The Value of a Gap Year

While most of her high school friends were cracking the books and tailgating at college football games last year, Macon Bianucci of Charleston, South Carolina, was deep in the African bush, rescuing injured and snared wildlife and learning how to track game. College was in her plans -- just not quite yet. After being accepted at several top-tier schools the previous fall, the graduate of Ashley Hall, a private all-girls school, decided to defer her admission to Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois.

“I wanted a break from studying,” she says. She also wanted to try living in Africa and decided this “was a good time to do it.”

Long a rite of passage for affluent Brits, the so-called gap year—time spent traveling, volunteering or working between high school and college — is now really catching on among U.S. students. A survey by the American Gap Association, a nonprofit that accredits companies that coordinate these stints, found that enrollment in respondents’ programs climbed 27 percent from 2012 to 2013.

Burnout is one of the top reasons students take a break, according to an independent study of 280 gap year participants by education policy experts Karl Haigler and Rae Nelson, authors of “Gap Year, American Style: Journeys Toward Learning, Serving, and Self-Discovery.” Subjects in the Haigler and Nelson study also cited a desire to find out more about themselves, a luxury in today’s hypercompetitive culture, says Kim Oppelt, a former school counselor, now community relations manager at education solutions provider Hobsons in Arlington, Virginia. High school students used to have the time to sample a variety of electives, she notes, but they’re “now under pressure to take advanced courses in every subject for all four years of high school. This gives them little time to explore their true interests.”

Recent Cornell University grad Wes Cornell says his self-designed gap year doing scientific research around the world certainly matured him and shaped his academic focus. In Costa Rica, he researched the health care of workers at coffee farms through Duke University’s Organization for Tropical Studies and did a program on sustainable development and tropical ecology with the environmental study abroad organization the School for Field Studies. He interned with the Colombia Nature Conservancy in Cartagena, and did research on viral pathways at a summer camp program at the Weizmann Institute of Science in Israel. Once he got to Cornell, where he studied ecology and agriculture policy, he noticed a lot of classmates struggling to find themselves. “Having had time off, I was able to figure out what really interested me,” he says.

Counselors typically encourage students weighing a year off to apply to college anyway, while resources are easily accessible, and defer acceptance if they decide to go for it. On the other hand, students who are unsure of their college plans (or readiness) may benefit from putting off applying.

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