



# Your Goals, Your Life, Your Gap Year

by Jane and Jason Sarouhan

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The phrase “gap year” may be met with either immediate understanding or confusion in any conversation. Don’t be discouraged if up until this point you too have felt more of the latter; you are far from alone. While every year young adults all over the world opt to take a break from school or work to explore other kinds of learning and experiences, the concept is still gaining traction in the United States.

Maybe you know of a friend, relative, or classmate who took a gap year. Perhaps you’ve heard incredible stories of volunteering on an organic farm in New Zealand, getting an internship in London, studying yoga in India, learning Spanish in Argentina, or running an after-school sports program in South Africa. These are fascinating images to be sure, but the question still remains, “What are gap years all about?”

At **The Center for Interim Programs**, we describe the gap year as a focused, finite period of time in which an individual takes a deliberate break from his or her current academic or professional path in order to explore other interests. It is not a vacation. It may indeed be fun, adventurous, and exciting, but it should also have a distinct structure and goals. It is an opportunity to develop a new skill, gain life experience, explore new parts of the world, and consider how certain interests may fit into a longer term plan of educational, professional, and personal enrichment. Fundamentally, and globally, it’s a rite of passage into adulthood, a chance to explore the world while considering “Who am I?” “What’s important to me?” and “What do I want to do with my life?”

## Who takes a gap year?

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Sixteen-year-olds. Sixty-year-olds. And everyone in between. But, typically, they’re 18–25-year-olds who have graduated from high school, perhaps completed a semester (or more) of college, and even those who have graduated.

They are straight-A high school seniors who have gotten into their top colleges. They are students who for various reasons decide not to go to college. They are college students beginning to question their current majors. They are

young professionals considering a career change. Regardless of their particular academic or professional standings, these individuals share many of the same motivations. They feel bored or burnt out and are looking for a break from school. They want to gain more focus, skills, life experiences, personal growth, and independence. They want to see what they are capable of when given the chance.

The gap year offers intentional time to explore these critical reflections. It allows young adults the opportunity to engage in hands-on learning, which generally provides a powerful connection to the relevancy of classroom studies. It's a time for exploration and rejuvenation. It can offer clarity regarding what to focus on in college and in the working world. It can provide professional experience, résumé builders, and exposure to a variety of industries. It is a cost-effective way to explore interests and skills without committing to a degree and student debt. Ultimately, and perhaps above all, it becomes an education in perspective, self-awareness, maturity, and confidence gained by taking learning outside of the classroom—an education that truly lasts a lifetime.

## What do people do on their gap years?

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With thousands of opportunities worldwide for gap students to engage in, one of the greatest challenges is figuring out the correct combination of experiences to meet one's goals, budget, and timeline. Below are five broad categories of organized gap year experiences.

### Facilitated group programs

In the past 15 years, the gap year field has expanded dramatically with the creation of programming specifically targeted to meet the needs and goals of high school graduates and matriculating college students. While there are still plenty of opportunities for "traditional" study abroad, facilitated gap programs offer an exciting alternative. With roots in experiential education, these two- to nine-month programs provide students with the following core components:

- Small, peer-based programs led by creative, experienced, and knowledgeable staff members.
- An engaging, field-based experience where students are deeply immersed in the particular program's educational lens. Examples include community service experiences that incorporate language learning, homestays and adventure travel, wilderness leadership expeditions that teach specific outdoor skills, art semesters where students explore art history and studio art studies, and much more.
- To varying degrees, these programs emphasize student growth and personal development through reflective activities, mentorship, and program models that give students the tools to succeed and then the opportunity to use those skills with ever-increasing levels of independence.
- Many of these programs offer undergraduate credit through affiliated accredited colleges and universities. Any student desiring to earn credit during gap time should inquire with his or her college.

### Volunteer experiences

Many students pursue volunteering during their gap time, and hundreds of organizations offer the chance to be of service domestically and abroad. Here are some common traits of volunteer organizations:

- They provide volunteer opportunities with people and/or with animals. Examples include working as a classroom teaching assistant, coaching sports, helping at an orphanage, building a library or supporting literacy programs, working hands-on with big cats and elephants, and training sled dogs or horses. Possibilities abound!

- They are generally more flexible than other experiences. Most projects have a minimum amount of required volunteer time (e.g., one or two weeks) and no maximum time. Also, there is often a minimum participation age of 18 but no maximum age. This means that with the exception of a few organizations that specialize in volunteer experiences for 18–25-year-olds, volunteer projects tend to have a wide variety of age sets on site.
- These experiences cost money. While this comes as a surprise to many would-be volunteers, the cost is generally a good indicator of the levels of volunteer and project infrastructure provided. In other words, the cost associated with volunteering generally depends upon what type of lodging, food, transportation, project oversight, emergency protocol, language translation, and volunteer participation you desire/require. Costs range from \$25–\$1,000/week but generally average about \$300–\$400/week for a moderately supported volunteer placement.

### Room and board opportunities

This arrangement allows one to be of service with little or no extra cost associated. Essentially, in exchange for your brain or muscle power, you will be given a clean place to sleep (room) and, depending on the arrangement, meals to eat (board).

- Examples include working on an organic farm/vineyard/ranch, serving at a retreat center as a cook, volunteering at an outdoor education center with children, building homes, constructing trails in national parks, and much more!
- Placements tend to be very flexible and generally ask for a specified minimum commitment. Often, volunteers can be of any age and nationality, so it can be a great environment to meet other travelers.
- As the level of oversight and supervision generally only extends to the work being accomplished, room and board volunteers have tremendous control over their free time. This is a “double-edged” opportunity, however, as sites may not offer much mentorship or infrastructure, thus requiring volunteers to take more initiative and personal responsibility.
- Finding and arranging room and board placements can take time and a lot of research. Many of these experiences are not highly advertised online or elsewhere.

### Professional internships

Internships allow young adults to gain relevant “real-world” skills and experience in a short time. While they are generally unpaid and require a set-up and housing fee, these positions can offer one-on-one mentorship, as well as professional references to help students build their résumés.

- Internships typically last from four weeks to several months and require about two to three months of lead time. There are many incredible international internship opportunities; some can accommodate English speakers while others are specifically designated for individuals who are reasonably conversant in other languages.
- Examples of internships span rural and urban, as well as domestic and international settings. They can be in almost any field one can imagine, including (but not limited to) law, education, journalism, business, health care, conservation, music, hospitality, marketing, fashion, politics, and engineering.
- Internships are generally the most independent gap year experience. Not only is one making the commitment to a professional position, but participants are living in a city/town on their own, providing for their meals, laundry, travel, and social life. It cannot be underscored enough that this is an incredibly independent experience, generally best placed in the final half to third of one’s gap time.

## Specialty courses

Specialty courses offer gap students the chance to investigate a potential passion, learn a skill set, hone a craft, or just try something new.

- These courses can last anywhere from one day to several months.
- Most are fee based and may include housing and food along with instruction.
- Examples include studio recording, glass blowing, dance/singing/music instruction, language tutorials, permaculture and natural building demonstrations, blacksmith apprenticeships, and cooking classes. If you dream about learning a skill or trade, someone out there is likely offering an opportunity for you to be trained in that discipline.

In addition to these five categories of experiences, many students also incorporate time at home taking classes or applying to school, paid work experiences, and/or personal travel. Students who work and help support the financial side of their gap experiences say they feel more invested in and discerning about each opportunity they ultimately choose. Independent travel allows “gappers” the freedom to explore with less overt pressure to have a concentrated learning experience and opens the door for spontaneity. Which opportunities one chooses and in what order one delves into each one is both the art and science of creating one’s gap time.

## Facts and figures

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A 10-year study from 1997–2006 of American gap year students by Karl Haigler and Rae Nelson illustrates some of the dramatic benefits of taking gap time:

- 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 or confirming their direction.
- The highest-rated outcome of gap years is gaining “a better sense of who I am as a person and what is important to me.”
- Gap experiences generally cost less than the equivalent time in college, and there are options that make it possible to earn money to help pay for college education.

Colleges and universities all over the country recognize the value and importance of gap time for incoming students. Schools like Harvard and Princeton actively promote students taking gap time and have established support programs. Many higher education institutions in the United States have established “deferral” policies for students hoping to take gap time, while many other schools are willing to accept and grant student deferral requests. Why are colleges so keen on supporting gap time?

Bob Clagett, former Dean of Admissions at [Middlebury College](#), stated in a September 2010 Time magazine article that while crunching numbers a few years ago he found that a single gap semester was the strongest predictor of academic success at Middlebury College. He also mentioned that he is amazed that people are surprised by this! Mary Lou Bates, Dean of Admissions at [Skidmore College](#), also independently relayed that freshmen who had previously taken a gap year had GPAs that were invariably several points higher than their non-gap time peers.

Finally, many parents describe witnessing, and gap students themselves report experiencing, tremendous growth and maturity during the gap time. Participants emerge more grounded, patient, compassionate, and determined. They are often more functionally independent and possess a greater sense of personal responsibility than they did prior to taking their gap year.

## Getting started

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### Make your pros/cons list

Even if not entirely formulated in your mind yet, list the reasons why you think a gap year would benefit you, what kinds of opportunities and destinations you would want to pursue, and any concerns you have.

### Apply to college first

We highly encourage students who know they want to take a gap year after graduating high school to go through the college application process alongside their peers. You have the support, structure, and momentum of your high school and college counselor, so take advantage. Ideally you'll receive college acceptances to your liking and then can request a deferral.

### Do your research

Web searches may quickly overwhelm you, so consider a few other measures as you begin looking into programs. Attend a [USA Gap Year Fair](#) to meet some of these programs in person if you can. Once in contact with organizations, do your due diligence: ask programs for alumni references, and don't be afraid to ask the tough questions about safety and supervision. Or perhaps you have friends or family members in places or positions of interest to you. Consider working with a gap year counselor who will be able to help you conceptualize the year, articulate your interests, and match those with reputable placements.

### Budget wisely

A gap year can run the gamut in terms of cost, but at a minimum there will be some expenses associated with this period of time. Work during vacations, summers, and even part of the gap year to help with costs. Instead of birthday, holiday, or graduation presents, ask for contributions to your gap year. Balance a more costly program one semester with a work exchange opportunity the next. Ask programs if they have financial aid.

**Are you still wondering what this gap year thing is all about? If so, it's probably because there is no one definition, place, experience, or expert that can authoritatively answer that question! It is up to you to decide what it is you are searching for and what kinds of opportunities will satisfy that quest.**

**A gap year will not be a string of just awe-inspiring moments. It takes a great deal of work to plan a productive gap year, and there will be challenging moments along the way. Patience, perseverance, curiosity, courageousness, and humility are key in achieving a full, risk-managed, and meaningful gap year, no matter what the activity. When all is said and done, a gap year transcends the year itself, and fans the lifelong flames of curiosity, openness, learning, and living.**

**Please feel free to contact us with any questions! [www.interimprograms.com](http://www.interimprograms.com)**