

EXCELSIOR NEWSLETTER

Excelsior Classical Covenantal Community

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www.excelsiorclassical.org

“The Gap Year” by Susan Wise-Bauer

Many of you probably know that my oldest son, who finished his high school work in May '09 and turned eighteen in August, is taking a gap year. I'm often asked about gap years and why they're a good idea, so I thought I'd post a few thoughts over the next week.

A “gap year,” for those of you who aren't familiar with the term, is a year taken off studies between high school and college. It's more common in Europe than in the U.S., but it's a recognized and valid option here as well (although many parents aren't aware of this). The gap year can involve work, travel, volunteerism, or a combination of those things.

There are two ways to approach a gap year: either apply to colleges straight out of high school and then ask for a one-year deferral from the college of your choice, or else finish the senior year of high school and apply late in the following fall. Either way, the student should plan on taking the SAT and any other standardized tests during the fall of the senior year, just as if the gap year weren't going to happen.

The first plan seems to be recommended by many admissions counselors; the fear is that the student will end up with an empty year during which nothing in particular happens (and that doesn't look good on college applications). However, if the student has an intriguing gap year planned, the second option is a perfectly good one; particularly for home educated students, the application can actually look stronger if it explains that the student is undertaking a challenging, maturity-producing project during the year after high school.

Here are a couple of recent news articles on the topic, should you wish to investigate further.

I'm a fan of the gap year from personal experience.

First: my own experience as a college freshman. I was educated at home, and by the time I'd gotten to be fifteen or sixteen

Returning Applications

We need your Returning Student Applications as soon as possible so that we can know where you'd like to serve in the fall. We are beginning to make plans for next year.

End of the Year Party

May 14th immediately after classes.

Details to follow.

Congratulations Logan Ramsey!

Logan Ramsey won this region's Daughters of the American Revolution oratory competition and advanced to the State Competition.

D.C. Trip

Be sure to check your email for information that was sent out regarding this upcoming trip.

You may contact Sandy Morris with any questions.

ACCS 2010 "Repairing the Ruins" Conference

June 17-19, 2010 in Durham, NC

Featured speakers are: Dr. George Grant, Os

Guinness, Matt Whiting, and Doug Wilson

Early registration pricing of \$200 through April 30, 2010.

Visit www.accsedu.org/Annual_Conference.ihtml?id=111716 for more information.

I'd finished most of my high school work and had taken college courses for credit. There didn't seem to be much point in delaying, so the year I turned sixteen, I went to college. I graduated college at nineteen and had a master's degree at twenty-one.

Looking back, I don't see this as a raging success. I was perfectly capable of doing the college work, but I was emotionally immature. (Hey, everyone's emotionally immature at sixteen.) University is more than a process of mastering material. It's an introduction to a community of learning. Fitting into a community takes time, and it takes emotional maturity. And it doesn't matter how hard you study, or how gifted you are—emotional maturity only arrives after the earth has gone around the sun a certain number of times.

Emotional immaturity can take two forms—lack of purpose, or over-focus on a narrow goal. I went through school too fast, too focused, unwilling to slow down and explore the experience. I regret that. I wish I could do it again.

This isn't so much an argument for a gap year as it is an argument against going to school early. But watching my college freshmen has convinced me that, for many students, seventeen or eighteen is too early.

Excuse me for a moment while I digress. Sending your kid to college early has become, in too many home school circles, a sort of proof of achievement. "My fifteen-year-old just didn't have anything left to do!" Now that I'm forty-one, when I hear that, I want to say, "Really? Anything? She's read all the Great Books, learned a foreign language, travelled, worked a job, volunteered? Amazing!" You have to have a certain amount of courage to say, "We've decided to wait for an additional year." Someone's bound to raise an eyebrow: What? Not ready yet?

Fifteen-year-olds are not ready for college. Many seventeen-year-olds are not ready for college. Quite a few eighteen-year-olds are not ready for college.

Which leads me to the second kind of experience: fifteen years of teaching college classes.

Most of our classes at William & Mary are small; thirty to thirty-five students. Out of an average freshman literature class, five or six are ready to be in college. The others aren't. They don't know why they're there (except that everyone else was going, so they did do). They don't know why it's important to learn what I'm teaching them. They don't know what

Kindly & The Ocean

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Field Trip: American Village 3727 Highway 119 S Montevallo, AL 35115 (205) 665-9995

Monday, April 19th 9:00am-12:15pm - They requested that we please arrive promptly. It will take approximately 3 1/2 hours to get to the Village from Tupelo. If anyone is interested in carpooling, send a group-wide e-mail letting everyone know.

Lunch will follow the program. Each family may choose to bring a packed lunch, or order a boxed lunch from Subway, which will be delivered to the American Village. The cost of the Subway lunch is \$5.00 and includes your choice of sandwich (ham, turkey or veggie), a bag of chips and a cookie. A drink is not included with the Subway lunch. You may bring your own from home, or purchase a drink for \$0.75 at the Village.

I am thinking we should be ready to leave the Village between 1:00 and 1:30, allowing most of us to be home around 5:00. If your family has Monday afternoon/night activities and needs to get home earlier, you will be free to leave following the program, which ends around 12:15. The cost is \$9.00 for everyone over 4 years of age - students and adults. Children 4 and under are free. One adult is admitted free with every twenty students. We will prorate this and spread the savings to each family. It won't be much, but every little bit helps.

If you have not done so, please RSVP to Connie Ramsey - 489-5120 (H) 419-8467 (C).

Here is the link to the American Village website. It contains lots of information about the Village, photos, directions and some educational materials:

<http://www.americavillage.org/>

they want to study, and they're simultaneously exasperated by the university requirement to take a wide variety of classes (that's supposed to help them identify what they want to study; it doesn't work all that well).

Students who've taken a gap year are, hands down, easier to teach. They've made a decision to go to college after doing something else—which means that they've also thought about why they're in the classroom. They've had a year away from formal learning; they missed it. And that extra year gives a maturity in responding to authority that just can't be matched. I can usually tell you without looking at my class records which students are nineteen or older. They sit up, waiting to hear what you have to say, and ready to take advantage of it.

The seventeen-year-olds slouch.

I talk to a lot of college juniors who still haven't figured out what they want to study. They're directionless and planless. They're going through the motions, waiting for enlightenment to strike them. But enlightenment's more likely to strike, in my opinion, when you're doing something meaningful—whether that's travel, or volunteerism, or working to save money.

It's also way cheaper to wait for enlightenment while not shelling out thirty thousand a year in tuition and fees.

My oldest son is currently in the middle of his gap year. He finished his high school work in May, spent the summer and fall working at a variety of jobs to save up money for his trip, and left in mid-January.

Over the course of seven months, he's working with three different volunteer organizations (a wildlife rescue program in South Africa, a poverty relief organization working with Indian families in the Rajasthan Desert, and a rainforest conservation project in Australia) as well as spending some time at a martial arts academy in China. He'll be back in mid-August to get ready for his freshman year of college.

I didn't encourage him to take the gap year because he was unmotivated or immature. In fact, he's an over-achieving oldest child: responsible,

conscientious, a reader and a thinker. He was academically capable of going straight into college. But there were several other considerations.

First: he didn't feel passionately about a field of study. He's not directionless—he wants to write, and he's talented—but what to major in? He's sat in on my college classes, which was enough to convince him that being an English major was not the best choice for a would-be writer. (I couldn't agree more—material for another post.) He's taken a couple of journalism courses, but that didn't really thrill him. History, maybe? Psychology? Theatre? Arguments to be made for all of them, and ultimately he's going to have to enroll in survey courses to feel his way towards a major, but a year of simply writing first will go a long way towards helping him get some perspective on this.

Second: it was time for him to have an adventure. On his own. He's eighteen and he's been home educated on a farm in Virginia. Time for him to figure out how to get un-stranded in an international airport; how to decide out whether or not he's getting cheated by a street vendor; time for him to miss his siblings; time to make decisions about where to spend money when it's running short. (OK, he has my credit card for emergencies, but “on his own” doesn't mean “without emergency money.”)

Third, he didn't feel strongly about any particular college. He'd done a bunch of investigating, but nothing really struck him. Well... I'm not going to start paying tuition if he's not thrilled to be there.

For this reason, we ended up waiting a year to apply. Many admissions counselors will tell you to go ahead and apply during the senior year, and then ask for admission to be deferred after you get in. That was my original plan. But he was still hemming and hawing in December of his senior year.

Looking back, I think he felt insecure about the appearance of his high school transcript; he felt like there wasn't quite enough on there, and that it would be stronger if he actually finished out the spring. Now that we've done the transcript and the applications, I actually agree. It looked much stronger in December 2009 than in December 2008.

(Side note: I'll post more on the college applications process later in the spring—I've had to be much more careful about my kids' privacy as they've gotten older, and I don't want to share information until he's settled on a school and told me how much he wants me to broadcast about his application itself. I will say that he's been admitted to two schools with scholarships and hasn't gotten any turn-downs yet—we're still waiting on the rest. But obviously delaying the year to apply didn't torpedo his chances.)

Anyway: once we'd decided to wait on his college applications, his gap year itinerary evolved over five or six months of planning. At first, he just wanted to go work in Australia. I told him he couldn't simply go rent an apartment in Sydney and start looking for jobs—no unless he took his mother, who would be guaranteeing the rent, along with him to apartment-hunt. That didn't seem attractive to him, for some reason.

So he started searching around for international trips that would give him a little more structure. (My advice to him: Look for opportunities that provide room and board—that way, even if you run out of spending money, you won't end up on a gutter without any food.)

In the end, he decided to book his volunteer trips through RealGap, a U.K.-based company that specializes in planning gap and post-graduation years for students. RealGap wasn't the cheapest way to go, but it guaranteed him transportation to and from airports, help with visas, a local contact in each city where he'd be, emergency assistance, and other support. He had several good job opportunities over the summer and fall, so he was fairly sure he could pay for the entire trip. (In the end, I had to loan him some of the airfare; obviously our plans would have been different if I hadn't been able to do that.)

We're obviously still near the beginning of the experience, but his emails and phone calls have been ecstatic. By the time he gets back, a freshman dorm is going to be entirely unchallenging for him. I don't know whether he'll have come any closer to deciding on a field of study (stay tuned), but certainly he'll be a more experienced writer—which means he'll have a better idea of what he still needs to learn.

This article was adapted from blog posts by Susan Wise-Bauer which can be found at www.welltrainedmind.com/blog/ Further information on this topic and links to helpful websites can be found on the original posts.

Preparing for April...

April Headmasters

April 9th - Rick Culp

April 16th - OPEN

April 23rd - OPEN

April 30th - OPEN

Lunch:

April 9th - **Lenny's**

April 16th - **Taco Bell**

April 23rd - **Steak Escape**

April 30th - **Abner's**