

How to finance a gap year

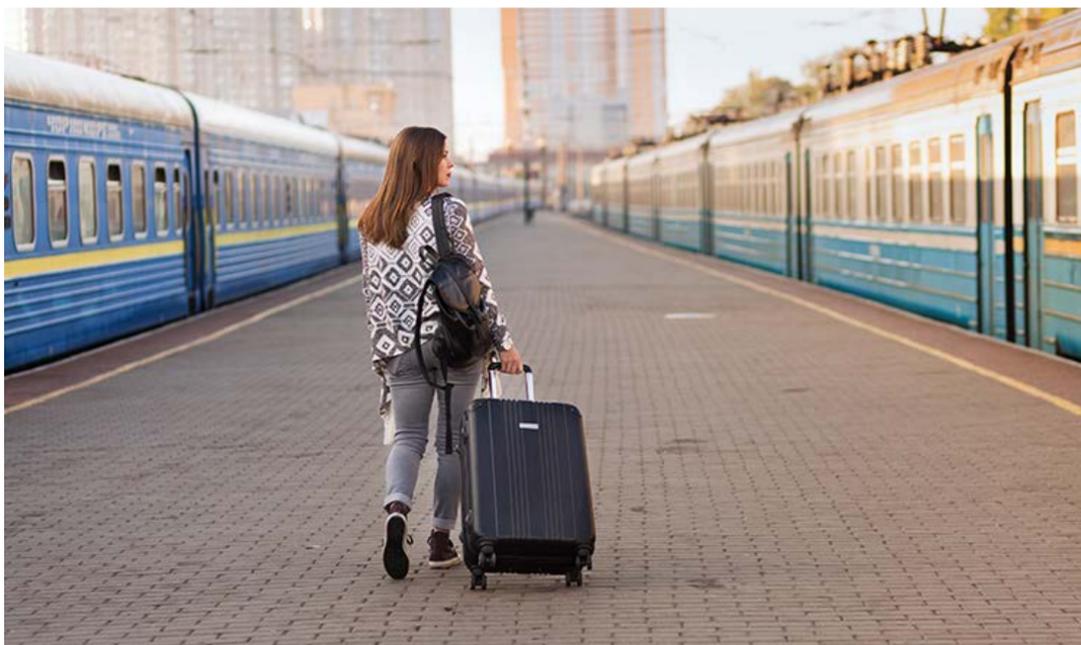
It's increasingly popular to take a year off between high school and college.

By **Beth Braverman**

The following article is part of The Modern Education, a [Chase](#) series to help people navigate the costs of college and beyond.

Like most of her friends, Mouna Algahaithi planned to finish high school, and then head directly to college. But during her senior year, after she'd already been accepted to a school, Algahaithi realized that she didn't really want to go right away.

"I was just doing what was normal and expected," she recalls.



One day, she was scrolling through Facebook and saw an ad for Global Citizen Year, a gap-year program that places students in one-year programs around the world between high school and college. Algahaithi thought that it might be a better way to spend her first year after high school.

The deadline to apply for the program was four days away, and Algahaithi had no idea how she'd cover the \$30,000 price tag, but she applied anyway, uploading financial aid forms along with her essay and checking the box indicating that she'd need financial help to make the trip. A month later she received a call: Not only had she been accepted to the program, but she had also received a fellowship covering the entire cost.

She spent the next year living in Senegal and working in a local childcare center. "The experience ended up changing my life more than I ever could have anticipated," says Algahaithi, who's now a junior at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

A long history

For decades, teens in Europe and Australia enjoyed a "gap year," a planned year off between high school and college, often spent traveling, volunteering or working.

Now, it seems, the practice is gaining popularity in the United States —in no small part because former President Barack Obama's oldest daughter, Malia Obama, took a year off between high school and starting her freshman year at Harvard.

The number of students enrolled in gap year programs increased by more than 20 percent between 2014-2015, and attendance at gap year fairs has nearly tripled since 2010, according to the American Gap Association. The organization estimates that more than 30,000 American students participate in a gap year annually.

Studies have shown several benefits to those who take gap years, including better performance in college and increased employability. Still, for most people who take gap years, the experience is not cheap. High-end, organized gap years can cost as much as a year at private college. Still, even if you can't get a full scholarship like Algahaithi, there are ways to enjoy the experience without going broke.

If you're interested in a gap year, but are worried about the expense, consider these tips to make it more manageable:

Be realistic about your budget

Talk to your parents early about whether they'll be able to help pay for your gap year, and how much you'll need to come up with on your own. "I talked a lot with my parents about whether this trip would be worth the cost," says Abby Newman, a 22-year-old senior at the University of Florida, who did a gap year in Israel. She financed the gap year with scholarships, her own savings, and assistance from her parents.

Look for lower-cost programs

If finances are an issue, skip the all-inclusive trips that hit multiple countries and instead focus on traveling to one country, with a low cost of living or going overseas for just part of the year. Also, consider different types of lodging: gap years in which students live with host families not only have lower costs, but also offer a more immersive cultural experience.

Incorporate work

Rather than spending the entire gap year volunteering and traveling, look for opportunities that include paying work or volunteer work that at least includes room and board.

Crowdfund

Online crowdfunding sites have made it easier to collect and track donations from your network. Jamie Jo Brenner, vice president at the gap year program Kivu, suggests students write a letter soliciting donations from family and friends along with their graduation announcement.

"The letter should tell readers briefly what you're doing, two things you're looking forward to on the trip, and what you hope to get out of it," she says. "That way donors don't think that you're just taking a fun trip around the world."

Consider schools that provide gap year support

A growing number of schools are offering gap year programs that cater to interested students, beyond simply allowing them to defer their admission. The benefit of doing the program via your school is that you may be able to use your financial aid package to cover some of the costs or earn credits that could reduce college costs down the road.

Research scholarships

Many gap year programs offer both need- and merit-based scholarship programs that can help offset the expense of a gap year.



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