

Understanding Gap Year Decisions Among Chinese International Graduate Students in the United States

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Abstract

"The concept of a "gap year" is commonly understood as the break taken between high school and university. However, there is a notable lack of research on gap years occurring between undergraduate and graduate studies, especially among international students. The existing literature provides some insights into this phenomenon. Zhang et al. (2022) and Trice (2003) have investigated the influence of cultural and societal expectations on students' decisions to take gap years. Li et al. (2017) have underscored familial pressures as a significant factor. Additionally, Flippen (2021) discusses the added complexities due to the shift to virtual platforms and the broader implications of the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, there remains a significant gap in our understanding of the specific motivations and challenges faced by Chinese international students in the United States. This student demographic has encountered unprecedented challenges during the pandemic, such as travel restrictions, visa issues, and a surge in anti-Asian sentiment. Understanding why and how these students navigate these challenges by choosing to take a gap year is crucial. It offers invaluable insights for the development of responsive educational policies and support systems, enhancing the educational experience and well-being of international students. Therefore, this study aims to address this literature gap by focusing on the motivations and decisions of these students during this transitional period and investigating potential cultural, personal, familial, or societal factors contributing to their decision-making processes.

At the time of submission, the current study conducted semi-structured interviews with eight Chinese international graduate students. Four of these students had taken a gap year between their undergraduate and graduate studies, while the remaining four did not take a gap year. Deductive thematic coding was performed to uncover significant patterns in the decision-making processes of those students. The study's preliminary findings reveal a complex scenario in which Chinese students grapple with balancing traditional values against their quest for self-exploration and development. These findings include: (1) a struggle between cultural identity and the anxiety associated with age and career trajectories, influenced by age-based cultural norms; (2) the major disruption caused by COVID-19, affecting career planning, visa issues, physical location, and psychological distress; (3) the role of gap years

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in both clarifying and hindering career development; (4) financial considerations; and (5) linguistic challenges. Additionally, these preliminary findings highlight the influence of age, gender, and educational background on opting for a gap year. The findings shed light on the intricate interplay of personal, cultural, and global factors influencing the gap year decisions of Chinese international graduate students. They underscore the urgent need for educational reforms that acknowledge cultural diversity, provide mental health support, and understand the evolving identities of students in international educational contexts. Additionally, this research aims to contribute to enriching academic discourse. It seeks to empower parents to offer more effective support and guide prospective students in making well-informed decisions about taking gap years."

Keywords: Gap Year, Chinese International Students, Cultural Norms, Pandemic Impact, Educational Decisions