

**THE GLOBE AND MAIL** 

# Gap year: Why your kid shouldn't go to school in the fall

erin anderssen

From Friday's Globe and Mail

Published Friday, Feb. 18, 2011 8:41AM EST

Last updated Friday, Mar. 11, 2011 4:03PM EST

---

A virtual rat named Sniffy rescued 20-year-old Daniella Badali from a life she didn't want.

Ms. Badali was in her first year of a psychology degree at the University of Toronto – a program she'd chosen blindly the night before the applications were due, feeling rushed by her teachers and wanting to please her parents. Sniffy was just a computer rodent, but fumbling through her assignment to shock him until he completed a task, she realized she'd made the wrong choice. She didn't want to be a psychologist, she didn't like feeling like a number in an overcrowded university class, and she despaired at her dismal grades. "I know it wasn't for me," she says. "I had no idea why I went to school. My head was all over the place."

She broke the news to her surprised parents at the end of her first year: She wasn't going back. "I held her in my arms and said 'This is not a setback at all,'" recalls her mother, Claudia. "'This is an opportunity for you to try something else.'"

Taking a break from school, in fact, could end up being the best thing Ms. Badali ever did. "I feel like a lot of pressure has been lifted off my shoulders," she says.

In Europe, the gap year – a year off before higher education – is an accepted, and expected, rite of passage. In North America, however, the traditional student track has long been to graduate from high school in June, and arrive at university in September. But amid concerns about persistent dropout rates, researchers say that many students who follow the straight-to-university path find themselves trapped in programs they don't like, burdened by debt and are more likely to quit. The pressure to get to class quickly is shortsighted, experts suggest, especially with recent studies suggesting increasing levels of anxiety – and, according to tests and interviews, little actual learning – among first-year students.

More than 80 per cent of Canadian high-school students will eventually go on to some form of post-secondary education – with about 30 per cent taking more than four months off in between, according to a 2008 Statistics Canada study. Saving money was the most common reason, and student from low-income families were more likely to delay school. Upon graduation, however, a Canadian Council of Learning study found that students who took a gap year were eight per cent more likely to be employed (possibly because of their work experience). They also earned about \$85 less per week than graduates of the same age who went straight through – though this was likely because they'd had less time in the workforce post-university.

A significant portion of students also shift paths after arriving on campus. One 2008 analysis of Statistics Canada data conducted by Queen's University researchers found that, of the 18 per cent

of university and college freshman who dropped out in their first year, nearly half had either switched schools or eventually returned. In fact, many students zigzag through school, with only 54 per cent of students graduating from their original program within five years.

Especially when their parents have university degrees, the majority of stalling students eventually head back to school – ideally when they're less likely to drink away their students loans and more likely to find a career they love.

“Your child will not want to flip burgers or stock shelves forever,” says Michael Ungar, a professor of social work at Dalhousie University who specializes in youth issues. “If they have any desire for a middle-class lifestyle, they will have to pursue a post-secondary education.”

---

© 2011 The Globe and Mail Inc. All Rights Reserved.