

## Introduction to Gap Years

**"Definition:** A Gap Year is a structured period of time when students take a break from formal education to increase self-awareness, challenge comfort zones, 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 degree."

Gap Years originally started in the United Kingdom in the 1970's as a way to fill the 7 or 8 month gap between final exams and the beginning of university. The intention in the UK for that time was to contribute to the development of the student usually through an extended international experience.

Gap Years came to the United States in the early 1980's through the work of Cornelius H. Bull, founder of Interim Programs. Since its transition to the United States, Gap Years have taken on a life of their own - now embodying every manner of program and opportunity imaginable, both domestically and internationally, all with the shared purpose of **increasing self-awareness, learning about different cultural perspectives, and experimenting with future possible careers.**

Since the 1980's many articles have been written about Gap Years, but perhaps most notably is the article primarily attributed to Harvard's former Dean of Admissions, William Fitzsimmons entitled "[Time Out or Burn Out for The Next Generation](#)." Since then, numerous books and articles have been written, most famously: "The Gap Year Advantage" by Rae Nelson and Karl Haigler.

While the American Gap Association is dedicated to increasing the number of Gap Year students, we understand that Gap Years may not be right for every student in every situation, and thus stand behind the most cardinal of advising principles in Gap Years: the student must make the choice - and thus take the ownership for - embarking on their Gap Year. As Holly Bull from Interim Program has said, this is perhaps the most important ingredient in a successful Gap Year.

Perspective Gap Year students should both recognize the inherent challenges and benefits of a successful gap year, not only for themselves but also for their communities and parent(s). Taking a Gap Year is an opportunity for the student to take more ownership of their life rather than following the "Cradle to College to Cubicle to Cemetery Cycle" [<http://thechoice.blogs.nytimes.com>]. The essence of taking a Gap Year has anecdotally been a blessing for both the student and their community in terms of creating some real-world circumstances where the parent literally can't "come to the rescue," and where the student is "set up for success" in navigating some of their own challenges. Please read more in the [Data & Gap Year Benefits](#) page to understand some of the more specific benefits about taking a Gap Year.

In the United States, while little official data has been kept on Gap Years (one of the American Gap Association's central goals), a recent survey of 300,000 first-time freshmen at four-year colleges and universities found 1.2% waited a year to enter college, according to the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles. The number, while not very large, has been on a steady increase as Gap Years grow in popularity. Currently, there are some very compelling reasons to take a Gap Year, and in the research of Karl Haigler [<http://online.wsj.com>], he found that the two most common reasons for taking a Gap Year were:

Burnout from the competitive pressure of high school, and,

A desire "to find out more about themselves."

## Who Makes a Good Gap Year Candidate?

In most cases, a Gap Year candidate fits into a few specific categories: some are tired of running the same academic tracks, thus feeling 'burnt out.' In this typical case, students tend to be fairly high achieving academically, but perhaps want some time to revitalize and seek passions that may lay off-the-track rather than within its four walls. In other cases, an ideal candidate, is one who simply doesn't know for sure what they want to be doing with their life and fear that the average \$39,800 per year [<http://nces.ed.gov>] in tuition costs won't be well spent until they do. Thus, taking a Gap Year is about clarifying their own goals from university, as well as into their first careers. In other cases, students will simply consider a Gap Year because they either didn't get into the university they were hoping to, or, because they were granted a Spring acceptance and now have a semester of time they want to do something productive with.

In every case though, a student taking a Gap Year is one whom will require some support as they'll necessarily be breaking barriers set by peers, their parents in some degree, and hopefully their own comfort zones.

## Best Practices in Working with a Gapper

Being an educator who relates to Gap Years, whether as an Independent Educational Counselor, an Admissions Counselor for a college or university, or being a high school educational or college counselor, there's much to know about Gap Years. In general, the best practice still remains simply to encourage your student to apply to college, get accepted and pay their deposit, then ask for a deferral to do their Gap Year.

Because 90% + of Gap Year students are college-bound, it's important to note that a relationship is necessarily being built with the university they plan eventually to attend and AGA strongly supports an open and honest dialogue with students and their Admissions Counselors so as to have clear admissions numbers and student goals. Sometimes, for instance and as a result of a Gap Year, this can mean a re-evaluation of the university's fit now that the student has greater clarity about their goals in higher education. In all reality, just as much as the student doesn't fit the university any more, in these occasional cases, so too does the university not fit the student any more. In every case, however, communication is key to a successful experience on the front, middle, and end of a student's Gap Year and should be considered as such. Many universities will request that a student, in the first phase, be transparent with their Gap Year plans. Then, throughout the course of their Gap Year, will even request updates as a form of continued recruitment, but also to identify any potential problems to the eventual enrollment at their institution. Finally, at the end of their Gap Year, it's highly advisable to make a point of working directly with the student to help direct them towards their now more-clarified academic goals, but also in ways that Gap Year graduates can best be incorporated into the campus life. The early data by Robert Clagett (former Deans of Admissions at both Harvard and Middlebury) is clearly showing that Gap Year graduates are more engaged in campus life and these students often will serve as hubs for campus life if given a bit of support and direction.

## Resources

- [www.americangap.org](http://www.americangap.org)
- [www.usagapyearfairs.org](http://www.usagapyearfairs.org)
- [www.gooverseas.com](http://www.gooverseas.com)