

Welcome to College. Now Take a Year Off

New gift to Duke will support gap-year projects before students enroll as freshmen, with aim of opening up option beyond affluent students



Duke University this year announced it will begin giving \$5,000 to \$15,000 to a few dozen admitted students with particularly compelling gap-year plans. Photo: LANCE KING/GETTY IMAGES

By

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Colleges are offering financial aid to entice admitted students to stay away for a year.

Gap years, long popular in Europe, have gained ground in the U.S. not just for wealthy teens who can afford a lengthy vacation, but also for students of modest means who want to pause before jumping into academic endeavors.

Incoming freshmen at Tufts University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Florida State University and Princeton University can get financial support to defer their enrollment for a year and travel, volunteer, or pursue other passions.

This fall, Duke University announced it will begin giving \$5,000 to \$15,000 to a few dozen admitted students with particularly compelling plans.

The gap year allows hard-charging, academically focused students “to reflect, to grow, to mature, to develop,” said Duke Undergraduate Admissions Dean Christoph Guttentag.

The school also benefits, he said, as students with creative problem-solving skills and resilience built from real-world challenges provide perspective inside and outside the classroom.

Venture philanthropists Laura and Gary Lauder have pledged \$500,000 a year for three years and will fund another three-year stretch if Duke grows the number of participants over the 15 or 20 annually who now take gap years and increases their socioeconomic diversity. The couple, whose daughter attends Duke, will then contribute \$10 million to permanently endow the gap-year program.



Peter Scharer, a Princeton freshman, spent a year in India as part of Princeton’s Bridge Year program.
Photo: Peter Scharer

After four intense years of high school, the Lauders’ son spent a year working for a startup in Israel, interning on Capitol Hill and traveling around Africa and India before enrolling at the University of Pennsylvania. He returned “a different person,” Ms. Lauder said.

She has offered a similar funding plan to Penn. That school’s admissions dean confirmed the discussion.

Many top colleges allow gap years. Duke is embracing them, backing organized trips or letting students design their own. Mr. Guttentag said plans could include things like apprenticing for a boat builder or joining a political campaign.

There is little data on how many students nationwide take a gap year, as many don't participate in organized programs and don't apply to school until afterward. The current push by colleges is focused on persuading high-school seniors who've been admitted to defer a year with the school's support.

Peter Scharer, a freshman at Princeton, spent last year studying Hindi and Urdu and volunteering at a school in northern India as part of Princeton's Bridge Year program.

The university launched that offering for 20 students in 2009, and this year it is funding 38 students doing service projects in Bolivia, China, India, Indonesia or Senegal. Princeton covers basic living expenses and offers need-based aid for travel and incidentals like visa paperwork.

"I was stepping away from the cycle that I had been in," said Mr. Scharer, now 19 years old. He said the program was "a powerful way to get a different perspective on the world, better understand myself, [and] better understand what I might be interested in studying."

Mr. Scharer said he has a new outlook on things like consumption and waste after seeing an open dump in India, and on the best way to offer aid to a needy community. He just finished a class on the interplay between national identity and language.

An analysis of students from Colorado College showed gap-year participants graduate slightly faster and have higher GPAs.

About 60 of that school's incoming first-year students take a gap year, 10% of the class and double the number from a decade ago.

Colorado College is host to a new research consortium of a dozen top schools aiming to better define what a purposeful precollege year looks like, and measure its benefits.

"It's had a reputation of something that is elite, homogenous and kind of a luxury," but that is no longer a fair description, says Abby Falik, founder and CEO of Global Citizen Year. That group has 150 fellows living and working in India, Brazil, Ecuador and Senegal this year.

As institutions endorse the gap year as a transformational, educational experience, they are considering how more students can access that potential benefit.

Global Citizen Year and Year On, another gap year organization, have agreed to match Duke's grant funds if students are admitted to their programs; those students can get up to \$30,000 in total support.

Global Citizen Year says it also has partnerships in the works with the University of Notre Dame, Colby College and other schools, some of which include financial support and academic credit for gap-year students.

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