

Gap Year? Do It Here

Taking a gap year at home can be as meaningful as doing one abroad.

By William Deresiewicz

Mr. Deresiewicz is the author of "Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life"

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People walk by Columbia University's main campus | Gabriela Bhaskar for The New York Times

PORTLAND, Ore. — High school seniors and their families face a difficult choice. Will colleges be open this fall? Will classes be held online? Many families are reluctant to pay or borrow tens of thousands of dollars for what may turn out to be a virtual experience.

Without the mainstays of campus life — dorms, dining halls, sports, parties — many young people are changing their plans, deciding to remain at home and spend the coming academic year at a local community college or public university. Others are deferring college altogether, taking a gap year.

As students arrive on campus with stronger academic skills but weaker social and emotional ones, already burned out after years on the academic treadmill, gap-year programs offer an invaluable corrective. Participants acquire confidence and independence, begin to develop a sense of purpose, and find out that there's life outside of school. Kids turn into young adults.

But there is one big problem with the gap-year option now, at least as it has traditionally been conceived. A large majority of gap-year programs involve overseas travel. Going abroad this fall is not desirable. Some overseas programs have already suspended operations for 2020-21.

This is an excellent time to broaden our idea of what a gap year ought to involve. The assumption that the best thing you can do with your time between high school and college is to go to a developing country, learn about the people there and use your privilege to help improve their lives is, now, starting to crack.

To be sure, an overseas gap year can be a very fine thing, and benefiting others is always a worthy goal. But you do not need to go abroad to make the world a better place.

By exposing existing inequalities, the current crisis has made blindingly obvious what should have already been perfectly clear. There is plenty of work to be done right here in the United States.

If anything, such work is even more challenging than anything that you can do abroad because the problems you address are ones in which you are directly implicated. It's a lot easier, morally and psychologically, to go to Peru or South Africa and deal with inequities "over there" than to go to St. Louis or Houston.

When you stay here, you are forced to deal with the consequences of your own comfort and privilege. You also don't get to "go home" at the end. You are already home, and this is what it looks like.

This issue, I should say, isn't merely theoretical for me. For the past six years, I have been involved with one of the few domestic gap-year programs that engage in the kind of work I'm talking about.

Tivnu: Building Justice is a social-justice-oriented Jewish gap-year program that takes place in Portland, Ore. I recently had occasion to speak with several of our alumni. One of them, Ami Furgang, now a senior at Middlebury, wanted to do a gap year but was skeptical of going overseas.

"There was something about taking that time in the U.S., knowing that I have benefited from systems that oppress people in the U.S., that felt like more of a responsibility," Mx. Furgang said. "Why would I leave Newton, Mass., to go to a quote-unquote Third World country, when there are people literally in Boston, let alone Portland, who I could be supporting?"

Mx. Furgang came to Portland because Tivnu is the only domestic Jewish gap-year program. But there are other options, most obviously the programs gathered under the umbrella of AmeriCorps: City Year, Volunteers in Service to America and the National Civilian Community Corps.

I grieve for the college-bound seniors who find their plans derailed by the coronavirus. But I believe that this can also be an opportunity for them: to step off the conveyor belt, to grow up a little bit, to learn about parts of American society they would never otherwise experience and to help their fellow Americans at this moment of unprecedented need.

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William Deresiewicz (@wderesiewicz) is the author of "The Death of the Artist: How Creators Are Struggling to Survive in the Age of Billionaires and Big Tech," and a member of the board of Tivnu: Building Justice.