A Pandemic Gap Year Is a Smart Move for Students

With many colleges and universities [still deciding](#) when to re-open their campuses after they were shuttered due to COVID-19, many high school seniors are thinking about [taking a gap year](#). Putting off college during the pandemic might enable them to get the on-campus experience they desire in 2021 instead of going to school remotely this fall.

Traditionally, a gap year is a semester or year of learning through experience. It is typically taken after high school and before college or starting a career. However, some college students choose to take a gap year while they're still in college or before going to graduate school.

As the [coordinator](#) of a [research group](#) that examines the impact of taking a gap year, here are five ways that students will benefit from the gap year experience.

1. Avoid Burnout

Perhaps most importantly, given the pressure in many high schools to excel in school and extracurricular activities to gain admission to college, a gap year gives students the opportunity to do something completely different. Just taking that [step off the treadmill](#) can lead to new growth and self-discovery.

2. Gain Maturity

Taking a break from your formal education can contribute to a deeper appreciation of what the purpose of school is really all about. This, in turn, allows students to begin college with a more mature and focused mindset.

A gap year can provide the opportunity to discover new areas of interest and even to completely reinvent yourself. One good example was a student who spent his gap year working as a fishing guide in Alaska. That experience led him to major in environmental resource management. Ultimately, he embarked on a career in nature conservation.

3. Boost Academic Performance

Could taking a break slow down a student's academic momentum? Actually, [research](#) conducted by an economist at Middlebury College — and replicated at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill — found the opposite is true. Not only did students who took a gap year perform, on average, better than those who did not, they actually performed better than would have been predicted, based on their academic credentials when they applied to college. For instance, the study found that the students who took a gap year earned GPAs that were .15 to .25 points higher than predicted.

4. Earn Academic Credit

At least [one gap year program](#) also provides the opportunity to be admitted to and earn academic credit at a variety of colleges. Other schools, such as [Florida State University](#), the [University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill](#), [Princeton](#) and [Tufts University](#) offer their own gap year programs for students who want to postpone their on-campus enrollment for a year, but not always for academic credit. These college-based programs can also include financial assistance when needed.

5. Gain Independence

It's not necessary to stick with a formal gap year program or limit yourself to just one activity. In my 45 years of working with gap year students, I've found that some of the best gap

year experiences are those that are self-designed.

If you create your own gap year experience, the most important thing to figure out is what you want to get out of it — be that work experience in a career you intend to pursue, learning a foreign language, doing community service or gaining greater cultural or environmental awareness. Then it's a matter of creating experiences that lead to that goal.

One memorable example was a student from Oklahoma who spent the first four months of her gap year tending llamas at a monastery in North Dakota, the next four months working for a lawyer in Tulsa and the last four volunteering at an orphanage in the Dominican Republic.

Resources Available

While taking a gap year can often cost a lot of money, that doesn't mean the gap year experience is limited only to those who can afford it. Many of the more expensive gap year programs offer need-based financial aid.

It is also important to remember that many self-designed gap year experiences can cost very little, or even provide the opportunity to earn money through jobs or paid internships. Alternatively, it could involve doing volunteer work while living at home. For volunteer experiences away from home, sometimes students get their travel and living expenses covered. Service opportunities are often voluntary and therefore unpaid, but programs such as AmeriCorps' City Year provide stipends to cover room and board expenses.

For those who want to join an existing gap year program, there are plenty of opportunities that provide students with a wide range of domestic and international experiences, leadership opportunities, and less formal learning environments. For example, you could check with the Gap Year Association for lists of accredited programs and its own research on the

impact of taking a gap year. In addition, USA Gap Year Fairs sponsors fairs around the country in late winter where [gap year programs](#) provide information about their opportunities. There are also a number of [accredited independent gap year consultants](#) around the country who can provide expert advice on gap year experiences.

For high school seniors contemplating deferring enrollment in college until they can be assured of having the on-campus experience they envisioned, May and early June is the time to consider gap year opportunities and to inform the college admissions office of their desire to delay their enrollment. Not all colleges have the same gap year policies, however, and some are reviewing them in the context of the current pandemic. For these reasons, it is important to learn what a particular college's or university's policies are and to make sure you meet the deadlines to inform the institution of your plans.

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