More Students Take Year Off to Travel, Study and Volunteer; Top Reason Cited Is High School Burnout

By SUE SHELLENBARGER

Eighteen-year-old Monika Lutz had dreams of a career helping solve economic and social problems in poor nations. So after high school, she took a year off before college to work with a company, suggested by family friends, that is trying to bring solar power to a remote village in India.

A few weeks of living in a mud hut changed her mind. Exhausted by the obstacles, she says, she told herself, "I'm not ready. I can't dedicate my life to this yet."

When Ms. Lutz starts college in the fall, she plans to explore other careers. "If I hadn't gone on a gap year, I might have spent four years and $200,000 on tuition to end up in that same country and find out the same thing," says Ms. Lutz, of Boulder, Colo.

Gap years have long been common in England, but organized programs are gaining traction in the U.S. While many students take a year off to earn money for tuition, programs involving international travel or service work are more common among affluent students or those from competitive high schools, where pressure to get good grades and gain admission to an elite college is most intense. Lower-cost options have increased in recent years, too, as government community-service programs have expanded.

There isn't a measure of the number of students who take gap years, but a recent survey of 300,000 first-time freshmen at four-year colleges and universities found 1.2% waited a year to enter college, according to the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles. The survey didn't track the students' reasons for postponing enrollment.
More colleges and universities, such as Amherst College, Princeton University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology, are adopting formal policies allowing students to defer admission. "Gap fairs" promoting various programs (usagapyearfairs.org) have multiplied fourfold in the past four years to 30 nationwide.

Students who don't make their own plans often sign up for organized programs. Positions may pay wages or provide scholarships, while others charge fees, some as high as $35,000.

Casey Santi, 18, of Winnetka, Ill., has been studying French and history, traveling and doing community service in Europe and Africa since enrolling in a gap-year program in June. She says stress during her senior year in high school led her to put off college for a year "to regain myself and get back on track." The experience has "increased my interest and my passion" to study art, she says. Living in Villeseque des Corbieres in southern France, a town of 300 "where everybody knows everybody," she says, "I already feel more mature."

Burnout from the competitive pressure of high school and a desire "to find out more about themselves," are the top two reasons students take gap years, according to a survey of 280 people who did so by Karl Haigler and Rae Nelson of Advance, N.C., co-authors of a forthcoming guidebook on the topic.

Taking a gap year is also linked to higher motivation in college, according to an Australian study of 2,502 students published in August in the Journal of Educational Psychology.

Ben Parker says his gap-year experience sparked an academic turnaround. Burned out by his senior year of high school from pressure to get into a competitive college, he quit his lacrosse team and let his grades slip. Talking with his parents, says Mr. Parker, of Glencoe, Ill., "we decided going to college would be a waste. I wasn't ready." He deferred admission to the University of Iowa and enrolled in the National Outdoor Leadership School, a Lander, Wyo., wilderness skills-training program. He then took a semester in Nepal studying language, living in a rural village and climbing in the Himalayas.

Mr. Parker, now 20 and a sophomore in college, says he emerged with a new ability to enjoy hard challenges. "By the time I got back to school, I was ready to be in school." He posted his best-ever grades, joined a mock-trial team, and later became editor of a campus literary magazine.

Teens shouldn't be pressured to take a gap year, says Holly Bull, president of the Center for Interim Programs, a gap-year consultant in Princeton, N.J. "The core value of a gap year is to be able to say, 'I can choose and create my life.' That can't be forced upon you," she says. To benefit, a student should be able to set worthwhile goals.

"If you're going to loiter around the margins of life for a year, you may be better off in the classroom," says Barmak Nassirian, associate executive director of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, a Washington, D.C., group. And while living overseas is a good way to learn a language, other academic skills can get rusty.

Not all gap-year programs provide enough structure or direction. When Shoshanna Silverberg, now 28, completed a gap-year program teaching in Ghana several years ago, "I felt very disenchanted with it," she says. Although she was assigned to a mixed-age classroom of 18 students, she wasn't given any direction about what to teach, and she was expected to discipline her restless charges by slapping them with a small switch. "I was really uncomfortable with that," she says. Frustrated that she wasn't accomplishing anything, she asked to be transferred to another job as an administrative aide at an art school, but "what exactly I was supposed to do was never really clear to me," she says. Then, she fell ill with malaria. In all, her experience taught her "how resourceful I could be," says Ms. Silverberg of Hartford, Conn., who is now a yoga instructor.
Parents and students should vet programs by interviewing past participants and asking about staffing and safety. Some international programs fail to provide enough support, for example.

Other students lose direction after taking time off and don't enroll in college. While his research found that 90% of students who took a gap year had returned to college within a year, to guard against dropouts, Mr. Haigler advises having students apply and gain admission to college first, then ask to defer enrollment for a year.

An estimated 5% of four-year colleges and universities have formal policies allowing students to defer admission, up sharply from a few years ago, says Linda DeAngelo, assistant research director for the Higher Education Research Institute. Many other colleges and universities allow deferrals on a case-by-case basis.

A gap year doesn't have to cost a fortune. Since Ms. Lutz finished several weeks in India and Nepal last spring, she is financing the rest of her time off with savings and a series of paying internships in communications and marketing.

Some programs pay a stipend and scholarships. Vicky Venegas, 20, of Washington, D.C., spent a year months with City Year, an urban community-service program that provides a stipend and scholarship of about $5,000 at the end. The experience working with children in a poor Chicago neighborhood instilled in her "this urge to learn something that would have an impact on the world," says Ms. Venegas, now a student at Harvard.

Many low-cost programs are difficult to get into, however. City Year and the National Civilian Community Corps, one of a national network of AmeriCorps programs, each had several times more applicants last year then they were able to accept.

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