

“Taking A Year Off Before Starting College” by Marie C. Franklin

In this season of early acceptances - and rejections - some high school seniors may decide that time off from school is a better option than college. But what to do? And who should do it?

"Kids who are tired, bored, burned out. Those who haven't done well and want to do better," said Bob Gilpin, a history teacher at Milton Academy and president of Time-Out Associates, a counseling firm that helps high school seniors come up with alternatives to college. Seniors, especially those from middle- and upper-middle-class districts, face intense pressure to graduate and go right to college. But, too often, some students are not ready to continue. Education fatigue is the most common reason students take a year off, according to research from the National PTA.

"In terms of academic and social maturity, many students would benefit from a directed year off," said Thomas Hughart, director of guidance at Wellesley High School. The idea also appeals to students "who have absolutely no idea what they want to do," he said.

Once a rare option in college admissions, one-year deferrals are now routinely available to students admitted even to prestigious colleges. Harvard College suggests that students take a year off in its acceptance letters, and 50 to 75 students annually take this option, according to the school's Web site.

But Gilpin said the competition between colleges to yield the right size class has prompted some to restrict deferrals.

"Connecticut College, for example, will grant a deferral, but it requires students to sign a pledge card that he or she will not apply elsewhere during the deferral period," he said.

Although such options as worldwide travel, internships, and volunteering can cost as much as a year in college, Gilpin said, there are affordable options for those taking a year off. City Year (www.cityyear.org), Americorps (www.americorps.org), and The Student Conservation Association (www.sca-inc.org) are programs with low tuitions, stipends, and scholarships.

"Kids who take a year off to do something volunteer-oriented like City Year often end up more mature and ready for college when the year is over," said Brad MacGowan, head of career and college counseling at Newton North High School.

And parents shouldn't worry that a year off from school spells trouble, Gilpin said. What's worse is flunking out the first year and having to carry the burden of a low GPA for the rest of the academic career, he said.

"A well-planned time-out can make all the difference between college for all the right reasons - or an expensive interlude," Gilpin said.

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