

# Gap Years: Maximizing the Value of a Bachelor's Degree

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## THE RETURN ON INVESTMENT OF A GAP YEAR

Colleges cost more now than ever before. The value of a Liberal Arts degree is in question and STEM courses seem like the fast track towards employment. And yet, more U.S. students are taking Gap Years than ever before—in fact, enrollment is up almost 60% over 2012. If this strikes you as paradoxical, then you're not the only one. However, looking at the research this begins to make better sense: students who take a structured Gap Year are reliably earning one to five points better in GPA over their non-Gap Year peers. A recent study by Bob Clagett, former dean of admissions at Middlebury, showed that Gappers at Middlebury were earning one to two points better in GPA, and at UNC (a public institution) that number jumped to almost five points difference, going ostensibly from a 3.0 to a 3.47.

## WHAT'S A GAP YEAR?

According to the American Gap Association, a Gap Year is:

*"A structured period of time when students take a break from formal education to increase self-awareness, challenge comfort zones, and experiment with possible careers. Typically these are achieved by a combination of traveling, volunteering, interning, or working. A gap year experience can last from two months up to two years and is taken between high school graduation and the Junior year of their higher degree."*

It is a common misconception that just taking time off or working for a year constitutes a Gap Year. While there are benefits to any conscious break, the positive outcomes of a Gap Year simply don't translate absent the structures of experiential education, mentorship, self-governance, and a host of other nuances.

However, to know what a Gap Year really looks like for a student, take this story from Katie in Uganda:

On my first day at school, I was put into a Primary 4 class (about 3rd grade) of six students. Two of the students were deaf and the other four had various other disabilities. I think that was the scariest moment of my life. Here I was, an average 18-year-old girl, fresh out of the Chicago suburbs, with no teaching experience expected to teach an English lesson in Ugandan sign language (which I did not know any of at the time) for three straight hours. "Oh my God... What do I do?!" Was pretty much the only thought going through my mind. But I slowly got the hang of it, and by

the end of class the students had learned how to put words in alphabetical order, and I had learned how to sign the alphabet! I realized on that day that I would be learning just as much, if not even more, from these kids as they would learn from me.

I am so grateful for this experience. If you asked me a year ago if I thought I could fly to Uganda, the country that the viral Kony video from last year was based on, by myself, I would have told you that you were crazy. But now I'm here, having the best time ever. Everyday is a challenge, but it is the best challenge and I cannot imagine spending my time anywhere else. I love this African culture, the people, the spectacular views of rolling hills and sunsets, and I especially love my students. These past few months in Uganda and the three months that I spent prior in South America have been unforgettable.

In many ways this story is so salient to that of a Gap Year because the creation of a 'story'—one really worth telling—is a fundamental stop in the evolution of an individual: it inevitably has the power to form the foundation for a life with purpose.

## WHO SHOULD TAKE A GAP YEAR?

It's clear that the majority of students will report their satisfaction with established educational paths. So whom then is the best fit for a Gap Year? Well, the honest answer is, anyone who doesn't light up at the idea of diving into a specific subject in college. Are they genuinely more excited about their classes at college, or their lives at college? This might be reflected in an uninspired GPA, or it may simply be a student who doesn't want to spend so much money on college without really knowing what they want out of it. The value of college has changed and the Gap Year movement is simply a response to it.

In a recent study of 280 Gap Year students by Karl Haigler and Rae Nelson, the highest three rated outcomes in order are: "a better sense of who I am as a person and what is important to me" followed by "gave me a better understanding of other countries, people, cultures, and ways of living" and "provided me with additional skills and knowledge that contributed to my career or academic major." Given these outcomes, it's pretty safe to assume that any student will benefit from a Gap Year.

As I like to say: if you're sending your students to college simply for a diploma, then read no further. But, if you want them to get the education that that diploma stands for, then a gap year is a great place to start.

## HOW DO YOU EVALUATE GAP YEAR PROGRAMS?

The obvious, and short answer is, start with the American Gap Association's accredited programs list. We're currently undergoing a thorough process with a well-respected and strong list of organizations at [www.americangap.org/aga-members.php](http://www.americangap.org/aga-members.php). But, there are many fantastic opportunities that are more niche, or, simply aren't a 'program' per se as falls under the umbra of the AGA. These might include WWOOFing, or teaching English at a specific rural school in Uganda.

If you're looking at partnering with a non-accredited organization, then save yourself time and skip the AGA's 54 pages of Standards, rather, the best answer is to simply ask the right questions. When looking at organizations, start with their website. Most of the information you need should be clearly found there. Once you find an organization you like, give them a call. I suggest starting with these five questions to ensure a safe, appropriate, and positive experience:

1. Can you speak to an alum? If they say no, then move on.
2. Do they have pre-departure or orientation materials you can see?  
Having a successful experience is about preparation but also about grounding expectations, and demonstrating that the organization has thought through things in detail is an important benchmark.

3. Who will be your supervisor or staff? Can you see a biography? Who is a typical student? While a nice phone voice at HQ is helpful, 95% of the time during your Gap Year will be spent with your team and staff/supervisor.
4. What are the intentions of the experience? This is both determined by the organization but also a matter of understanding 'fit.' So knowing your own intentions is a vital facet towards answering this 'fit' question.
5. What level of communications can family count on back home? Striking a balance between staying connected and responsibly fostering your independence as an adult is an important consideration here too.

## ALTERNATIVE RESOURCES TO CONSTRUCT YOUR GAP YEAR:

- Gap Year consultants: [www.americangap.org/resources.php](http://www.americangap.org/resources.php)
- Build-your-own-Gap-Year: [www.americangap.org/planning.php](http://www.americangap.org/planning.php)