

A POST GRADUATE YEAR; WHAT'S THAT? by Brian Fisher, AdmissionsQuest, Inc.

What Is a Post-graduate?

I used the term PG- colloquial for post-graduate - yesterday with a friend of ours- a Mississippi public high school principal. He looked back at me shaking his head, perplexed, having no idea what I meant. I realized what I had done as he asked, "What's a PG?"

I explained, in simplest terms, that a post-graduate or PG is a student who, for a myriad of reasons, has chosen to take an additional year of secondary school before moving into a collegiate environment.

Why?

A post-graduate year is not something for which family and student begin planning when their child is born. No one begins kindergarten saying "I'm going to move through primary and secondary school; then, I'm going to do a post-graduate year before I go to college." Reasons and motivations for post-graduate experiences vary as much as the students themselves.

As Lisa Antell, Admission Director at Bridgton Academy, explains:

"More than 1/2 the kids who start college don't finish, ever. The average time it takes to get a bachelor's degree is six years and only 37% finish in 4 years now

There's a big disconnect between the kinds of skills that kids develop in high school and what they're expected to do when they get to college."

Students may pursue a post-graduate experience as part of pursuing a particular college or university for which they found themselves unprepared after their traditional senior high school year. Other students may have graduated from high school chronologically or emotionally young, and these students and their families consider post-graduate experience in a desire to bolster a student's maturity. Some students may need to shore up their academic and emotional foundations before moving into their collegiate experience. Junior college serves as the answer for many students needing more development. But for some, a post-graduate experience may provide the best pre-collegiate stepping stone.

Who Takes a Post-graduate Year- a sampling?

Post-graduate athletes may work to achieve admission to a particular or stronger athletic program than they might have entered straight out of high school.

A focused course of study provides the impetus for some post-graduate students. Each year, a group of young men attends Bridgton Academy as part of pursuing admission to the Naval Academy.

Academic growth shapes the pursuit of many post-graduates. Some post-graduates work to improve grades, take more advanced placement courses, or work

toward admission to a more academically competitive college. Students from a large, institutional, high school setting may choose a PG year to develop academic skills such as critical reading and writing.

Special needs students diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or other learning differences may use a PG year to build their skills foundations.

A bump in the road such as illness, divorce, an untimely family death, may lead some students and families to consider a post-graduate year.

What Can Students Learn or Gain from a Post-graduate Year?

In three words, confidence, maturity, and time. Having chosen to invest extra time and effort in their education, post-graduates enter their PG year with a clarity of purpose: they invest themselves because they want to do well.

Confidence and maturity result from choosing to pursue the post-graduate year and successfully completing the experience. Time results from the decision to take the extra year and work through the college admission process in a more focused and purposeful manner.

Beyond personal growth, a PG year can open doors to college and post secondary programs that may previously have been beyond the student's reach.

How Colleges See a PG Year

A successful post-graduate experience can provide a degree of certainty and confirmation that a student may previously have lacked. Lisa Antell, Admission Director of Bridgton Academy explains:

“College admission officers appreciate any program or course of study that’s going to enhance the chances of that student’s success upon matriculation.

Colleges know in getting a post-graduate student that, chances are, he’s been away from home; he’s developed independence. Chances are he will be less of an admission risk than a student coming straight out of high school.”

Students in post-graduate programs also benefit from the smaller, more personalized college counseling offices of independent schools. Students live among, work with, and often are coached by, faculty who recommend them in the college application process. Recommendations written with insight available only from living in the closely connected communities of prep schools often prove insightful, forceful, and effective.

What’s it Like?

No two post-graduate programs are the same, but most begin with the common threads of a residential or boarding school experience coupled with a curriculum

designed to improve and build the skills and abilities necessary for a successful collegiate experience.

Residentially, a post-graduate program will take a student away from home, give him or her a roommate, and allow some degree of autonomy about how he/she manages time. Within this communal living environment, students will learn and practice everything from community building to sharing personal space

Some schools will have post-graduate student life much like that of a high school with little difference between 12th grade students and post-grads, while a post-graduate specific school, such as Bridgton Academy, offers a much more collegiate experience.

Not Only Boarding School: Day Student Post Graduates

Post-graduate programs are not limited to only boarding schools. Most post-graduate programs include a boarding component, but day schools offer post-graduate opportunities as well. Day student programs differ significantly in their approaches to post-grad students and in the totality and focus of their programs.

Without a boarding component, day school post-graduate programs focus much more on academics with less emphasis on maturity, community living, social growth, and athletics.

Day School post-graduate programs tend to draw students who like where they are. With positive home and social lives, day school post-graduates focus primarily on academics during their PG year. The day student post-graduate year often results as a response to college acceptances - choices that the student does or doesn't have as a result of college admission process.

Without any boarding or social components the day student post-graduate experience is much more like an extra year of high school albeit with flexibility to focus on particular academic areas. Day school post-graduates may be released from academic distribution requirements in order to focus on particular needs. As an example, this may include taking two math classes with one math class substituted for a history requirement. Flexibility results from the fact that the student possesses a high school diploma.

Karen Briggs, Admission Director at the Newman School in Boston, explains: "Day student post-graduates tend to like where they are. They feel the need to fix their academics."

Academics

All post-graduate programs work to build the academic skills needed for collegiate achievement. But this inclusive goal is nuanced from program to program. Academically strong schools will offer many advanced placement courses and,

possibly, courses for collegiate credit, while some PG programs focus on fundamental skills.

Almost all post-graduate programs provide students with access to faculty and a closely knit academic community that can only be found in the smaller school setting of an independent school.

Tom Burke, a PG at Brewster Academy, talks about his academic growth: “Here, I have a great English teacher. He’s opened up music and movies that I’ve never thought about and never looked at...Stuff that I’d never seen before. There are so many different people here; you learn so much.”

Rethinking-Broadened Perspectives-Personal Growth

Exposure to new perspectives and new environments may bring about some changes in priorities and perspectives for a post-graduate student. As the students and their interactions influence each other, a post-graduate may think about making a geographical leap when choosing a college. Some PG students may rethink the size of college that they want to attend. Potential college athletes may rethink or reaffirm their athletic/academic balance.

Again, Tom Burke, of Brewster Academy, provides student insight:

“I came here thinking that I was going to play hockey. A ton of guys went out for the team and I ended up not making it, which was a setback. It crossed my mind leaving because, being a kid, I was thinking that I was just here for hockey. It’s (hockey) not everything. I’m definitely going to play on a division III or club team. I’ve realized that it’s (hockey) not everything.”

The Post-graduate Admission Process

No road map exists for finding or applying to post-graduate programs. Educational consultants Marvin and Renee Goldberg of Options in Education suggest that students who are unsure about their plan beyond high school apply to both college and post-graduate programs. Evaluate the student’s position and make your decisions after visiting colleges and prep schools. The object, as a student, is to give yourself options while finding the best setting for your continuing growth.

Lisa Antell of Bridgton Academy suggests beginning with one of the independent school guides using the post-graduate program index. Call the admission directors of the schools that interest you. Ask the admission directors questions. They want a good fit between school and student more than anyone. If the fit isn’t good, “We’re happy to suggest other schools,” explains Lisa Antell.

To find a school with a student and college profile similar to the one that you need, ask to look at the school’s college acceptance list from the last few years. This provides the best indications of the type of student and quality of college guidance offered by each school.

When visiting a school, ask to speak with current post-graduate students. Then, ask the admission office for post-graduate parent references.

A Good Fit Between Student and School

Parents should work to make sure that a PG applicant's prospective school has the resources that fit the student's needs and goals. Signposts for a good fit include:

- Knowing your student's strength and weaknesses and openly communicating about them.
- Be open about any previous bumps in the road - anything that affected the student's previous achievement - illness, divorce, learning difference, etc.
- Does the school have enough post-graduates to provide a PG peer group?
- Quality of academics. Does the student fit within the school's academic profile?
- College counseling. Is it strong? Does it begin immediately?
- Athletics and extracurriculars: Are student and school matched?
- Does the school teach any collegiate courses that provide college credits?

The goal is to make sure that the post-graduate applicant fits within the profile of the school's academic, social, and athletic lives.

Parental Expectations

The post-graduate year, while a great and little known tool, is exactly that, a tool. It is not a magic wand or elixir. Students and families must enter the potential of a PG year with eyes open and heads up.

Parents and students need to articulate their goals from the outset. Know the goals before the start; evaluate and study the goals, and make sure that they fit with what the school can provide and the student can achieve. Hidden and poorly articulated goals lead to negative experiences. Dream and work hard toward the PG year goals, but insure that they are realistic.

The cost is high, but don't let the cost prohibit the possibility of a PG before exploring the financial aid and financing options. The post-graduate year is an investment.

**Expert Help Is Available:**

As with all school considerations and questions, if you're interested in greater expertise and a professional perspective, consider a member of the Independent Educational Consultants Association. To learn more about educational consulting and the services of educational consultants, visit www.iecaonline.com.

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