

# Mind the Gap Year

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By Trisha Gura  
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After she graduated from Rice University, Christine Bohne stepped off the academic path. With a degree in medical anthropology, she was aiming for medical school, eventually. But she also wanted to explore an interest in global health technologies.

She scored a yearlong [Princeton in Africa](#)

[Fellowship](#) and used it to help refugees return to Burundi and restart their lives. After that, she landed a 2-year gig with the [One Acre Fund](#), an agricultural microfinance organization that assists African farmers by providing agricultural necessities and teaching improved farming techniques.

Bohne is one of a growing number of graduate- and medical-school-bound students who are taking "gap years," which Ethan Knight, executive director of the [American Gap Association](#) in Portland, Oregon, defines as "a structured period of time where students take a break from formal education to increase self-awareness, challenge comfort zones, and experiment with possible careers." Now in her gap year's 31st month, Bohne has decided against medical school, for now at least, and instead applied to a doctoral program in public health. "Even if I don't go to medical school," she says, noting that the option remains open, "I will still have that holistic approach to health, just from a different angle."

Not so long ago, gap years were rare in the United States. However, with the increasing complexity of medical school applications, tough competition for medical school and graduate school slots, and burnout after 16 years of academic grind, more new college graduates are taking time to step off the traditional path, says David Verrier, director of the [Office of Pre-Professional Programs and Advising](#) at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. In fact, national statistics show that half of medical school-minded students are taking at least one gap year, he says. The percentage is even higher—60%—for undergrads at high-powered research institutions such as Johns Hopkins heading for medical schools nationwide. While not as numerous, "gappers," bound for graduate school are following suit.

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*"We talk about problem solving, but employers are looking more at kids who are good at problem finding." —Karl Haigler*

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Courtesy of David Verrier

David Verrier (*left*) counsels undergrads such as premedical student Rubi Luna (*right*) at Johns Hopkins University. Luna, a Johns Hopkins graduate, took gap time before applying to medical school to work for an [AmeriCorps](#) project in California that trains Latino immigrants in job skills.

## First steps

If you are considering taking gap time, says Jason Sarouhan, Vice President at The [Center for Interim Programs](#), LLC. in Princeton, New Jersey, "the first questions to ask are, 'Why are you taking this time?' and 'What do you hope to gain?'"

Your motivations may be academic: Maybe you need an extra year to enhance your resume to convince admissions committee members that you are a well-qualified candidate. Maybe you're seeking research opportunities to bolster your resume. Or maybe you just need to take a breather, or pursue a passion to feel like your life is meaningful. "There is so much pressure to get everything done and move on to your next phase in life," Verrier says. A gap year "is a chance, maybe your only chance, to do something that you may not otherwise do."

## Reach high

That "something" could be the pursuit of a venture. [Jocelyn Brown](#) wanted to further develop a low-cost respirator that she had designed as part of a team of seniors at Rice University, where she was a bioengineering student. After graduation, she found a job with [Beyond Traditional Borders](#), an initiative that deploys students to solve global health challenges through innovation. She obtained a \$250,000 grant from Saving Lives at Birth, a partnership of nonprofits and foundations. She used the funds to launch a yearlong clinical trial in Malawi, using the device to help infants in distress. The results were positive, and she netted \$2 million more to deploy the device in all government hospitals in Malawi. Brown is considering continuing her education when this 2-year project ends, but if she does she plans to study business, not science. "I am realizing that I am also very interested in marketing and the business side of technology development," she says.

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## Reach out

When searching for gap-time opportunities, you don't have to reinvent the wheel. Look around campus. Contact gap-year organizations; many provide initial counseling sessions free of charge, Sarouhan says. "Talk about this idea as much as possible," he suggests—with counselors on campus, professors, and friends.

Alex Dahinten got his gap-time idea from one of his roommates at Imperial College London. His friend had been awarded a summer internship at [Engineering for World Health](#) (EWH), a North Carolina-based nonprofit that sends engineering students to work in resource-poor settings. "I have had this thing in the back of my mind always telling me to go out there and try to use this engineering degree on a bigger scale and in a different way from your typical corporate engineering firm," Dahinten says. After graduation, he moved overseas and volunteered at EWH while picking up other jobs to pay the bills. The organization eventually hired him to train other interns and lead 2-month expeditions to Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Zambia, Tanzania, and Ecuador in which students repaired donated medical equipment at remote hospitals. He expects to apply to graduate school eventually, but only if he can "find the right program with the right kinds of projects."



Courtesy of Jocelyn Brown

Bioengineering graduate Jocelyn Brown took gap time in Africa to develop her senior project at Rice University: a low-cost device that provides respiratory support for premature infants.



Courtesy of Alex Dahinten

"Gapper" Alex Dahinten worked with Engineering World Health repairing broken medical equipment in developing countries.

## Filling skill gaps

An eventual career in science or medicine requires competencies in areas that are not scientific. You need to know about money to prepare a budget, for example, and be experienced at management to run a laboratory or department. Doctors need to be adept at working with people from different cultures, as do researchers who work with international teams.

A gap year can be a wonderful opportunity to bolster these kinds of nonacademic skills. For instance, Bohne learned team and leadership skills by managing 50 field workers in Burundi. Brown learned about finance and business while developing her device. Dahinten mastered Spanish and the ability to work within a culture very unlike his own.

In industry, employers look for competencies that you cannot obtain in a classroom, says Karl Haigler, a workforce-development consultant to industry and author of [\*The Gap Year Advantage\*](#) and [\*Gap Year, American Style\*](#). Employers seek individuals who are capable of

"supporting and cooperating," he says; those skills provide a framework for team building. Many gap-year projects can help you develop such skills.

And then there's the ability to spot a potential problem and its source. "We talk about problem solving, but employers are looking more at kids who are good at problem finding," he says. An example: Bohne managed a team of 50 who were collecting thousands of dollars apiece from an increasing number of clients and commuting back to headquarters carrying the cash in bags. Concerned about safety, she convinced her workers to deposit the money at local banks, avoiding the usual long lines by arranging to have dedicated tellers on standby during set days and hours.

## The nitty gritty

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Once you know what you want to do and where you want to do it, focus on details: time line, duration, and structure. A gap period can include more than one project, so think about how those projects might develop. For example, Joy Ekuta, who graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology with a degree in brain and cognitive science, traveled first to Guatemala, leading teams of five high school students on public health projects in schools and clinics and learning a local Mayan dialect. Then she journeyed to Zambia to be the first on the ground laying the framework for a clinical trial to prevent transmission of HIV from mother to child. She will likely travel next to Cambodia, where she will make her way alone to remote settings to study whether millions of dollars of donated medical equipment is increasing access to healthcare. "She is not learning a skill exactly," says bioengineer [Robert Malkin](#), whose Duke University laboratory gestated Ekuta's gap-year program. "She is exposing important abilities, growing as a person."



Courtesy of Christine Bohne

Christine Bohne (*right*) interviewing participants in the Youth Empowerment Project on behalf of [Haguruka](#), a nonprofit organization that aims to help women in rural and low-income areas in Burundi.

## Mind the gap

The opportunities are there. The greatest challenge may be deciding that the time is right to seize them. "My advice is this," says Malkin. "The rest of your life you are going to be an engineer, a scientist, or a doctor. This could be your last chance to be something else. Take it."

\*Top image: Christine Bohne in Burundi with two drivers, Innocent (*L*) and Leve (*R*).

Trisha Gura is a freelance writer who lives in Boston.