

The Gap Year Frontier

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Abstract

Gap year programs offer unique opportunities for high school graduates to mature and find their inner compass before they go on to college. The best programs offer deeply transformative learning that engages each student's head, heart, and hands. Inspired by the Danish Folk Schools and Deep Springs, a microcollege, these experience-based programs teach resilience, agency, creativity, empathy, and belonging. Students can earn college credit for their place-based environmental coursework and service learning. They spend time in nature and acquire some hands-on skills. The programs aim, in part, to instill leadership qualities that will be needed in the difficult times ahead.

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*Your vocation in life is where your greatest joy
meets the world's greatest need.*

- Frederick Buechner

Taking a year off after high school for a different kind of learning and work used to mean one was too immature for college or was at risk of dropping out of education altogether. But today, a variety of gap programs offer carefully structured, experience-based opportunities like learning Spanish while doing community development in Guatemala, or acquiring self-reliance, the ability to handle challenging situations, and other leadership qualities in a wilderness setting. Such programs have proliferated because so many high school graduates resist the default option of going straight on to college before they know who they really are and what they are here on earth to do.

They may have innate qualities classroom learning cannot develop.

Gap options continue to grow, and the Gap Year Association, established in 2012, now has around 250 members and an annual conference. As more and more students look to these possibilities, a key question will be: will these potentially life-changing programs provide more than an additional year for 18-year-olds to mature and perhaps experience a different culture overseas? The great potential for gap programs lies in the opportunity for high school graduates to experience *deeply transformative learning* before they enter college or a career.

The German term *Bildung* could be a synonym for "deeply transformative learning." *Bildung* involves

a person taking charge of his or her own maturation and education. It implies determination to become the person you would like to be. The connection between the inner development of a person and the potential outer change in society becomes important because the two are inseparable. A *Bildung* mindset conveys to students: become the change you want to see in the world. If you want society to make brave changes, become brave yourself.

What does deeply transformative learning look like from a student perspective? Garrett, an alum of the domestic Gap Program at Seguinland Institute on an island in Maine, describes it this way:

...this isn't the average academic setting – it is the *exceptional* one. You'll read Wendell Berry waxing poetic about the wonders of sustainable agriculture, while planting seeds & tending to the on-site gardens. You'll read about Thoreau's adventures in the Maine wilderness as you spend time in that same wilderness (and perhaps even climb Katahdin!). You'll meditate, canoe, hike, introspect, laugh, dance, cook, forage, & share meals with one another on the transcendently picturesque Maine coast (2021).

Ananda, an alum from Global Citizen Year, reflected:

College was always my goal, but I didn't know why.... I wanted to take the time to become the person that I wanted to start the rest of my

life. [From my host family in Senegal] I learned how to be more open, kinder, more generous. That allowed me to do everything that I aspire to do better. Global Citizen Year informed every class that I took in college, shifted my values from grades to learning and drove my commitment to make a change in the world.

The enthusiasm and engagement evident in these testimonials—and hundreds more could be quoted—tells us that gap year programs have the potential to accomplish a great deal more than is even attempted in conventional education. Readers of *Holistic Education Review* will be aware that learning is enhanced by engaging not just the brain. It can be far more effective, even transformative, if the head, heart, and hands all become involved.¹ Challenging and immersive experiences are unforgettable. They change people. Ben Franklin had it right when he said, “Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn.”

Thanks to Howard Gardner (2006), educators know about multiple intelligences and how education can be enlivened by engaging more than one intelligence at a time. Educate the Whole Child (2023) builds on this and lists five specific kinds of learning they want to see introduced to public K-12 classrooms. They are:

¹ For example, Joseph E. Zins et al, *Building Academic Success on Social and Emotional Learning: What Does the Research Say?* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2004). And see Tony Wagner's excellent DVD, *The Finland Phenomenon*, where project-based learning is shown achieving impressive results.

- Cognitive-intellectual activity, associated with the left brain.
- Creative-intuitive activity (the arts), associated with the right brain.
- Structured physical movement and unstructured, self-directed play.
- Handwork, and making things that can be useful.
- Engagement with nature and community.

Infused into each of these activities, should be as much social and emotional learning as possible.

The growing appeal of gap year programs comes from the demand by young adults for experience-based learning to prepare them for life. Without having had a single course in educational theory or policy, they know that a system organized around accountability enforced by tests and standardized curricula, a system that robs teachers of the chance to be creative and innovate, is shallow and unsatisfying.

Most gap programs allow students to earn some college credit but, operating outside conventional school or college frameworks, they can do more than convey information, teach test-taking, and prepare future citizens for functions already being taken over by AI. Commentator David Brooks had a recent opinion piece called, *In the Age of AI, Major in Being Human* (2023), he identified some of the qualities of which no AI program has mastered:

- A distinct personal voice--craft your own point of view, both written and spoken.
- Presentation skills--be able to give a good talk and to organize effective gatherings.
- A childlike talent for creativity--hone your imaginative powers.

- An unusual worldview--think outside the box.
- Empathy--use the arts and humanities to get beyond your own ego and understand others.
- Situational awareness--develop intuition for knowing when to follow the rules and when to break them.

If I were about to enter the workforce, one of my greatest causes of anxiety would be, "Am I going to prepare for a steady position, only to learn when I graduate that a computer does the job I expected to hold?" Adding to that stress would be student debt, climate chaos, a democracy under assault, an economic system rigged for fat cats, and my smartphone (to which I'm addicted) that makes me feel weak, depressed, and vulnerable. No wonder mental health issues cut a wide swath through the younger population. We ask a lot of young adults by expecting them to deal with all of this.

Is there a way to help students deal with these stressors on an inner, personal level by helping them, for example, to be more resilient, and at the same time become change agents working in an outer way to attack social and environmental challenges? The elephant in the room, an unraveling climate, creates an immediate and growing need for young, energetic leaders. As time unfolds, there will be a need to awaken the public to the crisis at hand to lessen its impact; to plan for mitigation in coastal cities facing sea level rise; to manage crisis responses to floods, droughts, storms, and wildfires; and to deal with resettlement and adaptation necessitated by a climate gone berserk.

What kind of gap programs can address this need for young, vigorous leadership? Two sources of

inspiration can help answer this question. One of them comes from an unlikely place, 150 years ago in Denmark. The Danish Folk Schools primarily served the common people and are credited with enabling a peaceful transition of Nordic countries from monarchies under pre-industrial conditions and immense inequality to the prosperous, democratic, and successful Scandinavian countries that exist today. The second source of inspiration is Deep Springs College, where students are expected to take a full academic load and at the same time spend 20 hours a week running their ranch in the California desert. They round up cattle, grow and cook their own food, repair farm equipment, and help administer the college, including selecting the next year's class. Deep Springs accepts only fourteen students a year. As with the Folk Schools, faculty live on the premises. Both models place great emphasis on learning from experience; both stress learning for life.

In 1837, N.S.F. Grundtvig perceived an educational system in Denmark that was completely out of step with the time, and studiously separated learning from life. The Latin Grammar School emphasized learning dead languages. It stressed memorization and discipline and largely ignored the rich traditions of Danish culture, language, and history. Grundtvig proposed going in the opposite direction—give the school some autonomy, and let it be a living organism. The vision which he articulated and others implemented led to Folk Schools throughout Scandinavia. In place of classical education, they stressed developing appreciation of the rich culture of their native country, much of it conveyed through singing and storytelling. Students were to develop a pride in their own culture and national identity and find their own strengths and inner compass through challenging projects and hands-on work. They developed interpersonal skills through working in

teams, learned farming skills and crafts, and acquired abilities to debate and solve problems that would become helpful in democratic citizenship. Grundtvig wanted no tests, grades, or certificates. Rather, students would develop a love of learning that could extend throughout life. The Folk Schools were state funded but independently run.

Striking similarities can be seen in the design of Deep Springs College, established in 1917 by an eccentric Los Angeles millionaire, who believed that character could be built by combining academic rigor, manual labor, and self-governance. A small cohort of young men was selected to spend two years, tuition free, learning and working in the high desert. Women are now an important part of the student body, and the president and dean are both women. The general pattern continues, however. Students learn how to be resourceful: if the irrigation equipment breaks, see if you can figure out how to fix it. Never been on a horse before? We'll teach you how to ride and work with cattle. Over the years graduates have distinguished themselves in roles that indicate the original formula still works. An excellent *60 Minutes* segment tells the story (2021). Both these instances exemplify *Bildung*, or deeply transformative learning. They also accord with the principles of holistic education, for example, as articulated by John Miller where he recommends combining and balancing yin and yang elements to maintain interest and energy in the learning process.

Gap year programs provide an opportunity to harvest insights from the Folk School and Deep Springs examples and apply them to preparing young people to get the most out of their college work. This experience-rich approach helps students to find their purpose and place in the

world, and to develop the qualities that will be needed for leaders in the future. Even gap programs that offer students a year to mature in a feel-good, overseas experience can do this. They certainly expand students' horizons. But more is possible.

A new operating foundation exists to promote gap programs that can deliver deeply transformative learning. *Springboard Gap Year* acknowledges its debt to the Folk Schools and their ideal of expanding a person's sense of belonging to include not just self and family but community, nation, nature, and the world. Springboard also aligns with the Inner Development Goals (2023) articulated so effectively by activists in Sweden. These in turn align with the U.N.'s Sustainable Development Goals. So much of angst among young people today comes from a lack of connection, leading to depression and even suicide. Gap year programs can teach how to find strength in shared commitment and at the same time assume more responsibility for the whole. Springboard describes itself as "Education for a Purpose-filled Life: galvanizing the movement for holistic learning that orients young leaders toward personal and community thriving" (2023). This emphasis on making connections differs profoundly from much of secondary and post-secondary education, which tends to analyze and divide in order to understand.

So far, Springboard has identified a group of outstanding programs. They differ greatly, and there is no desire to standardize. In fact, the diversity of approaches is celebrated. One program is a micro-college; another has a wilderness/ backwoods setting; another aims to become a community college. However, they all find ways to promote deeply transformative learning. They all instill success factors or personal

qualities that will serve students well as they make their way in the world. These qualities show up particularly well in the first program to become associated with Springboard, Seguinland Institute in Maine. Students there take courses in which they pose questions like "What is the good life?", "What is my great work?", and "What is ours to do in this time?"

Here are essential factors Springboard has identified for gap or other programs that seek deeply transformative learning. Each of these factors helps students answer the question of what they expect to accomplish by going to college. Each sets them up for success in college and later life.

Inner Compass

Dostoyevsky said, "To love a person is to see them as God intended them to be." This can be translated into the teacher helping the student find his or her *inner compass*. Only the student can do this work, but sometimes teachers can discern and nurture their gifts. This, in turn, allows them to follow the advice of Native author of *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013), Robin Wall Kimmerer, who asserts that if you know your gifts, you will know your responsibilities (2013).

Agency

This very broad concept could include grit, courage, steadfastness, and initiative. The person with agency does not wait to be told what to do. He or she takes responsibility and is enough of a self-starter to seize opportunities and turn problems into challenges, failure into learning. This quality both contributes to and draws strength from the other qualities.

Creativity

In his famous TED talk on this subject, Sir Ken Robinson says, “We are educating people out of their creative capacities” (2006), but encouraging creativity has been a cornerstone of holistic education at the K-12 levels. At age 18 there is still enough potential to be reawakened through artistic work—drama, ceramics, painting, and making music. The Folk Schools put great emphasis on singing as a way to reconnect with one’s culture and develop connection with other singers.

Belonging

At Deep Springs students come to “own the process” by being given a great deal of responsibility, for example, for preparing meals and administering admissions. When a team faces a challenge together, that tends to promote bonding. This can be cultivated, and in combination with empathy can lead to a caring that extends farther and farther from self.

Empathy.

Teen years tend to be self-centered ones. That is entirely appropriate during a period of figuring out “who is the real me?” and “who do I want to be?” This quest can be advanced by learning to understand and care about others. One can become less vulnerable and more able to offer genuine caring as they grow in the next quality.

Resilience

The times ahead will demand great resilience. Leaders will have to model it and encourage it in others. Its opposite, in both individuals and communities, is a certain brittleness, an attitude,

for example, that “this is the way we’ve always done it.” That simply will not work when one’s car floats away down the street or the roof blows off one’s house. The resilient person is able to have a constructive attitude, under one’s own control, and adapt to the unforeseen. Various games and challenges help to develop resilience.

A thoughtful monk asks a question. From his perspective, life on earth involves coming from distant realms, dipping into physical existence for a time, and then returning to *the Source*. He asks, “What did you come here to do?” Questions like this help students find their inner compass, their higher purpose. This, in turn, can be of immense value in the future, when leaders with depth and character will be needed to prevent scarcity, hardship, and possibly catastrophe from turning people against one another. Great gap year programs have the freedom of not being circumscribed by educational conventions. Those that succeed in offering deeply transformative learning have a unique opportunity to shape the future and help to heal the world.

Author Bio

Christopher Nye holds a PhD in American Studies and has been a professor and dean. During his career in higher education he instituted service learning programs and designed and ran several after-school programs at elementary schools using college students as mentors. He co-founded Educate the Whole Child, an initiative to identify and certify public schools that are doing just that. ETWC has national reach and is building a network of schools that are doing bold and pioneering work to restore child-centered and project-based learning to its rightful place in schools. He is also a published poet and author of the children's book *The Old Shepherd's Tale*.

Currently he extends his Whole Child work into the gap year sphere. He is an officer in two foundations and also manages a nature preserve. The book he is completing ventures into future studies and imagines a new civilization with radically different approaches to education, farming, and the economy.