

Time Out: The Gap Year Abroad

NO ONE SEEMS TO KNOW PRECISELY HOW IT STARTED, exactly when it picked up steam, or how fast the numbers are growing. But college admissions personnel, education abroad advisers and program providers are unanimous about one thing: the “gap year” is a rapidly growing trend.

Interest in students taking a “time out” between high school and college (or sometimes during college) has been steadily building for some time.

“In the last five to ten years there’s really been a tipping point,” says Holly Bull, president of the Center for Interim Programs (CIP), one of the first and longest-running providers of gap year programs in the country. “People understand the concept now; you don’t have to explain anymore what it is.” Bull adds that in her view “gap” as it is sometimes called, is “a trend on its way to becoming a movement,” pointing to the growing popularity of gap-year fairs, a spate of recent books, articles and other media attention given to the topic, and growing acceptance, even enthusiasm, among college admissions officers, including those at some of the country’s most prestigious institutions, for the practice.

Gap Year Not Always Acceptable

Back in 1980, when her father, Cornelius Bull founded CIP, it was a different story. “There was no term for it back then,” Bull says. “People didn’t know what it was. It was already pretty common in England, but here in the States the concept was really new.” At that time most parents and educators believed that for a student to take a year off between high school and college was a dangerous formula for never going to college at all, a concern that still exists, but is waning in the light of increasing evidence that a gap year can be a very productive step toward a successful college career rather than a retreat from it.

The term as well as the practice originated in the United Kingdom and is also popular in Australia. But as the gap year in the United States begins to define

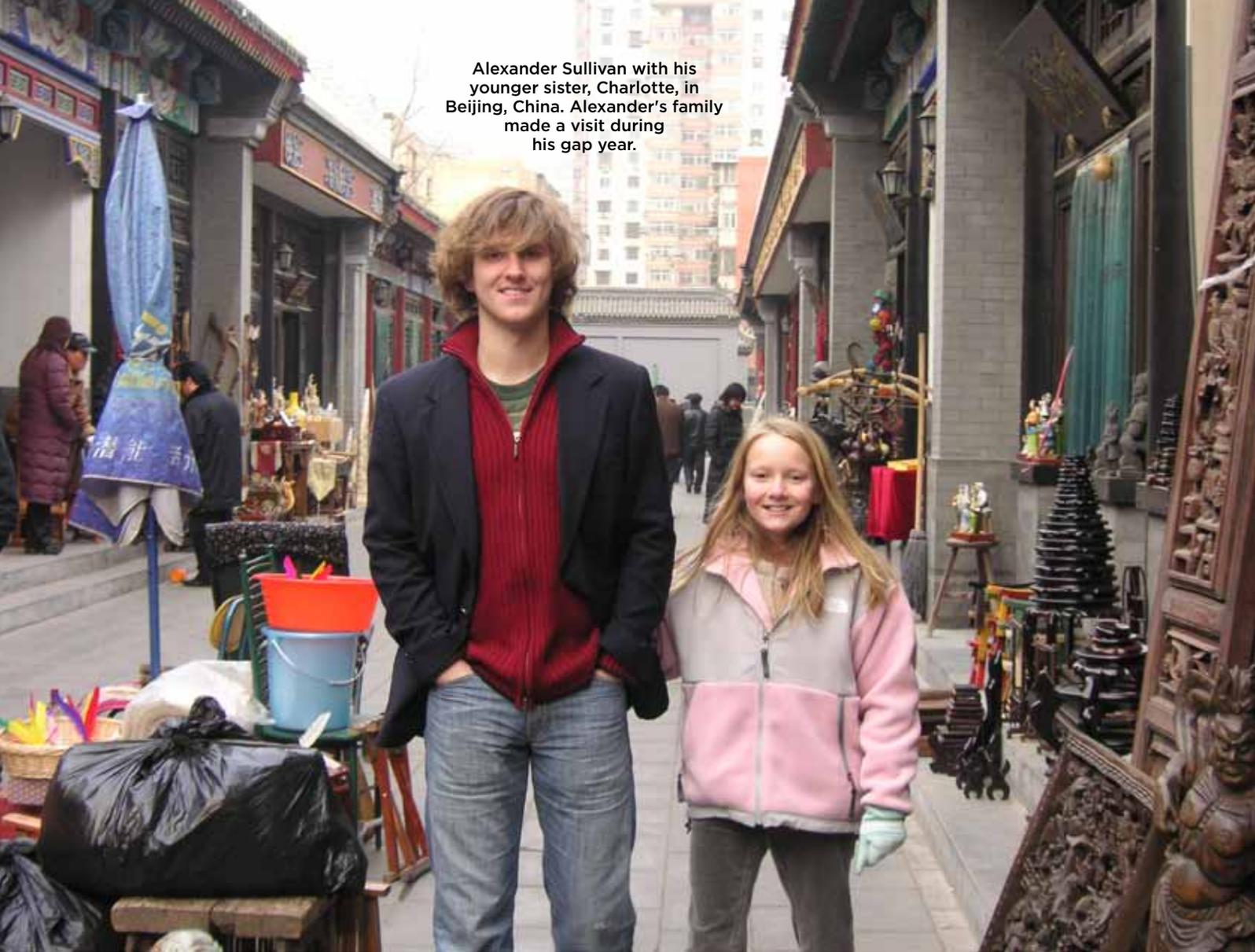
itself, differences between the British model and the U.S. one are emerging. “While in England some ‘gap-pers’ use the time for vacationing in trendy European partying spots, there’s a very different model taking shape for the American gap year,” says Kristin White, author of *The Complete Guide to the Gap Year*. “U.S. college admissions officers expect gap year students to have fun, but they also like to see a plan that includes activities with intellectual depth that will help students grow as people.” In conducting research for her book, White was able to confirm the growing popularity of the phenomenon in the United States “Colleges are reporting a doubling or tripling of the number of accepted students who are asking for a deferral in order to pursue a gap year” she says.

The CIP Web site describes a gap year as a time when students “take a year off (in reality, a year very much ‘on’) to immerse themselves in other cultures, explore specific interests, or volunteer to help others.” The gap year can help students gain greater confidence, a clearer direction, and invaluable life experience. In addition, more and more educators, from college presidents to directors of admissions and education abroad advisers are beginning to recognize the benefits of a “gap year” not only for students, but for the colleges they end up attending as well.

Benefits of the Gap Year

“Gap year programs are a great way for students to learn about their own individual interests and clarify their career pursuits before starting university,” says Cynthia Banks, executive director of GlobalLinks Learning Abroad, another program provider. “Education abroad does the same thing, but a junior in

Alexander Sullivan with his younger sister, Charlotte, in Beijing, China. Alexander's family made a visit during his gap year.



college is often already predisposed to a particular major...‘Gap’ may be a way to help students mature and choose the right path to begin with.” Gap students arrive at college more ready to buckle down and learn, according to Bull. “They’re less likely to be drinking like crazy, they’re not floundering around, they just have a better sense of their core and their compass.” Ron L. Witczak, assistant vice provost and director of study abroad at Portland State University (PSU) in Oregon, agrees. “If done properly, the experience can and will be transformative for the student,” he says, and adds “I believe that students who participate in successful gap year programs are much better prepared for higher education: they’re more prepared to think critically, to see the world through another lens, to gain some intercultural perspective and just be better citizens.”

Gap Year Students Often More Interested in Education Abroad

Witczak says that another benefit for schools may be that “gappers” arrive at college more interested in engaging in education abroad during their college years. “I believe that when students have had an international experience prior to coming to college, they are more likely than others to seek out another international experience,” he says. “Increasingly, our advisers are meeting with freshman students at orientation sessions who indicate that they have studied abroad before and want to know how best to plan for another experience. We have seen a sizable increase in advising to freshman students about what possibilities exist and how best to prepare for that experience.” (While not all gap year programs involve

study abroad, many, if not most of them involve at least one international experience during the course of the year.)

Specialized Gap Year Programs at Universities Emerging

The Office of International Affairs at PSU is currently engaged in a year-long pilot program in cooperation with Carpe Diem, a local organization that offers gap year experiences to recent high school graduates. As part of this pilot program, PSU grants credit on transcripts for all of Carpe Diem’s programs. Students from Carpe Diem can be admitted to PSU in one of two ways: either as visiting or “quick-entry students” or as students fully admitted to PSU. The quick-entry students receive a courtesy enrollment and registration for the duration of their

Carpe Diem program only. Students wishing to qualify for federal financial aid must be fully admitted to PSU and must complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) as well meet as all the admission requirements of degree-seeking students.

When asked how this arrangement benefits PSU, Witczak explains: “It enhances our portfolio of service-learning programs, for which we are nationally recognized. Also, gap year programs help the Office of International Affairs meet one of our president’s initiatives, which is to strengthen our relationships with the K–12 sector. Finally, since this program is a contract program, it offers some revenue to PSU for its services, critical in a climate of decreased state funding for higher education.”

“Gap” makes financial sense from a parental point of view as well. According to Rae Nelson, coauthor with Karl Haigler of *The Gap Year Advantage*, at least two studies have shown that the average length of time for students to graduate from college is now more than six years. The reasons include switching majors and changing schools, both more likely to happen when students are unsure of what they’re doing in school or how their studies fit into their overall career plan. “They’re 17, 18, they don’t know what they want to do,” says Bull. “They just want to get out and explore.” And while gap year programs abroad can be expensive, even low-income students can find opportunities that are affordable. “Thinking Beyond Borders is a selective program that offers full scholarships including tuition and air travel to several of their participants,” says White. “Another option is for students to use their federal financial aid to participate in programs that are affiliated with a college where they can receive credit. Leap Now and Carpe Diem are examples of two such programs.”

One of the most interesting things about gap year is the seeming paradox that when students are allowed to indulge in a year of relatively free exploration it often leads them toward much more focused career goals. Alexander Sullivan’s story is a case in point. As a high school senior Sullivan was accepted to Columbia by early decision. But since middle school he had had a desire to do something different before going on to college. He asked

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for and was granted permission to defer enrollment and in the fall of 2005, he went to Beijing. He spoke not a word of Chinese but he had a fondness for kung fu movies “and whatnot,” some previous study of Japanese, and an awareness that “China fever” was beginning. “I thought it would be exciting to go there, and of course it was,” he says. During the fall months he studied Mandarin at a small private language school with 28 U.S. college students, and lived with a Chinese roommate, with whom he had “a pledge” to speak only Chinese; the roommate has since become a lasting friend.

In December, Sullivan was joined first by some friends, later by his parents, and for a few weeks he traveled around China with them. He then returned to Beijing, where he worked as a research assistant at the Newsweek Beijing bureau, and at Voice of America radio news until the following June.

Now a senior at Columbia, Sullivan is completing work on his East Asian Studies major with a specialization in ancient Chinese philosophy and a focus on classical Chinese. He has returned to China twice during the summers for additional language study. “I discovered in that year a deep and abiding passion for China and the Chinese language, which I have pursued throughout college,” he says. “My gap year tremendously enriched my college experience; after all, it entirely launched my academic direction.”

The personal gains he made that year were also important. “My experience taught me that I could move confidently into any environment, no matter how foreign, and make a meaningful and successful experience out of it.” Of his career plans, Sullivan says, “I have several exciting avenues that I am exploring. As of now, none of them include China specifically. But as I continue to learn more about China in all its aspects, I will bring that awareness to my work, and in whatever I do, I will be looking for ways I can use my knowledge to foster cross-cultural exchange in the field and bring that work to the Sino–U.S. marketplace.”

As the gap year trend picks up steam, some colleges and universities are designing their own versions of gap-year programs. Princeton University made news in the summer of 2008 when it announced that it would be launching a “Bridge Year” program for newly admitted undergraduates. In the fall of 2009, the first cohort of 20 students began a tuition-free year of enrichment focusing on public service abroad. The goal of the Bridge Year is to provide students with an expanded perspective, a chance to relax and refocus between high school and college, and an orientation to service. Princeton covers all core program expenses and provides supplemental funding based on need for those who cannot afford the incidental costs—airfare, health insurance and personal items—that families are asked to pay. Students live with families in the communities they’re serving, and all receive language training as part of the program. The first group of 20 students is currently involved in a variety of projects in Peru, Ghana, India, and Serbia. According to John Luria, director of the program, who was asked for comment at mid-point of the first year, “Our first cohort is a remarkable group. It’s a fairly challenging experience, and participants seem to be fully embracing the challenge. It’s a bit early to make a definitive statement, but I can say that it has already more than met my initial expectations.”

Other schools are offering programs that combine some of the elements familiar to “gap” with credit-bearing courses. At Long Island University, there is no gap year program per se, but students enrolled in the Global

College spend three and a half years abroad, including a freshman year spent at the College's Costa Rica Center where a combination of seminars, field work and service learning projects expose them to multiple perspectives on contemporary global issues, empowering them to contribute to positive social change.

Accepting the Gap

While the concern about "gappers" never making it to college persists, there is now statistical evidence that for students engaged in a purposeful, well-planned gap year, this should not be a concern. Haigler and Nelson have recently completed the first survey of gap year students from the United States, the results of which will be published in their next book, *Gap Year, American Style*, expected to be published within the year. "We found that gap students return to college generally within six months after their gap year, with a reignited passion for learning, and the ability to connect formal education with real-world experiences," says Nelson. (Their survey of 300 students found that 90 percent had returned to school within one year and 80 percent within six months—and that the other 10 percent generally had good reasons for not having returned, such as taking an extra gap year, family illness, etc.)

Most educators do recommend that students considering "gap" apply for admission to college as seniors in high school, and then defer enrollment, a recommendation with which Sullivan agrees. "I would recommend settling the college question during high school, before a gap year," he says. "I would not have wanted to apply to college from China...communications could be slow and unreliable."

The most common time, and in the opinion of many educators, the optimal time to do a gap year is between high school and college, though there is a growing number of college students who also opt to do a gap year in the middle of their college years.

But according to Bull, the rise in gap year participation is not limited to teenagers and young adults. There is also a rising number of baby boomer retirees who are jumping on the bandwagon.

And why not?

"You know, when we're born, we're put on this track," says Bull. "Nobody asks us if we want to be put in school, we're just put in school. Nobody asks us if we want to go to first grade. And then after you finish high school, you're supposed to go to college, and there's not a lot of choice there either, really. When somebody comes along and says, 'Hey! Why not do a gap year, where you actually choose what to do based on *your interests*, nothing that you have to

do, or ought to do, or should do, but just what *lights you up*? And then this person starts laying out concrete options for you. I mean, why *wouldn't* people jump up and down over that?" **IE**

JANET HULSTRAND is a freelance writer in Silver Spring, Maryland. Her last article for *IE* was "Preparing Students for Good Health Abroad" that appeared in the fourth annual Health and Insurance Supplement to the November/December 2009 issue.

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