

## GUEST COMMENTARY

# Five myths of gap years

By Katherine Stievater

Last May, the White House announced that Malia Obama was going to Harvard, but taking a year off first. Articles with titles such as “The Growing Allure of Gap Years” quickly appeared in national publications. And just as quickly, they disappeared. Which is a shame, because gap years bring many benefits to almost any student.

Here are some of the most common misconceptions about gap years.

**Myth 1:** Gap years are expensive, and we can't afford it. Many people assume that gap years are for wealthy kids. The reality: This couldn't be further from the truth. Gap years are for anyone, and are designed around any budget. Some activities include stipends, and room & board. Many students fund all or a portion of their experience, which helps build good judgment and self-reliance.

**Myth 2:** Students who take gap years are less likely to go on to college. This is one of parents' biggest fears. The reality is 90 percent of students go on to college within six months of completing their gap year. For the minority of students who do not go to college right away, the gap year experience may surface some legitimate, individualized questions about the need, or the timing, to attend university.

**Myth 3:** There's a specific profile of a “gap year kid,” and it's not me. This is one of students' biggest fears, and helps explain why so few U.S. teens take gap years. There is a stigma about not heading right off to college. Interestingly, a third of all U.K. kids take gap years, and in Norway, over half take the year off. The reality: gappers (as they are commonly called) have little in common except the willingness to step off the traditional path. Every gap year experience is different, and is tailored to the unique

goals and interests of each student.

**Myth 4:** I will be “out of shape” academically when I get to college. Students and parents worry that taking time off erodes essential academic and learning skills. The reality: There is no evidence to support this concern. Studies have actually shown the opposite; gappers graduate college with higher GPAs compared with those who come directly from high school. They also tend to finish college on time. Ninety-four percent of gap year students graduate in four years, versus an average of 76 percent across U.S. News' Top 50 National Universities.

**Myth 5:** Gap years are about travel and outdoors, and that's not for me. This perception is understandable — so many images of gap years include students in canoes, or standing in front of gorgeous vistas or trekking in Nepal. The reality: a gapper's experience is limited only by their imagination! Gap years involve

many combinations of work, service and travel, and students can tailor it completely to their own preferences. There are always options right near one's home town for jobs, internships, volunteering, the arts, sports and so on.

Taking a gap year in the U.S. is still considered unconventional compared to Europe, where it is commonly considered a “Rite of Passage.” With U.S. colleges recognizing that students who take gap years are more refreshed, focused and engaged, now is the perfect time to discover the benefits of “real world learning.”

—Katherine Stievater, of Belmont, founded Gap Year Solutions to increase awareness of this option and to help students design experiences tailored to their goals, interests and budgets. Her son is currently working to help fund his gap semester trip to Cuba in the Spring 2017. Contact her at [katherine@gapyearsolutions.com](mailto:katherine@gapyearsolutions.com) or visit [gapyearsolutions.com](http://gapyearsolutions.com).