

# How to Make the Most of Your Year (or Two) Off

If you're like many Liberal Arts students who are graduating this spring, you may feel compelled to go to grad school... at some point. But after being in school for practically your whole life, it's not uncommon to want to take some time off. In fact, taking time off can be a great opportunity to clarify your goals and get some professional experience before jumping into time intensive and costly graduate programs.

But don't let this time go to waste. You can still be doing a lot to further your career in the years before you pursue graduate school. Staying active during this time will make you a more attractive candidate to grad schools and future employers. Here are a few ways that you can make the most of your time between college and grad school, and have some (productive) fun along the way!

## **1. Get a job – any job!**

Ideally, it is great to find work in the field you hope to pursue in graduate school and beyond. The Career Development Center has countless resources to assist you with this. However, if a lack of qualifications makes this difficult, don't despair! There are often plenty of ways to be gaining relevant experience in closely related fields. If you're interested in counseling or clinical psychology, for example, you may find temporary employment working as a special education paraprofessional in K-12 schools, a personal care attendant, or even a research, policy or administrative assistant in local mental health advocacy organizations. And there is nothing wrong with working as a barista at Starbucks to help you pay the bills! As long as you are being productive in other ways during your time off (see more ideas below) you are still making great progress toward your career goals.

## **2. Volunteer or Intern**

**Volunteering is a great way to stay active in your field**, or to learn more about various career opportunities before committing to further education. Many organizations offer formal volunteer or internship opportunities that you can find by contacting them directly, or by searching databases such as [www.volunteermatch.org](http://www.volunteermatch.org) or [www.handsontwincities.org](http://www.handsontwincities.org). Even if an organization does not have formal volunteer opportunities, take a risk and contact them anyway. You may find that they would be glad to have some extra help that will in turn allow you to build skills and professional relationships in your field.

## **3. Network**

Use your time off to connect with people in your field to learn more about careers, the job market, and recommendations for grad school or future job searches. This is a great time to schedule **informational interviews** to get the advice of professionals and explore the ins and outs of various industries before you commit to a specific field. Start by using **LinkedIn** ([www.Linkedin.com](http://www.Linkedin.com)). You can connect with hundreds of Hamline alums who are eager to talk with students and recent grads. LinkedIn is a great resource to connect with professionals in your field.

#### **4. Find short-term, service employment**

There are many great opportunities available to recent grads through programs such as **Americorps**, **Teach for America** and the **Peace Corps**. Typically, these are short-term service experiences that begin with intensive training and last for one to two years. Though they are not known for generous wages, they offer great benefits such as loan deferment and educational awards. Furthermore, these experiences are highly regarded by grad schools and employers, and it opens you to another network of professionals and alumni associated with the programs.

#### **5. Keep learning**

You may not be ready to jump back into traditional classroom learning right away, but that doesn't mean you want to turn off your brain completely. Take advantage of **community education classes** to learn new skills – public speaking, computer programs, CPR... There are many great ways to continue your learning and add to your resume without being in a formal degree program.

#### **6. Take baby steps toward the grad school application process**

The grad school application process can be daunting, but if you chip away at it little by little, it is absolutely manageable. Work with counselors in the CDC to learn about resources and make a schedule to get it done. Take **the GRE** the summer after you graduate – most grad schools will accept GRE scores for 3-5 years. **Stay in touch with your professors** and keep them posted on your career exploration progress. You'll want to maintain these relationships so they can write effective letters of recommendation. **Begin brainstorming ideas and creating an outline for a personal statement** so you have something to work from when it comes time to submit applications.