



Some students spend a gap year teaching children abroad.

Inspiring Gap Years

By Elizabeth M. Economou

Throughout high school, **Genny Boots** devoted herself to volleyball, and coaches said she was good enough to compete at the next level. But college volleyball would mean hours of practice, and weekends spent in buses traveling for away matches. Boots, now 21, chose something else significant. Instead of going straight to college after high school, she opted for a gap year.

A gap year is an academic break focused on self-exploration through experiential learning, internships, travel and volunteerism. It can include some amount of paid work, but a year spent only working is not a gap year, notes Ethan Knight, founder and executive director of the American Gap Association (AGA), a Portland, Oregon-based gap-year accreditation organization.

Gap years are growing in popularity, to the tune of 30,000 U.S. gap students projected this year, a 23 percent increase compared to 2015, according to Knight. Gap years were recently in the headlines when Malia Obama announced her plans to defer her Harvard admission to take a

year off from academia after high school.

Boots says she first mulled the idea of a gap year during her junior year of high school in Anchorage. “I figured everybody says they want to travel the world, but no one was actually doing it. I decided to do it.”

Boots’ parents were hesitant, wanting to make sure their daughter wasn’t giving up on college.

“The deal I struck with my parents [was that] I can do this year abroad, but only if I apply to college and get all that sorted before I leave,” she says.

She deferred her enrollment at Pacific Lutheran University (PLU), in Tacoma, Washington, south of Seattle, and then traveled to South America and Central

America. She spent her gap year exploring Bolivia, Colombia, Panama, Costa Rica and Nicaragua, and also taught English for nine weeks in Peru.

It was a transformative experience, Boots says. “I learned to navigate in a foreign country, trust my instincts, take care of myself in the strangest places and situations, and challenge myself to be comfortable with strangers and alone,” says Boots, who will begin her junior year in September.

The year even fueled Boots’ interest in her eventual journalism major. “I found that I have a real passion for people and the narratives we each carry with us. Journalism is a story-focused career and one that is versatile,” she says. “I was a lot less worried about my future coming into college than many of my peers.”

Proponents of gap years hold up experiences such as Boots’ as an example of how the hiatus can work. They argue it’s a way for high school students—who are either burnt out or searching for direction—to re-set themselves. But critics say the cost of gap years limits their accessibility, and therefore the academic leave should not be so highly promoted.

Gap-year roots

Broadly defined as a yearlong break from academic studies to allow for nonacademic activities, the gap (or bridge) year originated in England in the 1970s as a meaningful way to fill the eight months between final exams and the start of university. The student’s personal growth via extended travel overseas was a major component.

In 1980, Cornelius Bull, who spent 30 years in education as a headmaster at schools in Turkey, Austria, Arizona and Texas, introduced the gap year to American audiences through his Center for Interim Programs after recognizing the benefit to students of learning from hands-on and real-world experience.

Bull compiled an extensive database, creating the first gap-year counseling

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program in the United States. Today, that database consists of more than 6,500 group-travel programs, volunteer opportunities, internship placements, language courses and other offerings worldwide.

The AGA estimates that roughly 60 to 70 percent of all gap years taken include international travel.

Schools of thought

With gap years' growing popularity, various institutions of higher learning have developed plans for accommodating interested students. Some schools, especially private colleges, may work with gap students and even help set them up with structured programs.

Boots' school, PLU, receives about eight to 10 gap-year requests from incoming freshmen each year, says Melody Ferguson, director of admission. The small, private college, with an enrollment of 3,300, will reserve an accepted student's place. "We can defer their admission and scholarships for up to one year," Ferguson says.

Similarly, Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington, a school with 7,800 students, lets freshmen defer admission for one year, says Julie McCulloh, dean of admission.

"Private universities have more flexibility to implement these kinds of programs," says Susan Poch, assistant vice provost at Washington State University in Pullman, "whereas public colleges are governed by more rules and regulations."

Of course, many public as well as private universities do have study-abroad opportunities.

Gap-year options have been limited at the University of Washington (UW) in Seattle because of traditional-enrollment demand, according to administrators.

"Historically, this has been an enrollment demand-and-management issue," says Philip A. Ballinger, associate vice provost for enrollment and undergraduate admissions at the UW. "So many

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in-state students wish to attend [the UW] that our general policy has been that if admitted for a particular quarter, an applicant needed to matriculate that quarter, otherwise the place should go to another student.” The UW does, however, permit deferrals for health-related reasons and “exceptional opportunities,” Ballinger notes.

He also belongs to a coalition of admission offices that produced *Turning the Tide: Inspiring Concern for Others and the Common Good through College Admission*, a report that considers promoting gap years on a national level.

In 2011, the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill, with an undergraduate enrollment of about 18,000, began offering \$7,500 scholarships to help subsidize students’ gap years.

This year, Florida State University (FSU), an institution of more than 40,000 students, announced the availability of \$50,000 for scholarships of up to \$5,000 per gap-year student.

“It’s become increasingly clear that gap-year experiences can be transformative for students, helping them become better thinkers and citizens,” says Joe O’Shea, assistant vice president for academic affairs at FSU. “Having thoughtful and caring students on campus is something we want, and we expect gap-year students to infuse the student body with diverse and meaningful perspectives.”

O’Shea also serves as the president of the board of the AGA. “We want to send a message to higher education that colleges and universities should allow students to defer their matriculation to undertake a meaningful gap year.”

Benefits, cost

Many people in higher education agree: A gap year—if done right—offers tremendous value. Proponents say a gap year allows students to enter college better prepared.

“Sometimes it is health-related;

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Malia Obama made news in 2016 when she announced her plans to defer her first year at Harvard and take a gap year.

sometimes it is focus; sometimes students just know they are weary and recognize the need to become hungry for learning again, prior to going to college," says Gonzaga's McCulloh. "Students can be exhausted at the end of high school when they have put so much energy into school and extracurricular activities, and perhaps need some time for some life maturing."

A survey of gap-year alumni published in 2015 by the AGA found that 98 percent of gap-year students agree that their year promoted self-reflection; 96 percent agree it increased confidence; 84 percent agree it helped them acquire skills useful in their careers; and 77 percent agree that it helped them find their purpose in life.

As gap years gain traction, there are more organizations offering structured options. For instance, Pacific Discovery, Thinking Beyond Borders, and Carpe Diem Education are all application-based programs that set gap students up with adventures, internships and volunteer opportunities across the globe.

Yearlong, immersive international programs can run up a \$35,000 tab, says

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Knight of the AGA, though prices vary.

He says AmeriCorps is a national program that offers students paid stipends to serve nonprofits, schools, community groups and other organizations across the country.

Cross-Cultural Solutions (CCS), a New Rochelle, New York, nonprofit, offers gap years spent volunteering in places such as Morocco, Brazil and India. CCS programs are tax deductible and range in price from \$1,733 to \$11,500, depending on the destination(s) and duration of the program.

The cost has some people in academia concerned. "Gap years typically require resources—resources not available to many if not most students," says Ballinger. "I think gap years can offer students wonderful possibilities, but I would not want them to become normative or expected unless they were also to become widely possible for students from all sorts of backgrounds."

The high price tag is exactly why FSU began offering scholarships, says O'Shea. "We recognize that gap-year education can be inaccessible to many low-income students, and we want all students to be able to take advantage of a gap-year education regardless of their family's income."

For now, though, most students have to pay out of pocket. Boots acknowledges that she was lucky to be able to take her gap year. "It's worth noting that my experience is a privilege. Not everyone has that opportunity."

But for Boots and others who do have the opportunity, there's little doubt that a gap year can be a life-changing event.

"I came back and knew how to care for myself alone—something that has really helped me in college," Boots says. "I came back feeling confident in myself and knowing a little bit more about who I am." ▲

Elizabeth M. Economou, a former adjunct professor, writes from Seattle.

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