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# Give Me a Break: A Study of the Gap Year

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Give Me a Break: A Study of the Gap Year

By

Sophia Wellons

An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of Requirements for Graduation from the  
Western Oregon University Honors Program

Dr. Sriram Khe

Thesis Advisor

Dr. Gavin Keulks

Honors Program Director

Western Oregon University

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### Abstract

The Gap Year is a period of time taken away from formal education to pursue experiential learning and self discovery. The present study sought to investigate and understand how the Gap Year fits in to the American high school and university contexts. High school counselors and university students were interviewed and surveyed in order to understand if the Gap Year is part of the post high school plan discourse. Results indicated that counselors and students had a positive attitude towards the Gap Year; however, academic discussions of it remained limited. Implications of this study suggest that a Gap year may be a worthy post-high school option to discuss, and it is perhaps an indication of a new life stage, Emerging Adulthood. Further research including longitudinal and case study data was proposed.

Keywords: *Gap Year, university, experiential learning, time off, burn out, post high school plans.*

### Give Me a Break: An Investigative Study of the Gap Year

*“You are educated. Your certification is in your degree. You may think of it as the ticket to the good life. Let me ask you to think of an alternative.*

*Think of it as your ticket to change the world”– Tom Brokaw*

Go to college, get a degree, and get a job. It is the advice most United States high school students receive the minute they walk through their high school home room door. A college degree, any degree, is necessary for success, they are told. Just go to a four year university and figure out who you are and what you want to do there. A college degree is a sure thing.

Once upon a time, this may have been sound advice. Liberal arts education has always been about personal enrichment and self fulfillment. Its purpose is mainly for the personal cognitive and psychological benefit for the student. That has not changed. However, the lens in which students view higher education has.

A four year degree is now seen as an investment, specifically an investment towards a financially stable future. Students flock to universities, not for the personal enlightenment achieved through liberal arts education, but for the diploma that serves as a prerequisite for a job. They have been promised that a college degree will guarantee them, at the very least, a middle class lifestyle no matter what. It is a sound investment for all.

Unfortunately, a college degree is not a golden ticket to success, and, like all investments, pursuing higher education comes with certain risks; for example, crippling

student loan debt, the high probability of dropping out, and wasting years and money attempting to figure out what exactly what a student would like to do.

Higher education still remains a fairly good investment. However, students must not invest in it blindly. Self discovery has become too expensive to be done on a university campus. If students decide to pursue higher education, they need to go into it knowing what it is they want out of their experience and why. They need to have discovered themselves before investing their time and money into their future. They need to make their decision well informed and with eyes wide open.

Taking a year off before pursuing higher education may be what many high school seniors need in order to come to that understanding. Immersing themselves in life experiences—jobs, internships, volunteering, or travel—may provide the necessary framework in which to develop themselves and their interests in order to make an informed decision about higher education.

Success does not begin and end with a college degree. Some distance away from formal education may assist students in understanding that. Taking a Gap Year may be what students need in order to truly make the most informed decision—practically and personally—about whether to pursue higher education.

### Purpose of Liberal Arts Education: Holistic Learning

*“A liberal arts education is at the heart of civil society, and at the heart of a liberal education is the act of teaching” –A.Bartlett Giamatti*

Higher education has become the surefire way to financial prosperity and job security. However, colleges and universities were never meant to take the place of trade schools, to become a place to funnel students into prospective careers. These institutions of higher education were places for personal and academic enlightenment; and, despite current views to the contrary, that continues to be the goal of liberal arts education.

Deblanco (2012), author of *College: What it was, is, and should be*, describes college as a place meant to be “an aid to reflection, a place and process whereby young people take stock of their talents and passions and begin to sort out their lives in a way that is true to themselves and responsible for others,” (p. 16). Students’ experiences should help them develop thought patterns, new passions, new perspectives, and possibly a new or different way of life. While some have found and may continue to find financially lucrative career prospects from it, a college degree was meant to be an investment that transcended the fickle value of a dollar; it should continue to pay off in unimaginable and creative ways throughout the graduates’ lives (Deblanco, 2012).

Even without the rich economic rewards and potential financial security, a college education should be an investment in an individual’s personal and lifelong development intellectually, socially, and psychologically. Essentially, students in higher education should embark on holistic learning: a theory that seeks to engage the whole person – intellect, emotions, desires, intuition, and imagination— in the learning process (Laird, 1985). Or, in Deblanco’s (2012) words, “the nature of learning is holistic: intellectual



development is inextricably connected to psychological emotional, social, civic and physical developments...thus [learning] includes identity formation as well as the development of resilience, perseverance, and emotional maturity” (132). Colleges and universities are places where students are able to develop themselves as human beings through the aid of their professors, their mentors, and their peers. The best teachers will spark a drive for knowledge, a passion for education, an ambition to think and reflect in the classroom and outside of it. Those teachers who “have always been...in the business of trying to get the soul out of bed, out of her deep habitual sleep” reside in abundance on college campuses (Deblanco, 2012).

Furthermore, higher education institutions should provide an atmosphere for learning and personal development, including the development of interpersonal skills. The ability to work with others from around the world and understand their perspectives is necessary to function in today’s global society. Deblanco (2012) says college is where those abilities are fostered. In fact, it is through higher education that students become prepared for a life in a global society. Through holistic learning, students should be able to engage in their thought processes, in the changes that are occurring in their own mind, and in the changes that are occurring in the world. And “the outcome of this engagement is a concrete and tangible change in the mind—a change in how one thinks and makes sense of the world,” (7). Liberal arts education should provide the student four years of personal, academic, and social fulfillment.

## Financial Benefits of College Degrees

*“Education costs money, but then so does ignorance”* – Claus Moser

However, the main reason most students are attending colleges is not for personal enrichment but for the diploma, the economic benefits, and to attain the necessary qualifications for an entry level job. Education as an investment for a financial future, via adequate job training, is what has drawn legions of students to higher education today.

With more careers and jobs requiring college education, attaining a college degree has become an economically rewarding — and sometimes necessary— achievement. College graduates, on average, out-earn those with only a high school diploma. For example, the Bureau of Labor’s (2012) statistics found that median annual earnings for those with a bachelor’s degree were \$55,423 while the median for those with only a high school diploma (or GED) was only \$33,904 (BLS, 2013). In 2008, in the throes of the United States recession, college degree holders’ median earnings were 53 percent higher than high school diploma holders’ median earnings (Kaufman, 2010). Similarly, a recent study from Georgetown’s University Center on Education and the Workforce found that a person with a bachelor’s degree is expected to earn around 84 percent more over a lifetime than someone with only a high school diploma (Carnevale, Rose, & Cheah, 2011). Over the course of their lives, high school diploma holders are expected to earn \$1.3 million. Compared to those with Bachelor’s degrees, who are expected to earn \$2.3 million over a lifetime, and graduate degree holders (Master’s \$2.7 over a lifetime; Doctoral \$3.3 million over a lifetime), it is apparent that, financially, college degrees pay off.

While there are instances where a high school diploma holder may out-earn a college graduate, within those occupations, degree holders benefit the most. For example, an accountant with only a high school diploma may earn more than a social service worker with a Bachelor's degree. However, when comparing an accountant with a high school diploma to an accountant with a Bachelor's degree, the degree holder generally earns more (Carnevale, Rose, & Cheah, 2011). This trend is seen across occupations.

College degree holders also fared better when faced with unemployment. Another Georgetown University study found that, while unemployment for college graduates rose during the recession, college graduates still had a lower unemployment rate than high school diploma holders. At its highest, unemployment for *all* college graduates did not go beyond 6.3 percent. For all high school graduates, it soared to 13.4 percent and, in 2011, settled at 9.4 percent (Carnevale, Jayasundera, & Cheah, 2012). For recent college graduates, the percentage of unemployment remained around 6.8 percent and the unemployment rate for recent high school graduates was 24 percent. Perhaps this is because, during the recession, 200,000 jobs were created that required workers to have, at least, a Bachelor's degree, and, during the recovery, two million jobs have been created for degree holders; but 5.6 million jobs held by workers with a high school diploma or less have vanished and continue to disappear. As Carnevale, Jayasundera and Cheah (2012) discovered, four out of five of the jobs the recession has destroyed were held by workers without college education. A four year degree has seemingly become a necessary job requirement, and therefore may seem like a universally beneficial investment.

## College as an Investment

*“Public education is an investment of our future”*—Matt Blunt

While the financial rewards seem indisputable, that is not the only reason 84 percent of graduates surveyed by the Pew Research Center said that college was a good investment (Hoover, 2011). However, it was not so much the time spent in the classroom or the actual content learned that students cited as being the most beneficial.

Interestingly, of the students interviewed by Hoover (2011), most discussed extra-curricular involvement as the main reason why their college experience benefited them. For instance, for one student, student government helped hone his networking skills which he utilized when he started his own business—one that had nothing to do with his major area of study. Another student mentioned that the diversity on campus helped her gain confidence and broadened her perspectives. Experiences such as study abroad, the gaining of confidence, and networking and interpersonal skills were all cited as the main reasons why college was a good investment, not the actual academics pursued.

Networking skills; civic engagement; experience with diverse languages, cultures, and modes of thinking; gains in confidence and social skills; and differing perspectives all were mentioned as to why college was a beneficial investment (Hoover, 2011). Little was said about the actual classroom learning unless it included opportunities to develop these less than tangible skills. The actual content learned in a major area of study was not nearly as memorable or beneficial as the personal development that took place—mostly outside of the classroom.

Therefore, this begs a question: is college the only place where this kind of learning can be achieved? Can students gain these crucial skills, experience this kind of personal growth, outside of a college campus? Can students learn to network, interact with diverse populations and languages, gain confidence, and experience personal development without paying thousands of dollars in tuition? The answer is yes. There are many alternative ways to gain these skills.

The fact of the matter is that most students are going to college now with the explicit purpose that it will help them find gainful employment. They transition into the higher education system directly from high school without really knowing what it is they want in life. In short, they are making an investment in their future without the necessary research or knowledge base to support their decision. While college used to be an excellent place to discover oneself and it did eventually lead to a fairly guaranteed higher income, “times, they are a-changin’”.

#### The High Price of College: Tuition, Debt, and Drop-outs

*“It makes no difference how low tuition is if the student has no source of funds to pay that tuition” –James E. Rogers*

College has become expensive for some students, perhaps too expensive to be spent finding out who they are and what they want to do in their lives. The pursuit of self discovery, in college at least, has become a bit pricey. Since the 1980s the college tuition inflation rate has risen almost 500 percent (Odland, 2012). Not only has this rate risen faster than the general inflation rate, it has outpaced family income levels as well

(Reining in college tuition, 2012). Unfortunately, it does not appear to be slowing down either. FinAid.org's inflation research has found that, on average, throughout the years, the annual rate of inflation for tuition ranged between 6 percent and 9 percent. Based on their data, they expect the average rate of college tuition inflation to hold steady at around 7-8 percent a year for the next decade, which means that college tuition will double roughly every nine years (Finaid.org).

Because a college degree has become seemingly vital and necessary to succeed in this economy, the majority of students and their families operate under the assumption that the degree and its "hefty price tag is worth paying at all costs," (Fertig, 2012). As it is, with state governments' continual decline in support for higher education, most students—two thirds—find it necessary to take out large loans in order to afford the cost (Odland, 2012; Reining in college tuition, 2012). But, while these loans make college more accessible to students in the present, that money must be repaid, with interest in the future.

College seniors who graduated in 2011 have, on average, around \$25,250 accumulated in student loan debt alone (*Student debt and the class of 2011*). In the Oregon the average debt for the class of 2011 ranged from \$21,973 for the Eastern Oregon University graduate to \$28,907 at Southern Oregon University (OUS, 2013). This is merely the average. Many students, especially those graduating from private universities, are carrying student loan debt in the hundreds of thousands. For some, it is a financial burden too heavy to carry. According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 25 percent of government student loans are in default; the number is higher for community college students at 31 percent. In Oregon, 40 percent of borrowers are under the age of 30

and the loan default rate ranges from 2.8 percent from Oregon State University graduates to 7.8 percent for Eastern Oregon University graduates (OUS, 2013). Around 9.3 percent of borrowers are past due in Oregon; nationally, 10.6 percent are (OUS, 2013).

According to the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, it is estimated that student loan debt has increased to \$956 billion (Bennett, 2012). It is the first time in the United States history that national student-loan debt has surpassed that of credit card debt (Bennett, 2012), and unlike credit card debt, student loans are almost impossible to liquidate even if declaring bankruptcy. For those that graduated saddled with impossible debt, their college investment may not be paying out too well. For those who did not manage to complete their degree, that investment is certainly not.

Graduation rates on college campuses are, in Deblanco's (2012) words, abysmal. The United States once led the world in the percentage of 25- 34 year olds with college degrees. In 2010, it ranked twelfth out of the 36 developed nations in the percentage of adult degree holders; South Korea ranked first with 63 percent of the adult population holding degrees (Bell, 2011; Lewin, 2010) The dropout rate at most four year universities remains at around 40 percent (Samuelson, 2011). Only 30 percent of adults manage to attain a four year degree, and, for many of them, that four year degree takes five or six years to complete (Kaufmann 2012). In fact, according to government statistics, only 63 percent of full-time college students obtain their bachelor's degrees in six or fewer years (Kingsbury, 2005 ). For African-American and Hispanic students, that number is less than 50 percent. For those students who borrowed money to go to school, 29 percent never graduate and are left with high debt. They are left without any credentials to show for their time and money, and they can be worse off financially than when they even

applied to college in the first place (Samuleson, 2012; Kingsbury, 2005). If students decide to go to college, they need to know how likely it is that they will graduate as “going to college isn’t a passive investment like buying a four-year bond. You are actively engaged in attending college, doing the work, and getting your degree” (Yglesias, 2013).

### “College For All”

*“Higher education can’t be a luxury—it’s an economic imperative that every family in America should be able to afford”*—President Obama

Despite the rising cost of tuition and dropout rates that suggest that not everyone is financially and/or intellectually prepared for college, the United States society maintains that college should be accessible to everyone. While “College for All” did not initially suggest that everyone actually go to college, just that everyone who wanted to should have the chance. The K-12 schools, however, have created an atmosphere where everyone is expected to pursue higher education, even the students who are underprepared to succeed.

Rosenbaum (2001) showed how detrimental this philosophy could be when students who were unprepared for college were continually pushed or encouraged to attend. In a survey administered to 2,091 high school seniors from 12 high schools in the Chicago metropolitan area, it was discovered that most students did not view their high school education as relevant to their future work, and this was true for both work and college bound students. Perhaps because they did not see high school achievement as



relevant, they tended to exert less effort to achieve in high school, thus handicapping themselves for success in college. In fact, 46 percent agreed with the statement that “Even if I do not work hard in high school, I can still make my future plans come true”. The reason: community college credits would be the important grades, and, because of the open admission policy, low grades do not bar enrollment. High school, for them, was just a waiting room. They were all going to go to college anyway. Why bother? Forty percent of the entire sample with college plans felt high school was irrelevant.

Unfortunately, for them, it appears that high school grades are, in fact, relevant to success in their future endeavors, at least in regards to college performance. Rosenbaum (2001) found that over 86 percent of the students with low grades that planned on college, failed to obtain a degree. Of all the seniors in the study, only 37.7 percent received an associate’s degree or higher in ten years. This percentage was lower for those with lower grades. Only 13.9 percent of seniors with low grades received a degree. As the grades in high school increased, so did the degree attainment. For example, Rosenbaum (2001) found that 16.1 percent of the students with Cs, 41.5 percent of the students with Bs, and 65.8 percent of students with As went on to receive their degrees.

Furthermore, a recent report by CollegeBoard, found that only 43 percent of students in 2012 achieved the SAT College and Career Readiness Benchmark. This benchmark score 1550 indicates that the student will have a 65 percent likelihood that he or she will achieve a B- average in their first year of college. Fifty-seven percent of students who took the SAT in 2012—and presumably had college plans—were unprepared for the rigors of college coursework according to this Benchmark (CollegeBoard, 2012).

The “College for All” policy was a good idea in theory, but, in practice, it has fallen tragically short. While encouraging students from disadvantaged backgrounds to rise above their environments, it has also managed to do just the opposite: sending students from across the spectrum to college burdened with debt when they are academically or personally unprepared for success. For students who already struggle financially, this option may be even more detrimental to them. High schools encourage all students to plan on college, regardless of their high school performance. Unfortunately, while high school faculty members, particularly counselors, are encouraging college to low achieving students, they fail to mention the skills and knowledge necessary for college success. As Rosenbaum (2001) states “...high schools offer vague promises of open opportunities for college without specifying the requirements for degree completion” (56). Thus, low achieving students who see high school as irrelevant, enter college unprepared for the demands and with high expectations of college success, because nobody warned them. While pushing college, counselors did not did not stop to fully discuss students’ specific academic level and how that would impact their college plans. Students did not see their probable failure in their college plans because they had never been explicitly told, and thus they could not prepare themselves, either by increasing their academic achievements or revising their future plans (Rosenbaum, 2001).

“Academically Adrift” in College

*“Some people drink from the fountain of knowledge, others just gargle” –*

Robert Anthony

Furthermore, those students who may go off to college and succeed in attaining a degree may be putting in the minimum effort to achieve it. Using the Collegiate Learning Assessment, Arum and Roska (2011) assessed students’ gains in skills commonly associated with college completion (e.g., critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing). They administered the test to students in their first semester of college and at the end of their second year. What they discovered is disheartening: after two years in college, 45 percent of U.S. students exhibit “no significant gains in learning”. This may be partly because students spent 51 percent of their times socializing and 7 percent studying or perhaps because the course load they taken is undemanding (50 percent never took a class where they had to write more than 20 pages, and 32 percent never took a class where they had to read more than 40 pages a week). Citing the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) American College Teacher, Arum and Roska (2011) discovered that “40 percent of college faculty agree with the statement: ‘Most of the students I teach lack *basic skills* for college level work,’” (56).

Even when students graduate, they seem to possess no—or very limited—skills that college should have helped them develop. The students enter the workforce ill-equipped. If they do find employment, their employers rate them as unprepared or only somewhat prepared for the job. It is no wonder that over half of the 2010-2011 graduates are unemployed or underemployed (Bennett, 2012).

The fact is that for those students who are underprepared, uninterested, undecided, or simply sleepwalking through the requirements to gain their diploma, college is not the answer. Like any investment, college is a personal choice that must be considered in the context of that person's life. With the current economic climate, a college education is no longer a guarantee of a middle class lifestyle; it is a risky venture just like any other investment. Students who are underprepared for the type of academic work that will be required of them or students who have no interest in academia may not be suited to go to a four year university degree. They may be more successful in a trade or a certificate program. In fact, they may be happier as well.

#### Alternatives to Success

*"I spent three days a week for 10 years educating myself in the public library, and it's better than college. People should educate themselves—you can get a complete education for no money. At the end of 10 years, I had read every book in the library and I'd written a thousand stories" –*

Ray Bradbury

For students in high school, going to college is the standard measure of success, and if that student chooses an alternative route, they are thought of as second rate—failures (Samuelson, 2012). However, they really shouldn't be; as important as a four year college degree may be, it is still not the only path to success. Only around 20 percent of jobs in the United States require a bachelor's degree or more. Another 31.6 percent require at least some college, and 10 percent some post high school instruction (Bureau of Labor Statistics). What is more important is that many of the jobs that do not require a

college degree do, in fact, pay well. A welder, mechanic, or carpenter can often make, on average, just as much as a college educated teacher (Bureau of Labor Statistics; Samuelson, 2012). A two-year credential, such as the ones required for the paralegal or dental hygienist professions, can be a viable option for students who otherwise could not afford university, had no desire to attend it, or who would not succeed at a four year university.

These two-year programs, vocational schools, and apprenticeships often lead to careers with fairly comfortable incomes. For example, the average salary for a welder is \$37,900 (Bureau of Labor Statistic, 2012) with the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile making around \$55,240 annually. The average salary for a paralegal is \$49,960 and the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile make over \$75,000 a year. The average wage over all occupations for United States citizens is only \$45, 230.

All roads to success do not start with college. While grand exceptions, Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, and Mark Zuckerberg all became very wealthy, successful entrepreneurs who have influenced the world, and none of them graduated from college. They do illustrate the idea that college is not the be all and end all of success for certain students. Sometimes those with the entrepreneurial spirit would benefit more from diving into the deep end of business experience instead of their economics textbooks.

Peter Thiel, founder of PayPal, certainly believes that great achievement and success can occur outside of college. He even encourages it. Thiel created the Thiel Fellowship, originally known as 20 under 20. Each year, the highly selective fellowship gives some of the world's most creative and motivated young people a grant of \$100,000

to work on their research and self education. A network of mentors, from visionary thinkers, scientists, and entrepreneurs, provide the Fellows with guidance. The catch? The Fellows must not attend college for two years and instead focus only on their ideas, stating that “rather than just studying, you’re [Fellows] doing” (Thiel Foundation, 2011)

If becoming a doctor or lawyer is a student’s dream, then, yes, college will be necessary. But, for others with less distinct career paths or ideas about their career paths, there are other options. Entrepreneurial ventures, vocational trade schools, professional certificates or associates degrees, or even embarking on an untraditional career path such as horse training may all be alternatives to college that can lead to financial stability for those who do not want to, or are not suited for, higher education. We need to remember that liberal education may not work for everyone and is not the only route to a fulfilling or financially secure career.

### Taking A Break: Gap Year Defined

*“The difference between school and life? In school, you’re taught a lesson then given a test. In life, you’re given a test that teaches you a lesson” – Tom Bodett*

Not everybody needs to go to college, and not everybody needs to college immediately after graduating from high school. Considering the cost of tuition and the even greater costs associated with dropping out of college, most students cannot afford to embark on a journey of self-discovery only to discover that academia is not for them. Those who go to college are mostly there for the benefit of gaining a career. If a student is undecided, confused, or overwhelmed, perhaps some time away to explore their interests, test drive a career, or just travel and learn a new language would be more beneficial than going straight to college. It may allow the student to develop the clarity of mind to really understand why they are choosing to go to college or, perhaps, why they are not.

This “time out” from formal education to explore options is often referred to as a Gap Year. While fairly new to the United States, a Gap Year has been a rite of passage in many other parts of the world. In the United Kingdom, the Gap Year could possibly be traced back to Victorian times when young adults would take their Grand Tour. In present day U.K., Australia, and New Zealand, the Gap Year seems to have been accepted as part of the process of growing into an adult. In Australia, from the 1974 to 2004 the number of students taking a year’s break after high school went from 4 percent to 11 percent. In the U.K., from 1997 to 2002 the percentages rose from 6.2 percent to 7.9 percent of students deferring going to college for a year (Birch, 2007). An estimated 2.5

million young adults from the U.K. were planning their Gap Year in 2012 (Statenca, 2012) while around 24 percent of young Australians actually took one (The National Centre for Vocational Education Research, 2012). Many of these students take time off to backpack around the world. Others choose to volunteer their time at home or abroad or to work part-time in order to gain experience and save money.

Gap Years are about as varied as the individuals that take them. The U.K. Department of Education and Skills defines it as a time out of formal education, taking between three to 24 months, where the “time out sits in the context of a longer career trajectory” (Heath as stated in Sehlik, 2010, p. 304). It is a time to take a hiatus from formal education in order to explore options and it can be tailored to meet any of the student’s needs. The American Gap Association has further defined the Gap Year as:

A structured period of time when student take a break from formal education to increase self-awareness, learn from different cultures, and experiment with possible careers. Typically these are achieved by a combination of traveling, volunteering, interning, or working. A gap year experience can last from two months up to two years and is taken between high school graduation and the Junior year of their higher education (American Gap Association, 2012).

However, there is a catch: the activities undertaken in this time off must be productive in some way. The time spent away from formal schooling must help students broaden their mind, develop new skills, or benefit them in a way that could eventually be applied to future formal education or life, however informally. It is time off for students to discover



their self-identity, to immerse themselves in another culture of language, or experience a career through volunteering, interning, or working.

Gap Years can be spent in United States based organization such as AmeriCorps or working for Habitat for Humanity. International volunteer organizations are also available options allowing the student to volunteer all over the world. Cultural and language immersion programs also exist for students wishing to attain fluency in another language, and many other programs exist, from adventure travel to teaching English abroad (Engle, 2010). The cost and time commitment vary with each, but there are so many options available it would be easy for a student to find a match.

For those that would like to “test-drive” careers, a Gap Year can allow for the opportunity to gain hands on experience before they decide to invest in that career choice (Go, 2007). Potential nurses, dentists, and doctors can volunteer in hospitals in South American or African countries and gain practice in the medical field before they even arrive at med school. Students considering social services, environmental services, or teaching can gain similar experience abroad or through United States volunteer programs such as AmeriCorps or City Year. And still, for others, a Gap Year may allow them the opportunity to discover an unorthodox career or follow a passion wherever it leads them.

For example, Wood (2007) wrote of the success of Julie Wells’ Gap Year. A junior equestrienne, Wells decided to pursue her passion for riding horses after high school instead of following the well worn path to college that many of her peers were taking. It paid off. Now a professional rider, she is competing at the Grand Prix level. She found success in her passion because of her Gap Year. While probably the exception,

Wells' story may resonate with many other students in the United States and, despite her success, Wells still had not given up on college entirely. She planned on taking specific college courses in business in order to further her success in the field.

Traveling, volunteering, gaining work experience, or actually working, a Gap Year can be anything a person wants it to be, whenever they have the time or resources for it. It does not necessarily have to be costly either; while exotic adventure service learning or world travel is an option for some, military service, national service programs, part-time jobs, internships, and cheaper traveling options have served other “gappers” well (Fitzimmons, 2000). Despite the variety, through anecdotal evidence, common themes seem to have emerged about the Gap Year experience. Most experiences seem to entail some form of cultural immersion, community service, learning, and travel—all either domestically or abroad (Tomer, 2010). It is not spending a year watching television on a friend's couch or a beach vacation spent in a tourist hotel. It is work; it is experiential learning.

### Why a Gap Year?

*“It is a miracle that curiosity survives formal education” – Albert Einstein*

One reason students may be drawn to a Gap Year is for the benefits it seems to provide for students who feel they have not quite reached adulthood yet. The potentially new developmental stage, called, Emerging Adulthood, may explain why students in their late teens and early 20s may need a break before investing in college. According to Arnett (2000), the typical characteristics of Emerging Adulthood include a more self-focused approach to life and less certainty, yet more optimism, about the future. Identity

exploration, instability, self-focus, feelings of being ‘in-between’ life stages, and an awareness of the possibilities in life make up the psychological profile of an Emerging Adult. While similar to that of Adolescence (which also is a relatively recent addition to developmental psychology), there is a sense of urgency in the Emerging Adult to solve these questions of identity and purpose. Arnett (2000) gives the age of 30 as the deadline. A Gap Year might seem like the answer or at least the route to the answers.

However, a more common reason students take a Gap Year is simply a need for a break (Andrews, 2010). In a survey of 280 Gap Year students, burnout from high school and a “desire to find out more about themselves” were cited as the top two reasons for taking a break (Haigler & Nelson, 2005). They are burnt out from schooling and the stress that comes with it. For many students, years of pressure to perform well on tests achieve high SAT scores, and get into the ‘right’ college in order to pursue the ‘right’ career leaves them exhausted and overwhelmed at the prospect of college. From the moment of their kindergarten interviews to graduating high school with honors, some students have spent so much time attempting to do well in school that they do not know who they actually are (Fitzimmons, 2000). A Gap Year, for them, gives them much needed time to recharge their academic batteries. For others who had low motivation or achievement in high school, it is a break from the struggle that school represented to them. They go back to school with more motivation, maturity, and direction needed to succeed in college (Fitzimmons, 2000; Martin, 2010). In Middlebury College, for example, students that took a Gap Year showed a pattern of having higher GPAs than predicted, and the pattern remained in place over all four years (Clagett, 2011).

### Academic/Skills Outcomes

*“The only thing that interferes with my learning is my education” – Albert Einstein*

Martin’s (2010) research study supports this perspective. He looked at 2,502 high school students and 338 university “gappers” for two studies respectively. Study 1 sought to predict Gap Year intentions (i.e., are there any similarities in people choosing to take a Gap Year); Study 2 investigated how the Gap Year affected future academics. Post-school uncertainty and lack of academic motivation predicted Gap Year intentions in Study 1. Lower motivation and lower school performance predicted post-school uncertainty which predicted whether or not a student would choose a Gap Year. This was significant over all demographic variables. Like their burnt out counterparts, the students in this study did not have a valid reason or motivation to attend university.

Study 2 discovered that participation in a Gap Year positively predicted academic motivation, which was also significant over all demographic variables. University students who took a Gap Year were more motivated, had greater persistence, better planning skills, and better task management skills than those who did not take a year off. A year’s break from higher education did not adversely impact these students’ motivation (Martin, 2010).

Martin (2010) deduced from his results that post-school uncertainty— a lack of clarity around post school plans— is resolved when a person undertakes a Gap Year. The individual would be more likely to engage in activities, such as volunteering, that help develop clarity and decision making. Martin (2010) goes so far as to suggest that “participation in a gap year may enable possible resolution of motivational deficits” thus

enabling students to excel in higher education when they attend, when they would not have been able to do so before.

Along with a resolution to motivation, Martin (2010) discovered that many “gappers” reported having achieved more self directedness, maturity, improved employability, career choice formation, and a variety of life skills (Jones, 2004), leading Martin to conclude that a “Gap Year can be seen as an educational process in which skills and critical reflection contribute to an individual’s development” (p. 6). Furthermore, in their survey of 280 Gap Year students, Haigler and Nelson (2005) discovered that the top three outcomes of the Gap Year experience were gaining a better sense of self and what is important, a better understanding of other countries, people, cultures, and ways of living, and skills and knowledge that contributed directly to a career or major area of study. Thus, from a student’s perspective, the Gap Year was an academically rewarding experience that not only helped them achieve certain skills but also helped prepare them for further formal academic study.

Similarly, O’Shea (2011) evaluated the experiences of international volunteering through an educational perspective. She found that the main reason for taking time off was for a “break from education or the ‘academic treadmill’” (p.4 ), however, other reasons for taking a Gap year included developing ‘soft’ skills, differing perspectives, and character traits the students may have lacked. Most “gappers” in O’Shea’s (2011) study reported a gain in knowledge and personal growth.

In the psychosocial sphere, Gap Year participants reported positive changes. Along with a better comprehension of personal identity, they reported that they felt they

gained confidence, tolerance, mutual respect, an appreciation for community, tenacity, patience, maturity, empathy, independence, an ability to communicate with others, and a greater acceptance of general responsibility (O'Shea, 2011). These skills, often dubbed 'soft' skills, are just as important to functioning in a workplace as general knowledge, especially in a global workplace.

O'Shea (2011) stated that the experiential education was fused with civic engagement, resulting in a myriad of educational benefits for those volunteering abroad. Individuals also reported greater self-efficacy, were proud to make a difference, and gained greater awareness and appreciation of culture and political structures. Not only did the students return from their international community service with greater general knowledge of the world, they also gained a deeper understanding of their own culture, community, and family life. Often times, this understanding was coupled with a greater appreciation of their homes, but some developed critical feelings. This deeper understanding and thinking demonstrates a greater development of critical thinking skills in these students. Many "gappers" reported being able to see the world in shades of grey when before everything fell into terms of black and white. Intellectual development certainly occurred as "gappers" reported more confidence, especially in their abilities as decision makers (O'Shea, 2011).

From an educational perspective, O'Shea (2011) determined that the Gap year has valid educational benefits. The intellectual, psychosocial, and civic development that occurs in students who take a Gap Year does, in fact, benefit them in their own lives as well as their future academic pursuits. The Gap Year, O'Shea (2011) concluded, is a form of experiential learning.

### Personal Outcomes

*“Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself” – John Dewey*

While the academic benefits of a Gap Year are well documented, King (2011) was more interested in the personal—subjective—growth that occurred for “gappers”. Through qualitative data, King (2011) investigated the anecdotal evidence that supports that Gap Year participants undertake a significant amount of identity work during their time away. King (2011) interviewed 23 participants who had taken a Gap Year within the last five years. He discovered that university students previously had instability in their identities and felt they were in a ‘go-between’ phase—not adults but also not children. However, during the interviews, participants frequently referred to a gain in confidence, maturity, or independence during their Gap Years. They also, when they came back, perceived there being a distinct difference between “gappers” and people who went straight to higher education. “gappers” felt they had more maturity, more life experiences, that they were more developmentally prepared for university, and that they had less of a “school” approach to life i.e., they were going to school by their own choice rather than to fulfill a schooling obligation (King, 2011).

Because of the various reports of having an unstable identity and the considerable identity work that “gappers” undertook, King (2011) concluded that a new state of human development—Emerging Adulthood—should be considered as a time where identity and lifestyle experimentation takes center stage. The Gap Year experiences, for some, allow for the undertaking of such identity work in order to help young people transition into adulthood and manage the adult decisions and responsibilities.

### University's Response

*“It is in fact a part of the function of education to help us escape, not from our own time—for we are bound by that—but from the intellectual and emotional limitations of our time”—T.S.Eliot*

While it may be expected that most students are quick to defend the Gap Year as a beneficial academic experience, it may come as a surprise that many universities endorse it as well. In fact, many prestigious universities from Harvard to Princeton actively support some sort of Gap Year. Having seen many young adults who have long felt high pressure to achieve success, William R. Fitzimmons, Dean of Admissions at Harvard, recommends, in the acceptance letter, that students defer their studies for a year. He does this not only for the students he feels may be unprepared for the rigors of college but also for those who have always excelled. He says that “it is common to encounter even the most successful students, who have won all the ‘prizes’, stepping back and wonder if it was all worth it,” (2000). He considers a Gap Year not only a time to grow, but it is also a time to gain perspective, on the world and on the student’s life. Harvard has been recommending something like a Gap Year for over thirty years.

Princeton too has endorsed the concept of a Gap Year and has even created its own version. The Bridge Year Program is a university designed Gap Year. A select number of incoming freshmen delay their formal study by partaking in a nine-month international volunteering service commitment in China, India, Peru, or Senegal. Princeton says that the students who embark on this experience not only help support community-based initiatives, but it also helps students gain “international perspectives



and intercultural skills, an opportunity for personal growth and reflection, and a deeper appreciation of service in both a local and international context” (Bridge Year Program, 2012). Princeton seems assured that the time away from formal education will benefit students not hurt them. From the results of the Bridge Year Program, it appears they are correct.

However, it is not just the Ivy League universities that are endorsing the Gap Year. Increasingly, universities are creating formal policies that allow students to defer admission for one year. Around five percent of four year universities do so today (Deangelo as cited by Shellenbarger, 2010). Some universities, such as Eugene Lang College, have partnered with an international volunteer organization, Global Citizen. Students gain foreign language skills and learn about poverty and themselves while working in communities around the world (Abrams, 2012). The price is not cheap—averaging around \$28,500—however, 80 percent of students are able to get some financial help in the forms of scholarships and full-ride scholarships are available (Tucker, 2012).

Overall, from both the students’ and the universities’ perspectives, a Gap Year appears to have more benefits than drawbacks. Students seem to be able to gain confidence, responsibility, broadened perspectives of themselves and the world, and more motivation and certainty when it came time to return to school (O’Shea, 2010; Martin, 2010; King, 2011). According to Haigler and Nelson’s (2005) survey, 60 percent of respondents claimed that their experience with their Gap Year helped them either choose a career path or major or confirmed their original choice. Furthermore, time away from schooling also seems to help alleviate burnout and help students develop clarity on their

lives and their choices (Fitzimmons, 200; Martin, 2010). By taking a year off to explore their options, “gappers” who later chose to attend university felt that they had made a conscious decision to do so; they were not just following the “natural trajectory along an ‘academic treadmill’” like their peers who went immediately to college (O’Shea, 2011). Also, while it should not be the main intention of a Gap Year, taking a year off to accomplish something may help students get into a college that may not have accepted them before or the time spent in working may help students *afford* a college they might not have been able to afford before.

### The Flipside

*“The flip side of freedom is this: When you’re completely free, you’re also completely on your own”*—Lauren Oliver

However, it is not a perfect system. As with anything in life, a Gap Year—depending on where it is taken—can also come with a few risks. For those students volunteering abroad, in-country health and safety risks are always something to consider. Even for those volunteering through an American organization on United States soil, safety is not a guarantee and, as with any place, precautions should be taken. While a Gap Year can be very affordable depending on what a person does, there are many programs, trips, and activities included in a Gap Year that can be very expensive. For example, through Council on International Education Exchange (CIEE), a Gap Year program that offers study abroad in Chile for a semester can cost close to \$12,000. To spend an academic year through their program in Paris, France, students would be out almost \$25,000. (CIEE.org). Similarly, the International Partnerships for Service Learning and

Leadership, which pairs classroom experience with community service in the U.S. and abroad, can cost almost as much (ispl.org). While some financial aid and scholarships are available, the price is still expensive and those Gap Year options seem to be reserved for the affluent.

Also, while many students may find motivation in their Gap Year, there will always be the potential—and most common—downside of it becoming a wasted year. The Gap year is meant as a time away from formal schooling but not a time-out from learning. It should be an experience that broadens the mind and results in some sort of gain in skill and knowledge. That may not always occur depending on the student and their experience. Perhaps the biggest worry of parents, teachers, and high school counselors is that if students take a break from school, they may not ever return to academic learning. While this did not occur in the studies previously mentioned (King, 2011; Maritn, 2010; O’Shea, 2010; and Haigler & Nelson, 2005), it is still a concern and a possibility.

It is perhaps this threat of the potential inability to return to school that sways many high school seniors from the United States to eliminate the Gap Year from their future plans. Or perhaps it is simply a lack of knowledge of the possibilities of a Gap Year. The fast paced, goal-oriented culture of the United States seems to have taken over the school system. Most students may not be aware of the Gap Year simply because they are not accustomed to the idea of taking a break from pursuing the next goal, from pursuing higher education. Their counselors are not helping with this matter.

### Are Counselors Discussing the Gap Year?

*“The assumption with every freshman—the goal of post high school education is hopefully a four year college. If that is not the best route—either for money or grades—then it is the two year college”—Counselor 2*

At least, this was the case in Rosenbaum’s (2001) study. Using a self-report survey and face-to-face interviews, he met with 27 counselors from eight Midwestern high schools, two of that were predominantly African American and two that were predominantly white. There were 16 males and 11 females in the counselor sample. Through the interviews, Rosenbaum (2001) was able to investigate how high school counselors interact with students. In the past, it was not uncommon for a high school counselor to dissuade or completely discourage students from attending higher education institutions if they felt they were not ready. That practice is virtually unheard of now. Most counselors did not feel they gave advice anymore; they gave information, specifically college information. They felt, because of the harm of discouraging a student and the potential threat of a lawsuit from parents, that they could not dissuade college. All the counselors’ students were urged to attend, even if they were unprepared. For example, in one of the schools, Rosenbaum discovered that every student had to fill out a college application, regardless of their college intentions, because the school felt that the practice couldn’t hurt (Rosenbaum, 2001).

Even when a student was academically unprepared and has unrealistic expectations of pursuing a degree or profession, the counselors did not feel it was their place to discourage them. They may have gently reminded underachieving students about

the need to raise their grades and focus on their study habits, but they would not flat out tell them to also consider an alternative career plan if success in college seemed unlikely. Part of this reluctance to discuss a student's shortcomings stemmed from a desire not to 'burst their bubble'; part of it comes from a desire not to displease the parents who could override counselor's suggestions even when it came to which high school classes their student took.

Overall, Rosenbaum (2001) found that high school counselors focused mainly—or only—on sending their students to college. They did not advise students about jobs and often lacked the knowledge or credentials to do so. Higher education was their priority as they felt a four year degree is a necessity. If the counselors were not even discussing job prospects after high school, they were probably not discussing a Gap Year, meaning at least some students were not receiving advice that could benefit them and may, in fact, have received advice that put them at a disadvantage.

### The Present Study

The present study seeks to investigate whether the trend of taking a Gap Year is continuing to occur in the United States. With the research and anecdotal evidence suggesting that a Gap Year is beneficial, I will look to see if students are aware of it as an option and, more specifically, if high school and college counselors are discussing it as an option. The previous research seems to suggest that there is limited to no discussion of the possibility of a Gap Year; the purpose of my research is to investigate this and further understand the Gap Year and the role counselor's play in it.

**Hypothesis.** My hypothesis is that counselors are not discussing the Gap Year as an option and many students remain unaware of the possibility. Further, many students, once educated about the Gap Year, will show an interest in it.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Western Oregon University students (72 females, 32 males with a mean age of 22.5 and average high school graduation date of 2008.5) were recruited to this study through a survey handed out in their classes. Overall, 9.6 % of the sample were sophomores, 38.4% were seniors, 23% juniors , and 28% freshman. One participant was a graduate student.

Twenty-nine (25 female; 4 male) of the 104 students surveyed were in the Western Oregon University Honors program. Eighteen were freshman, five were sophomores, four were juniors, and two were seniors. Two took a Gap Year while the rest went to college right after high school

Six high school counselors were contacted via email requests for an interview. Five High school counselors (three female and two males) responded and participated. They represented several high schools across Oregon: Lakeridge High School and Lake Oswego High School, located in Lake Oswego and Central High School, located in Independence.

### **Materials and Procedure**

See Appendix A

One self-report survey was created for this study to investigate students' experiences, attitudes, and opinions regarding the Gap Year. It included 11 multiple choice or yes or no questions and two opportunities for comments.

The survey was sent to a convenience sampling of Western Oregon University students. The form of consent was handed out before the survey. Students then handed the surveys back. Surveys were collected in a folder in a random manner in order to maintain anonymity and consent forms were collected in another folder. Any questions students had were answered after all surveys had been turned in to me.



## Results

### Survey

One hundred four students from Western Oregon University were surveyed. Of the students surveyed, 90 percent indicated their high school counselors **did not** discuss the Gap Year with them. As such, 72 percent of the students did not have any prior knowledge of what a Gap Year was exactly.

There were 17 students who took some time away from formal education between high school and college. Two of the 17 indicated a counselor had discussed the Gap Year option, the rest had not.

Students indicated that a gain in maturity, readiness to work, time to figure out career/major, gaining real world experience, alleviating burnout, a gain in work ethic and knowledge in what they liked to do, a gain in social confidence, and less stress were the main reasons for why the Gap Year benefited them.

Those who took a Gap Year felt they were overall satisfied with their time off.. On a likert scale from 1 (not prepared) to 5 (very prepared), the students indicated they felt better prepared with a  $M=4.06$  .

For the students who went straight onto college, there seemed to be a disinterest in the Gap Year. On a Likert scale from 1 (not interested) to 5 (very interested), the mean score was  $M = 2.32$

**Counselor Interviews:**

Five high school counselors were contacted via email requests for an interview. Two interviews took place over email; the other three were in-person interviews. Over email, two counselors responded to structured interview questions. The in-person interviews were conducted as semi-structured interviews. A list of questions was used as a guide; however, follow up questions were asked.

**Job Duties Overall.** Most counselors work an academic counseling and scheduling. Occasionally if a student has a social/personal problem they will address that, but their main job duties have to do with academics and making sure students succeed academically.

**Advise on Post High School Plans Overall.** All counselors advise on post high school plans and careers. All counselors advise on career and a variety of post-high school plans, but college attendance – 4 year or 2 year – takes precedence over other options.

**Advise on a Gap Year Overall.** They will advise on a Gap Year, but only if the student brings it up to them first. College planning takes that majority of the attention and other options, like the Gap Year will be addressed and discussed if a student comes up with the idea first.

**Ever Recommended a Gap Year: Overall.** Most counselors would recommend the Gap Year if the student brings it up first and if this student has a concrete plan that shows what they will do for the term. Counselors will discuss it, and if the student has a good plan, they may support it. But, overall, it appears that they are hesitant to broach the

subject first with a student as they don't want to be responsible for the student never returning to education.

**Would you Recommend a Gap Year? Overall.** It depends. It looks like half the counselors would recommend it to students to gain maturity, confidence, and independence if the student had a plan. The counselors seem open to the idea of the Gap Year, but still hesitant to bring up the subject first. As one said, "it is not my place to suggest it – it is a personal/family/lifestyle decision". If a student broaches the subject and the counselor thinks they would benefit from it, it appears that they will support it and recommend that they do it.

**Professional Opinions on Gap Year: Overall.** Depends on the person. The professional opinions seem to suggest that a Gap Year could be a beneficial experience for some students, but only certain students. It is not for everyone. From my conversations with the counselors, they seemed intrigued by the idea of a Gap Year, but were still not comfortable broaching the subject first with students, did not believe it was for everyone, and suggested it had to depend on the student taking it. They did not write it off completely – or at all. Many seemed to really support it, so long as it was for the right student.

**Did you take one: Overall.** Most of the counselors had had at least some sort of break from education between degrees. From those that I talked to, it appeared that they benefited from the time off with reduced stress, more maturity, a different learning mindset, and a different perspective on life, education, and the topics discussed than other students.

### **College Counselor Interview**

The brief interview with an academic college counselor did not yield information regarding a Gap Year. It was stated that a Gap Year was not discussed nor was it a reason students mentioned for leaving college.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Survey**

While the majority of the students indicated that they would probably recommend a Gap Year to students (Yes: 49; No 30; Maybe/It Depends: 10), the students who went straight to college did not seem interested in the concept (Mean=2.32). The majority of the students who did not take a Gap Year would not have chosen that option for themselves, however, that did not prevent them from considering recommending a Gap Year.

Of the students that took a Gap Year, the majority of them felt it had been a beneficial experience for their personal and academic lives (M=4.06) . Through their various experiences (non career and career track occupations, volunteering, military service, religious missionary service), they had during their time away from formal education, they gained maturity, confidence, a work ethic, time to contemplate, real world experience, and an alleviation of burnout and stress.

There were four students who took a Gap Year and would not recommend it, however, comments reflect that it was their individual experience—not the concept as a whole—that they were reacting negatively towards. One stated that she took off more

time than originally planned and felt behind, the other three did not indicate why they would not recommend it.

### **Interviews**

Overall, counselors will discuss the Gap Year and other post-high school plans besides attending college with the caveat that the student must bring the subject up first. While the majority of the counselors interviewed reflected interest in the Gap Year for their students, their main goals in their profession continued to revolve around academics, namely helping their student's graduate high school and pursue some form of formal higher education.

A few counselors had found benefits in the Gap Year and had actually recommended it to select students. So long as the student had a concrete plan on how to spend their time away, the counselors supported their students' decision, especially if that student reflected a need for social and personal growth. However, even the counselors that would recommend it or support their student's decision would prefer to work the Gap Year into plans for higher education.

### **Student Interviews**

All three students interviewed felt the time they spent away from college was beneficial for them. Disinterest in college and interest in other opportunities (travel, work, etc.) appeared to be the main reason why each student decided to delay their academic career. However, after working jobs with no room for promotions, two of the students decided they needed to return to school for better job prospects.

While one student did reflect that starting later than the other students has created an age barrier, all three students cited that the time away helped them mature, gain confidence, and helped them see where their interests lie. Even though the students could see the potential drawbacks to their decision, for them, the time off appeared to be what they needed. For them, personally, it was the right decision.

### Discussion

*“It is worth noting that extraordinary achievements are never based on emulating someone else’s achievements, but on some unmeasurable combination of (a) marching to one’s own specific and unique drummer and (b) accidentally—perhaps unconsciously— doing something that captures the Zeitgeist in new and unexpected ways”*—William R. Fitzsimmons

While a college degree has statistically proven itself to be a beneficial long term investment, with the rising tuition costs, it has become an investment too risky to venture into blindly. Gone are the days where most students were able to leisurely spend time finding themselves amongst their liberal arts studies; that has become too expensive. In order to fully realize their investment’s potential, college students today must enter their universities with at least some idea of what academics or careers they would like to pursue. Or they must have the understanding that a four year degree is not something they would like to pursue. This is virtually impossible for an eighteen year old fresh out of high school, even more so for a recent high school graduate burnt out from studying.

This was the exact reason one student cited for taking time off. Student #1 indicated that time off from school was necessary to help her figure out her interests and she was glad she took it.

### Student Spotlight

Student # 1 took a year off from formal education and spent her time traveling. For seven and a half weeks, she backpacked through Northwest Europe with her boyfriend at the time. For her second trip, she went to South America by herself for a language program and traveling.

When asked if it was a good idea for her to take the year off, she responded, "Yea. Oh yea it was a good idea." She explained that after high school, she didn't know what to do in college so she figured she might as well go travel. She liked Spanish in high school and wanted to develop that more, but other than that she had no idea what she wanted to do.

The first trip, while mostly recreational, gave her a better perspective on being on her own, traveling on her own, and a deeper understanding of adult relationships. She learned to compromise with a partner on things of greater importance than those that came up in high school.

The second trip gave her a greater understanding and fluency of Spanish. Also, because she was traveling on her own – no companion – she gained a sense of independence. When she returned to school, she knew she wanted to have Spanish as her major or minor, whereas if she went straight to college she would have changed majors many times.

When she came to college she said she felt more mature than a lot of people. Especially when it came to an understanding of relationships, she felt she knew how to deal with men a little differently than the average straight out of high school eighteen year old. On a slightly less serious note, her travels were great icebreakers in class and gave her a different perspective on the lessons being taught.

Overall, the time off to travel, explore ideas, and to think about her choices was beneficial for her. Her Gap Year worked out in her favor.



Similarly, Student #2 indicated her disinterest in higher education and uncertainty about her desired career led her to delay pursuing a four year degree.

### Student Spotlight

Student # 2 took three year off between high school and college because she didn't want to go to college and had no idea what to study there. She knew she didn't want a normal 9-5 career. Instead, she decided to take a job at a bakery, which she said was a learning experience. Her employer was very helpful. She worked the front and cooked lunch. She learned to interact with people better as she said she was "really shy before". She learned to be responsible and set a good example and she certainly gained social skills and self confidence.

After she returned to college, she didn't know if she was more prepared, but she said she was no less prepared than she would have been at eighteen. She mentioned she was more motivated to learn now that she knew she did not want to

work in the bakery her entire life. Overall, she said "A lot of college students have no idea what they want to do or who they are yet - taking time off to save money and work hard was good preparation". She is definitely glad she took some time off. It was good to get the experience and gain a good work ethic.

Student # 2's sister went straight to college after high school, but she noted that she saw the benefit in taking time off for her sister. She saw that starting later helped students be more mature, more focused, and more confident. Her sister did mention, however, that she saw people look down on her student # 2. There is tremendous pressure to go to college and she saw people thinking it "weird" that her sister did not go right away.

A staple in countries like the U.K., New Zealand, and Australia, a Gap Year

offers a constructive alternative to going immediately from high school to college. A year spent finding oneself through work, internships, volunteering, travel, or other productive pursuits instead of paying for tuition and possible wasted credits may be just the solution needed for America's new generation of students.

Fitzsimmons, Harvard's Dean of Admissions, has been advocating a Gap Year for years, noting that "it is common to encounter even the most successful of students, who have won all the 'prizes,' stepping back and wondering if it was all worth it" (2000). His call for a time out from the increasingly fast paced academic world in which we live is relevant as much to over achieving, motivated students as well as the unmotivated, burnt out ones. Many other colleges, Ivy Leagues included, have similarly begun to endorse a Gap Year for their students; however, the phenomenon is rather recent within the last decade.

### **Counselor Interviews**

Because of that same fast paced, goal oriented culture that Fitzsimmons (2000) referenced, it was hypothesized, in the present study, that the option of taking a Gap Year was not being discussed with high school students by their high school guidance counselors. After interviewing five high school counselors from both low and high income areas, it was found that counselors discussed a variety of post high school plans with students, but they focused mainly on college or post high school formal education. As one counselor said, "the assumption with every freshman—the goal of post high school education is hopefully a four year college. If that is not the best route—either for money or grades—then it is the two year college."

Similar to Rosenbaum's (2000) study, the counselors in the present study indicated feelings of obligation to encourage students to go to school, regardless of the high schools socio-economic status. For example, many counselors were wary of

bringing up the Gap Year as they felt they did not want to say anything to dissuade their students from college:

“I wait for them to come to me with that option [the Gap Year]. It is a really tricky thing. I don’t want to be responsible for that. If they are barely getting out of high school, they might not get back—I don’t want to be responsible for that” (Counselor 4).

“If they took a year off to work, I would feel they might get stuck in a job because of the paycheck they feel is good money (when really it isn’t) or they just will never go back” (Counselor 3).

“Like the military, it is not my place to suggest it—it is a personal/family/lifestyle decision” (Counselor 4).

These statements are almost identical to how counselor’s responded in Rosenbaum’s (2000) study. Counselors in Rosenbaum’s (2000) study were hesitant to ‘burst the bubble’ of college success for students and instead focused on their high school career. While counselors in this present study would discuss the Gap Year or alternative post high school plans if a student brought the subject up, the counselors tried to discuss it in the context of how college and further education may fit with it.

Contrary to what Rosenbaum (2000) found, many counselors in this study indicated a genuine interest in the Gap Year. For example, several mentioned students who they were working with who were taking one:

I have a student this year who will graduate early. He'll take a gap year along with a few community college credits then move to OSU's engineering program. Even though he's graduating early, he's incredibly immature socially. A gap year provides him with the opportunity to work on these skills, to gain a better understanding of how he functions on his own before he immerses himself in a very rigorous area of study (Counselor 2).

Counselors have seen the worth in preparing students socially as well as academically. One counselor even went so far as to wonder if it is more detrimental to push underprepared students to college than to encourage them to take some time away. However, despite how open they were to the idea of time away from higher education, their responses indicated that their discussion of a Gap Year would be the exception to the rule. Advising on higher education plans was the norm, and while they might see the value in a Gap Year for certain students and advise on post high school plans other than college, those plans were not openly promoted even to those students who may benefit from it.

### **Surveys**

It was also hypothesized that previously unaware students—once informed of a Gap Year—would show an interest in it. Through a convenience sample, a survey was distributed to 104 students at Western Oregon University. Of the students surveyed, 93 of the 104 indicated their counselors did not discuss the Gap Year with them, and 74 of them had no prior knowledge of what a Gap Year was. Contrary to what was hypothesized, the interest in the Gap Year for students who had not taken one was low

( $M = 2.46$  on a 1 to 5 scale). However, overall, the majority of students indicated that they would recommend taking a Gap Year (49 recommended it and 10 said they would maybe recommend it depending on the student). As the majority of students (74) indicated they felt prepared for college, it was concluded that they personally would not benefit from a Gap Year; however, they could see it benefiting others. The students were receptive to the Gap Year as an option.

Of the 17 students who *had* taken time away from formal academics, only four indicated they would not recommend the Gap Year. Even then, only two indicated a lack in any benefits gained from their experience; the other two indicated, for them personally, the experience benefited them. They all cited maturity, real world experience, confidence, work ethic, and time to figure everything out as the main benefits to their time away from formal education. Alleviation of burnout and the experience of less stress were also mentioned.

### **Overall Indications**

The counselors who took time away from education between their undergraduate degree and their graduate degree also mentioned similar benefits. Several mentioned that when they returned to school, they knew what it was exactly they wanted to do, why they were there, and what they wanted to do with what they wanted to study. They mentioned that their maturity brought a different perspective to the classroom and that their work ethic was significantly different—better—compared to the work ethic they had during their undergraduate years.

The increase in maturity and academic motivation found in the present study's participants is in accordance with the previous research. In Martin's (2010) study, Gap Year students returned to school with more motivation and drive to succeed academically than they previously had before. Similarly, O'Shea (2011) found that "gappers" gained knowledge, personal growth, confidence, tolerance, mutual respect, maturity, empathy, independence, communication skills, and greater acceptance of responsibility in their time off. While the participants in this study had a vast array of Gap Year experiences (volunteering, non career track jobs, traveling, military and religious service, and one career track job) compared to the participants in O'Shea's (2011) and Martin's (2010) study, the benefits appear to be the same or at least very similar. So long as the time away was spent in a productive manner, certain personal, social, and academic benefits will emerge.

However, despite the cited benefits, counselors especially reflected ambivalence about the worth of a Gap Year. Even the counselors most adamant about their students attending college reflected that a Gap Year might be less detrimental to a student than pressuring all students (prepared or not) towards higher education. However, despite the interest in it, most counselors preferred to focus on academics and college attendance, only discussing other options if the students themselves brought them up in conversation.

There is one conclusion to draw from whether or not the Gap Year is a viable option for students: It Depends. Students and counselors seem to agree that the Gap Year is an intriguing option and may be well worth considering; however, deciding to take that time off is a very personal and multifaceted decision. Simply put, for some students it may be a good idea but for others, not so much. There are great benefits, but the time

spent off can seem wasted or some students may feel it as a setback academically and socially. It Depends.

This conclusion is perhaps best represented through the words of the last student interviewed who gave a reflective analysis of his personal choice to take time off while considering the experiences of others who had taken a break. He stated:

### Student Spotlight Three

Well, choosing to take some time off had a lot to do with wanting to do something on my own, and to sort of challenge myself. I was tired of being restricted to the set course which is held seemingly by the fear of failure and I didn't like that. So when I graduated I met up with a friend and left to go hitchhiking. After the adventure I began starting a life in Chicago, however there was a small crisis with my family and returned to Oregon (19 years old) where I lived in Portland trying to make my way.

I didn't have any urge to return to college during this time as I saw no real benefit to going to school when I was unsure how it would help me with what I wanted to do. (And at this point I wasn't quite sure what that was still.) After about two years of staying at various places and working various jobs I felt that school, after all, would be a good place for me to begin a more focused lifestyle and would get me out of a sort of rut (it's very hard to work your way into an industry).

I started College last year when I was 21 at PCC. After the first year I switched to Southern

Oregon University and moved to Ashland. Now in reflection, in many ways I am kicking myself as I will not be graduating until I am 26 or so. However I already have a good taste for what the professional world is like, and am not dreading this at all and know roughly what life will be like when I do graduate (I'll know which step to take when the time comes). But also I feel a little estranged in college as many peers seem to be in a little different place than myself (at PCC this was much less the case, I think this is a more SOU/four year college thing). In the end, I value my time in which I was not in school for the experience it gave me, however, I feel if I did not do what I did I could very well be in a better position than I am now.

In the end I feel you cannot have it both ways, and everyone must make a choice on this.

Also, I know many people who took a break off of school and then never returned or tried but are struggling allot to be in school. I feel this is a very common thing and is a major risk to those that do take time off.

## **Limitations**

The present study was conducted with the purpose to investigate one small facet of the Gap Year: Whether counselors were taking part in the Gap Year discussions. Because of the qualitative manner of much of the research, there were many limitations to this study. First, the present study used a convenience sampling of students which could result in biased survey and interview results. While attempts were made to include high schools with different socio-economical backgrounds, demographics were not the focus of the present study. As such, results could have differed had this been treated as a more important variable. However, since such a study would have required much more time, it was not feasible for this project.

The present study relied on self-response. To further investigate the Gap Year phenomenon, a longitudinal study following Gap Year takers may further shed light on the implications of taking time away from formal education. Similarly, distinguishing students based on their degree choices (liberal arts versus pre-professional) may also assist in understanding their viewpoints on investing in higher education and taking time off.

While there are many limitations to this study as well as potential for further investigation, the present study did conclude that, for some students, a Gap Year may be a good investment in their future. From high school counselors to college students to “gappers” themselves it was indicated that the development of ‘soft skills’ and emotional maturity are necessary. For some, achieving these skills comes from the college experience. For others, it derives from time away from formal education.



## **Implications**

As one counselor put it, “there’s no reason in concrete for why a graduating 18 year old needs to enter college right away. Depending on the individual, a gap year may be the best strategy for self-exploration, self development etc.” A student fresh out of high school, with no inclination of what he or she may be interested in and little concrete life experience to figure that out may need some time to come to any personal conclusions. While not for everyone, one implication from this study is that a Gap Year may be a viable option for students, meaning it should not be an option counselors, parents, or teachers shy away from openly discussing.

**Emerging Adulthood.** As the present research showed, those who took time away from education, mostly, benefitted from it, and the majority of all students surveyed found the Gap Year to be a post-high school option they would recommend. Similarly, comments from counselors seem to suggest a professional interest in its benefits for students. Furthermore, the idea of student preparedness for college—academically and emotionally—has become a popular topic of discussion in both academic and the general public. Perhaps, one implication of this study’s findings is that the phenomenon of the Gap Year is gaining popularity, which may imply that there is a need it serves for the population that takes them.

Emerging Adulthood is a proposed addition to the life stages commonly accepted among the psychological community. Arnett (2000) stated that this is a period of time in late adolescence and early adulthood characterized by the self-interest. It is a time to explore one’s identity and is characterized as an in-between time full of instability and

self-focus. Essentially, it describes the average 18 year old college freshman. With the arrival of the Gap Year and the growing popularity of Gap Year services, perhaps Arnett's (2000) claim that of the existence of life stage between adolescence and full-fledged adulthood has some merit. As with any life stage, certain conflicts must be overcome in order to move on to the next. Perhaps the Gap Year assists in finding a resolution for the conflicts in identity and instability some of these Emerging Adults confront.

**The College Response.** As seen with Princeton and other schools, a Gap Year and college attendance do not necessarily need to be mutually exclusive. By partnering with international volunteer organizations, such as Princeton did with their Bridge Year program, or even local organizations, colleges today have an opportunity to work with students needing a Gap Year by building it into their programs.

For example, international volunteer services could provide an opportunity for students to gain real world experience, work with a different culture, and partake in a learning environment that is fresh and new to them, assisting in alleviating potential burn out. Another option would be to create a year-long volunteer service or internship program that incoming freshman could partake in for college credit. Partnering with organizations such as Habitat for Humanity or Americorps may be an option for some colleges as they work to create a Gap Year program for their students.

At its core, a Gap Year offers experiential learning, a break from the rut of formal education, and the chance to gain experience in real world situations that translates into personal and social growth. If college campuses saw the value in taking a break from

formal classes and immersing oneself in experiential learning, they could easily incorporate this into their curriculum framework and benefit a lot of undecided, possibly unprepared students in the process.

### **Conclusion**

*“I’m still learning”—Michelangelo*

With rising tuition costs and the changing landscape of the college campus and economy, it may be time for some students to deeply investigate the personal and economical benefits and drawbacks to attending a higher education institution before diving right in. If the previous and present research shows anything, it is that not everyone needs to attend a university and not everyone needs to attend a university immediately after high school.

Higher education attendance is an investment that should not be taken lightly. As much as anything else in this world, attending a university is a personal choice that students must make for themselves and for their futures. In order to make a well informed decision, taking time away from formal education may be necessary to attain some practical perspective and, possibly, personal enlightenment.

If there is anything to learn from the Gap Year experiences, it is that learning and education are not constrained to the walls of a university. Experiential education can be just as valuable, if not more so, as formal education, and learning never ends. It is time to start recognizing and valuing that.

## Appendix A

### Gap Year Survey

#### Demographics

1. Gender: M: \_\_\_\_\_ F: \_\_\_\_\_
2. College Class Standing: Freshman \_\_\_\_\_ Sophomore: \_\_\_\_\_ Junior \_\_\_\_\_ Senior \_\_\_\_\_
3. Is English your first language?

#### Survey Questions

1. What year did you graduate high school? \_\_\_\_\_
2. Did you go to college right after high school? Y/N

If no, did you:

- a. Enter military
  - b. Volunteer
  - c. Travel
  - d. Work at non-career track job (fast food; retail etc.)
  - e. Start working in a career field (paralegal, administrative assistant etc.)
  - f. Other: please specify \_\_\_\_\_
3. Are you familiar with the concept of a Gap Year? Y/N
  4. Did your high school counselor ever discuss after the option of a Gap year between high school and college? Y/N
  5. Did you feel prepared for college after graduating high school? Y/N
  6. Would you have been interested in a Gap Year if you had been aware of that as an option? Y/N
  7. If you did take time off from formal education before entering college, do you think that the break made you better prepared to be a college student? Y/N

In what ways: \_\_\_\_\_ -

8. Would you recommend a Gap Year as an option to high school seniors?

Any

comments? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix B**

## Gap Year Thesis: Counselor Interview Questions

1. How long have you been a counselor?
2. Have you always worked only as a counselor, or did you pursue other career paths before this?
3. What are your main responsibilities?
4. Do you advise students on post-high school plans?
5. Do you advise them about college? Military? Employment? Vocational training? Community colleges?
6. Do you advise them about the Gap Year?
7. Have you ever recommended a student take a similar break from formal education? Why or why not?
8. Would you ever recommend a Gap Year? Why or why not?
9. What are your professional opinions of the Gap Year?
10. In your own education, and in your career, have you even taken something like a Gap Year?
11. Is there anything else you would like to add?

## Appendix C

### Survey Results

Of the students surveyed, 93 indicated their high school counselors **did not** discuss the Gap Year with them. Ten students, however, did. As such, 74 students did not have any prior knowledge of what a Gap Year was exactly but 29 students did.

#### Gap Year takers:

There were 17 students who took some time away from formal education between high school and college. Of those 17, eight worked at a non-career track job, two volunteered, five traveled, two were in the military, and one worked at a career track job. A few students did several.

Two of the 17 indicated a counselor had discussed the Gap Year option, the rest had not.

#### *Recommendations:*

Twelve said “Yes” they would recommend taking a Gap Year. Four indicated “No”. One person said “Maybe/it depends”. The Maybe explained that “some would benefit from it [Gap Year] other maybe not so much; More responsible and less likely to Maybe do what I wanted instead of what I needed to.”

Of those that indicated “No”, one explained that she ended up taking off more time than she originally planned. Another said that while they would not recommend it, they were more mature when they came back to college. One indicated that her time off helped her gain real world experience, guidance, and direction in what she wanted to do, but would not recommend it. One did not indicate a reason.

When indicating if they were better prepared for college after their Gap Year, they were overall satisfied with their time off and better prepared (M=4.06).

Students indicated that a gain in maturity, readiness to work, time to figure out career/major, gaining real world experience, alleviating burnout, a gain in work ethic and knowledge in what they liked to do, a gain in social confidence, and less stress were the main reasons for why the Gap Year benefited them.

#### Straight to College:

Eighty-six students indicated that they went straight to college after high school.

*College Preparedness*

Seventy-four students said they felt prepared for college, 25 indicated they were unprepared, and three were ambivalent.

*Interest in Gap Year*

Students rated their interest level of a Gap Year on a likert-scale from 1-5. The mean score for students who went straight to college was 2.32 (1 – 32 people; 2 – 22 people; 3- 26 people; 4- six people; 5- eight people) , indicating a low interest in taking a Gap Year

*Overall Sample feeling on Gap Year:*

Overall, 49 people indicated that “Yes” they would recommend a student taking a Gap Year, 30 said “No”, and 10 said “Maybe” or “It Depends”.

**High School Counselor Interviews:**

Counselors time ranged from 2.5 months to 15 years?

Main Responsibilities:

1. Help students graduate, at –risk of drop out/failing students, crisis management, communicating with other school personnel, classroom guidance by year,
2. Academic counseling, personal/family counseling (social emotional), career/college counseling – more of the latter than the former.
3. Less counseling – more scheduling/paperwork. 504s, class presentations for college/career. Advising on college/career. Very little “true counseling” – referrals for that.
4. I’m responsible for my section of the alphabet for the entire 9-12. Everything. Academic, career counseling, communication, person, social counseling – we do everything. We make sure that the kids are okay enough to be successful in their academics for future success. They need to maintain academics.
5. Personal/social counseling. Scheduling. Academic counseling.

Overall: Most counselors experience academic counseling and scheduling. Occasionally if a student has a social/personal problem they will address that, but their main job duties have to do with academics and making sure the student succeeds or manages their academics.

Advise on post high school plans:

1. Yes
2. Yes
3. Yes, but focus on bigger picture route – it’s not fine tuned for specific students. Before all seniors sat down with a counselor to see if they had a plan, now we never sit down with every senior. The majority of it is technical training or college.
4. Yes.
5. Yes

Overall: All advise on post high school plans and careers.

Advise about college, military, employment, vocational training, community colleges:

1. All of the above
2. Yes
3. Yes. Invite them to come to presentations on these options, have booklets and a couple of sessions geared to “Life beyond CHS”, but we’re not pulling them in individually. We have a big financial aid night. In the past we had more fairs, but we had to cut out what we can and cannot do.
4. Yes. The majority goes onto four year colleges and that is the assumption with every freshman – the goal of post HS education is hopefully a 4 year college. If that is not the best route – either for money or grades – then it is the 2 year college. We go into how to get ready for post HS education work as individually as we can – forecasting. Yes, we want you to go to college, but we also want you to make the best decision for yourself. If that is not college, that is okay. With the military, we stress that the #1 reason for going into it *has* to be service. But you better use them for education.

A lot happens in the classroom where they find a subject or teacher they like or admire. Some of the focus for our students is just to please get to graduation and let them realize they cannot get a job without a diploma.

5. Yes. All of them.

Overall: All counselors advise on career and a variety of post-high school plans, but it seems that college attendance – 4 year or 2 year – takes precedence over other options.

Advise on a Gap Year

1. Yes, it comes up but gets nowhere near the attention as college planning
2. Yes, but we don’t promote Gap Year services



3. I've had students who've chosen to do it. I've never recommended it.
4. We throw it out there in different way that it is an option. Like other options – military etc. – someone brings it up and we throw out the options and talk about it and how it works with college. There are exciting options for people it makes sense for. For maturity reasons a kid is considering a Gap Year are already so mature to understand the value it will be a more incredible experience. For others, it is another year to grow emotionally and get ready for independent life.
5. Not before. But recently, it seems more kids are interested in it. So, yes, I will advise on the Gap Year when they are interested.

Overall: They will advise on a Gap Year, but only if the student brings it up to them first. College planning takes that majority of the attention and other options, like the Gap Year will be addressed and discussed if a student comes up with the idea first.

Ever Recommended a Gap Year:

1. No. But if it comes up in the classroom, I give it due respect
2. Yes. I have a student this year who will graduate early. He'll take a gap year along with a few community college credits then move to OSU's engineering program. Even though he's graduating early, he's incredibly immature socially. A gap year provides him with the opportunity to work on these skills, to gain a better understanding of how he functions on his own before he immerses himself in a very rigorous area of study.
3. If a kid has a concrete plan that is going to help them experience/build a resume, yes.
4. I wait for them to come to me with that option. It is a really tricky thing. I don't want to be responsible for that. If they are barely getting out of high school, they might not get back – I don't want to be responsible for that.
5. No, I wait for them to come to me.

Overall: Most counselors would recommend the Gap Year if the student brings it up first and has a concrete plan that shows what they will do for the term. They will discuss it, and if the student has a good plan, they may support it. But, overall, it appears that they are hesitant to broach the subject first with a student as they don't want to be responsible for the student never returning to education.

Would you Recommend a Gap Year?:

1. Yes, because already I've an example from a student who graduated last year, and took a .5 year gap year and it was a very rewarding and important experience for

- them before they enter college in January. I believe there are certain students for whom a gap year would be a very good option.
2. Absolutely. They are great for younger students – students still 17 when they graduate – who are searching for that “thing” they want to do. It’s also great for students who are exploring languages, and for those who feel they just need a break from the classroom.
  3. Most students that are in this school do not come from families that can afford it or from families that value education as much. If they took a year off to work, I would feel they might get stuck in a job because of the paycheck they feel is good money (when really it isn’t) or they just will never go back. It is hard to go from earning money to paying for more school. To suggest a year for them to find themselves would be negative.
  4. Like the military, it is not my place to suggest it – it is a personal/family/lifestyle decision. If they are throwing out ideas, I could throw out that idea and include the 1. Risks 2. Value and 3. Education. But it is a family decision.
  5. Possibly. It is hard to wrap my head around it. But, a lot of kids aren’t ready for college and getting out in the world will help them do better in school. Some of the kids we are just fighting for them to just reach graduation. So, I can’t say any decision is just black and white. Sometimes the traditional path – the one that we want them to take – is not the one that is best for them and we have to respect that. It is a good lesson to let go and let the kid’s make their own decisions.

Overall: It depends. It looks like half the counselors would recommend it to students to gain maturity, confidence, and independence if the student had a plan. The counselors seem open to the idea of the Gap Year, but still hesitant to bring up the subject first. As one said, “it is not my place to suggest it – it is a personal/family/lifestyle decision”. If a student broaches the subject and the counselor thinks they would benefit from it, it appears that they will support it and recommend that they do it.

#### Professional Opinions on Gap Year:

1. There’s no reason in concrete for why a graduating 18 yr old needs to enter college right away. Depending on the individual, a gap year may be the best strategy for self-exploration, self development etc.
2. They’re not for everyone, but for those whom it fits, it can be the experience that gets the moving in the right direction. They usually come back more mature and centered.
3. Unless kid has mindset for education/ support of family, I would advise doing this kind of experience during college or after graduating college. A lot, if they take a year off, they don’t go but the reason they take a year off is not for self-improvement. I would advise kids to apply even to private schools and figure a way to do this, take out loans if necessary. It depends on their family cultural

background – how their families raised them, if they value higher education, if they would have that support or mindset to seek self improvement.

4. Depends on the person. Any decision really. I highly value using community colleges to bet a Bachelor's. But it depends on the person for the different ways it could look. For some, just getting a full time job can be huge – they grow up, earn money, grow up real fast. It doesn't have to be an expensive abroad program. Still, there is the risk of you're working for money and you get stuck. It depends on the person.

We probably have a few students who start college too soon and bomb out. Would it have been better? More disasters starting college too soon?

5. It is hard to wrap my head around the idea, but more and more I'm seeing students that are not ready for college who want to take a year off and I have to stop and think, you know, that might not be too bad. What is the rush? If that is best for the student, and that they are getting some growth out of it, then why not?

Overall: Depends on the person. The professional opinions seem to suggest that a Gap Year could be a beneficial experience for some students, but only certain students. It is not for everyone. From my conversations with the counselors, they seemed intrigued by the idea of a Gap Year, but were still not comfortable broaching the subject first with students, did not believe it was for everyone, and suggested it had to depend on the student taking it. They did not write it off completely – or at all. Many seemed to really support it, so long as it was for the right student.

Did you take one:

1. Yes kind of. Put off entering grad school by being a grad-assistant coach.
2. No
3. Yes. After my bachelor's degree, I had a year off where I was waiting to start graduate school. It was one of the most relaxing years of my life. I read what I wanted to read, I worked as a waitress.
4. Went back to graduate school after being a mother. It was so different to be an older student in school. I had been around a little. It brought a deeper meaning and understanding for a lot of things that came up, when you live life, there is a different quality to education. Colleges can appreciate someone who's taking the time. Colleges on different levels understand the value of living life.
5. I went back to school in my forties. When I was in undergrad, I was there to just get the degree. I studied last minute – for the test, not for the knowledge. When I went back it was totally different. I wanted to learn – it wasn't last minute. I had a sense of maturity. I knew what I was there for.

Overall: Most of the counselors had had at least some sort of break from education between degrees. From those that I talked to, it appeared that they benefited from the time off with reduced stress, more maturity, a different learning mindset, and a different perspective on life, education, and the topics discussed than other students.

Other Comments:

4. Lakeridge school numbers: 186 went on to a 4 year college; 52 2-year college; 1 person went into the military; 2 an apprenticeship; 1 career/education (mission work); 6 employed/seeking employment; 2 special services/community; 1 is traveling (married to military); 6 unknown; 5 took a year off.

**College Counselor Interview:**

“While I am not speaking for all Academic Advisors and their opinion, typically time off is a personal decision which changes from student to student. While I have advised students to take time off for various reasons; as a method to further investigate their interests has not been one of them. Finally, in regards to my personal opinion, I do not see a pattern of time off being good or bad. Rather as I mentioned before, it differs for each student.”

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