**South Texas College**

News Center

***Is a Gap Year Right for You?***

**Expert Advice for Seizing Opportunities this Fall**

As COVID clouds the higher education skies this fall, an increasing number of graduating high school seniors across the country are considering a “gap year.” Typically defined as a semester-or-longer hiatus devoted to professional development between high school and college, it’s a trend that as many as 750,000 students nationwide plan on following this fall, according to the Gap Year Association.

But is taking a gap year the smart thing to do? According to Dr. Nancy Garcia, Director of Comprehensive Advisement & Mentoring Services, students have options.

“Instead of things being ‘either-or,’ still taking community college classes can be a part of a gap-year plan,” says Dr. Garcia.

Usually, during a gap year, students travel, volunteer, and perform paid work or internships to boost their resumes. While traveling may be out of the picture, students can stay involved, perhaps volunteering with an organization in a career field that interests them. Whether they are working to help support their families or pursuing new interests, there is still time to pick up a few classes and keep moving forward with their education.

“Why not take a lighter course load?” posits Dr. Garcia. “Students can get ahead by taking those classes and still … get a job or volunteer.” Since the bulk of South Texas College’s classes are online, she says it’s the perfect opportunity to make progress, since coursework can be done on students’ own time.

Taking a total break from school could cause problems. Often, students who plan a later start can lose momentum, or even fail to make it back to school at all. Studies show that over half of students who delay their education do not return to earn a bachelor’s degree, according to a recent article by Inside Higher Ed. Even for those who return, there are disadvantages.

“Students who take more time off and come back after years, it’s hard for them,” says Dr. Garcia, who has seen the difficulties firsthand in seven years as the advising director. When students come to college straight from high school, they are used to studying, going to class and doing their homework. Also, their reading, writing and math skills are still fresh in their minds. Dr. Garcia says that for those who come straight from high school, “they’ll likely place at the college-ready level, versus developmental, when students take time off.”

Placing at the developmental level means students have to catch up by taking more classes, delaying their career paths even further. It’s yet another reason why the Federal Reserve Bank of New York stated in a recent analysis that a gap year could cost individuals $90,000 of lifetime earning potential. When college is delayed, careers and years of higher wages are set back.

“Getting into a career pathway as early as you can, that’s a plus,” advises Dr. Garcia. By taking just one, two, or even three classes, students can maintain steady progress toward their goals, and before they know it, find themselves closer to a degree.

“It’s about going slow and steady to keep progressing through that career pathway.”

Nationwide, most students seem to agree. In an annual survey by the College Savings Foundation, more than a third of students reported a plan to either take a break *or* head to community college to save money on tuition. Financial advice sites like NerdWallet are joining the chorus in recommending community colleges as affordable alternatives to university this fall.

“If schools are going to be online, why not come to the most affordable option?” asks Dr. Garcia. “Students can take advantage of the courses we offer at the community college and really save money in the process.”

Long before COVID, South Texas College offered some of the lowest tuition rates in the country. And on top of the already affordable price, more than 75 percent of students avail themselves of some form of financial aid.

That support is only increasing. [STC is offering brand-new dual enrollment and “last dollar” scholarships](https://news.southtexascollege.edu/stc-introduces-cares-act-funded-scholarships-for-fall-2020/) this fall, totaling $1.2 million in funding. Financial aid can even be used to purchase laptops this semester, making online classes more accessible than ever. Says Dr. Garcia, “It’s a really good time for students to take advantage of those [scholarships].”

Across the nation, the loudest complaint from students at four-year universities is that they don’t want to pay $50,000 or more for haphazard virtual instruction. At STC, exceptional *and* affordable online classes have been going strong since 1997. In fact, the College was named among the “30 most innovative online colleges” in the nation, according to Online Schools Center. Among all those ranked, STC rated *number one* in affordability.

By 2018, 10 percent of STC students were taking courses exclusively online, building credits on their own schedules with top-notch instruction and support. With the virtual campus rolling out even more classes online, interest has only increased. Since March, the College has bolstered virtual support, offering more orientations and tutorials, as well as online tutoring sessions, available 24-7.

“We’re known for quality learning in our online programs,” says Dr. Garcia. “It’s the same quality as our other classes, and it gives students the opportunity to do things in their own time.”

According to Dr. Garcia, advisors are seeing more students return from the workforce to take college classes. Some have lost their jobs because of COVID, and now they’re looking for new employment while they are in school — a smart choice, says the administrator.

By enrolling in as little as one class, students have access to the school’s Career & Employer Services, which has moved 100-percent online to help students with their job searches. From resume help to exploring the exclusive student job board for internships and careers, it’s a one-stop shop for an occupational makeover.

This support, coupled with the flexible schedule that online learning provides, lays out a perfect launchpad for students who want to find work. And whether students are returning to college or thinking about higher education for the first time, they can take advantage of free expert advice at STC to ensure they are making the best decisions.

“It’s crucial for students to talk to someone about their current situation,” says Dr. Garcia. “Advisers really care about our students, and they want to make sure students get on the correct career pathway.”

August is typically the school’s busiest month for academic advising, with advisors

making upwards of 10,000 contacts to help students plan for brighter futures. Dr. Garcia urges students who are looking for direction to take advantage of the free service.

In the end, Dr. Garcia says, while COVID may have thrown us a curveball, there’s no need for students to face the crisis alone.

“Anyone considering attending can contact us,” says Dr. Garcia. “It’s about turning a challenge into an opportunity.”

*Sources:*

*There has been a surge of interest in taking time off, as much as 750,000 students, or 30-percent of incoming college freshmen according to the Gap Year Association:*

[*https://www.cnet.com/how-to/should-i-take-a-gap-year-or-service-year-during-coronavirus-here-are-5-good-options/*](https://www.cnet.com/how-to/should-i-take-a-gap-year-or-service-year-during-coronavirus-here-are-5-good-options/)

*Two 2005 studies suggested that students who delay enrollment are 64 percent less likely than their "on-time" peers to complete a bachelor's degree and 18 percent less likely to complete any college credential:* [*https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/05/29/gap-years-and-delayed-enrollment-may-be-concern-during-pandemic#:~:text=Two%202005%20studies%20suggested%20that,to%20complete%20any%20college%20credential*](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/05/29/gap-years-and-delayed-enrollment-may-be-concern-during-pandemic#:~:text=Two%202005%20studies%20suggested%20that,to%20complete%20any%20college%20credential)

*Delaying college during the pandemic takes a financial toll:* [*https://libertystreeteconomics.newyorkfed.org/2020/07/delaying-college-during-the-pandemic-can-be-costly.html*](https://libertystreeteconomics.newyorkfed.org/2020/07/delaying-college-during-the-pandemic-can-be-costly.html)

*College Savings Foundation: more than a third will go to community college or take a gap year:* [*https://fox6now.com/2020/07/03/should-college-aged-students-take-a-gap-year-amid-pandemic/*](https://fox6now.com/2020/07/03/should-college-aged-students-take-a-gap-year-amid-pandemic/)

*When Colleges Say Stay Home: Options for Undergrad, Grad, Veteran and International Students*

[*https://www.nerdwallet.com/article/loans/student-loans/remote-college-fall-2020*](https://www.nerdwallet.com/article/loans/student-loans/remote-college-fall-2020)