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Development in the Gap: A Case Study of Emerging Adults in Structured Gap Programs

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Development in the Gap: A Case Study of the Emerging Adult in Structured Gap Programs

A Dissertation Presented
by

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Submitted to the Graduate School of Education

Lesley University

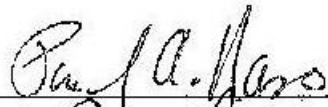in partial fulfillment of the requirements
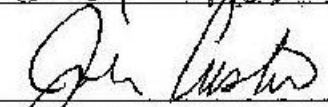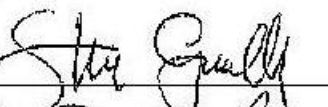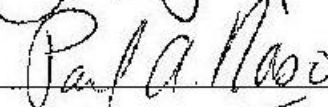
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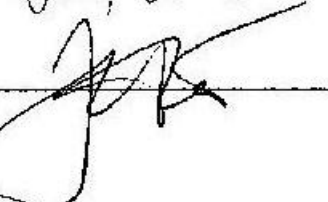
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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Ph.D. Educational Studies
Educational Leadership Specialization

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Approvals

In the judgment of the following signatories, this Dissertation meets the academic standards that have been established for the Doctor of Philosophy degree.

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examined the 18-24-year-old population of undergraduate students at one northeast, public university who participated in a structured gap program between their secondary and post-secondary schooling. Data were collected in three phases. Study participants emerged from an initial questionnaire that invited participation from the eligible university population of 3,355 students. Data included survey responses from 100 students, interviews with four respondents, and a case study of one informant. The four student interviews occurred on the university campus in audio recorded, face-to-face appointments. One of the interviewees, Caitlin, became the focus of an instrumental case (Stake, 1994) that reported the factors that led to her gap decision and her experience within the Student Conservation Association. Caitlin's case was based on her survey responses; interview data; follow-up interview data; and photos, postings, and journal entries from her social network account which she maintained during her gap period and her university experiences. Additional narrative data about Caitlin's case resulted from interviews with other informants to whom Caitlin provided access. The findings detailed the pivotal events and critical features of structured gap programs, evidence of personal development, and the factors of access and support involved with attending a structured gap year program. Informants gave evidence that structured gap year programming provided them with the opportunities to build resilience, become self-directed, relate to people, find independence, and define their passion. Findings reveal how participation in these programs fosters dispositions indicating greater likelihood that the student will enroll in college and persist toward degrees. The findings also give reason to both high school guidance and college advising programs to consider the role gap programming may serve in addressing the ephebagogical needs of the

emerging adult and spur post-secondary institutions to appraise the extent to which they

endorse and credential these experiences for young people.

Key terms: gap year, emerging adulthood, ephebagogy, college preparation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DEDICATION

I dedicate this study in gratitude to all of the students that participated in this inquiry and to all

the students whom these results will affect. Three liturgies guide my interest in this topic and

affirm my dedication to students in this vibrant age of learning. First, the quote from philosopher

Epictetus, "We must not believe the many, who say that only free people ought to be educated,

but we should rather believe the philosophers who say that only the educated are free." In a

country where the rising cost of education is quickly becoming oppressive, we must reaffirm our

commitment to freedom through education. Second, the quote from philosopher Cicero: "The

diligent farmer plants trees of which he himself will never see the fruit." Time is a commodity

that no human technology can create. Development takes time. Our students need time and we

have the power to give that to them. Creating a culture around allowing this time is going to take

educational leaders some time. Finally, the liturgy of my faith as a Unitarian Universalist brought

me to the work that brought me to this curiosity. In this study I affirm and promote the inherent

worth and dignity of every student. As an educational leader, I seek justice, equity, and

compassion for each of them. They need acceptance of who they are and encouragement toward

physical, intellectual, and spiritual growth because they deserve the free and responsible search

for truth and meaning. Learning communities have the right to conscience and students deserve

access to a democratic process. In this, we can strive toward the goal of world community and

respect for the interdependent web of all life. This is for our students in the tradition of Edith

Lesley Wolfard who designed her school, "to be different; to consider the individual of basic

importance; to inculcate the ideal of gracious living; and to foster the traditions of American

democracy." Just as Mrs. Wolfard helped to put kindergarten in our schools, let us build schools

for the sorts of learning to which we are only just awakening.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

It is difficult to tell exactly when the term "gap year" became a buzzword in our culture. We have come to understand that a gap year is a period of time a student chooses to take between graduating from high school and entering higher education or the workforce. Taking a gap year, often called by various names, is a relatively familiar practice of giving a young person some time to go on an adventure, face a challenge, or experience a rite of passage on their way to becoming an adult.

In my job as a director of public adult and community education for the past eight years, I have interacted with a large number of students who seem to have missed the opportunity to explore themselves as people on their way into the adult and post-graduate world. In my home district context, I encounter alternative education high school students, high school dropouts, school-aged special education students, families who school at home, and adult learners. I work with high school students who arrive at graduation with panic, and I frequently meet with young adults who have graduated but high school never really prepared them for the next steps.

I identify with these students because I was one of them. In high school, my experiences became disenchanting and rather than dropping out, I found alternative ways to finish early and move on to college. I entered a graphic design degree program, which made my parents happy. When I failed there, I entered a business administration degree program, which seemed to appease the faculty and my advisor. When I failed at that, the college placed me on academic suspension and encouraged me to reevaluate my goals.

Embarrassed and frustrated, I was fortunate enough to have highly involved parents and a family who valued education and did not tolerate surrendering to the college's decision. It took time, but I eventually found my place and went on to have a successful and fulfilling educational

experience. I was not from an affluent family, but I was certainly from a family wealthy with

support and confidence that I could succeed. During college, I maintained full-time employment

and I was able, on my own, to pay for excursions to foreign countries, professional training,

adventure recreation, and other enriching opportunities. I am fortunate in that I was able to gain

access to these things. I did recognize, however, that there is a disparity in opportunities for the

students who need these the most.

In my hometown, typical students who are neither overtly privileged nor profoundly

needy were not as prone to know about or consider experiences beyond academics. For example,

students from wealthy families could attend a National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS)

excursion. Parents of a youth involved with juvenile justice might send their student on an

Outward Bound (OB) Intercept excursion. Special education students were involved in the

Special Olympics or publicly funded therapeutic recreation programs such as horseback riding. I

was fortunate to access these without wealth, delinquency, or disability. Of these, the only

eligible group to which a student can *choose* [emphasis added] to belong is the delinquent.

In my duties as a director of an adult and community education program, I meet students

who need the kind of support offered by gap programs toward their development. I work with

students hobbled by poor college entrance choices resulting in various consequences. Their

circumstances prevent them from reentering because of financial aid default, lack of aid, lack of

access to developmental opportunities, and even the stigma of needing extra time that often

negatively affects their self-confidence.

My personal and professional experiences have caused my interest in transition period

learning to grow. I am interested in post-graduate, gap year programs for the students who have

completed secondary education before entering higher learning or the workforce. It occurs to me

that research about the importance and meaning of gap year programs will allow educational

planners and policy makers to start a conversation about availability and access.

Exploring the nature of existing gap year programs and their participants may offer

helpful insight for secondary education planners and policy makers. I am interested in knowing if

the student experience within these programs can inform how we prepare high school students

for upcoming transitions. There is reason for us to question whether a four-year, secondary

program is the only preparation a student needs for college entrance and whether all students

who arrive at university directly from high school are ready to take on college-level

responsibilities. Our society has systematically created a situation where education is more

expensive than ever and simultaneously is more necessary than ever. In creating this urgency, we

have added increased detriment to the college decision-making process. The problem is that

unwise college entrance potentially wastes already slim resources.

Statement of the Problem

The problem this study addresses is the frequently reported problem of young people who

leave secondary school experiences unprepared for the choices of the adult world (Harte, 2013;

La Du, 2013). Students enter the postgraduate world with an array of choices in front of them.

These choices include enrollment in higher education, employment, enlistment in military

services, and engagement in other enriching pursuits. These enriching pursuits can include

athletics, arts, and faith. At this time, we operate our secondary schools as feeders to only one of

those pathways: college. We have reason to question whether our students are ready and fully

informed of all of their choices as they pertain to college and careers (Harte, 2013; La Du, 2013;

Marklein, 2012; The College Board, 2013).

America also appears to be in the midst of what Sir Ken Robinson has called academic

inflation (2006) where various credentials no longer carry the same importance. A high school

diploma, on face value, does not make a person employable any longer. Likewise, labor-based jobs formerly accepting high school graduates are now looking for technical and vocational degrees (Harte, 2013). In many internet chat spaces and social media platforms there is a new term: "degreeification" (Biffo, 2011). Job market analysts, Burning Glass Technologies, refers to this phenomenon as "upcredentialing" (2014, p. 1). Sir Ken Robinson calls this, "academic inflation" (2006). These terms refer to the ascription of higher requirements for jobs alongside an absence of noticeable duty changes. The degreeification, or upcredentialing, of jobs means that *all* [emphasis added] students must be ready, willing, and able to go to college immediately upon graduating from high school if they are to meet that standard. As society increasingly expects all students to attend higher education, society challenges schools to address the individual learning needs of students who may not be "college material." Gap year programming may be the additional attention that young people need if they are in this group.

Many fields have concerned themselves with the events of passing into adulthood. Society approaches this topic with curiosity and fascination. We explore this passing through art, literature's bildungsroman, psychology, and anthropology's rites of passage to name a few. Educational systems of transitioning young people into the adult world have existed in many societies including Scandinavia and America. The two, however, have addressed the challenge dissimilarly. Since the mid 1800s, the Nordic states have included a system of education they call the Folkehøjskole in their publicly funded, comprehensive plans. The folk high school exists for allowing newly minted high school graduates to spend one or two, optional, extra years on development and maturation (Bagley & Rust, 2009). Based on my initial examination of program literature and marketing materials, the most closely related American cousin to this system is the private, gap year program industry. Many of the program missions, methods, and

themes are identical. What are not identical are the prices of participation and the source of funding.

Many American, postgraduate, gap year programs are exclusive due to program prices and funding sources. Gap year programming has emerged as a robust industry and it is an industry relying on students and their families having faith in the educational and developmental benefits of these programs. This is evident at events like the Gap Year Fairs (USA Gap Year Fairs, 2014) held each winter in locations such as Philips at Andover, Massachusetts. These opportunities rely on the families' ability to pay. While there are some structured gap year programs operating by grants and benefactors, many of them carry tuitions rivaling those of many colleges. The reality is that lack of ability to pay has the potential to exclude a family from many opportunities. There are, however, a number of programs that vary in price and funding options (USA GYF, 2014; Mohn, 2006) but the fact remains that a family must anticipate some cost.

The consequence of not treating this problem with a sense of urgency is students may waste money on college programs that do not suit them or their situations. Students may choose their own post-graduate path and there are many disciplines from which to choose among college degree programs. We might be sending students on journeys, however, that are ultimately a waste of their time. College attrition rates and the rates of persistence to degree suggest that the first year of college is a time of great loss from the college population. Similarly, the rates at which students do not persist to degrees suggest something is happening to our students causing them to abandon their original plans. Even when students persist to degrees, research has shown an average, declared student changes their major from three to five times (BUC, 2013). Students develop ideologies and achieve a sense of self through exploring societal issues and wrestling

with new experiences. Students who have not explored societal issues and wrestled with new

experiences are more apt to waste time, money, and effort in unsuitable college and career

pathways for lack of self-awareness (BUC, 2013; Harte, 2013, La Du, 2013, Marklein, 2012).

      The challenge lies in finding clarity regarding the following circumstances and claims.

Society is placing a higher demand and emphasis on college degrees. High schools claim to

prepare all students for college. Some students need extra time and experiences that are more

robust in order to meet that demand. Gap year programs claim to offer that extra time and robust

experience (USA GYF, 2014; Martin, 2014; Platt & Brooks, 2014). The gap year industry is an

exclusive opportunity. There appears to be a locked cycle of events where privilege begets

privilege as explained by the Matthew Effect[1] (Rigney, 2010).

      Detractors from gap year programming would say school should be competitive and

instantly gratifying. They would say giving a student more time to prepare unnecessarily delays

the gratification of college completion. Giving a student time away from academics in order to

explore, learn non-academic lessons, and learn more about themselves does not award credit

toward degrees. Gap periods appear to be lost time in the competitive arena of career attainment

and college completion. To students who are not spending their time making quantifiable gains

toward college degree completion, there are critics who would say these programs waste time

that delays success as defined by degree achievement. In response to the concern that taking a

gap year negatively impacts a student's marketability to preferred colleges, many higher learning

institutions have begun to market gap time with guaranteed re-application consideration

(Fitzsimmons, McGrath, & Ducey, 2011; Selingo, 2014).

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[1] The Matthew Effect, from the book of Matthew 25:29, that states, "For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath."

Purpose of the Study

I intend to learn about the phenomenon of student participation in structured gap year programs as an alternative to enrolling directly in higher education after high school. I am particularly interested in forming an understanding of what these experiences do for the participant in such programs. Central to the results of this study are what the students perceive to be the critical events and pivotal moments of their gap year experience. In addition to the self-reported student experience, I collected data about the factors that influenced their entry to the programs as well as the supportive structures that affected their entry. I am interested in knowing whether the students report a different experience in composite categories. The purpose of this study was to capture those student voices in order to answer the following three inquiries:

- What do students report were the critical features and pivotal events of their experiences in gap year programs?

- What evidence do students report about the impact that their experiences and expectations of post-graduate, gap year programs had on their personal development?

- What were the factors and conditions of the students' access to gap year programs?

The study seeks to discover the kinds of experiences gap year program participants have had. The study urges students to share which elements of the program structure were most engaging and affirming for them. Similarly, the study benefits from what the students claim were distancing and confusing about the programs. Based on a review of program claims and testimonials from industry marketing materials, and researcher first-hand experience, I suspected the students would respond with mostly positive feedback about these programs. Arnett (2002),

in his work on emerging adults, states that face-to-face interview and interpersonal data

collection are the most effective methods for gathering information from this age group. Student

voices formed this narrative.

Further, I sought to understand how students perceive the post-graduate, gap year

experience contributed to their personal development. Due to the emerging adult's self-centered

worldview (Arnett, 2002), it was most illuminating for the respondents to express themselves

through anecdotal tales rather than to ask them to make broader, reflective statements about the

impact of these programs on their personal development. I believed that in reviewing student

responses, my analysis of their answers would draw conclusions about personal development

more effectively than an adolescent perception of their own development. Other parties such as

parents, higher education institutions, employers, and educators could potentially answer this

question. The student perspective, however, is the goal of this study. The students' anecdotes and

answers to survey questions and interview prompts had twofold benefit. First, their responses

informed the study of student perspective. Second, the prompt to share allowed the student to

reflect on their own words thus helping them reconsider the experience or re-examine their own

thoughts and feelings about the experience.

Additionally, I asked whether students report their experiences in the post-graduate, gap

year program matched their expectations. Naturally, the expectation of an event and the actual

event can have discrepancies. I am interested in finding out from the students whether the

program met or did not meet the expectations leading them to partake and whether there were

any surprising or puzzling experiences. Helpful to this question was Stephen Brookfield's model

of the Critical Incident Questionnaire (1996). This model uses five essential and mutable

questions to prompt reflection for the purposes of learning from experiences or incidents. These

five questions appear in the initial survey tool as a means for spotting themes and patterns for further interviewing. What follows is an explication of the guiding questions that drove the purpose of this study.

First, what do students report were the critical features and pivotal events of their experiences in gap year programs? I would like to know what students report are their experiences in gap year programs. The purpose was to compile their stories about what they did, what they especially remember, what they consider important about the experience, and what impressions the experience made on them. When asked to tell stories about the critical events and pivotal moments, I would like to learn what students identify as having the most impact.

Second, what evidence do students report about the impact that their experiences and expectations of post-graduate, gap year programs had on their personal development? Through survey responses and interviews, I would like to know if students report that their reasons for wanting to attend these programs matched the results they feel they achieved. It is also important for the researcher to contextualize what the students perceived to be the skills needed for college, career, and adult life. Based on their perceptions of those expectations, it was important to discover if the students believe their gap year program experiences helped them to excel in these areas.

Third, the study would be remiss not to explore the subject of access to gap year programs. What were the factors and conditions affecting the students' access to gap year programs? Because a majority of gap year industry offerings bear a cost, it was important for the research to discover whether the impact of cost and funding holds important data for the implications of this study. It was also important to discover what the contributing factors were if a student was interested in gap year programming but was unable to access it. To this end, I

programmed the initial survey tool to collect data from students who indicated interest. There were results that represent free opportunities, cost-bearing programs, and programs for which external funding may be accessed by some students. Because access is not simply a question about money, I attempted to understand the supportive structures that students have experienced as well. Students were able to share information such as how they knew gap programs were available to them, why they ultimately chose to participate, as well as who may have helped them in the decision process. This illuminated the parental involvement or mentor supports that increased their access to programming.

Because the emerging adult style of expression is self-centered (Arnett, 2002), the interview and interpersonal exchange was the most effective way to gather authentic and meaningful responses. The purpose of this study is to capture how students report their experiences, how they qualify those experiences, and how those experiences matched their expectations and motives for the programs. Storytelling and social interaction was the catalyst for discovering these factors and conditions.

The exploration of the three guiding research questions presented an opportunity to discuss the level of preparation that public schools are able to provide to students in preparation for career, college, and citizenship. The experiences, expectations, and access to transition programs between high school and college are important to understand in our effort to make all students ready for adult life. The student perspective on their experiences, expectations, and access to gap year programs offered insight as to whether the opportunities offered personal development beyond the pale of traditional secondary education. A close examination of how the students experience these programs, what were the students' expectations of these programs, as well as an inquiry into the students' access to these programs stands to inform further discussion.

Students were able to give evidence of the contribution, detraction, or null effect of these programs and factors.

Definition of Terms

To achieve clarity in the discussion of this topic it is important to make clear the manner in which each term is used.

Perceptions

Central the purpose of this study is to ask the students what they thought and felt about the structured gap year experience. Perceptions express a point of view. They are the personal meanings students make of their experiences. Perceptions in this study refer to how the gap year experience seemed to students and how their experiences seem to inform their identities. The student's perception is at the center of this study because it represents the reality of their experience. Students had a greater ability to express the true meaning of an educative experience rather than simply reviewing the mission statements of the programs they attended. Universities and places of vocation may have perceptions of these benefits and detriments as well. The students, however, are the ones who had opinions about whether these programs garnered student interest and buy-in.

Postgraduate

The term *postgraduate* in this study refers to the period after a student has completed their high school diploma. This is important to qualify for the purpose of this study because there are a number of structured expeditionary programs for students that exist for pre-graduate students. While these experiences are no less beneficial to the learner, I did not focus on the programs students attend during summer breaks from school, nor did I focus on the programs of foreign exchange that contribute to the students' diploma credentialing process. In this study,

postgraduate was limited to discussion about the time after high school graduation and, where necessary, I refer to the period after college as *post baccalaureate*.

Gap year

A gap year is a period a student chooses to take between graduating from high school and enrolling in post-secondary education. *Gap year* alone simply means the time one takes. It does not necessarily suggest the student participated in a structured program. Students who take a gap year may choose to hold a job, travel independently, practice arts or athletics, enjoy unstructured time off, or engage in other personal projects. While the potential for how one chooses to spend their time is nearly limitless, the *gap year* merely refers to the time and not the activity in which the student engages. This study focused on the experiences of students engaged in structured gap year programs; however, it also seeks to emphasize the importance of this time as a maturation period.

Gap year program

I used the term *gap year program* to refer to the structured organizations that enroll students during a gap year. These programs are public and private, for-profit or nonprofit, and domestic or foreign. The array of programs this study revealed were numerous and I aggregated the data on all organizations students reported in order to create categories of program themes. Based on my initial investigation of a USA Gap Year Fair held in Andover, Massachusetts, there were 40 tabling organizations representing eight overarching missions. I included public, local, and faith-based organizations as satisfying the definition as well. These opportunities, however, tend not to market themselves to the same degree as the fair attendees. Research of my target population was the best method for unearthing these.

Personal development

Development of the whole person is multifaceted; however, for the purpose of this study personal development specifically addressed the issues of maturity, a personal sense of preparedness for adult life, ideologies, and identity. Ideologies are the beliefs by which a group or society orders reality to render it intelligible. Ideologies in this study refer to the students' ability to wrestle with ideas in order to decide how they feel about the major issues in their society. Identity is the distinct personality and unique features of a person that persist throughout time. Identities in this study refer to the students' process of discovering their personalities and uniqueness. This study focused specifically on the students' perception of their own personal development.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study will be important to at least five major groups. The students directly impacted by the choices they must make are the foremost affected. The study also affects the parents as they support their students toward these decisions. The findings will affect institutions of higher learning and the employment sector as well in that they are the receiving institutions of our graduates. Finally, the local level school districts and their governing bodies, as well as the state-level policy makers concerned with secondary education programs are the intended consumers of these results.

The first group I discuss is the group of students who are wrestling with postsecondary choices. America, and particularly my own context in Maine, has a tradition and an expectation that students complete high school in four years. We dub students who eke into a fifth year "super seniors" or "fifth years" which often carry negative connotations. It is a connotation the student has failed. Research that has the potential to illuminate the benefits of an optional year

will support an argument that our community allow, accommodate, and accept a student's need

for extra time. This holds vast potential for the rising graduate.

Parents of the students, who may not be ready to transition, will benefit from informed

decision making, as well. While it is not always the students who hesitate to recognize the need

for extra time, parents will also benefit from research that informs the practice. Parents who

realize their student will need the extra time can make better-informed efforts to advocate for

their student. Parents who are less apt to accept their students' requests for extra time may find

comfort in research suggesting a positive trend of college retention and graduation rates among

gap program participants (Martin, 2010).

Institutes of high learning will find these results significant in that students who make

poor enrollment choices (timing, degree programs, institutions, etc.) cause high general attrition

rates, poor freshman retention rates, and decreased persistence to degree statistics. Results

illuminating whether gap experiences improve and inform student enrollment decisions will

allow higher education institutions to benefit from invested, persistent, and mature learners. In

the careful meting of resources, they can make informed institutional decisions about admissions,

enrollment, and student services.

Future employers of graduates will find the results of this study significant in the

evidence and testimony of the affects of gap year programming on personal development.

Personal development influences the potential and professional capital of rising college

graduates. Were employers to take a stance on gap program opportunities, educational practices

may respond to industry demand. Employers can also begin discussions as to how both the

public and private job markets can foster this skillful workforce by participating in the funding

and other support of gap year experiences in their communities. The business sector of society

has notable pull in the realm of higher education, as they are the ultimate recipients of the human resource. With knowledge about gap year program outcomes, business can engage in discussion about the potential for internships, apprenticeships, or pre-service programming.

Local policy makers will find the results significant in their discussion about school effectiveness. As high schools graduate students ostensibly prepared for college and the workforce, findings on the outcomes of a gap year program experience will prove helpful to the conversation about local program efficacy. These findings will also affect discussion about whether post-graduate programming may be a future initiative that could find its way into the comprehensive educational plan of public school departments.

Delimitations of the Study

This study includes the perceptions of college students who engaged in a gap year program before attending higher education at one public university in New England. There are six delimitations to this sample.

I only surveyed the population of one university in order to attain results for this study. To ensure the study is manageable for one principal investigator, it is important to select a location where my invitation to participate can draw a sufficient number of participants. The university selected is one of the seven state universities in a New England state. With a total population of 9,820 (7,400 of whom are undergraduate), it represents 25% of the university population in the state. According to the Office of Institutional Research external data report from the 2013-2104 school year, this university's population of 18- to 24-year-olds was 4,072 in the fall semester. Of those 3,523 (86.5%) persisted into the spring semester. This location promises greater diversity for this study as it is located in the largest city in the state. Even as

such, it qualifies as a "small city" by national standards. At this rate of potential inclusion, one university location is a sufficient site for this study.

As a study of the human experience, one delimiting feature of the data I collected is that the student perceptions are self-reported. In order to capture the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of the students it is important to focus on student voices. Their ideas about, and expectations of, the programs guided my understanding of the students' motivation to engage. The students' reactions to and experiences within the programs were a powerful measure of whether they encountered opportunities to develop. As a student is the point of delivery for educational services, the *customer service* experience was essential to understanding student buy-in, persistence, and motivation for these developmental opportunities.

In the initial survey and subsequent interview, there was no corroboration of program facts regarding the post-graduate, gap year program the student attended. I recorded data from the student perspective and I only checked for readily available information on the specific program in order to contextualize student responses. It was not always possible to gather supporting documents on the various programs the students reported. In the event the gap year program was public, local, or faith-based, there was little to no supporting materials and I reported the student perspective at face value. I also relied on the students to report their programs of attendance in order to acquire a list of opportunities I would not be able to discover on my own.

By the virtue of selecting a university as a study site, one of the delimitations of this study was the elimination of gap year participants who did not choose to enroll in university. This in no way suggests there is not a population of students who choose the workforce rather than higher education. While there is most certainly a population of students who choose

extended gaps, religious involvement, athletic careers, vocational training, homemaking, and other nonacademic pursuits, this study focused on the perceptions of a population who chose university. This delimitation allows potential for further research on the eventual pathways of gap year program attendees.

Due to the diversity of student experiences, there is a robust population of adult and non-traditional college students in this state university. While the experiences that occur in the gap of these learners' educations are no less important to their personal development, I did not focus on these learners' experiences. I am specifically interested in the perspectives of the traditional university students who delayed attendance by one year in order to spend an optional extra year on their personal development. Adult, nontraditional learners have the benefit of years of maturation, adult life, and societal involvement to inform their eventual college enrollment choices. This study focused on the perspectives of young people afforded a *gap* [emphasis added] and not a *disruption* [emphasis added].

Finally, I did not focus on students who took unstructured gap time outside of formal programs. This delimitation comes largely from the fact that unstructured time was difficult to qualify in terms of the experiences and exposures that were available to the student. As stated above, experiences of students outside of formal programming are no less important to personal development. The fact that one researcher cannot capture these, however, makes this type of inquiry complicated to the point of compromising the integrity of the study. This delimitation allows potential for future research in lifeworlds (Sandberg & Andersson, 2011) and society's assessment of those as educative.

Literature Review

To orient and inform this study of the nature of gap year experiences it was important to review the literature in three main areas. The first area is the interdisciplinary field of developmental psychology as it pertains to this age group of student. The second area is secondary education; and more specifically, alternative education philosophies and methods. Finally, the subject of preparation education for career, college, and adult transitions is important to inform discussion about the educative value of experiences and learning happening in this phase.

The adolescent brain and behavior are at the heart of Arnett's (2000) concept of the emerging adult. Arnett's insistence that we not refer to them as young adults comes on the premise that it suggests adulthood has already manifested. In the education of people as a general philosophy, pedagogy is the common term for the education of all. Etymologically pedagogy means to teach the child. In the mid 1970s, Malcolm Knowles coined the term andragogy and detailed the six assumptions of andragogical methods (1975). The inclusion of this literature is important to the study of postgraduate, gap year programming as we examine the new term, *ephebagogy* (Flowers, 2014) and how the elements of this teaching affects personal development and the evolution of students' ideologies (Arnett, Ramos & Jensen, 2001) in an age group between 18 and 24 years old. The principle of ephebagogy explores the unique teaching and learning that happens for students who have exited childhood [pedagogy] but have not yet entered adulthood [andragogy] (Flowers, 2014).

Central to the argument for ephebagogy is the inclusion of alternative education pathways and elements. The arguments for experiential and expeditionary learning opportunities proves helpful in the exploration of post-graduate, gap year experiences as significant to personal

development (Knapp, 2010 ; Itin, 1999 ; Wraga, 2011; Dewey, 1938). The literature shows the

experiential and expeditionary methods of delivery are the most important to the student

experience and schools should be full of engagement for deep-seated learning (Knapp, 2010;

Itin, 1999; Dewey, 1938). Likewise, learning should be replete with vigorous challenges as

opposed to turmoil for the sake of rigorous didactics (Wraga, 2011). Ephebagogy and the

learning potential for gap year programming rely on the literature asserting true student

development comes when we place the student inside the learning and give them safe places to

take risks and make mistakes (Knapp, 2010; Itin, 1999; Dewey, 1938; Robinson, 2007).

The literature on factors concerning students as they prepare for college, career, and adult

life is a body of literature that of great importance to the discussion about gap years and gap year

programs. Research surrounding the gap year involves exploring whether this could become

common practice if evidence proves it increases student achievement (Martin, 2010; O'Shea,

2011; Platt & Brooks, 2014). With student achievement, college retention, and persistence to

degree at the heart of the discussion (ACT, 2012; ACT 2013), it is important to include literature

about the ways students need to be informed toward pathways and degree selection. Part of that

discussion requires inclusion of literature exploring whether life experiences that happen in the

gap of schooling have value when applied to college programming (Tate, 2013; Laitinen, 2012;

Sandberg & Andersson, 2011).

Design of the Study

This qualitative study unfolds in three phases that happen in a sequence informing the

next. The first phase of the study is a survey that captures both open-ended and multiple-choice

responses through an anonymous, digital tool. The second phase consists of six individuals who

consented to participate in an interview. The survey responses informed the questions and

discussion prompts for the interview. The third phase consisted of one primary informant for the case study that I selected from the interview phase. The following details the study's general design, data collection, data analysis, instrumentation, and procedures.

General Aspects of the Design

The rationale for conducting a qualitative study on this topic lies in the importance of understanding students' perceptions of their personal development experiences. While a quantitative analysis of the success or stagnation of gap year program students in university is possible, the voices of the students about why they felt the way they felt is the focus of the inquiry. In order for the details of a human experience to emerge, it is important to qualify them with rich textural and structural description in order to capture the essence of the experience (Creswell, 2013, p.80; Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 36).

For this study, I surveyed and conducted interviews with participants who represented the traditional, undergraduate, student population of one public university. This is a university in a small New England city with an undergraduate population of 7,400 students. The population is approximately 91% white and 58% female. As such, this university represents 25% of the total state university population and offers the state's greatest potential for sociocultural diversity. The delimitations of the initial sampling include the exclusion of non-traditional and adult university students, and traditional students who entered higher education immediately after high school graduation.

The initial survey identified the population who fits the criteria of my delimitations. I programmed the survey to discontinue if in the demographics section the respondent proves to be a delimited demographic. I aggregated the limited responses from the non-target demographic in order to contextualize the phenomenon. I reported traditional students who respond to the survey but are not a fit for the study if they did not take a *structured* gap year program (Figure 1.1). I did

not consider them for further interviews. If the respondent fit the criteria of the study, the

Qualtrics™ survey software revealed the subsequent questions.
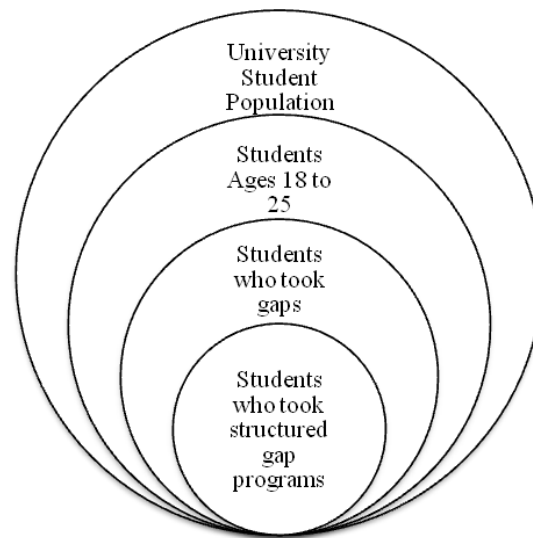
Figure 3.1 Delimitation of the sample.

From the population who successfully complete the entire survey, I selected six

individuals who demonstrated willingness to participate in interviews in order to gain an

understanding of the themes and categories. I interviewed four individuals. The key to gathering

this type of data lies in the careful formulation of survey and interview questions. Rather than

ask a young person to speak to their ability to prioritize tasks, for example, it may be more

effective to ask them to talk about an *event* that taught them how to prioritize tasks. Their self-

focused perspectives are likely to reveal meaningful data in their self-centered accounts.

From the interview participants, I selected one individual who was willing to participate

in a case study. This person represented the typical case of the phenomenon of post-graduate gap

year program participation. A case study approach allowed me to examine one individual's

experience that had clear boundaries and provided context to describe the setting of a gap year

experience (Creswell, 2013, p. 123). I selected the case study informant based on analysis of the

interview's overarching themes. This individual represented a typical case and I selected her from the interview phase to participate in follow-up interviews and further case building.

The case study method is the most appropriate method for a study of this nature as the guiding research questions ask for description and explanation (Yin, 2011) of the phenomenon of gap year program participation. The study seeks to discover what happened to the student during this experience and how or why this happened. Additionally, the case study allows the researcher to gather data from a more natural setting rather than relying completely on the remembered voice of student account in contrived settings such as interviews.

Defining the boundaries of the case early allows the researcher to focus the design with a so-called end game in his or her purview. However, one concern is the potential for the case to change after early collection of data (Yin, 2011). In this event, I was prepared to read different literature and revise the research questions as needed. The use of case study method allows the researcher to study a typical case of student participation in light of revelatory events (Yin, 2011).

I began the research process with an application to Lesley University's Institutional Review Board garnering their approval (Appendix A) prior to contacting the research site university. According to this site's policies regarding accessing their student body for research, I applied to the Office of Research Integrity and Outreach and received their approval (Appendix B) prior to accessing their students. To start the data collection process I submitted a letter to the university (Appendix C) in order to gain access to their students. This university is familiar and adept with using the university email system to disseminate survey invitations. I devised a website that participants may view at <http://www.pg-gapyear.weebly.com> in order to give them the necessary information and disclosures about this study. I distributed an email letter

soliciting participation (Appendix D) and submitted a *call to action* in the campus newspaper

advertisement section (Appendix E). The QR code embedded in the campus newspaper

advertisement allowed students use smart devices to connect to the portal website (Appendix

F.1) using mobile technology (Appendix F.2). After covering proper protocols for informed

consent (Appendix G), I asked the university population to participate in a Qualtrics™

questionnaire (Appendix H) meant to locate the target demographic and collect preliminary data.

I aggregated survey responses in order to create thematic categories of the post-graduate,

gap year programs. From those categories, I selected from the willing respondents to invite to an

interview. From interview participants I selected one case study subject for deeper inquiry

through interview, narrative, collection of artifacts, and review of documents as they pertain to

the students' experience.

Participation and Setting

The students I targeted for participation in this study were university students who have

attended a post-graduate, gap year program. They were students who were between the ages of

18 and 24 years old and were be traditional, undergraduate students at one university. They were

students who have taken at least one year of time between high school graduation and post-

secondary enrollment. They were students who participated in structured programs of

engagement and their participation entailed their self-reported perspectives on those experiences.

At the start of the study, I considered two possibilities for the case phase. One option I

considered was a case built on the experiences of a composite group of students. The other

option was a case built on the experience of one person. The results of the interview phase led

me to select a single primary informant.

Role of the Researcher

My role in the study of gap year program participation is one that warrants explanation. When I was young, I perceived gap year programs as a privilege of students who parents could bear the cost. Similarly, I witnessed parents who did not have the disposable income resorting to gap year programs in response to their students' delinquency. This experience left me with the impression that a well-behaved student of modest income could not access these programs. Because I was able to fund my own opportunities in my mid 20s and 30s, I have developed a high opinion of gap year programs and the benefits they offer to students.

Because I am a participant and proponent of the gap year expedition, it is important to note that I must bracket my support of these programs during the creation of the survey and interview questions. I needed to word questions in unbiased formats and allow the questions to reveal the natural reactions of participants. Additionally, I asked scripted questions consistently between participants and draft incidental follow-up questions in open formats allowing the respondent to give perspective free from my perspective and experience.

I approached this study through the constructivist worldview, which asserts that a researcher recognizes their own background to shape their interpretation as it flows from personal, cultural, and historical experiences (Creswell, 2014). Similarly, the assumptions of the constructivist worldview are that humans construct meaning as they engage with the world they are interpreting, interpretation is shaped by experience and background, and the generation of meaning is always social (Creswell, 2014).

Methods

The methods for this study fell into a three-phase structure in both the data collection and data analysis procedures. The data collection occurred in survey phase, interview phase, and case study phase. In this section, I will discuss the instrumentation and procedure for the survey and

the interview. I will also discuss the procedure for the case study phase. In the data analysis

procedure, I will discuss those as they pertain to survey, interview, and case study.

Data collection. I began data collection by distributing a survey to the population of the

university site. From the responses of participants, I scheduled interviews with four respondents.

From the interview, I concentrated on one individual to write the case. For that I did further

interviewing, gained access to documents and other artifacts of the gap year experience (journals,

emails, letters, program descriptions, etc.) that revealed details about the experience.

Survey phase: Instrumentation and procedure. The survey was an open and anonymous

questionnaire I created using the Qualtrics™ platform. This questionnaire featured seven

delimitation questions, 15 gap program questions, and six demographic questions. I programmed

the survey skip and display logic in order to capture the appropriate information. I programmed

the survey with branch logic in order to reveal the latter part of the questions if the participant

demonstrates they are the target respondent. The benefit of a digital questionnaire instrument for

the initial data gathering in this study is its manageability and ease of distribution (Creswell,

2013).

Interview phase: Instrumentation and procedure. The interview questions were a product

of analysis of the survey answers. The questions were open-ended and I conducted these in a

face-to-face interview. I prepared 27 questions that allowed the participants to expound upon

responses they gave in the survey phase. I formulated these questions after the close of the

survey phase. The interview protocol is appropriate as my topic operates on the assumption that

the student response is the most meaningful data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). The use of an

interview environment is the most appropriate format for this age group, as social interaction

tends to compel this age group into more meaningful contribution than isolated or distanced communication (Arnett, 2000).

Case study phase: Procedure. The case study phase of the research was a discreet exploration that included interviews, examination of documents, collection of artifacts, and evidence, which form a narrative of the typical case (Creswell, 2013). The selection of the case study subject developed from the interview phase. During the analysis of transcripts and documents, I determined that this approach more effectively represented the data collected and was a more meaningful way to present findings. In a study of the student experience, the case study method is the most appropriate method for the researcher to unearth the details of that experience. The essence of the case study approach keeps the student voice as the heart of the study while the delimitations of the university location, the age of the target population, and the occurrence of taking a gap then, further, the participation in a structured gap year program provide the boundaries (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Data analysis procedure. At each of the three phases of data collection, it is necessary to evaluate the findings and analyze the data for emerging patterns and themes. I took a similar, and sometimes identical, approach with the results of the survey, the interview, and the case studies. During the analysis of responses, it was important to incorporate a coding system that allowed reliability to demonstrate consistency of coding. Qualitative analysis of survey and interview discussion is an open and repetitive process and I was receptive to the voices of participants without bias. My background and experiences suggested that students would have had positive and affirming experiences in their gap programs. I reported students who have had puzzling or distancing experiences free from investigator bias.

Survey phase. The data analysis of the survey phase was straightforward. The purpose of the

survey phase was mainly to discover the population from which I selected interview participants.

The data collected from this phase fell into two main categories. First, there were respondents

who had taken a gap period but fell into a delimited category. These were students who took

unstructured [emphasis added] gap periods. I were reported any data collected on this population

but specified that the target demographic for this study were students who participated in

structured gap year programs. The second group was the students targeted for this study. I

evaluated the responses from target respondents for patterns and themes in order to create

interview prompts.

Interview phase. When I conducted the interviews, I used a method of digital capture that

allowed me to study the nuances of the language used when the participants discussed their

experiences. I used audio recording, as I did not suspect video recording would add meaningful,

additional data as in the case of a sensitive or emotional reflection. I had the audio transcribed in

order to review and analyze the students' perspectives. I focused the analysis on both a careful

read of the transcripts as well as memos from the face-to-face interaction. From the students'

responses, I evaluated the content for the themes and patterns that guided my selection of the

case subject.

Case study phase. I based the case on an individual person and elements may included

photos of the program experience, marketing/informational materials from the program attended,

artifacts of the activities, documents of achievement, accolades, reports, awards, etc. In order to

give context to the program the informant attended, I included mission statements, strategic

plans, and voices of stakeholders. Analysis of these data involved identification of patterns and

themes that get to the heart of the case (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2012, p. 5). I examined

whether the literature corresponded, discuss unanticipated findings, and discussed the

transferability of the findings to broader populations (Creswell, 2013).

Chapter Outline

Chapter One: Introduction

In Chapter One, I covered the statement of the problem to be studied and the purpose of this

study. I listed my guiding research questions and defined all terms that were relevant for the

readers' understanding. I discussed the significance of this study and listed the delimitations of

this study's sampling and methods. I discussed which bodies of literature are included in the

history and discussion of the topic and I described the research design and methods of the study.

In order to contextualize my own interest in the topic, I discussed my pathway toward this

inquiry and, where appropriate, referred to my own sociocultural perspectives and how these

affected my research.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

In Chapter Two, I addressed the three main bodies of literature that contribute to the study. I

talked about the psychology of the emerging adult (Arnett, 2000; Arnett, Ramos & Jensen, 2001)

between the ages of 18 and 24 years old. I reviewed alternative education models and theories

and I discussed the research around career and college transitions.

Chapter Three: Methods

In Chapter Three, I described each data collection method that I used. I provided a rationale

for each of the methods I used and I provided complete information about how I used them. I

described how I developed each of my instruments and gave detail as to how I field-tested these

instruments before the actual data collection. Finally, I explained how I recorded and

safeguarded my data and all the steps I took in order to maintain the confidentiality and

anonymity of my participants.

Chapter Four: Results

In Chapter Four, I reported the results of the aggregated data of the initial survey, the

interview narratives, and the details of the individual case. I sub-sectioned this chapter into the

three main phases of the study. The first phase garnered data that lead to the identification of

interview subjects. I devoted the second and third sections to the more in-depth student contact. I

organized the interview section into thematic categories. I organized the case section according

to the themes that emerged from the multimedia data.

Chapter Five: Summary, Implications, Discussion, and Final Reflections

In Chapter Five, I discussed the results, talked about the implications of the findings,

made conclusions, and suggested additional areas of research that would strengthen further

discussion. In the conclusion, I referred back to my sociocultural perspective in order to ensure

credible and trustworthy conclusions of the data. I presented actionable recommendations

(Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 205) and ended the study with a complete picture that leaves the

reader with a sense of closure on the topic of gap year program participation.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In the United States, we have a standardized sequence of education. Students begin in kindergarten; although in short time, we will become accustomed to four years old being the standard starting age. Elementary school is a familiar foundation to academic and social learning while middle school is the predictable ushering into high school's structure and movement between disciplines. At the high school level, important variation and allowances come into play. Families find options such as alternative high schools, magnet schools, vocational technical high schools, foreign exchange, or early graduation just to name a few. The secondary school years are ripe with prospects to succeed or fail. There was a time when the reality that some students would fail was acceptable. Society relegated students who did not finish secondary school to labor-based industries and fields that did not have a secondary school prerequisite.

Two things have changed this landscape for the American graduate. First, we no longer live in a society that provides ample vocational opportunities to those without a secondary credential. Second, schools cannot afford student dropout. I intentionally use the financially relevant term "afford" because the schools lose subsidy when their students leave (State of Maine Title 20-A §15674), and the manner by which school performance is measured is weighed heavily with their ability to retain students until completion (Maine, 2014). Society cannot afford this in other respects either. We need a citizenry that is empowered with decision-making and problem-solving skills. We need a population of creative workers, nurturing parents, discerning voters, diligent Samaritans, and moral characters (Dewey, 1916; Dewey, 1938; Mann, 1848; Lindeman, 1961). America has a history of expecting these things from our public education system. So we have to ask ourselves; is the public K-12 system enough for *all* students?

What happens to the high school graduate who is not ready for the world after high school? What happens to the adolescent who does not feel prepared for the rigor of college? What happens to the youth who do not know his or her ideological stance because they have not explored their beliefs and ideas? What happens to the young teenager who is not ready to leave high school? These questions apply to the 18- and 19-year-old students who are stuck in an estuary no longer carried on the swift current of childhood but not quite ready to enter the expansive tides of an adult world. As we attend the annual graduation ceremonies, commencement speakers extol students as the future of our society, the promise of the nation, the ones who will hold the power one day making proclamations of their potential. What happens to the student whose mind races with panic at the prospect?

This dissertation, an exploration of society's response to the high school graduates who are not ready for the demands of higher education and adult life, begins by considering an approach found in Nordic countries where they seem to have asked and answered many of the same questions. In public Nordic society, there is a model of schooling called the folk high school. This is not to be confused with our own concept of high school as the Scandinavians mean to say *higher* schooling such as we mean when we speak of *higher* education. What started in Denmark in the 1850s as the Folkehøjskole has extended to the other Nordic nations as folk menntaskoli, folkehogskole, folkhogkola, and kansanopisto. The transliteration into English is "people school." What occurs in this school is what I mean when I ask, what happens to the student who is not ready for life after high school? The people's school is a place that is non-academic, non-graded, non-competitive, and experiential. It is a place where a student can spend one to two years trying on ideologies by wrestling with topics of social importance, discovering their interests and taking extra time to mature.

The principles of the folk high school movement are not completely absent from the American context; however, the abundance of offerings, the comprehensiveness of the process, and the awareness is not as ubiquitous as in the Nordic states. The United States is replete with educational programs that take different shapes in an effort to address the diverse learners in society. What these models do for the American population, and what they do not do, is my motivation for reviewing the literature about the Scandinavian Folk High School, a well-established cultural norm for one region. The unifying principles of the folk model appear to address a learning need that American schools serve through discreet models.

This literature review addresses six inquiries to unearth solutions to the problem of what to do with the developmental learners existing in an estuary where the current of the pedagogic turns to the tide of the andragogic. If the Nordic countries have a rich tradition of folk high school programming, it is worth examination to discover answers to the following questions:

- What are the features of the folk high school that make it a unique learning opportunity?
- What are the cautions toward the folk high school experience and how could that influence what is regarded as best educational practices?
- What are the national and cultural identities of the Nordic people that contribute to the success of a schooling program that offers extended opportunities to the emerging adult?

To couch these features in an American context it will be necessary to explore the models that we already have in order to spot their differences and identify the parallels.

- What does the system of "folk" schools in America do for the learner and who is their target audience?

- What is the "gap year" experience and which learner benefits from this system?

- What are we already providing to our learners through public means that achieve the goal of transitions for the emerging adult and how do those function?

Through an investigation of what already exists for the emerging adult learner, it may be possible to identify the characteristics of a highly effective learning environment for this population. With these discoveries, we may be able to broach the conversation of how education in the United States could grow in ways that suit the learners only marginally served at this time. Our schools have the capacity and the willingness to do what it takes to ensure that all learners reach their goals. The task before us at this time is to take a closer look at the education that is happening around us in order to execute the programming that emerging adults need.

Literature Review

Folkehøjskole in the Scandinavian countries draw approximately 17% of the populations of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Denmark (Bagley & Rust, 2009). This inquiry emerges from a noticeable and documented American condition of high secondary dropout rates (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012), high post-secondary attrition rates (American College Test, 2012), and the outcry of a pervasive unpreparedness of our emerging adults in current society (Gates, 2005; Robinson, 2006). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2012) cites that 37.4% of all students between 16 and 24 years old are high school dropouts and that of the young people that *do* graduate and *do* enter post-secondary education, only 65.8% of them will return in their sophomore year according to an American College Test (2012) study. Further, in his 2005 address at the National Education Summit on High Schools Bill Gates

speaks of the current high school's failure to produce young people prepared for employment, innovation, citizenship, and further studies. Sir Ken Robinson (2006) also asks us to reconsider the tiers of importance upon which we place content areas. He suggests that the current school system places lower importance on the areas that students claim are their highest motivations to persist in school.

The overarching mission of the folk model is to ensure that citizens are fully-fledged and able to contribute to society. Academics are not the focus as much as the quality of life and the enrichment of people. These schools conduct no exams and issue no degrees. The tuition is taxpayer funded and the student is only responsible for room and board. In this model, students who are 18+ (and in some schools 15, 16, and 17 years old) spend one to two years in a free educational program where democratic principles and learning for life are emphasized (Davis, 1971; Fleisher, 1968; Paulson, 1980). Denmark's peaceful, educational revolution began on a philosophy that education was a humanist, liberal, and artistic practice (Grundtvig, 1825-1861/1975).

From Nikolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig's writings, spring the concept of the folk high school, which remains a pivotal component to the comprehensive educational plan of all Nordic countries (Bagley & Rust, 2009; Davis, 1971; Fleisher, 1968; Koenig & Dalton, 2011; Møller & Watson, 1944; Paulson, 1980; Toivainen, 1995). Moreover, seminal pieces of literature on adult learning theory draw directly from principles of the Scandinavian folk high school movement and the philosophies of Grundtvig as well (Lindeman, 1961; Knowles, 1975; Brookfield 1984; Warren, 2012). America bases its modern notion of public adult education on the same Grundtvigian philosophies the Nordic states took to create the folk high school model (Lindeman, 1961).

American education opportunities already exist in some iteration similar to the folk philosophy. This inquiry furthers the discussion about the potential for American school reform to borrow the successful methods from the folk model in ways that increase student success and contribute to the greater goal of a functional society. To this end, I will address six questions in this argument.

- What are the marked features of the folk high school model that makes it unique?

- What are the critiques of this type of schooling that speak to its effectiveness?

- What are the features of Nordic national identities and attitudes toward education?

- What kind of schools are there in America that claims to operate in the "folk" spirit?

- Which organizations does America have that are facilitating this kind of learning experience?

- What schools does America have that serves the same kind of learner?

This is a significant topic to pursue, and is worthy of further research, as the health and wellness of our communities rely on our ability to retain and effectively educate *all* of our citizens.

The Nordic Folk High School Model

In the Nordic countries, there is a model of schooling referred to as the Folk High School. The moniker may be confusing since a *high school* in America refers to schooling attended when a student is between the ages of 14 and 18. The Scandinavian Folk High School is actually what America calls a *gap year*. The model is for students who have completed secondary school, have attained the age of 18, and are seeking a program that will inform their decisions about whether they will enter post-secondary academics or if they will join the workforce (Bagley & Rust, 2009; Fleisher, 1968; Koenig & Dalton, 2011; Toiviainen, 1995).

This concept is not new to the American context but what makes the Scandinavian Folk High School Model different is that the nations' comprehensive educational plan funds these years as an acceptable pathway for students (Bagley & Rust, 2009; Fleisher 1968). Nearly 17% percent of the populations of Sweden, Norway, and Denmark choose a Folk High School for the year after traditional secondary schooling (Bagley & Rust, 2009). With an estimated total population according to the United State Central Intelligence Agency (2014) of 20.5 million people, that leads us to a Folk High School population of nearly 3.5 million attendees. Other countries that feature folk high schooling include Finland, Iceland, Germany, and Austria (Bagley & Rust, 2009). While the wording of charters that provide for these models are different from nation to nation, the folk model asserts that students need a comprehensive transitional opportunity in order to achieve the goals that the citizens desire of their students (Fleisher, 1968).

The folk concept was borne from the philosophies of Nikolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig in the mid 1800s (Davis, 1971; Fleisher, 1968; Møller & Watson, 1944; Paulson, 1980; Warren 2012). What started as a sermon of national consciousness for the Danish people turned into a deeply held attitude toward democracy, enlightenment, and learning for life. While Grundtvig was not directly responsible for the incorporation of the first folk high school program (Møller & Watson, 1944), schools began to appear around Scandinavia that deeply embodied his philosophies. The largest emphasis for this model is that school should be for the *living* and focus on subjects that are *alive* (Knudsen, 1976). Grundtvig was highly critical of teaching subjects, language, and skills in a historical fashion. His emphasis was on contemporary situations needing human attention and human conditions that progressive thinking and applicable human action can improve.

The folk concept is prevalent throughout the Nordic nations with a spirit for education of common people (Bagley & Rust, 2009). The word "folk" relates to the Old English *folc* meaning people, or members of a family or tribe (folk, 2014). While in an American English context we use the term "folk" when speaking of people or things that are unsophisticated or countrified, Grundtvig used the term *folkelig* in a way that has more to do with our term "ethnic" (Simon, 1998/1989). The folk high school's mission is to teach to the *people* in the highest vibration of humanism and democracy. While many nations have some form of adult learning opportunities, it is unique to the Nordic regions that the folk experience is engrained in the habits and dispositions of her people.

Features of the Scandinavian folk high school[2]. Folk high schools are typically one to two years in duration and offer a broad assortment of programs that are non-academic, experiential, residential, and do not award credits nor conduct examinations. The student is only responsible for the cost of room and board for these publicly funded programs. Many Scandinavians take advantage of this opportunity, however, this prevalence of participation does not negate the criticism of schooling that focuses on non-academic topics, poses costs in addition to secondary and university studies, does not focus on the competition created by grades and degrees, and annexes people from the workforce for an additional one to two years. The education that happens in the folk model addresses the needs of learners that exist in the estuary where how we teach children mingles with how we teach adults.

According to researchers Sylvia Bagley and Val Rust (2009), and Frederic Fleisher (1968) the most salient feature of the folk high school model is that the programs are specifically non–academic. Students enter these schools intent on pursuing a passion or discovering new

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[2] I obtained data used for this section (Appendix H) from marketing publications and websites of the various folk high schools and state-run associations.

interests. Programming includes aesthetic studies, visual and performing arts, environmentalism and stewardship, travel and international relations, democracy and peace studies, sports and outdoorsmanship, languages and cultural studies, agrarian trades, and spiritual exploration. The individual schools carry select offerings and students apply to the school that appeals to them. Folk schools endeavor to keep the student population small as most are residential and can house an average of 100 students per session. These authors maintain that this small residential setting allows the schools to focus on community building, relationships, and discussion as the primary mode for learning and ideology building.

Students that attend the folk high school are typically between the ages of 18 to 24. There are some schools across the nations that have programming specifically catered to a population of 16- and 17-year-olds. There is no upper age limit for attending a folk high school and some specialize in programs for older learners. Schools reserve the residential spots for the younger learners and there are offerings for commuter participants lasting for shorter sessions. Throughout the Nordic countries, there are even programs that accommodate disabled populations specifically populations with deafness or blindness.

In keeping with the historical sentiment that spurred the creation of the folk high school, there is an emphasis on democracy as a mode of operation in the school and as a platform for the lessons (Davis, 1971; Møller & Watson, 1944; Paulson, 1980). Policies with a focus on democracy guide Norway, Sweden, and Denmark's schools in order to prepared students for citizenship. A large part of those democratic structures uses discussion as a learning tool and a focus of the daily rhythm. Students frequently find themselves in common living spaces seated in conference with their peers and their instructors to discuss matters at hand. There is a strong

emphasis on problem solving through the application of real world knowledge and immersion in the experiences of life (Bagley & Rust, 2009; Fleisher, 1968).

Rural living and citizen enlightenment were strong sentiments in the creation of the original Danish folk high schools and to that end, folk high schools value native language (Møller & Watson, 1944). Folk high schools are typically situated in rural areas and instruction is primarily in the native language of the region. While many Scandinavians are adept in English and other languages, it is considered in keeping with the goal of "education for the people" to teach to the common person. Requiring that participants have foreign language skills risks excluding citizens with less cosmopolitan exposures (Møller & Watson, 2009). Additionally, the ability to express one's deepest interests and ideologies is at its best in the language of one's upbringing and primary immersion. In addition to native language, schools that specialize in craft serve to maintain local and regional traditions such as wool dyeing, boat building, basket weaving, woodcraft, or other indigenous activities that preserve culture.

In a folk high school, there is no performance grading of the participants and there are no exams conducted on the topics (Bagley & Rust, 2009; Fleisher, 1968). The same laws that provide for the schools' funding and management dictate the exclusion of exams specifically. The schools are primarily for the students' personal growth and students receive a certificate of completion that vouches for their time. Sweden is the only of the Scandinavian states that issues these certificates with a rate declaring the students' merit or distinction on a one through four scale (Bagley & Rust, 2009). With this achievement, a student may choose to enter the workforce, enroll in a post-secondary institution of higher learning, or use their enrichment to be the heads of family and community.

Nordic national identity and education. Because educational structures are functions of a municipality, the principles of that institution reflect the goals and the values of its citizenry. In short, taxpayers support programming when they see schools raising children up into the missions and objectives of the adult population. This is an ever-moving target as the evolution of social and technological society changes at a rapid pace in the 21st century. There are central themes and foundational principles that mark the Nordic people. These shape the national identity that inform that way they execute schooling. Authors and researchers not that the Nordic states value empowerment of the people and nationalist ideals, socially just practices, connection to nature, valuing informal learning, and recognizing the human spirit of growth and development (Bagley & Rust, 2009; Fleisher, 1968).

In the early days of the folk high school, the philosophies of N.F.S. Grundtvig set the stage for much of the missions and principles of the model. While regarded as a man of faith, his faith orientation was not exclusively Judeo-Christian as his writings toyed with a number of concepts that fluctuated between the Christian God, Norse mythos, humanism, and pagan notions of nature worship (Grundtvig, 1825-1861/1976; Møller & Watson, 1944). A consistent element in his musings was the concept that the human spirit was a boundless arena and the power of people lies with their ability to discuss, collaborate, hear the living word, and be informed and autonomous in their transactions. (Grundtvig, 1825-1861/1976). That empowerment of the folk and that spirit, the *Volkgeist* (Fain, 1980) were the precursors to the creation of the first folk high school in the disputed borderlands between Denmark and Germany in 1844 (Møller & Watson, 1944).

Scandinavian laws concerning the free and public education system echo this spirit of empowerment and nationalism (Bagley & Rust, 2009). Throughout the history of Denmark,

Norway, Sweden, and Finland, political strife, war losses, and the annexation of borderlands have led to movement in an attempt to reclaim national identities (Møller & Watson, 1944). The folk high school is one such movement and was the birth of adult education for the Danish, agrarian people in the borderlands of Denmark and Germany in 1844 (Møller & Watson, 1944). Folk's establishment was the beginning of an iterative process toward democracy. The movement believed turning the power of self-governance in educational settings over to the people was in the highest spirit of advancement and egalitarianism (Møller & Watson, 1944; Warren, 2012).

During that time of political dispute between Denmark and Germany, the founders of Denmark's first folk institutions were largely responsible for keen acts of nationalism. These included hunkering in disputed plots to ensure the flying of the Danish national flag as well as a concerted decrease in agricultural production as retort to the systematic plundering of resources by the Nazi's during WWII (Møller & Watson, 1944). Notable adult education researcher, Eduard Lindeman, quoted the Danes in his 1926 seminal work The Meaning of Adult Education as having said, "What the enemy has taken from us by force from without, we must regain by education from within" (p. xviii). This sentiment of active sovereignty and nationalism is a marked feature of the Nordic movement as a whole (Fain, 1980; Fleisher, 1968; Davis, 1971). One feature of folk that has persisted nearly untouched is the insistence that education of the people happen in native languages. For this reason, the main tongue of folk high schools throughout the Nordic countries is the predominant language of the area. This reinforces the assertion that common people should not allow cosmopolitan exposures, or lack thereof, to impede their ability to relate to their compatriots (Bagley & Rust, 2009; Fleisher, 1968; Davis, 1971; Møller & Watson, 1944).

Tantamount to nationalism is the folk philosophy of equality of all people. At times of international conflict, this was thematic of their resistance to persecution. This philosophy is present in the argument for equality across the socioeconomic lines. Celebration of the agrarian peasant was important to the movement that sought to educate the common man (Fain, 1980; Davis, 1971). This social justice lives on the Nordic national identity in what we commonly referred to as the "Nordic Welfare State" (Toiviainen, 1995). Whether with an air of criticism, or possibly something lost in translation, the concept assures Nordic state meet the citizens' needs regardless of socioeconomic position. This value shows up in social programming throughout the nation, not the least of which in public education.

Another sociopolitical element in the evolution of Nordic schooling is the challenge presented by the native Saami people of northern Norway, Sweden, and Finland. In a nearly identical sequence of events to that of the United States, the Nordic countries engaged in a period of education, conversion, and colonization of the native people's culture. In the early 1700s, Sweden established a system of Saami schools for the purposes of teaching children piety, devotion, obedience, and acculturation through tactics of isolation, surveillance, and substitution of native language and faith (Lindmark, 2006). These placements were frequently against the will of the child and the parent (Swedish Institute, 1999) and largely done when laws were enacted requiring parents to teach their children to read when they themselves were illiterate (Lindmark, 2006). In 1732, the Jokkmokk Saami School was created for these purposes but in 1950 this institution was converted to the Jokkmokk Folk High School where the undertaking is one of adult education and Saami cultural revival instead of cultural suppression. In the fashion of folk revival, Jokkmokk is now a place where adults, both Saami and non-Saami, may go to learn the handicraft—*duodji*—of the Saami (Swedish Institute, 1999).

Grundtvig's writings on the common laborer insist that the work of one's hands is an honorable endeavor and that the wisdom garnered from labor was inherently educative. Fewer than 70 years later, the same sentiment appeared in the famed Atlanta Compromise speech of Booker T. Washington as he held labor in high esteem and asked that the gifted laborers consider their vocation a boon rather than a marker of lower social caste (Washington, 1895). Repudiating the perception that labor places one in a lower social order is pivotal to upholding the sentiment of equality. Also central to this argument is the subject of wealth and Grundtvig's assertion that there is "nothing base in poverty" (Møller & Watson, 1944, p. 39) and the true travesty was in the deficiency of morals and faith. By this example, the Nordic national identity is largely informed by a notion that lack of wealth means little to the true value of the citizen but that factions of penury within society is damaging to the fabric of the whole (Grundtvig, 1825-1861/1976). Conversely, the Nordic countries in their exercise of folk education feel that upward mobility is the right and the privilege of all people and many Nordic residents cite this value as one of their ultimate goals for their educational systems (Kyrö & Nyyssölä, 2006).

The most salient principles of the folk high school movement are experience and the human spirit. The curriculum of both the early and more contemporary folk institutions enjoys great freedom and flexibility. The session-to-session population so defined the earlier iterations of folk schools that topics and foci changed regularly (Toivainien, 1996). Currently, the schools maintain a steady set of offerings but the schools benefit from autonomy and local control of subject matter (Fleisher, 1968, FIN 2014). This feature allows these schools to remain relevant in their teachings, interesting to the student population, and to cater to the needs of the current generation (Fain, 1980; Toivainien, 1996; Fleisher, 1968; Davis, 1971). Both Fleisher (1968) and Toivainien (1996) note that among the more overt elements of curriculum, there lies in the

luminal spaces a hidden curriculum that is executed by the virtue of residential living, rural

settings, intramural stewardship, and organic human interactions. The Nordic national identity

allows this informal human development to serve as curriculum in what Grundtvig called the

"school for the living."

Less tangible in education is the objective that education helps one define the spirit.

Academics and other measureable human performance are easier to gauge and codify, but

authors note that fostering the human spirit is as much an element of folk curriculum as any other

(Fleisher, 1968; Toivainien, 1996). Finding one's way, as Toivainien puts it, is of such

importance that a common folk school marketing practice in Nordic culture is to exalt alumni

that make it to high profile positions in politics or other notable leadership. This is not unlike the

American university's practice of spotlighting noteworthy graduates; however, folk high schools

do this to emphasize "human environment" rather than "classroom methods" as inspiring true

human capitol (Grundtvig, 1825-1861/1976; Møller & Watson, 1944).

Nordic national identity is nearly inextricable from the methodologies of the model. As

the school was borne from the people in a time of conflict, the continual decanting of new talent

plies the countries with much the same spirit. They challenge the status quo and move toward

empowerment, nationalism, justice, experience, and spirit as they always have and as how the

folk high schools will ensure they always will.

Cautions toward the folk structure. Critics discuss nationalism, the usefulness of

quality-of-life instruction, and the sustainability of incurring the expense of schools that do not

immediately and directly add to the employable citizenry. The folk high school operates non-

competitively by eliminating exams and grades garnering criticism that folk schools are a

contrived setting (Fleisher, 1968). Additionally, folk high schools are typically located in rural

areas and can have insular qualities compared to sequestration or institutionalization. Students

leaving these environments can appear disoriented when they leave the experience (Fleisher,

1968).

      In its beginnings, the folk high school was a place where national identities could flourish

while the people worked to preserve language and culture. On the heels of international conflict

and deep losses in the mid 1800s, the people of Denmark were fiercely in pursuit of national

character that would help them to overcome these losses. Folk high schools were places for

common citizens to engage in communal decision-making, share skills and information, and

revive elements unique to their culture. From those early days of the folk high school model, the

subject of nationalism is a strong element in what marks the movement (Davis, 1971; Fleisher,

1968; Paulson, 1980). In Danish there is a term for the soul of the people; *Volkgeist.* Literally

translated, this *folk soul* considered the element of that marked nationalism. Some authors

describe this sense of national pride and collective idealism as paving the way for "Volkish"

thought and leading to racist supremacy. Author Peter Vierek questions the function of national

pride when he hints to similar ideals as the underpinnings of the Nazi party (Fain, 1980).

      We perennially discuss the purpose of schools and the industrialized world questions the

inclusion of non-academic elements in the programs of study (Robinson, 2006). American

secondary schools traditionally include athletic teams, and aesthetics including the visual and

performing arts. Americans value life skills such as home economics and industrial arts, as well

as clubs and organizations that span the topics of social awareness to non-athletic competition. In

an era of budget cutting and subsidy curtailments, these programs are often the first cuts in many

American and British schools (Robinson, 2006). The argument for this frequently comes down to

the belief that a schools' first priority is *academic*. The Scandinavians specifically designed folk

high schools to avoid academics even though there are fine arts and humanities that have an element of academia such as creative writing, or social studies in the form of peace studies. Folk gives students the opportunity to immerse themselves in topics that they may otherwise not have the chance to sample in adulthood (Fleisher, 1968).

An important feature of the folk high school is the lack of competition created by taking exams, achieving credit for courses, and earning degrees. In Sweden, Norway, and Denmark the laws providing for folk high schools specifically prohibit the practice of examinations and grades (Bagley & Rust, 2009). In the spirit of N.F.S. Grundtvig's philosophy of a "school for life," the emphasis is on the inherent rewards of learning and engaging in a community of learning (Grundtvig, 1825-1861/1975). Holding the participant to an exam and withholding a completion document robs the experience of this inherent reward. This attitude toward authentic learning is one likely challenged if we attempt to apply this logic to a model of education that proposes to prepare young people for the world. In short, there is a perception that eliminating competition and failure from the learning experience creates a student who is ill prepared to function in the working world.

In a Fordian system, industry relies on the production of new, employable, bodies. Thirteen years of publicly funded education, nine of which compulsory, two to four years of undergraduate post-secondary education, and the potential for some years in graduate schooling means a significant amount of time spent in developing this human resource. To suggest that any of those years be of non-academic content promises questioning. Additionally, by the admission of its own graduates, the folk high school system garners criticism in its inability to mirror "the real world" by the virtue of its elective and rural nature (Fleisher, 1968). The sequestration that a folk student experiences for these years tends to be more closely akin to religious sabbatical or

rehabilitation. Fredric Fleisher notes that, at times, students feel less prepared for the "real world" after this period away from the metropolis of life.

American Models of Folk-like Education

Scandinavian folk high school subjects are not unique and we find them in educational institutions all over the United States. While none possesses all of the elements of a true Scandinavian model, there are schools for the adult and the transitional populations in three main iterations. First, the American community college model offers an opportunity for learning that allows a student to think more critically about whether they would like to continue in a traditional 4-year university or whether they would like to join the workforce. The second iteration appears as what American's call *gap year* programs. The subjects addressed and methods used here are the mostly closely aligned with the folk spirit and serve the same demographic. Third, public adult education programs and learning centers exist throughout the United States. Topics within these institutions run the gamut from folk enrichment, to vocational, to academics

Folk curriculum is available to the American adult learner already. The community college system, the commercial gap year industry, and public adult learning centers, however, do not strike upon the same experience achieved by fully funded opportunities Nordic states. The community college adheres to vocational preparedness programming bearing a cost, the gap year industry poses such an expense that it bars participation of the less affluent, and the adult learning centers do not offer the fully immersed experience of yearlong and residential stays. Each of these institutions; however, are largely composed of students between the ages of 18 and 25 speaking to Arnett's theory that a specific kind of learning must take place at this time of

emerging adulthood in a student's life (Arnett, 2000; Arnett, Ramos, & Jensen, 2001; Flowers 2014).

Among the values that inform non-academic, life-skill education are the beliefs that education is a form of social welfare, democracy is a value to be taught as well as demonstrated, enrichment education enhances a person's quality of life, and education is the great equalizer that *prevents* poverty rather than simply *cures* it (Mann, 1848). We see the philosophies of N.F.S. Grundtvig, who gave birth to the folk high school, in the seminal works of America's John Dewey and Horace Mann. What these American researchers and educators view as a Zion of education has existed in theory for American institutions for nearly the whole of the 20th century.

In Mann's 1848 address to the Board of Education of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, he warns against a system that perpetuates the widening of the gap between the *haves* and the *have-nots*. Among the maladies fostered by a system of disparate castes are the issues of poverty and crime (Mann 1848; Schuilenburg, 2008). Mann states the lack of education among a class of people relegating them to a life of public assistance does nothing to progress a people. He cites that society can create laws that provide people with the essentials but that without education "even well-fed, well-clothed, and well-housed people can remain uncivilized" (Mann, 1848). These notions of ensuring the just and equal education of adults include Grundtvig's assertions that all men, including the agrarian populations, be free to learn. Mann says this comprehensive education applies to everybody in social progress.

A major vein of that social progress is the affirmation of democracy as the means by which that progress occurs. As Dewey and Mann have declared, it is through education that we achieve democracy and by the conscious cultivation of the human mind. That cultivation is not limited to the academic content of schooling because the quality of one's life relies on so much

more of the human experience (Dewey, 1938; Crane, 1919; Itin, 1999; Knapp, 2010; LaPlante, 2013; Wraga, 2011). American society honors this belief as secondary curriculum all over the country reflects the all-encompassing nature of human development by inclusion of athletics, the arts, life skills, and social humanities.

As one begins to see themselves as a fully-fledged and contributing member of their society, a true democracy stresses the importance of equality among its people. The voices and the votes of each citizen are counted equally and the education needed in order to inform a citizenry toward a good life is imperative (Libresco, 2012; Meier, 2000; Thomas & Hartley, 2010; Green, 1996). America posits itself as a society where education is liberally applied.

The progress of society is a perennial endurance challenge. Allowing people to fall into categories of inequity and pretending that these castes are a natural state of affairs can only lead to inescapable poverty and the crimes that accompany such (Mann, 1848; Shuilenburg, 2008). If the purpose of education is to achieve a level of civility that is the mark of being human then it is our most comprehensive and enduring form of social welfare. To ensure the free and responsible search for truth and meaning, education is our greatest demonstration and exercise of democracy (Dewey, 1916; Meier, 2000; Libresco, 2012; Thomas & Hartley, 2010).

"Folk" schools in America. Folk high schools in America have been in existence since early 1900 in the spirit of the movement that started in Denmark. Sometimes referred to as People's Colleges, schools exist such as the Danebod in Tyler, Minnesota; Highlander in New Market, Tennessee; or John C. Campbell Folk School in Brasstown, North Carolina. These types of schools are more in keeping with the original conceptualization of folk education as it was in Denmark conceived of by N.F.S. Grundtvig. The original schools in Denmark were places for democratic discussion, preservation of an indigenous way of life, and preparation for the trials

that come with the exercise of politics (Møller & Watson, 1944). These were not necessarily

schools for *young* people looking to discover their interests and develop their ideologies. These

were for *all* people to do so.

The agrarian, rural, elective, and sporadic education centers that provide an adult "folk"

experience in America are those that more closely resemble retreat centers, family camps, and

recreation organizations. The *volkgeist* is present in the teachings of American folk when one

considers that the early start of the Highlander movement was an effort on the part of Miles

Horton to address the issues of civil rights as they pertained to race issues and union formation

(Toivainien, 1996). At Highlander, the focus was not on teaching from a pulpit of authority.

They wanted to draw out the needs, experiences, opinions, and purposes of the people that came

to the school (Adams, 1980). As America's more historied folk program, making it the easiest to

research, the authors assert that Highlander's elements that most closely resemble the original

Grundtvigian philosophy are the social justice elements that saw America through some of its

most notable civil rights efforts (Adams, 1980; Toivanien, 1996).

While not a highly comprehensive organization at this time, the Folk Education

Association of America is led largely by adult educators in Massachusetts. Currently their home

page features 10 members from across the country (Appendix J) and the organization is currently

campaigning for increased membership and discussing the potential for this organization. One of

those potentials is that of collecting dues from the disparate folk schools in order to systematize

and market the folk concept (C. Spicer, personal communication, July 2, 2014). According to

Christopher Spicer, member of the FEAA Board of Directors, the challenge in organizing the

adult folk education programs across the country lies in finding a common language. There is

still space for discussion about what "folk" actually means and what connotations that carries

(personal communication, July 1, 2014).

        American gap year programs. We typically refer to programs for students that choose

to take time off between completing high school and beginning post-secondary studies or joining

the workforce as gap year, post-graduate (PG) year, or fifth year. For offering the transitional

student an opportunity to explore interests and develop their ideologies, the model that most

closely meets this objective in our culture is what we call the *gap year*. The gap year industry,

America's most closely related cousin to the Scandinavian Folk High School, is a business that

addresses the youth building and citizen development for those transitioning into adulthood. The

fodder of its curriculum nearly matches the course lists of Scandinavian folk high schools, and

the missions draw upon much of the same philosophy of cultural exposure, experiential learning,

and adventure.

        USA Gap Years Fairs is an organization that offers public events and publishes local

compendiums of gap year programs. At the Gap Year Fair event held at Phillips Academy in

Andover, Massachusetts on February 1, 2013, 38 programs presented their offerings (Appendix

K). Of the 38 representatives, three were counseling services for families considering gap year

experiences for their student. Among the other 35 programs were options for academic

preparation, aesthetics, environmentalism, foreign language, mixed adventures,

outdoorsmanship, stewardship, social justice, service, and foreign travel[3]. Foreign travel was the

most prevalent offering with 14 of the 35 vendors offering this experience.

        With a showing of 14 out of 35 vendors representing the travel abroad experience it

would stand to reason that the United States is following a trend of international rite of passage

much like what has been seen in British schools (O'Shea, 2011). A prevalence of international

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[3] I collected and examined pamphlets, brochures, and other marketing materials from all 35 organizations.

travel among a young population harkens to the Grand Tour of aristocratic, adolescent males of

the late seventeenth century (O'Shea, 2011). A study of U.K. adolescents returning from such

experiences found the benefits to be gains in civic education, understanding of culture,

intellectual development, decision-making, and psychosocial development. Researchers also

found, however, that students found it hard to return to their home contexts after the experiences

(O'Shea, 2011).

The gap programs are typically for-profit, privately owned, short in duration, immersive

and/or residential, and bear a cost to the student and their families (Platt & Brooks, 2014). One

category of program operates on volunteerism and service learning where the student has the

potential to participate at no cost. However, the bulk of gap year programs marketed to families

bear a cost that can reach upward of $20,000. Agencies in place to assist students and their

families in locating appropriate gap year placements may charge fees into the thousands. There is

marked exclusion of students who have an inability to pay. The tuitions of some gap programs

rival the tuitions of many public colleges. The companies, while offering scholarships and some

shorter free programs, frequently charge families in the tens of thousands of dollars for full-year

enrollments.

Andrew J. Martin of the University of Sydney asserts that there is a trend in who

participates in a gap, and a trend in the affects of that participation. Students demonstrating

uncertainty about the future, lower motivation for academic participation, and lower academic

performance are the likely students to abstain from immediate enrollment in higher education.

Additionally, there is research that shows the students that do participate in a gap year experience

demonstrate higher levels of academic motivation upon enrollment in higher education (Martin,

2010). It is essential to note here that Martin does not indicate that the students of the study

participated in structured gap year programs but rather they simply abstained from higher

education enrollment for one year.

        Public organizations that serve potential folk participants. For the purpose of this

inquiry, I define "potential folk participant" as a young person (18- to 24-year-old transitional

learner) whether they have or have not completed a secondary credential. In service of this

population, a number of public opportunities exist to address their needs and learning objectives.

As society becomes more aware of alternative learning styles, and the influence of multiple

intelligences, alternative schools and charter programs have increased in America. Community

colleges are ubiquitous institutions in service of learners seeking direction in education and

career paths. In some states, Maine being one, the State department of education includes an

array of educational opportunities through public means for its adult populations. We allot

portions of these services for the 16- to 20-year-old population. In an effort to validate the

informal learning that happens in the gap, colleges and universities are developing standard Prior

Learning Assessment protocols (Tate, 2013). Each opportunity serves an element of the

comprehensive offerings to this population. For the following sections, I refer to opportunities in

the State of Maine as a microcosm of American institutional offerings.

        Community colleges. The community college system principally serves the students

having left their compulsory secondary programs on the premise that in two-year's time the

student will have a stand-alone degree that may articulate into a four-year degree program at a

college or university (Fonte, 2011). This two-year degree also serves as a work-force readiness

credential affording the student the choice to discontinue academic studies (Ayers, 2011). The

programs within a community college system typically serve as precursor to further studies but

can also offer students an opportunity to explore interests. The Maine Community College

System, for example, offers nearly 300 degree programs spread over fourteen categories that

cover trades in education and development, business and computers, hospitality and tourism, and

the health trades to name a few (MCCS, 2013-2014). Beyond its position as a viable transition

option for students, the MCCS also advertizes that between its seven institutions and eight off-

campus locations it positions itself within 25 miles of 92% of the state's population. For the state

of Maine, the community college system serves the rural person just as the folk high school

model endeavors to do in Scandinavia.

The community college system of the state of Maine enrolled over 18,000 students in the

fall of 2013. At 1.4% of the population participating in an organized educational opportunity,

this statistic suggests that participation in these programs is a significant feature of the

comprehensive education programming offered to the state of Maine. While the structure of

community colleges diverges from the fundamental structure of folk high school programming,

there is still a feature that serves a similar purpose. A number of students considering post-

secondary education are not necessarily wont to enroll directly into four-year programs and often

seek two-year programs as a transitional experience (Fonte, 2011). Community college

participants use the credits and degrees earned at this level to move on to colleges and

universities, or in many cases move on to careers with a 2-year degree.

According to Richard Fonte (2011), the benefit of the 2-year, transitional, education

experience is the benefit of extra time for development. With ACT (2013) statistics showing a

significant student attrition from his or her freshman years of college, it becomes more important

that opportunities be made available that are closer to students' homes, less expensive, shorter in

duration, and offer programming in relevant areas that may serve as terminal degrees for students

that choose not to continue (Fonte, 2011). Additionally, the spaces in which community colleges

operate address a societal need for technical trades and offer the benefit of a ready labor force

(Ayers, 2011; Fonte, 2011).

 Public adult learning organizations. The "learning for life" that marks Maine's adult

education traditions is heavily rooted in the principles that adults need to have diverse exposures

to learning embedded in their experiences in order to function in the world at large (Lindeman,

1961; Knowles, 1975, Brookfield, 1984; Warren, 2012). While community colleges are

transitional academic programs for young adults, there are also learning centers for adults that

offer instruction in areas that are not considered the fodder of higher education, per se. Public

adult education programs cover topics too numerous to encapsulate in this paper. The Maine

Adult Education System offers learning in overarching areas that include Adult Basic Education

(ABE), High School Completion (HSC) by way of diploma courses or high school equivalency

testing (GED™ or HiSET™), Maine College Transitions (MCT), vocational training, and

enrichment classes for quality of life enhancement. Maine is not unique in its state-funded

offerings but is in the minority of states to do so on this spectrum. These institutions offer adult

and transitional learners the opportunity to engage in skill building that runs a gamut of price

points and does not scrutinize student performance by way of examinations, grades, or degrees.

 Not long after Dewey's prominent works on education, experience, and democracy,

another researcher crafted philosophies that would be the basis of modern, American, adult

education. Eduard Lindeman, in an effort to unearth life's truths, traveled to Denmark in 1920

where he encountered the Danes operating in the wake of international conflict. His interests

were piqued by the budding, educative efforts among the agrarian families and concluded that,

"adult education will become an agency of progress if its short-term goal of self-improvement

can be made compatible with a long-time, experimental but resolute policy of change the social

order" (p. 166). Lindeman was so moved by the democratic structure and quest for Grundtvig's "living word" that he penned his own seminal work in 1926.

It was not until many years later that Malcolm Knowles birthed the concept of andragogy when he penned his six assumptions of andragogy (1975). These assumptions are that adults need to know the reason for the learning. They value education that builds upon their experience and missteps. They need to be involved in the planning of the learning and its evaluation. They value education that has direct relevance. Adults need problem-centered lessons rather than content-centered, and finally, adults respond to internal motivators rather than external (Knowles, 1975). Drawing upon Lindeman's work from nearly fifty years earlier, as well as from Dewey's assertions that much of this applied to children as well (Dewey, 1916; Dewey, 1938), Knowles became the first to delineate the teaching and learning of adults from that of children.

Where Knowles left off in defining andragogy, Stephen Brookfield picked resumed the discourse in his discussions of how these assumptions function in action (1984). Brookfield, a student of both Lindeman's and Knowles's work went on to detail the education of adults and the importance of including the learner in the lesson planning and evaluation, and capitalizing on the experiences that shape the learner. He is the creator of the "Critical Incident Questionnaire" (1995) which asks the facilitator to use the responses, reactions, and reflections of the participants to inform the immediate, next steps of learning. In this spirit of responsive planning, the flexibility to adapt the learning opportunities is a marked feature of modern, American adult education organizations.

It is particularly important to adapt to the current student needs and political climate as the works of Dewey, Lindeman, Knowles, and Brookfield work their way into our modern concept of the adult learning center. We can delve further into the history of what it means to

educate the adult and give credit to Grundtvig, the very man upon whose philosophies triggered

the folk high school and the "school for life." In Grundtvig's tradition, the State of Maine

publicly funds learning opportunities meant to address the needs of the community, inspire social

justice and upward mobility through learning, and provide opportunity for exploration that

improves one's quality of life (MAEA, 2014). Among those offerings are the programs that

speak to the more urgent need of providing a qualified workforce (e.g. GED™, HiSET™,

computer literacy, industry-specific training, etc.) and preparing adults for post-secondary

education. Equally important are the enrichment opportunities that are non-academic, non-

competitive, and non-compulsory. With 83 publicly funded locations as of FY2015 (Maine

Department of Education, 2014), Maine's public, comprehensive plan for education is evidence

that much of the philosophies of these authors and researchers are hard at work.

  Prior learning assessment departments. Another contemporary trend in the world of

post-secondary education is the subject of Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) (Tate, 2013) and the

accrediting of adult students by way of an assessment of work-related and informal learning

experiences. Institutions also refer to this process as recognition of prior learning (RPL),

assessment of prior learning (APL), and accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL). For

the purpose of this inquiry, I refer to this practice only as PLA. The Council of Adult and

Experiential Learning (CAEL) is a national organization that champions the concept of

supporting students toward college credential completion by way of taking into consideration

non-academic vocational training, volunteerism, experiential and adventure-based learning

excursion, or immersion in the field of their choice.

  The evaluation process by which PLA departments give students credit differs between

institutions. Typically, a student begins this process by selecting a program of studies. In many

cases, the student needs to matriculate thus receiving an advisor in their field. The adult student

would then present their certificates, licenses, and other demonstrations of learning for credit

through the portfolio process or the granting of credits for nationally recognized credentials. Of

Maine's 16 private post-secondary institutions, 8 public 4-year universities, and 7, 2-year

community colleges, many either have, or are developing PLA departments (Prior Learning

Assessment Conference, personal communication September 13, 2013; Maine College

Transitions Conference, personal communication, December 2, 2013)

Discussion about PLA and CAEL is important in that it demonstrates our society is

already recognizing the inherent worth of activities that happen for students outside of the four

walls of accrediting institutions. In short, the learning of *life* is as essential as formalized

classroom learning. According to CAEL standards, the movement to accredit the learning of life

endorses review of on-the-job learning, corporate training, independent study including massive

open online courses (MOOCs), military service and volunteer service (Tate, 2013).

In order to ensure a consistent and equitable application of CAEL principles, the

standards of an assessment dictate that the credit awarded is not for *experience* but for the

learning, subject matter experts conduct the assessments, and that any fees associated with the

process are for the *assessment* and not for the *credit* [emphasis added] (Tate, 2013). Laitinen

(2012) argues that the credits granted for PLA are an appropriate measure of learning since the

traditional system of credit granting received criticism as being an arbitrary system anyway. If a

brick-and-mortar course awards credit for attendance and compliance rather than learning, then

she argues that PLA may be the better system of assessing *actual* learning.

Not without criticism, PLA has been described by Frederik Sandberg and Per Andersson

(2011) as "lifeworld colonization." By this, the researchers assert that a system of evaluating

life's experiences for accreditation may simply be a system of reducing the human experience to

another form of currency. In essence, the researchers question whether PLA creates a system of

engagement that is merely akin to working for money in order to cash it in for goods and

services. Does a learner's immersion in the world amount to points or chips for which they cash

in for college credit? Does this have a negative impact on the level to which one truly engages in

their "lifeworld" if they are in pursuit of this currency rather than authentic learning?

Chapter Summary

The importance of researching how we treat transitional learning is vital to our success as

a people because repeatedly we have shown that education is not what we do for only our

children. Creating language for the education of adults is a fairly new and compelling mission

and now we face what happens in between. Based on N.F.S. Grundtvig's work to define the

"living word," and the education that seeks to liberate people, the Scandinavian Folk High

School shows us that a comprehensive approach is possible. Ushering children into adulthood is

an educational effort that we see in our American context but we experience nothing exactly like

what we seen in the Nordic countries.

While we have "folk" institutions, gap year programs, and public organizations that take

up the reins in one manner or another, we do not have the systematic abundance of this type of

learning as seen in the Nordic states. Exploration of how America provides this education, and

how the population receives and participates in it, is important to pursue because we are quickly

realizing that we cannot leave anybody behind. As Horace Mann puts it,

> Education then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is a great equalizer of
>
> the conditions of men,—the balance wheel of the social machinery. I do not here
>
> mean that it so elevates the moral nature as to make men disdain and abhor the

oppression of their fellow men. This idea pertains to another of its attributes. But I

mean that it gives each man the independence and the means by which he can

resist the selfishness of other men. It does better than to disarm the poor of their

hostility toward the rich: it prevents being poor (Mann, 1957)

Whether we are preparing a workforce, molding an intellect, or supporting our families, assuring

that we prepare citizens for this work is the goal of human society. "Balance" and "poverty" are

not simply expressions of finance but a measure of human capital. Age and location largely

dictate how education happens for the individual so it is wise for America to evaluate what it

does, where it does it, and for whom educationally. It is especially wise to do so through a lens of

programming that has s demonstrated success record within the Nordic context. Discovering

where we are similar and where we are different holds promise for future growth.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to discover the details of students' experiences as they participate in structured gap year programming after high school but before attending university. In this, I have attempted to discover the pivotal events and critical features of gap programs, how those programs contribute to students' personal development, and what factors influenced the students' access to gap programs. I used a three-phase approach to locate my target population, delve into the topic, and then go deeper through a single case study.

This study comprised three phases that included a survey disseminated to the 18-24-year-old population of one university, interviews of four informants that experienced structured gap year programs, and a case study of one, typical, gap year program participant. I collected the data for each phase in succession using the results to inform the sequential phase. The survey allowed me to find the informants in a larger university population with the assistance of the institution's Office of Research Integrity and Outreach. From the resulting, delimited sample, I interviewed all four informants that were willing to schedule time with me. Upon my thorough examination of these accounts, I developed a single case around the individual that offered a typical example of the structured gap year student participant experience.

General Aspects of the Design

The case study method is the most appropriate method for a study of the student perspective on gap year experiences due to the personal nature of the experience as well as the depth to which a study such as this must go in order to reach the "heart" (Miles & Huberman, p. 25) of that experience. The case study method aligns in six ways with the purpose of this study.

First, the population is a bounded system of students in a specific age group and having experienced a similar event (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p.27; Stake, 1994). Case study is an

exploration of a phenomenon within a bounded context that specifically details what is *not* [emphasis added] studied (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 25).

Second, the multimodal form of data collection allows for a deeper understanding of the descriptions and explanations that comprise the case (Yin, 2012). The multidimensional approach to data collection addresses the questions, "What is happening or has happened?" and, "How or why did something happen?" (Yin, 2012, p 5).

Third, case study drills down to as small a sample as possible for reliable and relevant data. In this, individuals or composites, serve to typify and exemplify the experience this study aims to explain and can, in the case of gap year, flesh out the themes on access and outcomes. Case study focuses on a small population that allows for a snapshot of a typical population (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 27; Stake, 1994).

Fourth, with qualitative case study data the researcher has the ability to identify the themes and patterns that allow for analytical generalization in order to inform further studies of the emerging results. Case study findings allow for analytical generalization, as opposed to statistical generalization, and allow the ordinary to emerge (Yin, 2012, pp. 6-7) as "generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes" (Yin, 1994).

Fifth, case study data collection procedure calls for a multimedia approach. This is appropriate to a student's experiential educational encounter as the artifacts of this are multimedia in nature. In the case of gap year and experiential learning, the multimodal data collection and multimedia artifact involved with case study are most appropriate for a multifaceted human experience (Yin, 2012, p. 10). Multi*modal* speaks to the modes by which the researcher *collects* the data and multi*media* speaks to the *formats* the data takes.

Sixth, this study of one individual who participated in a structured gap year program serves as an instrumental case (Stake, 1994) for refining the theories of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000) ephebagogical practices (Knowles, 1979; Flowers 2014), and the ecology of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The case is not intrinsic in the study's attempt to allow the case to "speak for itself" (Stake, 1994). Instead, the case of Caitlin's gap experience is illustrative of the concepts that bolster an argument for the development that happens in structured gap experiences.

Propositions

Based on the guiding research questions, I have formed correlating propositions at the onset of the study. First, the study seeks to know what students report were the critical features and pivotal events of their experiences in gap year programs. The intention for this inquiry is to find out *what* has happened to the student. The first proposition, therefore, is that there will have been precipitating events and occasions of learning that offer the potential for clarity, struggle, personal connection to tasks, realizations of self, and exposure to defining factors.

The second guiding research question asks what evidence students report about the impact that their experiences and expectations of post-graduate, gap year programs had on their personal development. The intention of this inquiry is to discover *how* those features and events affected them. The second proposition is that students experienced events, learning, connections, realizations, and exposures that had positive effects on their sense of self, awareness of their personal preferences, ability to take personal responsibility, and performance in tasks such as academic commitment, employment, or specialized skill sets.

The third question attempts to reveal what were the factors and conditions of the students' access to gap year programs. Essentially, this inquiry asks *why* the student was able to

participate in a gap year program. The access factors suggested by the survey include financial

and personal supports. The third proposition is that students who accessed gap year programs

were students who had capital, specifically financial and social capital, were able to participate

through supportive relationships with people in their lives and financial support.

Role of the Researcher

In the process of data collection from gap year students, it is important to recognize that

influence from the researcher may affect responses from students and even the decision to

respond. As I discussed in chapter two, there is a debate about whether taking a year off from

academics between high school and college is beneficial to students. Gap program proponents

argue that this period allows for important development (Bagley & Rust, 2009; Fitzsimmons,

McGrath, & Ducey, 2011; Martin, 2010; Mohn, 2006; O'Shea, 2011; Platt & Brooks, 2014).

Detractors argue that cost-bearing programs are expensive, federal financial aid does not cover

many programs, and gaps delay students from contributing to the workforce (Fitzsimmons,

McGrath, & Ducey, 2011; O'Shea, 2011).

I am *not* one who experienced a structured gap by my own definition, but I have

experienced multiple structured programs that posit themselves as gap opportunities later in adult

life. To delineate the role of the researcher, I must "calculate the distance between the lived

experiences" (AMF, 2011) of myself and of those that I study. To frame my reporting and

understanding of their responses, I have to evaluate to what extent my own educational and

structured program experiences are similar to or different from my informants' experiences.

The table offered by Arzubiaga, Artiles, King, and Harris-Muri (2008) comes from work

done by the researchers on cross-cultural interview considerations (Table 3.1). The following

encounters have correlating potential consequences. The way respondents perceive I feel about

them may have an effect on their responses (Arzubiaga et al, 2008). These categories are helpful

to this discussion of the role of the researcher considering that attitudes toward education are a

culturally defining factor in many cases.

Table 3.1.

Encounters in Research Projects and Their Potential Consequences.

Encounters During Study Activities	Reflections on Potential Consequences
Informants' perceptions of what the researcher's main community thinks of them.	What do students who did not immediately enter higher education from secondary education think *educators* think of them? How do those perceptions mediate their performance in the study tasks?
The influence of researcher's affective responses to informants.	How is the causal and informal demeanor of an educator/researcher perceived by gap year participants/students?
The (often implicit) criteria use to recruit key informants.	How do the narrow criteria of age and participation in gap programs that qualify as *structured* skew samples among the gap year participant populations?
The history of contact that informants have with the researcher's main community.	How does the student's history in education mediate their engagement with research tasks presented by an educator/researcher?
The history of perspective toward educational structures that informants might have developed over time.	How do gap participant/students living in a state where college readiness, upcredentialing, and tuition ROI debates are constantly discussed and presented daily in the media engage in a gap participation study?

Adapted from Arzubiaga et al, 2008

My affective responses to them, the criteria used to bring them into the study and the

respondents' relationship with the subject of formal and informal education will come into play

as they report their perceptions (Arzubiaga et al, 2008). Additionally, the topic of the urgency of

college attendance and the debate of college spending permeates our culture, and I propose that it

is likely students will have opinions on costs and investments as they pertain to formal and

informal learning experiences. This is principally possible considering recent events and protest

at this particular university over budget cuts, reductions in force and programming, and tuition

appropriation.

Further, the manner in which I affirm and promote the stories of my participants appears

in how I write the case. In this, I have calculated the distance between the case as is reported to

me through interview and the case as I report it through my writing (Stake, 1994). Stake says of

the case report that, "more will be pursued than was volunteered [by informants] [and] less will

be reported than was learned" (p. 240). The criteria for inclusion in this case report is limited to

my discretion as to what illustrates the salient theories, addresses the research questions, and is

indubitably limited to the hospitality of my participants.

Setting and Participants

The setting for this study is a public university in the northeastern United States. This

university site is the second largest of the state university system and recently announced its

conversion to a "metropolitan university" featuring three campuses in the state's most populous

regions. The university's Office of Research Integrity and Outreach (ORIO) has a process by

which external research must request access to the student body. The researcher may display

flyers and posters in accordance with policy, purchase advertisement space in the campus

newspaper, request directory information for email recruitment, or request that faculty and staff

forward recruitment materials. For this study, I chose to purchase advertisement space and

request email directory information. The university redacts the information of students that have

requested privacy.

The university hosts an extracurricular organization that publishes a student newspaper

11 times per semester. According to their rate card, the newspaper states they serve all three

campuses of this university. Two of those campuses are located in the southern region and one is

located in the central region. Both regions are urban and all three municipalities have citizens of

diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. The university publishes 2,800 – 3,000 copies of every

issue. These issues are available at 44 locations within the campuses. The newspaper's local

press kit states that copies of the newspaper are also available at 17 off-campus locations in the

southern region. In addition to their print saturation, the press kit claims that they have 900+ fans

on Facebook and 500+ followers on Twitter.

This student newspaper has a partnership with a public newspaper for content sharing

that covers the northern, rural portion of the state. This publisher states on their Facebook page

that they serve 50% of the state's counties that span 68% of the geographic space. This coverage

is important to mention in the current era where distance learning and online enrollment are

ubiquitous. The university offers six undergraduate degrees that students may attend completely

online.

To contextualize the reach of their marketing, the press kit gives demographic details on

the student body (Table 3.1.). Of a total enrollment of 8,923 students, 7,098 are undergraduates,

1,553 are graduates, and 272 are law students. Further, the student body is 59.3% female, and

90.4% residents of the respective state. The press kit states that only 1,109 students live on

campus making the student body 87.6% commuter with an average student age of 27 years old.

The press kit also claims that this university is the largest of the seven state universities. By my

calculations, however, this is inaccurate as one other has a student body of 11,247 as reported in

2013.

Table 3.2.

Population Statistics for Research Site University

	Total University Population[a]	First-year Undergraduates Fall 2014[b]
Female Population	59.32%	59.29%
Caucasian Population	88.14%	82.36%
Maine Residents	90%	78%
Commuter Population	82%	39%
< 25 years old	67%	98%
Average Age	27	19

Note. [a]Source of information is The Free Press local rate card demographics section
[b]Source of information is the university's Common Data Set 2014-2015

I prepared a full-color, 6-inch-by-6-inch advertisement (Appendix E) for the student newspaper and purchased one quarter-page space for three runs. These three runs appeared on January 12, 19, and 26. In addition, I circulated a recruitment letter (Appendix D) to the students via the web portal and social networking, which they received on the same dates. The registrar's office of the university filtered a list of 3,533 students that fit the age criteria of 18-24-year-olds including students that were 24 years and some months old as satisfying the age range. The Qualtrics™ survey remained open for 20 days.

As a means of disseminating the survey information electronically, I created both a Weebly™ website (Appendix F.1) and a Facebook event. The Weebly™ site gives potential respondents the informed consent form, the invitation letter to students, an abbreviated version of the purpose of the study, and a link to the Qualtrics™ questionnaire. Offering this information in a shareable, digital format allows the study to benefit from social networking thus contributing to the sample in a snowballing manner.

The university registrar's office emailed the invitation and link to 3,533 students. Mailer Daemon returned eight of these invitations as undeliverable. There were 105 surveys accessed by participants leading to 100 completions. Forty-five respondents indicated that they took a break

between high school graduation and college entrance. Eleven respondents indicated that they

participated in a ***structured*** gap year program. Of the six individuals that indicated consent to be

interviewed, I was able to schedule face-to-face interviews with four informants based on their

availability and willingness. From the four interviewees, I selected one individual on whom I

built the case study.

Data Collection

This study followed three phases of data collection that included a survey, interviews,

and collection of face-to-face interview narrative, artifacts, and corroboration from other

stakeholders to form a case study. At the onset of the study, I intended for the survey to collect a

large enough sample of data to create a framework for further questioning. I designed the

interview to capitalize on the social energy of the emerging adults' communication style (Arnett,

2004). From both phases of formative data, the case study emerged from my deeper inquiry into

the events of, personal development through, and access to structured gap year programming that

the informant experienced.

Survey Phase: Instrumentation and Procedure

The first phase of the research involved using a Qualtrics™ survey to identify the

students among the population of the university that fit the criteria of the sampling. The

questionnaire has 28 questions divided into 11 blocks and I programmed it with 5 points at which

the survey ends via skip logic if the participant identifies themselves as a member of a delimited

group. Upon completion of the entire survey, participants are directed to a block where they are

offered the opportunity to enter a drawing for a chance to win one of ten $10 Visa gift cards. I

destroyed the contact information collected for awarding this prize after the respondent received

the incentive. All questions were optional with none forcing a response from the participant.

Informed consent and delimitation factors. The initial questions on the survey were meant to whittle the respondent population down to the target group. I programmed these questions with skip logic taking the respondent to the "thank you" page at the end of the survey if they answered as part of a delimited group. The question established their status as a student of the study site, determined that they took a break, collected their age, asked for the length of the experience and asked for them to categorize the objective of that gap time. The survey solicited them to select multiple responses including work, travel, academic study, homemaking, leisure, athletics, or other. The "Other" option gave them the opportunity to fill in a response. The final delimiting factor was the distinction of being a structured gap program. The question began with a definition for their consideration:

A *structured* gap year program is a program that is organized and offered by some kind of institution. These structured programs can be anything from organized excursions, academic preparation programs, faith and religious studies, athletic team membership, internships, apprenticeships, foreign travel programs, project-based volunteerism, etc. These can be programs offered by your own school district, your place of worship, a local service organization, a gap year industry program, a pre-college program, etc. [bold face and emphasis is as appears in the participant survey]

Respondents indicating that they participated in a structured gap program proceeded to the next block of questions.

Gap year program information. The questions included in the block regarding gap year program information addressed the objectives of each of the three guiding research questions. Questions eight through 10 asked respondents to select a category that fit their program, give the

name of the specific program, and to indicate the duration of the program. Each of these begins a

framework for question one as it pertains to critical features and pivotal events.

Questions 11 and 12 addressed all three guiding questions. The results as to whether a

program offered college credit, and whether the student intends to apply these, addresses all three

guiding research questions. College credit may be a critical feature of programs, speak to

expectations of program outcomes and benefits to the student, as well as be a factor that may or

may not have affected their access to the opportunity.

Contextualizing access: Funding and supportive structures. Dovetailing with credit

data as mentioned above, the contextualization of access questions include exploration of

funding, belief systems, criteria for program selection, as well as support from influential people.

I have based this survey question upon one of the propositions that students with both social and

financial support for these programs are more likely to access a structured program rather than

enter university directly. Information about financial considerations also allows the potential for

evaluation of programs that carry no costs.

The Critical Incident Questionnaire. Based on Stephen Brookfield's (1995) work on

reflective teaching, I have worded the following block of questions in the spirit of his work to

invite participant reflection. The wording of each question varies slightly from Brookfield's

original work based on suggestions from pilot study individuals. This block of five questions

addresses guiding research questions one and two in search of evidence for critical features,

pivotal events, and the impact of experiences and expectations. These questions were optional

for the individual to address and allowed for unlimited, narrative response.

Demographics, solicitation, and compensation. Each of the questions at the end of the

survey serves various "housekeeping" objectives. The inclusion of gender and GPA were simply

included in order to offer an opportunity to categorize results and detect emerging trend. The

survey asked respondents if they were willing to participate in an interview and I asked how they

would like me to contact them. Finally, each respondent entered whether he or she would like to

enter a drawing for the gift card and entered his or her contact information for the award.

The end of the questionnaire routes to the same "thank you" landing page that even

delimited individuals saw. The salutation message stated

"Thank you for your participation. Keep up the great work in your studies. If at any point

you would like to withdraw your responses from this study and discontinue your

participation, please contact the researcher at sflowers@lesley.edu. If you would like to

receive a copy of the results of this survey, please contact the researcher

at sflowers@lesley.edu." (Appendix F.3)

I aligned the questionnaire items to each of the research questions. I have indicated in Appendix

L where each of those cross sections appear and in which cases one questionnaire item addressed

more than one of the original research questions. Demographics and logistical questions did not

necessarily align to the research questions and I indicate this in the table in Appendix L.

Interview Phase: Instrumentation and Procedure

Of the 11 survey participants that indicated that they took a structured gap year program,

six indicated that they were willing to sit for an interview. I contacted all six of these potential

informants and was able to schedule interviews with four individuals (Table 3.3). These

interviews occurred at the library on the university campus between February 23 and March 3.

Each interview lasted between 55 and 75 minutes guided by an interview protocol (Appendix M)

that I created based on the emerging themes from the survey responses. I taped these interviews

using a dual, digital system that allowed me to expedite the recording to a commercial

transcription service. The transcribers produced a clean verbatim document that allowed me to delve into the text during my analysis.

Table 3.3.

Four Interview Informants' Demographic Data

Name	Gender	Age	Gap Program	Program Cost Notes
Michael	male	23	AmeriCorps (Habitats for Humanity)	Free; stipend/scholarship
Aaron	male	24	Christian Junges Dorfschule	Free
Tahlia	female	24	McMullen Dressage	Apprenticeship
Caitlin	female	24	Student Conservation Association	Free; stipend/scholarship

The interview protocol included six major sections. First, I asked the student for a specific grand tour (Spradley, 1979) description of their gap year experience in which I asked them to talk openly about the events and their features. The responses allowed me to note key concepts and sentiments to focus further the questions of the latter part of the survey. The second section focused on questions about events that led up to the students' decision to take a gap year program. This included questions about their high school experience, precipitating events, support from influential people in their lives, and feelings about going to university.

The third section addressed the feelings and reactions to the beginning phase of their gap experience. I asked questions about their expectations, and whether their initial experiences affected those expectations. The fourth section of questions asked about their thoughts and feelings midway through the program. I asked about critical factors and pivotal events, and whether those events challenged or redefined their thinking. The fifth section addressed the end stage of the gap program specifically about their relationship to cohort peers in the program as well as their perception of themselves compared to those having not taken a gap year program.

The sixth section of the interview protocol featured subsections based on the emerging themes from the survey data and other reflective elements. The four themes within which I

developed further questions were exploring the unfamiliar, building relationships, redefining

preferences, and sheltered independence. Informants answered questions prompting them to

compare their high school experience, the gap year experience, and their university experience in

these domains.

The last portion of section six included a generalized reflection on how they would

explain their experience to a young person interested in the same gap program, a card

categorizing activity, as well as an inquiry as to whether they were aware of Prior Learning

Assessment (PLA) services at the university. For the card sorting activity, I asked the student to

categorize language that emerged from the survey data. This included quotes from all survey

informants in generalized terms. Each of the quotes appeared on separate cards (Appendix N)

and I asked interview informants to attempt to group and label the statements to arrange them

according to similarities they saw in the statements. The script of these instructions was verbatim

for each participant (Appendix O). I asked them if they saw any categories emerging and what

they would label each of the categories that they created.

Case Study Phase: Procedure

One interview informant stood out as an opportunity to create a case for the third phase

that would typify and exemplify the structured gap year program experience. This informant

gave detailed, well-developed responses, and represented overarching themes that emerged from

all interview informants' responses. Creation of the case began with an in-depth examination of

the transcribed interview to select the areas in which artifact and corroboration would make

possible a deeper understanding of the case. The case study informant agreed to participate in a

Google Docs format to workshop the text of her narrative as well as to participate in gathering

further artifact and corroboration. I submitted an IRB addendum memorandum (Appendix P) to

Lesley University to include accounts from other people from the informant's experience. Using

a more detailed consent form (Appendix Q), the informant gave me permission to contact her

parents and her university professors.

This participant's circumstances offered a robust opportunity to pull multimedia sources

of artifact and corroboration into its presentation. This informants' interview narrative was well-

developed enough for me to solicit the following elements in order to tell her story

Corroboration**:**

- Statement from the Student Conservation Association (SCA) public relations

- Perspectives from the informant's parent(s)

- Recommendation from university professors/mentors on informants'

   capabilities

Artifacts**:**

- University Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) policy and documents

- Awards, scholarships, and other recognition

- Evidence of the partnerships the informant forged with industry partners

- Training certificates from skills attained during the gap program

- Multimodal evidence of completed SCA projects

For each of the addendum informants, I drafted a short set of questions that pertained to their

particular role in the informant's experience (Appendices R, S, & T). I conducted interviews

with the VP of communications for the gap program as well as the interview with the informant's

father via telephone due to their out-of-state locations. I communicated with two of the

informant's professors via emailed questionnaire. These questionnaires were simple Microsoft

Word™ documents allowing the respondents unlimited, narrative space.

Data Analysis Procedure

The process by which I digested and made meaning of the data from all three phrases

came from detailed examination of the language used to discuss the critical features and pivotal

events of the informants' gap experience (Yin, 1994). This involved careful consideration of the

nuanced meaning of words, as well as inference when the informant used indirect phrases and

language specific to youth and current popular culture (Creswell, 2013; Creswell, 2014). I

conducted this analysis of both the survey and the interviews by highlighting statements in the

printed transcripts that were salient to the guiding research questions. I then sorted statements

and concepts into larger categories through a system of cards and chips that allowed me to label

overarching themes in the informants' narratives. The cases study analysis involved a much

deeper examination of the concepts in order to refer to literature and prevailing wisdom in the

field of education, psychology, and social ecology (Arnett, 2004; Knowles, 1975,

Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Survey Phase

Of the survey responses and questions most useful to the study, the data was textually

rich narrative from open-ended questions (Yin, 1994). The short responses from the eight

individuals who completed these sections gave insight as to the students' perceptions of their

expectations, experience, access, and personal development. Analysis included a thorough

reading of each response to survey items and my successive attempts to label and categorize the

themes and elements that emerged. Where students used language and phrasing that suggested

learning, growth, and development (Appendix U), I captured these quotes in order to understand

which areas they felt were most meaningful. All four participants provided language as evidence in four major areas. Each of them spoke of opportunities, discoveries, and meaning making related to the following: exploring the unfamiliar, building relationships, redefining preferences, and sheltered independence. From these areas, I developed the interview protocol that asked informants to expound upon those in a natural sequence from before their gap year program to their experiences after having completed the gap year program.

Interview Phase

I commissioned Maine-ly Transcription, a commercial service, to transcribe each of the four interviews that I conducted with students. Each interview last approximately one hour resulting in many pages of candid and rich textual evidence. The transcription service I requested was a clean verbatim document that eliminated "um" and "ugh" and other utterances that were not important to the meaning I would make of their statements. My focus was on the meaning the informants made of their experiences through narration. Audio recording and transcription capture their language and, as I was physically present for these interviews, I made notes on their meaning by noting when their affect, gestures, and tone expressed emotion, sarcasm, or subliminal meaning. Upon receipt of the professional transcription documents, I reviewed the recordings against the written transcripts to ensure full and accurate capture of participant reported data.

I reviewed each informant's transcript to reacquaint myself with his or her story then organized the responses by the six interview protocol sections as I described in the instrumentation and procedure section. From this I extracted salient quotes that I felt captured their perceptions within the overarching areas. In this, I created another card sorting activity for me to aid in my grouping of the categories. I used 91 direct quotes from the informant narratives

that encapsulated their thoughts and feelings throughout the questions. I found that all of them made statements that were, at times, slightly off topic from the question. Their statements, however, were indicative of values and sentiments that emerged. I organized these 91 quotes on to sorting chips and separated them in order to create my categories by considering the statements in isolation from one another.

From this categorizing activity, I created label statements that generalized the informants' experiences into statements that will serve to generalize the more global, structured gap year program experience. As I organized my categories, I found that many statements served multiple purposes in the event that one quote eluded to values around two separate categories. For instance, quotes about learning the value of caring for others contributed to a category about relationships as well as about responsibility. I also found that while clarifying my thinking around the themes, some statements had to be moved from one category to another. This was an iterative process

Case Study Phase

Analysis of the case study relies upon literature in the fields of education, psychology, and social ecology. Through careful examination of the informant's words and a review of supplementary artifacts and corroboration, the results emerged from my examination based on the work of Jeffrey Arnett (2000) who has written about the emerging adult from a psychological perspective. Arnett's study of the social, emotional, and developmental features of the 18-24-year-old, lends itself well to an analysis of programming geared toward students in a gap phase of their education and personal development. Arnett's proposition is that the emerging adult differs significantly from the needs of the child and from the needs of the adult. My proposition

is that gap year programming undertakes an educative task that is neither pedagogical nor

andragogical.

Additionally, Malcolm Knowles (1975) defined and disseminated the term andragogy in

the early 70s and created his set of assumptions of the adult learner. Through his creation of this

set of assumptions, I propose that a set of assumptions can come from an analysis of the learners

in gap year programming. Knowles challenged the notion that adults would respond to

pedagogical practices. I challenge the notion that emerging adults respond fully to pedagogy, but

agree—as Arnett—that the emerging adult does not fully respond to andragogy. The analysis of

this case study is done through a lens of the kind of education that being offered in this type of

institution. The delivery is neither in the tradition of high school nor college, therefore I propose

that critical learning structures are offered in gap year programming that is unique to this

practice.

Finally, the structured gap experience serves as grounds for an exploration of

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) definitions, propositions, and hypotheses for his theory of the ecology

of human development. In an analysis of the case, Bronfenbrenner's definition of ecology,

human development, and the ecology of human development offer lenses for how environmental

factors affect human development evident in this study. Additionally, Bronfenbrenner's

definitions for "molar activity" (pg. 45), "relation" (pg. 56), and "role" (pg. 85) serve as

definitions as they pertain to this analysis. Most important to the analysis of this case are

Bronfenbrenner's hypotheses on the subjects of micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems.

Chapter Summary

The study included three phases of inquiry; survey of the 18-24-year-old population of

one university, interviews with four informants that indicated they participated in structured gap

year programs, and a case study of one individual that represented the typical structured gap year

program participant. In this chapter, I covered the general aspects of the study's design, my

propositions at the onset of the study, the role of the researcher, setting and participants, data

collection, and data analysis procedure. In the data collection and data analysis sections, I

covered the three phases with respect to instrumentation and procedure. I gave further details

within each of these sections as to their thematic organization as the categories emerged through

my analysis.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Introduction

This study of the structured gap year experience seeks to uncover what that experience involves, how that experience contributes to student development, and what the factors are that influence students' access to these programs. In a three-phase approach, the study included a survey of the 18-24-year-old population of one university, interviews with four of those respondents, and a case study concentrating on one student from the sample. This chapter details the results of the survey and the interview, and presents the case. In this chapter, I also address the three guiding research questions of this study, and address each question through a discussion of the findings.

In the section titled "Survey Results," I report what I learned from an analysis of the questionnaire responses from survey participants. Further, I discuss the data from the 11 survey respondents who indicated that they participated in a *structured* gap year program. Six of these 11 respondents proceeded in the survey to provide narrative responses to questions in two remaining survey segments that included factors of access, and the Critical Incident Questionnaire. Last, I present an analysis of the survey responses and explain how the responses and analysis informed my preparation for the interview phase.

In the section titled "Interview Results," I present specific details about interviewees and their gap year experiences. These details include a brief profile of their backgrounds and their student status. I then discuss the themes that emerged from the interview phase data: relationships, responsibilities, relevance, and revelation. Finally, I explain how the analysis of the survey and interview data informed the transition to the case phase of this study.

In the section titled "Case Results," I present the findings at they pertain to Caitlin, the individual upon whom I built the instrumental case record. Caitlin's story unfolds in a report of her high school experiences; the influences, access and support of her gap decision; the events of her gap experience; the skills and other outcomes of that experience. The case record includes data from addendum informants that have corroborated Caitlin's account and from artifacts of Caitlin's gap journey and college accolades after the gap.

In the section titled, "Guiding Inquiries," I revisit the three guiding questions upon which I have based this inquiry. Using data from all three phases of the study, I discuss the features and events of the gap experience, the personal development that occurs in the gap experience, and the factors of students' access to the gap opportunities.

Survey Results

The purpose of the survey phase was to identify and initiate contact with as many gap year program students at one university location as possible and capture general information about their gap year experience. The registrar's office of the university identified all 3,533 students on the email list as satisfying the age and enrollment requirement. My goal was to enlist the response of as many of these as were willing. While the response rate was not of the size for statistical significance, the limited response still served the purpose of unearthing a small population for case creation. The limited survey response led directly to a limited pool of potential interviewees. Nevertheless, from the limited pool it was possible to select one individual about whom I could construct an illustrative case.

The survey opened on the Qualtrics™ platform and I disseminated invitations via social media and email saturations to the target population on three occasions. The campus newspaper ran print advertisements for the survey opportunity in three of their issues and the university

registrar's office filtered an email address list of approximately 3,533 students fitting the 18-24-

year-old range in undergraduate studies. The greatest traffic on the questionnaire platform

occurred after email saturations. From the population invited to participate, Table 4.1 shows the

filtration of the sample size as it pared from the larger population of eligible, reachable students

to the smaller numbers of participates at each of the delineations. Respondents accessed the

survey 105 times providing 100 completed surveys. These numbers ultimately left me with the

four individuals whom I interviewed.

Table 4.1.

Filtration of sample

Stage of sample selection	Students
Total 18-24-year-old population invited through email	3,533
Responses to survey invitation	105
Completed surveys	100
Respondents who took a gap period	45
Respondents who took a structured gap program	11
Respondents completing narrative sections of survey	6
Respondents agreeing to interviews	6
Interviews conducted with individual respondents	4
Case study primary informants	1

Note: Six of the 11 students indicating they participated in a structured gap completed narrative sections of the questionnaire, only five of whom agreed to participate in an interview. One other respondent not completing any narrative responses agreed to participate in an interview. Only four respondents followed through in scheduling these interviews.

Forty-five participants indicated that they took a gap period between high school

graduation and beginning their first semester of university. Of these, 11 respondents indicated

that they participated in a *structured* gap year program as defined within the survey as a program

planned and endorsed by some organization. Six of these respondents chose to provide narrative

responses to the open-ended sections of the survey. These six respondents agreed to participate

further as interviewees for the study. I contacted all six potential informants and four of them

followed through in scheduling interviews with me. One of these individuals became the subject

of the case.

Gap Period Participants

At the time they completed the survey, the median age of the 45 respondents indicating

that they took a gap period break from school was 22 years old. Twenty-three percent of these

individuals said they participated in a program that lasted less than one year in duration. Sixty-

four percent were in programs that lasted between one and two years. Seven percent took two- to

three-year breaks, and 7% took a break longer than three years. Prompted to describe how they

spent this gap time, respondents indicated an array of activities as they had the option to select

multiple responses from the list. Table 4.2 shows that the majority of respondents indicated that

they spent their gap doing "work." A fewer number of students indicated spending time on travel

and leisure, while even fewer indicated other activities, academic study, homemaking, and

athletics respectively in fewer instances.

Table 4.2.

Time spent during a general gap period (N=45).

Category	Percentage
Work	84%
Travel	45%
Leisure	30%
Other	25%
Academic Study	23%
Homemaking	11%
Athletics	11%

Nine of the 11 survey participants who indicated the option of "other" listed the details of

how they spent their time as

- Military/armed forces (three participants indicated this)

- ■ Volunteerism (three participants indicated this)

- ■ "Learning independence"

- ■ "Moved to a commune and learned to build wooden boats"

I designed this study to focus on those having participated in structured gap year programs, but I have noted for future research that when prompted by the term "gap year," many people responded with robust activities that—while not structured by my own definition—held meaning for the survey respondents. I will discuss in chapter five the potential for a similar inquiry into the experiences of those reporting unstructured or work based gap year activities.

Structured Gap Program Participants

Of the 45 respondents, 11 indicated that they participated in a structured gap year program. This definition was part of the survey question to which it pertained and read

> A structured gap year program is a program that is created and offered by some kind of organization or institution. These structured programs can be anything from organized excursions, academic preparation programs, faith and religious studies, athletic team membership, internships/apprenticeships, foreign travel programs, to project-based volunteerism. These can be programs offered by your own school district, your place of worship, a service organization, a gap year company, a pre-college program, etc.

I included a list of categories in the questionnaire from which they could select as many categories as they wished to characterize their particular structured gap year program. Table 4.3 indicates all of the options and respondents were able to select as many categories as they pleased in order to characterize their experience. Five of the 11 respondents indicated their programs fell into the "social justice/service/volunteerism program" category.

Table 4.3.

Categories of structured gap year programs (N=11).

Category	Participants
Social Justice/Service/Volunteerism	5
Travel Abroad/Cultural Immersion	3
Vocational/Internship/Apprenticeship	2
Sports/Athletics	2
Environmentalism/Sustainability	2
Faith/Religion/Spirituality	1
Academic/College Preparation	1
Outdoors/Conservation	1
Art/Music/Aesthetics	0
Other	0

When asked to give the name of the specific program, seven respondents listed names

while four opted to skip the question. Programs listed were

- U.S. Navy (Darlene, 21)

- Working student with McMullin Dressage (Tahlia, 24)

- Christian Junges Dorfschule (Aaron, 24)

- Capernwray Bible School, Carnforth, England (Samara, 19)

- The Carpenter's Boat Shop (Brian, 20)

- Student Conservation Association (Caitlin, 24)

- AmeriCorps: National Civilian Community Corps (Michael, 23)

Program durations varied from less than six months, six months, more than six months, but less

than one year, one year, and more than one year. Four respondents said that their gap year

program was one for which the participant could be offered college credit. When asked if they

planned to use gap year experience credits toward their university degree program, two said yes,

one said maybe, six responded no, and none indicated that they did not know.

Two survey questions concerned sources of funding and cost for the participants' gap

year experiences. Respondents were able to select multiple options from the list of possible

funding sources. Table 4.4 shows the choices that the questionnaire presented to respondents and

the majority of the study participants indicated that they accessed free programs. Again, the

questionnaire allowed the respondent to select as many options as they pleased to describe their

experience. The interview phase made it possible to see that event within programming that was

at no cost to the student, they encountered incidental, and personal expenses. Participants

indicated that these expenses fell to them or they accepted assistance from parents.

Table 4.4.

Funding sources for structured gap year programs (N=11).

Funding Source	Participants
My gap experience was free	6
I paid for my gap experience	3
My parents/guardians paid for my gap experience	3
My gap experience was publicly funded (i.e. city/town, state, federal)	2
Other	1
I took out a loan to pay for this experience	0
I received a scholarship to do my gap experience	0
My parents/guardians took out a loan to pay for this experience	0

The options for this question were for overall costs without a calculation for specific

program length. Upon analysis of individual responses, one respondent who spent time traveling

said the program was less than six months and cost between $1,000 and $5,000. Another

indicated a program length of more than six months, but less than one year costing between

$1,000 and $5,000. One respondent participated in a program lasting six months that bore a cost

between $5,000 and $10,000. Other respondents indicated that their program was free or publicly

funded.

Narration of the Gap Experience

The next block of questions addressed beliefs, factors, and influences in the program

selection process. These questions were open-ended and six of the 11 respondents indicating they

engaged in structured programs completed these sections. I did not omit any participant

responses. In responses where I was confident that I was not changing the meaning of the

statements, I edited the responses only for grammar, spelling, and readability conventions in the

interest of clarity. These open-ended questions fall into two categories. First, the factors of

access questions asked the student about issues of beliefs and support leading to the decision to

participate in a structured program. The second section follows the model of Stephen

Brookfield's Critical Incident Questionnaire (1996) to uncover the reflective thoughts and

feelings the participants had about their experience. Questions with fewer than six narrative

responses indicate a question that one or more participants declined to answer.

Beliefs, factors, and influences in access. The first question in the access section was,

"What experiences and/or beliefs led you to feel that a gap year program experience was the

right choice for you?" Table 4.5 shows the participants' responses in statements that they did not

feel that they were ready for college, and that they desired a sheltered opportunity to develop

further. Two participants specifically stated that they had preconceived notions of what they

wanted to do, but desired a low risk, low investment opportunity to try their interests. Two

participants said they, "need[ed] to get a feel for what the 'real world' was like" and that, they

thought they knew exactly what they wanted to do but decided on a different path after their gap

year program experience. Each of the participants mentioned influential people such as parents

and older siblings as having encouraged them to take this extra time to explore their preferences

and try new things before university.

Table 4.5

Experiences and beliefs leading to the gap year program.

Respondent	Response
Tahlia	I needed to get a feel for what the 'real world' was like even though I still wasn't fully independent. I learned that my passion for horses most likely wasn't going to 'pay the bill' and I needed to go back to school for something more practical.
Aaron	I did well in German class. My mother suggested it as she did a semester abroad in college.
Samara	I graduated high school early and wanted to take a year off before university to travel.
Caitlin	I was a straight A student in high school who also went to college while I was finishing high school. I saved up a lot of money and thought I knew exactly what I wanted to do. I then visited a friend who was in college in Washington State and decided that I could go to school any time but I may not always have the opportunity to travel and try something new.
Michael	My oldest sister did the program and it seemed to be very worthwhile so I pursued it, too. It was an experience I knew I wanted to do before I entered college.

Participants gave details of the factors that made them select the specific gap year programs that they chose when asked, "What were the factors that made you select the specific gap year program that you did?" As evidenced by the responses from Table 4.6, respondents expressed preconceived notions about their interests. They said they wanted to explore those interests further and that some programs tied financial incentives to programs such as stipends and reduced costs to access the experience. One participant experienced a change of focus as she was, "originally going to go to school for equine studies," but that instead she chose an equine-oriented gap year program, "to make sure it was something [she] actually wanted." Another respondent stated that she was "paid a little" by AmeriCorps and that she was able to go "far from home."

Table 4.6

Factors of gap program selection.

Respondent	Response
Tahlia	I was originally going to go to school for Equine Studies. Instead, I chose to pursue a working student opportunity to make sure it was something I actually wanted for a career without spending $40,000 on a year of college out-of-state. It was a free program where you worked off your lessons by taking care of the horses. I also got to bring my own horse to Florida for the winter. It. Was. Awesome! [sic]
Aaron	It was affordable. I hosted a student my senior year of high school and because of this I got to go to Germany for the price of a plane ticket.
Samara	Location (England)
Caitlin	I would be working to protect the environment. I would be camping most of the time and working with people my own age. While I was only getting paid a little, I would receive a large AmeriCorps award at the end. It was far from home and in the mountains.
Michael	My oldest sister.

Table 4.7 shows responses to the third question, "Were there people in your life that influenced your decisions to seek and select a gap year program?" Four of the five respondents to this question named at least one person in their lives who was involved in their decision-making through setting examples, mentoring, conversation, encouragement, or help in research. Caitlin stated that she did not discuss this decision with anybody. Coincidently, Caitlin became the case subject and she subsequently reported in a further interview that she did discuss this with her parents. Aaron, Tahlia, and Michael stated that these influential people had positive contributions to these conversations and that they supported the student in this endeavor. Caitlin later said that her parents felt surprised by her interest in a gap program, but that they were supportive nonetheless.

Table 4.7

Influential people in gap program selection.

Respondent	Response
Tahlia	My horseback riding instructor, my parents, and myself.
Aaron	My mother told me to give it a shot and I got in. My grandmother was very proud because of her German heritage and that played a role, too.
Samara	My parents were very influential and it was their wish that I take part in this program.
Caitlin	No. I chose to do this on my own because I didn't want to end up stuck in my hometown forever or be young and not take advantage of it.
Michael	My older sister.

Brookfield's Critical Incident Questionnaire. Stephen Brookfield's Critical Incident Questionnaire (CIQ) (1996) was the guiding influence for the five questions prompting the respondents to reflect on their experience. These questions were open-ended allowing the respondent unlimited, narrative space with none forcing a response. Brookfield's model for questioning includes the terms engaging, distancing, helpful, confusing, and surprising (1996) for framing reflective thinking. I catered each of these question models to the gap program objective adjusting the language of only one. In the second question, my pilot group of 18-year-olds suggested that "distancing" was confusing for their age group and encouraged me to use "disengaging" as it created an opposing relationship with the former question that asks what was "engaging."

First, participants discussed what they found to be most engaging. The Brookfieldian question asks, "Reflecting on your experience, what happened during your gap year program that you found most engaging?" Table 4.8 lists those responses including exploring new things, new learning, opportunities, and reinforcing relationships with new people, exercising, discovering

personal preferences, and financial rewards. Respondents mentioned "meeting new people,"

learning about "another culture," "gaining insight," getting out of their "comfort zone" and

making "lifelong friends." Participants stated they learned "a lot" about themselves, engaged in a

"once in a lifetime experience" and were able to do things and see places they had never before

done or seen.

Table 4.8

Engaging experiences in the gap program.

Respondents	Response
Darlene	Being immersed in another culture.
Tahlia	I learned about the horse world at the top level. It was truly a once in a lifetime experience and I met wonderful people and had just an amazing time.
Aaron	I found that making friends again was tough but rewarding. I wasn't hanging out with nerds, jocks, or cliques anymore, but I was with all sorts of people who always wanted to talk to me.
Samara	Meeting new people from all over the world and thus engaging with different cultures. I was working with community members and gaining insight into British culture and national travel to other parts of the UK.
Caitlin	I learned a lot about myself, discovered my passion for the environment and conservation work. I gained a severe love for camping and backpacking (which was something I had never done before having this experience), and I got out of my comfort zone.
Michael	I was volunteering the whole time on a team with other people. Being with them 24/7, I made some lifelong friends and had a great time all the while. Everything was paid for and I was provided a small stipend every other week. It allowed me to travel to parts of the US that I have never been to before.

Participants also discussed what they found to be most disengaging when asked,

"Reflecting on your experience, what happened during your gap year program that you found

most disengaging?" Responses included realizations about their preconceived notions and the

adult living skills that came from that learning such as the student who learned that it was

difficult to "make ends meet" in the equine business. Table 4.9 indicates their responses when

they stated that they learned more about their personal preferences as in the case of the

participant who said the "found that [he] hat[ed] city life." Another respondent stated that

meeting people with whom she did not agree "dampen[ed] the experience" reinforcing the

presence of relationship building skills in the gap year program experience.

Table 4.9

Disengaging experiences in the gap program.

Respondent	Response
Tahlia	I learned that it was very difficult to 'make ends meet' even at the top level in this sport. The financial situation is very dim in this particular sport.
Aaron	I found that I hate city life. I moved from a community of 1,000 people to a city of 60,000 and I don't like the feeling of city life. It's too busy and impersonal.
Samara	Culture shock and seasonal depression because it was nearly always raining or dreary.
Caitlin	Every bit of my experience was worthwhile.
Michael	You sometime run into people that you don't agree with and it can dampen the experience.

Next, the section asks, "Reflecting on your experience, what happened during your gap

year program that you found most helpful?" Table 4.10 shows that they were able to increase

skills in their desired interests, they learned because the environment was non-competitive, gap

programs gave them opportunities to be independent away from home, and that they met people

that prepared them for their future goals. One respondent stated that in his program there was,

"no pressure to succeed" and that the instructors let him "ease into learning." Two respondents

mentioned that being far away from home was helpful, and two respondents discussed their

increase in communication skills and the ability to be with large groups of people as being

helpful.

Table 4.10

Helpful experiences in the gap program.

Respondent	Response
Tahlia	I learned to be a much better horseback rider and learned a lot about horse care and maintenance.
Aaron	I think the biggest thing was that there was no pressure for me to succeed. I went into Germany knowing 2500 words; about the kindergarten equivalent. My teachers there understood that and let me ease into learning.
Samara	Being away from home for the first time (for an extended amount of time).
Caitlin	I learned how to live on my own somewhere that was far from home, communicate with people who I didn't know, take responsibility of my own life, and I learned how to travel and plan for myself.
Michael	It allowed time to set things up for college. I mentally was prepared to handle being around that many new people in a communal environment.

When asked, "Reflecting on your experience, what happened during your gap year

program that you found most confusing?" the responses included comments about struggling

with interpersonal conflict as well as navigating cultural mores that differed from the home

culture. Two respondents listed in Table 4.11 answered simply by stating that nothing was

confusing for them. Tahlia found that some clientele from the dressage and equine industry could

be rude but also stated that these interactions "built character" reinforcing the theme of building

skills for relationships with others. Another respondent felt troubled by the availability of alcohol

to youth in Germany stating that it was "weird and awkward" because it was outside of his own

experience. Getting outside of one's comfort zone is one of the many expectations that programs

and their participants have of the gap programs. These responses demonstrate that those new

experiences—while confusing—were still valuable with opportunities to learn, grow, and

develop.

Table 4.11

Confusing experiences in the gap program.

Respondent	Response
Tahlia	Some of the clients were rude and expected a lot from us. It certainly built character and I still don't regret anything about the experience.
Aaron	I struggled from time to time with politics and not understanding how Europe differs from the US. I had a hard time with the amount of alcohol available to kids. I didn't drink and the way high school students did there was weird and awkward for me at first.

Respondents discussed what happened during their gap year programs that they found to

be most surprising. The questionnaire asked, "Reflecting on your experience, what happened

during your gap year program that you found most surprising?"

Table 4.12

Surprising experiences in the gap program.

Respondent	Response
Tahlia	The fact that I ended up not pursuing my passion/hobby as a career choice and I have decided it is better as a pastime/hobby than to generate my income.
Aaron	I thought that I would know what I wanted to do when I was done. I said to myself that I want to teach English now. After a year of helping my teacher in class…instead I decided I want to coach soccer, but I didn't know that until I was 20 years old not 18.
Caitlin	I surprised myself really. I worked outside 40+ hours a week, camped, slept, and lived out of a tent for most of my 6-month experience. I succeeded in my work and my personal life and truly felt how wonderful independence was and that I could do anything I wanted to and do it on my own.
Michael	It was the happiest and most self-satisfied I've ever been in my life.

Table 4.12 details that respondents redefined preferences and changed trajectories in

university and career focus. They also report an increase in their self-confidence. Some

participants discussed that they ended up not pursuing their formerly held passions and one

stated, "I surprised myself," because she discovered that she, "could do anything." One

participant closed by saying, "It was the happiest and most self-satisfied I've ever been in my

life.

Survey Analysis into Interview Phase

The results from the survey questionnaire emerged into the four categories I have listed in

Table 4.13. I read the narrative portions of the survey results multiple times in order to identify

statements alluding to the respondents' feelings on their learning, development, support, and

access to the gap year program opportunities. I noted language that each respondent used and

correlated all words concerning "learning" and "development" (Appendix U). I coded the

statements for contextually related elements and grouped the concepts into the four emerging

categories. Generalizing the language, I then created the categories with four sub-statements

explaining the features of the categories. Based on the open-ended, narrative responses of the

questionnaire participants, they expressed the major categories of gap as exploring the

unfamiliar, redefining preferences, building relationship skills, and sheltered independence

building. Each sub-statement is a generalized encapsulation of responses from participants that

fit into larger, more generalizable statements of the experience.

I used these generalized categories to create the interview protocol that followed a

chronological sequence of the experience and incorporated the emerging elements from the

survey. The interview questions (Appendix M) began with factors prior to the gap program,

factors at the start, factors of the midpoint, factors surrounding the immediate completion of the

program, then reflections on the program from a present standpoint.

Table 4.13

Survey Result Categories

Emerging Category	Features of the Category
Exploring the Unfamiliar	Trying New Things Seeing Different Places Experiencing Unfamiliar Situations Learning About a Different Culture
Redefining Preferences	Changing One's Mind Realizing Something About One's Self Discovering a New Passion Adjusting One's Goals and Plans
Building Relationship Skills	Meeting New People Learning How to Compromise Understanding Others' Perspectives Making Lasting Friends
Sheltered Independence Building	Trying New Activities Without Pressure Avoiding Expensive Consequences Having the Freedom to Try New Activities Feeling Safe to Make Mistakes

Utilizing descriptive, structural, and contrasting ethnographic interview questions

(Spradley, 1979), the open-ended questions incorporated the major survey categories in order to

capture the interviewees' stories. The questions followed Spradley's model and drilled into the

categories of new experiences, discovery of new interests, relationships formed with other

people, and the category of self-agency. In order to capture the arc of the learning that happened

for the interviewee, I asked about their experiences before the gap, in the beginning of the gap, in

the middle of the gap, at the end of the gap, and since the gap.

Interview Results

The interview phase of this inquiry involved the participation of four informants who indicated on the survey questionnaire that they were willing to sit for an interview. In this section, I will discuss the demographics and brief background of each participant. I will discuss the emergent themes from the interview phase and I will detail the responses that I have grouped into relationships, responsibilities, relevance, and revelation. Based on these overarching themes of the gap year experience, I will discuss how these results informed the case phase and how I determined the elements that contributed to the case record.

Interview Informants

Four individuals agreed to schedule a face-to-face interview for this study (Table 3.3). All of them became full-time, undergraduate students after having participated in structured, gap programs. Each met me for our interview on the metropolitan campus in the university library. Each of the face-to-face interviews with Michael, Aaron, Tahlia, and Caitlin lasted between 50 and 75 minutes.

Michael is a 23-year-old male from the central region of the state. He participated in an AmeriCorps program in which he traveled to what he referred to as the "Deep South" to work on construction projects in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. His organization worked with other construction organizations such as Habitats for Humanities and KaBOOM! playground installers. Michael was a student of the hospitality management B.A. program at the university and completed his undergraduate degree during the course of this study.

Aaron is a 24-year-old male from the mid-coast region of the state. He participated in a gap year program that his high school endorsed. Aaron reported that his high school participated in a foreign exchange program that extended the offer to students in a fifth year option after

having graduated. Aaron chose to participate in the year between this high school graduation and college entrance. He traveled to Germany where he attended Christian Junges Dorfschule, a German secondary school, as a traditional, academic student where he learned German and played semi-professional soccer. Aaron is a student in the German undergraduate program at the university. Aaron reports that he is at approximately the halfway point of his undergraduate degree program.

Tahlia is a 24-year-old female from the mid-coast region of the state. For her gap year experience, she participated in a private apprenticeship program recommended to her by her equestrian coach. Previous to her gap year program, Tahlia visited and enrolled in an equine studies school, but after her visit became concerned about the cost of the program and withdrew before actually beginning. She chose, instead, to join the McMullin Dressage School where she traveled to Florida in an "earn-to-learn" apprenticeship. Tahlia was a student of the undergraduate accounting degree program at the university. Tahlia completed her undergraduate degree during the course of this study. She reports that she will continue to take post-graduate courses toward her goal of becoming a Certified Public Accountant.

Caitlin is a 24-year-old female from Wisconsin. She participated in the Student Conversation Association (SCA) as a corps student connected to the AmeriCorps organization. She traveled to Adirondack State Park in upstate New York where she engaged in conservation work and trail building. Caitlin is now a student at the university's hybridized undergraduate/graduate program for public policy in environmental studies. She is currently an undergraduate senior and the university officially accepted her into her graduate phase during the course of this study.

Interview Phase Emergent Themes

I intended that the interview questions would elicit information from the participants about their experiences, development, and access to the program through questions about their explorations, preferences, relationships, and independence. Interview informants spoke freely and openly offering four hours, 15 minutes, and 27 seconds of audio-recorded data with which I could work. My analysis of the 39,101 words of transcribed data uncovered the following overarching themes. Gap year program participants learned about their social identity and their reactions to human relationships within the microcosm of the gap year program and the transferability of those skills to macro spheres. In Bronfenbrenner's discussion of the ecology of human development (1979), he describes microsystems (p. 22) as small settings in which a person participates and within which he or she has roles—activities expected of a person in a particular position (p. 85)—and responsibilities. Gap year programs embody this microsystem and participants learned about their roles and responsibilities as members of a larger community –a macrosystem (p. 26)—through challenging their preconceived notions and expectations of the social and working world. Gap year program participants felt enriched by exploration that they perceived was relevant to their personal goals and vocational interests, and that had immediate applicability. Finally, gap year program participants derived meaning from learning revealed to them through (a) opportunities to do authentic work as well as (b) access to transitory opportunities.

I read each transcript multiple times, identifying salient statements. I wrote each on a post-it note, coded the pseudonym, and referenced the interview question numbers. I collected 91 quotes of various lengths and began to physically sort and move these into related topic categories as I saw them emerging. The original categories were relevance, opportunity,

responsibility, preconceptions, relationships, expectations, revelations, and realizations. As I

considered the placement of each quote, I consciously generalized and eventually identified four

themes, three of which absorbed the content of one or two original categories. Relationships

stood alone. Responsibility absorbed preconceptions and remained "Responsibility." Relevance

absorbed expectations and remained "Relevance" and both opportunity and realizations became

a part of "Revelation." These themes create the gap program experiential tetrad of Relationships,

Responsibility, Relevance, and Revelation each of which I will discuss in the following sections.

Relationships. Participants gave examples and made statements that indicated human

relationships were a critical feature of their gap year experience. All of them spoke of new

relationships that they have maintained. Two spoke specifically of this facet being one of the

most important takeaways for them. They each discussed conflict and the ability to resolve

conflict as a meaningful result of their interactions with people in their gap year programs. All

four of them also made comments about the concept of "coming out of [one's] shell" as a theme

of their development. Two spoke specifically about not being shy any longer. Three spoke

specifically about feeling liberated in interactions with the working world. Two spoke

specifically about learning the importance of advocating for themselves and building the

confidence to do so. Aaron described a time he advocated for his values when he was offered

alcohol and when he was encouraged to engage in what he considered to be aberrant sexual

activity. Tahlia described self-advocacy when having to begin a crucial conversation with a

cohort who was not contributing his labor fairly to the work tasks.

Informants discussed events that taught them to manage difficult situations with people

and to resolve conflict. Topics that informants raised included race relations, attitudes toward sex

and alcohol, roommate disagreements, de-escalation from "blow ups" and "freak outs," and

confrontation in the face of quarrelling. Michael reflected that

> I was with these people for 10 months. They became, more or less, family. With that,
>
> little conflicts would arise, and you just had to deal with them. [The program] made it
>
> really easy to approach an uncomfortable situation. It made it easier to click with people,
>
> because [now] I'm used to the differences that people have.

All four participants discussed bonding with program cohorts as an important feature of

their gap year program experience. This particular bonding occurred during the gap experience

but informants also detailed their ability to bond in future relationships to which they credit the

gap program for these skills. Informants also reported that their university experiences have

lacked the structure for fostering bonds among students, whereas that aspect was a salient feature

of the gap program. They stated that of the most important outcomes for them were the personal

relationships. Aaron referred to his "new family." Michael stated, "It's one of those unspoken

things where we'll always have each other. It's more bonding than I'll probably ever have with a

future friend." Additionally, Caitlin and Tahlia stated that it is "pretty tough" to build close

relationships with peers at the university as "there's little interaction" built into the classroom

setting. All four agree that their gap program was distinct from university in opportunities to

become close to other people interpersonally.

Informants also reflected on experiences that they felt helped to define their interpersonal

character through relationship building and personal development. Aaron and Caitlin discussed

coming away from the gap program no longer feeling shy. They cited the confidence to approach

people in personal and professional settings, and the willingness to engage strangers. Michael

talked about his new confidence to lead and his comfort with fitting into a large university setting

with his relationship-building skills. Caitlin said that before the gap program, she had never experienced positive attitudes before when venting about frustrating situations. She stated that the gap environment allowed her to become the person that she suspected that she had been too shy to be before. Tahlia added that her character growth came with not taking conflict too personally and learning to "let it roll," a skill she says has helped define her interpersonal style moving forward.

Gap year program experiences offered participants new learning about their social identities and reactions to human relationships within a microsystem of the gap program and about how those transfer to macrosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner defines "relation" as whenever one person pays attention to or participates in activities with another person (p. 56). Gap students report that programming that encouraged this attention and activity specifically helped them to build conflict resolution skills, create deep bonds, and develop character traits that define their interpersonal styles. Bronfenbrenner hypothesizes that this relationship, and specifically joint activities in relation, are what facilitate learning and development (p. 60).

Responsibilities. The role that each person assumed within their gap programs relied on the relationships formed with cohort members. This increased their sense of responsibility to their function and to a greater community. Each participant noted lessons they took from moments of conflict, fear, remorse, or difficult decisions forcing them to take responsibility for their emotions. Each of them spoke of expectations for their program prior to their participation and detailed how those views may or may not have changed through the process prompting them to take responsibility for their experience. They were able to identify the elements of those experiences in order to generalize their feeling toward, and reaction to, the social and working

world prompting a greater sense of responsibility to outside systems. Additionally, they each

made statements claiming that pivotal moments in the gap year program have increased their

understanding of their current fields forcing them to take responsibility for their college and

careers choices.

All four informants discussed the factors that came to bear on their decisions about

college entrance. All four expressed commitment to the idea of college entrance from the

beginning, but Aaron and Caitlin reported hesitation about their readiness for the responsibilities

of higher education. Michael and Tahlia stated they were sure they were ready, but valued the

gap offering as a development opportunity. Additionally, Caitlin and Tahlia cited greater

awareness, after their gap program, of the transferability of their skills from the gap into

university and from university into the working world.

Informants discussed the theme of taking responsibility for themselves in comments

about having to choose their actions in challenging situations. Caitlin spoke of her gap as being

the first time she was ever on her own and put in a leadership role. Aaron discussed, at length,

the notion that high school does little to prepare young people for life after high school. He states

> High school doesn't prepare you for a life after high school at all. They tell you all the
>
> bad stuff that is going to happen to you. They don't tell you how wildly free and
>
> independent you are because you can't imagine it. High school doesn't prepare you but
>
> the gap year did.

Aaron went on to discuss gap year peers confronting him with foreign attitudes toward

adolescent sexual behavior and alcohol use. He stated that he abstained and that the freedom and

independence of the gap program allowed him to take full responsibility for those choices. Other

examples informants shared were opportunities to take responsibility for the differences between

complaining and venting, failure on the job, academic failure, and rising to the occasion even when others shirk duties.

The responsibilities *given* to the informants in the course of their learning were also important to them. Tahlia reflected that her experience was "a lot of work," and while it was an unexpected workload, she recounts that a post-gap employer referred to her as "exactly what [the employer] was looking for." Tahlia believes that her willingness to work hard during the gap led to her ability to handle future responsibilities. Michael spoke of how he believed that he was somebody who "had it all together" but also credits his gap experience with "building the structure" for him to take responsibility for home reconstruction for disaster victims. Caitlin, as an undergraduate/graduate hybrid student, says that because of the level of responsibility her gap program gave her, her department recognizes her as a student who can take on higher caliber, independent work. Caitlin states that she writes laboratory protocols for the first-year environmental science department courses at the invitation of her professors. In Aaron's experience with sports team management, he was recognized as a hard worker rather than innately talented. The coach that gave him greater responsibilities on the team had such an impact on him that he states that this is how he coaches his own team now.

Beyond the themes of responsibility for the experience and responsibility for the self, informants talked about the responsibility they felt for others. Within the microcosm of their gap experience, informants discussed being responsible for one another in leadership roles, caring for one another through challenges, and even being responsible for those unable to care for themselves. This care and responsibility extended beyond the microcosm as Michael spoke of building homes for people displaced by disaster, Caitlin spoke of greater responsibility to nature and conservations, Tahlia discussed the importance of taking responsibility for living creatures in

her care, and Aaron talked about the team dynamic in which the harder worker is honored over

the innately gifted. Each informant indicated that their gap experience included moments in

which they realized a sense of "selflessness," as Caitlin puts it, and what I call

interconnectedness.

Gap programs offered participants opportunities to learn about their roles and

responsibilities as members of a community through challenging their preconceived notions and

expectations of the social and working world. Themes of this finding include taking

responsibility for their learning experiences, taking responsibility for themselves and their

actions, taking responsibility for others within their systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and then

experiencing trust from others who gave them increased responsibilities. Arnett refers to the age

group of 18-24-year-olds as being in a self-centered time of life (2001) and Bronfenbrenner's

concept of the exosystem (p. 25)—referring to settings or groups to which the individual does

not belong—helps to illustrate the developmental concept of placing the focus of responsibility

outside of themselves. The ability to take responsibility for actions and outcomes in systems

outside of one's self, marks growth from emerging adulthood into adulthood and an

understanding of the interconnectedness of people.

Relevance. All four participants reported that they were able to learn more effectively—

from their perspectives—because the learning was about things they chose for themselves and

was relevant to their interests. They also made statements that being able to see the use for the

learning, in context, made them more interested in the objectives of their programs.

Examples include building a home for hurricane victims, learning a foreign language immersed

in the originating country, and appreciating the rigor of being responsible for live animals, seeing

the gravity of environmental impact.

In many instances during their interviews, it was evident in the participants' remarks that their gap experience was highly relevant to their personal interests and career goals. All four interviewees made comments claiming that high school did not prepare them for life after high school. Further, interviewees expressed elements of usefulness and tangibility with respect to their gap experiences. Each of them stated that they experienced moments in which they gained global thinking skills, and they talked about their gap experiences being an investment in themselves. The common element of these portions of their stories indicates a higher sense of relevance attributed to gap programming over other educational experiences.

Other interviewees echoed Aaron's previous quoted sentiment about how "high school doesn't prepare you for a life after high school at all" when they stated that high school did not feel "worthwhile" and that, as Michael puts it, "the gap year taught me more than high school did in the entire time." Both Tahlia and Caitlin regretted that high schools spent a great deal of effort on academic skills leaving them with a paucity of "real world" and "hands on" skills. Each interviewee either stated or intimated that the gap year program gave them more exposure to relevant skills than their high school curricula.

In giving details of their programs and of the duties required of them, each participant commented that their activities felt useful and real. They made comments about the impact they felt they had on the communities in which their programs took place. They used terms such as "hands on" and "tangible." Michael noted that many of the skills he built could go on his resume and that his learning felt relevant in that, "the things they [were] teaching [us], [we were] executing within the hour." All four individuals had the chance to engage in relevant and authentic work through their gap experiences giving them the skills that led them into jobs upon their return.

Interviewees discussed a sense of, as both Caitlin and Michael put it, "bigger picture" thinking when translating their gap experiences to the larger context of the "real world." They discussed "finding [their] passion," "learning about [their] roles," and "doing [their] part." They brought up the concepts of volunteering, recognizing worth in people and nature, and delaying gratification. Using terms such as "mission," "owing [to others]" their successes, and "selflessness" demonstrates their sense of coming out of their adolescent self-centeredness. Their statements exhibit that they gained the relevant skill of thinking of themselves as part of a bigger system.

Two of the study participants specifically discussed the concept of investing in themselves. Tahlia spoke at length on the topic of money and the return on the investment that she expected to see. She weighed her choices between an investment in college and an investment in her gap year program. She spoke of "gains" as she described her decision to take a one-year gap program as a better investment in herself rather than to pay tuition at a four-year, equine studies college. She cited the relevance of this experience as her ability to apprentice in the working world of equine management. She said in retrospect that the equine studies college would have been a poor ROI. Similarly, Caitlin described "gains" in terms of social and professional growth. Caitlin's concept of investment was more in terms of the sacrifice she made as she chose to delay college. In her case, she treated *time* as the commodity rather than *money*, but specified that this investment in the self is relevant to her development.

The significance of learning and developmental experiences in the gap year program was pivotal to these informants. Their claims that high school did not offer applicable learning and developmental experiences couple with the emphasis they placed on "useful" and "tangible" learning opportunities. Additionally, the importance of big picture thinking and the value placed

on investment in the self, demonstrates their belief that the gap year program experience was

unique in its relevance.

Revelation. Participants reported an appreciation for being in a "real" context for their

learning. All of them made comments to the effect that "hands-on" and "in person" were more

valuable than classroom learning. They also made comments that demonstrated their

understanding that many of these authentic experiences were fleeting opportunities as they report

feeling the sense that they needed to seize the moment and do these things while they were

young and unimpeded.

Interview informants referred to the concept of revelation and having truths revealed to

them through their direct experiences. All of the interview informants stated that they felt college

was an expectation of them and that society—particularly schools—led them to believe that little

else is acceptable. Their experiences revealed to them that not only are there other viable options,

but that these options were had value to them. Further, they commented that the need to "get out"

was important to them as they considered their plans for after high school. The opportunity to

"get out" and "re-create" themselves allowed them to test their interests and curiosities. This

allowed them to either affirm those interests or reject them and explore other curiosities. The

realizations that the students derived from these gap experiences were personal and specific.

Nevertheless, their individual narratives convey the common theme of transformation. The two-

way revelation of the world to the student and the student to the world allowed informants to

refine their sense of direction.

Remarks indicative of the theme of revelation also included observations by the

participants that challenged the insistence of college attendance. Each commented that there

seemed to be a college-centric agenda within society and in planning pathways for young people.

Tahlia and Caitlin used the word "pressure" when describing the discussions she and her peers

had with guidance counselors and parents about the transition. Caitlin emphasized that she

craved experiences other than college. Michael and Aaron echoed this sentiment when they

pointed out that an extra year gave them time to "put things in order" and that their perceptions

were that gappers fared "fine" after a break from school. Both Tahlia and Caitlin expressed

concern about the costs of college then stated that the gap opportunity revealed their interests to

them in ways that cost less. Despite this challenging of college-attending activity, Caitlin did say

of her initial choices, "I didn't want to be that person who didn't go to college." Tahlia

encapsulated much of her own thoughts when she said, "Four years is a lot of time and a lot of

money to invest in something that is not what you even need."

Informants reported feeling a need to "get out" when talking about their plans for after

high school. All four informants stated that they wanted to leave their homes and their

hometowns in order to experience new surroundings. While college entrance offers new scenery,

these young people saw opportunities to have the world revealed to them through the gap

programs. Aaron referred to his experience as a "chance," an opening that offered him a "free

year." Caitlin and Tahlia both referred to their feelings of not being able to stay at home. They

mentioned feelings about not wanting to "get stuck" and needing an opportunity that was outside

of their current contexts in order to "re-create" themselves. In this, informants addressed the need

to have the world revealed to them but also to reveal themselves to the world.

According to responses, gap year experiences have either an affirming or a disrupting

affect on participants' goals for the future. Two participants found reason to affirm their interests

in the field that brought them to the gap year program, and two found reason to change focus

after having had revelatory experiences. Caitlin and Michael began their processes with an

interest in environmentalism and hospitality, respectively. Their gap year experiences served to

deepen their interests, and they came away with greater appreciation and confidence. In the cases

of Tahlia and Aaron, they experienced profound shifts in their interests when they learned more

about themselves and their original field of interest. Tahlia's immersion in the equine industry

caused her to reassign her interest in dressage to a pleasure activity rather than a career.

Inversely, Aaron came away from his original intention of teaching English, toward athletic

coaching and sports management. Tahlia's career interest turned into an amusement and Aaron's

amusement turned into a career interest. In each of the informants' experiences, the revelation of

the actual work made a difference in their commitment to or departure from the field.

Study participants also discussed various realizations that occurred in direct response to

their experiences in the gap year programs. These realizations included questioning their faith

and belief in God, newfound confidence in their capabilities, the sense of feeling lost when

surrounded by different cultural values, and their comfort when realizing that they made good

choices to embark on this path. All four informants traveled far from home. Caitlin left

Wisconsin for the backcountry of Upstate New York. Michael, Tahlia, and Aaron left a rural

New England state for the Southern Gulf states, Florida, and Germany respectively. Each

encountered people, geographic terrain, socio-cultures, and nature that challenged their

perceptions of normalcy and forced them to question themselves. Each made comments specific

to their own realizations with one common element: their experience showed them something

that made them realize that the narrow scope of their cumulative experiences was only a fraction

of the greater world.

Whether we refer to this delay of entry into the academy as Grand Tour, Rumspringa,

rite of passage, sabbatical, pilgrimage, or gap year, the element that binds these is the element of

revelation. Students who take time away from study—and to work in some cases— are in a better position to witness the truths that the world reveals. The four informants of this study have described this as challenging the notion that college is the preferred path for young people, emphasizing their knowledge that truth lies beyond familiar terrain, that these experiences hold opportunities for them to either affirm or reject their current proclivities, and that meaningful realizations hold promise for their development.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) uses the term "molar activity" (p. 45) to describe ongoing behaviors that "possess a momentum of its own" and that have meaning to the people involved in the activity. He differentiates these from spontaneous, single actions and notes that a molar activity is one that is enduring and has a goal whether tacit or explicitly known to the actor. Both high school and college attendance qualify as a molar activity in that they have an enduring timeframe and that the community of participants recognizes both the momentum and the goal of that participation. At this time, the concept of college transition is that of a singular event when one simply stops doing one activity—high school—and begins another—college. The results of this study on the gap year suggest that the act of college *transitioning* [emphasis added] becomes another molar activity in its duration and its goals. The event of transition becomes the process of transitioning. Bronfenbrenner hypothesizes that development is a function of "substantive variety and structural complexity" (p. 55) of molar activities. The findings of this study show that a gap program adds the potential for that substantive variety and offers a more durable transfer into the structural complexity of higher education.

From Interview Analysis to Case Study

In isolation of personal details, the tetrad of the gap year experience remains conceptual and general. The use of a case study serves to show exactly how these elements affect a person

and her development. As I do not intend to capitalize on any uniqueness in Caitlin's story, hers is an instrumental case (Stake, 1994) that provides me a platform upon which to present the features and events, personal development, and factors of access of the gap experience. Caitlin's story of her involvement with the Student Conservation Association, coupled with accounts from her father, her professor, her advisor, as well as artifacts from the program and her university, illuminate the elements of the structured gap experience that are the focus of this study. The case of Caitlin allows the educational community to see the impact that the structured gap year opportunity had on Caitlin's development.

I selected Caitlin's story to use in building the case for three predominant reasons. First, Caitlin's experience was largely typical of a gap year away from home in that she accessed a widely known and well-attended organization within the realm of gap offerings. Her program is one that serves many students each year, and while it has a competitive application process, is not exclusive. Second, Caitlin's home life and high school experience were also largely representative meaning that she did not report any extraordinary features of her upbringing. Specifically, she did not present as being a member of any overtly marginalized or privileged group, and her secondary schooling was a traditional, academic, four-year program at an American, public school. Third, Caitlin's enthusiastic recollections of her experience—coupled with her present activities—made it possible to probe more specifically into her experiences to discover how those contributed to the developmental objectives of her program as well as her expectations for her participation.

In Caitlin's interview, she discussed three major factors that warranted further exploration. First, she discussed a feeling of being "lost" or disoriented in her planning for life after high school and gives a great deal of credit to the SCA program for helping to orient her.

Second, she discussed the subject of finding her "purpose" and her "mission" in life. Third, she discussed the professional and collegiate success that she has experienced, and again, credits this largely to her gap year journey. Caitlin agreed to participate in a focus on her journey and consented to an examination of her experience that included discussion with essential people and inclusion of other artifacts that tell her story. Serving as the basis of the case, the transcription of her interview provided a springboard upon which our further discussions built and evolved into a deeper telling of the student experience within a structured gap year program.

Case Results

Caitlin Frank is a 24-year-old university student at a large public university in New England. She is originally from Wisconsin, and is now studying public policy and environmental science in an undergraduate/graduate hybrid program. The gap year program in which Caitlin participated was through an organization called the Student Conservation Association (SCA). It was a five-month corps program. One could go to any number of SCA locations and Caitlin traveled to one located in Adirondack State Park of upstate New York. The program consisted of environmental projects in stewardship such as trail building and invasive species removal. The program taught her these environmental skills then trained her how to teach these skills in turn. In addition to hands-on work, the SCA introduced participants to working with various agency partners in the environmental industry.

Caitlin responded to the call for study participants identifying herself as a person who took a gap between high school completion and college entrance. Two things, however, are unique about Caitlin. First, she completed college coursework as a high school student due to her advanced academic abilities and second, Caitlin completed one semester at a college after high school graduation but before choosing to participate in her gap program. In an effort to reset, re-

create, and refocus, Caitlin participated in her gap year before her more earnest entrance into a

university program of study.

Caitlin's understanding of the main objective of this program was to give participants

experience in environmental conservation by getting participants out of doors and putting them

to work. The program's participants in Caitlin's cadre were a combination of people who had

just graduated high school and people who had already graduated college and were considering

going into masterate programs. Caitlin said each participant was there for individual reasons, but

the main objective of the program was to meet the mission of providing young people with

hands-on learning experiences geared toward environmental stewardship.

The Vice President of Communications for the SCA organization, Kevin Hamilton[4],

spoke to the same missions when he stated that the organization's most pivotal undertaking is to

attract young people to environmental service. The association states on its website that the

mission is "to build the next generation of conservation leaders and inspire lifelong stewardship

of the environment and communities by engaging young people in hands-on service to the land"

(Student Conservation Association, 2015). Mr. Hamilton says the SCA has been doing exactly

this since its inception on June 24, 1957.

Further, Mr. Hamilton emphasized the importance that the SCA places on diversity in

their participant demographic referring to the alarming statistics that state and national park

workforces are a retirement-ready population and of the ethnic disparity in park patronage. First,

he states that the current workforce in national and state park service is an aging population. He

quotes the statistic of retirement-ready individuals at approximately 50%. Mr. Hamilton explains

that the urgency of this is due to waning funding and waning support of the positions employed

to conserve and protect natural spaces. He explains that the great fear of the retirement-ready

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[4] I did not assign pseudonyms for individuals providing information from the public domain.

workforce is that the government will not fill their positions once they have left. The SCA

promotes youth involvement as a means of ameliorating this loss by fostering this sense of

urgency in youth.

Mr. Hamilton stated that the work of Dr. Stephen Kellert is important to the SCA

research and marketing efforts. Pivotal to the SCA's urgency around serving youth is Kellert's

conclusion that, " prolonged and challenging immersion in the outdoors, especially in relatively

pristine settings, can exert a powerful physical, emotional, intellectual, and moral-spiritual

influence on young people" (Kellert & Derr, 1998). Additionally, Mr. Hamilton cited the work of

the Search Institute and its 40 developmental assets for adolescents (2007). He shared the SCA's

document of activities as they relate to eight of the 40 assets. These assets include emotional

competence, communication, teamwork, planning and decision-making, altruism, self-

awareness, initiative, and perseverance. These *assets* are important to distinguish from *skills* in

our understanding of labor market preparation as a central task of education in the face of a

changing labor market (van de Werfhorst, 2014). Gap programs address the assets that students

require when modernization and job obsolescence continuously alter our grasp of the demands of

the future labor market.

The second statistic to which Mr. Hamilton refers is the ethnic disparity in park

attendance and park workforce. He references a 2011 study by the National Park Service

showing that the 30% non-white population of their survey sample yielded only 22% of those

reporting that they had visited a national park within the past 2 years (National Park Service,

2011). In response to this disproportion, the SCA endeavors to attract a diverse population

offering its experiences to all youth. Mr. Hamilton reports that the SCA serves a population that

is approximately 42% non-white each year. The guiding principle of their diversity initiative is

that visitors, workforce, and the community at large should see society's diversity reflected in the ranks of nature's conservationists.

Because Caitlin did not know exactly what she wanted to do, her personal objective for joining the SCA was to discover some direction and she hoped that this would reorient her back toward college someday. She states that she performed well in high school and had many plans for what she would do after graduation. Caitlin went to a college for one semester but recollected that she did not accomplish anything. She says that while she completed her assignments, she did not enjoy it and felt that she was "lost." Caitlin wanted to do something that was out of her comfort zone; something that would possibly gear her towards things that she had not done before. Caitlin had never been camping or hiking and she wanted to immerse herself in something that was different—something in which she had an interest but no experience.

The High School Experience

When Caitlin was in high school, she had a generally positive experience. She said she loved high school and she appreciated that she was able to take Advanced Placement (AP) classes and graduate near the top of her cohort. Caitlin also took community college courses while in high school as she was in a program for students who felt the high school curriculum was not challenging enough. Caitlin's father recalls that she was a high performing and conscientious student. He says she has always cared a great deal about her GPA and demonstrated her motivation and responsibility by also holding a job as a clerk in a natural foods grocery store while in school.

Caitlin felt that her high school was very academically driven and less attentive to the social skills and the critical thinking necessary for the adult and working world. Caitlin's high school encouraged students to take academic courses beyond graduation requirements. She felt

that one of the only ways to have a less competitive, interpersonal experience in her high school was to join art classes. To her, that was the most social one was going to get outside from being on an athletic team, in marching band, or a part of a similar activity. Caitlin developed a passion for arts and hoped to pursue this in college some day.

Caitlin graduated with a 4.2 on a 4.0 scale due to her AP coursework and was 76th in her class of approximately 300 students. She did not regard her GPA or advanced placement as being of any real distinction because she felt that nearly anybody was eligible to do this while he or she was at junior and senior level. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction began issuing district report cards after the 2011-2012 school years, so information specific to the years of Caitlin's attendance are not available. Reports for 2011 through 2014 school years do indicate, however, that in their Overall Accountability Score and Rating that her high school outscored the state average for "On-Track and Postsecondary Readiness." The school consistently achieved the distinction of "significantly exceeding expectations" in this category (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2015). Caitlin claimed that many of the students graduating above her in the rankings went to what she referred to as "Ivy League" colleges and many of the others attended the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Even with its reputation for a strong academic program, Caitlin felt as though her high school did not prepare her for true independence. In reflection, Caitlin feels her high school focused nearly exclusively on academic achievement. Caitlin hesitated to, as she puts it, "bad-mouth," her high school or the high school experience, but she feels as though she only learned how to study. She often wonders how someone like her—who had the drive to go to college and be ambitious right after graduation—could suddenly decide, "I am not ready." Caitlin's parents raised her to view college as a worthy goal, but she also knew that there were other options on

her path to adulthood. She felt like she wanted to see places other than her hometown and felt

compelled to be unlike her family members that she observed staying close to home. Going to

college meant having access to the world for Caitlin.

The Critical Transition

Throughout her upbringing, Caitlin had dreams of going to the University of Wisconsin-

Madison and eventually getting her master's degree. Caitlin was primarily interested in art and

during her first exploration of college programs, she felt art would be her path. Caitlin's father

says that when Caitlin was a younger student his anticipations around college attendance were

largely the hope that she would choose to go but that he never—as he puts it—"explicitly

expected" this of her. Mr. Frank says that Caitlin was a "model student" who loved going to

school. He says that with most students who are naturally bright and motivated, college

attendance seemed like a natural next step.

Caitlin remembers specifically being in her living room the day her father called her

upstairs to talk about her plans for college. She recalled that he said, "You know how much this

is going to cost. I support you if this is what you want to do, but I just want to remind you one

more time how much this is going to cost to go to art school." She considered her father's words

and ultimately discounted the goal of art school.

Caitlin ultimately chose a school that she did not actually want to attend because she felt

it was her last resort. Caitlin can barely explain the sudden indecision she experienced as she was

considering schools but in the end, she based her decision on a desire to go to the city—to

Milwaukee. A grocery store workmate living in Milwaukee invited Caitlin to be her roommate

and assured her that the city was pleasant and that Caitlin would fit in. Caitlin had never spent

much time in Milwaukee and when she went to the school there, she says she hated it. She says

that she still felt compelled to go because she did not want to be the person who did not go to college. After her first attempt at a semester of college, she thought, "I'm not even prepared for college at all—not for the social setting of it, not for the classroom. I'm just not prepared." She was a student who performed well in high school and even as she attended what she called a "mediocre" college, she says she still did not feel prepared.

Caitlin's Predicament

Caitlin went straight to college right out of high school, but she was not altogether pleased with her choice of school or degree program. She completed her courses in that first semester but she did not feel inspired and she felt like she was simply going through the motions. During this underwhelming time, two other things happened that seemed to throw Caitlin off balance. First, Caitlin separated from what she referred to as her "first lover" and because of her relatively bounded community, she saw this person often and it was difficult for her. Second, she took a trip to Seattle to visit a friend; she discovered an enthusiasm for traveling and found the confidence to strike out into the world.

Mr. Frank said that Caitlin desired to "get out on her own" so she moved away from home to Milwaukee even though she did not need to due to their home's proximity to the college. For Caitlin, her desires to get far away from home and try something new were important influences in choosing a post high school program. Her trip to Seattle was the first time Caitlin had traveled alone. She felt liberated and felt encouraged that she was able to handle herself away from home and plan her own adventures. After that trip, Caitlin discovered new confidence to search for opportunities that were farther from home. Traveling on her own for the first time made her think, "I want to try something totally different."

Caitlin stated she "did not want to end up stuck at home forever." Her opinions about staying close to home are very different now from when she was 19. Caitlin states a number of reasons for not wanting to stay home any longer including strained relationships with some family members and other interpersonal stressors. Caitlin felt that her family did not understand what she was going through. She wanted to leave and "re-create" her self—to start on a path of her choosing. She did not think she could successfully achieve that surrounded by or consistently encountering people that she knew.

Caitlin had seen her immediate and extended family members experience not going to college and staying in their hometowns. She says that even now, many of her friends have ended up back in her hometown. She says she does not have as many judgmental feelings about it as she used to and now thinks it is perfectly acceptable to stay in one's hometown. Her personal experience, however, was a desire to get away from what she always knew. She felt like she would be a better person and that she could grow from this. Caitlin wanted to remove herself from an environment in which she was making unhealthy choices and dwelling in negativity, and she wanted to learn who she was without those pressures.

Mr. Frank admitted that he and Caitlin's mother could have been more involved when Caitlin floundered in college, but he realized the detriment of her being in a degree program to which she was not 100% committed. Mr. Frank says that when Caitlin attempted college the first time, he felt she was pressed into declaring a major. He feels that 18 years old is too young to require students to decide what they want to be for the rest of their lives. Caitlin has two siblings and her father stated that his expectations of each of the children were unique unto their own skills and abilities. Mr. Frank says that he himself did not complete college, but that as a parent one always wishes for their children to achieve their greatest potential.

Mr. Frank feels that many young people are "automatically pushed to go to college." He explains that it seems in the United States—with the loss of manufacturing industries—society tells kids that college is the only way for them to make a "decent living." Mr. Frank argued that most kids do not have a full understanding of what they want to do with the rest of their lives. He says that in his family, he did not want to force any of his children to go to college. He did want them to know that college was an option, but that there were many other options out there, too. Armed with this support and compelled by her predicament, Caitlin began to research her options.

The Critical Decision

At a midpoint in Caitlin's first attempt at college, she approached her parents to tell them that she wanted to quit school. Mr. Frank says that he implored her to finish what she started and not to waste her tuition money. Caitlin admitted to her parents, however, that she had already stopped going. She had not told her parents earlier because she was afraid that they would be disappointed in her. She says her parents were a little upset with her when she said, "I am dropping out of college," to which they asserted, "You belong in college." She went on to say, "I don't know what I am doing here at all. It's just a waste of money."

She conducted much of the research by herself, and then she said to her parents, "I have narrowed down these two different things. One is the SCA program. It is for five months. Basically, I will be camping the whole time." They said, "You have never even been camping." She said this threw her parents off their guard. Caitlin admits that camping and outdoorsmanship were foreign to her and even her father offered that he raised none of his children "outdoorsy." The suggestion that she would stop going to college—where they felt she belonged—and go

camping for five months was puzzling for them at first. The other option she found was a job working on a cruise ship in Alaska as a baker.

Throughout the process of choosing a pathway, Caitlin and her parents decided that if her eventual goal was to go to college, that she should do something that would spark her interest for that transition. She said to her parents, "Can you help me make a pros and cons list? I don't really know what to do, but I know I cannot stay here." Since she had no interest in going to culinary school or anything similar, there were more pros on the list of doing the SCA program, rather than going to Alaska. She and her parents agreed that if she wanted to be successful, a program that would guide her toward her passions and guide her back to an interest in college would be better than doing something less applicable. With her parents, she made a list for the different options and they helped her to settle on a decision.

Mr. Frank recalls a time when acquaintances of his family—who had a student the same age as Caitlin—questioned Caitlin's decision to join the SCA. He remembers Caitlin feeling hurt when the acquaintances asked her, "Are you *sure* you want to do this?" then asked him, "How could you let her do this?" He remembers that they seemed "devastated" that he would approve of Caitlin's decision to delay college entrance. He told them, "She is 19 years old. This is the time to do this kind of stuff." Mr. Frank recognizes that these acquaintances had a different relationship with the topic of college attendance and the associated costs. Caitlin's father stated that this family was financing their student's schooling and that he was simply unable to do that for Caitlin. He suspects that this element gave those parents a greater sense of authority to allow or disallow, or to approve or disapprove of the options.

High school was, indeed, a generally positive experience for Caitlin and her high academic performance seemed to suggest readiness for the academics of college. Caitlin found,

however, that her need to challenge herself in new areas and expand her repertoire for social

interaction, exploration, and discovery made her feel unprepared. After a disappointing first

attempt at college, a rending brush with romance, a small taste of independent travel, and with

the support of her parents, Caitlin chose to enter the SCA program in May of 2010. The

following five months provided Caitlin with experiences to which she credits much of who she

has become today.

The Gap Experience

As Caitlin prepared herself for the gap experience with the SCA, she anticipated that she

would be with other 18- and 19-year-olds faced with indecision between high school and college.

She was nervous because she had never been to the mountains before and—by her father's

account—was not raised an "outdoorsy" person. She knew that a program like this was exactly

what she was looking for, but she still felt anxious as she embarked. When she met her cohort

members and began the journey into the mountains, Caitlin found two things surprising. First,

she was with people of many different ages many of whom were in their 20s and transitioning

between college and the working world, or college and graduate school. Second, as they neared

the mountains and closed in on where they would be living, she felt surprisingly comforted. Her

nervousness subsided and her excitement grew as she thought, "This is exactly where I need to

be."

In the beginning, Caitlin's SCA group participated in a month of training in which they

trained for Wilderness First Aid and environmental education. Next, the group trained in the

actual trail work and all of the skills that one needed to go out and do the job. "Hitches" are what

the group called it when they entered the wilderness for one to three weeks at a time. The first

hitch that Caitlin went on was for ten days requiring the group to hike for seven miles with all of

their gear during a "buggy" season. It was the end of May into the beginning of June when there were black flies and gnats everywhere. She hiked with four other people who she had just met a month before and says that the whole hike in was "awful."

On the first day, she volunteered with a partner to go back and get the rest of the group's gear. That day she hiked a total of 20 miles in the bugs, the heat, and then the rain. She reported thinking at the time, "I don't know if I'm going to make it. What am I doing here? This is awful." She suffered many insect bites and her lymph nodes swelled. She says the conditions of the hike and the conditions of the week were uncomfortable but she says she did not mind the physical work even though the work was more demanding than she had thought it would be. In the beginning, Caitlin felt like she was not learning anything and she wondered, "Where is the conservation in this? What is the purpose of this project? I do not get it at all."

Caitlin said the first week was participants' "make-it-or-break-it time." It was physically demanding. The group hiked with approximately 50 pounds of gear including the group gear, their personal gear, and the tools so even their hands were not free. Caitlin believes that these physical challenges also challenge a person mentally. At the end of her ten days—when she was finally able to take a shower—she thought, "I am really proud of myself." She reports that she had never felt *that* [emphasis from informant] proud of herself. This was the first moment that Caitlin felt, "I actually accomplished something on my own." In the first week she had thought, "I don't know if I can do this." After the first few days, however, she felt fine. She says the best feeling in the world was that moment when she did something that nobody thought she could do. She says that she is always striving to have that feeling again.

On July 11, 2010, at approximately the halfway point of her five-month program, Caitlin

posted a journal entry on her social media account giving her friends and family an update on her

activities.

Hello from the Adirondack Mountains! The name 'Adirondacks' is derived from the Mohawk *ratirontaks*, meaning, "They eat trees." It was a derogatory name, which the Mohawk historically applied to neighboring Algonquian-speaking tribes; when food was scarce, the Algonquians would eat the buds and bark of trees. So here I am, in the land of bark eaters! If you were tagged in this note, it is probably because I have yet to have the chance to call or write you. The majority of my time here is spent in the backcountry of the woods camping and out of cell phone service or civilization for that matter. However, I would like to share, with those of you who I haven't had the chance to speak with, what I've been up to here on the East Coast.

To begin with, my first month here was spent being trained how to save lives in the woods (I received my Wilderness First Aid Medicine training), cut down the smallest to the tallest of trees (I am a level two in the Game of Logging), ward off bears and other mammals, how to build bog bridges, maintain and create trails, live off the land and many other tricks to camping and working in a backcountry setting. Although there was an overload of information handed to me in a short period of time, my first month was spectacular! Everyone I work with is true a gem—some are from the Northeast, some from the West Coast and there are even a few from the Midwest. We are all lucky to live in such a beautiful place for this period of time—even where our permanent residence is located on Little Tupper Lake is a beauty. I wish pictures could capture the essence of the place.

After a whole month of training, we finally got into the field and were able to apply the skills we had been working on all month. I will admit that they couldn't have possibly trained us for some of the challenges that you encounter in the field. Factors like weather, supplies, environment, and specific projects are all situations where you learn as you go—which is my favorite type of education!

The first project I worked on was on the Northville Placid Trail—we were constructing a 35-foot, three-stringer bridge over Cold River. This required work such as cutting down a couple of trees using a crosscut saw, peeling bark, digging trenches, working in the mud knee deep in water, and a variety of grueling tasks. But we made it through the week with the foundation completed, over 45 miles traveled by foot and a hard week's work! My second project that I worked on last week, and will be continuing for the next 10 days starting tomorrow, is located in St. Regis Pond. This project is just as tasking on the body as it is mentally. We have been working to create, move and restore overused campsites all while canoeing from one campsite to the next. The area is wonderful and is nestled in the middle of the mountains. Although the work may sound easy, (essentially, it is) but combined with extreme heat conditions and hours of canoeing each day, it was definitely one of those weeks. One of the highlights about camping in this area is the opportunity to

swim after a long day's work and if you are lucky enough, you will see ancient snapper turtles!

So, I am off tomorrow for another 10 days in the area, this time leading a group of three people! And I will answer that question that I have been asked so many times since I've been here and may be on your mind: Do I really love the work I am doing? The answer is yes. Aside from making music and painting, I have never felt so sure about anything I was doing in my life. Yes, it is hard and definitely not for everyone but I see myself in this field for quite some time.

It was a grueling project constructing a bridge over moving water as Caitlin described

this as a "raging river" (Figure 4.1). It rained and everyone was soaked. By the end of the week,

however, Caitlin reported that she felt "great" but that two people had quit and left the program.

Caitlin believes they could not handle the rigor. At the end of the program, participants would

receive an AmeriCorps award to spend on education so there were some financial incentives to

do the program. Looking back, though, it was such a small amount that Caitlin could see why

some people said, "Forget it." Most people who really enjoyed the experience talked very little

about how terrible it was and more so *made fun of* [emphasis from informant] how terrible it

was.

Figure 4.1. Caitlin's first SCA project completed (2010, October 23).

Caitlin says there were certainly times when the group laughed about how miserable they were and she thinks that built a lot of character in her. She says she was never much of a complainer, but that she could definitely indulge herself in complaining. She thinks this gap experience has taught her to complain about very little now, and that learning how to indulge in complaining with people who have a positive attitude was something she had never experienced before the SCA.

The other participants and she laughed a lot and talked about why they were there, especially in the first couple of weeks. Many of their conversations dealt with what they were doing in the SCA program, what the participants did before, and they talked about the "bigger picture" of it all. Many of the people who were there—she estimated that 75% of them had already graduated from college—had gone to college for some sort of environmentally-related or recreationally-related degree. There was talk of, "Why are we here? How are we making an impact?" Particularly toward the end, there was talk of, "How do we think this is going to be a stepping stone into something else?"

This program was not a job. The participants were paid, but it was approximately $70 every two weeks. From Caitlin's perspective, nobody in her SCA cohort was participating for the sake of having a job. To her, it was a development program. Some people were participating because it was something to fill their time, or to put on their resume. Some people had gone to school for environmental science or environmental education, but had never had any actual experience working in the field. Those who were high school graduates were there trying to figure out, "What's next?" Much of the experience was for professional development purposes, and some of the work was to gain experience with people in diverse situations.

Caitlin and her peers also saw this as a leadership development program. There were many times when the participants had to be their own leaders as the leader/supervisor rarely went out on the hitches with the groups. For many of them it was the first time the members were by themselves having to do tasks with their peers and leading each other. Caitlin felt truly independent when the group went on hitches with different people. Within the small group, each person had to be a leader at times. This meant anything from meeting with an agency partner, to doing a site visit beforehand, to leading peers through a project. It was the first time Caitlin had truly been a leader among peers. She does not like to use the word "authority," but she was the only person who knew what was happening at the site and that was a new experience for her.

The group experienced moments when none of them really knew what they were supposed to be doing. Caitlin remembers feeling that, "People are depending on me to lead us through the day and take a break for games or water breaks, and to make sure everybody is eating." She had to lead the group through a weeklong hitch making sure everybody was pulling their weight in making dinner and doing their chores. She was 19 years old and everybody she was with was between 21 and 24 so she was the youngest of the group on one particular hitch. She did not feel like a boss—she does not like the term "boss"—but she felt like a leader. She says it was great feeling that, "I can really be a real person." In this instance and others, Caitlin uses the word "real" when she illustrates the skills and events that made her feel relevant, empowered, and involved.

Caitlin also recalls a time while on the trail when the group discovered that they mistakenly packed a tent without its poles. She recalls the problem-solving skills that the situation required and recounts the ingenuity that she and her peers demonstrated when they were able to use their new skills to jury-rig their shelter (Figure 4.2). The image shows Caitlin giving

enthusiastic thumbs up with four peers as they pose next to their accomplishment. They were

able to create stakes from sticks and circumvent the issue of not having poles by stringing the

peak between trees. Caitlin classifies this as one of the group's important accomplishments in the

face of unexpected hardships, not just because of the outcome, but because of the independence,

leadership, and ingenuity they displayed.

F*igure 4.2.* Caitlin's team solves how to erect a tent without tent poles (2010, June 26).

Skills and Dispositions Coming Away

Caitlin notices a difference between her and other people her age that did not take a gap

year before university. She is older than many people who are in her university program and she

thinks that makes a difference. Caitlin observes that many of them went directly from high

school to college, and they have never really traveled or participated in programs like the SCA.

She observes that even transfer students have not typically had that break in time to experience

the "real world." She thinks this break was valuable to her. She has gained many opportunities at

university simply because of her experience in the gap-year program, the skills she has built, and

the experiences that she has had afterwards. Caitlin took more time than one year off after

completing the program. She has participated in other projects with the SCA and has taken other

jobs while traveling around the country. She feels that she has more experience than most people

do at her age. Caitlin also believes that her social development is different from her peers.

Dealing with agency partners and dealing with people in the professional setting is experience

that most of her classmates have not had in the environmental field and she feels this has given

her a professional edge.

Building resilience. Caitlin feels that the SCA gap program prepared her to challenge

herself mentally and push through anything. Caitlin thinks the SCA prepared her to overcome

situations, both physically and mentally, without feeling the "wear and tear." She now knows

that she can accomplish goals, do this on her own, and that she does not have to depend on

anybody. She feels capable. Caitlin has continued in trail work and has begun leading trail work.

Every summer, and when she lived in Milwaukee throughout the school year, she led the gap-

year program for high school students. It was a shorter program for the summer leading up to

what they could do after they graduate. The SCA has geared some of these programs toward

inner city, at-risk youth engaging in environmental education and conservation projects in

Milwaukee. In her work with inner-city populations, Caitlin served diverse youth, as is the

mission of the SCA to diversify the conservationist and visitor populations of the National Park

System.

In working with high school youth, she often hears them say, "I don't think I can do it."

Many of her students seem to feel that, "The world just seems so big, and everything just seems

so hard. Is hard work really going to pay off?" As she is in a dual undergraduate and master's

degree program, she reports that she has "so much on [her] plate." She feels, however, as though

the SCA trained her and she believes that she learned many lessons on what perseverance and

vision can provide to her. She frequently tells students that even though the work is hard, the payoff in the end is going to feel wonderful.

Caitlin says people typically expect that if one works hard for a long time, it is going to pay off later. However, Caitlin has learned that sometimes, for the hard work one does, one is not going to see the benefits. She says that her experience with the SCA taught her to feel that this is okay. She learned the concept of selflessness and doing work without having the expectation that she would see immediate benefits. Caitlin believes that is an important concept for the environmental field. The SCA experience taught Caitlin that the work of environmentalists is important but that these people are probably not going to see the result. Caitlin refers to the fact that in conservation work, the visible results can happen beyond the lifespan of one person.

Similarly, an individual may work diligently on an environmental effort and it may not be successful. Caitlin has learned that people must have the perseverance not to allow this to discourage them causing them to become apathetic or diverted. She says one must have the resilience to rework a project. The general lesson that Caitlin takes from these points is that one must be able to be at peace with failure, and be at peace with not seeing the fruits of his or her labor. She says, "It feels really good when you have worked hard and it turns out but you must also be okay if it does not turn out."

Becoming self-directed. Caitlin's SCA experience was similar to being a learner at university because she says her environmental studies program is very "do-it-yourself." Because of the manner in which her university structures its programs, and because it is a commuter school, she feels like nothing is "handed" to her. She feels compelled to put in the effort for her opportunities and she knows that if she wants an opportunity she has to work for it. She says she

must show professors, "I want this opportunity," or even just bring those opportunities to their attention and say, "Can I do this for you?"

Caitlin's professor, Dr. Sanders[5], speaks to her independence and willingness to learn. He states that he has given Caitlin projects that capitalize on her skills in organization, design, monitoring, communication, outreach, and appreciation for the work. He credits gap year with many of these skills saying

> I believe the gap year helps instill work ethic by allowing students to take a break from classes and experience the world as an individual. Gap year clearly establishes a sense of independence and a much clearer understanding that undergraduate and graduate education is a means to an end. I see this understanding in Caitlin (J. Sanders, personal communication, June 29, 2015).

Dr. Sanders says that Caitlin is independent, collegial, highly capable, and among his top performing students having a strong work ethic. He says she is an excellent communicator and has the ability to work and maneuver within structured organizations while being able to think "out of the box." He lauds her as having excellent leadership abilities. He closed his remarks about gap programs by saying, "Look, when you are young you need some real adventures. These adventures are not simply for fun—they are extremely important for self-identity, confidence, and development."

Caitlin's university professor/advisor, Dr. Walters, details the qualities he saw in Caitlin that distinguished her from her peers and affirmed her self-directedness when he said

> She has sought me out asking for projects...This in itself is a significant attribute that most students do not possess...Caitlin has demonstrated key characteristics of a self-starter, someone who wants to take responsibility for their own learning and gaining of

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[5] I refer to this source by a pseudonym to prevent identification of the case informant.

experience. If I have to recruit someone, the outcomes generally are not as satisfactory (T.

Walters[6], personal communication, July 9, 2015).

He went on to say that Caitlin's maturity, confidence, time management, and decision-making

may be due to the experience in the field that she gained while in the SCA program. He cautions,

however, that young people with this thirst for knowledge can often find themselves

overwhelmed when they attempt too many projects at once. Dr. Walters says that he asked

Caitlin to develop, pilot-test, and run a component of a lab for his lab class, Fundamentals of

Environmental Science, where she was essentially performing educational design using active

learning. He says her performance was of high quality given that it was her first time.

Caitlin also uses the term "self-starter" when describing her gap program and the

motivation she felt there. The organization gave participants projects, but she states that the

projects were very "learn-as-you-go"—experiential learning. Whether her university classmates

agree or not, Caitlin thinks her particular university, and its environmental science program, are

quite experiential. She says the program educators do not simply hand opportunities to the

students. They need to work for the opportunities. She feels that being self-motivated is vital to

her program and that there is very little "handholding." Caitlin says that being a learner in

university is similar to being a learner in her gap year program in that leaders tend to say, "Here

are the tools that you have. Now take them and do what you want with them," rather than putting

everything in a "step-by-step instruction manual."

Relating to people. The SCA gap program helped Caitlin to "come out of [her] shell."

She says that she was quite shy before this program and even her family has said, "I don't know

what happened to you" after the experience. She would not go so far as to say that she is

outgoing [emphasis from informant] now but she is more willing to talk to people. In many of

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[6] I refer to this source by a pseudonym to prevent identification of the case informant.

her work and school projects, she has to call agency partners and colleagues to ask them for

meetings and interviews. She does not hesitate to call people to initiate connections. Outside of

work and school, she feels more confident to talk to someone if she is sitting in a public place

reading a book, or if she is waiting for friends. She feels at ease to engage someone doing

something that interests her or catches her attention. Caitlin states that she has "pretty much done

a one-eighty [-degree turn]" in her social style.

In her time after being a participant in the SCA, Caitlin worked with youth programs on

short-term environmental projects that the SCA also provides. Caitlin says that the effects of

relationship building within the programs is evident in the before and after photographs of the

groups. The groups traditionally take a picture before heading out for the wilderness then

photograph themselves again when they return. Figure 4.3 is an illustration of the contrast she

reported. Caitlin notes a consistent trend in the positions and proximity of members between the

photographs. In the "before" pictures the members stand up straight, shoulders squared, arms to

their sides, and rarely touch each other. In the "after" photographs, the members lean into one

another and are touching—some even embracing each other.

Figure 4.3. Caitlin's youth group demonstrates their developing closeness (2014, July 21).

Caitlin says the social aspect of the SCA program was "awesome." She feels that some of

her SCA cohort members know her better than do her friends that have known her longer. She

has remained close to "five or six" people out of the 20 participants in her program and this small

group have stayed in contact since the program ended. About one year after the program ended,

she visited some of them, and together they took a road trip across the country. These friends

even attended Caitlin's wedding and have visited her at her new home in the Northeast.

Caitlin feels that building relationships at university have little in common with building

relationships while she was in the gap year program. The SCA structured its gap year program to

facilitate connections between its members. She recalled participating in "goofy games" that

helped to build rapport. Caitlin notes that the university does not structure for relationship

building at all. This is particularly true in the classroom. She reflected on a time when she

attended a technical college where at the beginning of the semester the instructor prompted

students in an icebreaker activity in which they shared, "something silly about yourself and what

is your major."

Caitlin reports that her university does not do icebreaker introductions between students

like her gap program and the technical school did. Caitlin observes that students jump right into

the course and if the instructor expects students to do a group project, Caitlin says one has to

figure it out him or herself. She realizes that if students want to connect with one another they

must be willing to initiate. In the university setting, Caitlin has observed a lack of structured

efforts to bond the students to one another. In the SCA program, the participants had structure.

The group spent quite a bit of time with one another. The group lived together, worked together,

ate together. The program expected group members to lead together and then follow together in

turn.

Caitlin feels there is less intentional relationship building at the university. Additionally,

Caitlin's impression of the university's handling of interpersonal affairs is that they respond with

the sentiment that students should, "just figure out your problems and if there are conflicts, come

to us as a very last resort." Caitlin understands the laissez faire attitude in that it forces students

to resolve their own conflicts. This also makes it hard for students, however, when there is not a

structured effort to bond the student body. Caitlin claims she has many friends who feel it is

difficult to make friends at university. She speculates that this may be due in part to the high

commuter population of the university and that one strength of the gap program was

cohabitation.

Interestingly, Dr. Walters does say that the environmental sciences department of the

university attempts to foster closeness between its students. He says the department is unique in

that they require all students to participate in "field immersion," which is a student orientation

and community-building event. All students go to a camp for three nights where they focus on

community building. He says this is crucial because the department relies heavily on group-

based projects in the curriculum.

Finding her independence. Caitlin speaks highly of her level of independence at the

university. She compares it favorably to the independence that she felt as a gap year participant.

Caitlin transferred her credits from the college in Milwaukee to her current university. Once

here, she made connections with many of the professors in her degree program. Last fall one of

her professors, Dr. Sanders, offered her a research assistantship. Caitlin worked under his

direction last semester and her assistantship this term is independent research. She is able to use

his laboratory and all of his resources.

During the spring semester in which the data collection occurred for this study, Caitlin

participated in an independent study for one of her major classes. The professors have led her to

believe that the department rarely approves such studies for students at her level. Caitlin

attributes this special permission to her positive reputation and her robust experiences. In the

words of her professors, the life experiences Caitlin has had are deeper than the experiences of

other students at her grade level or age are. Due to this, her professors have given her projects

that they have not offered to other students. Professors have assigned Caitlin to write labs for the

introductory environmental science classes and have invited her to participate in other special

projects with them. She feels good when her professors offer special projects, but sometimes

Caitlin feels the workload becoming too heavy. She says, however, that this just requires her to

be more motivated to get the tasks done to meet the deadlines.

      Defining her passion. Reflecting on her upbringing, Caitlin did not have the impression

that her parents ever considered environmental conservation. Caitlin's school did not appear to

espouse awareness of environmental conservation either. The concept of environmental

stewardship or having any responsibility to the natural world was not part of her lifestyle before

her gap year experience. Going into the SCA program, she knew the mission was conservation

and she learned more about environmental education and environmental science. She did not

actually think, however, that she was going to become so deeply engaged in efforts to protect the

environment. The most important take away from this program for Caitlin was about her role—

everybody's role—for protecting the environment and for doing his or her part and doing it

selflessly.

      Currently, Caitlin leads summer cohort groups of students who are entering gap year

programs through the SCA organization. When she has conversations with high school students,

she recommends these programs because she knows that many young people are unsure of what

they want to do. She identifies with some of these kids because they are in the position that she

was. Caitlin perceives that these young people feel forced to go to college as if that is their only

option. She encounters students who feel they are not going to be successful without college.

Three years ago, Caitlin claims she may have said, "You don't need college to get anywhere."

However, she says she does not believe that anymore. When it comes to gap year programs, she

tells young people that the opportunity may not be there later and they should take advantage of

it now. She gives testimony to the fact that young people will learn many lessons from it,

particularly if they are unsure about their plans for the future.

This past summer, Caitlin took SCA students out to "get a taste of" what they could do

after high school. They traveled to various national parks to work while she taught

environmental education, sustainability, community activism, and stewardship. Caitlin lets her

young students know they do not have to feel pressured to go to college right away even if they

are a high performing student. She tells them that college is always going to be there, but these

gap experiences are not always going to be.

When she talks with high school youth, Caitlin is troubled by what they report is the

advice they receive from their high school guidance counselors. Caitlin gets frustrated when

counselors say, "Go to college. Go to college." This troubles her so much, in fact, that she says

she "absolutely can't stand it." Caitlin feels that counselors and other advisors do not invite

students to consider a gap year program. She feels they do not encourage students to do

something that will give them experiences that they will not get in college such as "true"

independence and trying activities outside of their comfort zones. She understands that not all

participants will want to enter the environmental field, but there are other programs out there.

She tells them, "You are going to gain so much from that experience…You are going to learn a

lot about yourself. You are going to gain so much socially and professionally that, even if you do

not go into the environmental field, you can take that to college with you, or take that to a different job."

Caitlin's father says he never worried about her during this time of indecision because he knew that she was a "good kid" and acknowledged that—in retrospect—her gap program experience was invaluable for her. He says that he and her mother had always been "nothing but encouraging" and that he finds it "neat" that at such a young age she has been able to identify what her passion is. Mr. Frank acknowledged that none of his children grew up very "outdoorsy" and he realizes how much the SCA program opened Caitlin's eyes to another part of life. He says that Caitlin has "taken to this nature stuff like a duck to water" and that were he to converse with parents of a student considering gap programs, he would "heartily endorse it."

The Meaningful Outcomes

Caitlin feels that two features of her program have been most important to her. First, the relationships that she built held great meaning for her. She feels that these folks know her better than people that she has known for a long time do. This was meaningful to her because she felt that she was finally able to be the person she wanted to be. She says that she "has people now who [know] *that* [emphasis from informant] person really well." She speculates that maybe this is the person she always was but was just too shy to be suggesting that her gap program helped her hidden self to emerge rather than grow or develop.

The other feature that held meaning was her newfound passion—her drive, her ambition. Caitlin says she now knows what her mission and her purpose is in life. She knows how she wants to get there and how she *can* [emphasis from informant] get there. Since her gap program, she has been "nonstop" in trying to achieve her goals and setting new ones. Caitlin uses her

social media account frequently to express and announce the exciting developments in her career

as a student and as an environmental conservationist.

Each year the Maine Community Foundation (MCF) extends an invitation to the students

of each of the state's seven public universities to participate in the Maine Policy Scholar

competition. The MCF selects one student from each university who will, "tackle a real-life

policy issue currently facing Maine. After conducting extensive research...the

scholar...produce[s] a final report in the form of a memo to the Governor or appropriate

policymaker that outlines the problem, the data available, and recommended policy solutions"

(Maine Community Foundation, 2015). This spring, the MCF chose Caitlin (Figure 4.4) to

represent her university and her policy memo to the Governor will be published in April of 2016.
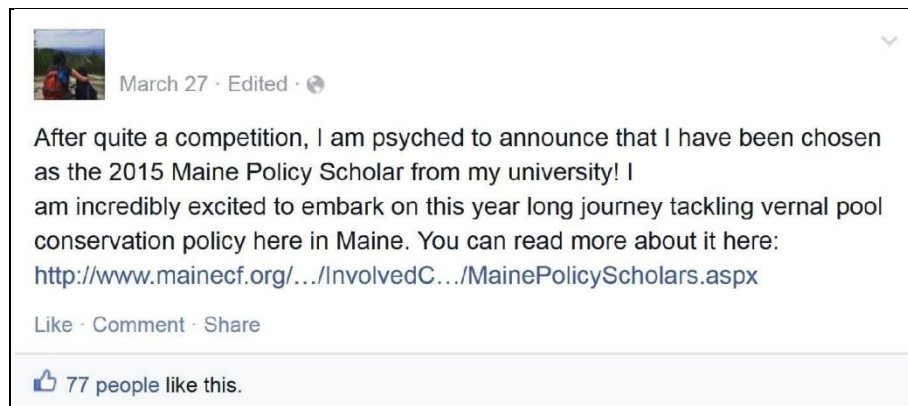
Figure 4.4. Caitlin's social media announcement of her 2015 Maine Policy Scholar award (2015,

March 27).

Additionally this spring, Caitlin was hired and appointed to positions within her

department (Figure 4.5) alluding to those of her qualities of which her professors speak so

highly. Just six days prior to her enthusiastic, social media post, Caitlin received a scholarship

award from the university funded by the state's most notable outdoor recreation outfitter. This

well-known retail organization prides itself on its outdoor conservation education efforts and

congratulated Caitlin on her achievement stating that they chose her due to her, "potential to

greatly improve communities through the environment in Maine[7]."

Figure 4.5. Caitlin's announces on social media her college accolades (2014, April 29).

Caitlin says that the biggest difference this gap program has made for her is that it

provided her a "start over" or a "rebirth." She says she was a normal kid, a self-proclaimed art

geek, and a high performer in school. In the semester of college that she attempted, she did

"rebellious things." She asserts that her behavior was not out of control, but the behavior was

uncharacteristic for her. The biggest difference her gap has made for her is that she was finally

able to find something that she could say, "This is what I want."

Caitlin reflected that the program experiences were rewarding but that her feelings and

personal outcomes were the most important. She stated that she recommends SCA and other

programs that are within the same organization to students now that she is a leader for high

school youth in SCA programs. Caitlin says that what she did through the SCA spurred her

interest in going to school for environmental science and pursuing her master's degree. Her

experience led to many different opportunities and she feels that she owes everything that has

happened for her to the program. Caitlin stated that the object of her desire was to find a way to

become passionate about college again. She never seriously questioned her academic ability or

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[7] As posted to Caitlin's Facebook account.

her desire to get a degree, but she wanted to find a program that would let her grow and direct

her back to a path that she could follow with passion. Caitlin's status today as a high achieving,

award-winning student is evidence that she was able to do just that with her gap program.

As we neared the end of data collection for this inquiry, Caitlin tagged me in a social

media entry in which she posted Adrienne Wichard-Edds Washington Post article, "Want to help

kids succeed in college? Let them take a gap year." Caitlin posted this with the emphatic

comment, "Yes! Yes! Yes! @Sara Flowers!" Through her gap program, she discovered a self

that she really liked and of which she was proud. Caitlin states that she can genuinely say, "This

is the best version of me that I have ever been, and I always want to be."

Capturing the Gap for Credit

Just as Caitlin's father felt she was "pushed" into college, both Drs. Walters and Sanders

shared similar feelings about the guidance and advising practices for students in transition. Dr.

Walters specifically states that high schools seem to lack in the areas of teaching (a)

preparedness for increased responsibilities, (b) balancing duties, and (c) soft skills for the adult

and working world. He feels that universities could do a better job of recognizing the informal

learning that happens in programs such as those of gap years.

Dr. Sanders gave his plea on the topic of how high schools and colleges could work

together in guidance and advising during this crucial transition. Gap years, he says, can be a

recognized element of higher education and he alludes to "credentializing" these experiences

much as I have discussed in regards to PLA department terrain. Dr. Sanders says

> I think that gap years can be an integral part of the post high school experience. Guidance
>
> offices in high schools and colleges should work together to help students pursue
>
> experiences that allow them to grow and mature on their own... It is these youth

adventures that we reflect on for the rest of our lives, which says something [about] their

importance in defining who we are. With that noted, gap year should not simply be time-

off, but rather an intentional part of learning and becoming an independent and more

mature adult. High schools, and more so colleges, can offer opportunities in the form of

non-credit bearing internships and maybe a little life coaching. They should also provide a

safety net in regard to [assurances] and opportunities for gap years to be recognized in

leadership transcripts, which I have proposed to my own university. The knowledge,

skills, and abilities acquired during the gap year should be of sort that they can be

included in a personal and professional portfolio. Colleges and universities can work with

students in very hands-off ways to inform students, supervisors, and employers about how

to document learning in any job. This is especially important for those overarching skills

such as leadership, organization, work ethic, and communication. Of course, there are

specific skills and abilities that are unique to each job and each experience that should be

identified, as well. If students have a means to credentialize these experiences at the

college level, then we will have a better handle on recognizing gap years as part of the

post high school educational experience (personal communication, June 29, 2015).

For Caitlin, the developmental and professional outcomes, as well as the logistical

"credentializing" of her experience, are among those meaningful outcomes that she has

experienced and now recommends to her youth group participants.

Caitlin is currently in the process of applying to use elements of her gap program

experience for university credit. She was able to go to the Prior Learning Assessment (PLA)

office at her university to make an argument that the skills she learned in her program were

relevant to some of her core classes such as the diversity requirement. She made a case for why

she did not need to take certain classes because the gap year program provided learning

outcomes that met the core concepts of the course. She says it was a straightforward process as

she wrote the PLA office a proposal, they reviewed it, and they awarded her credit. Caitlin even

used some of her artistic experiences and demonstrations to satisfy the fine arts requirement of

her university. VP of Communications, Kevin Hamilton, stated that the SCA does have

agreements with some colleges and universities to award credit for either the nationally

recognized certificates that they offer, the internal certificates they have created, and for total

program completion.

Mr. Hamilton mentioned that both Sterling College and Colorado State University were

frequent SCA collaborators, but no formal Memorandum of Understanding is in place at this

time. Through a review of Caitlin's university PLA policies, her Wilderness First Aid (WFA)

certification is worth one, one hundred-level, general elective credit. Mr. Hamilton speculated

that the Leave No Trace (LNT) certification might also be worth credit as it is a nationally

recognized certificate. Caitlin's university PLA department does not give credit for LNT (K.

Mitchell[8], personal communication, June 24, 2015). Further, the SCA issues internal certificates

in Certified Field Technician and Certified Field Specialist in the hopes that they may

standardize the skill set and create portable, stackable credentials. No further information is

available at this time as to whether any university imports these as credit bearing.

Analysis Through Categories and Themes

As an instrumental case of the gap year program experience, Caitlin's journey emerged

from a larger survey of her university population, and a discrete interview process for a small

target group. Both the categories that emerged from the survey and the themes that emerged from

the interviews give me a framework upon which to build the details of Caitlin's experience. The

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[8] I did not assign pseudonyms for individuals providing information from the public domain.

survey categories of student responses emerged as exploring the unfamiliar, redefining

preferences, building relationship skills, and sheltered independence building. The interview

themes emerged similarly as relationships, responsibilities, relevance, and revelation. In the

following sections, we are able to view Caitlin's experience through a lens of each of these

categories and themes.

As Caitlin chose to divert from the college entrance path and select a gap program, she

discussed the fact that camping, outdoorsmanship, and conservation were new and unfamiliar

activities for her. Her father reiterated that claim when he said that he raised none of his children

to be "outdoorsy" and commented that her choice was surprising to him and Caitlin's mother.

Caitlin's primary interest as a high school student was in her academic achievement but

discussed that her more passionate plans for the future included artistic endeavors and higher

education in such. While Caitlin states that she is still quite passionate about art, the SCA

experience noticeably influenced her career trajectories. The relationships with which Caitlin

came away from her SCA experience were an important element for her as she discussed the

lasting friendships, the continued contact, and the relatability skills that she built. Finally, the

SCA program offered Caitlin a structured place with parameters for experiencing independence

in ways that she states were far different from her high school program and her university

experience.

Interview themes were not altogether different from the survey categories, however the

evolution of the categories into themes was well developed through participants' responses, and I

will illustrate these more specifically through Caitlin's experience. The relationships that Caitlin

discussed were not limited to simply making friends. Negotiating how she relates to people

involved more crucial interactions such as learning how to channel frustration among peers in

productive ways, and taking a leadership role while avoiding authoritarian approaches that she

referred to as being a "boss." The effectiveness of Caitlin's relationship skills sharpened in her

blooming out of shyness, networking with others in positions to further her career, and the

personal fortitude that she says has helped her to succeed at university.

The theme of responsibility dovetails effectively at this point as Caitlin discusses a

newfound imperative for environmental awareness. Caitlin considers her relationship to nature to

be an important responsibility thus bringing her more closely in touch with adulthood. Arnett

states that a decrease in self-orientation and greater consideration for those outside of the self is a

marked indicator of entering adulthood as evidenced by emerging adults' self-reported

observations (Arnett, 2007, p. 27). The responsibility with which the SCA charged Caitlin for

herself, her peers, her work, and ultimately the global environment was the crucial objective of

the experience by both her account and the account of the SCA's Vice President of

Communications, Kevin Hamilton.

The relevance of the SCA experience was not entirely apparent to Caitlin at the onset of

her decision-making. As Caitlin grew during those five months, however, she came to realize

that the experience was meaningful to her life's journey and grew to appreciate its relevance. All

participants in this study asserted that the success of their experience relied upon their inherent

interest in the topic whether it was dressage, German language, soccer, hospitality, service, etc.

Caitlin's experience was no less representative of this theme despite the fact that the SCA

program activities were foreign to Caitlin, a confirmed indoor person.

Finally, Caitlin's journey began in Wisconsin where friends and family members

surrounded her that she described as "homebodies." Caitlin's home culture was not one of travel

or exploration. Just as other interviewees stated that putting themselves far from home was a

critical feature of the experience, Caitlin traveled to the Adirondacks of upstate New York

ultimately landing in the New England state in which she now attends university. The two-way

revelation happened for Caitlin as she entered these new terrains discovering the opportunities,

challenges, and intricacies. All the while, she applied her talent, passion, and labor that

ultimately revealed her to the larger world of environmental conservationism and public policy

work.

　　　　Caitlin's story is not one of specific or unique significance to a discussion of the gap

opportunity but rather a tool for illustrating the features and events, the personal development,

and the access that one person experienced on her journey. Caitlin's story helps us to see how

these categories and themes function and her story helps the educational community more fully

understand how the gap program opportunity can bolster the skills young people need for the

adult and working world.

<div align="center">

Guiding Inquiries

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　　　　The purpose of this inquiry was to explore the gap year experience (a) to reveal its

essential features, (b) to explain its impact on personal development, and (c) to identify the

factors of access. The findings indicate that through an exploration of students through a

questionnaire, individual face-to-face interviews, and case building with one informant, I have

been able to address each of the guiding research questions. Through these inquiries, the findings

establish that gap programs feature unique opportunities for students to develop into adults that

are more competent and that layers of support are pivotal to students' access.

　　　　The students who were able to experience this nonacademic gap in their educational

process were able to show that the gap opportunity is a valuable time of new exposures, and the

chance to explore. Program thrust them into increased responsibility, real life opportunities to

rise to the occasion of these responsibilities, and the authentic interactions between people that make the work effective whether that is through connection or conflict. The findings of this study detailed the essences of the gap experience, the developmental opportunities within these kinds of journeys, and the issues of how these students were able to access these. Specific details and narrative accounts from participants made it possible to analyze what happened to students while in these programs. What follows is a discussion of how the findings from interviews and the case record answer each of the guiding research questions.

Critical Features and Pivotal Events

The first inquiry asked, what do students report were the critical features and pivotal events of their experiences in gap year programs? All six of the questionnaire respondents, four of whom I interviewed, discussed that new and unfamiliar environs, opportunities to build relationships with people, and the opportunity to be on one's own were the critical features of the gap programs. The pivotal events of these experiences were ones in which they had revelations about their preferences and passions, and experienced new learning leading to personal development in their relationships, responsibilities, resilience, and independence. Each of them traveled to places far from home to new regions of the county and in Aaron's case, to another nation entirely. In these places, they found themselves with new people who became pivotal to their journey and even became so close to these new friends that they—as in the case of Caitlin—traveled across the country to attend her wedding. Each of the participants encapsulated their gap program experience as a chance to navigate their world free from their home contexts and to discover a lifelong pathway by stepping into temporary programs that offered robust, non-academic learning opportunities.

Personal Development

The second inquiry asked what students report about the impact that their experiences and expectations of postgraduate, gap year programs had on their personal development. All of the study subjects discussed their personal development through the pivotal events relating to relationships, responsibilities, resilience, and independence. Caitlin's story demonstrated her increase in relationship skills both personally between cohort peers, and professionally as she branched out into the environmental and policy fields of education. She experienced increased duties and a commensurate level of comfort for the work. Caitlin discovered her positive mindset for perseverance in the face of difficult work and she revealed a sense of independence within her that has led to her autonomy as an accomplished university student. In Caitlin's case in particular, she reached a level of competence for environmental work and her father, her professors, and her departmental community recognize this competence. Each of the interview subjects discussed the impact these skills had on their ability to relate to people in their adult and working worlds. They found they could take responsibility for their university academics, jobs, and activities of daily living. They increased their resilience for tasks they find difficult in their adult and working lives and they increased their sense of independence after having participated in a gap program. Michael blossomed in his diversity skills, Aaron grew into leadership, Tahlia learned how to stand up for herself, and Caitlin learned about the limitlessness of her world and the responsibility that she needed to take for the planet.

Factors of Access

The third inquiry asked, what were the factors and conditions of the students' access to gap year programs? Each respondent spoke of supports that allowed him or her to participate in their gap program. These supports included (a) financial support such as access to free or low

cost programming; (b) moral support such as encouragement from parents, relatives, friends, instructors, and coaches; and (c) informational support in the form of knowledge about and guidance toward program selection. Some survey respondents indicated a cost for their programs, but all four interviewees reported having accessed programs that were at no cost to the student, publicly funded, or of such little cost, they were only responsible for personal care and conveyance. Parents, friends, non-academic instructors, and other family members were of great importance to informants as they all discussed supportive people in their lives that gave assistance in the decision-making phase. Finally, the informational support for programs like these was a factor that garnered input from both primary informants as well as from the addendum informants during the case building. While high school guidance and college advising offices allege to support students, informants, the case subject's father, a gap program representative, and two university professors assert that information and articulation are a weakness in this transaction. Informational support is an area for further research and development.

Chapter Summary

In this study of the gap year activities among a small population with one university, I reported the critical features and pivotal events of the gap experience, the impact of those on their personal development, and the factors of the students' access to these programs. I reported survey result categories of exploration of the unfamiliar, opportunities to redefine preferences, building relationship skills, and experiencing sheltered independence. Interview themes demonstrated gap opportunities that were rich in relationships, responsibilities, relevance, and revelation. Through a case study of one individual, supported by the testimonies of her father, one program representative, and two of her university professors, and by artifacts of her

university and professional achievements, I reported the developmental skills of building

resilience, becoming self-directed, relating to people, finding independence, and defining

passions. It is by these findings that we discover from students the wealth of potential within gap

year program opportunities.

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, DISCUSSION, AND FINAL

REFLECTIONS

Introduction

Each winter, the USA Gap Year Fairs organization schedules a whirlwind tour of the country bringing with them the various regional and national gap year program representatives. They spread their brochures, post cards, look books, decals, and trinkets across their booths and tables. Speakers take the stages of host auditoriums presenting testimonials to high school students and their families. They promise prospective applicants an experience like nothing they have ever had before. The man talking about a music conservatory wears a tweed jacket with leather elbow patches. The Outward Bound speaker wears a casual fleece vest and a branded baseball cap. Another presenter talks about a pre-university, agricultural program in Vermont in his cuffed dungarees. Parents stop at tables, arms crossed, nodding rhythmically as the agent makes his or her best pitch. Students thumb through catalogs gazing at vibrant photos and slip colorful, branded, stickers into their event goody bags.

Many of these students eventually go straight to college, but unfortunately, many of them will not return for sophomore years. Some of them will not even complete their freshman year. Luckily, programs like the ones they see at these fairs give them information about alternatives. Some of these students will leave home but not for a degree program at a college or university; they will leave home and learn more about music, outdoorsmanship, community engagement, foreign language, and many of the other topics offered by gap programs. These students will spend upward of one year engaged in non-academic learning that will help them to develop into fully-fledged, contributing members of society ready for college and careers. Unlike the programming that high schools can offer, and unlike the environment of the typical university,

gap year programs get students out of their comfort zones and offer them a chance to develop

organically through contact with authentic activities. Private studies conducted within the gap

industry show that "gappers" do return to and perform well at university. These findings suggest

to educational leaders that the practice is worth our attention.

As educators, we are heavily engaged in how our students make their way into adulthood.

We help them to sharpen their literacies, tell them about the "real world," and encourage them to

dream about what they will be when they "grow up." We find ourselves shackled to a definition

of success, however, that seems to presume that four seamless years of high school will

transition directly into four seamless years of college. Conventional wisdom states that the good

students are the ones who manage not to fall off the eight-year assembly. Sir Ken Robinson

(2006) points out a dilemma when he refers to the concept of grouping children by their "date of

manufacture" and reminds the educational community that many students learn at different paces

and in different timeframes. Further, Vollmer's parable of the blueberries[9] (2002) demonstrates

how students are not commodities that we may cast out if they arrived unripe, damaged, or

insufficient. A business and manufacturing model does not appropriately transfer to school

operations. Therefore, quota, yield, and deadline cannot be the vocabulary of educators. The

pattern of penalizing students and schools when students fail to make a seamless transfer

between high school and college is hurting young people and subsequently hurting society.

The landscape of the United States job market demands increasingly higher education

credentials to be qualified for the jobs that make our country function. College completion is

quickly becoming the standard for career entrance when it was once considered the vanguard.

Higher education costs increase annually despite our social justice measures to ameliorate this,

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[9] Vollmer recounts that as an ice cream company executive, he would send back a shipment of inferior blueberries but stands corrected when he asserts that schools should operate as businesses as a teacher points out that schools do not get to reject the kids of their communities.

and yet we insist on degrees while making it more difficult to earn one. Put simply, we need

more college graduates and we need to stop insisting that there is a single pathway to degrees

requiring a fixed amount of time. The programs that allow students to step out of academics for

one year of exploration and discovery may be just what we need.

My inquiry into the gap year experience began with an interest in the Scandinavian

Folkehøjskole. How these countries offer transitional, non-academic programming to their

emerging adults between secondary and post-secondary school intrigued me. Born from one

man's philosophy for a socially equitable nation through education, the Grundtvigian folk high

school model exists in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland, and in a slight variation in

Germany and Austria. My inquiry led me to wonder: what kinds of education happen in the

United States that speaks to the same missions? In the United States, we have "folk" schools that

deal in local crafts, music, and politics and these schools operate more as retreat centers or

private, rural learning centers. Additionally, the United States has three major public options that

address transitional learning though our community colleges, public adult education programs,

and our universities' Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) departments. Finally, there is the

educational model that became the focus of this study: the gap program industry.

The United States' gap program industry is a diverse field featuring programs that span

the interests and the budgets of students looking for additional time to develop. Well-known

programs include Outward Bound, the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS), Where

There Be Dragons (Dragons), Sea|mester, and many others that offer travel, volunteerism,

outdoorsmanship and many other program foci. The United States' gap program became the

focus for this study because the program content, structure, and objectives are nearly identical to

those of the Scandinavian Folkehøjskole. The major difference, however, is the issue of cost. The

American gap programs are largely a for-profit industry and many of the more popular programs charge tuitions that rival many colleges. The other notable difference is the ubiquity of information for students and their families on availability, access, and eligibility.

The importance of a discussion about this kind of schooling relates directly to both the problem and the controversy of the topic. The current statistic for college student retention and students' persistence to degrees indicate that we have a crisis of student outcomes requiring innovative educational leadership. The situation calls for a new understanding of and approach to college preparedness as only 64.2% of freshmen return for sophomore years at 4-year, public universities. Further, the statistic for persistence to degrees is only 36.4% at 4-year, public universities (ACT, 2015). Historically, we have accepted as fact that not everybody was "college material." We now enter an era, however, in which so many of our professions require post-secondary degrees that the student who is not college material finds him or herself left out of many opportunities to contribute and to thrive. Whether we blame this phenomenon on "academic inflation," (Robinson, 2006), "upcredentialing," (Burning Glass, 2014) or "degreeification," (Biffo, 2011) the fact remains that our society demands that we attain higher degrees than what the economy previously endured. An increase in the required educational attainment of eligible applicants without a noticeable or substantiated increase in the duties of the position marks this phenomenon.

The problem before us as educational leaders is to find ways to foster the growth and development of our emerging adults in ways that ensure them against the plummet of sudden rigor in the university setting. The statistic showing that the average college student changes their major three times before completing a degree (ACT, 2013) is troubling. This suggests much time and money wasted on poor orientation and poor decision-making. Post-secondary tuition

investment is one of the largest expenses many people will encounter and we have a

responsibility to conserve those resources and invest in our futures more effectively. While some

may say that a gap year is time wasted away from college, others see this as solid investment to

mitigate the potential that ineffectual personal choices prolong college.

      In this concluding chapter, I discuss the findings of this study on the gap student

experience. I detail both the theoretical and the policy implications of these results and give my

recommendation for further research. I discuss the limitations of this particular study, give my

final reflections on the topic, and conclude with an emphasis on the importance of further work

in this area and the urgency with which educational leaders must move forward.

Empirical Findings

      Through this examination of the gap program experience, students report that the critical

features of their experience were (a) access to unfamiliar environments and activities, (b) the

opportunity to form meaningful relationships and build the skills for such, (c) the opportunity to

be on one's own, and (d) responsibility for their own independence. They report that this

contributed to their personal development in how they were able to define their lifestyle

preferences and their personal and professional passions. They were able to increase their skills

for building relationships with people, and they report that they learned adult skills for

responsibility, resilience, and independence. Further, the study informants report that their access

to gap programs relied on financial supports; the moral encouragement from parents, family,

friends, and other influential people in their lives; and guidance about how to access information

about these programs.

Exploring New Terrain

The four individuals who participated in the face-to-face interview phase of the study detailed the critical features of their experiences through story telling. Three of the individuals reported being natives of the state in which they attended university and tell stories of leaving New England and traveling to Germany, Florida, and what one called, "the Deep South." The fourth individual came from Wisconsin and traveled to Upstate New York, eventually landing in this New England state. All four of them report that this break from familiar environs was critical to their leaving comfort zones and forcing themselves to acclimate to cultures and surroundings that they, in the beginning, found puzzling. These gap programs gave students the opportunity to travel outside of familiar terrain and to focus on this newness. Their local high schools—by definition—could not offer this, and while university offers this new terrain, it cannot do so in isolation of academic work and the other demands of college matriculation.

Forging Relationship Skills

In these unfamiliar surroundings, they found opportunities to connect with people who were cohort participants or with people that they encountered as a means of the work they were doing. They report experiencing conflict, bonding, and team building as they worked with clientele, agency partners, peers, supervisors, teammates, instructors, and in some cases animals. The informants report that these opportunities were pivotal in their experiences because this led to lasting friendships, future career and academic opportunities, the ability to navigate bonds in future relationships, and the ability to resolve conflicts in future interactions.

All individuals report that their skills in relating to people within social systems increased during their gap. Three students told stories of times that they experienced conflict with peers and discussed their thinking and their resolutions. Topics of conflict included intoxicating

substance use, sexuality, division of labor, race, religion, work ethic, and classism. All of the

study informants resolved that these interactions have better prepared them for the adult and

working world. Further, the positive relationship building in these programs led to friendships

and bonds that the students reported as being meaningful and enduring. All four made comments

that they have "life-long" friends from their gap experiences that they feel know them better than

others with whom they have spent more time. They report the gap friendships as being deeper

even if the duration of the friendship has been shorter. These findings suggest that

relationships—and the skills for such—formed in gap programs taught the students the value of

depth rather than breadth in their friendships by recognizing the quality of their bonds over the

duration of their bonds.

Becoming Independent

The features of, and relationships within, the gap experience were pivotal for these

students as they report their greater sense of independence and their increased capacity for

responsibility. Through construction projects, responsibilities for animals, care for the

environment, and duties as leaders, instructors, and coaches, they all report that they mark their

personal development in these programs by being on their own in decision-making, leadership,

and execution. Gap programs design themselves around the concept of sheltered independence

and weaning toward total autonomy. These students found themselves able to engage in

independent work and autonomous decision making with increasingly more responsibility in

organic situations that neither high school nor college was able to offer them.

Defining Interests and Passions

The impact that these features and events had on their personal development came as they

defined their lifestyle preferences and their professional and academic passions, built skills for

relating to and working with people, and made gains in personal responsibility, resilience, and independence. One student portrayed his gap program as reaffirming his career interests, as he knew college was his objective and did not veer away from his degree program of choice. He did report, however, an increase in his relationship building skills and his increased awareness of diversity and conflict resolution. The three other individuals expressed more indecisiveness about their objectives for entering a gap program and were able to define their pathways through the experience. Two of the three reported making changes to their academic objectives after having immersed themselves in their gap learning. As I reported in the statement of the problem, the student retention rates from freshman to sophomore years is low enough to warrant alarm. Students who were able to participate in gap programming were able to sort through preferences in order to make more solid decisions about degree programs. Changing one's mind in a nonacademic gap program poses a less calamitous consequence than a change of major at a tuition collecting, postsecondary school.

Layers of Support

Finally, the support around their access to programs proves important to their stories. While the American gap program industry is rife with high-priced options, all four individuals in the interview phase accessed no cost or publicly funded programs. A private apprenticeship, a public school post-graduate year, AmeriCorps, and the Student Conservation Association were all programs that offered these students the opportunity to participate for little to no expense beyond incidentals and some transportation. In these students' experience, they were able to access learning opportunities that were not only a fraction of the cost of postsecondary school, but even less on the spectrum of gap organizations.

Family, friends, and other influential people such as non-academic instructors, coaches, and acquaintances were important factors influencing the students' access to their gap. All students reported supportive encouragement from parents and two discussed siblings, extended family, and friends as having an impact on their awareness of and confidence for taking the gap. In the case of two students who are athletes, their instructors and coaches were pivotal in their decision-making to experience a gap program in their field, as well. In the experience of the case study individual, her parents expressed concern and puzzlement in the beginning of these discussions, but ultimately their support of the decision were important to the student as she chose her pathway. Conspicuously missing from the data is any mention of an academic instructor or high school guidance counselor having an influence on a student's decision to seek a gap program. The case informant, her father, and her two professors, however, discuss this as area of concern and potential for the future of this topic.

The Gap in Support

All of the interview subjects discussed the paucity of information about gap programs and the underrated opportunities for students to bridge between high school graduation and college. Informational support, it appears, is the most salient opportunity for development borne from this study. All of the students, and the addendum informants of the case, stated that our society focuses on college entrance as being the goalpost of high school completion and that high school offers or recognizes little else as being valid options for young people. Informants talked about not feeling ready for college or the adult world, and addendum case informants echoed this as they affirmed that we ask 18-year-olds to make crucial, life decisions at an age when this is a particularly unfair demand. The information available to young people and their families was

important to this study sample, but all recognize that the information did not come from those

whose jobs purport to prepare students for life after high school.

Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study connect to three main theories that help to illuminate the

results. First, Jeffrey Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood (2000) specifies that that young

people between the ages of 18 and 24 are unique in many ways featuring distinct psychological

and developmental markers. Second, Malcolm Knowles (1975) work around andragogy and the

principles and assumptions that separate this concept from pedagogy holds wisdom for how to

interpret the learning results on the gap exploration. Last, Uri Bronfenbrenner's (1979) work on

the ecology of human development provides the terms and the hypotheses to explain where

Arnett's development theory, Knowles's learning theory, and Bronfenbrenner's environmental

theory come together to show that structured gap programs provide the developmental and

educational environment to align with ephebagogy that frames the education of the emerging

adult. The findings of this study revealed that the emerging adult—to whom gap program

marketing is directed—benefits from a unique educative approach not completely unlike

andragogy, and that the environs and relationships of gap programming contribute to meaningful

development in role and identity.

Arnett's Emerging Adulthood Theory

It is important to distinguish the emerging adult from the other terms used for this group

such as late adolescent, young adult, transitional adult, or simply youth. Emerging adults are

people who are neither children nor adolescents. They are not an adult so it is insufficient to call

them a young adult or a transitional adult. "Youth" is too general a term and other terms referring

to what they will become seem to rob them of a present identity (Arnett, 2004, pp. 17-21). This

study focused on the population of 18-24-year-olds that Arnett calls the emerging adult and

defines this as being a person in an emerging phase of identity exploration, instability, self-focus,

feeling in between, and possibilities. These young people are not typically married or raising

children. They are independent from parental control but not always from parental support.

Many times in the interview process of this study, students talked about the gap program

as being an opportunity or a transitory offering that may or may not be available to them in the

future. In this age of exploration, self-focus, instability, and possibilities, the gap program

opportunities gave them this environment to pursue structured, informal, non-academic,

educative, and developmental achievements. Study participants spoke frequently of their

emerging adulthood as an opportunity and commented on their freedom but referred back to the

concepts of support and sheltered opportunities. This allowed them to try new activities where

missteps and poor decisions were not harmful to their outcomes.

Knowles's Assumptions of Andragogy

These student accounts through the lens of emerging adulthood give evidence that gap

year programming offers an experience of potential value. The programs' features prove critical

to the participants and many of the practices and structures dovetail with the principles—and

later the assumptions of—andragogy. Malcolm Knowles (1975) authored the four principles as

being (a) a need for education that capitalizes on the learners' experiences, (b) involving the

learner in decision-making, planning, and evaluating their work, (c) learning that has relevance

to the student's work and personal interests, and (d) learning that is problem-centered rather than

content-oriented. He later added a fifth: (e) adult learners respond to internal motivators rather

than external. Given the psychology of the emerging adult, the only of the assumptions that is

problematic for this age group is the element of experience.

As the informants said throughout this study, one of the most pivotal features of their gap program was the opportunity to go to new places and see new things. The gap programs gave them experience in ways that sheltered them as they made gains toward greater independence. Gap programs gave them safe places to experience instability before the potential for what Arnett (2000) considers "calamitous consequences" as the stakes become higher in college. Enrollment in expensive colleges certainly raises the stakes. Ephebagogy is the set of principles for learning and this framework is what the gap program provides. This is where students learn through andragogical methods, but the experience is the non-academic, educative element they had not had elsewhere. Participants framed much of their story telling around their experiences rather that identifying outcomes directly. The evidence of their development, however, showed when they spoke of their emotions around those events and how this experiential opportunity gave them something that they were not able to find at high school or university.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecology of Human Development Theory

These aforementioned sheltered systems can be described by what Uri Bronfenbrenner calls the microsystem (1979, p. 22). Every day, students participate in education and engage in what Bronfenbrenner calls "molar activities" (p. 45). He defines these activities as societal norms for ongoing behavior perceived as having meaning by its participants. Both high school attendance and college enrollment satisfy this definition, but we have yet to see gap opportunities become as process-driven as they are event-specific. Bronfenbrenner defines human development as a person's ability to negotiate his or her environments with greater and greater complexity as time passes, and he describes the ecology of human development as the study of the environmental interaction between the developing person and their setting (pp. 21 & 27). Worth noting here, Bronfenbrenner was responsible for the theory and defense of the current,

national Head Start Program through his many hypotheses and a proposition stating that

environment plays a pivotal role in the social identity and personal development of humans. Two

of these hypotheses apply to the gap findings. First, in the microsystem of the gap program, the

emerging adult has the opportunity to develop as evidenced by Bronfenbrenner's fifth hypothesis

that a person learns best by engaging in activity that is demonstrated to them and in relationship

with other people in that system. Second, his ninth hypothesis stresses the importance of role

placement as a means of evoking behavior consistent with expectations for responsibility. The

gap year program gives the emerging adult participant the environment and the roles that foster

the habits and dispositions expected of them when they participate in the macrosystem (p. 26) of

the larger working world.

Placement inside of his and her experiential learning was at the forefront of each

participant's story. Aaron learned a language and about a culture by living among the people.

Michael witnessed poverty and the devastation of natural disaster by participating in the

rebuilding. Tahlia learned about a sporting industry involving animals by earning her learning

and having hands on both the animals and the sport. Finally, Caitlin went into the woods and

through rigorous labor and contact with agency partners learned about the camaraderie and about

the urgency of environmental policy planning. Each of them needed to immerse him or herself in

the work and they needed to do it in a common rhythm with others to recognize their roles and

responsibilities within a greater society.

The gap year concept and industry focus on the student who is 18-24 years old in the

emerging adulthood phase. Arnett shows us the unique features of this group of people and

highlights the psychological features attempting to explain their proclivities, behaviors, and

decisions. Knowles's work with andragogy gives us his principles and assumptions of the adult

learner, which we can use to talk about how we can better educate our emerging adults. Because these students lack the authentic experiences that Knowles says is important to adult learning, the gap year becomes this structured microsystem for these learners between the molar activities of high school and college. Bronfenbrenner tells us that these settings of contact with learning and the roles associated within a system of people are meaningful to human development. The gap program opportunity offers young people the setting, the learning, and the system for them to negotiate their environments with growing complexity as they prepare for the adult and working world. Through this study, I found four young people whose stories show that the emerging adult—in all his and her intricacies—needs a learning environment that the gap program provides in order to take full advantage of the development achieved through authentic environments among people immersed in the work of the world.

Practical Implications

For a discussion on praxis as it relates to the gap program option, it is important to delineate the home culture and values of families, the institutional procedures and norms of private organizations, and the public policy of municipalities and their public schools. For this discussion, I will discuss practice as personal, private, and public. The task in front of educational leaders is to create the urgency and foster the values that start at a foundational, personal level. Shaping this discourse and shaping how to communicate these values is one illustration of how leadership can rise to the occasion. The practical implications of a study on gap programs are that educational leaders must create urgency around a set of values, norms, and policies toward affecting an increasingly wider culture. Ultimately, the values of a community inform policy and this is how leaders will be able to take action at a programmatic level.

The first implication for practice is of home culture and family values. This warrants reflection on our feelings about investments and the return on those investments. If education is an investment in our future—all of our futures and not just that of the student in question—then the implication is that sound school selections will lead us to greater student outcomes and effectually greater societal outcomes. The foundational stakeholders in this effort are the students, parents, and guardians that foster the values and beliefs around education, development, and enrollment decisions. The case informant of this inquiry illustrates the necessity of parent buy-in, encouragement toward exploration, and the repudiation of those naysayers that view a gap as time and money wasted.

The second implication for practice is of private norms and procedures where those organizations operating insularly and with discreet constituents can affect this culture by encouraging, employing, enrolling, and enlisting the gap student adding value to the practice. The private sector of schools, businesses, and discreet organizations is the next in a level of stakeholders as we discuss investments in students and the human resource. Private post-secondary schools, gap year organizations, other agency partners, and receiving institutions are pivotal in both social movements and economic influence. If colleges and universities begin to view the gap year program as a necessary and influential transitional experience, there is a likelihood that this would iterate back to the personal values and forward into the public policy.

Finally, the third implication is where our greatest opportunity lies in our public support and provision of programming. Much like the Scandinavian Folkehøjskole model, policy around financial, moral, and informational support of gap opportunities will increase our responsiveness to student development and our urgency for high quality educational experiences and improved student outcomes. Given that there are many free and publicly funded programs for the

transitional student already, the duty of any public policy would be straightforward, as it would simply need to address the allowances, encouragement, and information necessary for students. Public policy recognizing the need for additional, developmental time for students in emerging adulthood stands to revolutionize both the practice of high school guidance counseling and college advising.

All four interview informants gave details of coaches, parents, siblings, and peers who encouraged them to participate in their gap programs. Absent from their stories is any influence from academic instructors, high school guidance, or educational administration. These findings give reason for caution around how we treat the topic of post-secondary pathways. Educators must bear in mind the implications of our celebratory and exclusionary practices around college entrance and around students who choose gaps or time away. Participation in a structured gap yields positive outcomes for students and suggests that students will experience greater achievement in college after their gap. The implication for educational leadership is that how we treat the subject of varied, post-secondary pathways stands to affect the perceived value we place on the options. Excluding gap programs from conversation, subverting or ignoring data about students taking a gap, and consigning gap participants to a group outside of the college-attending statistic squanders a valuable opportunity on the part of K-12 educators. While a gap does indeed delay entry to college, it may at the same time increase the likelihood for completion of higher education. This challenges 9-12 schools in particular to reconsider how they package and discuss the topic of what can happen for students after high school.

If Caitlin's father is any indication of a trend, parents seem to defend supporting their students who enter a gap under the auspices that youth is fleeting and the young have strong wills. Caitlin's father defends her decisions by telling the naysayers that youth is when you "do

stuff like this." He appears to relegate the discussion to apologies and excuse making. High schools post their senior exit surveys about college acceptance then begrudgingly report to their school committees that one group did not go to college. In their goal setting for new school year, they assert that they will groom more students toward college in hopes of reporting a better statistic next time. The findings of this study do not discount the urgency of college attendance, but they suggest that entrance into gap programs may be an additional statistic by which high schools can measure their diligent efforts to help students make their way into adulthood. The findings of this study show that gap program entrance is still a solid step in a forward direction. The public policy opportunities lie in our choice to fund programs such as these, reconsider college-entrance statistics as being the ultimate in high school accountability rating, and rethink our perspectives on the students who are just not ready for college. Caitlin's story of her circuitous route to college success and graduate school entrance is a case in point—gap programs cultivate something in young people that make them ready for the world in ways that high schools and colleges do not. We have an opportunity to construct our funding, accountability, accreditation, and awareness policies around this knowledge.

Limitation of the Study

This study was set forth to explore the population of former gap year participants at one university in a rural, New England state. While the potential population for the survey was sizable, the response was small making the informant pool a sample of convenience. Case studies are important for their depth and not their breadth, but there is still great potential for a study like this to access a much larger population for more generalizable results.

The students participating in this gap program inquiry were largely homogeneous and the fact that they were all current university students did not allow the inquiry to drill into the

experience of students who did not choose a college pathway after having had a gap year experience. The potential that meaningful results could have come from a study of students that chose the workforce after their program involvement limited this study. Likewise, the fact that informants chose this one university and its degree programs limited this study.

Another of the limitations of this inquiry was in the distinction between a gap period and a structured gap year program. Of the 100 individuals that responded to the initial survey, 45 of them indicated that they took a gap period between high school graduation and college entrance. Only eleven of those 45 indicated that they participated in a structured program, which leaves unanswered questions about what kinds of experiences the other 34 had. They indicated an array of ways in which they spent their time, but this study did not delve into what those experiences looked like or whether we could qualify or quantify those experiences in any sort of accredited way.

A further limitation of this study lies in the group of students who were not even part of the initial recruitment: the students who wanted to take a gap year but did not. The recruitment letter asked for students between the ages of 18 and 24 who took a gap year. The study did not probe the interest in gap programs but one must assume that there is a population for this. This study did not address the issue of students who did not have the financial support, the moral encouragement, or access to information about these options. If we are to begin a discussion and create a sense of urgency around this leadership topic, it will be important to understand why students do not participate in programs that show positive outcomes for student development.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research to replicate these results is worthwhile particularly in the event that the sample increases giving the results greater validity. In order to further the findings of this

inquiry, three relevant expansions hold promise for deeper inquiry. First, a replication of results

in other university settings or throughout a greater array of universities would provide an

opportunity to scan a broader diversity of student. Second, there is potential for discoveries in the

gap experiences of individuals who embarked on less structured journeys having not enrolled in

structured programs. Third, in order to clarify the issues of access to gap programs, there is a

need for research in the areas of why students do not take gap years or participate in gap

programs.

First, a replication of the survey activity among a larger university or a larger system of

universities will prove meaningful. This inquiry was original in its intention to collect student

voices as a means to capture the gap participant experience. Many journal articles, books, and

chapters on this topic deal with the policy, educator, and public sector issues of gap year

programming, but there is very little in the literature that uses students' accounts to discuss the

features and events and how those have affected the students' development. My first

recommendation for further research is a similar approach but with a larger sample of students.

The questionnaire used for the survey phase of this inquiry had the potential to gather data with

statistical significance. The low response, however, simply relegated the questionnaire to a

search tool.

My second recommendation for further research is an exploration of the informal

learning that happens in the gap period for students who do not enroll in structured programs. In

my own experience as an adult and community education director, as well as my experience as a

person who participated in gap-like activities, my curiosity is piqued by the individuals from the

survey who reported that they took a gap period, but did not participate in a structured gap

program. These individuals reported having spent their time in similar activities as those who

went to structured programs, so we must assume that there were critical features and pivotal

events within those as well. As we discuss Prior Learning Assessment departments and their

practices of credentialing out-of-school, learning experiences, there is a rich study potential on

the topic of students who are learning in informal environments before enrolling in post-

secondary education.

My third recommendation for further research is an inquiry into those values and beliefs

from the student perspective, the influential people's perspectives, or both. The students who

were interested in the gap opportunity but did not participate in the either the gap period or the

structured program, will have information about the reasons for why a student may not choose

this pathway. This study addressed the issues of financial access, access to moral encouragement,

as well as the access to information leading to awareness of programming. One must assume that

there is a population of student that was, or would have been, interested in a gap period or

program but that one or more of the aforementioned reasons led to their decision to enroll

directly in college. The informant for this inquiry's case experienced an event in her decision-

making process of nonsupport from acquaintances, which leads me to believe that there is rich

opportunity for an exploration of values and beliefs around taking a gap.

Final Reflections

While conducting this study on the emerging adult in gap programs, I have learned

important elements of the gap experience. My informants taught me that the non-academic

opportunities available to young people possess a wealth of potential for participants and, to my

delight, I have learned that students can find many of these opportunities for free or at low costs.

The most important discovery of this study, however, has been in the findings suggesting that

guidance and advising practices are woefully inadequate for helping students and their families

consider the reasons for the structured gap options and navigating the many program options. This study has both validated and refuted my propositions in three predominant areas. First, all of my informants validated that programs had positive impact on the students' development. Second, gap programming is available to all students refuting my assumption that gap programming participation necessitates some degree of affluence. Third, there is a distinct possibility that hesitation to participate in gap programs does not come from my proposition around ignorance of the programs' value and return on investment, but from a paucity of information about the programs' very nature and availability.

As I concluded my final remarks for this thesis, I found myself having lunch with a Swedish father of three while visiting Tanzania. He spoke of how each has made his or her way into adulthood. His youngest, he said, faced uncertainty about her future and bandied ideas that included not attending college right away. Roger, my Swedish lunch mate, said to me, "Then do you know what she said to me? Have you ever heard of this *thing* called a 'gap year'?" I assured Roger that I was familiar with the topic and with his lip crinkled in disdain he said, "Well, all I could picture was my little girl in Thailand surrounded by drug dealers!" Clearly, my new friend had been watching such films as *Midnight Express* and *Brokedown Palace* and I reserved my comments while he concluded that his daughter studied art history in California for a short time before returning to Sweden to become a veterinarian.

The enduring message of a study on the gap program opportunities for young people is that non-academic time away from familiar environs is a valuable and robustly educative time for the emerging adult. Hesitation around the practice of this time away seems clouded with fears of losing precious time, worry of precarious foreign situations, distrust that non-academic time holds promise for development, and uncertainty of how others will perceive the student and their

families if the student does not go directly to college. In May of 2015, the newly minted

American Gap Association (AGA) launched its first national conference in Baltimore listing

breakout sessions in overseas security, the gap year/college credit relationship, emerging

adulthood, and growing the field of gap through awareness strategies. Posting successful

outcomes by their own account, the AGA has slated their second, annual conference for May

2016 in Boston. Much as NEASC codifies the standards of our schools and colleges, AGA

promises to do this for the gap industry. Support around this effort will be the new horizon for

education as the AGA works its way into our regulatory language.

Chapter Summary

An inquiry into the practice of taking a gap is an opportunity for the community to

explore the features and events of the gap program, the personal development that happens in a

gap, and the factors and conditions of a student's access to the gap. The current expectation for

school achievement is to graduate from high school directly entering post-secondary education.

The population that is taking a break from academics for other developmental opportunities is

doing so with noticeable success. This inquiry of the gap program experience from the student

perspective has shown that the features of gap programs have positive impact on student

development and that the access to these experiences is an area for educational leaders to

develop further. The implications for personal values, private norms, and public policy around

educational practices means that we must foster this sense of urgency to ensure that the

investments we make in students garner returns that will sustain us. With so many educational

opportunities—both formal and informal—already among us, we do not have to start at the

bottom. We only have to fill the gaps.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Lesley University IRB Approval Letter

29 Everett Street

Cambridge, MA 02138

Tel 617 349 8234

Fax 617 349 8190

irb@lesley.edu

Institutional Review Board

DATE: 12/3/14

To: Sara Flowers

From: Robyn Cruz and Terrence Keeney, Co-chairs, Lesley IRB

RE: IRB Number: 14-028

The application for the research project, "Perceptions of Gap Program Students Concerning Personal Development During Gap Year" provides a detailed description of the recruitment of participants, the method of the proposed research, the protection of participants' identities and the confidentiality of the data collected. The consent form is sufficient to ensure voluntary participation in the study and contains the appropriate contact information for the researcher and the IRB.

This application is approved for one calendar from the date of approval.

You may conduct this project.

Date of approval of application: 12/3/14

Appendix B: Research Site University IRB Approval Letter

Protocol HRPP # 112514-08

TO: Sara Flowers
FROM: Rose Cox
DATE: December 10, 2014
RE: Perceptions of Gap Program Students Concerning Personal Development During Gap Year

Notice of Evaluation- Not Engaged

The Office of Research Integrity and Outreach (ORIO) has evaluated the information provided in your inquiry regarding the recruitment of University of Northern State (USM) community members. Based on the information you have provided it has been determined that USM is **not engaged** in the research project. Our understanding is that you intend to use surveys, interviews, and case studies to learn how students perceive their experiences and expectations of structured gap year programs. If this is not accurate, please contact us immediately.

An institution is considered *engaged* in a particular non-exempt human subjects research project when its employees or agents for the purposes of the research project obtain: (1) data about the subjects of the research through intervention or interaction with them; (2) identifiable private information about the subjects of the research; or (3) the informed consent of human subjects for the research as described in Office of Human Research Protections Guidance on Engagement of Institutions in Human Subject Research. USM is not engaged in this research study and therefore no further determination or review is required.

Recruitment of USM community members may occur through the following outlets on USM property:
1. Flyers and posters on any USM campus in compliance with USM policies regarding advertisements from outside organizations,
2. Advertisement in the USM newspaper,
3. Request directory information from the USM Registrar, such as e-mail addresses, unless an individual student has taken formal action to restrict its release, and/or
4. Request a USM faculty or staff member forward an email recruitment letter to other USM community members on behalf of the external principal investigator.

The ORIO and the USM Institutional Review Board (IRB) appreciate your efforts to conduct research in compliance with federal regulations that have been established to protect human subjects in research. Please consult with the ORIO whenever questions arise about whether planned changes to the project might qualify USM as engaged in the research project. If you have any questions please feel free to contact us at 207-780-4517 or by email at USMorio@USM.state.edu.

Date of Determination: December 10, 2014

Sincerely, Rose A. Cox
Legal Intern
Office of Research Integrity and Outreach University of Southern Maine

Appendix C: Letter Requesting Entry

Dear Ms. Casey Webster;

I am a student of Lesley University's Ph.D. program for Educational Leadership. I am also alum of the University of Northern State. I was awarded my B.A., M.S., and C.A.S. from your institution. It feels natural that this relationship should come full circle.

At this stage of my program, I am looking for a higher education site at which I may research my topic with the working title, "Perceptions of Gap Program Students Concerning Personal Development During Gap Year."

The problem with which we are faced is high first year attrition, a low statistic of persistence to degree, and a seemingly high population of young people who do not know what they really want yet. The purpose of my study will be to learn about gap year programs, how students experienced those, whether they felt they contributed to their personal development, and whether those programs met their expectations.

The significance of a study like this has the potential to be broad. Our students and their families will benefit from these findings. Higher education institutions and employers will benefit from students who are committed to, and excited about their careers. I believe this step is part of making that a reality for all of our students. I also believe the findings will be valuable to the local and state discussions about how we are organizing our public high schools.

I would like to have access to the USM undergraduate population of students between the ages of 18 and 24 in order to find the students who experienced structured gap year programming. From those results, I would like the opportunity to conduct an interview with 10 to 15 students in order to get robust descriptions of the opportunities. Finally, I would like to do a case study on one to three individuals in regards to their individual experience.

This is important work and I am eager to discuss a relationship with the university in order to begin this exploration.

Yours in Education,

Sara M. Flowers

Appendix D: Letter Inviting Participation

Dear Undergraduate Student/Participant;

You are the expert when it comes to the true student experience! Because you are the expert, I need your help.

I am a student at Lesley University in Cambridge, MA. Like you, I was an undergraduate student at the University of Northern State so I know what an enthusiastic, active, and driven group of people you are.

I am working on my Ph.D. here at Lesley trying to learn more about post-graduate, gap year programs and how those kinds of programs help young people to develop and feel ready for college, careers, and adult life in general.

If you are an undergraduate student between the ages of 18 and 24, I would like to invite you to take a survey about that experience. I would also like to have some students speak to me a little more directly about their experiences in an interview. From there my plan is to pick a few students would like to spend more time with me digging deeper into what that program was all about, how it helped you develop as a person, and whether your program met your expectations of a gap year experience.

Because I know your time is valuable and you are enrolled in classes, playing sports, and doing all the fun things that college offers, I would like to offer participants the opportunity to enter a drawing for ten chances at a $10 Visa gift card. At the end of the survey there will be a place for you to indicate whether you would like to be entered and how to get a hold of you if you are drawn.

I am eager to learn more about these gap year programs and how you experienced them. Hearing your voice is the only way to truly capture how you think and feel about your gap year adventures. If you would like more information about the study, the purpose, the significance, and the consent to participate you may visit http://www.pg-gapyear.weebly.com or use your smart device to scan the QR code. I hope to hear from you!

Yours in Education,

Sara M. Flowers

Appendix E: Campus Newspaper Advertisement

Appendix F: Portal Website for Study Participation
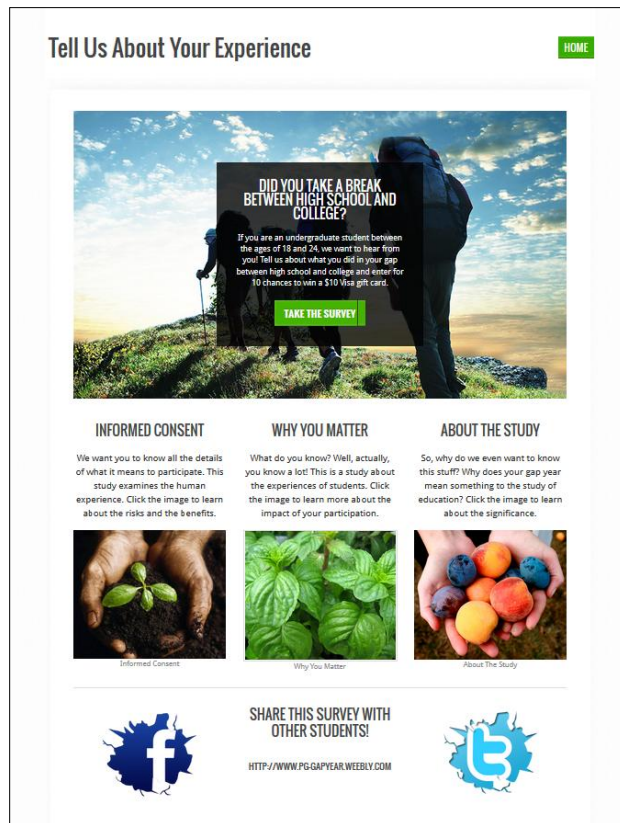
F.1. Full Website
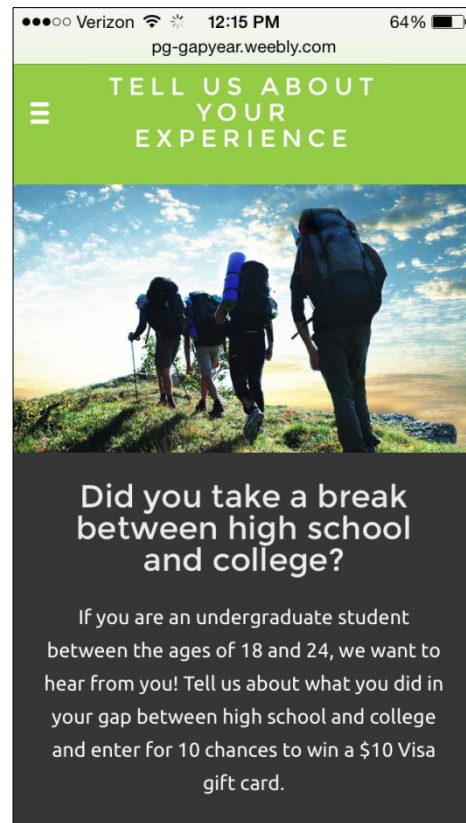
F.2. Mobile Website
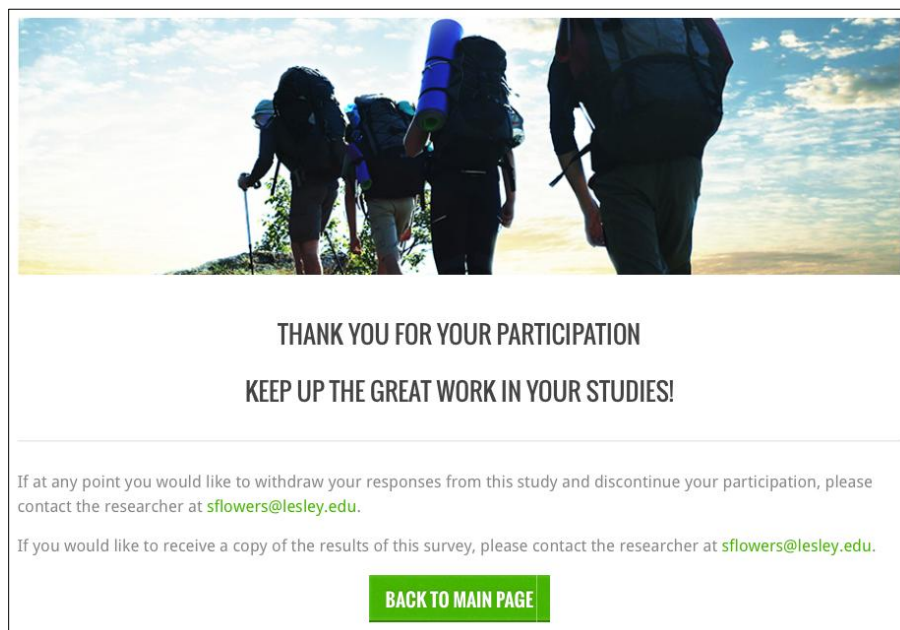
F.3. Completion Landing Page

Appendix G: Informed Consent Form

Title: Perceptions of Gap Program Students Concerning Personal Development During Gap Year

Investigator: Sara M. Flowers, Graduate Student for Ph.D. in Educational Leadership

Dissertation Committee:
Paul A. Naso (pnaso@lesley.edu), Senior Advisor
John Ciesluk (jciesluk@lesley.edu), Lesley Committee Member
Colin P. Amundsen (amundsencp@gmail.com), Non Lesley Committee Member

Lesley University IRB Co-chairs:
Robyn Cruz (rcruz@lesley.edu), Lesley IRB Co-Chair
Terry Keeney (tkeeney@lesley.edu), Lesley IRB Co-Chair

University of Southern Maine IRB:
Casey Webster (cwebster@usm.maine.edu), Human Protections Administrator

Description:
This study will investigate

1.) What do students report were the critical features and pivotal events of their experiences in gap year programs?

2.) What evidence do students report about the impact that their experiences and expectations of post-graduate, gap year programs had on their personal development?

3.) What were the factors and conditions of the students' access to gap year programs?

Undergraduate students between the ages of 18 and 24 years of age are invited to respond to a survey about their experiences during a gap between high school graduation and college enrollment.

From this population, some students will be selected to participate in an interview about their gap year experiences. This interview will be in the form of a face-to-face interaction.

Based on the themes of the collective experiences, one to three individuals will be asked to participate in a case study. This will involve in-depth discussions, artifacts of the experience, interviews with people who are familiar with the informant's experiences in the gap year program, and possibly a review of documents as they pertain to the gap year experience.

Risks and Benefits:
There are no perceived risks of participation in this study. The benefits include contributing to the knowledge base of the gains and drawbacks of student participation in gap year experiences before enrolling in higher education institutions.

Voluntary Participation:
Your participation in the research is completely voluntary. There are no payments or college credits for participating.

Confidentiality:
Results from the survey will be reported as aggregate data. Interview and case study participants will be assigned a pseudonym that will be used to represent your name and the program in which you participated. All information will be recorded anonymously. Only the investigator will know your name, but will not divulge it or identify your answers to anyone. All information will be held in the strictest confidence.

Right to Withdraw:
You are free to refuse to participate in the research and to withdraw from this study at any time. Your decision to withdraw will bring no negative consequences - no penalty to you. If you wish to withdraw from this study, please contact the investigator at sflowers@lesley.edu.

Audio Recording:
In order to capture responses from participants accurately and completely, the investigator may ask to audio record face-to-face interviews or telephone conversations. The investigator will make no audio recording without your knowledge and consent.

Informed Consent:

I

_____,
(Please print name)

have read the description including the purpose of the study, the procedures to be used, the potential risks, the confidentiality, as well as the option to withdraw from the study at any time. Each of these items has been explained to be by the investigator. The investigator has answered all of my questions regarding the study, and I believe I understand what is involved. My signature below indicates that I freely agree to participate in this study and that I have received a copy of this agreement from the investigator.

I agree and wish to continue.

_____   _____
(Signature)   (Date)

Copy of Results:
If you would like to receive a copy of the results of this study, please contact the investigator at sflowers@lesley.edu.

Appendix H: Survey Questionnaire

Informed Consent Statements

○ I agree and wish to continue.

○ I disagree and would like to exit.

First Delimitation Factor

Are you an undergraduate student at the University of Northern State? (Includes Portland, Gorham, and Lewiston campuses)

○ Yes

○ No

Second Delimitation Factor

Did you take a break between high school graduation and your first semester at university?

○ Yes

○ No

Third Delimitation Factor

How old are you?

○ 18

○ 19

○ 20

○ 21

○ 22

○ 23

○ 24

○ My age is not listed

Gap Year Program Information

How long was your gap period?

○ Less than 1 year (<1)

○ One to two years (1-2)

○ Two to three years (2-3)

○ More than three years (3+)

What did you do in your gap period? (Select all that apply)

☐ Work

☐ Travel

☐ Academic study

☐ Homemaking

☐ Leisure

☐ Athletics

☐ Other ▢

A structured gap year program is a program that is created and offered by some kind of organization or institution. These structured programs can be anything from organized excursions, academic preparation programs, faith and religious studies, athletic team membership, internships/apprenticeships, foreign travel programs, to project-based volunteerism. These can be programs offered by your own school district, your place of worship, a service organization, a gap year company, a pre-college program, etc.

Did you participate in a structured gap year program?

○ Yes

○ No

How would you characterize your gap experience? (Select all that apply)

☐ Travel Abroad/Cultural Immersion

☐ Social Justice/Service/Volunteerism

☐ Art/Music/Aesthetics

☐ Environmentalism/Sustainability

☐ Sports/Athletics

☐ Outdoors/Conservation

☐ Academic/College Preparation

☐ Vocational/Internship/Apprenticeship

☐ Faith/Religion/Spirituality

☐ Other ▢

What was the name of your gap experience program?

▢

What was the duration of your gap year program?

○ Less than six months (< 6 mo.)

○ Six months (6 mo.)

○ More than six months but less than one year (6 mo. - 1 yr.)

○ One year (1 yr.)

○ More than one year (> 1 yr.)

Sometimes, gap year programs advertise that they may be worth college credits for their participants. Was your gap year program something for which you could receive college credit(s)?

○ Yes

○ No

○ I don't know

Did you, or will you, use any of your gap year experiences for credit toward your university degree program?

○ Yes

○ Maybe

○ No

○ I don't know

Contextualizing Access: Funding

How was your gap year experience paid for? (select all that apply)

☐ My gap experience was free.

☐ My parents/guardians paid for my gap experience.

☐ I paid for my gap experience.

☐ I received a scholarship to do my gap experience.

☐ My gap experience was publicly funded (i.e. city/town, state, federal).

☐ I am a member of an organization that offered the experience (i.e. faith, club, brethren, etc.).

How much did your gap year experience cost?

○ It was a free program

○ Less than $1,000

○ $1,000-$5,000

○ $5,000-$10,000

○ $10,000-$20,000

○ More than $20,000

○ I don't know

Contextualizing Access: Supportive Structures

What experiences and/or beliefs led you to feel that a gap year program experience was the right choice for you?

What were the factors that made you select the specific gap year program that you did?

Were there any people in your life that influenced your decisions to seek and select a gap year program experience?

The Critical Incident Questionnaire (Brookfield, 1996)

What about your gap year program experience did you find most engaging?

What about your gap year program experience did you find most distancing?

What about your gap year program experience did you find most helpful?

What about your gap year program experience did you find most confusing?

What about your gap year program experience did you find surprising?

Demographics

I am a:
- ○ Female
- ○ Male
- ○ Prefer not to answer

What is your current Grade Point Average (GPA)?
- ○ I don't have one yet. This is my first semester.
- ○ 3.00 or higher
- ○ 2.00-2.99
- ○ Below 2.00
- ○ I don't know this.

Solicitation for Interview

Would you be willing to be interviewed about your gap year program experiences?
- ○ Yes
- ○ No

Excellent! How can I get in touch with you? If you're on Facebook or Skype, and prefer to be contacted there, let me know in "other contact."

Name: _____
Phone Number: _____
Email Address: _____
Other contact? Please give detail: _____

Enter the Drawing

Thank you for your participation!

To show our appreciation, would you like to be entered for a chance to win a $10 Visa gift card?

○ Yes
○ No

Great! Unfortunately, we have to ask for identifying information in order to contact you if you are drawn. Please know, however, your responses to the survey will remain confidential and your contact information will be discarded after the drawings have been awarded.

How can we get in touch with you if you are drawn?

Name: _____
Email: _____
Cell #: _____

Appendix I: Folkehøjskole Data Sources

Page/Publication	URL
Denmark (main)	http://www.danishfolkhighschools.com
Finland (main)	http://www.kansanopistot.fi
Norway (main)	http://www.folkehogskole.no
Sweden (main)	http://www.folkhogskola.nu
Scandinavian Seminar	http://www.scandinavianseminar.org
"The Danish Folkehøjskole" (Denmark)	http://danishfolkhighschools.com/media/812419/the-danish-folkeh_jskole-web.pdf
"What is Folk?" (Norway)	http://www.folkehogskole.no/hva-er-folkehogskole
"Folk High School - Eligibility Higher Education 2014" (Sweden)	http://www.folkhogskola.nu/contentassets/661975767efe479bbb6e15db46a83ed8/1/folk-high-school---eligibility-higher-education-2014.pdf
"Factsheets on the Folk High School" (Sweden)	http://www.folkhogskola.nu/contentassets/661975767efe479bbb6e15db46a83ed8/faktablad-pa-andra-sprak/folkhogskola_eng_engelska.pdf
"Folk High School: What is it?"	http://www.scandinavianseminar.org/index.php?id=95

Appendix J: Folk Education Association of America Programs

FEAA Member Organization	Location
Adirondack Folk School	Lake Luzerne, New York
Alaska Folk School	Talkeetna, Alaska
CedarRoot Folk School	Nordland, Washington
Crowley Folk School	Sarasota, Florida
Danebod Folk School	Tyler, Minnesota
Driftless Folk School	La Farge, Wisconsin
Folk School, The	Fairbanks, Alaska
Living Arts School, The	Boulder, Colorado
Michigan Folk School, The	Ann Arbor/Traverse City, Michigan
Pleasant Valley	Decorah, Iowa

Appendix K: Gap Year Organizations Sample

GAP Year Organization Name	Focus Area
Adventures Cross-Country (ARCC)	Travel Abroad
AFS Intercultural Programs USA	Travel Abroad
Amigos de las Americas	Social Justice Service
Art History Abroad	Aesthetics
Aspire by API	Travel Abroad
Carpe Diem Education	Travel Abroad
Council on International Education Exchange (CIEE)	Travel Abroad
Dynamy Internship Year	Multiple Venture
Eastman School of Music: University of Rochester	Aesthetics
L'Ecole Internationale d'Etude de la Terre	Environmentalism
Education First: International Language Centers	Foreign Language
Experiment in International Living, The	Travel Abroad
First Abroad	Counseling/Information
Hebrew University of Jerusalem, The: Rothberg International School	Travel Abroad
Interim Programs, Center for	Counseling/Information
ISA Gap Year	Travel Abroad
Leap, The	Travel Abroad
Maximo Nivel	Social Justice Service
Minds Abroad	Travel Abroad
National Outdoor Leadership Schools (NOLS)	Outdoor/Stewardship
Next Step China	Travel Abroad
Outward Bound	Outdoor/Stewardship
Oxford Edge, The	Academic Prep
Projects Abroad	Travel Abroad
Rustic Pathways	Outdoor/Stewardship
Safe Passage/Camino Seguro	Social Justice Service
Sea|mester	Outdoor/Stewardship
Summit Adventure	Outdoor/Stewardship
Taking Off	Counseling/Information
Thinking Beyond Borders	Travel Abroad
Vermont Tech: Institute for Applied Agriculture and Food Systems	Sustainability
Vermont Youth Conservation Corps	Sustainability
Volunquest	Social Justice Service
Where There Be Dragons	Travel Abroad
Yanapuma	Social Justice Service
Youth for Understanding	Social Justice Service

Appendix L: Alignment of Guiding Research Questions to Survey Questions

	GQ 1: What do students report were the critical features and pivotal events of their experiences in gap year programs?	GQ 2: What evidence do students report about the impact that their experiences and expectations of post-graduate, gap year programs had on their personal development?	GQ 3: What were the factors and conditions of the students' access to gap year programs?
SQ 01: Statement of Agreement/Disagreement			
SQ 02: Are you an undergraduate student at the University of Northern State? (includes Portland, Gorham, and Lewiston campuses)			
SQ 03: Did you take a break between high school graduation and your first semester at university?			
SQ 04: How old are you?			
SQ 05: How long was your gap period?			
SQ 06: What did you do in your gap period?			
SQ 07: Did you participate in a **structured** gap year program?			
SQ 08: How would you characterize your gap experience?	X		
SQ 09: What was the name of your gap experience program?	X		
SQ 10: What was the duration of your gap year program?	X		
SQ 11: Was your gap year program something for which you could receive college credit(s)?	X	X	X
SQ 12: Did you, or will you, use any of your gap year experiences for credit toward your university degree program?	X	X	X
SQ 13: How was your gap year experience paid for?			X
SQ 14: How much did your gap year experience cost?			X
SQ 15: What experiences and/or beliefs led you to feel that a gap year program experience was the right choice for you?			X
SQ 16: What were the factors that made you select the specific gap year program that you did?			X
SQ 17: Were there any people in your life that influenced your decisions to seek and select a gap year program experience?			X
SQ 18: Reflecting on your experience, what happened during your gap year program that you found most engaging?	X	X	
SQ 19: Reflecting on your experience, what happened during your gap year program that you found most disengaging?	X	X	
SQ 20: Reflecting on your experience, what happened during your gap year program that you found most helpful?	X	X	
SQ 21: Reflecting on your experience, what happened during your gap year program that you found most confusing?	X	X	
SQ 22: Reflecting on your experience, what happened during your gap year program that you found most surprising?	X	X	
SQ 23: I am a: female/male/no answer			
SQ 24: What is your current Grade Point Average (GPA)?			
SQ 25: Would you be willing to be interviewed about your gap year program experiences?			
SQ 26: How can I get in touch with you?			
SQ 27: Would you like to be entered for a chance to win a $10 Visa gift card?			
SQ 28: How can we get in touch with you if you are drawn?			

Appendix M: Interview Protocol

1. (Grand Tour: Specific[10]) Can you tell me about the gap year program that you took before you entered university? What was the name of the organization? How long were you a part of it? What did you understand the main objective of the program to be?

2. <u>Prior to taking a gap</u>

    2.1. (Grand Tour: Specific) Tell me about your experience as a high school student. How did you feel about school in general?

    2.2. (Example) Was there something that happened or something that you learned about that prompted you to think about a gap year program?

    2.3. (Included Terms) You said that ___ and ___were important influences for you to choose a gap year program. Were there any other factors in your life that had an impact on your feelings about university and whether you should take a gap or not?

    2.4. (Included Terms) You said in your survey responses that you spoke to _____ about your decision to take a gap year. Were there any others?

    2.5. (Native Language) When you were talking to _____about your decision to do a gap year program, what did that conversation sound like?

3. <u>In the beginning of the gap</u>

    3.1. (Experience) You said in your survey responses that ____ was a motivating prospect for you to take a gap program. Can you tell me more about that?

    3.2. (Experience) Was there anything that surprised you once you got there?

    3.3. (Experience) What didn't surprise you at all?

4. <u>In the middle of the gap</u>

    4.1. (Included Terms) You said that in the beginning you expected ____ and ___. Was there a time during your gap year program that you adjusted those expectations?

    4.2. (Example) Can you give me an example of something that happened during your program that perhaps challenged your beliefs or presented an unfamiliar situation?

5. <u>At the end of the gap</u>

    5.1. (Native Language) When you have/had conversations about the experience with people who were in your gap program, what do/did those conversations sound like?

    5.2. (Dyadic) Do you notice a difference between you and other people your age that did not take a gap before beginning university?

---

[10] Question types refer to the work of James Spradley in his 1979 work *The Ethnographic Interview*

6. <u>After taking a gap</u>

    6.1. (Theme 01) Exploring new experiences "Exploring the Unfamiliar"

        6.1.1.(Example) Can you give me an example of something that you have experienced recently that your gap program has prepared you to handle?

        6.1.2.(Experience) Did you experience anything new in your gap program that defines your goals today?

        6.1.3.(Directed Contrast) How is being a learner in university similar to being a learner in a gap year program? How is it different?

    6.2. (Theme 02) Building relationship skills "Building Relationships"

        6.2.1.(Example) Can you give me an example of how your skills with people have been affected by your gap experience?

        6.2.2.(Experience) Do you have any people with whom you have stayed in touch that you met while in your gap program? [Is there a reason why or why not?]

        6.2.3.(Directed Contrast) How has building relationships in university been like building relationships in your gap program? How has it been different?

    6.3. (Theme 03) Redefining preferences "Redefining Preferences"

        6.3.1.(Experience) In your gap experience, what ended up being most important to you?

        6.3.2.(Experience) What are the biggest differences that having a gap year program have made for you?

    6.4. (Theme 04) Sheltered practice in independent living skills "Sheltered Independence"

        6.4.1.(Example) Can you give me an example of a time during your gap program that you felt like you were truly independent? [Is there a reason why or why not?]

        6.4.2.(Directed Contrast) How was your gap program similar to high school in preparing you for life after high school? How was it different?

        6.4.3.(Directed Contrast) How has your level of independence at university been like the independence you felt during your gap program? How has it been different?

    6.5. (Native Language) If you were to have a conversation with a student that was interested in the same gap program experience that you had, what would that sound like?

    6.6. (Card Sorting(Appendix A)) Given these statements (Appendix B), what do you see being the categories that these fit into? Are there any statements you feel are missing? Are there statements that you would leave out? What would you title those categories?

    6.7. Are you intending to use any of your gap year experiences to earn college credit toward your degree?

Appendix N: Card-Sorting Chips

Trying new activities *"I gained a love for ___ which was something I had never done before"*	**Changing your mind** *"I ended up not pursuing my passion as a career choice"*	**Meeting new people** *"Meeting new people from all over the world [was engaging]"*	**Trying activities without pressure** *"There was no pressure for me to succeed"*
Seeing different places *"I didn't want to end up stuck in my hometown forever"*	**Realizing something about yourself** *"I learned a lot about myself"*	**Learning how to compromise** *"Some of the clients were rude. It certainly built character"*	**Avoiding expensive consequences** *"I learned it was very difficult to make ends meet in this sport"*
Experiencing unfamiliar situations *"I struggled with politics and not understanding how Europe differs from the U.S"*	**Discovering a new passion** *"I discovered my passion for ___"*	**Understanding others' perspectives** *"I had hard time with one of their customs. It was awkward for me at first"*	**Having the freedom to try** *"It was truly a once in a lifetime experience"*
Learning about a different culture *"Being immersed in a different culture [was engaging]"*	**Adjusting your goals and plans** *"I learned that my passion wasn't going to pay the bills"*	**Making lasting friends** *"I made some lifelong friends and had a great time"*	**Feeling safe to make mistakes** *"They understood [me] and let me ease into learning"*
Intentionally blank for fill-ins	**Intentionally blank for fill-ins**	**Intentionally blank for fill-ins**	**Intentionally blank for fill-ins**

Appendix O: Verbatim Script of Instructions for Card-Sorting Activity

"For this activity, I would like to know what are the most important features and critical elements of a gap year program experience.

On these cards, I have printed a series of statements. The italicized quotes are statements that I took directly from the survey responses. You may recognize that some of these statements are your own, but they are a selection from all participants. The underlined labels are my attempt to encapsulate themes that I saw in students' answers.

As you read those, I would like you to pick out statements that are true for you and your gap year experience. If you see any statements that you believe do not pertain to you, you may place them to the side. There are also some blank cards and pens if you feel there are any statements missing from this activity.

Do you have any questions about this activity? [Answer questions that arise]

I am not going to speak while you do this activity unless you need me to clarify any of the statements. You may begin when you are ready.

 [Give participant time to read, eliminate, and add cards]

Now that you have a selection of statements, can you group them according to similarities you see in the statements? Do you see any categories emerging?

[Give participant time to consider the statements and create categories]

What label would you give to each of the categories that you created?

[Record labels]

[If participant eliminated cards] If you had to put these statements back into the group, into which category would you place them?"

[Capture photo of the categories and placements]

Appendix P: IRB Addendum Memorandum

To: Institutional Review Board, Lesley University
From: Sara Flowers, PhD Candidate Educational Studies
Re: Addendum to IRB application
Date: 05-19-2015

While in the process of conducting the research project tentatively titled, "Perceptions of Gap Program Students Concerning Personal Development During Gap Year," (IRB Number 14-025, approval date 12/03/2014) it has become necessary to request an amendment to the application.

In the case phase of the study, I propose to include data from people other than the informant in order to answer the guiding research questions. These people may include the informant's parent(s), professor/mentors at the university, the site supervisor of the informant's gap year experience, and other gap participants from the informant's gap program.

I have attached the informed consent form for the case phase to this memo. Additionally, I have attached the proposed "Consent to Contact" page in order for the informant to indicate the sources she wishes to include.
The questions directed toward these additional individuals will follow the guiding research questions to discover:

1.) The critical features and pivotal events of experiences in gap year programs as it pertains to their knowledge of the informant's experience from the addendum informants' perspectives;
2.) The impact that those experiences and expectations of post-graduate, gap year programs had on the informant's personal development as it pertains to their knowledge of the informant's experience from the addendum informants' perspectives; and
3.) The factors and conditions of the students' access to gap year programs as it pertains to their knowledge of the informant's experience from the addendum informants' perspectives;.

The only data that I intend to gather from these addendum informants will be narrative information gathered via face-to-face conversation, telephone conversation, and/or email exchange. I intend to gather any other potential data format from the primary informant directly and solely.

Appendix Q: Case Study Consent to Contact

In the case phase of this study, it is important to explore multiple sources of information in order to construct a complete picture of the participant's gap year experience. Based on a close read of the interview transcript, there are 12 potential areas for further exploration.

In order to proceed with full, informed consent from the participant, please indicate the sources that you permit the research to contact:

1. Statement from the Student Conservation Association (SCA) public relations (public domain)
2. ____ Perspectives from the informant's parents
3. ____ Account from the informant's SCA supervisor
4. ____ Verification from SCA cohort participants
5. ____ Recommendation from university professors/mentors on informants' capabilities
6. University Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) policy and documents (public domain)
7. ____ A transcript of the informant's PLA award of credits*
8. ____ Artifacts from the informant's high school experience
9. ____ Evidence of the partnerships the informant forged with industry partners
10. ____ Training certificates from skills attained during the gap program
11. ____ Multimodal [material, photo, video, media, etc.] evidence of completed SCA projects
12. ____ Environmental science course labs written by the informant.

Contacts:

Name	Title/Role	Phone Number	Email Address	# from above
1.)				
2.)				
3.)				
4.)				
5.)				
6.)				
7.)				
8.)				
9.)				
10.)				
11.)				
12.)				

_____   _____
Signature of Research Participant   Date

*unofficial copy delivered by student

Appendix R: Interview Questions for SCA VP of Communications

1.) What are the overarching objectives that SCA intends for its participants?

2.) Does the SCA have articulated agreements with any colleges, universities, or accrediting entities?

3.) Does SCA compile data about what participants do after the program?

4.) Would I be able to get the data about the percentage of your alumni that attend college?

5.) What are some of the nationally recognized certifications that SCA participants come away with?

6.) To whom do you market the SCA program?

7.) Do you notice a certain pattern in your participants (Follow-up: Do you have any explanation for the diversity or lack thereof?)

8.) Is there anything that you might like to see high school guidance councilors do differently with regard to pathways for after high school and the options those students have?

Appendix S: Interview Questions for Informant's Parent

1.) As Caitlin was a younger student, what were your expectations around college attendance?

2.) What were your thoughts and feelings when Caitlin told you that she wanted to enter the SCA program rather than attend college?

3.) Has Caitlin's experience in the SCA program had impact on your feelings about college attendance?

4.) What differences do you think it has made in Caitlin since she has participated in the SCA gap year program?

5.) If you were to have a conversation with another parent whose child was considering a gap year program instead of college, what would that sound like?

Appendix T: Interview Questions for Informant's Professor(s)/Advisor

1.) What are some of the qualities that you see in Caitlin that prompted you to enlist her help on special projects? Can you briefly describe the nature of these special projects?

2.) Do you notice any qualities that Caitlin has that distinguish her from other students and that you attribute to her gap year experience?

3.) As a university-level instructor, what are your thoughts about high school guidance practices toward colleges, careers, or gaps?

4.) Based on your experience with Caitlin, are there any university policies, beliefs, or practices pertaining to students who take a gap year that you feel are needed or that need to be changed?

5.) If you were to give Caitlin a recommendation to a future educational or employment opportunity, what comments on her abilities would that recommendation include?

Appendix U: Sample Terminology for Coding "Learning" and "Development"

		to learn (v.)		
absorb	discern	get	make certain	soak up
accept	discover	get the hang of	make sense of	spark
acquire	distinguish	get the idea	make sure	spot
appreciate	establish	get the message	master	strike
ascertain	excavate	get the picture	notice	stumble on
assimilate	exhibit	get the point	observe	substantiate
be aware	exhume	glean	perceive	sympathize
be conscious of	explain	grasp	pick up (on)	take (in)
come upon	explore	happen upon	possess	take meaning
comprehend	expose	have knowledge of	prove	take up
conceive	extract	hear	read	tell
conclude	fathom	hit upon	realize	think of
confirm	feel	identify (with)	recognize	turn up
corroborate	figure (out)	incorporate	register	uncover
cull	find (out)	ingest	reveal	understand
delve	follow	interpret	root	unearth
detect	formulate	intuit	see	uproot
determine	gain	know	seize	validate
devise	garner	learn	sense	verify
digest	gather	locate	settle	work out

		to develop (v.)		
accomplish	discipline	function	nurture	strike gold
achieve	educate	gain	pan out	strike it rich
add to	elevate	grow (up)	persevere	succeed
advance	enforce	heighten	persist	support
amplify	enhance	improve	prefer	swell
appreciate	enlarge	increase	progress	take effect
augment	evolve	intensify	promote	take steps
beef up	execute	magnify	prosper	take up
bloom	expand	make progress	provide for	teach
boom	feed	maneuver	pursue	thrive
boost	flourish	mature	respond	undertake
consummate	flower	move up	rise in value	upgrade
cultivate	form	multiply	spurt	uplift
develop	foster	nourish	strengthen	work out