

By the middle of his second semester, right before Duke canceled in-person classes and sent students home for the semester, Babu, 19, who asked to omit his last name, felt he was finally hitting his stride. The first semester of his freshman year was stressful and chaotic in the way that the first semester of college always is. But by spring break, he felt he'd made a solid group of friends and was getting the hang of college.

Then the school shut down out of concern for the quickly worsening coronavirus pandemic, and he's been living at home with his parents in Chapel Hill ever since. Even though Duke is bringing a limited number of students back to campus this semester, as cases in North Carolina remain high, Babu, like hundreds of other students around the country, is sitting the semester out.

"I trust Duke, but the situation in North Carolina is such that no reopening plan is going to end up working," Babu told VICE. He filled out a form requesting a semester off in late May, and by June, was officially unenrolled for the fall semester, owing no tuition or fees as long as he's not in school. Instead of going back to campus, Babu's flying out to L.A. this fall to live with his sister and work as an intern (likely remotely) for LA city councilmember Bob Blumenfield.

Whether taking gap semesters or deferring first-time admission, college students across the country are taking time off from school as a direct result of conditions created by COVID-19. Schools told VICE they're fielding multiple times the normal amount of deferral requests from first-year students, who'd rather take no classes at all than be introduced to college via remote learning, or sit in classrooms worried about the ongoing pandemic.

Colleges and universities have all sorts of hodge podge plans for teaching during the pandemic: Some are operating fully in person while others have canceled all in-person learning, only offering classes online. But, according to a routinely updated survey of nearly 3,000 schools in the United States by the Chronicle of Higher Education, the vast majority fall somewhere in between, giving students schedules with a mix of in-person and online classes. Some 25 percent have yet to finalize plans at all.

Instead of paying full tuition for online class (something students generally don't like) or gambling with the possibility of arriving back on campus and moving in, only to be sent home again in the case of an outbreak, students like Babu are skipping the year on their own terms. With the platonic ideal of a gap year spent traveling or WOOFing somewhere off the table because of the pandemic, students told VICE they're planning on using this time to pay off already crippling student debt, work internships that serve their degrees, and pursue personal projects. Most of them are doing all of this from family homes they've been living in since March.

Like Babu, Elizabeth Olshanetsky, 19, a rising sophomore at Yale, decided to take a gap semester when Yale announced that sophomores wouldn't be allowed to live on campus or take in-person classes this semester, in an effort to minimize the number of people around the school. "When Yale made this decision, I was like, *OK this is tough*," she said. She didn't want to sit in her dorm room, taking online school, but she also didn't want to miss graduating with her friends.

### Life

6 College Students on Going Back to School During the Pandemic

Ultimately, she decided a semester of classes only, no socializing, wasn't worth it. "I'm first-generation American, my parents went to college in the Soviet Union. My dad didn't really know what the consequences of taking a gap semester would be, in terms of job hiring and everything. But

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I explained to him that the reason I chose Yale was not just for the classes, but to actually have a college experience.”

She’s spending the upcoming semester interning from home for Republic Labs, an investing company, and continuing to write for her personal blog, on which she tracks startups in NYC. “If somebody were to ask me what my dream job is right now, it’s exactly what I’m doing,” Olshanetsky said.

Ryan Foxx, 19, is also taking the semester off, and may not even return to their original school. Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, where Foxx went as a freshman last year, is one of the schools doing a hybrid approach, holding a shortened semester that goes fully online after Thanksgiving break. “It was only going to be three months of in-person classes, and then you do your liberal arts classes online,” Foxx said. “Just the thought of leaving my home state, which is Colorado, risking my health in a city, and then going to classes and not really getting the education I felt like I was paying for... That’s why I deferred for the fall.”

Foxx plans to work while living with their mom for the next few months, trying to earn money to start paying off mounting college debt. “With the time off [since March], I’ve had a lot of time to think about student debt, and what I’m actually getting myself into,” they said. “We’re expecting 17 and 18 year olds to make a huge financial risk for a career they don’t know they’re going to have in four years. I made that financial risk, and have student debt over the national average, after *one year*. It’s just a lot of money, and it feels like your money isn’t going toward the thing that it should.”

Foxx said they’ll likely return to school in the spring or next fall, but at a new school, with lower tuition that’s more affordable. Foxx’s school, like countless others across the country, raised its tuition this school year, in a routine move that feels, to a lot of students, like a slap in the face during a pandemic and recession with record levels of unemployment. Also, students don’t generally like online classes. After schools were forced to go remote in the spring, colleges were hit with more than 100 class action lawsuits filed by students, seeking reimbursement for tuition, fees, and room and board expenses. Online classes weren’t worth the money they paid in tuition, and certainly aren’t worth the higher cost.

### Identity

People Who Stayed Home For College Share Their Best Partying Tips

KATIE WAY

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Amanda Bennett, a rising junior at the University of San Francisco, is also taking the upcoming semester off, and is thinking for the first time transferring to a community college or less expensive school.

“My school decided to keep their tuition the same—the cost of attendance being about \$70K/year—despite all classes being remote, and that is not something my family and I can afford at this time,” Bennett told VICE in an email. “Because of this decision and their little-to-no attempts to aid students that are experiencing financial setbacks due to the pandemic, I have decided to potentially transfer to a community college or a cheaper institution.”

According to a June survey of more than 10,000 students from more than 200 schools, more than half of U.S. college students say they can no longer afford tuition. Seven percent of those surveyed said they unenrolled, either to get jobs or go to school somewhere else.

In response to concern about returning to campus during the pandemic, unaffordable tuition, and an unwillingness to take online classes, schools around the country tell VICE they've fielded higher than usual numbers of deferral requests from first-year students. News eng. (3)

"In a given year, UCF typically sees between 50 and 60 first-time-in-college students request to change their admission term post-admission offer," Rachel Williams, a spokesperson for the University of Central Florida, told VICE. "This year, we have received 350 requests to date."

Texas A&M, the largest university system in the country, similarly said it received more deferral requests than normal, but only "marginally so," and mostly from international students. Both UCF and Texas A&M will reopen on a hybrid schedule this month, with students taking a mix of in-person and online classes until Thanksgiving break, when the schools go fully remote.

MIT, with its much smaller class size, also reported a significant increase in deferral requests. "There were 87 first-year students who have opted to defer their admission until next year, which is about 8 percent of first-year students," Stu Schmill, MIT's Dean of Admissions, said in an emailed statement. "Typically, between 10 and 15 students, representing about 1 percent of admitted students, will defer in a given year."

MIT added that it planned for an increase in deferrals, and still plans to admit the same number of students for fall 2021, which may or may not also be affected by continuing waves of the pandemic. Students who took gap semesters said they'll wait to see how things are shaping up midway through this semester, then make a decision about the spring. Babu said he has to give Duke a decision by October, but it'd be hard for him to go back without a widely available vaccine. Even though he's continuing to work out in L.A., he's treating this time off as a much-needed break from school that he's always wanted to take, but wouldn't have considered seriously before the pandemic.

### Life

A Beginner's Guide to Getting an Education Without Going to College

ZOÉ SAMUDZI

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"Even if this whole year ends up being like, not very good or not very fun or whatever, it's something different," he said. "I have all my friends and I don't want to graduate without them, but I think this gave me the excuse I needed, to be like, *I should do this, I can do this.*"

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hit one's stride, get the hang of, sit out, end up, all sorts of, minimize, socialize, consequence, hybrid, defer, a slap in the face, reimburse, setback, marginally,

Have you hit your stride at MU? How long did it take? If you haven't hit your stride yet, what is preventing you?

Use two adjectives to describe your freshman year.

How many solid friendships do you have? How do you know they are solid?

People have been affected by COVID-19 in all sorts of ways. How has it affected you?

It was hard to get the hang of .....

..... felt like a slap in the face.

..... is certainly worth the higher cost.

When have you taken a much-needed break?

Has COVID-19 inspired you to change your life?

Did you consider sitting the semester out?

Do you think our campus will reopen this semester? Do you worry about sitting in a classroom?

What's your opinion of taking a gap year? If you took one, what would you do?

What is your opinion of MU's plans for teaching this semester?

Are online classes worth it in your opinion?

Miss Olshanetsky wants to actually have a college experience. What do you think she means?

Do you feel you are really getting the education you are paying for?

What is one thing you agree with in this article?

What is one thing you disagree with in this article?

What is one thing that surprised you about this article?