

Gap Year Ideas for College Students

It's an uncertain time for starting college. Experts have suggestions for alternatives.

By Melody Warnick

April 23, 2020, 5:00 a.m. ET

As painful as it was to watch my 18-year-old daughter's senior year end abruptly last month, with time-honored rituals like prom and graduation evaporating into the ether, she was clear on one point: Better now than next year. Her freshman year of college still beckoned, gloriously unaltered, from what felt like a distant future. Surely things would be back to normal by then!

Now it's not so clear. Best-case scenario: Covid-19 is under control by this fall and campus life resumes. Worst-case, according to an analysis by the consulting firm McKinsey: In-person classes might not resume till fall 2021. When I asked my daughter how she'd feel if she had to do her freshman year of college online, she immediately said, "I'd take a gap year."

For some families, lost income makes it impossible to consider paying tuition right now. For others, it's more about a refusal to forgo the yearned-for experiences of university life outside the classroom — giggling through late nights with roommates, exploring new interests through campus clubs, playing or cheering for college sports teams — for a pale, Zoom-fueled imitation. They'd rather take a year off and try again in 2021.

Some parents may worry that any deviation from the traditional college path may make their child less likely to enroll at all. But Mark Sklarow, chief executive officer of the Independent Educational Consultants Association said: "A higher percentage of those who took a gap year will complete college than those who do not." The Gap Year Association cites a figure that 90 percent of gap year students return to college within a year, though it is difficult to find solid statistics because some students take time off without participating in official gap year programs. And of course, the circumstances this year are unprecedented, so history may not be predictive.

Latest Updates: Coronavirus Outbreak in the U.S.

- [As states face a downturn worse than the Great Recession, McConnell suggests they consider bankruptcy.](#)
- [Wednesday was California's "deadliest day," with 115 deaths, though Pence predicts an end by Memorial Day.](#)
- [The House votes to create a special investigative committee on coronavirus response and relief.](#)

[See more updates](#)

Updated 15m ago

More live coverage: [Global](#) [Markets](#) [New York](#)

Students who have accepted spots at colleges for the fall semester need to find out whether the college will allow them to defer admission to take a gap year — and what that will mean for tuition. “Even if you’re approved for a gap year,” said the education consultant Kristin White, author of “The Complete Guide to the Gap Year,” “it’s not always a given that your financial aid package will be the same.”

In a typical year, an estimated 60,000 students, including a few high-profile teenagers like Malia Obama, postpone college in favor of a post-high school gap year. But often a gap year includes travel or work experiences that are by no means guaranteed right now, in light of travel restrictions and a severely diminished job market.

Is it possible to have a meaningful gap year under these circumstances? During a pandemic? Abby Falik, founder and chief executive of Global Citizen Year, an organization that runs a gap year fellowship, suggests that graduating seniors see this time not as a derailment of plans, but as a “purpose year” that can ground them, challenge them and make them better students later on.

“If you make the most of this time, you will eventually believe that this is the only path that you could have taken,” she said. Here are some suggestions on how to craft a purposeful gap year, even in this unusual time.



Jacob Wilson had been spending his gap year learning Spanish and improving his climbing skills. Aaron Hjelt



Now at home near Chicago, Mr. Wilson is still working on building his climbing dexterity — in his bedroom. via Jacob Wilson

Set Clear Goals

Before they offer a gap-year deferral, most universities require accepted students to submit a plan of action for what their goals are and how they'll structure their time to achieve them. "I tell students to come up with three to five personal, practical or professional goals," said Julia Rogers, board president of the Gap Year Association and the owner of EnRoute Consulting. Those could be things like diving deeper into Spanish, mastering bread baking or learning to sell your hand-drawn illustrations online.

Sign up to receive our daily **Coronavirus Briefing**, an informed guide with the latest developments and expert advice.

[Sign Up](#)

Design Your Own Curriculum

Even if you're not up for tackling a full slate of college classes online, don't bow out of education altogether. An embarrassment of online learning riches can help high school graduates study exactly what they're passionate about, whether it's Shakespeare by way of a

Harvard course or UX design through a coding boot camp. Some programs may even allow you to earn college credit.

“To me it’s about exercising that learning muscle going forward,” says Jeffrey Selingo, an education consultant and author of the forthcoming “Who Gets In and Why: A Year Inside College Admissions.” “Once you stop focusing on any kind of formal or informal learning, it’s going to be really hard to get back to that when you decide to go to college.”

Experience Another Culture

Some organized programs that offer immersive trips abroad — like Amigos International, Where There Be Dragons, and Thinking Beyond Borders — are still enrolling students for fall 2020, with generous cancellation policies. Even if Covid-19 keeps international travel off limits through next year, students can find a foreign language speaker online with whom to practice their nascent Mandarin, or taking virtual field trips through the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. Even a road trip to a different part of America — assuming stay-at-home orders are lifted — can feel like an exploration of someplace entirely foreign.

Tap a Mentor

When Covid-19 hit, Global Citizen Year pivoted, retooling its international travel-based gap year program into virtual leadership courses for its cohort of 150 students. A key component: participants get matched with mentors who coach them one-on-one toward their goals. To D.I.Y. their own mentorship relationship, teenagers can tap the networks of their parents or send emails asking leaders in fields they’re interested in for a 15-minute Zoom chat. Ms. Falik calls it “finding your teachers”: Identifying what you’re curious about and who can teach you about it. Admittedly, this may be challenging with many sectors of the economy stalled, though it’s also possible that some mentors have extra time on their hands right now.

Make Social Change

The national service initiative AmeriCorps is still recruiting volunteers from 18 to 30 for programs like FEMA Corps, which partners with the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and VISTA, whose volunteers often address poverty-related issues. Fifteen percent of its participants are under age 20.

“We have thousands supporting Covid-19 response efforts in a variety of ways across the country,” said Samantha Jo Warfield, a spokeswoman. For families looking for a cost-neutral gap year, AmeriCorps programs typically cover living expenses, and all include an education award for college. The nonprofit Service Year Alliance lists even more long-term paid service opportunities, in focus areas like the environment, health and nutrition and public safety, at its Service Year website. For the politically minded, Election 2020 Gap Year helps students find ways to volunteer with election campaigns.

Be Adaptable

One of Ms. Rogers’ clients, Jacob Wilson, was using part of his gap year to master rock climbing in Mexico before Covid-19 canceled his plans. Now he does ledge hangs at his home near Chicago. That’s the essence of the gap year mind-set: Teenagers who are ready for challenges can find ways to achieve their goals. And just as a traditional education is about preparing a young person for adult life, learning to be resilient in handling the challenges of an unpredictable gap year can build valuable life skills as well.

The Coronavirus Outbreak >

Frequently Asked Questions and Advice

Updated April 11, 2020

- **When will this end?**

This is a difficult question, because a lot depends on how well the virus is contained. A better question might be: “How will we know when to reopen the country?” In an American Enterprise Institute report, Scott Gottlieb, Caitlin Rivers, Mark B. McClellan, Lauren Silvis and Crystal Watson staked out four goal posts for recovery: Hospitals in the state must be able to safely treat all patients requiring hospitalization, without resorting to crisis standards of care; the state needs to be able to at least test everyone who has symptoms; the state is able to conduct monitoring of confirmed cases

READ MORE ✓