Mind the Gap

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Graduating high school is a magical period in the lives of many young adults. It’s a time to celebrate friendships, accomplishments, and to look ahead to the future. However, for many teenagers, it’s also a time filled with anxiety. In recent years, it is becoming more common for students to take a year after graduation to refresh themselves as a way to ensure that they will be fully ready for the academic challenges ahead. Often, students choose to join the military in order to gain life experience and provide national service before starting college. Students who make this decision deserve admiration, certainly, but what about students less inclined for military duty? Many graduating high schoolers are exploring alternative approaches to service before re-entering school. Known as a “gap year,” this interval between high school and college is becoming a structured way to engage with national service. Some programs are structured around community organizing, environmental activism, or combating hunger, just to name a few. Although most traditional students still enter college immediately after graduating high school, it is obvious that there are many potential benefits of taking a gap year to engage in national service.

From a developmental psychology perspective, the gap year is useful for students who feel overburdened by choosing a major too early, who need time to renew focus toward academic studies, and who would gain maturity by spending time in a professional environment. Many students enter college directly after high school out of obligation, but haven’t settled on what they want to study. As David Koeppel (2004) wrote, “Many students and career counselors say the pressure to choose the ''right'' major is more intense than ever because of factors like rising tuition costs…. Parents and students today often consider college more an investment than a time of academic and personal exploration” (para. 3). Students take this decision very seriously, and many would benefit from taking a year to consider which academic path is best for them. Taking a year off also assists students who may need to reset their focus before this intense period of academic study. As the American Gap Association (2017) has documented, “one of the two biggest reasons Gap Year students chose to take a Gap Year was to address academic burnout” (para. 6). This burnout is a very serious issue for many college students, and often has nothing to do with their abilities as a student. In fact, a gap year can provide these students with additional academic maturity through the experience of spending time outside of the classroom. Andrew J. Martin (2010) conducted a research study that found, “…gap year participation positively predicts academic motivation and that this effects are significant over and above the effects of demographic covariants” (p. 2). This evidence seems to dispel the common fear that students will sacrifice academic skill and motivation if they do not directly enter college. Instead, students are benefiting in the precise way that gap years intend: by allowing them the opportunity to simultaneously refresh and gain meaningful experiences that will help them to succeed when they arrive at college.

From an ethical perspective, a year devoted to national service can do wonders in terms of providing students with valuable experience, putting them in positions of leadership, and empowering them to claim their education when they ultimately enter college. The experience students gain from taking a gap year often translates not only to better academic performance, but also to increased civic engagement. For instance, AmeriCorps, one of the largest national service organizations in the country, offers an impressive variety of experiences, including responding to disasters, fighting illiteracy, assisting low-income communities, and addressing community needs in education, health and the environment (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2017). These experiences can not only be eye-opening for students, but transformative. Data suggests that students who participate in a national service program such as AmeriCorps are more likely to gain lifelong leadership skills and remain engaged as a citizen post-college. A study by Nina Hoe (2015) found that “63% of adults who participated in a national service gap year in college voted in the 2014 midterm election (versus 36% of the eligible voting public) and 88% participated in some kind of community service in the previous month (versus 25% of the general public)” (p. 15). These numbers demonstrate an astounding margin in the level of community engagement shown by gap-year students. These leadership experiences gained during the gap year translates into leadership in the classroom by encouraging students to claim their education in a more empowered way. Thinking Beyond Borders (2017), another highly successful cross-cultural gap year program, reported that “TBB alumni report a strong sense of purpose and direction for their studies and a sense of self that prepares them for a happier, more fulfilling life” (para. 4). Programs such as AmeriCorps and Thinking Beyond Borders are providing students with important learning opportunities that foster life-long learning and leadership. This is a shared goal of higher education, and these programs are providing a powerful pathway toward that goal.

Finally, from an economic perspective, students who use a gap year for national service could qualify for additional grants and scholarships, receive internship or practicum credits, and increase their ability to graduate in four years. With rising costs of tuition that show no signs of slowing down, students in need of financial relief could find necessary cost reduction by participating in a national service program. Many schools, including Warren Wilson College (2017), offer scholarships to students “who have shown leadership in any number of ways, including involvement in some form of volunteer activity (i.e., Habitat for Humanity, Food Not Bombs, social justice activism, etc.)” (para. 3). Although most of these scholarships are not currently exclusively for gap-year students, it’s clear that universities are being mindful about the value these students have in their classrooms. Other colleges also offer credits for this experience, an acknowledgment of its legitimate educational impact. One author noted, “A few universities offer gap programs that don't buy time off school. Instead, they count as a semester or year of course work. After completing the Gap Experience at St. Norbert College in Wisconsin, students return to campus with sophomore standing” (Snider, 2014, para. 8). In other words, schools are taking the innovative approach of actually embedding the gap year into their curriculum. This approach increases students’ ability to graduate in four years, and results have proved successful. As Hoe (2015) discovered in her study, “The median time to graduate for gappers was 3.75 years, with an average of 4.07 years” (p. 14). This successfully reinforces the idea that students are coming in focused, and not wasting unnecessary time and tuition dollars as they complete their education. If students can be assured that they will not suffer financially by taking a year for national service, more are likely to give it a try.

We are learning that there is no “one-size-fits-all approach” to education, and it appears that there are many students who benefit from taking a gap year before entering college. It also seems that there are many opportunities for a gap year to become a structured way to assist students who need maturity, financial assistance, or simply time to reset before entering college. This option might not be in every student’s best interest, but it is hard to dispute the positive results for the ones who choose to take advantage of it. It is also a testament to the success of service organizations that more colleges are willing to find creative ways to accommodate students who want to participate. We have always known that education happens outside the classroom. The more that we can empower our students to be more globally minded in their approach to learning, the better our college classrooms will be.

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