



Minding The Gap

Advice on Structuring a COVID-19 Gap Year to Ensure Your College Student's Success

by Kristine Oller

Many of my clients, colleagues, and friends who are wrestling with the dilemma of whether or not to enroll their child in the upcoming fall semester of college (regardless of whether it will take place online or off) are having a tough time making this decision. Not only are there as many pros as cons to each option, but there are also a lot of variables still up in the air while each institution figures out what their safety protocols will be.

Another factor that makes the decision difficult is that it's forcing parents to choose between a known quantity (enrollment) and an amorphous idea (a gap year), leaving many folks understandably asking: *If my kid doesn't go to school... what exactly will they do instead – especially since the usual work and travel opportunities are currently nonexistent?*

I have an idea for you, but first I must admit that what follows is offered based on my two decades of experience and expertise as an organizer, coach, and strategist – not as a parent. I do not have children; I have four nephews, one of whom is entering his junior year of college and one who is a college freshman.

Recently, as we were getting ready for bed one night, my husband and I started to discuss whether, if we did have a child, would we let them go back to campus in the fall (or pay full freight for a year of online learning) and we agreed that we probably wouldn't. Having cared for my sister who has been suffering from a painful chronic illness all of her adult life – whose symptoms are eerily similar to what so many of the “long-haul” COVID-19 survivors are experiencing – I admittedly have a bias towards protecting a loved one's long-term health (if at all possible) over preventing an interruption in their education.

As my husband drifted off to sleep, my strategist's brain began to ponder how I would actually structure a gap year for “my child.” A few days later, I was talking with a mom of a college sophomore who was deliberating about this very choice, a choice which, for her, is more fraught because her child has a medical condition that requires oversight and care. I shared my hypothetical gap year plan with her and she found it to be helpful, which prompted me to offer it here in case it might be helpful to others as well.

My suggested structure has **six components** and is designed around the assumption that the student has one or more parents who are occupied with work and thus lack the time (and likely the skills) to be a substitute educator at the collegiate level. Three of the components focus on **education** and the other three focus on **supporting** that education.

Considering the stress that this unprecedented upheaval and social isolation is already generating, I recommend that the academic achievement goals for this gap year be clear yet reasonable. This structure isn't meant to ensure that a student stays on track with the demands of their degree, it is meant to ensure that a student does not fall behind in their academic aptitude and that they end the year better prepared to handle life **after** graduation.

I'd also recommend looking at a calendar and creating your own 2020–21 "academic year" by selecting when the semesters will start and end plus where the vacation days and weeks will be. This creates a structure that the entire family can plan around.

Here are my six recommended components for a COVID-19 Collegiate Gap Year:

1 – Portfolio Projects

This is a year for the student to focus on what they are naturally good at and interested in (or to experiment in order to find those things). Motivation to do the work required will come more naturally if a student is learning about what they love. Decide on one to three projects that can be part of their "professional portfolio" post-graduation (or look good on a resume in their chosen field). If possible, find something out there in the "real world" with an actual deadline that they can submit to for publication, or for inclusion in a festival, or for participation in an online event, or for entry into a contest. The point is not for them to get accepted or win or get published; the point is for them to manage their project, deliver their best work, and meet the deadline. (Therefore it is fine if the publication/event/etc. that they are submitting to is for professionals only and is legitimately out of their league – you are just borrowing the structure that the submission guidelines and deadlines provide.)

2 – Reading List

For a variety of reasons, not every student loves to read and not every student has an easy time with reading. That said, reading is a proven gateway to simultaneously improving and expanding one's vocabulary, writing skills, critical thinking, concentration, imagination, and empathy. Based on a student's abilities (and after considering what else is on their plate), decide on the number of books that they will be required to read for the semester and decide (in advance) what those books will be. Choose half of the titles from college-level recommend reading lists and let the student choose the other half themselves (no matter what they select, remember that reading is reading is reading). Upon completion of each book, the student would be responsible for sharing either a written or oral synthesis of their thoughts about the book (what resonated most, salient points, author's intent, etc.)

3 – Financial Education

A gap year is the perfect time for students to learn critical financial skills that high school and college curriculums will never teach them: the basics of managing money, the basics of increasing wealth, and the basics of generating an income for themselves. There are quite a few quality online courses dedicated to each of these subjects. Find one of each that you like, and have your student complete the lessons. (See the resource list below.)

4 – Curriculum Coach

A healthy dynamic between parents and their offspring is difficult to sustain if one or both parents are also trying to be the teacher, coach, deadline enforcer, and chief motivating officer. Why not remove that burden by bringing someone in to help coordinate and facilitate your student's year? A wise investment for a parent might be to hire a trustworthy individual (who works well with college-aged students) to serve as a "curriculum coach" for this gap year. (This role is different than that of a tutor for a particular subject.) The student and the coach can have weekly or bi-weekly meetings so the coach can track the student's progress, help them make and adjust their weekly schedule, help them research profile projects if necessary, receive their book reports,

and offer support and accountability. At regular intervals, the coach can then communicate to the parents about the student's progress and any difficulties they may be encountering. (See the resource list below.)

5 – Study Group

To add an on-going social component to the gap year, assemble 4-6 of your student's peers who want to commit to participating in an online study group (and possibly even share the cost of the curriculum coach). The dates and times for these group meetings can be set in advance and the coach can be there to facilitate them (again, the coach is not necessarily doing any tutoring). The participants in these Zoom study sessions can be "muted," with each student working independently while still in visual contact with the others and the coach. Then everyone can "unmute" for some socializing at the beginning and end of each session or during breaks. (A real-world example of adults utilizing this kind of support tool is [CaveDay.org](https://caveday.org))

6 – Therapist

Even if a student seems to be "fine," it might be valuable to schedule regular online appointments with a therapist throughout this gap year (if possible) just so the student has a safe, private space in which to vent and complain and process their anxiety and disappointments without being judged. At this age, students likely won't want to share their inner emotional life with their parents, but keeping their fears and frustrations bottled up – especially during this tumultuous time in history – is not good for their long-term mental or physical health.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

For students exploring their skills, strengths and what they'd like to focus on:

<https://www.creativelive.com/>

Curriculum coaches:

<https://inkwellcoach.com/>

Financial Education:

<https://abundancebound.com/financial-empowerment/>

<https://kristineoller.com/cashflow-course/>

<https://sidehustleschool.com/>

<https://www.creativelive.com/catalog/business/money-and-finance>

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