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Importance of Taking a Gap Year

“One of the things I see students frequently asking and coming up with is what success looks like to them. We’re handed definitions of success by our peers, by culture, by media, by school, by parents, and we’re not asked what it looks like for us. A gap year asks you to consider that question,”¹ explains Ethan Knight, the Executive Director and Founder at the American Gap Association.

A new phenomenon is rising among the young people of America -- a phenomenon which existed in years past but is just now gaining momentum again among students and parents alike: The Gap Year. A Gap Year is a year, usually between high school and college, during which students take a break from their current academic track to focus on themselves and new experiences. An article from the Huffington Post from 2016 entitled *10 Reasons You Should Take A Gap Year* explains that, “While it’s not common in the U.S., taking a gap year is considered the norm in some countries all over the world, including the United Kingdom and Australia.”² Not uncommonly, “many teenagers in other countries wait a year after high school before heading to college. In Norway, Denmark and Turkey, for instance, more than 50 percent of students take a

¹ Forbes

² Huffington Post

year off before college, according to the Nordic Institute for Studies in Innovation, Research and Education in Oslo, Norway.³ Over the past few years, interest and enrollment in Gap Year programs have been increasing rapidly, as highlighted by President Barak Obama's daughter, Malia, who opted for a year off before attending Harvard. A 2015 report run by the American Gap Association shows that interest in Gap Years has increased by a whopping 294% since 2010.⁴ "According to the study-abroad organization Council on International Educational Exchange, Harvard College has seen a 33% increase in the number of their incoming students taking gap years."⁵ And U.S. News and World Report states that "acceptance letters from Harvard even suggest that students might consider taking time off before they enroll."⁶ The most prestigious colleges in the nation are coming alongside the idea of a Gap Year, and NBC News reports that some are even beginning to offer scholarships and financial assistance for students to take a gap year: to travel, to volunteer, or to complete an internship.⁷ All students should consider taking a Gap Year between high school and college to serve, travel, or better themselves for future education and careers. But what is this really about? Why so much interest? What do students even do or accomplish on their Gap Year? These are some question that will be addressed in this thesis.

³ American Gap Association Web

⁴ American Gap Association Web

⁵ Huffington Post

⁶ Huffington Post

⁷ Forbes

Encouraging young men and women to consider taking a Gap Year, A New York Times' article *How Taking a Gap Year Can Shape Your Life* expounds, "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."⁸ Though the remainder of this thesis will cite many positive results of a Gap Year, maturity seems to be a common theme associated with all paths. A large portion of students who take a Gap Year end up volunteering or serving in some fashion. Regularly, Gap Year students become philanthropic by volunteering or going on mission trips as well as gaining maturity needed for proceeding in life.

One of the primary reasons students give for taking a Gap Year is to "find myself." As a result of the break, they find that they have a more well-rounded and refined worldview at the conclusion of it. A Gap Year will help the students know both themselves and the world better. Following from that, because many students participate in some sort of community service, they gain a priceless understanding of life and humanity. While gaining this understanding, they become more adept in emotional intelligence, and believe it or not, employers tend to be more interested in applicants with high emotional quotients ("EQ") than high intelligence quotients ("IQ")⁹. Above all, the student will leave the year knowing who they are and what is important to them. Their worldview is firm.

⁸ Time

⁹ American Gap Association Web

As stated earlier, many students participate in some sort of volunteer work or community service over the year, inciting them to help others and care for those in need. Huffington Post presents it this way, “You’ll understand there are bigger issues for humanity than a failed date night.”¹⁰ Since the student will be spending this year serving and surrounded by those who love serving, it makes sense that a higher feeling of philanthropy will be impressed upon the individual. In the article *10 Reasons You Should Take a Gap Year*, Suzy Struntner explains that many schools report that gap year students are more involved on campus¹¹ as compared to those who did not take time off. It is fair to conclude that students who show a level of service as young adults will translate to volunteering for the rest of their lives. In fact, through the American Gap Association study on past Gap Year students, it was found that 89% of those Gap Year alumni being of various ages and status reported participating in community service in the last month.¹² The statistics speak for themselves. Gap Year students have a greater motivation to help others and be a working part of the community.

“Many of the best benefits of taking a gap year are difficult to quantify: maturity, confidence, and a refined sense of direction for instance,”¹³ explains Frances Bridges of Forbes magazine. Though benefits relating to maturity are hard to quantify, they are definitely not hard to pinpoint. Skills learned on the Gap Year prepare the student for life, skills such as problem-solving, money-handling, and communication. If done correctly, a Gap Year should be quite busy, but there will be many times when the

¹⁰ Huffington Post

¹¹ Huffington Post

¹² American Gap Association Article

¹³ Forbes

student will have time to think - - to really contemplate life, future, themselves, etc. Society has lost the value of unobstructed and relaxing reflection, and it must be won back. Something that perhaps could be measured is new friendships. These friendships will bond individuals together with a sense of purpose and hold the students accountable once the Gap Year is complete. Additionally, many students will become interested in their future career during this time. Therefore, this year will help them define success, make their own choices, and clarify the future for themselves and others.

All in all, "Gap Year students are perceived to be 'more mature, more self-reliant and independent' than non-Gap Year students," explains the 2007 Australian article *The Characteristics of Gap-Year Students and Their Tertiary Academic Outcomes*.¹⁴ Generally, one can glean that Gap Year students gain superior maturity during their academic break over those who go directly to a university. A Gap Year formalizes the students' Worldview, encourages them to help others for their whole lives, and brings out new colors of maturity. Though maturity cannot be quantified, it may be the most qualifying denominator of a student's future.

"Having structure was extremely important for me," said Kenneth Hubbell, a sophomore at Princeton University, who went to Urubamba, Peru with Princeton's Bridge Year Program to assist a water filter project. "It helped me validate my desire to study chemical engineering, and it reminded me that as a chemical engineer I have tools to work on important projects. I was the type of person who would've been happy holing up in a lab, studying some obscure form of chemistry for my entire life, and I don't

¹⁴ American Gap Association Web

think I'm that person anymore.”¹⁵ One of the highest concerns parents and mentors may have for their students regarding a Gap Year is the question of college. They fear if their children delay college in a Gap Year they may never attend at all. But this is an unfounded concern. The students who take intentional time off to participate in a Gap Year are not the type of students who give up on life and become basement couch potatoes. In fact, the American Gap Association reports that “90 percent of students who took a Gap Year returned to college within a year.”¹⁶ And in this day and age, colleges are making it easier than ever to return to the classroom after a Gap Year. According to U.S. News & World Report, “Acceptance letters from Harvard even suggest that students might want to take time off before they enroll.”¹⁷ Clearly, universities are more accepting, and even encouraging, of Gap Years now. Students will have a generally better college experience if they take a Gap Year because it leads to greater scholastic success, higher mental maturity, and a stronger financial foundation.

Consistently proving to be the result of Gap Year programs, success in college is one of the biproducts of a Gap Year that perhaps can be measured. “A number of researchers have shown a connection between a deliberate choice to take some time off and getting better grades upon return to the classroom.”¹⁸ And in fact, “Middlebury College, has found that those who delay a year before starting college have GPAs that, on a 4.0 scale, are 0.15 to 0.2 higher than otherwise would be expected.”¹⁹ Additionally,

¹⁵ Forbes

¹⁶ American Gap Association Web

¹⁷ Huffington Post

¹⁸ NYTimes

¹⁹ Time

“When Clagett (Bob Clagett, former Dean of Admissions at Middlebury College) ... looked at the actual academic performance of students who took a Gap Year compared to their predicted performance based on their academic rating, students who took a Gap Year almost always over-performed academically in college, usually to a statistically significant degree. Most importantly, the positive effect of taking a Gap Year was demonstrated to endure over all four years.”²⁰ Perhaps the reason for such results could be that participants of Gap Years proclaim that the break gave them time to think and refine their college major following from a career choice. “For most students, gap experiences have an impact on their choice of academic major and career – either setting them on a different path than before a Gap Year or confirming their direction (60% said the experience either ‘set me on my current career path/academic major’ or ‘confirmed my choice of career/academic major’).”²¹ Knowing what they want to do clarifies and boosts the students’ interest in learning as well as gives them a goal so they can stay focused for the long run of their higher education.

Maturity: Something everyone admires and hopefully aspires to attain. Not surprisingly, students who took Gap Years tend to be more mature when entering college and throughout their entire lives. Regardless of how they may decide to spend the break, they will assuredly run into new situations that will test their adaptation skills, skills needed for life. Celia Quezada, age 44 and a first grade teacher in Greenfield, CA, who was a Gap Year attendee, shares, “Had I not done the program first, I probably

²⁰ American Gap Association Web

²¹ American Gap Association Web

would have dropped out of college just from the culture shock.”²² In addition to new experiences, the year also gives students a chance to reflect and perhaps put together pieces that failed to connect in high school, maybe regarding learning a language or information learned in history class. Leading to maturity, the break can also provide the student a well-desired break from high school burnout to focus on other mind-enriching subjects like language experience. These are just a few ways a Gap Year can influence a young person’s life and guide them into greater maturity.

Carrying the heavy burden of paying for college is a common issue among young people, and the idea of taking a break from school and from a secure job may not appeal to the logically-minded. But this need not be an issue. Because of the growing popularity of the Gap Year, many scholarships are available for Gap Year students for college especially if the Gap includes college credit. The American Gap Association points out that if there are not any scholarships available at the university of choice, the student may have to take time to explain his or her Gap Year qualifications. More often, students were welcomed to their university with a handful of scholarships in their pockets. To keep from financial issues in the future, the student will not be wasting money on a degree he or she does not want nor need. They will have thought through their degree options and have chosen something of which they can follow. And in the case that students spend a portion of their Gap Year working for an income-producing job, they may have greater funds available to them because of their hard work and scholarship offers.

²² NYTimes

To summarize, students will have a generally better college experience if they take a Gap Year. It has been shown that Gap Year students have overall higher percentages of obtaining superior grades over those who go directly to college from high school. Though hard to measure, undoubtedly they express higher mental maturity for life and their education. Finally Gap Years bring in high opportunities for scholarships as well as perhaps giving the student more financial understanding and security.

“The world is a book and those who do not travel read only one page.” - Saint Augustine. Here is a time in adult life that cannot be taken back. Here is a perfect time to travel. As a person just starting out in life, the student would have low bills and low payments versus in the future when they may be more tied down by mortgages and debt. American Gap Association (“AGA”) reports that 85% of Gap Year students showed interest in traveling on their break. Students who take a Gap Year will have the opportunity to travel, showing them new experiences, new cultures, and new world views.

Without a doubt, travel, whether international or domestic, adds to a person’s repertoire of knowledge and skill. As a traveling Gap Year student, the traveler will return with a plethora of new experiences, such as learning a new language, trying new foods, and developing new friends and connections. International experience also enhances a person’s resume, adding to their employability in the future. From AGA’s study of hundreds of Gap Year alumni, those who traveled reported that “being in a new and different environment” was the most meaningful element to Gap Year.²³

²³American Gap Association Article

While in these new countries, the Gap Year students will witness cultures both intriguing and unfamiliar. Important cross cultural knowledge will be gained over this time. Again, such knowledge will more than likely play a role in their future careers. As travelers, they will cross speed bumps along the way, but these issues play to their advantage by gaining problem-solving skills. Breaking down prejudice, one more thing students can learn from living in other counties, is the ability to find cultural differences interesting and even humorous at times. The ability to laugh at oneself and at uncomfortable circumstances will bring joy and success to the Gap Year student.

Undeniably, a person's world view constitutes the foundation of a person's choices, thoughts, and actions. Traveling shapes world view. Mark Twain says, "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts." Traveling helps students to better understand life and humanity while removing some negative influences on their lives. According to one popular saying, a person is the combination of their five closest friends, and by bringing new friends into one's life, the student's world view may either change or become more firm. As the Gap Year student's world view is becoming clear, he or she will experience, perhaps for the first time, ownership of one's life. This confidence encourages them to boldly make important choices without hesitation.

Obviously, travel is a common option for a Gap Year, and with good reason. Students who choose not only to take a Gap Year, but choose to travel as a part of it, will find themselves experiencing new things, immersing themselves in new cultures, and defining for themselves a perhaps new world view. So if a student has an

unquenchable wanderlust and an eagerness for all things new and exciting, a Gap Year may be for them.

"If you were hiring entry-level employees, wouldn't you rather employ the risk-taking 23-year-olds who found their way in the world for a while than the 22-year-olds who have not done much besides going to school?"²⁴ Though many students take a break not only from school, but also from working, taking that Gap Year will enhance the student's employability and drive for their career. And for those who do, in fact, spend time working during their Gap Year, they could earn much money to contribute toward their futures and set themselves up for successful careers. Working or interning on a Gap Year instills in each student a strong work ethic, the knowledge and value of time and money, and how to set and comprehend favorable goals.

Never underestimate a hard worker. Taking a Gap Year to work, intern, or serve will strengthen and develop a student's work ethic enhancing a future career. While taking the break, students will work hard to achieve that gap year goal. Whatever it may be that the students are hoping to complete, it is up to them to strain for that finish line. In the process, they will find what is important to them regarding success. It is so important for the student to know not only what their year goal is, but also what will be their goal for life. As the students work during their Gap Year, they will experience a new ownership of life and responsibilities that may be new and daunting for some. But now is the time to learn, the time to make mistakes, the time to find ownership of their own life. Satisfying these fleeting and possibly superfluous desires holds an element of

²⁴ NYTimes

importance, but the student can also learn practical experience for their future jobs and gain cultural skills for careers. Concrete experience could be a game-changer when they seek employment post-college.

Trending in this world today, especially in America, is the idea of a hard worker but an unpleasant coworker. Because of their experience over the Gap Year, the students will have a better understanding of life and humanity, making them reliable and compassionate. Employers tend to prefer applicants with high emotional intelligence over those with high intellectual intelligence,²⁵ and taking a Gap Year definitely boosts the students' emotional intelligence. "Eighty-eight percent of Gap Year graduates report that their Gap Year had significantly added to their employability. [Milkrund graduate recruitment Gap Year survey],"²⁶ The American Gap Association reports that students who took a Gap Year exude "more job satisfaction"²⁷ than others in their field. As a result of their better understanding of the world, Gap Year students can also be perceived as more selfless in their careers. The AGA also states that "beyond academics, 86% of gappers surveyed were satisfied or very satisfied with their jobs, 63% reported voting in the 2014 November elections, and 89% reported participating in community service in the last month."²⁸ Clearly, taking a Gap Year heightens understanding of value, leading to an enjoyable career and a cared-for community.

Following the idea that a Gap Year helps students set good goals for their career, obviously, taking a Gap Year to work or intern helps students set goals for college.

²⁵ American Gap Association Web

²⁶ American Gap Association Web

²⁷ American Gap Association Web

²⁸ American Gap Association Article

Because of their career clarity, they have a better chance of knowing where they are headed to college and what they want to study when they arrive. Studies done by the NYTimes say that, “61 percent of students change their majors by the end of their second year.”²⁹ Gap Year students are less likely to be a part of that 61% because they have had time to work in their field, reflect upon their goals, and solidify their choice. Since Gap Year students are more successful in college and the degree they choose, they will not waste time or money on an unwanted degree. Gap Year Students are satisfied, scholarly, and stationary.

Therefore, people who take a Gap Year for a future-enhancing job, a life-changing internship, or an opportune service project leave knowing the value of hard work, appreciating the value of money and life, and seeking value through strong goals. “For most students, gap experiences have an impact on their choice of academic major and career – either setting them on a different path than before a Gap Year or confirming their direction.”³⁰

In closing, all students should consider taking a Gap Year between high school and college. Taking a Gap Year is an important decision that must not be taken lightly. But the obvious benefits of such a Gap Year are also not to be taken lightly. In the words of Ethan Knight, Executive Director and Founder at the American Gap Association,

“I want to encourage students to give it a shot. I have been doing this for 13 years, I have never heard of a student who regretted their gap year, no matter how troublesome, no matter how many trials and tribulations there were - but you have to want to do this.”³¹

²⁹ NYTimes Major Decisions

³⁰ American Gap Association Web

³¹ American Gap Association Web

Overall, students leave their Gap Year with more maturity, a higher understanding of humanity, a stronger worldview, better future employability, and defined goals for college and career. This year will give students the perfect opportunity to take the leap into new experiences and find themselves walking into adulthood as more well-rounded, contributing members of society with clear views of their futures.

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