1. Should You Take A Gap Year?

Taking an independent, non-affiliated/ unstructured gap year is incredibly difficult. **It's incredibly rewarding, but also indescribably miserable, lonely, frustrating, and challenging**. When you take an independent gap year, you are accountable for your own growth–whether it be in the form of time management, budget and financing, day to day living, work, travel, etc. You are also accountable for factors beyond your control: geographic mobility, visa restrictions, hiring cycles, a shitty and/or competitive job market, etc. Covid will exacerbate these challenges and no matter how meticulously you plan, expect a bumpy road ahead.`

I took an independent gap year after high school without any University affiliation. I was basically a high school graduate living in a country where I basically spoke the language with little to no funds. I pooled my savings to take classes to learn the language, then found an unpaid volunteer opportunity, improved my language skills, negotiated into an internship opportunity, worked two paid jobs alongside my unpaid internship to save up, then leveraged my story to land an internship at the largest startup incubator in the world. The last bit happened in the last three months of my May to September (17 month) gap year. In between all of this, I had two to three month stretches of time where I was unemployed, sleeping or watching tv for 20 hours a day waiting to hear back about jobs, speaking to maybe two-three people my age once a week. Some months I was miserable and some months I had the experience of a lifetime.

TL;DR you will learn from failing over and over and it's ok to not have a concrete plan yet as you decide whether to take a gap year or not. Whatever you plan, it won't happen that way anyways. However, as you navigate this decision, **please ask yourself WHY you want to take a year off.** If you're taking time off solely to avoid the alternative (Zoomiversity), just know an independent gap year (especially now during Covid) isn't much better. You will be alone, you will be bored, and you will struggle to find motivation. **You don't need a concrete plan but you need to be intentional.** With one year of your time, what is one thing you want to learn or accomplish?

For me as a cocky high school grad, I wanted to find out whether to go to college or not and why. And it can be that ridiculous. **What is the one thing you want to learn or accomplish in your valuable time off?** Being intentional will help you stay focused and excited about trying out new things, having stretches of time when you're just thinking and doing nothing, and jumping back up when things don't work out.

There is no wrong answer but "travel and see the world" is definitely not the right answer. You're figuring out how to use your time, not where to use your money. If you're traveling, be intentional about what you're learning, what you're exploring, and why. (For the time being though, be a team player and **stay home**).

2. Identifying Work Opportunities

Regardless of what your motivating goal is, look for opportunities where you would be able to have the most impact.

Covid obviously is a challenge (I mean, it's the reason why you're probably taking the gap year anyways). Everyone's trying to take time off, no one's trying to hire, you can't travel anywhere, and connecting/networking with people over Zoom just isn't it.

On the other hand, Covid presents a unique opportunity for those seeking to take time off. With appropriate safety and public health measures, you can make a big impact organizing your own covid-relief projects, or participating in local/ community initiatives such as food drives, PPE distribution, tutoring and supplementary education, etc. Any time you can commit to local initiatives will have tangible impacts and many local nonprofits and advocacy groups will be seeking volunteers to assist in critical operations, research, and intervention programs that they don't have the bandwidth to manage at the moment.

Start local. Whether you're an economics major, a computer science major, or a public policy, history, english, philosophy, psychology major–there is so much work you can do on the local level. Especially at nonprofits and community initiatives, you can almost create your own adventure, tailored to your academic strengths, preferences, and interests. Code a platform to facilitate the grant application process or manage donations. Devise a plan to optimize budgets and reduce unnecessary expenses. Spotlight their work through journalism, offer physical help, start your own project within the nonprofit, etc. You go to Princeton–and there's so much you can offer from your time in the classroom–in the service of humanity.

Remember, you're constantly exploring during your year. Think of your year as a set of stairs. Start at the bottom, feel comfortable spending 3-4 months building your skills and story. You don't have to start big at some fancy company doing world changing work. Start small, make an impact, experiment and explore, build your reputation, and use your meaningful experience and story (and glowing recommendation) to find the next big opportunity.

+ Don't feel the pressure to stick to your discipline. Your value comes from your ability to take initiative, to incorporate diverse perspectives and experiences, and share that narrative and growth.

3. Actual Resources and Actionable Tips

- Update your resume and take time to write personalized cover letters. See other resources in the google drive folder (Princeton WEP resources)

- Read local news, identify well known organizations and movements in your community. Cold call.
- Nonprofit whitepapers, policy reports, etc. If you can't find anything in the news, look through advocacy reports and pick out a couple organizations that are mentioned in the report. Cold call.
- Incubator Directories: I'm only familiar with the incubator I worked at but go through their companies, reach out to ones you're interested in. Here are the two I'm familiar with.
  - https://www.welcometothejungle.com/en
  - https://stationf.co/
- Get a LinkedIn, use TigerNet to reach out to alumni.
- Recruiting services: Handshake and LinkedIn are pretty solid. I've been exploring RippleMatch and like it quite a bit. They don't require cover letters, will connect you directly to recruiters based on your profile.
  - https://ripplematch.com/
- Do anything in your unemployed, free time. Coursera, Udemy, Skillshare, etc. are all one click away. Not a huge fan of Duolingo but it will persistently guilt trip you into doing something.
- Tutoring is a great way to review academic materials while making money. Best part-time gig, made most of my gap year money through tutoring and admissions essay reviews. Would highly recommend. Working at a cafe, on a farm, etc. is also great if you can find an open position. Add some structure to your days.