

God in the Gap Year: The Benefits of Taking Time Off Before Going to College

By Derek Melleby

INITIATIVE

TRANSITION

COLLEGE



On a recent flight, I had two interesting conversations that affirmed much of my thinking about how students can transition more successfully from high school to college. The young lady seated next to me on my right was a senior in high school, seemed very bright and had been accepted to her “first choice,” The College of William & Mary, an academically rigorous institution in Virginia.

“But I’m not going next Fall,” she said. “I don’t think I’m ready for college. I found out that I can defer my admission until the next year, and so I’m going to spend time teaching English in South America.” *Really?* She went on to explain how she didn’t want to waste time and money by going to college without clear reasons and goals. Taking time to serve others in South America would not only help *them*, but also would help *her* better understand her place in the world and the gifts she had been given. In her mind, this would enhance her college experience. In fact, William & Mary applauded her decision to take a “gap year” and was looking forward to her arrival a year later. I never got around to telling her what I did for a living. She looked tired and a little bored so I simply encouraged her and told her I thought she was making a wise decision.

Seated on my left was an older woman, who, ironically, was returning home after teaching a college course in Central America. A college professor for more than 20 years, our conversation focused on the state of incoming college students. She has noticed a shift. More and more students have no idea why they are in college, and many come for what she considers to be individualistic and self-centered reasons: they go to college to get a degree to get a job, with very little reflection on becoming a better person or their responsibility as a global citizen. She thoroughly enjoys the opportunity to teach students abroad because they are more engaged in their studies and understand that what they are learning makes a difference in the world.

If nothing else, my calling was certainly affirmed in this two-hour flight! For the past six years, I have been studying college transition and offering seminars to students and parents about how to transition more smoothly to the world of the university. Put simply, my hope has been to offer students a vision for how to make the most of their college experience from a Christian perspective. As I’ve traveled the country talking to students, parents, youth pastors and college professors, I have begun to hone in on some answers and draw some conclusions. One of my conclusions is this: *students should strongly consider taking a gap year before going to college.*

In an interview for the journal of the American Family Association, I suggested this: “College is not for everyone. My hunch is that when all of the current research being done on college transition is finished, the solution to the problem of students transitioning poorly will be simple, but most people won’t do it. If you want students to transition well and make the most of their college experience, students should strongly consider not going to college immediately after high school. More and more 18-year-olds are not developmentally ready—emotionally, intellectually and spiritually—for college. Not to mention the financial burden that college brings. Not going to college or taking some time off before going to college should seriously be considered.” To my surprise, I am not alone in my assessment. Increasingly more and more students and parents are seeing the benefits of taking a gap year before and during college. What follows is an overview of what a gap year is and why it has been a beneficial decision for many students.

Gap year FAQs

What is a gap year? A gap year is simply taking “time off with a purpose.” It is not a time to do nothing, but is an intentional time of reflection and discovery before a major transition in life. Taking a gap year is very prevalent among students in other parts of the world (United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and Canada) and its popularity is increasing in the United States. It does not necessarily have to be for an entire year. The terminology also is used to refer to taking a semester “off” as well.

Why do students take a gap year? A gap year brings focus. According to *The Princeton Review*, “Likes and dislikes, plans for the future, and even the reason why you want to be in school can come into sharper focus with a simple change in environment. Time off can give students added focus and enthusiasm when they return to school. If a student isn’t ready for college, time off can cultivate maturity and self-discipline... Admissions counselors at professional schools tell us that taking time off for school is rarely a disadvantage for an applicant. In fact, they often choose the student who took a year off and is ready to become fully engaged in school over the one who has been on autopilot and will burn out in a few months.”

Many students simply go through the motions: they go to high school, they go to college, they get a job and very few are reflective on why they are doing what they are doing. A gap year can provide a remarkable opportunity to take a “time-out,” to be forced out of a routine, and into deeper engagement with life and learning.

There is an economic benefit as well. In the article, “How to Become a World Citizen, Before Going to College,” *New York Times* reporter Tanya Mohn suggests, “It makes economic sense for students to explore their interests before college, advocates of gap years say; freshmen who do so are less likely to party too much, fail courses or change majors repeatedly—all of which can result in more time needed to graduate, and more expense.” Taking a gap year can be a time for students to think more thoroughly about why they are going to college, *why* they are studying, and what their future career plans might be.

What do students do during a gap year? A simple Internet search for “gap year” reveals many Web sites dedicated to helping students design and plan a gap year experience. Popular sites include: www.gap-year.com, www.gapyear.com and www.collegegapyear.com. There are all kinds of opportunities for students domestically and globally. Here are four general categories for what students do: volunteer/service, explore/travel, study abroad (you can do this before going to college), and work/internships. There are also explicitly Christian gap year opportunities. Students can take part in short-term missions or inner city outreach, and there is a growing trend for camps and churches to offer programs for gap year students to study the Bible, take classes in developing a Christian worldview, and think deeply about calling and vocation. (For a growing list of Christian gap year programs visit: www.cpyu.org/gapyear.)

Another alternative is to take a semester or year of courses at a community college while working a part-time job. This “real world” experience can have similar benefits as a more intense gap year program. Explore the Web sites, ask guidance counselors and talk to missions’ pastors. You will be surprised by the number of opportunities that exist for students at this stage in life.

How do parents know if a gap year is a good decision for their child? In their helpful book, *The Gap-Year Advantage: Helping Your Child Benefit from Time Off Before or During College*, authors Karl Haigler and Rae Nelson suggest that parents ask and wrestle with the following questions:

- Have you asked your child why she wants to go to college after high school (instead of where does she want to go to school)?
- Are you focused on ensuring your child has access to the right college—or on her success in college and life beyond?

- Is your child—your 18-, 19- or 20-year-old—ready to succeed in college now?
- Does your child have not only the academic preparation, but also the focus, discipline and maturity to take full advantage of perhaps the most pivotal transition period in her young life?

The authors add, “If you hesitated before answering these questions, it may be time for a reality check.” Having a good conversation around these questions should help parents have a better sense of whether or not taking a gap year is a wise decision. My fear is that most parents and youth workers are not asking these kinds of questions. College has simply become the assumed next step after high school, and students and parents are paying the price.

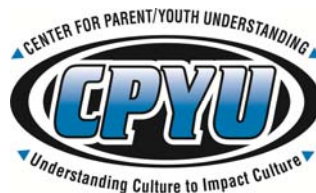
I can’t stress this enough: fewer and fewer students are ready academically, emotionally and spiritually for college. Haigler and Nelson conclude, “According to the American College Testing service, less than half of those entering traditional four-year colleges after high school will have graduated after five years. One-quarter will have dropped out during their freshman year. Of those in college, many will report that they do not know why they are there or how their classes relate to any life or career goal. Many of those in school, as well as those who have left, will have accumulated considerable debt without a realistic chance of finding a job... For a number of students, a gap-year plan may make the difference between graduating successfully from college with a strategy for life beyond and floating uncertainly on a path of young adulthood that may be accompanied by significant financial and emotional costs. Through the gap year, for the first time in their highly structured lives, students may have the opportunity to discover and follow their passion and to truly live in the present.”

And for Christian students I would add this: *taking a gap year could provide a remarkable opportunity to think more deeply about the person God has created you to be and where He might be calling you to serve him.*

Recently, I was speaking to a group of students in Pittsburgh. Near the end of my talk, I explained that more and more students consider taking a gap year before going to college. After the talk, a student came up to me with tears in his eyes and thanked me for making that suggestion. The student didn’t think he was ready for college, but he didn’t know an alternative to suggest to his parents. Learning about the benefits of a gap year gave him a way to talk about this subject. My hope is that there are more conversations like this among parents and their college-bound kids.

Taking a gap year is not for everyone. Many students are ready for college, to be sure. But if we are going to be serious about transitioning well and making the most of the college experience, a gap year should definitely be considered as a legitimate “next step” after high school.

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