ASK AN EXPERT

KATHERINE STIEVATER, GAP YEAR CONSULTANT

How can a gap year benefit high school graduates?

The young man had finished high school but wasn't ready to step to the college starting line. He and his family turned to gap year consultant Katherine Stievater, who helped him arrange a seven-week homestay in Peru, followed by a four-month gig as a ski instructor/restaurant worker in Wyoming, and a spring internship at a boutique investment bank in Boston.

"His parents paid for his plane ticket (to Peru) and the rest he self-funded," Stievater said.

The internship especially turned out to be, well, a sound investment.

"After his internship, he told me, 'I don't think I want to be an investment banker,' " she said.

Pushing pause on schooling after high school has gained popularity in recent years as students seek more purpose-driven personal and professional pursuits. The concept got a profile boost a couple years ago when Malia Obama took a gap year before enrolling at Harvard University.

"I really want to destigmatize the idea of a gap year," Stievater said. "I basically try to interrupt the process that says, 'Don't think about taking a gap year.' "

Stievater will travel from her Massachusetts home to present "Discover Gap Years" from 7 to 8 p.m. Wednesday, Dec. 5, at the Hinsdale Public Library (see Page 23 for details).

The founder of Gap Year Solutions, she assists students who need a breather from the schooling "treadmill" in charting a course for a healthy transition to college. For some, the notion conjures images of European backpackers. But that's not Stievater's model.

"The most successful gap year students will have a structured plan that addresses a student's interest and goals," she said.

A gap year can serve to equip young people with work experience as well as life skills they might not have acquired in their teens.

"Skills like time management, networking, dealing with adversity and working with people of diverse backgrounds," Stievater said.

She observed the way the interlude can lead to greater maturity and better performance once the student does get to campus.

"They feel more confident, and they're more comfortable talking to their professors," she said. "They're more motivated and have more focus about what they want to do."

Not surprisingly, parents can be skeptical about a gap year's value vocationally and economically. Stievater said it all depends on the plan. When her own second oldest son needed a break before going to college, they designed a plan where he would support himself for the year knowing his parents would cover tuition once he was ready to enroll. Twelve months later her son was much more prepared. So was the one-time investment banking aspirant that she shepherded.

"The last part of his gap year, he used the money he earned from his banking internship and backpacked by himself in London, France and Barcelona," Stievater said .

OK, so there may be backpacking, but as part of a more intentional journey.

"(A gap year) is a time for them to be authentic and figure out who the heck they are," she said.

— by Ken Knutson

Gap year consultant Katherine Stievater said families devote considerable time picking the optimal college for their student but tend to give little thought to whether the teen is truly ready to go. "(Location and timing) have to coincide for the student to have the right experience in college," she said. (photo provided)

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