

Time Off Helps

Taking a 'gap year' after graduation to work or volunteer can be an antidote to the woes of high school. And it leaves students eager to learn more

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Editor's Note: Our 2006 Kaplan College Guide will be on sale at newsstands from Aug. 22, 2005. Please come back to see our updated picks of the hottest schools after that date.

Posted August, 2004 - While their peers slog through Milton's "Paradise Lost" in freshman lit in fall 2004, many standout high-school graduates won't be anywhere near campus. Take Robert Padnick—he's working at Cartoon Network. Aya Hamano will be tutoring inner-city children with an after-school program in Harlem. Both are high-achieving high-school graduates who have been accepted to top universities. But like a growing number of students, they've decided instead to take a year off—a "gap year"—before college.

The concept is not new in Europe, but it has been gaining more acceptance among American parents and their overscheduled teens. While there are no hard statistics on how many kids opt to take a year off to work, play or volunteer, many educators agree that the trend is on the upswing. "I've seen this idea evolve from one that kids and parents were skeptical about 18 years ago to one they embrace heartily," says Carl Bewig, associate director of college counseling at Phillips Academy in Andover, Mass. For many students, it's the perfect antidote to the years of pressure to get into a good school, with kids risking burnout from rigorous academic, athletic and extracurricular activities designed to make them more well rounded than the next student. Harvard's dean of admissions, William Fitzsimmons, actively encourages incoming students to take time off. "They gain almost four years' worth of perspective in that one year," he says.

Padnick is one student who has taken Fitzsimmons's advice. The class salutatorian at his Los Angeles high school in 2004, Padnick was accepted to Harvard. But, he says, he really needed a break. "I just felt that a year in a new environment, in a new job, in a new place would give me a sort of idea of where my real interests are," he says. So the 18-year-old applied for a paid internship at the Atlanta offices of Cartoon Network. Instead of hitting the books, he'll be living on his own (with a little financial help from Mom and Dad).

Padnick's motives are typical of students who take a gap year. William Damon, director of Stanford's Center on Adolescence, says the gap year plays the role in a student's emotional development that college itself once did. Once they hit the classroom, most students are focused on finding a job—not their "inner bliss." A gap year is really the only time they have the freedom to experiment. "Nowadays the majority of undergraduate majors are in business," Damon points out, "and what that means is the developmental advantage of having a moratorium period that had traditionally been part of the American collegiate experience is rapidly being eroded."

Parents who worry that their child may never go back to school should relax. Most kids do eventually hit the books. Reid Conti, 23, worked for three years before enrolling at Santa Clara University. The Seattle native says that "after years and years of school, it was just getting old doing the same thing." He took an IT job, and by the time his peers were in their third year of college he was making \$40,000. When he was finally ready to get back, he felt refreshed.

Planning a year off may seem daunting, but there's a virtual industry to help. Students interested in volunteering with inner-city children should check out the nonprofit City Year (cityyear.org). "I wanted to do something practical," says Phillips Academy grad Hamano, who's working in Harlem in fall 2004. "I'm really into politics, and I kind of felt helpless being in school. I wanted to do something real." More interested in going abroad?

Global Experiences (globalexperiences.com) has gap-year programs ranging from paid internships in Australia to language and fashion-design classes in Italy to volunteer-ing on organic farms in Ecuador. Still unsure? Counselors at the Center for Interim Programs (interimprograms.com) and Time Out Associates (timeoutassociates.com) help guide teens to tailored programs for just under \$2,000. After a year off, Milton might finally begin to make sense.