

GUEST COMMENTARY

Teen anxiety changing gap years

By Katherine Stievater

All across the U.S. an amazing thing has happened — many more students are now routinely considering the idea of a gap year. It is a rare school I visit that has not had an increase in the number of graduating seniors taking a year off before starting college. Most school counselors are eager for more information so they can better advise their students (based on the 100 plus schools I have visited over the past two years).

Historically, “Gappers” (as gap year students are called) often combined a desire to see the world with a commitment to global citizenship and service work. The idea that gap years are about travel is still fairly embedded in the minds of parents and students. At a recent Boston-area gap year fair, the speaker asked the audience to help construct a word cloud. What two words appeared largest and in the center? “Travel” and “adventure.”

Lately, however, there has been a real broadening of the type of students taking a gap year. At Gap Year Solutions, we like to say that any student can benefit from interrupting the traditional, “automatic” process of moving straight from high school onto a college campus.

These days, Gappers are looking less to see the world and more to take a step off the academic treadmill, catch their breath and de-stress. Some just need a “mental health break” before the rigors and independence of college — especially when many have not yet acquired the maturity and important life skills necessary to succeed

at independent living.

A big driver of the growing interest in delaying the start of college is the growing stress and anxiety faced by our teens. The UCLA Freshman Survey has asked most of the same questions since the 1960s. The just released 2018 data reaffirms the increasing mental health challenges faced by incoming students. The 13.7% of freshman reporting feeling “frequently” depressed is again up from the prior year and more than double the 2009 rate.

(Interestingly, 2009 corresponds with the launch of the iPhone and mobile apps. Studies are beginning to draw this correlation. One piece of research just published in the Canadian Journal of Psychiatry found a meaningful link between social media use and screen time and an increase in anxiety among this age group.)

The shift of gap years away from travel and towards other activities is supported by anecdotal evidence as well as hard numbers. We have worked with Gappers who never traveled. Instead their gap years consisted of experiences such as pursuing an entrepreneurial venture, working as an EMT before applying to nursing school and completing a series of internships close to home.

To be sure, plenty of students still travel, many on structured gap year programs. But they make up a relatively small portion of the total students taking a year off. Based on recent research conducted by Gap Year Solutions, we estimate that 23,000 U.S. high school seniors defer college for reasons other than medical

situations, military service, religious service and family situations. Out of this group, approximately 3,500 students (15%) participate in structured gap year programs involving some form of travel inside or outside the U.S. This leaves 85% doing something else.

There is growing recognition of the need for gap years to evolve. Michael Horn, co-author of the new book “Choosing College,” recently observed that “a core reason many students struggle in college is that they lack an intrinsic passion and purpose for being there in the first place.” His version of a gap year includes participation “in active experiences, such as last-mile training programs, internships and externships, apprenticeships, paid work, experiential learning opportunities, short courses or community service.” Travel and adventure is nowhere to be found on his list of activities.

In the end, every student is different, and has unique interests, goals and budget with which to work. gap years have evolved to encompass so many choices to build life skills. More than anything, we encourage parents to listen closely to their teens and help guide them to be the best versions of themselves when they finally step onto campus.

Katherine Stievater founded Gap Year Solutions to increase awareness of gap years, and to help students successfully transition to college. Learn more at a gap year presentation at Belmont High School on Feb. 11 or visit <http://gapyearsolutions.com>.