

Are You Ready for a Gap Year?

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As a former high school principal and literacy initiative director at the U.S. Department of Education, Karl Haigler assumed his own kids were college-bound. Then his youngest son Adam dropped a bombshell. “In April of his senior year, after he’d already been accepted to college, Adam informed us that he wasn’t ready to go,” he says.

At first, Adam’s decision bewildered his parents. “He was a good student, so it wasn’t like he couldn’t do the work,” Haigler recalls. “Then he told us that he was burned out. He’d been doing this school stuff for 12 years, and he wanted to spend a year experiencing some other things and giving something back to the community. When I heard that, I thought that was a constructive way to at least begin the conversation.”

Adam’s situation isn’t unusual. Whether from burn-out, vocational uncertainty or a desire to see the world, more and more college students are taking a structured year off. Called a “gap year” because it often comes between high school and college, this year typically involves internships, community service, or other forms of real-world work experience. After their son completed a successful gap year, Haigler and his wife co-authored “The Gap Year Advantage,” to help families through this pivotal time.

“Students generally come back from their gap year much more focused and independent,” says Haigler. They’re more financially aware, and more conscious of the way things are outside of academia. The gap year also helps them learn about themselves. We did a survey of 300 gap year alums, and 60% said that as a result of their gap year, they found a career focus. And among gap year alums in their 20’s who’d entered the workforce, almost 70% reported being satisfied with their careers – compared to an average job satisfaction rate of about one third.”

Will Kimmell can attest to those results. When he started his gap year, he was planning to major in history and political science. Then he spent a year working on organic farms in Peru and Ecuador, and doing wildlife conservation in South Africa. “I’d always liked to spend time outside, so I chose activities based on being in the wilderness as much as possible,” he says. “As a result, I really got interested in sustainable living and sustainable agriculture, so I decided to change schools and majors. I’m now studying environmental studies and peace and conflict studies. I wasn’t too set on anything before I left, but it kind of shaped what I’m going to do for the rest of my life.”

According to Brian Kurth, a career counselor and author of “Test Drive Your Dream Job,” Kimmell’s approach to his gap year was just right. “The gap year is meant to be productive, not just sitting, drinking Diet Coke and watching Oprah,” he explains. “You need to have an agenda, whether it’s travel, volunteer work, an internship/mentorship, or all of the above. You need to have your goals set. And the number one goal is to define what a great job is, based on what your passions, strengths and skills are.

“It’s personal and professional due diligence to seek out what you really want to do,” he continues. “And it ultimately will save time and money for both the student and the parent, because if you go off to school not knowing what you want to do, a four-year program may become five or six years. You do have risks

if you take too much time off, and you don't necessarily want to go back to school at 25. But six or 12 months isn't going to make or break somebody in the big picture of life."

Haigler attributes his son Adam's college success to his gap year experience. After teaching English in Costa Rica and working in a nature conservancy in New Zealand, Adam "came home a different guy," Haigler says. "He was fluent in Spanish, and he'd decided he really wanted to explore teaching as a career. He was very much capable of taking on the challenges of the world, not just the challenges of a freshman year. He's graduating with two bachelor's degrees in June - with no debt. I'm absolutely sure that would not have happened if he hadn't taken a gap year.

"There's more to learning than just being in a classroom," Haigler says. "Some of the greatest learning opportunities come in very unexpected places."

Gap Year Quiz

Is a gap year right for you? These questions will help you decide – and make the most of whatever experience you choose.

1. Do you have passionate interests and clear goals?

"I think the best sign that you're ready for a gap year is that you're really interested in learning something that you don't think you can learn in school," Karl Haigler says. "Maybe you want to explore an interest, improve your Spanish or French, go overseas - there are plenty of opportunities out there."

2. Are you ready to spend a year working hard – rather than taking it easy?

According to Kristin White, author of "The Complete Guide to the Gap Year," "If a student takes a year off and stays home, or doesn't accomplish or experience anything different, it could be detrimental to college and job prospects. In a true gap year experience, the learning process continues, with the only difference being that it is outside of the structured world of higher education."

3. Can you handle challenges by yourself?

"The biggest gap year mistake I've heard is when kids are tethered to home by their cell phones," says Haigler. "If there's a problem, they'll call their parents and have them solve it. That's just not the way to do it, because you're not growing up - and your parents aren't growing up either. "

4. Are you willing to cover all or part of your gap year expenses?

"Either by finding scholarships or doing fundraisers or whatever, you've got to contribute in some way for a gap year to be meaningful for you," says Haigler. Fortunately, though exotic programs can be pricey, some gap year experiences don't cost a dime. "There are wonderful free and low cost gap year options available," White says. "For example, AmeriCorps offers free health insurance and a stipend, as well as a \$4700 bonus credit toward college tuition."

5. Are you motivated to continue higher education after your gap year ends?

“A gap year could be problematic if you really question whether you will ever go back to school,” says Brian Kurth. “But if you’re motivated and engaged, and have been historically, you’re going to be fine.” According to Haigler, his research shows that a gap year doesn’t lessen your chances of graduating. “A little over 90% of the kids we interviewed went back to school within a year after finishing their gap year,” he says.

6. Are you willing to spend months planning your gap year?

Successful gap years aren’t spontaneous. “You really need to do program research,” says Haigler. “Get on the web. Talk to kids who’ve done the programs you’re considering. Typically, your parents will need to be involved, so you need to talk with them about the sequence of activities, and what you want to try to achieve.” If you neglect this research, he says, your preferred programs could fill up. “The longer you wait, the less options you have.”

7. Are you capable of learning from any negative experiences?

According to Kurth, even disagreeable gap year experiences can have great value. “One of my dream jobs was to be a dog trainer. So I set up a career mentorship with a dog trainer who owned a dog daycare center. And I realized that long term, I don’t want to clean up poop and spray down urine all day long!” Many gap year students come to similar realizations after unhappy stints in jobs they thought they’d love.

8. Are you in your late teens or early 20’s?

Experts agree that gap years are easier when you’re young. “There are fewer challenges between high school and college, or during college,” Haigler says. “It’s just easier to go when you don’t have kids or other responsibilities, and you haven’t accumulated debt that’s hanging over your head.” But Kurth says older people can also benefit from a gap year-style exploration. “The older you get, the faster you’re going to know if something is right for you. So rather than a gap year, a 37 year-old might just need a gap two months to figure out what their path really is.”

SCORING

7 - 8 Yes answers: You’re an ideal candidate for a potentially life-changing gap year.

5 – 6 Yes answers: You should seriously consider whether a gap year could benefit you.

4 or fewer Yes answers: Now is probably not the time to take a gap year – but keep it in mind if your circumstances change.