

# our view

## Moving Beyond the Gap

*thirteenth in a series;  
generating thoughts and  
discussion in the  
study abroad community*

cīee



This is the thirteenth in a series of “food for thought” pieces from CIEE. The themes vary but all deal with **study abroad for U.S. undergraduates**. We present our ideas not as the only viable ones but rather **to stimulate discourse** in furtherance of the study abroad enterprise. Previous topics include:

- How Are We Doing?
- Standards
- A CIEE Eye for the Study Abroad Guy...or Girl
- Parents, Pills, & Pandering
- A Research Agenda for Study Abroad
- What’s It All About?
- Numbers
- Mirror, Mirror on the Wall
- Down With America
- Beware the Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing
- Leadership, Management, & Study Abroad
- Be Careful What You Wish For!

We welcome your comments and requests for additional copies at any time to [editor@ciee.org](mailto:editor@ciee.org).



**It was an exciting moment** when we were informed that our daughter was stronger than kindergarten material but not old enough to be in 1st grade; so, as an “advanced” student she would be put in “Transition.” The idea was that for children who had better academic skills, motivation, and/or interpersonal development, a different experience was appropriate before starting 1st grade. In retrospect, we remember little about Transition other than it existed, seemed to make a lot of sense, and that this young child is now, many years later, a perfectly normal adult. Did it work? We don’t know for sure but it certainly did no harm. And, at the time, there was a strong logic to assisting the child during this important personal transition and a special curriculum and approach that was easy to support.

There is another transition in education that is every bit as important as the pre-school one, the transition from high school to college. This transition is a very personal one and different for each student; not only because the needs of students differ widely but because those needs are impacted by the nature of their high school experience and the type of college in which they are enrolling. Depending on their academic skills and social maturity, there are also many additional differences in the challenges that this transition imposes.

In recent years, there has been a good deal of discussion about “Gap Year” and even more recently, “Freshman Year Abroad,” which is often a form of a “Gap” experience. As many of you know, there is a buzz among students about taking a break before college, to do something a bit different before they settle into the college routine on campus. Princeton recently announced its desire to develop a “Bridge Year” program to reach up to ten percent of its incoming freshmen with a program of this type; not academic study, but experiential learning centered on

a volunteer/internship experience and cultural integration. The program is a work in progress. A number of other schools, including Skidmore, are offering a Freshman Year Abroad program, and/or have January intakes of new freshmen (Middlebury, Franklin & Marshall, etc.). This means there are cadres of high school grads with a semester off before starting college, some of whom have an interest in doing something abroad. A recent article cited a fourfold increase in Gap Year students entering Swarthmore.

Every year, for many years, we've received calls from students who've been accepted to college and want to defer admission using the year in between to study abroad and/or have a similar experience. For many years, our answer to these students was that our programs are 300 level and above, designed to serve a college audience more advanced in their studies, and that we were sorry, but we couldn't help them. The calls persisted. A couple of years ago, therefore, we decided to offer a variety of Gap experiences. This *Our View* is designed to share some of what we've learned and provide food for thought for the study abroad field regarding Gap Year and Freshman Year Abroad.

Gap Year means different things to different people. The traditional "English" or "British" Gap Year was composed of a year off; traveling, seeing the world, visiting the continent, and perhaps polishing one's French or fencing skills before settling into life at Cambridge or Oxford. Over the centuries, while the name has held, the purpose, activities, and outcomes of a Gap Year experience have changed. After all, it doesn't take a month of sailing to get to Australia any more. Times have changed and Gap Year needs have changed too.

In our experience, there are two populations that are interested in a Gap Year program. The first are those who are graduating from high school and are deferring college; college applications, college admissions, college in general. Some of these stu-

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dents are very bright and very motivated, but they traditionally have not been high performers and are simply seeking a break to find themselves before they start running on the college treadmill. Often these students have had more than their share of academic and other problems and parents see a Gap Year as a way to help them grow up. In the 50s, the similar course for men in this position was to join the Army, for women, a year at Brooke Street Bureau. Trying to work with this population is very complicated and beyond the scope of this *Our View*.

The other population is highly motivated, very much plans on going to college, has applied and been accepted, and is deferring college to pursue a personal interest or activity unavailable to them during their high school years. Many have strong language and cultural interests which they have been unable to pursue due to a crush of AP exams, SATs, college

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admissions essays, and varsity sports. In recent years, we can add to this group those students admitted to college, but for a January start date. Schools are finding that January starts have economic and operational benefits for them. At some schools, there is an organized program for 1st semester freshmen. But at others, students find themselves with four free months and are looking to use the time productively via some sort of Gap experience.

High school counselors, college admissions officers, and even some of those “in-your-face” parents are willing to consider and support a Gap Year experience. In spite of this, the total number of students involved is very small. We believe this is a lost

opportunity. If we're going to grow the number of students studying abroad, Gap Year and/or Freshman Year Abroad programs provide a real opportunity for a study abroad experience very early in a college career, in fact, at its inception. This experience is very likely to lead to an additional experience some time later during the student's four years of study. We know anecdotally from our work in this area that students who participate in these personal transition programs move on to college more motivated, more focused, and with greater purpose than might otherwise be the case.

Study abroad offices are in an ideal position to take leadership in this area. The knowledge, skills, and abilities to sort options, provide counseling, and manage the available experiences are very consistent with the skills requisite to study abroad. So, what do we need to do to lead?

First, the term Gap Year doesn't really describe this experience very well. It makes it sound like someone is filling a hole in their life when in fact they are pursuing their education with an innovative and non-traditional approach. If we were to call these experiences "Freshman Programs Limited to the Gifted and Talented," my guess is that interest would grow exponentially. More and more, we like to think of these programs as "Gateway Programs" that open a door to the future. The point is that a Gap Year is not a hole-filler—not the medicine of the loser—but often the first choice of some very talented winners. Thinking about this differently will remove some important barriers to participation.

Second, just as study abroad has grown via improved programming and innovative program models, so too with Gateway programs. We believe that multiple models are required to meet multiple needs. For some students, a structured 13th year fits the bill; done right, this model can achieve fully-integrated language learning in an academic setting where no English is spoken. For others, a less-structured, language train-

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ing effort combined with volunteerism, a homestay, and a support network works well. Some students do fine on their own, although not that many. The program which is right for a student very much depends on their interests, experience, maturity, and motivation for pursuing the experience in the first place.

Many high schools have relatively fewer programmatic options compared to colleges, so that part of the “Gateway” for students involves learning to choose wisely from a broader menu of options. Counseling these students into the right program is a key task for which study abroad offices are very well-suited. Right now, much of the advice is coming from the place they are leaving—high school—or from independent consultants (some good, some not so good), and not from the place they are going to, their college. A reversal here makes sense.

Third, we believe that every program must have a suitable level of challenge. Our experience is that Gap Year students in less-structured programs need to do more than study a language and have a work opportunity while living with a family. The people we see on these programs are usually very smart and highly motivated. They suck the value out of their experience quickly. Providing learning leadership via resident staff and program design will keep them engaged throughout the experience. Capstone projects, directed self-study, and online support and engagement, along with certain enrichment activities, are all ways to ensure that the experience is greater than the sum of its parts.

Next, each campus will have to decide for itself how to integrate the experience into its curriculum. Many students involved in Gap experiences do not have any expectation regarding program credit, which is very different from study abroad. Learning how to work with this issue is critical. A clear approach to whether or not a participant can earn academic credit, advanced placement status in language programs, and so forth, would help clarify how this experience

fits into their college education. Too often, students are left to their own devices to figure this out and frustration with the process inhibits participation.

Finally, this is an area crying out for leadership. The Admissions Office is not going to make this happen. Their job is to find students, not find out what they want to do if admitted. The strongest ally for freshmen abroad is probably the CFO on campus who is trying to figure out how to get more students into the college without building more dorms. A strong Freshman Year Abroad program allows colleges to fill their dorms during the spring semester when study abroad numbers tend to rise. The economics are compelling. The experience is compelling. Why doesn't study abroad take the lead in providing a Gateway Year approach for incoming freshmen, something that very few schools offer but for which there are always requests, and gain control of this growing field before others less-equipped do so? The opportunity is very real.

Having made this suggestion, we're reminded of the New Hampshire farmer visited by the State Agriculture Department with ideas to improve the farm's productivity. After listening to all of the nice ideas proposed, the farmer asserts, "I'm only farming half as smart as I know how right now, and I'm already working twice as hard as I want. I don't need any new ideas." Study abroad offices are already hard-pressed to meet the growing demand of students, parents, faculty, and administration for increased study abroad activity, while at the same time having to live with limited resources. If leadership in this area is to happen, and study abroad is to make it happen, there will have to be resources allocated. But the logic is strong and taking on the leadership of personal transitions abroad makes a good argument for an increased budget that will pay off for all concerned.



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