

“Time Out!” By Rebecca Onion

One of my best friends in high school, Cristie Ellis, who’s 24 now, got into Williams College, but told them she wanted to wait a year. When the rest of us were freshmen, worrying about papers and frat parties, Cristie was in the Rocky Mountains. She spent a semester with the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS), learning wilderness survival skills. She’d write letters home describing the miles she’d hiked and how she was learning to rock climb and push her limits.

“In high school, there wasn’t a lot of time to step back and think about myself,” says Cristie’s younger sister Tari, 21, a Brown University sophomore who did a semester at a Navajo reservation in New Mexico and a semester in a small town in India. “During my year away, I learned a lot about the kind of person I want to be.”

“I felt so cool, so lod, so independent,” agrees Maggie Turner, 19, a freshman at Connecticut College who spent a semester in London studying fashion. “I felt amazing.”

Convinced? Your two main obstacles to take a year off are 1) your parents and 2) the potential cost. Robert Gilpin, an educational consultant, says to let your mom and dad know that colleges often like it when you take time off, because you come back more focused and mature. Tell your parents that you’ve thought this out and you’re not going to waste a year watching *Simpsons* reruns.

Start by researching on the Web or talking to a guidance counselor. Log on to Robert’s consulting firm Web site, www.whereyouheaded.com. Or use a search engine like Google, type in some key terms (e.g., “program + Costa Rica + language”), and go from there.

The financial issue is harder. A lot of the options that look tempting are not cheap. (A semester with NOLS costs from \$7,200 to \$9,700. Eek.) But there are programs, like the Student Conservation Association (www.sca-inc.org) or Americorps (www.americorps.org), that are low- or no-cost, or that will pay you a stipend. The year after high school is the first opportunity you have to make your own plans. Why not get in touch with your crazy, globe-trotting, independent alter ego?

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