Gap Year Guide
What is it and is it right for me?

What is a Gap Year?
- An *intentional* period of time between high school graduation and starting college for a student to learn more about their interests, values and what they would like for their future.
- A structured opportunity for high-quality experiences such as an internship, traveling, and volunteer efforts like Americorps, CityYear, and Global Citizen Year.
- There is a *full* intent for the student to start college a year (or semester) after graduating from high school.

It is NOT working a standard job in the community, playing video games, "hanging out," or living with parents.

Is working in my community for a year considered a gap year?
Usually not. Taking a year break between high school and college to work a job that does not require a college degree is called "delayed enrollment" and it usually derails a student's educational pursuits.

How might a year off impact me?
There are countless stories of students who intended to go to college after a "year off," and never did, or took many years off. Working a minimum wage job while living with parents is not a different enough experience to add to your personal growth. Like many in this situation, you could end up in a low-wage unskilled job and get stuck in an earning-money and paying bills cycle. However, a true gap-year program (like CityYear, Americorps, or Global Citizen Year) could add tremendous experiences and skills that will help you better know yourself and learn what you'd like to do (or not do) with your life.

What does the research say?
Students who take a year off to work, particularly those who are low-income, will likely not enter college at all, or, if they do, will not finish. As for gap years (as defined above), researchers say it is likely to benefit students and prepare them for college and their future, but often, a true gap year is only in reach for the wealthy.

Researchers also say "academic momentum," meaning continuing education without taking long breaks, has a direct effect on college completion. This means that if a student disrupts their momentum by taking time off, they are more likely to not complete college.

Will it hurt my chances of going to college?
Delaying entry into college won't impact admission or federal financial aid directly (see below about how it affects your financial aid).

You might, however, be influenced to not go to college. Many things can happen during your "year" off. If you aren't committed to going to college, it's likely that a "year off" can turn into many years or never going. Adult events, like having children or getting married, can further delay college and increase the likelihood of not earning a degree.

Important note: for every level increase in education, yearly income increases and unemployment rates decrease. Getting a degree will help you earn more money and have more employability for the rest of your life.

What is the college-going rate for those who wait to go to college or go right after graduation?
Remember the crucial difference between "gap year" and "delaying enrollment." The [American Gap Association](#) says that 90% of students who participate in a true gap year continue to college within a year and graduate on time. [A study on delayed enrollment](#) says "students who delay postsecondary enrollment have lower odds of bachelor degree completion."

How will a gap year affect my financial aid for college?
Your financial aid is determined by the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) which you complete each year of college. If you work full-time for a year, your income will be considered on the FAFSA. If you received a scholarship – you might lose it if you delay enrollment, and some scholarships are only available to students who go directly from high school to college.

Does it make sense financially to work full-time for a year before college?
Usually not. The money you earn could decrease your financial aid package. Most "would-be college students" fall into an earning/spending cycle and typically can't save much money. Working part-time during college is a good way to earn money without interrupting your academic momentum.

Will taking time off help me emotionally or mentally for college?
It depends on how you spend that time. Having a purpose, focus, and intention is always good for the mind and spirit. For some, college or a structured gap year program can provide that. Just taking time off with no plan probably won't be helpful.

What if I'm not sure of a major or what I really want to do with my life?
Visit [EducationQuest.org](#) to see some career-exploration tools. If you're unsure of a major, you can take your general education courses (Gen Eds) first. These are classes all students need to graduate, regardless of major. You can usually take these courses online or at a community college – just make sure the credits will transfer to your college of choice later on.

These books go deeper into gap years and how to make it work best for you:
- *Gap Year: How Delaying College Changes People in Ways the World Needs* by Joseph O'Shea
- *College Can Wait!: The reluctant student's guide to gap years, resume-building, travel, internships, and figuring out what you really want* by R.J. Vickers

The bottom line:
The choice to take a gap year depends on you and your long-term goals. If you want to go to college, but want to first take a year to learn more about yourself and life – it could be beneficial. If you want to take a year off to work with the intention of saving money for college – you will likely not make it through college.

If you have a long list of reasons holding you back from college, maybe you aren't ready – and that's okay. Spending time in the real world, in the workforce, or in the military might be what you need to learn more about the career direction you want to take in your life. It's never too late to start college, but it may be easier to do when you're already in an educational routine.