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“Why Doesn’t Everyone Do This?”: Dissecting the Disparity Among Gap-Year Program Participants

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Executive Summary

- In the United States, immediately attending college in the Fall following high school graduation is common and expected.
- However, there is a small but growing population of students who take on a gap year before starting their college career.
- This homogeneous demographic of students, typically affluent, who do take a gap year experience the various benefits of taking a much-needed break from school.
- This means that there is a large group of students who do not get to experience benefits from a gap year due to lack of promotion, social stigma, and other barriers.
- It is important for students of all backgrounds, especially low-income students of color, to be made aware a gap year is an option for them just as much as it is an option for their peers.

Background (The Goal of Gap-Year Opportunities)

A gap year is defined as “a structured period of time when a student takes an intentional break from formal education” (Blythe & Gallagher, 2020). The “gap year” as a concept and practice began in the United Kingdom in the 1960s. It was used as a way for students to fill the 7-8 month gap between final exams and the start of university

with international experience.

It wasn’t until the 1980s that the “gap year” made its way to the United States through the work of Cornelius H. Bull, an educator, school headmaster, and founder of the Center for Interim Programs. His programs are a service designed to assist high school students in making an effective and meaningful transition to college, and college students who are reassessing their goals. He encouraged students to “follow their bliss” and he helped place thousands of young people in apprenticeships, volunteer positions, and cultural study programs (Haigler & Nelson, 2005).

Gap-year opportunities continue to look like this and also include working a job or internship, traveling, or simply taking a break from academics to focus on mental health. Gap years are known for and promoted as a way for young people to “deepen one’s practical, professional and personal awareness” (Gap Year Association, n.d.).

Problem Analysis

In the gap year world, there is a lack of data that captures *why* certain students decide to take on a gap year compared to their peers who enter straight into higher education. However, a 2015 National Survey of Gap Year

Alumni found that gap year participants – commonly referred to as “gappers” – were majority female, White, native English speakers, and from households where the estimated income was over \$100,000 per year. Additionally, where approximately 10% of American high schoolers attend private school, 35% of gappers did (Hoe, 2015).

24% of all gappers said their parents had influenced their decision to take a gap year, with parents’ level of education being a determining factor as to whether or not they influenced their children. 18% of gappers with at least one parent with a bachelor’s degree and 30% of those with at least one parent with a graduate degree were influenced by their parents. This means that almost 50% of gappers in the survey have parents with advanced degrees who encouraged them to take time off before entering college. Lastly, a significantly higher proportion of gappers from higher income backgrounds received financial support from their parents during their gap year (Hoe, 2015).

The Gap Year Association’s Alumni 2020 Survey found that from a sample of 1,795 respondents, 78% of respondents identified as White, 5% as Asian, 4% as Latino, and 2% as Black (Blythe & Gallagher, 2020).

There is a lack of research on how to better support “would-be” gap year participants. This means that there are large demographics of students, particularly students of color and low-income students, who would benefit from participating in a gap year, but are not being reached. There are many gap year programs, such as AmeriCorps, that are federally funded and provide stipends for their volunteers. However, not every gap year program pays their volunteers.

Benefits of gap year

Gap years provide both personal and academic benefits. Since 2020, a mental health crisis has been affecting young people across the United States. A 2018 study found that over one-third of incoming freshmen suffered from mental health problems (Auerbach, et al. 2018). These mental health issues corresponded with lower academic performance and higher dropout rates. However, gap year students return to school with higher motivation (Martin, 2010). The time away from school typically re-ignites a passion, desire, and curiosity for learning.

The benefit that most gap year alumni speak to is how their time away from school allowed for them to discover themselves and enter college with confidence, awareness of themselves and the world, and clarity about their interests and career ambitions (O’Shea, 2013). After spending the majority of one’s life in the school system and only being told that the next step is to attend college, students are left with the skills to do well, but are unsure of what they want to do with them (Deresiewicz, 2014). Taking this time off of school allows for students to realize that there is life outside of academia.

Barriers to gap year

With the benefits of taking a gap year being far and wide, the barriers to taking a gap year are also extensive. The six areas that are the most common barriers for students to participate in a gap year are: financial, representation and visibility, faculty and administrative support, family support, and community and social support.

On the financial front, depending on the type of gap year program they are interested in, the funding to take on such opportunities may not be as readily accessible to all students. According to the 2015 National of Gap Year Alumni, 71% of respondents said their parents contributed financially to their gap year (Hoe, 2015). For low-income students, it may not be possible for their parents to help contribute financially towards a gap year, making it unlikely for them to participate in said gap year. Representation matters for gap year participation because gap years are not as visible to students from different socioeconomic or racial backgrounds, and are not as representative for students of color or students with disabilities. The 2015 National Gap Year Survey found that 85% of respondents were avid supporters and promoters of gap year experiences and would be highly likely to encourage others to take on a gap year (Hoe, 2015). With this, having more racial and financial diversity in gap year participants would lead to more recruitment among students of color from all socioeconomic backgrounds.

Faculty and administration support is not as far reaching as it could be. Not only are gap year opportunities not as promoted as immediately attending college, but if high school

,college, and college faculty are not actively mentoring or supporting students, it will be extremely difficult for students to plan or even consider taking a gap year. Family support is a great barrier as it is less common for parents who have not attained higher education degrees and make above a \$100,000 income to promote gap year opportunities to their children (Hoe, 2015).

Similar to family support, if a student lacks community and social exposure to the concept of a gap year, they are less likely to be aware of how the process works making them less likely to find the motivation or encouragement to participate in a gap year (Haigler & Nelson, 2005).

A common fear among parents is that if their child takes a gap year they will not go on to attend college. It is believed that students lose momentum and motivation when they do not immediately enter college following high school. According to the Gap Year Association, 90% of students who took a gap year returned to college within a year (Haigler & Nelson, 2013). Another common fear or misconception is that upon entering college, gap year students struggle more in their college courses due to the time spent out of school, overall affecting their academic outcomes. However, when looking at academic outcomes, Middlebury College and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill created a methodology that looked at the academic performances of students who had taken a gap year compared to their peers who had not taken a gap year (Clagett, 2012). The study showed gap year alumni had significantly higher grade point averages (GPAs) for their freshman

years, which continued throughout their four years in college. Gap year students outperformed their peers who did not take a gap year. They also held a higher number of leadership positions on campus compared to their non-gap year classmates. Due to their time away from school, students credit their gap years for being the reason why they are passionate about their studies, motivated, and confident in their skills (Martin, 2010).

Recommendations

While taking on a gap year has become more common than within recent decades, there is still a lack of diversity among gap year participants. In order to address this issue, recommendations include:

- **Promotion:** In order to reach students who do not typically participate in gap years, such as low-income or students of color, it is imperative to promote these opportunities in school through educational staff such as counselors, teachers, and gap year alumni. Schools need a network of people within and outside the school that students can reach out to learn more and consider if a gap year

is something they could be interested in.

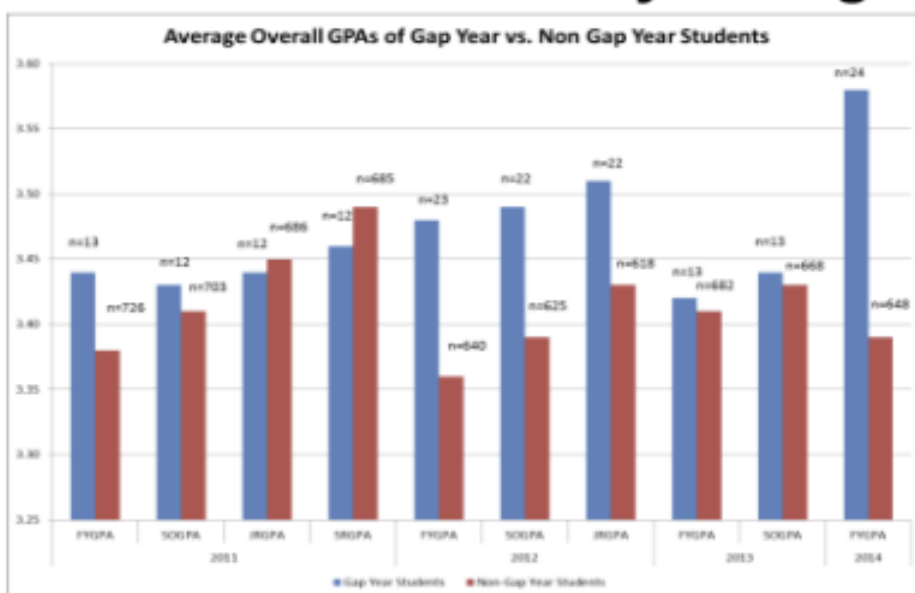
- **Funding:** For federally funded programs, such as AmeriCorps, receiving more funding can make their volunteer programs more desirable and accessible for interested students. By putting more funding into these programs, costs can be covered for underrepresented participants. Policymakers can work towards securing funding for volunteer programs that “would-be” gappers. It would be ideal if federal volunteer programs could receive more funding to not only make their gap year opportunities desirable, but possible for young people to live off of.
- **Permission & Representation:** For students unfamiliar with the gap year process and experience, it can feel as though they are barred from not only gathering information but trying the experience for themselves. According to UNC researchers, observing and comparing ourselves against the successful action of others, even strangers, leads to empowerment and motivation.

- **Culture:** Currently, there still remains social stigma surrounding not immediately attending college after graduating from high school. This stigma around gap years may also differ among racial groups for different reasons. It is important for there to be a cultural shift around the concept of a “gap year” and for the experience to be deemed valuable. Providing parents from all backgrounds with adequate information on the possibilities and positives of such opportunities for their children can minimize stigma and allow them to support their potential gappers.
- **Research:** There is a lack of research within the field of gap years. It is difficult to assess exactly how many college students have participated in gap years. It is even more difficult to determine why college students did not take a gap year. More must be done to understand why there is a lack of financial and racial diversity among gappers and how to increase these numbers.

Conclusions

The costs of not expanding the accessibility around gap year opportunities are vast. By not reaching students who would not typically participate in a gap year, there will continue to be a lack of financial and racial diversity among these opportunities. Without direct change to how gap years are discussed, promoted, and financed, students who deserve to benefit from the same opportunities as their White affluent peers will continue to be shut out.

Results at Middlebury College



Endnotes

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