

FIRST EDUCATION

by Margaret Farley Steele

THE GAP YEAR

More and more graduates are taking off the year after high school to do other things.

Someday Sarah Conway hopes to be a doctor, but when she won an early-decision spot at Amherst College last year, she felt she wasn't ready to start down the road to her M.D. just yet. So instead of joining the freshman class as scheduled, the 18-year-old from West Hartford headed overseas.

Her first stop was Spain, where she is studying the language, culture and government while living with a family in Barcelona for three months. After the holidays, she expects to travel to South Africa and coach field hockey for several weeks, and in February, she'll fly to Costa Rica to teach English to schoolchildren until May.

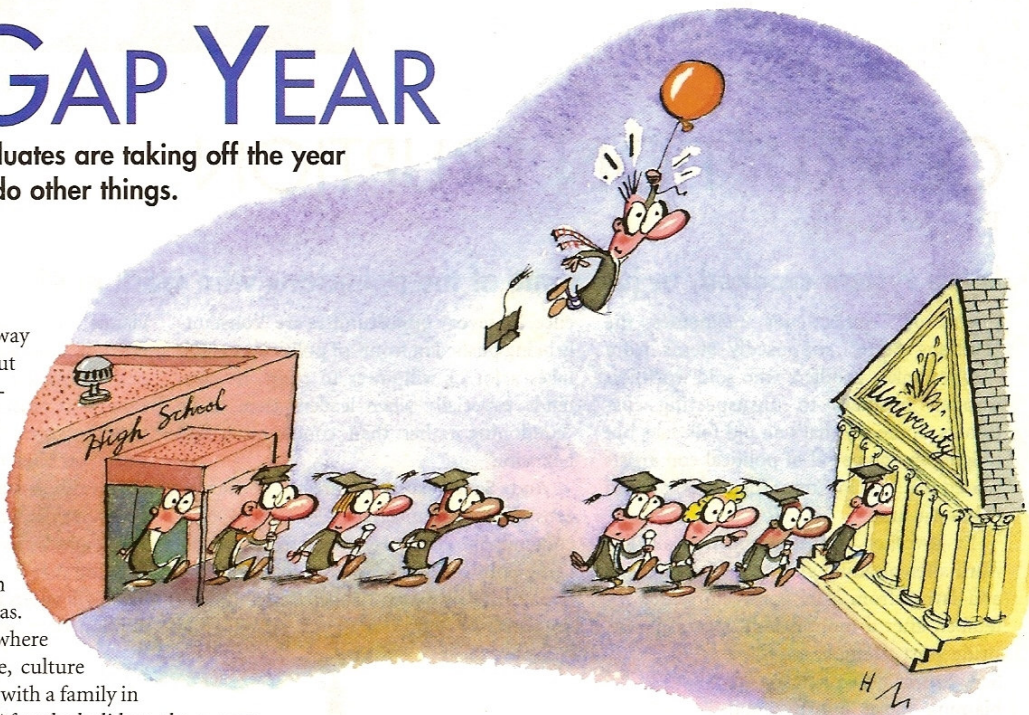
The Hall High School graduate is taking what is called a "gap year," a break between high school and college meant to give students a feel for the world. Traveling, charity or conservation work, learning a language and working to finance their education are typical gap-year activities, but by no means the only options.

Having a touch of real-world experience when they arrive on campus is a plus, college counselors and admission personnel say. "It gives students a clearer sense of direction," says Diederik van Renesse, an independent educational consultant in Westport. And it doesn't hurt that they start college a little older, he adds.

As the pressure to get into college intensifies, a break can be healthy, claims van Renesse. "Taking that year often recharges them and helps them see the importance of a college degree," he says. His own son, Benjamin, a senior at Suffield Academy, is considering a stint with AmeriCorps, according to van Renesse, who calls it "a wonderful option." His one stipulation: Complete the college application process while still in high school, when the momentum and mechanics are in place, and then defer admission.

At Wesleyan University in Middletown, about 25 students defer admission each year, according to Nancy Hargrave Meislahn, dean of admission and financial aid. "There's a general sentiment that a gap year adds to the diversity in the classroom, and in that sense it's a real positive," she says. One student recently tackled organic farming; another worked at a day-care center in Mexico. "The plan for a lot of students is to work the first half of the year to pay for the experience they'll have the second half of the year," says Meislahn.

Although guidance counselors and students are more aware of the value of a gap year, "not as many parents are embracing the concept as we might hope," says Martha Merrill, dean of admission and financial aid at Connecticut College in New London. Their desire to have



their youngsters in a good college is paramount, she says, and some fear that a detour could end up derailing plans for higher education.

Consequently, the practice is winning acceptance here "very slowly," says Tom Pastorius, vice president of Projects Abroad in Providence, R.I. Still, students from the Northeast are the most likely to take a gap year, according to Chris Yager, director of Where There Be Dragons of Boulder, Colo., which coordinates student programs in developing countries. Youths from Connecticut, Massachusetts and New York make up 50 percent of its gap-year participants, he says.

Sarah Conway's dad was thrilled with his daughter's decision, and impressed by the organizational know-how of the gap-year programs she selected. "We really encouraged her when she started to talk about pre-med because it's such a long haul," says Dr. Stephen Conway. "We wanted her to broaden her horizons in terms of the world and other cultures. It's a win-win on multiple levels. On a tangible level she'll learn Spanish, something she can enjoy that's also marketable. The intangibles have to do with personal growth—getting around a new city on your own and gaining a new perspective."

Chris Kelly of Wilton would agree. During his senior year at Wilton High School, Kelly, 19, recalls being so concerned "about making the right decisions for my future that I was afraid to move forward with life." Instead of starting college last year, he volunteered as a construction worker with Habitat for Humanity in Costa Rica. "To literally build a house from the ground up, while learning to speak Spanish, has probably been the most impressive accomplishment of my young life," says Kelly, now a freshman at Miami University in Ohio.

His time away relieved his apprehension and enabled him to reflect on his goals. He left for college with his confidence restored, along with an Air Force scholarship he applied for during his time off. "These kids don't get lost in a gap year," Yager says. "They get found."

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