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English 1101

13 November 2014

Gap Years: Helpful or Harmful?

 A gap year is a period of time that is usually taken after high school, but before entering college, when a recent high school graduate postpones college in favor of pursuing “personal enrichment activities.”(Gap year para 1) But are these gap years helping you or are they doing just the opposite? Taking a gap year is actually beneficial for high school students entering college. According to *Time*, “Many educators tout taking a gap year, saying that kids who step off the academic treadmill after high school to work, travel, volunteer or explore other interests are more mature when they arrive at college and more engaged in their education going forward.”(Para 3) Taking a gap year allows you to “recharge your academic battery”, continue your search for potential colleges to attend, as well as allowing you time to decide on a major. Gap years also allow you to travel abroad, give back to your community, and give students a chance to learn how to become an independent person before going to college. Although gap years seem to be an excellent idea, taking a gap year comes with its disadvantages. Some of the disadvantages include losing your best friends because they did not take a gap year and having to take a course you do not like or want due to course changes. Deciding on whether or not to take a gap year is a very important decision and should be a personal choice, not a choice that someone makes for a student.

 Gap years allow you to “recharge” your academic battery. After spending twelve years as a student in school as well as going through an extensive college search, it is time for a break. Recharging your academic battery will allow a student to come back to school fresh and with a renewed interest to learn as well as a renewed vigor to impress college professors. Taking a gap year allows you to continue your college search. Did the college of your dreams not accept you? Could you not find the college of your dreams? Using the extra time that a gap year gives you allows you that extra time to find the perfect college. According to Campus Explorer, “You can use your gap year to continue your college search for the right school, while taking classes or engaging in other activities to strengthen your college application.” (Para 4) Found the perfect college? What shall you major in? A gap years allows you the time to find the perfect major. Taking courses at a community college or even online is a good way to learn more about a certain field that you want to go in.

A gap year allows you to see the world. Taking a gap year allows you to broaden your horizons, that is, seeing the world from another person’s point of view. “Think you want to be a history major? Visit places steeped in history, like Rome.”(Campus Explorer para 7) Visiting places such as Rome allows you to be that much more “into” your field of study, in this case, History. Experiences that you endure and encounter while traveling abroad could lead to discoveries about yourself as well as new interests. For example, if one were to travel to Italy and eat pasta prepared a certain way, that pasta could become a favorite food. Taking a gap year allows you to add to your resume. The gap year that was taken could give opportunities to become an intern in a particular field that you were considering going in, such as Nursing. Interning at a hospital during a gap year would give you valuable insight as to what it is like to be a nurse as well as discover what a nurse does. “[Interning] will help you bring practical, real-world experience into your college education, and it can get you some career contacts to contact after you graduate.”(Campus Explorer para 13)

Giving back during a gap year is a great way of volunteering. Volunteering at an organization such as AmeriCorps can give you a sense of accomplishment and self-pride. Those same programs can also give you extra money that you can put away to pay those inevitable college fees and dues. According to Fox Business, “Undergraduates at Middlebury College and the University of North Carolina who had taken a gap year before enrolling in college on average had a GPA 0.1 to 0.4 higher than predicted based on high school academic credentials.”(Para 5) Gap years give students time to think. Usually, in a high schooler’s senior year, everything is moving extremely fast around them. By giving him or her the time to slow down that he or she craves, that student will finally be able to just think at his or her *own* pace, with no one telling that student that he or she needs to “hurry up.” According to the *Huffington Post*, you should “give yourself room to think and breathe and be on long train rides from country to country or days spent strolling through new towns. You’ll be surprised where your mind wanders when you give it free rein.” (Para 11)

During a gap year, students learn how to be independent. During a student’s gap year, he or she is usually away from friends and family. Being away from friends and family forces you out of your ‘comfort zone” and by forcing students to be more independent during a gap year makes settling into college that much smoother. According to Mic, “[m]any college students who have never lived away from home find themselves in tough situations when they arrive at college. In many cases, these tough social situations can lead to changes in psychological or physical well-being, distracting students from academics.” (Para 10) The changes that students face can lead to them dropping out of college or committing suicide from the stress that a new environment causes. Had the student taken a gap year away from familiar people, he or she would be more acclimated to settle down.

For some students, taking a gap year is an unproductive experience, especially if he or she does not establish a plan or action for the gap year. Gap years are an easy way to lose the momentum that you had from high school. Skills such as essay writing may be forgotten during the gap year. Although, as long as you have a plan of action for your gap year that involves learning, then those same skills that you learned during high school can *help* you during the gap year. Some gap year students are afraid of losing friends in his or her gap year. Of course, you *will* lose some friends during your gap year, but once you arrive at college, there will be many other freshmen wanting to make friends with you. Some students are afraid to take a gap year due to all of the planning involved in taking one. Planning would include travel plane, accommodations, and volunteer opportunities. Although it is a lot of work to plan a gap year, the experience learned during one can pay off when a college sees what all you did during your gap year.

Students who take a gap year most likely will lose access to guidance counselors, friends, and even scholarships because he or she did not immediately go to college. Sure, a student will lose *some* resources, but there are lots of online resources for a student to contact as well as admissions counselors that would be more than willing to help a student with scholarships. According to College view, “To make the most of a break from academic study, many students consult books and web sites on college planning; talk to their high school counselors, college admission representatives, parents, and trusted teachers; pursue an internship or volunteer opportunity; and seek advice from other students. Be sure to analyze your goals and reasons for taking a gap year before committing to something that could have a major impact on your degree pursuit and subsequent career.”(*The Gap Year* Para 6)

Gap years can be an exciting time for students as well as parents. With the proper planning, a gap year can be one that includes plenty of learning as well as plenty of fun. But remember: staying on track is key for a successful gap year. Slacking off or taking gap years for the wrong reasons is bound to force a student off track.

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