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Taking a Gap Year? *Here's What You Need to Know*

Year after year, an increasing number of graduating high school seniors are choosing to take a [gap year](#) before heading off to college. All things considered; a gap year can be a great way to:

- increase self-knowledge,
- get real-life work experience while saving some money for college,
- develop or enhance your skills (whether through work or volunteerism),
- learn about other cultures,
- become fluent in a second language,
- and experience tremendous person growth along the way!

Yet, as intriguing as this all sounds, consider the pros and cons carefully. After all, a gap year is not for everyone!

(Mostly) Advantages of a Gap Year

- **Self-awareness:** A gap year can help you boost your self-awareness, an important life skill (both personally and professionally). Insight into your own behaviors and the impact on yourself and others helps you increase your confidence and independence. And self-knowledge is key in making great career decisions.
- **Global / intercultural awareness:** Some gap year experiences involve travel and opportunities to learn about different cultures. You might even learn a foreign language in the process. And global / intercultural awareness is highly valued by employers seeking to hire new college grads.
- **College success:** A structured gap year can have a positive effect on your college success in several ways. For example, [Gap Year Association's National Alumni Report](#) shows that, on average, students who take a gap year:
 - ✓ make higher grades in college,
 - ✓ are more likely to graduate on time,



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- ✓ and arrive on campus as better leaders, are highly motivated, and civically engaged, according to university staff.

What's more, Jeffery Selingo (author of [Who Gets In and Why](#) and [There is Life after College](#)) says that most students who take a gap year:

- ✓ came away from the experience feeling more energized and focused,
 - ✓ are better prepared for college,
 - ✓ have a greater sense of what they want (and *don't* want) to do,
 - ✓ and may be more confident about choosing a college major and career path.
- **Work / paid internship experience:** Using your gap year to work part- or full-time (or to do a year-long paid internship) in an occupational field of interest before heading off to college, you can learn about the field and associated careers, gain insight into who you are, and discover the types of work tasks you enjoy most. And you can develop new skills all at the same time. In addition, you can start to build your professional network and get meaningful letters of recommendations for your college and work applications.
 - **Savings:** Through a job or paid internship during your gap year, you can save money to pay for college, decreasing future student loan debt. On the other hand, taking a gap year has its own financial implications!
 - **College credit:** You may be able to earn college credit if participating in an [accredited gap year program](#). Be sure to check you school's policies carefully!

(Mostly) Disadvantages of a Gap Year

- **Loss of momentum:** During a gap year, there's a real risk of losing your academic momentum. Having been out of school for an extended period of time, you may find it hard to get back into the swing of student life again in terms of studying, taking exams, and writing papers.

In addition, while [research findings](#) show that 90% of students who take a structured gap year attend college *within that year*, 10% do not! Besides, even if you attend college after the gap, you will still be 12 months behind — extending an already lengthy educational process and your transition into the world of work. So, if you already have a good idea about your intended college major and career path, you may



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be better off starting college right after high school (or staying in school if you're in college already).

- **Less support in the college application process:** Generally speaking, students going directly from high school into college typically have greater access to guidance and support in the college application process (e.g., help with filling out college applications and financial aid forms; tools for college and scholarship searches; easy access to transcripts and letters of recommendations; etc.). Therefore, if you're a rising high school senior who plans to apply to post-secondary institutions *after* your gap year, the process may be a bit more cumbersome.
- **College credits:** While you *may* be able to earn college credit if participating in an [accredited gap year program](#), keep in mind that many colleges *do not accept the credits* earned during a gap year. In addition, some schools *accept* the credits, but classify them as “empty credits” on your college transcript (meaning that the *coursework does not count towards overall graduation requirements*). So, be sure to check school policies regarding gap year credits.
- **Deferral:** Perhaps you've accepted an admission offer from your favorite school. But now you've decided to [defer](#) enrollment for a semester or year while earning college credits elsewhere during your gap. You need to know that many colleges *do not* allow students to earn credits elsewhere during the gap; and students may need to *reapply* for admission after the gap.
- **Impact on student status:** Depending on the college's policies and the number of credits you take during your gap year, you may lose your “freshman status” (being classified as a “transfer student” instead). This can affect the college application process, grade point average requirements for acceptance into the school and major, financial aid, housing options, and much more. So, review the college's policies and gap year approval process thoroughly.
- **Impact on financial aid:** Of course, earning money during your gap year has its benefits. Yet, there are some potential drawbacks as well. For example:
 - ✓ While you can use your earnings to pay for college, you will need to report the income you earned on the [Free Application for Student Financial Aid \(FASFA\)](#) form (potentially increasing the [Expected Family Contribution](#) toward college costs).



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- ✓ If you defer your enrollment, your chosen college might not have merit-based scholarships, grants, loans, and work-study aid available after your gap year, resulting in higher college costs. Be sure to check with your school to find out how a gap year could affect your financial aid package.
- ✓ Most scholarships are available only to *current* high school seniors and cannot be deferred. Therefore, taking a gap year after college will limit your scholarship opportunities.

All things considered, taking a gap year after high school could result in higher college costs in the long run.

- **Cost:** Many structured [accredited gap year programs](#) come with big price tags! While prices vary greatly based on location and fees, these programs can cost *as much as a year of college*, according to the [Gap Year Association](#).

Of course, you may choose to develop your own gap year agenda — which may be relatively inexpensive, depending on your plan. Even so, “there’s no such thing as a free lunch!”. So, as you weigh your gap year decision, may sure you know what it will cost.

Fill the Gap

A gap year can be a life-changing experience. Yet, it is not for everyone! After carefully considering the pros and cons, what do you think? Is it a good option for you? If so, think carefully about your goals and put together a solid gap year plan that will help you gain insight into to who you are (in turn helping you further explore, expand, and refine your college and career choices).