

# CAREER JOURNAL.

THE JUNGLE | Focus on Recruitment, Pay and Getting Ahead

## New High-School Elective: Put Off College

BY TODDI GUTNER

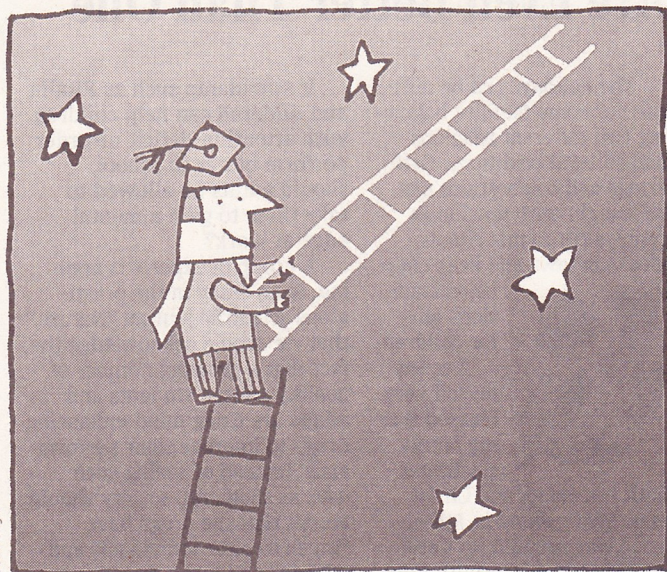
Like many motivated, focused high-school students, Lillian Kivel had worked hard academically and in community service in hopes that her efforts would win her acceptance into a good college. It did. Trouble was, Ms. Kivel's focus was much less clear when she had to decide which college to attend—the Boston-area senior had applied to 38 schools because her interests were so varied.

At the suggestion of friends, Ms. Kivel decided to take a gap year—a year outside of academia between high-school graduation and college matriculation. It wasn't rest and relaxation that Ms. Kivel sought, but rather an opportunity to gain life experience and focus her goals. Gappers, as they're called, typically feel that taking a year off will give them a head start in college—and life. "I [have] the opportunity to explore my interests, like medicine and China, outside the classroom," she says.

Ms. Kivel eventually decided to attend Harvard College, but deferred entrance until fall 2009. Ms. Kivel lived at home this fall and interned at the Boston branch of Partners of Health, a global health outreach nonprofit. She's also serving as a legislative aide in the Massachusetts Statehouse. And she's auditing an anthropology class at Harvard.

To fill her spring months, Ms. Kivel turned to gap-year consultant Holly Bull, president of Interim Programs, to help her sift through more than 100 different programs in China. Ms. Kivel will live with a host family in Shanghai, study Chinese language, history and culture in a classroom setting, and teach English to children. "I have gained so much by ... becoming more responsible and independent [and] exploring my interests," Ms. Kivel says.

The increased focus, maturity



John Segal

and motivation that gappers obtain—along with a brief escape from the intense pressure that leaves many high-schoolers burned out—has led more high-school guidance counselors and college admissions officers to suggest gap years to high achievers and strugglers alike. "Not every 17-year-old is ready to enter college, and a gap year... allows them to be in the real world, do service and approach college much more deliberately," says Karen Gianino, senior associate dean of admission at Colgate College.

Longtime educator Karl Haigler, co-author of "The Gap-Year Advantage," agrees. "We think that there should be more of a focus on success in college, not just on access to college," he says. That's partly what motivated Princeton University to become the first school to formalize a gap- or bridge-year program. It will be launched in the fall of 2009, starting with 20 students and growing to 100. Students will be invited to apply after they have been accepted to the school. The program will send students for a year of social service work in a foreign country. Students won't be

charged tuition and will be eligible for financial aid.

Formal gap-year programs typically cost between \$10,000 to \$20,000, including living expenses, says Ms. Bull. Students can often apply for financial aid through Free Application for Federal Student Aid ([www.fafsa.ed.gov](http://www.fafsa.ed.gov)), or look for scholarships and individual study-abroad loans through specific programs. There are also community-based programs, like AmeriCorps, where students receive room and board in exchange for service work and a small stipend.

To get the most out of the experience, students should already be accepted into college and defer admission before the gap year begins, says Missy Sanchez, director of college counseling at Woodward Academy, a private school in Atlanta. "They can use the necessary high-school resources for their applications and have something to come back to after their year off," says Ms. Sanchez.

The year should be well-planned and researched to avoid a lot of downtime. "Most students choose to do a smorgasbord of two or three programs through

out the year," says Ms. Bull.

That was Sabrina Skau's strategy. She spent three months teaching English in a small Costa Rican town. She taught Spanish at her local high school in Portland, Ore., for two months. She spent three months working in a hospital and orphanage in Cordova, Argentina. And she wrapped up the year with a five-week Spanish program in Barcelona. Though Ms. Skau had deferred her admission at University of Rochester, she also reapplied to Brown University and was accepted. She began her freshman year in August. "The gap year prepared me to be much more focused and independent at college because I have already been away on my own," Ms. Skau says.

Students can research many of the 8,000 educational programs, internships and public-service jobs on their own, but many find it daunting. Several private schools across the country, such as Atlanta's Woodward Academy, have begun to hold gap fairs, where vendors come to meet prospective participants. Students from any school can attend. Another option is to hire a gap-year consultant. They typically charge about \$2,000 to help research and guide students to reputable programs.

It's important to investigate the program's track record, credibility, supervision, structure and safety, says Mr. Haigler. Get references from at least two past participants and speak to them personally—don't just settle for email. Finally, check your status for family medical coverage. Insurance policies often don't cover adult-age dependents if they are no longer full-time students, but temporary insurance policies are often available.

Ms. Kivel was able to remain on her parent's insurance policy. She will fund the \$12,000 cost of her Shanghai semester from savings from a part-time job and help from her parents. "I'm just thrilled to be taking the year off," she says.