

Pros and Cons of the College Gap Year

After high school, not every student is ready to race off to college. Here are some reasons why a year off can be a great idea... and a terrible one too.

The final report cards are in. The SAT scores are recorded. The speeches given, the pictures taken and the caps thrown into the air...

High school is over. It's time for college.

Right?

Well... not always. A year off in between high school and college is becoming more and more commonplace these days.

This so-called "Gap Year" has a lot going for AND against it. Which side of the fence your student falls on depends on a few different things.

- Has your child been accepted to college yet?
- Do they have a clear idea of what they want to go to school for?
- Are they prepared mentally for the college lifestyle?
- Are you able to afford your share of the tuition bills yet?

It's another in the long line of college decisions you'll have to make that isn't just tied to one factor. Money, academics, maturity and ambition... they'll all play a role.

Emerald College Funding Solutions doesn't endorse a "gap year" one way or the other. But in an effort to help make your choice a little easier, here's what we find to be the most common pros and cons of a year off from school...

Pros of the College Gap Year

- Some students just need a break. Remember, your child has been going to school for 12 straight years. A year off can be just the thing to help refresh and reenergize them – to get them mentally strong and hungry for the rigors of a college course load. That way, there's much less chance of a burnt out student coming home for their first Winter break.
- A year off doesn't have to be a year OFF. Delaying college a year can allow students to use their time very constructively. An internship can help them determine what course of study to pursue... a volunteer program can help teach the value of teamwork and open their eyes to different aspects of the world... a job can teach good work ethic and help them save money so that textbooks, a new laptop, even those frequent late night pizza runs – don't end up coming out of YOUR pocket when they arrive on campus.

In fact, *New York Times* education writer Jonathan Glater states that ***"Every admissions officer I spoke to about taking a "gap year" said that students who had made that choice arrived on campus wiser and more mature and had a sense of perspective their younger classmates lacked."***

- It's another year you'll have to save money too. If your Expected Family Contribution is more than you can afford and you've exhausted all avenues for financial aid and scholarships, an extra year to put aside tuition money could be very welcome. It could be just what you need to get your college savings account up to where it needs to be.
- A year off doesn't necessarily have to affect your child's chances of going to their dream school. Many colleges will defer enrollment for a year for admitted students, allowing them the security of knowing they've still got a desk waiting for them while they're out working, volunteering or experiencing the world.

Cons of the College Gap Year

- That "left back" feeling. It can be hard for kids if their friends have moved on to new lives at new schools and they're now a year behind. This can be a discouraging and lonely place to be.
- A "gap year" isn't necessarily going to result in a student getting into a better school. Unless your child is taking classes to better their academic profile, most schools aren't going to adjust their decision based on a year of work or travel... no matter how beneficial it's been to the student.
- The potential for a wasted year. If your child is intent on taking a year off, it's crucial that they do something, *anything* that will end up being productive and beneficial to their future college career. The temptations are there to sleep in... hang out with friends... work a menial part time job and then spend every dime they earn... If your student is intent on going to college, the "gap year" should be spent with that goal still in mind.

"I do not advocate taking a year off for the sake of taking a year off. Anyone who wants to take the plunge should come up with a plan," Glater says in *The New York Times*.

Whether or not your child goes right to college or takes a "gap year" really depends on your precise set of circumstances.

A year off does not kill their chances at a successful college career whatsoever. In fact it can greatly enhance them. But a wasted year may set them so far back that it's hard to recover.

If your decision isn't dictated by your ability to afford college now, then do some research and see what opportunities are available to your child if they take a year off.

A good place to start is at <http://www.usagapyearfairs.org/>, which can fill you in on many "gap year" organizations and fairs being held in your area. Check them out and see if you or your child thinks any of them would be worthwhile to try out.

But no matter when your student starts, always keep your eye on the prize of that college degree. Good luck!