to serve as a liaison for these types of objective information sessions.

I didn't know what a gap year was until I was presented with the option at a high school assembly. And although it took me two years to really unpack my gap year, my summarizing phrase is: "I already have everything I could possibly need to be successful." My experience taught me that success is personally defined, and I'll find a lot more success if I know – and

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Due to an increase in the number of students exploring gap-year options, the Gap Year Association (GYA) has been providing real-time leadership and support for students, school counselors, educational institutions, researchers, parents and other stakeholders. This has involved weekly virtual forums where program staff, higher education representatives and school counselors convene to share experiences, solve problems and innovate around COVID-19.

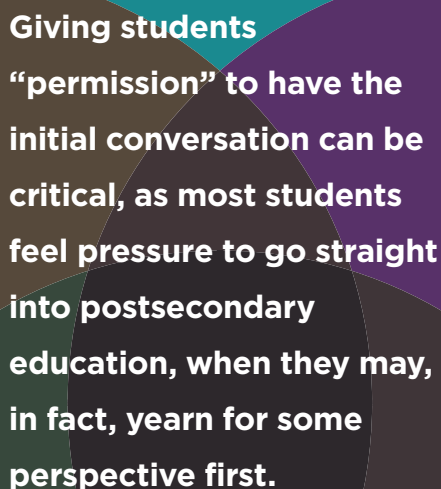
Additionally, GYA has free planning resources available for students and families, as well as a network of experts to lean on. Learn more at:

- www.covidgapyears.com/
- www.gapyearassociation.org/programs-covid.php
- www.gapyearassociation.org/program-search.php
- www.gapyearassociation.org/planning.php

believe in – what I'm pursuing.

You may have students who aren't certain higher education is their next path, and they may want to do more than work for a year. A gap year is that middle path. Our research and the myriad personal stories we have heard over decades attest to the positive impact gap years have, even – and maybe particularly – in this time of COVID-19. As one gap-year student said, reflecting the sentiment of tens of thousands, "It is a transformational experience that has just begun to define my life. If you can dream it, you can do it."⁵⁰

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