

Here's How to Make a Gap Year Before College Count

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Over the next three months, many high school graduates across America will start college. Some, unprepared for the challenges of higher education or the independence it requires, will struggle without clear direction.

Almost [half](#) won't graduate within six years. As educators, we work hard with limited resources to make college accessible and formative. But part of the answer could be found outside formal education, before students set foot on campus.

American students are taking gap years at record numbers, and educators are embracing the trend as a way to increase students' motivation and performance and make them better thinkers and citizens. As president of the board of the [American Gap Association](#), which sets standards and accredits gap-year programs for high-school graduates to participate in before they start college, I have the privilege of helping promote the practice for U.S. students.

Common in Europe and Australia, the gap year—taken the year before starting college—is growing in popularity among American students. How do the college-bound spend their gap years? Many defer college admission to volunteer overseas, but others stay within the U.S. to volunteer or undertake expeditions or internships. The [main idea](#) is that they be immersed in new environments that expand their skills and their perspectives, so that they can see themselves and their world in a new light.

Is a gap year for you? Here are a few things to consider:

1. Each year, more colleges encourage gap years: Public and private [colleges](#) around the country—including all the Ivy League universities—are endorsing gap years and setting up special deferment policies for interested students. Some, such as [UNC-Chapel Hill](#), [Tufts](#), and [Princeton](#), even offer funded gap years to incoming students, and others, such as the [New School](#), award academic credit. Structured gap years, also called “bridge years,” can help [improve the odds](#) of college enrollment and performance during college. Still, not all colleges and scholarship programs allow deferrals, so students should inquire during the application process.

2. Gap years are becoming more accessible to lower-income students. Gap years have rightly been criticized for not being accessible to low-income students. Fortunately, more colleges and gap-year programs, such as [Global Citizen Year](#), offer financial aid to students, and new low-cost, high-impact models are developing, such as [Omprakash EdGE](#), which offers free room and board for the year in some locations. But much more needs to be done. The U.S. State Department, for instance, could expand its [Gilman Scholarship Program](#) and allow low-income students on accredited gap-year programs to receive funding. And while [USA Gap Year Fairs](#) are a start, we need more awareness of—as well as financial support for—gap years among low-income families.

3. Employers are beginning to recognize the competencies that gap years provide. Gap-year alumni report that many of the perspectives, skills, and competencies gained during the year—to work *with* diversity and *through* adversity, to be confident and mature, and to solve problems and think creatively—have helped them secure jobs and excel professionally. In time, it's likely more employers will recognize the benefits of hiring former gap-year students.

Researchers are just beginning to understand [how gap years affect students](#), and we need more longitudinal studies on how to maximize student development and on the impact on communities where gap years are taken. But we

know gap years can be a powerful complement to higher education. Let's encourage more students to pursue this promising opportunity.