



## **Time Out or Burn Out for the Next Generation**

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### **Taking time off before or during college**

Perhaps the best way of all to get the full benefit of a “time-off” is to postpone entrance to college for a year. For nearly 40 years, Harvard has recommended this option, indeed proposing it in the letter of admission. Normally a total of about 80 to 110 students defer college until the next year.

The results have been uniformly positive. Harvard’s daily student newspaper, *The Crimson*, reported (5/19/2000) that students who had taken a year off found the experience “so valuable that they would advise all Harvard students to consider it.” Harvard’s overall graduation rate of 98 percent is among the highest in the nation, perhaps in part because so many students take time off. One student, noting that the majority of her friends will simply spend eight consecutive terms at Harvard, “wondered if they ever get the chance to catch their breath.”

During her year off, the student quoted above toured South America with an ice-skating company and later took a trip to Russia. Another interviewed in the article worked with a growing e-commerce company (in which the staff grew from 10 to 100 during the year) and backpacked around Europe for six months.

### **Some options for the interim year**

Members of one recent class participated in the following activities, and more, in the interim year: drama, figure skating, health-care, archeological exploration, kibbutz life, language study, mineralogical research, missionary work, music, non-profit groups, child welfare programs, political campaigns, rebuilding schools, special needs volunteering, sports, steel drumming, storytelling, swing dance, university courses, and writing—to name some chosen at random. They took their interim year in the following locales: Belize, Brazil, China, Costa Rica, Denmark, Ecuador, France, Germany, Guatemala, Honduras, India, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Mongolia, Nepal, Philippines, Scandinavia, Scotland, Spain, Switzerland, Taiwan, Thailand, Uruguay, United States and Zimbabwe.

Many students divide their year into several segments of work, travel, or study. Not all can afford to travel or to take part in exotic activities. A number have served in the military or other national service programs. Some remain at home, working, taking part-time courses, interning, and still finding the time to read books they have never had time to fit into their schedules or begin to write the “great American novel.” Others have been able to forge closer ties with parents or grandparents from whom they may have drifted away during the hectic pace of the high-school years.

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## **Reactions to the year off**

Students taking a year off prior to Harvard are doing what students from the U.K. do with their so-called “gap year.” Other countries have mandatory military service for varying periods of time. Regardless of why they took the year off or what they did, students are effusive in their praise. Many speak of their year away as a “life-altering” experience or a “turning point,” and most feel that its full value can never be measured and will pay dividends the rest of their lives. Many come to college with new visions of their academic plans, their extracurricular pursuits, the intangibles they hoped to gain in college, and the career possibilities they observed in their year away. Virtually all would do it again.

Nevertheless, taking time off can be a daunting prospect for students and their parents. Students often want to follow friends on safer and more familiar paths. Parents worry that their sons and daughters will be sidetracked from college, and may never enroll. Both fear that taking time off can cause students to “fall behind” or lose their study skills irrevocably. That fear is rarely justified. High school counselors, college administrators, and others who work with students taking time off can help with reassurance that the benefits far outweigh the risks.

Occasionally students are admitted to Harvard or other colleges in part because they accomplished something unusual during a year off. While no one should take a year off simply to gain admission to a particular college, time away almost never makes one a less desirable candidate or less well prepared for college.

## **Achieving balance**

While the focus here has been on ways to relieve stress for today’s high-achieving generation, we should note that in fact most students are coping well with pressure, even thriving. This remarkable time offers opportunities that previous generations (and students in many other countries today) could not imagine. Colleges, for example, now reach out through their recruiting programs to talented students from every economic background. Financial aid makes college a reality for outstanding students on a scale that was not possible before. Graduation rates at leading American colleges and universities remain extremely high and students express satisfaction with their college experiences.

It is important to remember that access to higher education around the world is at present limited to a lucky few. Those fortunate enough to enjoy such a privilege have a responsibility to use their talents to provide expanded opportunities for future generations. Our young alumni and alumnae have been successful in meeting the formidable challenges they have faced since college. But they continue to remind us that the rigors of competing in the new world economy impose high standards on everyone. They do not (nor do we) tell today’s students to “slack off” and achieve less. Recent graduates advise today’s high school and college students to prepare themselves emotionally as well as academically.

It is worth noting that extraordinary achievements are never based on emulating someone else’s achievements, but on some unmeasurable combination of (a) marching to one’s own specific and unique drummer and (b) accidentally—perhaps unconsciously—doing something that captures the

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Zeitgeist in new and unexpected ways. Those whom parents often want their children to emulate either used their own ingenuity to give the public a product or image it desperately wanted, or happened to catch a hot wave of the time, or (ideally) both.

While their achievement stands as an ideal for which others strive, others cannot by definition duplicate that achievement because it is in-duplicable. So the problem can often be well-meaning but misguided parents who try to mold their children into an image of success they value; and their children, being moldable as they are, often get on board and go along with the program before they have any capacity to make such a choice for themselves. Yet the paradox is that the only road to real success is to become more fully oneself, to succeed in the field and on the terms that one defines for oneself.

So the pressures placed on many children probably have the unintended effect of delaying a child's finding herself and succeeding on her own terms. We should all have the right to gape with awe at Yo-Yo Ma's musical triumphs, while at the same time achieving our own more modest ones in our own fields and ways: finding hominid bones that shift our conception of paleontology, or composing smooth jazz melody, or tracing the rise and decline of Roman gentes. Parents and students alike profit from redefining success as fulfillment of the student's own aims, even those yet to be discovered. Burnout is an inevitable result of trying to live up to alien goals. Time out can promote discovery of one's own passions.

The fact remains that there is something very different about growing up today. Some students and families are suffering from the frenetic pace, while others are coping but enjoying their lives less than they would like. Even those who are doing extraordinarily well, the "happy warriors" of today's ultra-competitive landscape, are in danger of emerging a bit less human as they try to keep up with what may be increasingly unrealistic expectations.

The good news is that students themselves offer helpful suggestions about how best to handle the challenges they face. In part because of all the obstacles that confront them from the earliest stages of their lives, this generation has emerged generally more mature, sophisticated, and, at their best, better prepared to cope with the demands of the twenty-first century. They learn at an early age how to cope with both victory and defeat and with the formidable demands placed on them by adults and peers. Yet many would benefit from a pause in their demanding lives. Let us hope that more of them will take some sort of time out before burnout becomes the hallmark of their generation.

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