PLANNING A GAP YEAR- FAQ’S

What is a “gap year”?
Some call the gap year a year off, while it can definitely be viewed as a year “on.” A gap year is traditionally time a student takes between high school and college, or college and career/grad school to focus on a valuable and specific experience. Another trend focuses on building a gap year into the undergraduate experience, perhaps combining internship experience during a year abroad. A gap year is much more than just backpacking across Europe; it can also include interning, volunteering, studying, teaching, and other types of experiences.

Why do students take a year off?
Some students feel this is a great time to explore or make a difference in the world before committing to a job or graduate school, while others simply need a break from school before taking the next step. Still others take the time to build a new skill by finding internships, attaining a one-year Masters degree, or enrolling in summer institutes to build their resume in a particular field. Others take time to solidify career options, or to focus more time and energy on preparing for the LSAT or MCAT. Taking a gap year is a very personal decision, and can take many different forms.

How do I decide what type of experience is best for me?
Consider the reasons you are considering a gap year to begin brainstorming your options. What would you like to get out of it? Is there something you could do to make your medical school application stand out a little more? What skill might be missing from your resume for graduate school, or your next career? Do you see this as a chance to do service to a particular cause or community? Or perhaps you have a strong urge to live overseas. What would you like that to entail? Answering some of these questions will begin to provide direction for your search.

Are fee-based gap year companies worth exploring?
Absolutely! Although some of these resources can be a bit pricey, they can often take a ton of legwork out of planning your trip. Whether it’s finding you housing, placing you with a host organization, or helping you secure the proper visas, working with fee-based organizations can often be the most convenient and safest route to go when considering travel abroad.

How do I find out more about these programs?
After you’ve identified some opportunities through our resource guide and from your own research, continue to investigate each by carefully reading the website for all of the pertinent information. If you have questions, call and find out everything you need to know. Perhaps most importantly, try to find alumni of the particular program you are considering. People who have “been there and done that” can give you first-hand experience.

How do employers view candidates who take a gap year?
As long as your gap year has a purpose, many employers view your time off favorably. For one, you’ve probably matured and gained more real-world experience as a candidate in your gap year and can better articulate your reasons for applying to a particular position. In addition, it can give you time to build transferable skills, as well as help you demonstrate your character through situations that challenge you to deal with adversity or to learn about a different culture.
How do medical school admissions officers view applicants that take a year off?

Many medical schools view a year off as a means for students to gain maturity, as well as a more concrete understanding of professional goals and aspirations. Additionally, students may find that taking a year off affords them the opportunity to address any potential shortcoming in their application, such as gaining more exposure to the field, re-taking coursework, expanding their research experience or pursuing volunteer and/or shadowing opportunities of interest.

How might taking a gap year benefit law school applicants?

- Some pre-law students choose to take a year to get hands-on experience in the working world. Taking time to gain work experience has many potential benefits for those applying to law school:
- Taking a year off before applying ensures that all undergraduate coursework is viewed toward law school applications, including the spring semester of senior year. For students who may have challenges based on GPA, one additional semester of grades can be helpful.
- Gaining full-time work experience can make an applicant more competitive by giving them a different perspective from which to view the world, which is then reflected in an applicant’s personal statement and other admissions essays. Students can also garner a professional letter of recommendation that can be used to complement academic letters in the application.
- Having a work experience is a great way to beef up the Professional Experience section of the resume, especially if the student doesn’t have much work experience during college years. Work experience speaks to the maturity of an applicant, as it indicates how much professional exposure the applicant has had.
- Most importantly, taking time to work gives students the opportunity to reflect and truly decide whether law school is the appropriate professional pathway for them. It can be easy to make the decision to go while in college when everyone else is applying to some professional/graduate program of some kind. Taking time after graduation allows students to get out of “on-track mentality” and make decisions based on their personal desires, circumstances, and goals.

What do I need to plan for a gap year abroad?

- Time- It’s probably best to begin as early as your sophomore or early junior year looking at options. A gap year takes a lot of careful thought and planning; it is not a last-minute resort when all else fails. You’ll want to take time to research options and fulfill all of the necessary requirements for applications and travel.
- Visas- If traveling abroad, you will need the proper documentation to live and work in the host country. Utilize Emory’s resources to find out what documentation you’ll need for your stay.
- Vaccination- Get all recommended shots for the country you are visiting. Often this is a requirement for travel.
- Housing- Where will you stay? Does your program provide housing, or will you need to find safe housing on your own? In some countries, alumni may be a good resource for recommendations on where to live.
- Cell phone/internet- Check with your cell phone provider to find out about affordable options for communicating overseas. Find out if you will have internet access nearby.
- Financial support and planning- Some of these programs are expensive and may not provide money for living costs. How much money will you need to save? Will you be able to find scholarships or other funding sources for your trip?
- Travel guides- Use them to get familiar with the place you are visiting, as well as some of the attractions you’d like to experience while you are away.
- Current events- Is there anything of particular concern going on in the host country? Are there any conditions or other issues you should be aware of before committing your choice?
- Travel/medical insurance- Unfortunately, people do get sick – complicating matters when they travel. Protect yourself against accidents and illness. Research your existing providers, as well as those specialized in this area.
Can internships be combined with study abroad experiences?
While some study abroad programs have opportunities built into them to gain internship experience, some students choose to find their own experience while away. Emory isn’t responsible if they pursue an internship that is not affiliated with an Emory program – meaning it’s up to the student to get their own living arrangements and insurance coverage. There may also be work permits or visas to obtain, or specific research visas. Emory’s CIPA office is a great resource for finding out more in this area.

My parents are worried about my plan to take a year off. How can I ease their concerns?
Parents are often concerned after paying tuition or four years when a student speaks of a gap year. They may feel the student is avoiding “real life” or is directionless. It is worth sitting with your parents and explaining the goals of your year off. They need to understand that it’s not a vacation and has a very specific purpose. In addition, the gap year is increasingly popular among employers and most universities. If parents see this as a benefit to your career and personal development that will ultimately enhance your postgraduate education or career development, their concerns may lessen.