

TO GET THE MOST OUT OF COLLEGE, TAKE A YEAR OFF

THE GAP YEAR

BY TUCKER COOMBE

■ Kids like Peter Saudek are usually chomping at the bit to go to college. He attended Lexington High School, one of Massachusetts' most competitive secondary schools. He played guard on the varsity basketball team, sang with an a cappella group, served as class president for two years and was inducted into the National Honor Society.

Saudek recalls his high school days vividly. Classes started at 7:45 a.m. and were followed by meetings, practices, rehearsals, a quick dinner with his family and then homework that often took until after midnight to finish. Every minute, it seemed, was scheduled. "At a school like ours," he says, "college is around every corner and behind every doorstep. Talk of college starts in ninth grade, and from there the pressure starts building."

Talk to Peter, and you hear the voice of an earnest kid. He speaks deliberately and seems to think things through carefully. "I always felt more comfortable learning outside the classroom," he says. One summer, he volunteered at an urban camp for special-needs children. Another summer, he attended Outward Bound wilderness school in Washington state, where he learned to sea kayak and mountaineer. "Doing something hands-on, being engaged with a group of people, that's when things clicked. It was a lot more natural for me than trying to study algebra, chemistry and history out of textbooks."

As he approached senior year, Saudek started looking at colleges. "My friends would say, 'I found my dream school!' — but that never happened with me." In fact, it was during an overnight campus visit that he began questioning why he wanted to go to college at all.

He applied to eight colleges. (Many of his friends applied to twice that many.) As senior


year wore on, with all of its attendant tension and energy, he felt increasingly anxious. When he was accepted at a college, he greeted the news with a sense of relief instead of excitement. "I really wasn't excited to go to *any* college; that's the bottom line," he says.

When it was time to make a decision in April, his sister Rachel, who was three years older and a student at Oberlin College, called him. "It was an incredibly timely phone call," he says. His sister told him she had decided to take time off from college to find some direction in her own life. "This uncertainty you're feeling," she said, "is not going to just go away." So she urged him to consider what an increasing number of students applying to colleges do every fall: take a year off.

In 2000, the Harvard Admissions Office published a paper called "*Time Out or Burn Out for the Next Generation*." In it, the authors state their concern "that the pressures on today's students seem far more intense than those placed

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on previous generations.” The paper discusses the value for students of taking a time-out of sorts: “a time to step back and reflect, to gain perspective on personal values and goals, or to gain needed life experience in a setting separate from and independent of one’s accustomed pressures and expectations.”

Advocates for what has come to be called the gap year maintain that those who defer college for a year of experiential learning — usually spent on any combination of work, travel and service, often abroad but sometimes in the United States — arrive at college with a renewed sense of focus, purpose and energy, ready to take full advantage of all that higher education has to offer. Some kids join gap-year programs, while others create their own schedule. Just 1.8 percent of kids defer admission to college these days, for any number of reasons. Nonetheless, in terms of acceptance and popularity, the American gap year seems to be gaining ground. The American Gap Association, from a study of 14 gap-year organizations, cites an increase in enrollment of 58 percent from 2012 to 2013.

Statistically, studies have found that many students are not moving purposefully through their undergraduate education. The National Center for Educational Statistics examined first-time, full-time freshmen who entered college in 2004. After six years, almost 40 percent had not earned a bachelor’s degree from the institution where they had initially enrolled. And more than 31 percent had not earned a bachelor’s degree from *any* institution.

Debt is another issue. The Project on Student Debt estimates that “two-thirds of college seniors who graduated in 2011 had student-loan

debt, with an average of \$26,600 per borrower.” Winding one’s way aimlessly through an undergraduate education, in other words, can have long-lasting implications.

So, while some consider the gap year a rich kid’s game, an unnecessary expense to be tacked on to four years of tuition, more and more consider it an invaluable element of a young adult’s education. And a handful of universities, seeing what gap-year kids can offer on their campuses, have developed innovative programs that make the year possible — raising the question of whether the American gap year is becoming not just more accessible, but more relevant than ever.

Ethan Knight is director of the American Gap Association, an organization aimed at accrediting programs and educating the public about gap-year possibilities. “Basically, gap year is a structured time, [typically] between high school and college, for students to do some self-reflection, to experiment a bit with possible careers, and have some supervised experiential learning. Experiential is the crux of that, because students have been so exposed to four walls and textbooks, theory and not practice that the relevance of what they’re being taught [might have been] lost.”

It’s important to note that a gap year does not mean hanging out, living at home and watching *Star Trek* reruns, he says. In fact, some consider the word “gap” misleading, calling it instead a “bridge year” since it serves as a bridge between one experience and the next, rather than as a gap that one falls into. No matter the name, the options for this experiential year of learning are wide ranging in terms of scope, purpose and cost. Kids can enroll in a program of international service, study and travel, hire a gap-year consultant to match them up with jobs and internships or design the year themselves.

Saudek was at a graduation party when he got the call saying he’d just been accepted into Global Citizen Year, a gap-year program

that places graduating high school students into a year of immersive, intensive service and learning in the developing world. “I was elated,” he says. “It felt like things were coming together. I remember thinking, ‘I don’t know exactly what I’m getting into, but I really like the idea of this.’”

So, while his high school classmates learned their way around college campuses, Saudek navigated life in the small Ecuadorean city of Ibarra, living with a host family and working in a variety of volunteer jobs. In the course of eight months, he traveled to rural areas with a team of Ecuadorean educators to teach young kids how to use computers; helped revitalize an urban youth organization; and worked in the kitchen of a restaurant, practicing his Spanish and earning a midday meal in the process. In the evenings, he’d play street soccer with his host brother. Saudek also thought a lot about college — why it seemed the right next step and what he might like to study.

Robin Pendoley, director of a gap-year program called Thinking Beyond Borders, has interviewed hundreds of graduating high school seniors and their parents. “What the students will tell you,” Pendoley says, “is that they’re burned out on learning. But the more you talk to these kids and their parents, the more you realize that they’re not burned out on *learning*. What they’re saying is ‘I’ve worked really hard to get good grades and test scores so I can get into college. I don’t know why I’m going to college; I don’t have a sense of the purpose of college.’ I think our idealized vision is that students are going to arrive on college campuses as freshmen, open the course catalog and be excited about it. But the majority of students are arriving on their college campuses and thinking, ‘I have *four more years* of school to get through.’”

Holly Bull is head of Center for Interim Programs in Princeton, New Jersey, one of the country’s oldest and most highly respected gap-year consulting companies. What appeals to kids, Bull says, is the chance to create some plans based on their own interests.

“What I find with most students is that when you sit down with them, they love the idea that this could be kind of a smorgasbord year.”

Bull's own stepdaughter Samantha Krieg designed such a year after working herself into a state of exhaustion during her years at prep school. She began by working on an organic farm, saving enough money to pay for a good chunk of her travels. She studied at a small, intensive language school in Florence, Italy, and lived on her own in a nearby apartment. She traveled to the Bahamas and became a certified yoga instructor. And she worked as an intern with a small fashion company in Dublin, Ireland. “To me, it matters less what kids actually do than the fact that they're choosing what they do,” says Bull. “[For these kids,] so much of this process is just stepping out into the world.”

As hard as Saudek had worked in high school, he was faced with a slew of new challenges in Ecuador. “Everything is different when there's a language being spoken that you don't really understand at first,” he says. “There wasn't always someone to lean back on. I had to take on new responsibilities and navigate all kinds of unfamiliar situations.” He recalls the day his travel wallet — containing identification, health insurance and money — went missing. “That was a tough moment,” he says. A friend in the community helped out with some spare change, he recalls, so he could catch a bus back to his host family's home.

The cost of a gap year is an obstacle for many. Ethan Knight says a typical gap year can cost as much as \$35,000 but that the average gap year ranges from \$3,000 to \$15,000. Financial aid is available from some programs: Global Citizen Year, for example, costs \$30,000 for an eight-month experience but offers financial aid to 80 percent of participants.

Pendoley, of Thinking Beyond Borders, says there's no single, easy answer to how to pay for a year off. On a grand scale, he says, “I don't think colleges and universities are in any way going to invest lots of resources behind gap year, because the conversation right now is that

college [itself] is just too expensive.”

But even in today's cautious economic climate, a handful of colleges and universities believes a year of experiential learning to be so valuable — not just to students but for the schools as well — that they've created their own gap-year initiatives. One of them is New York City's the New School. Dr. Stephanie Browner, dean of Eugene Lang College — the New School's liberal arts, undergraduate college — says that the college has long had a special interest in students who've taken time off before college. To underscore its commitment to the gap-year concept, the New School has joined forces with Global Citizen Year to develop a program that comes with a full year of academic credit.

If a student applies to both the college and the gap-year program and is accepted into both, he or she becomes an official New School student — paying tuition to the school only — and embarks on a year that includes the traditional gap-year program augmented by a two-semester reading-and-writing seminar. “When you weave together civic engagement and project-based learning with the academic experience of research, writing and thinking,” says Browner, that's precisely the kind of learning the New School wants to support.

Other universities have created small but highly regarded programs of their own. Princeton University's Bridge Year Program, started in 2009, sends selected students to China, Senegal, Peru, India or Brazil and matches them with community-based organizations for nine months of “humble” service work, home stays and intensive language training. Princeton pays for the core cost of the program. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has developed the Global Gap Year Fellowship, which offers \$7,500 to select students who design their own international year of service.

Julia Rogers, director of En Route Consulting, believes the gap year is “on the crest of a wave”

in terms of popularity and acceptance. “I think the positive way to grow the gap year is to encourage it to be a deliberate, focused time of experiential learning versus a time to go party, backpack around aimlessly or hang out at your parents' house. If the gap year [were to go] in the direction of the meaningless year, it would be disastrous.” But if it retains its purposeful center, she believes, “the possibilities are endless: It could become a year of service, AmeriCorps could expand, there could be students doing amazing projects all around the world. So, the gap year becoming widely popular is both my greatest fear and my greatest hope.”

After his gap year, Saudek enrolled at American University as an international-relations major. In global development and poverty classes, he found he had a lot to contribute. “I had lived among a lot of the conditions we were talking about,” he says. Writing a paper for the class, he could draw on what he had seen and experienced. Soon he decided that what really excited him was environmental studies and music. So he changed majors and transferred to Oberlin College. Switching it up and doing something different, he says, was what his gap year had been all about. The application to Oberlin College required an essay, and Saudek didn't think he had another college essay in him. “I just couldn't do it. So I ended up just writing a really long poem. And they took me.”

Looking back, he says, “I learned more about how I want to lead my life, and gained more long-term skills, during those eight months in Ecuador than during the two years I've spent in college. Things like responsibility, patience, cross-cultural communication and respect for the complexity of issues. When people ask me, ‘How was your year off?’ I think to myself, ‘If anything, it was a year *on*.’” **E**

