

**CAREER**

**DEVELOPMENT**

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**Webinar  
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# Gap Year Pros and Cons: Helping Students Determine if a Gap Year Might be Helpful

Jennifer R. Curry, Ph.D. NCC, Shirley B. Barton  
Endowed Professor & Molly E. Ravn

Louisiana State University

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## Webinar Objectives:

At the conclusion of this session attendees will be able:

- Define a gap year.
- Articulate how a gap year can help students prepare for college and career.
- Understand the importance of students choosing a gap year with intentionality.
- Describe types of gap year programs.
- Identify pros and cons of gap years based on student development.

## Defining Gap Years

- Gap years have been common throughout Europe since the 1960's, with the mission to allow students that have just completed their secondary schooling experience a time to “reassess, take stock, and enjoy a different type of learning experience—be it in the form of travel, paid employment or internship, studying a foreign language, or performing service work.” (SCA 2021)
- Gap years were initially viewed as an experience reserved for humanitarians or those that were not capable of the traditional college experience, however in recent years there has been a shift to understanding the gap year as a time for personal and professional growth. (Hermann et al., 2017)
- The Gap Year Association formally defines a gap year as “a structured period of time when a student takes an intentional break from formal education.” (GYA, 2020)
- “A semester or year of experiential learning, typically taken after high school and prior to career or post-secondary education, in order to deepen one’s practical, professional, and personal awareness.” (GYA, 2021)

## Why Do Students Choose a Gap Year?

According to the Gap Year Association (GYA, 2020), GY alumni were surveyed about factors that motivated them to pursue a gap year. Of survey respondents (n=1,190), the following motivations ranked as the top six:

- Wanted to gain life experiences/grow personally (81%)
- Wanted to travel/see the world/experience other cultures (70%)
- Was burned out/wanted to take a break from school (35%)
- Wanted to learn/practice a foreign language (27%)
- Wanted to volunteer/do service work (22%)
- Wanted to figure out what to study or explore in college (20%)

(Gallagher & Kempie, 2020)

## Similar Results...

- American Gap Association's (AGA) survey of national alumni conducted in conjunction with Temple University's Institute for Survey Research.
- A total of 558 completers
- Respondents reported reasons for pursuing a GY, and the top 3 included:
  - (1) wanted to gain experiences, personal growth (92%)
  - (2) wanted to travel, see the world, other cultures; and
  - (3) wanted a break from academic track. Most other choices were around 50% or less which demonstrated that these top 3 choices were the main reasons for the majority of alumni taking the survey

(Hoe, 2015)

## NACE Competencies...

- Critical Thinking/Problem Solving.
- Teamwork/Collaboration
- Professionalism/Work Ethic
- Oral/Written Communications
- Career Management
- Global/Intercultural Fluency
- Leadership
- Digital Technology



(NACE, 2021)

## 2018 Colorado College Gap Year Research Consortium

The primary mission of the Gap Year Research Consortium at Colorado College is to encourage and disseminate the results of higher educational research on the outcomes of students taking a gap year between high school and college. The Consortium will establish a clearinghouse for the research methodologies that colleges are using, so that member institutions can replicate those methodologies and/or share data within the Consortium for the purpose of meta-analysis across institutions, encouraging close collaboration between college admissions leaders and their institutional research colleagues. We envision sharing the results of this research with member institutions and the broader educational community through bi-annual newsletters, symposia, and articles in publications.

## Research on Gap Years and Student Development

- Helicopter parenting leads to less efficacy, less confidence, and difficulty in post secondary transitions (Lythcott-Haims, 2015)
- Helicoptering is also statistically significantly found to negatively affect perceived autonomy and competency (Schiffrin et al., 2013)
- King (2011), conducted a qualitative study of 23 GY participants and found that participants experienced a sense of maturing, gaining confidence and independence from their families, and worked on their own personal growth particularly in the form of identity development (pivotal to college preparation)
- King (2011) also found that GY participants believed they had a potential career edge because their gap years had provided them real world experiences beyond academics and they felt more confident about interviewing for jobs
- Martin (2010), used structural equation modeling (SEM) to predict factors that influence students GY decision making. As predicted by Martin (2010), postschool uncertainty and low achievement were predictive of higher motivation for a gap year. Martin also found that a gap year did not adversely affect academic motivation at university, but rather had more adaptive profiles following gap years.

## Research on Gap Years and Student Development

- In a study of students at competitive, high pressure high schools, nearly half (49%) of all students reported feeling a great deal of stress on a daily basis and 31 percent reported feeling somewhat stressed. Females reported significantly higher levels of stress than males (60% vs. 41%). Grades, homework, and preparing for college were the greatest sources of stress for both genders. A substantial minority, 26 percent of participants, reported symptoms of depression at a clinically significant level (Leonard et al. , 2015)
- Rask (2020), using regression models found a statistically significant difference in GPAs for first semester and for the first year for students who had taken gap years compared to their peers who had not taken gap years. By sophomore year the effect had fallen substantially and by the junior year there was a major drop in differences between gap year and non-gap year peers (Rask, 2020)

## How can gap years assist students in preparing for college and career?

Based on data from the GYA, the top 5 skills that GY alumni respondents reported improved for them during their GY was:

- Cultural awareness (55%)
- Communication (48%)
- Self-direction (39%)
- Problem solving (30%)
- Lifelong learning (28%)

The following skills were ranked the highest for those who strongly agreed that their AmeriCorps experience helped them develop that skill:

1. Adapting to new situations (71%)
2. Responding to unexpected challenges (66%)
3. Working with people different from myself (66%)

(Gallagher & Kempie, 2020)

## Choosing a gap year with Intentionality

**Step 1:** Make a list of goals you would like to achieve, skills you want to learn, and experiences you want to have.

**Step 2:** Challenge yourself with where to go and what to do. Now is the time to experience the world by living in it.

**Step 3:** Tackle the logistics. Consider implications for college after your gap year, and also logistics for your actual gap year.

*“No two gap years are alike: Intentionality, deliberately expanding one’s comfort zones, having a cross-cultural experience, and reflecting on your experiences are critical components to a quality gap year.”*



(GYA, 2021)

## Types of Gap Year Programs

- Most programs fall into one or more of these categories, and many individuals choose to mix and match experiences.
- Examples of programs:
  - Oyster: Gap and Responsible Travel Specialists
  - Youth International
  - AdventureEXP

### 1. VOLUNTEERING | SERVICE

To emphasize empathy, hardship, and the interdependence of us all.

### 2. CAREER EXPLORATION | INTERNSHIP

To understand what your major might be like in the real world.

### 3. PAID WORK

For increased ownership, improved career ambition, and financial literacy.

### 4. FREE RADICAL

Allowing some space to explore the unknown is what makes a "gap year".

## Types of Gap Year Programs

Gap year programming common themes...

- Cultural Immersion/Language Development- Chinese Gap Year in Taipei
- Travel abroad- Pacific Discovery
- Academic programming/Skill training- BroadFutures
- Wilderness/Adventure- National Center for Outdoor & Adventure Education
- Art- ArtsBridge
- Religious affiliation- Tahoe Residential Leadership Camp
- Social justice movements- Cottonwood Gulch

## Other Planning Considerations

- Helping students to consider:
  - Structure, Communication Restrictions, Ethical, Budget, Duration, Insurance/visas/logistics, Self-care, Equity, Medications, Supervision and Safety, Relationships, Academics, Financial Commitments & Aid
  - Safety ([https://www.gapyearassociation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Planning\\_Your\\_Gap\\_Year.pdf](https://www.gapyearassociation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Planning_Your_Gap_Year.pdf))
- Preparing for a gap year and new experiences
  - Learning language/important phrases
  - Testing new sleeping arrangements
  - Tasting new foods
- How does equity impact the ways we are viewing these gap years?

## Potential Gap Year Benefits

1. Academic Benefits: Students who are high achieving but feeling burnout or those who are underachieving, unsure about their post-secondary direction and unmotivated may benefit (both ends of the academic spectrum).
2. Financial: A gap year may allow some students to save necessary funds for emergencies and unforeseen expenses that could derail them later.
3. Social: Some students may need extra time to mature. A gap year can provide time to better understand how to serve others, how to work with individuals from other cultures, and how to be more independent.
4. Emotional: A gap year may help some students build coping strategies, take an academic break, develop resilience, address depression and anxiety before entering the stress of college.

## Potential Gap Year Detractors

1. Lack of diversity and inclusion.
2. They can be extremely expensive depending on the program.
3. Students may be far from home during a gap year which can be challenging.
4. Many of the academic outcomes of gap years have been measured on highly elite students from high income homes and other measures are self-perception. Therefore, it's hard to know how much career or college impact these programs actually have.
5. Potential for Gap Year melt.

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