

Gap Year Stories

Many students decide to take a gap year (or two or five...) between undergrad and medical school – sometimes it is to improve their MCAT scores, to take a break from academia or to just explore and grow before going on to medical school. No matter what the motivation, gap years can be beneficial for many different reasons. The testimonies below will provide inspiration and information as you decide whether a gap year is right for you.

TRANSITIONAL PROGRAM /VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES:

Many students want to give a year or two of service before continuing their education.

Angelica

I did Teach for China, which is like Teach for America, but in China. I taught English and Conversational English for a year in Yunnan, China to a class of 43 7th graders. I also started the first anti-smoking education program in the district that other schools have adapted as well. Teaching definitely builds leadership skills like no other. Trying to come up with different learning methods for different types of learners forces you to think about problems in at least a few ways.

Michael

I spent the school year (9 months) in Spain working for the Spanish government as part of their “auxiliares de conversación” program in 2016-17. I was fortunate in that I was accepted and then deferred enrollment.

Trent

I am a City Year Corps Member in San Jose, California. I work in an elementary school in an underserved district tutoring kids in literacy and math and helping lead an after-school program. I learned about City Year through my adviser, who told me it would be a good fit for me, as I had done a lot teaching-related things during my undergraduate years at WashU. My experience has been very positive, and I recommend Americorps and City Year to anyone who is looking to take a year or two off.

Scott

I volunteered at the Newark Community Health Centers working as a substitute teacher. I knew that I wanted to help an under-served population close to my home community. I agreed to work unpaid, and they were more than happy to create a position for me that would give me a good experience to understand community health better. In addition to working at the NCHC, I have been working as a substitute teacher. This job was ideal for me because I was able to choose when I wanted to work -- which allowed me

to travel for interviews without having to worry about taking off from work. On my medical school interview trail, many interviewers were impressed with the position, understanding that it may be more difficult and time consuming than traditional research that students pursue in their gap year.

Reed

After graduation, I took the MCAT and after some deliberation decided to apply in summer 2010. I finished my postbac semester, and started volunteering at a free clinic in Atlanta at that point. In August, I finally found a job as a research assistant/lab tech. I interviewed at the Medical College of Georgia for the second time in October 2011, and was accepted in November 2011.

Jess

I actually took 5 gap years, as I wasn't premed in college and didn't decide I wanted to do medicine until three years out of school. For the first two years, I did Teach For America in rural Mississippi. I then transitioned to a teaching job in Austin, Texas, which I left in early December. Following this, I traveled in Southeast Asia until May, took the last pre-med prerequisite course I needed at my local state university over the summer while I shadowed physicians there. Soon after moving, I landed a job as a research tech in a science lab, where I've been for a year and a half. During that time, I've volunteered at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania, taken the MCAT, taken a biochemistry course, and successfully applied to medical school. Next year, I'll attend Duke, Penn, or UCSF. I think that my diverse postcollege experience made interviews a piece of cake, as I had tons of experiences upon which to draw. What is most important, though, is that I think I really grew as a person during those five years. I encourage people to take time off between undergrad and medical school. Do something that's going to interest you and shape who you are in the future.

WORK/RESEARCH:

Some students choose to work or do research before applying or reapplying to Med School.

Andrew

During my gap year I continued to work on my undergrad thesis research. I decided to take a year off because I thought it would be a productive and enjoyable year, which it was. It also generated two publications. I think taking a year off is a great option if you have an interesting opportunity. With a year off you can do things you might not be able to later in life, and your work can be a great topic for interviews. Students often worry about making the training process take an extra year. It becomes apparent in medical school (or earlier) that there is no rushing through this process and life is good before getting to the "end." You have to learn how to do the things you want and enjoy life along the way.

Nathan

I waited tables and bartended for two years before medical school, and did some clinical research on the side. Best decision I ever made.

Laura

I spent my gap year working in the same lab at WashU that I worked in during undergrad. The best way to find a lab is to contact researchers directly and take advantage of the connections that you have from previous research. I have decided to go to Yale for MD/PhD.

David

I worked for Bank of America for almost 2 years in the quantitative management associate program. I enjoyed it, but also learned more about my desire to become a physician. So, I left to study for the MCAT and apply to medical school. I was recently accepted to the University of Rochester School of Medicine.

Josh

If I hadn't taken a year off after undergrad, there is no way that I would have gotten into WashU MD/PhD. I asked for a one year lab technician position in the lab in which I was writing a senior honors thesis. The PI of the lab happens to be influential at the school of medicine (not dumb luck) and I did everything possible in the year that followed to make sure that he would write me a strong letter. As far as I am concerned, it was a lot easier to work hard at research that I found exciting and inspiring than to get in the 99th percentile on my MCAT or straight A's in my premed courses.

Josh G.

I spent the year working as a research technician at the Washington University School of Medicine. This job provided a great inroad to research, which I likely will continue in some form during medical school at the University of Connecticut. I also occupied my freetime to explore by teaching Hebrew School at two synagogues. This experience will help me if I continue my pursuit of a career in some discipline of pediatric medicine.

Chen

I ended my senior year knowing that I wanted to reapply. I felt comfortable with my MCAT score, and I didn't think it would be a good use of time to take more classes, so I looked for an opportunity to gain more clinical experience. I found a job as an emergency room scribe through PhysAssist. They have multiple locations across the country and I found a position near home. During this time, I reapplied and it went much smoother the second time around. I had more interviews and got in. Perhaps clinical experience was that missing link the first time around.

Brandon

When I knew I was going to be taking a gap year, I immediately decided that I wanted to work and not just relax. By doing so I hoped to both take a break from academia as well as stay busy and involved in medicine in some capacity. I knew that I had found what I was looking for when I learned about the PhysAssist Scribes program. I have been serving in the Emergency Department of St. Mary's Hospital in St Louis. I work directly with ER physicians, writing notes for them with their final review and approval. Not only have I had a broad exposure to many different medical problems, I have learned in advance about the details and intricacies of medical charting. This has helped prepare me for the clinical world of medicine while giving me the break from academia that I sought. This past year has proved to be one of the best years of my life to date. I look forward to attending University of Louisville's School of Medicine this fall, and I feel refreshed and more prepared than I expected.



VARIOUS EXPERIENCES:

Others choose to use their time to learn about the world around them through a variety of ways.

Kimberly

I took two gap years. I have worked in the Ob/Gyn department at Washington University School of Medicine doing clinical research. The patient interaction noticeably changed me; my family, friends, and bosses have all commented on how I have matured and become more comfortable speaking with patients. It was definitely noticeable during interviews! My grades in college weren't stellar but I definitely had a lot more to talk about now that I'm a few years out of college. Outside of work, I did things that I love and enjoy: mentoring a girl through Big Brothers Big Sisters, taking classes through WU and COCA, taking up photography, and exploring St. Louis. I'm so glad to have worked on my hobbies! The reason why I worked for two years was to save money to travel the world. I quit my job in March 2012 and am in the middle of traveling around the world until school starts in August. These 20 weeks through Europe, eastern Asia, and south Asia are a dream come true!

Rob

I graduated in 2007, did just under a year of research at the medical school, then moved to Los Angeles. In L.A. I did construction, worked as an extra for TV, and taught MCAT classes for Kaplan. I also volunteered in an ER. I don't know if it helped me get in to Med School, but I will say it was nicer and easier to deal with application stuff when I wasn't dealing with the MCAT and finals and other undergrad things. It's also a lot of fun, and if you have some weaker patches of your application you can beef them up. Also, I always recommend doing something interesting in your time off, not just something standard. That makes you a more interesting applicant and it gives you something fun to talk about in your interview.

Julie

I graduated May 2008, then worked for 1 year at the WU School of Medicine as a research tech II in a neuroanatomy lab. During this first tech job, I gained a very useful skill-set that helped me to find work in Seattle, WA, in a more clinically-directed laboratory. At my new lab, I studied the molecular genetics of pediatric acute myeloid leukemia. During these three years, I was able to network with physicians at the Fred Hutchinson Center/UW hospitals and to gain a lot of shadowing experience. Sometimes I regret not going straight through to medical school like most of my peers did. However, looking back, it's clear that I would never have had so much of the clinical exposure that really nailed my decision to enter medicine. It was nice to have a meaningful, rewarding job for a few years while I strengthened my application to medical school. My advice for graduating students is this: take any available research/clinical opportunity, even if you fear you might not like it. Hard work earns recommendations for each additional experience you seek. These connections and experiences will become the foundation of your career!

NEED HELP DECIDING WHAT TO DO IN YOUR GAP YEAR?

Schedule a one-on-one career advising appointment with one of our Advisors or Career Consultants by calling (314) 935-5930.