

Generation gap year: More students deferring college

September 09, 2007

SOURCE: CHICAGO TRIBUNE

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By Ian Shapira, The Washington Post

WASHINGTON Billy Neville was flipping through the humongous Fiske Guide to Colleges last fall, yet another senior at a pressure-cooker high school in search of a game plan, when his mother told him something unexpected.

"She said, 'Keep in mind, you don't really have to go to college next year. You can do something fun,'" recalled Neville, 18, who graduated in June from Walt Whitman High School in Bethesda, Md. "I genuinely liked that idea, but I didn't know how serious she was and how well a year off would work. But I started looking at the idea, and it looked better than going to college because I didn't know what I wanted to do at college." Ultimately, Neville was accepted at Miami University in Ohio. But he deferred enrollment for a year, joining the ranks of maverick students who take a "gap year" -- time off between high school and college. Some do it to find enlightenment and introspection, others to learn something new or pursue a passion.

There are no hard counts of gap-year students, but the National Association for College Admission Counseling reports anecdotal evidence from counselors that more high school graduates these days are seeking a year off. Gap-year consultants who charge \$1,000 or more to advise students on how to fill the time have emerged.

Some students say they take a gap year to escape stress accumulated from Advanced Placement courses and competition over grades and class rank.

"I grew really tired of everything in school. I just didn't like the atmosphere, especially at Whitman, where if you're not an overachiever, then you're just ... I don't know," Neville said. "So, I was hoping, in my year off, I'll find out what really interests me."

Ann Larson, a senior associate director of admissions at Miami, said the university grants deferrals for medical issues, military service, study abroad and other reasons, case by case.

"We really have no problem with students taking gap years," Larson said. "It's very positive what they bring back to the university. It's a maturing experience."

Time out but not time off

College admissions officers said they want gap-year students to improve upon an area of expertise or perform some kind of public service. John Blackburn, dean of admissions at the University of Virginia, said students often seek deferrals for missionary work or public service jobs through such non-profit organizations as Operation Smile, which performs free reconstructive surgery on children born with facial deformities in developing countries.

Admissions officials at Georgetown University estimated that 25 to 30 students admitted each year in a class of almost 1,600 ask for a deferral, requesting trips abroad to learn a foreign language, intern at a foreign embassy or work at a foreign or domestic magazine.

"Students have to have a plan that we approve of. Mostly it's for some type of cultural enhancement," said Charles Deacon, Georgetown's admissions director.

Some outsiders might consider a gap year an exercise in slacking off. But many students plan their time intensively. Some turn to consultants, such as the Center for Interim Programs in Princeton, N.J., or Taking Off in Boston.

Consultants typically charge nothing for the first conversation. Students who want to meet for a lengthy period and discuss options tailored to their interests might pay \$1,000 for short-term help or \$2,000 for longer-term guidance.

Consultants say they keep up with dozens of programs, so they know which ones are safe and reliable. They also say they know how to draw out students who might be unsure of their goals.

"I ask them, 'How do you want to live? Do you want to live on your own or with other kids? Do you want to learn another language? What's your budget?'" said Gail Reardon, founder of Taking Off. "I have over 3,000 opportunities available."

Neville, planning his gap year on his own, checked out studyabroad.com and considered some volunteer opportunities. He had a yen to travel with a friend in Europe and possibly find work. He thought about a job in Austria as an English-speaking sports commentator, but he passed. Recently, he returned from a week of building homes in Chiapas, Mexico. He hopes to teach skiing or find other work in the mountains of Colorado. He also aims to volunteer with Habitat for Humanity to help rebuild New Orleans.

"I want to find out what I can accomplish without my parents or my school telling me what I can do," Neville said.

Crash course in finance

Zach Duffy, 17, who just graduated from the Ethical Culture Fieldston School in New York City, will spend part of his gap year traveling in India in the fall with Global Learning Across Borders, based in New York, to cultivate interests in Buddhism, Hinduism and the environment. He deferred enrollment at Whitman College in Washington state.

"The only trip I've taken abroad is to Italy, and I stayed at a nice hotel in Rome and Florence," Duffy said. "I have a desire to learn more about the world because I think I'll be able to conduct myself better in all aspects of my life. If I see poverty in India, then I'll be more humble. I'll just be a more interesting person."

But choosing to take a gap year and forming a plan was not easy. It also was tricky to determine whether the plan would be financially feasible. The Duffys wanted to know whether Brown University in Rhode Island -- where Zach's older brother is a rising junior -- would give the family more financial aid even if Zach were not attending college. (Universities often give extra help if families have two or more children in college.)

Why are the Duffys so concerned about aid from Brown in the next school year? Zach's gap year will cost more than \$10,000, including fees, immunizations and equipment.

"We're hoping that they will treat Zach's gap year as if it were a college experience, but we don't have a commitment from Brown yet," said Mark Duffy, Zach's father.

Even if Brown turns down their request, Mark Duffy said the gap year will go forward. Zach has a plane ticket for India on Sept. 16