In Fervent Support of the 'Gap Year'

The New York Times
http://parenting.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/01/04/
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I wasn’t enthusiastic when my daughter first floated her plan to take a “gap year” before college. As someone who couldn’t wait to matriculate, I didn’t see the point of delaying that great intellectual awakening. I felt vaguely disappointed that she wasn’t more eager to embrace all those books and ideas and late-night conversations about the cosmos. And what if her gap year turned into a permanent crevasse and she never earned a degree?

But she had just slogged through a brutal junior year at a cutthroat private high school, where she felt overworked and undersupported by her college-obsessed peers. She needed a break. Besides, my husband and I weren’t eager to pay for a college education she wasn’t ready for.

She’s hardly the only one. A growing number of American students, shattered by the grueling marathon of high school and the coldblooded “college process,” are opting to take a year to regroup before tackling higher education — a practice long common in Britain and Australia. Attendance at “gap fairs” more than doubled in the United States between 2010 and 2013, and enrollment in gap-year programs grew 27 percent from 2012 to 2013 alone, according to Ethan Knight, executive director of the American Gap Association. Many college websites, including Harvard's and Yale’s, now encourage prospective freshman to consider a gap year.

No wonder: Research shows that students who take a gap year not only arrive at college refreshed and refocused, but also perform better academically. One study found that gap-year students at Middlebury and the University of North Carolina maintained grade point averages between .1 and .4 points higher than their gap-free peers. “That should reassure parents worried that their kids are never going to get back on track after a gap year,” says Bob Clagett, a former dean of admissions at Middlebury who conducted the study.

Encouraged, we began discussing gap-year options. The key stipulation: It couldn’t cost us anything. Her college fund was for college, not for launching a start-up or snorkeling the Great Barrier Reef. But our daughter was welcome to get a job or an internship, or volunteer for a program like City Year, which pays young adults a small stipend to work in underserved urban communities.

Then in December, she was accepted early-decision to her first-choice, big-reach college. The gap-year plan fizzled, but only temporarily. As soon as she learned of a family in Salzburg, Austria, looking for an American au pair, my daughter — an experienced babysitter and nearly fluent German speaker — signed on, deferring her college admission by one year. While her friends Facebook-stalked their freshmen
roommates and shopped for extra-long sheets, she filled out paperwork for an Austrian work visa.

She remained preternaturally calm about the prospect of moving overseas until about a month before her departure. “I hope I don’t freak out when I get there,” she remarked one day. “You know, being in a foreign country where I don’t know anyone, not speaking the language, living by myself. …” I, of course, had been silently considering that possibility for months. But rather than scream, “Well, DUH! Shouldn’t you have thought about that before?” I simply said, “What’s the worst that can happen? If you hate it, you’ll do something else.”

I needn’t have worried. Taking a gap year turned out to be one of the smartest decisions my daughter has ever made. She had a spectacular experience in Salzburg, bonding with her host family, perfecting her German, traveling through Europe with assorted new friends, and otherwise developing the confidence and skills necessary to navigate unfamiliar terrain. In the wish-I-didn’t-know department: She couch-surfed, accepted autobahn rides from strangers and once had to decide whether to spend her last three euros on food or bus fare home.

By the time she started college this fall, she couldn’t have been better prepared — or more excited. She approached the whole experience of picking classes, making friends and trying new activities with a newfound sense of purpose and perspective. The gap year broadened her academic interests — history and computer science? Who knew? — as well as deepened her extracurricular ones. She’s taken up tennis, applied to become a peer counselor in sexual health and joined an a cappella group, despite never having sung before.

As a bonus, taking time off seems to have inured her to the binge drinking so rampant among new freshmen. When you’ve spent a year legally sipping pilsner with intrepid friends in European pubs, hanging out in a dorm room doing shots until you puke looks pretty unappealing. Though more women than men take gap years, it’s the men who may stand to benefit the most from that extra year of maturing. “If colleges encouraged more male students to take a gap year, it would reduce a lot of the alcohol-related problems on campus,” Mr. Clagett said.

My son is looking at colleges now and this time, I’ll be the first to suggest that he start the process by stopping out.