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COMMENTARY

Gap Years and College Internships

Good or Bad Ideas?

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Many students choose not to attend college continuously from matriculation to graduation. Reasons for breaks in collegiate tenure abound. One such reason is to participate in a professional internship program, either one found and offered to the student by their academic institution or one the student has discovered and applied to on their own. These programs are methods of on-the-job training which often take place in white collar or professional settings where students work in a field that they are considering as a career. Prior research on such programs has focused on labor market effects, generally finding positive outcomes such as an increased employment probability, higher wages, and a shortened unemployment period immediately following graduation.

Students may also choose to simply take a break from their curriculum. This is known officially as voluntary academic leave, is not to be confused with involuntary leave (academic probation), and known colloquially as taking a "gap" (as in gap year or gap semester). Research on these occurrences has focused on determinants, that is, why students choose to take them.

Much less attention has been given to the immediate academic and other collegiate effects of these breaks in undergraduate tenure. There are several channels through which a tenure break could affect collegiate outcomes. First, compared to students who attend continuously, those who take breaks may find it harder to make connections from previous courses as retention is more difficult over longer periods. Second, there may be readjustment costs to returning to school, that is, it may take time to readjust to college life and studies. Third, taking a leave of absence may affect students' planned course of study in that not all courses may be offered every semester to continue unabated through coursework. Internships may have additional effects including changes in occupational desires and ambitions.

In this study, our analysis estimate the impacts of these two occurrences on a long list of outcomes. We accomplish this by merging longitudinal college student survey data on over 103,500 undergraduate students from 463 different institutions of higher education in the United States. Our empirical techniques include descriptive analysis and hypothesis testing, regression, and propensity score matching. Our rich data set allows us to control for over 40 important student characteristics.

Among our results, we find that, on average, collegiate internships increase post-return study habits, GPAs, graduate school desires, satisfaction with both the institution overall and perceived coursework relevance, full-time post-collegiate job desires, and personal wealth aspirations. Gap years, on the other hand, *decrease* post-return study habits, GPAs, satisfaction with the institution, graduate school desires, the growth of interpersonal skills, and increase the likelihood of preferring a part-time post-collegiate job.

Thus, there are both good and bad types of college breaks. Robustness checks show our estimates hold for both domestic and international students, for both business and non-business majors, and for both normal and extended-tenure (5+ years between matriculation and graduation) students.

The results of our analysis suggest the following educational policy prescriptions. First, college administrators and faculty should champion professional internship programs whenever possible, encourage students to participate, incentivize them to do so, and perhaps devote more resources to expanding such programs. In the case of voluntary academic leave, the reverse is true. Administrators and faculty should discourage students from taking gap semesters and years and perhaps provide disincentives towards these choices. In the form of improved student outcomes, both students and institutions can benefit from such policies. Outside of policy, we also simply encourage students to consider the academic effects of these breaks before opting into them.

The full study can be found in Routon, P. Wesley and Jay K. Walker. 2015. "A Smart Break? College Tenure Interruption and Graduating Student Outcomes." Education Finance and Policy 10(2):244-276.

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