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‘Gap year’ a boost for pre-college students

Taking a year off before attending college allows students to earn money and gain self-confidence.

BY JUSTIN POPE
The Associated Press

It was hardly the average teenager’s idea of a good time. Gerrit Lansing spent his days shoveling out a barn and crushing grapes under the hot Mediterranean sun.

But Lansing calls the year he took off before college one of the best things he ever did. Burned out and aimless after high school, he spent part of the year in Greece, working on a farm in the mornings, then taking afternoon classes that helped him develop a love of classical poetry.

“I gave me time to just sort of figure myself out and what I wanted to do and what I was interested in,” said Lansing, now a junior classics major at Sewanee, the University of the South, a small college in Tennessee. “I felt coming into college I was just a step ahead.”

Many college admissions officers support the idea. While cautioning that a “gap year” between high school and college isn’t for everyone — and that just goofing off isn’t worthwhile — they say many students who take one return more confident and self-aware.

“Students feel this sense of ownership over their time,” said Paul Marthers, dean of admissions at Reed College in Oregon, where about 10 percent of students defer admission. “They made the decision.”

Still, the popularity of gap years appears to be increasing only modestly.

Most of a dozen or so colleges contacted in the past week said the number of students who defer admission is relatively small, flat year to year or even declining.

“In other countries, notably the United Kingdom, gap years are far more popular and an entire travel industry has grown up around them. About 11 percent of all British students take them, according to Tom Griffiths of Gapyear.com. Employers there look beyond degrees and at life experiences when hiring new graduates, he said.

In the United States, however, experts say the increasing stress of college admissions makes parents nervous.

“These are families that somehow see this as not part of the grand plan,” said Gail Reardon, who founded a Boston company, Taking Off, that helps students plan gap years. Adds Lee Stetson, dean of admissions at the University of Pennsylvania: “Not wanting to break stride is the American way.”

But experts say that as the admissions process gets more stressful, the case for a gap year gets stronger. Colleges generally encourage the practice — as long as students who have committed to one school don’t use the extra year to apply elsewhere. Since the 1970s, Harvard has used the letter it sends to admitted applicants to advise them to consider a gap year.

Generally, schools make students submit a proposal beyond “lying on the beach,” but often little more is required. The University of Chicago says it will grant deferrals for almost any reason as long as students don’t apply elsewhere.

“I knew I was looking at many, many years of school,” said Keegan, of Greenwich, Conn., who is thinking of becoming a veterinarian. “Before I went into it, I thought it might be good to do something different.”

Gap years need not be a luxury for the rich.

Some students use them to earn money for school. Many programs offer scholarships or compensation for labor; AmeriCorps offers a living allowance and education funding. Reardon said anyone would be hard-pressed during a gap year to spend the $30,000 or more many of them would be paying for college.

Besides, “if you look at the investment of the first year of college when your kid is not ready to go, it’s money well spent,” Reardon said.

Lansing said the experience continues to pay dividends.

“I don’t think there’s any rational explanation to just run to college,” he said. “There’s no reason. It’s just what everyone does.”

Connecticut College.

Of course, instead of deferring, students can just postpone applying to college — and their gap-year experiences could make them more attractive candidates. But there’s a momentum to the process that makes it easier to apply to high school, and parents’ concerns about getting off track are understandable. Lansing’s parents backed his plans, but insisted he have a college lined up.

Students seem to be getting more creative with their gap-year plans. An incoming Wellesley College student will intern with a pastry chef at a famous California restaurant this year; a Penn student will volunteer in Vietnam. Reardon recalled a student who worked as a beekeeper and shepherd in France.

Kristel Keegan, who plans to attend Cornell University, will spend next year teaching in Costa Rica, working as a ski instructor in Colorado and then perhaps working in New Zealand or South Africa.
Artist to be featured in exhibit

Walter Creech knew he couldn't be a graphic designer and a painter, so with his wife's blessing, he left his job as a commercial artist five years ago and returned to his passion.

Designing clothing labels and fashion illustrations became a chore for Creech when the job became computer-intensive, he explained.

"Pushing a mouse around and pushing a pencil or brush around are very different," he said. "I decided that one year working on a computer, I was going to lose any artistic ability that I had."

Today, he paints watercolor and acrylic scenes, predominantly landscapes that reflect North Carolina's notable architecture and bucolic beauty. One of his recent works depicts the cupola at East Carolina University in Greenville.

Creech will showcase his watercolor creations from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Friday to Sunday at Bennett Vineyard in Edward, a hamlet about 25 miles north-east of New Bern. His demonstration will inhabit the vineyard's new wine tasting room, where wine samples from the North Carolina vineyard will be available.

The artist's work includes meticulous reproductions of some of the state's most recognizable architecture, such as the Old Well at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill in his sought-after painting "Carolina Moon."

Creech knows a thing or two about architecture. His father was in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and he used to work summer construction jobs growing up.

"When you combine knowing how things are put together with knowing how perspective works, that lends itself to painting architecture and making it look correct," he said. "Intuitively, I can look at someone else's work and can tell if it's not right."

In 1974, Creech graduated from Southern Alamance High School, where he participated in Junior ROTC for four years and never took a single art class. From there, he attended Ringling School of Art in Sarasota, Fla., where he graduated three years later with a commercial degree.

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Creech fell in love with nature while canoeing and hiking on his father's farm in Cedar Cliff, near Saxapahaw. He spent hours observing nature and created his first painting when he was a high school senior.
Artist

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art degree.

His 18-year stint in the commercial design industry produced some unusual projects — like designing labels for tube socks and painting a portrait of a cologne bottle for a newspaper advertisement.

“If you can name a sock or a clothing (brand,) I probably did labels for them,” he said.

Creech’s only source of income is the sale of his paintings, but the craft never seems like work for the Saxapahaw resident. Painting has allowed him to exercise his skill of observation, often producing captivating results.

“A lot of painting actually just comes down to memory, being observant and observing nature,” he said. “I’ve been doing that for years, and I’ve gotten pretty good at it.”

It’s this observant nature that prompted him to pull over during a rural drive one day and ask a family if he could paint their house. The resultant painting, “Snow Camp Morning,” depicts a highway leading to a snow-dusted farmhouse.

Before painting one of his watercolor creations, Creech customarily pencils three to four thumbnail sketches and two to three smaller watercolors from different angles.

People often ask him how long it takes to paint one of his full-size watercolors.

“The true answer is on a big painting, I don’t know,” he said. “I’ll paint on it a while and put it aside and work on another painting.”

Creech encourages art aficionados and the uninitiated alike to attend his Bennett Vineyard exhibition. He said he will probably be working on a painting during the showing, and he enjoys sharing his technique with anyone who takes interest.

“A lot of artists have problems telling people how they do certain things,” he said. “I don’t. I have no problems at all with telling people.”

People should “come out if they like artwork and they like realism,” he said.

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Walter Creech will demonstrate painting techniques and sign prints for patrons in the new wine tasting room of the Bennett Vineyard. The public will be able to sample wines and view artwork.
Ending the College Loan Giveaway

Forty-two members of the Republican rank and file in the House sent a powerful message to their leaders last week when they joined with Democrats and voted to close an outrageous loophole that allows lenders to skim billions of dollars from loans that should be going to needy college students.

At issue is a special category of student loans for which the government guarantees lenders a gargantuan return of 9.5 percent, even though the prevailing rate charged to students is lower than 3.5 percent. The loans, backed by tax-exempt bonds, were created in the 1980's, when interest rates were high, to keep lenders in the college loan business. Congress tried to phase out the high-interest loans in 1993, when rates declined and federal subsidies were no longer needed. But the lenders have contrived a series of bookkeeping tricks that have kept the system going, despite damning reports by the Government Accountability Office, the Congressional Budget Office and outside advocacy groups. More recently, the House Republican leadership has seemed determined to keep the gravy train running for the banking industry.

The amendment, sponsored by Representative Chris Van Hollen, Democrat of Maryland, is likely to be tied up in a rules dispute. But the Republicans who broke ranks to support the bill put leaders on notice, and set the stage for a very public battle over the issue that should begin after the July recess. The leadership should read the writing on the wall.
Workshop teaches magic of making books

Dr. Nancy House and Catherine Billingsley, staff members with the East Carolina University Art Department, recently gave a workshop on bookmaking to several Pitt County teachers and faculty.

Those in attendance included Cathy Tripp from Farmville Central High School, Rebecca Thomas and Sharon Davis from Farmville Middle, Nathalie Smith from Sam D. Bundy, Diana Siessel and Marcia Turman from Chicod Elementary, John Lynch from Ayden Middle, Kim Furstenberg from Ayden Elementary, Cheri Williams from A.G. Cox Middle, Valerie Lynch from South Greenville, Annette Brooks from E.B. Aycock Middle, Ann Cherry from Elmhurst Elementary, and Sue Gibbs from Wahl-Coates Elementary.

The workshop taught about several types of books and how to construct them. Each day taught different techniques on dying fabric and paper to be used for bookcovers, along with stitching them together in assembling the books.

The first book made was the process journal, in which entries were made daily about the activities of each day. The uneven fabric dying done one day led to the fabric accordion book the next day. Dye was sprayed on watercolor paper and some bleached out for covers of the book-in-a-box book. The triangle accordion book was made from a sentence strip and the dyed watercolor paper cover.

Other books that were made included: altered books, origami star book, wandering book, the hot dog blanket book, multiple cuts and accordion fold books, and the book using six signitures for the adapted coptic stitch, which was taught by Lisa Beth Robinson.

Books demonstrated or shown were: even fabric dying, index card book, the star book (triple accordion fold), labyrinth book, slotted zigzag book, Who am I? book, cereal box sketchbook and more.

There was a discussion about illustrating poetry in books to include haiku and diamonte poetry. Some illustrated their own poetry.

An exhibit of the books that were made will be displayed outside the Gray Gallery in the Jenkins Fine Arts Center at ECU through Sunday, June 26.

For more information about future workshops, contact the ECU School of Art at 328-6140, Nancy House at housen@mail.ecu.edu or Catherine Billingsley at billingsleyca@mail.ecu.edu.