Stepping Off The Conveyor Belt: Gap Year Effects on the First Year College Experience

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STEPPING OFF THE CONVEYOR BELT:

GAP YEAR EFFECTS ON

THE FIRST-YEAR COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

Dissertation

by

LORI I. TENSER

Submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

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STEPPING OFF THE CONVEYOR BELT:

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by

Lori I. Tenser

Karen Arnold, Dissertation Chair

ABSTRACT

Taking a gap year between high school and college has become more common in the United States in recent years, yet little research attempts to describe or analyze the experience of the students who arrive on college campuses after such a year out. This qualitative study followed 12 first-year students attending highly-selective private institutions in the northeastern U.S. as they experienced the transitions from high school to gap year to college. With varying levels of family support and high levels of personal motivation, the students participated in a wide range of gap-year endeavors. The findings indicate that students were heavily influenced by their encounters during the gap year, leading to strong evidence of self-authorship among the participants, which in turn shaped the way students pursued their goals when they arrived at college. Particularly influential were encounters that involved independent problem-solving, participating in multigenerational relationships, and immersion in new cultural settings.

The students' transitions to college during the first year were marked by patterns of Sovereign Engagement with regard to learning, relationships, and decision-making. Commonly marked by internalized goals, authenticity in relationships, and greater individual agency, "Sovereign Engagement" captures the self-authored perspective that these students brought to their college experience. Contrary to suggestions in the popular media, not all

gap-year students found the transition to be seamless; nor were they uniformly motivated to earn good grades.

As a summary of the findings, the Gap Year Impact Model provides an important frame of reference for understanding the experiences, needs, and sovereign decision-making patterns of gap-year students. The results offer students, parents, colleges and universities an introduction to the lived experiences of gap-year students, who are arriving on campus in increasing numbers each year.

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A guitar pick. A jewelry box. A backpack. A prayer book. A bracelet.

These are some of the precious objects students showed me; physical symbols of the lasting impact of their gap-year encounters. Their stories were rich with texture — sounds, sights, feelings, relationships, obstacles, and triumphs. Lena, Julie, Paulina, Peter, Mark, Daniel, Layla, Maria, Vinny, Jackie, Tessa, and Andy arrived on their respective college campuses in the Fall of 2013 after having taken a gap year. They graciously agreed to take part in this study, and to maintain connections with me during their first year of college. I could not be more thankful for their time, their energy, and their enormous capacity for reflection. This dissertation is the result of their kindness and generosity. I hope that I have done justice to their fascinating stories of growth and development.

I have been privileged to work with an illustrious and supportive dissertation committee. The wise and wonderful Dr. Belle Liang, who provided context and connection between students' relationships and their college experiences; the astute and compassionate Dr. Heather Rowan-Kenyon, whose own pivotal work on access to college informed the development of my research questions and who reminded me to be comfortable with ambiguity; and the astounding and indefatigable Dr. Karen Arnold, my chair, who possesses super powers that allow her to read 100 pages faster than a speeding bullet, clarify theoretical concepts more powerfully than a locomotive, and leap over immense hurdles of advisee self-doubt in a single bound.

My journey through this program would have been far less rewarding without the kindness, clarity and companionship of my esteemed doctoral colleagues Amir Reza, Mark

Bruno Mars, and for reminding me about the things that truly matter. For you, this dissertation is free of unnecessary emoticons and the eight common allergens.

I am humbly indebted, most of all, to Alan, the love of my life and the first doctor in our family, who never, ever, doubted me for a minute. Not. Once.

This study explored the journeys of self-discovery taken by gap-year students. It became, as it should have, a similar journey for me.

"It is good to have an end to journey toward;

but it is the journey that matters, in the end."

— Ursula K. LeGuin

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CHAPTER ONE: OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

Statement of the Problem

The first year of college is known to be a time of significant transition and growth, and student adjustment during the first year of college has been studied extensively by researchers in the field (Christie & Dinham, 1991; Evans, et al., 2010; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Skipper, 2005; Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005).   Overwhelmingly, the literature is based on traditional (17-19 year-old) students who move directly to college after graduating from high school. What happens, however, when a student takes time off between high school and college?   The group of students known as "gap-year students" – those who choose to take a year off between high school and college, often to travel or do volunteer work – has not been the subject of extensive scholarly research. Existing literature might group these students within a broader category of nontraditional students, along with those who are adults, single parents, or who attend school part time; however, gap-year students as an increasing subpopulation among first-year college students are missing from the conversation.

A growing cohort of individuals and organizations posit that there are tremendous benefits to taking a gap year after high school graduation and before the first year of college. An apparent surge in the popularity of gap-year experiences has led to increased curiosity about who takes a gap year, under what circumstances, and to what advantage. Despite the confident claims of gap-year professionals, it remains unclear how taking a gap year may impact the experience of students when they embark on their first year of college. This study seeks to understand a group of gap-year students as they make the adjustment to college after

a year away from school, through a series of interviews, directed written reflections, and focus groups during their first college year.

It stands to reason that students who choose to take a gap year may, as a result of the time spent out of a school environment, experience their first year of college differently than do many traditional students who go directly onto college after completing high school. To date, however, only a few studies have attempted to make sense of the existence of gap-year students, and fewer still have focused on the academic or psychosocial adjustment to college made by gap-year students. Neither have researchers explored the extent to which these gap-year students identify their own experience as different from those of more traditional first-years. Research in this area should offer insight into the adjustment of this growing cohort of first-year students, and may in turn be useful to colleges and universities that offer accepted students the opportunity to defer before beginning their first college year. Specifically, a better understanding of gap-year students will help practitioners provide support and guidance to these young women and men as they arrive on college and university campuses to pursue their educational goals. If going from a gap year to college differs from going directly from high school to college, the field of higher education must make room for these students. Whether they are poised for a smoother adjustment, or a rockier one, or if perhaps there is no detectable difference – this should be of considerable interest to the field of higher education, and particularly to those who study or monitor the first-year experience.

As gap-year students emerge as a distinct subpopulation on American college campuses, they may begin to have an impact on admissions processes, the provision of student services, and measures of student success and persistence. Furthermore, just as institutions have sought to understand the stories of students of color, transfer students, non-

traditional aged students, veterans, and international students, understanding the stories of gap-year students may help colleges and universities define how student services should be designed to address their distinct needs and interests.

Additional information about the impact of a gap year also may be valuable to parents and high school guidance counselors, as they help students identify their post-secondary goals and expectations. Therefore, it is important to consider how gap-year students experience the first year of college, and the ways in which their perceptions and patterns of adjustment are similar to or different than those of other first-year students. To begin to understand their experiences, this qualitative study examined the lived experience of 12 gap-year students during the course of their first semester in college. This mode of research allows us to "understand the meaning of events and interactions" encountered by gap-year students (Bogdan & Bilkin, 2007, p. 25), and provides a rich look at the transitional journeys of these students.

Purpose of the Study

"Those who take a gap year straight from school arrive at university refreshed, focused, and they succeed. They're far less likely to drop out of their chosen course. They're more mature, they're able to contribute to tutorials, they're more globally aware. In short, they turn out to be jolly good university students."

~ Richard Oliver, Chief Executive of the Year Out Group,

BBC broadcast, September 2010

"Gappers are distinct because they have a set of experiences different from those of their peers; they tend to be more mature; they develop leadership and coping skills earlier than most of their classmates."

~ Haigler and Nelson, in *The Gap-Year Advantage*, 2005

For years taking a gap year has been a popular option in the United Kingdom and Australia. During the past decade in particular, these numbers appear to have been increasing. For example, since 2002, approximately 7.7% of university applicants in the UK have chosen to defer their acceptance by one year (Abidi, 2004; Griffith, 2008) and use the time for other experiences. According to one report, the numbers of gap-year students in Australia have recently reached 11% of high school graduates, compared with 7.9% in the UK (Birch & Miller, 2007). Another Australian study estimates that 20% of recent high school graduates took a gap year (Curtis, Mlotkowski, & Lumsden, 2012). The British government has officially endorsed the gap year, and in 2002 launched a series of steps designed to encourage volunteer-based experiences, in hopes of improving social citizenship, boosting job skills, and improving access to education (Abidi, 2004, p. 13).

But does a gap year reliably help to turn out "jolly good university students," as Richard Oliver of England's *Year Out Group* asserts? Are such students predictably more mature and better leaders than their peers, which Haigler and Nelson confidently claim? To begin examining these issues, it is essential for us to know what it is like for these students to enter college after their gap year.

To delve into gap-year students' experiences, the following primary research question and subquestions have guided this study:

Research Question: How do gap-year students experience the transition to college during their first semester?

- **Subquestion 1**: What patterns or issues are evident in the academic, social, and personal adjustment to college made by gap-year students?

- **Subquestion 2**: To what extent do gap-year students identify their own experience during the first semester of college as different from that of traditional first-year students?

- **Subquestion 3**: What are the common antecedent conditions and gap-year experiences that shape the students' transition to the college environment?

Significance of the Study

According to recent news reports (Grose, 2010; MacDonald, 2008; Mohn, 2010, 2011; Rinehart, 2013; Ruiz, 2011; Shellenbarger, 2010; Smith, 2008; Tucker, 2012), choosing to take a year off between high school and college is now becoming more common for young people in the United States, who are following in the footsteps of their counterparts in Australia and the UK. Some stories in the popular press have suggested that the stress of competitive high school environments "leaves students drained and craving refreshment" (MacDonald, 2008), or that gap year students are trying to "reclaim the down time that used to come naturally" (Smith, 2008). The implication is that students work so diligently during high school – presumably so they will gain acceptance into a reputable college – that they are too exhausted to go directly to college when they graduate.

However – and perhaps paradoxically – another salient aspect of the developing gap-year phenomenon in this country is that it is typically a carefully-planned, very busy period

of time. Whether choosing to work to earn money to help pay for their education, deciding to travel alone or on a guided expedition, or opting to do community service, gap-year students are filling their "time off" with a great deal of productivity. Some suggest this will make them better prepared for the college experiences that await them. In fact, this attitude seems to be gaining credence with high school guidance counselors and college admissions officers, and is evident in some shifts in admissions policies.

Increasingly, American colleges and universities are offering students the opportunity to defer enrollment for one year after acceptance, which allows individuals to indulge their desire to travel, engage in community service, or pursue other interests. For example, some elite institutions – including Middlebury College, Harvard University, and Princeton University – have begun accepting students with the encouragement or the explicit condition that they embark on a full-year or half-year experience prior to matriculation. Middlebury regularly admits a cohort of 90 to 100 students affectionately known as "Febs," who are offered mid-year acceptance into the first-year class, and encouraged to pursue other activities during their intervening Febmester, described on Middlebury's website. The Dean of Admissions at Harvard advocates finding ways to relieve the stress and frenetic pace of childhood and high school, indicating to prospective students that "(p)erhaps the best way of all to get the full benefit of a 'time-off' is to postpone entrance to college for a year" (Fitzsimmons, McGrath, & Ducey, 2011, "Taking time off before or during college," para. 1). And in 2009, Princeton proactively formalized the gap year option by designing its own selective, community service-focused bridge program, "making it easier for students who want to delay matriculation specifically to do community service abroad" (Greenwood, 2009, "Mind the gap: For some students, the best way to kick off a Princeton education is to go

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somewhere else," para. 5). Most recently, Tufts University established a service learning

program, known as Tufts 1+4, as a full year bridge program that is focused on community

service (Schonfeld, 2014).

As if to underscore these trends, a burgeoning field of gap-year organizations, both in

Europe and the U.S., specializes in helping high school students identify productive and

satisfying gap-year activities, and in some cases actually structure and operate their own

programs. Groups offering such experiences bill them on their websites and in promotional

materials as important for skill-building, as a way of giving back to one's community or

protecting the environment, or as a significant step in one's personal growth and

development. With a considerable presence on the Internet as well as strong marketing

departments, some prominent groups serve as clearinghouses for other entities offering

specialized internships, volunteer experiences, or travel options.

Many well-known organizations – including *City Year*, the *Center for Interim

Programs*, *Global Citizen Year*, *National Outdoor Leadership School*, *Thinking Beyond

Borders*, and *Year Out Group* – have begun to participate in annual Gap-Year Fairs now held

at 30 locations around the country. Sponsored by *Dynamy Internship Year* and modeled after

the popular college fairs that showcase admission representatives from different schools,

Gap-Year Fairs bring together representatives from a collection of organizations, offering

students opportunities to explore a variety of structured gap-year experiences, most of which

are for-profit ventures for the sponsors. In an effort to attract students and their families to

the Gap-Year Fair, the website *usagapyearfairs.org* claims that gap-year experiences "give

students a developmental advantage over their peers by providing them with an opportunity

to expand their perspective and gain direction that give the college years meaning and

focus*,"* and suggest that high school students will enhance their likelihood to graduate from college by using a gap year productively.

Gap-year organizations and web-based resources also have increased in popularity in recent years. Many promote specific internship, travel, or service options as "solutions" to creating a productive and well-structured gap-year experience that may involve training, travel, service or language study. As they gain momentum, some sites and programs now also offer the possibility of financial aid, or provide other suggestions for financing the gap year, in an apparent effort to help level the playing field in terms of economic ability to take advantage of these options. Internet searches are also likely to discover articles by presumed experts in the field, who seem intent on allaying concerns about taking a gap year. "Some parents and other onlookers may still feel a knee-jerk resistance to the idea of 'interrupting' an education or a career to take a year out," says one on-line article, "[b]ut those doubting Thomases are beginning to look rather blinkered in an age that attaches great value to flexible learning and a healthy work-life balance" (Griffith, 2012, "The Allure of the Gap Year," para. 4).

Formed in 2012, the American Gap Association (AGA) attempts to collect and promote gap-year data, opportunities, and resources. The website *www.americangap.org* asserts that students who take a gap year will develop in key areas – namely: "motivation, optimism, grit, and conscientiousness." This organization goes on to claim that students who take a gap year will gain acceptance into better colleges, earn a higher grade point average (GPA), and have clearer career goals than their classmates. One esteemed member of the AGA advisory board, Robert Clagett, formerly served as the Director of Admissions at Middlebury. A long-time proponent of gap-year experiences, Clagett has embarked on a

study to explore the academic success of college students who had taken a gap year, as measured by their earned GPAs. Also serving on the AGA Board are author-researcher Karl Haigler, and Holly Bull, president of the Center for Interim Programs, both of whom have been vocal advocates of taking a gap year. An article in *US News & World Report* refers to the research of Clagett and Haigler and Nelson as evidence that "students who take a gap year between high school and college do better once they get to school." (Loftus, 2014, "How a Gap Year Can Make Students Successful," subhead).

There is an intuitive frame of reference built into much of the consumer-oriented material on the market today about gap-year students: time off makes sense and can help students prepare for college. Indeed, an extra year – particularly one in which students are responsible for their own decisions and managing the ups and downs of their experience – may contribute to increased levels of maturity, however that may be measured. But to what extent does the gap year provide additional insight into academic goals and objectives, and to what extent does student performance and overall satisfaction reflect the gap year decision?

The transitional experience for first-year students entering college after a gap year may seem inconsistent with much of the existing literature and research on delayed entrance into college. However, because the gap-year student has taken time out of the normal sequence, she may find that she is not instantly more prepared for the college experience, and in fact it may be that she feels surprisingly unprepared. Anecdotal evidence suggests that a student may go through a kind of reverse culture shock, caused by returning to a structured educational environment (and possibly one with a residential component) after having been very responsible for her own travel, finances, daily routine, food preparation, and other personal needs.

Clearly, the time is right for extensive research into the gap year phenomenon from many angles, building on some limited previous research, and looking more intently at the conditions that allow high school completers to choose a gap year as a viable option. Gap year organizations are, by and large, profit-making endeavors, and so may not appreciate research that reveals their programs as anything but egalitarian and universally beneficial. However, high school counselors, admissions officers, parents and high school students, deserve to have specific findings upon which to base their important decisions.

Since most of the research to date has emerged from Australia and England, it is not clear whether the conclusions drawn or the assumptions made will map easily onto the experiences of gap-year students from the United States. Therefore, researchers must get to know the American students who choose to take a gap year before going to college.

While the research literature has yet to explore this phenomenon, a number of recently-published guidebooks offer blueprints for students considering a gap year and their families, and these books tout a long list of benefits to the gap-year experience. "Those who have taken a structured gap-year arrive at university refreshed and focused and they are more likely to complete their chosen course at university," claims the *Gap-Year Guidebook* (Withers & Bosberry-Scott, 2009, p. 9). Another handbook, *The Gap Year Advantage*, asserts that students gain "greater confidence and independence," a "passion for learning," "perspective," "organizational and practical skills," and the ability to "take things in stride" as a result of their gap-year experiences (Haigler & Nelson, 2005, p. 30). These assertions are intrinsically related to the way a gap year is defined and conceptualized.

Defining the Gap-Year Phenomenon

A gap year can be defined in a number of ways. In the most general sense, a gap – or interruption – can be planned or unplanned, intentional or unintentional, desirable or undesirable. In many contexts, a gap may be seen as a helpful respite from a routine or situation, and it also may be seen as an omission or weakness. Similarly, taking a gap year has connotations that are at once positive and negative, and for students may be both restorative and eye-opening, and at the same time jarring or disruptive. Commonly-used definitions of a gap year center around both the amount of time and the activities involved.

Stehlik (2010) uses the definition put forward by the UK's Department for Education and Skills, which describes a period from 3 to 24 months during which an individual takes time out from a formal work or education trajectory. In *The Gap-Year Advantage*, Haigler and Nelson offer a less-specific length of time ("from one semester up to two years") but indicate that the student "takes a break from formal education to travel, volunteer, study or work" (p. 25). Similarly, Goldrick-Rab and Han (2011) refer to "anecdotal evidence" that students pursue gap years for purposes of travel, volunteering at home or abroad, or working to earn money for their education.

The AGA website (http://www.americangap.org/) offers a somewhat more focused definition of a gap year, though with a less-specific time frame, identifying the year as "[a] structured period of time when students take a break from formal education to increase self-awareness, learn from different cultures, and experiment with possible careers."

Indeed, gap-year students are, in essence, making a transition out – departing from the standard educational sequence from high school to college – and then making another transition back in. The decision to do so, however, is not always as easy as staying "on the

conveyor belt" from high school to college (Griffith, 2008, p. 2). Starting the first year of

college after having been off that conveyor belt, gap-year students may feel out of step with

their peers because of the time they have spent after deferring their entry. When they arrive

at college, these students bring that year of experience with them.

Taking time off before college is not as common in the U.S. as it has become in

Australia and Europe. In this country, therefore, these students are widely perceived as

"delaying" the start of their college careers, and according to several studies they would be

presumed unlikely to complete postsecondary education (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Goldrick-

Rab & Han, 2011; Rowan-Kenyon, 2007), in contrast to the claims of the gap-year

organizations. Perhaps, however, the characteristics and conditions among the gap-year

student population paint a more complex picture.

Postulated Gap-Year Outcomes

Students who choose to take a gap year may take on new dimensions of responsibility

and challenge as they begin to explore an alternative to direct entry into college. The Center

for Interim Programs, one of the organizations that worked closely with Haigler and Nelson

to identify individuals for their study, promotes the gap year as a chance for meaningful

growth and personal exploration, telling students reading their website that they are "ready"

to embark on an independent experience, away from their friends and family for the first

time, adding that this is "the first time that you are exercising a substantive choice regarding

what it is that you want to do with your life, at least for twelve months." In addition, the

website suggests that a gap year is "a rite of passage in a culture that seriously lacks this

important process of initiation for young adults (www.interimprograms.com)."

What does this reference to a rite of passage imply? What might be the results? A recent *New York Times* column suggests that there may be both economic and personal benefits to taking a gap year, and that most students find meaning in their gap year experiences (Glater, 2009). Whether or not the students themselves perceive this choice to be a means of achieving a particular advantage, the decision to take a gap year presents both opportunities and challenges. An examination of the outcomes of gap-year is an essential next step.

The vast majority of gap-year programs identify a number of advantages to taking a gap year. They entice students with such phrases as "have the adventure of a lifetime," "get a glimpse of the real world," "begin a lifelong education process," and "increase your maturity and self-esteem." Articles in the popular media, along with some material from college admissions offices, either subtly or explicitly support these claims. Parents, in particular, and students themselves may worry, however, that after a gap year the student may choose not to go back to school.

Researchers and gap-year proponents Karl Haigler and Rae Nelson have found that by and large students who take a gap year do return to finish their education. In their recent survey of 280 former gap-year students, Haigler and Nelson found that 90% of students began or returned to college within a year of their gap-year experience. Their respondents reported having become far more active learners, and also reported that they experienced increased levels of clarity in their educational objectives as a result of their gap years. According to Nelson, 60% of the respondents identified the gap year as important or very important in establishing their majors and career direction. In addition, "the majority viewed themselves as more educationally motivated than their peers," according to Nelson (Haigler

& Nelson, personal communication, October 22, 2010). In their recent book highlighting the results of their study, Haigler and Nelson assert that students enjoy greater academic success in college. "After a gap year, 66 percent of students in our survey report taking academic work more seriously and 24 percent answered they regarded studies "about the same" as before a gap year," they write (Haigler & Nelson, 2014, p. 78). They also tout a GPA of 3.1 or higher for 74% of the study's respondents, but do not offer any context for those grades.

One additional implication of the Haigler and Nelson research, along with the seemingly endless array of organized gap-year program websites, is that a student will generate additional cultural capital by taking a gap year, and in particular by signing up for one of the more structured gap-year experiences. Haigler and Nelson looked at a range of categories and found that former gap-year students' self-reported outcomes also included greater self-confidence, increased ability to adapt and handle ambiguity, ability to analyze and solve problems, clearer communications skills, and stronger ability to work with people from diverse backgrounds (Haigler & Nelson, 2013).

A recent dissertation by Hoe about the gap year in the context of other postsecondary delays found that students who had traveled extensively during their gap year performed well in college, and gained important skills, as well. Such outcomes were attributed to impactful experiences such as "confronting challenge, leaving one's comfort zone, having new experiences, developing relationships, having a group experience, traveling, having unstructured time, and participating in homestays, service work, language trainings, and outdoor adventure" (Hoe, 2014, p. 220), that might be encountered during a year of travel.

Perhaps these studies provide further evidence for the idea that the gap year is yet another form of social stratification. And perhaps there is simply a great deal we do not yet know.

While the outcomes implied by existing research may be demonstrable in the long run, in practice the transition back into a structured educational setting immediately after taking a gap year may not always be easy for students. The shift in students' experience and growth students is intertwined with their identity development. The sense of liminality felt by students, along with the process of emerging adulthood, which will be discussed further in Chapter Two, remind us that gap-year students may be straddling different phases of their development and operating within different, overlapping smaller environments (or microsystems). If the gap year allows a student to take more responsibility for his own life, does the return to a structured educational environment pull that student back in some ways? These complexities require and deserve further study, and once understood will be valuable to practitioners in the field of higher education.

Overview of Research Design

Through semi-structured individual interviews, the collection of monthly responses to written prompts, and focus groups, this study gathered data from gap-year students at three different selective institutions in the Northeast United States. The process of data collection began in September 2013 and concluded in February 2014, once students had completed the fall semester and received their final grades for first-semester courses.

Although it may have been possible to collect quantitative data from schools or individuals about the number of gap-year students over time, or to gather such measurable

indices as GPAs or years to completion of the degree, this study sought a deeper

understanding of the students' experiences as they transition into the college environment.

To do so, the study consisted of a series of direct interactions with 12 gap-year students

during and after their first semester of college, since qualitative researchers "work in the

field, face to face with real people" (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 9). Because I wanted to

capture the perspectives and experiences of first-year students who took a gap year prior to

attending college, and to learn about their stories as fully as possible, this qualitative study

used a phenomenological approach (Bogdan & Biklin, 2007; Patton, 2002; Rossman &

Rallis, 2003).

 The specific details of the research design are discussed in detail in Chapter Three.

Personal Experience with the Topic

 I did not take a gap year myself. I doubt, had someone suggested it to me, that as an

18-year-old I could have seen the possibilities in the idea. Today, I approached this study

with a personal interest in gap-year students, as a result of my professional career and, in

particular, my own relationships with students at Wellesley College. As the Dean of First-

Year Students, it is my responsibility to support first-year students through their academic

and personal transitions during their first year at Wellesley. During my career, I have read

about, studied, and interacted with a wide variety of students and believe I have a strong

sense of the kinds of challenges first-year students face. The core of my work is building

relationships with individual students, and through these relationships I have begun to

appreciate and understand their lives. Gap-year students I have known present a complex

and intriguing set of life stories, and these students often confide in me when they are

seeking to make meaning out of their college endeavors. Through these conversations, I

have developed enormous respect for, and interest in, the ways that gap-year students engage

with the college and reflect on their own experiences. My engagement with the student

participants in this study gave me an even deeper appreciation for the gap-year student

experience.

Summary

Scholarly research about gap-year students from the United States should examine the

specific outcomes that are, by both objective and self-reported measures, the direct result of a

gap-year experience. While the current study begins the conversation, this research does not

fully explore all of these aspects of gap-year student experience. For instance, it does not

attempt to quantify the numbers of students who elect a gap year, or to examine statistical

patterns of their circumstances. Moving forward, my hope is that a number of different

perspectives on the gap-year experience will emerge. This study has generated foundational

and thought-provoking concepts for additional qualitative and quantitative study, along with

in-depth research on specific aspects of these students' lives. First, and most importantly, the

voices of gap-year students have been heard and recorded, and their experiences should be

evaluated and shared with professionals in the field of higher education.

If, indeed, gap-year students become "jolly good" college students, researchers must

make explicit the factors that allow this to be so. This study offers an opportunity to begin

the scholarly conversation.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Overview

Given the absence of substantial peer-reviewed literature about the gap year, a thorough review of the extant literature must consider several relevant aspects of the phenomenon. First, there is a significant body of literature that examines delayed entrance to postsecondary education, and the gap year should be examined in the context of that research. Next, studies of the transition to college during the first year, which are plentiful and often look carefully at the diversity of student characteristics and experiences, are extremely relevant to the gap-year student experience in college. And finally, the antecedent conditions that make it possible for students to elect a gap year are related to research into the influence of cultural capital.

This section will explore each of these interrelated bodies of literature in depth, and then will go on to present additional literature related to the theoretical framework of my study.

Looking at Delayed Student Entry to College

A considerable body of literature has explored the factors associated with delaying the start of postsecondary education; however, gap-year students are typically absent from these studies. Rather, the research on delayed entry into college focuses primarily on the common characteristics of students to do not go directly from high school to college (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Goldrick-Rab & Han, 2011; Roksa & Velez, 2012; Rowan-Kenyon, 2007). In particular, most studies have explored familial and socioeconomic conditions that cause

students to delay entrance into college for one year or more. In addition to family backgrounds and socioeconomic status, these studies also look at the social roles and adulthood transitional behaviors that such students may play after high school, as well as during college, and how they impact college enrollment patterns. And several studies highlight the likelihood that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds also lacked sufficient academic preparation, particularly in math (Rowan-Kenyon, 2007), and had lower standardized test scores (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005).

The 2005 report from the National Center for Education Statistics, *Waiting to Attend College*, provides extensive data to suggest that taking a year off from college makes students significantly less likely to get a college education. According to the report, "for whatever reasons students wait to enroll in college, those who do delay are at a considerable risk of not completing a postsecondary credential," and "delayed entrants begin their postsecondary education at a relative disadvantage compared with their peers who enroll in postsecondary education immediately after high school graduation" (Horn, Cataldi & Sikora, p. iii). These conclusions do not appear to offer insight into the group of American students who are likely to choose to take a gap year to travel, volunteer, or pursue an internship. In addition, according to the data analyzed by the NCES,

> Compared with students who enrolled in postsecondary education immediately after high school graduation, delayed entrants were more likely to come from low-income families, to be single parents, to be Black and were less likely to be White… Delayed entrants also were more likely than immediate entrants to be Hispanic, American Indian, to have parents who never attended postsecondary education, and to speak a language other than English as their primary language … (p. iv)

The NCES report also identifies four main pursuits of high school completers who did not go directly to college: serving in the military, getting married, starting or raising a family, or employment. These major life pursuits, however, are less likely to reflect the experiences of gap-year students, whose decisions to take time off after completing high school are typically intentional.

Similarly, Roksa and Velez (2012) offered a sociological perspective on delayed entry into college, in an effort to better understand some of the endeavors outside of education that may contribute to the delay. For example, certain "traditional markers of transition to adulthood" have, in the authors' estimation, been undervalued by researchers (p. 770). This study explored the interrelationship of delayed entry, delayed completion, and life course transitions. Social roles typically associated with adulthood – such as parenthood, marriage, and employment – were determined to have a significant impact on the likelihood that students will be able complete their educational goals, particularly if they have entered into these roles prior to entering college.

In a related study, Rowan-Kenyon (2007) looked at predictors of delayed enrollment, and discovered that those students who went directly to college after high school typically had a higher level of parental involvement in their decisions. Using data from the National Education Longitudinal Study: 1988–2000 (NELS), Rowan-Kenyon found that the amount of relevant influence exerted by both school and home is typically reduced for those who delay college enrollment, as more time elapses and other life experiences intervene. Rowan-Kenyon's analysis demonstrates that "there are differences in background characteristics, academic preparation and achievement, social capital, and cultural capital based on time of enrollment" (p. 209). For example, Rowan-Kenyon found that "(p)rivate high school

attendance was higher for those graduates who enrolled in college immediately (11%) than for graduates who delayed enrollment (4%) or did not enroll (1%)" (p. 199).

Another recently-published report, *The Condition of Education 2010*, looked at the rates of immediate enrollment in college by young people who had completed high school. The results show there are persistent differences in students' post-high school choices, determined by such factors as household income, level of parents' education, and race and ethnicity. According to the report, students in lower income groups have exhibited only slight improvements in the rate of immediate enrollment in college from 1972 to 2008, despite gains overall in the percentage of students who enrolled in college immediately after completing high school. Specifically, completion rates among high school graduates from low-income families lagged behind those from high-income families by 25% in 2008 (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, pp. vii, 36).

The choices available to applicants at six different British institutions were the subject of a study by Reay, Davies, David, and Ball (2001). The researchers looked specifically at "individual, peer group, familial and institutional influences and processes in choice-making" (Reay, et al., 2001, p. 859), and also at the extent to which the students' options were impacted by socioeconomic class and other personal circumstances. They found that students from different socioeconomic and racial groups experienced incongruent constraints and opportunities when deciding whether to apply for post-secondary education. For example, the students in lower socioeconomic groups were less likely to have had experienced prior academic accomplishment (such as A-level grades), were more likely to need to work (which impacted the time available for studying), and often faced transportation concerns, since the better colleges might require traveling longer distances, with greater expense. This seems to

demonstrate that early conditions of disadvantage continue to result in inequity for students after they graduate from high school.

Despite these studies, it is important to note that there may be multiple reasons that students might choose not to go directly to college after finishing high school. Certainly, those who are unable to go immediately to college – or to the college of their choice – due to a set of risk factors can be said to face greater obstacles and challenges than do their classmates who are able to go directly to college. However, such disadvantaged students seem to have a very different profile than those who typically identify as gap-year students. Rather, students who actively choose to delay college, particularly those of middle- or upper-class backgrounds, and especially those whose parents are college-educated, may be dealing with a different range of choices. The nature of the delay is not consistent across these groups.

"There is a social class gap in the gap year," according to researchers Goldrick-Rab and Han (2011, p. 424), who believe that the commonly-accepted profile of gap-year students is less consistent with those of school-delayers as described in previous studies. The nature of the delay for many gap-year students is not discussed in the earlier research, and therefore the delayed enrollment literature does not sufficiently explain their decisions. This study looks at the probability that such factors as socioeconomic status, academic preparation, gender and race are predictive of delayed enrollment (Goldrick-Rab & Han, 2011). Using the NELS data previously considered by Rowan-Kenyon (2007), this analysis focuses on the characteristics of students who waited eight months or more after high school before starting college. Interestingly, the study shows that what the authors describe as a "class gap" among students who delay entrance to college is rooted directly in the students' academic

preparation at the high school level, and also to their behaviors of marrying and having children (Goldrick-Rab & Han, 2011, p. 441), which are some of the traditional markers of transition to adulthood noted in earlier studies.   In particular, "differences in course-taking and family formation may contribute to the observed 26 percentage point gap in college delay among students in the top 20% of the SES distribution compared to students in the bottom 20%" (Goldrick-Rab & Han, 2011, p. 435).

Alexander, Bozick and Entwisle (2008) considered the college-going expectations held by a group of low-income students in the Baltimore area. The study compared students who went directly to a two-year college with students who went to a four-year college and also those who did not attempt college within the first year after college. This analysis of postsecondary experiences suggested that future research into college persistence should take into account "life arenas beyond school, such as relevant aspects of family life, employment, and, for some, military experience or contact with the criminal justice system" (p. 392).

This body of research on delayed college entry is directly relevant to the topic of gap-year students, and ties in nicely with studies examining students' transition into college, in addition to the literature on the cultural capital that college students possess.

The Transition to College During the First Year

Whether a student goes immediately to college after high school, or arrives there after some delay, it is widely accepted that the first year of college is a time of significant transition, and student adjustment to the first year of college has been studied extensively by researchers in the field (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005; Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998; Christie & Dinham, 1991, Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Skipper, 2005). The

first year "is critical not only for how much students learn but also for laying the foundation on which their subsequent academic success and persistence rest" (Reason, et al., 2006, p. 150). Overwhelmingly, the transition to college literature is based on "traditional" students who are likely to go directly to college after graduating from high school. Nevertheless, an exploration of the experiences of gap-year students during their first year of college must be located within this broader body of literature.

Terenzini et al. (1994) used a series of focus groups and individual interviews to understand adjustment to college by first-year students at a number of different institutions. The study discussed what the authors described as the "educational portion of the American Dream," namely, that steady academic progress (without interruption) is commonly assumed to be part of the blueprint for success in this country. Many of the students interviewed, according to the researchers, had "assumed all along that going to college is what one does after completion of high school. College was simply the next, logical, expected and desired stage" (Terenzini, et al., 1994, p. 62). However, that set of responses contrasted with those of first-generation students in the same study, for whom college was not simply a logical next-step, and who therefore faced far more significant challenges as they adjusted to the new cultures of the college environment, often without meaningful parental support. The authors pointed to the importance of campus involvement and of validating experiences, both in and out of the classroom, in the successful transition of students from a variety of backgrounds.

A number of studies have attempted to identify the factors that correlate with successful transition to college during the first year. In a study of 56 first-year college students, Brooks and DuBois (1995) looked at both environmental factors and individual

characteristics that were predictive of adjustment to the first year of college, comparing measures of adjustment. Their findings suggest that individual skills and strengths are strongly correlated with positive adjustment of first-year students, and that environmental variables have a lesser but measurable impact. Another study by Mooney, Sherman and LoPresto (1991) found a positive correlation between such factors as high self-esteem and strong academic locus of control with effective adjustment to college among first-year students. This study was based on a sample of 88 female students from one college, and utilized a series of self-reporting instruments to evaluate both the factors and the outcomes. While the actual distance a student's college was from home did not necessarily affect adjustment during the first year, her perception about that distance did have an impact (Mooney, et al., 1991). These two studies support the need for further research regarding the adjustment of gap-year students, as an important subpopulation among first-years, as it has been suggested that "different kinds of students may react differently to selected college experiences during their first year" (Pascarella, et al., 2004, p. 254).

Indeed, the process of becoming acculturated during the first year of college is a recurring theme in the literature. In their study of first-year college students, Smith et al. (2006) explored the ongoing processes of socialization and the forms of discourse that play central roles as students adapt to their new environments. This qualitative study involved a series of interviews, focus groups, and shadowing observations of 112 first-year student participants at a large university. In their discussion of students' social development during the first year of college, the authors identify a tension between "separateness" and connectedness," which they call "in(ter)dependence" (Smith, et al., 2006, p. 86). During the first year, the findings suggest, students appreciate the chance to make independent choices,

and at the same time are reliant upon networks of support as they negotiate both academic and social challenges. "The tension between independence and interdependence," the authors state, "was very apparent in students' explanations of how they (re)established their identity when transitioning through the first year" (Smith, et al., 2006, p. 94). Their discussion of the process of socialization that occurs during the first year of college highlights the concomitant student needs to define a sense of self and cultivate supportive relationships with others. This work is resonant of Arnett's research on emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004, 2007), discussed in greater detail below, which proposes that modern young adulthood is marked by ambivalence and indecision, commonly stemming from a confusing confluence of freedom and responsibility.

Making a successful transition may also be related to student expectations. Kuh (2005) uses the results of two questionnaires to examine the expectations and experiences of students during their first year of college, and to ascertain how different factors impacted their levels of engagement. He points out that "what students expect shapes their behavior, which in turn affects their academic performance and social adjustment to college life" (Kuh, 2005, p. 88).

While not looking specifically at college students' adjustment, O'Connor, et al. (2011) examined adolescents in Australia to better understand what factors are predictive of positive development during the emerging adulthood. Waves of survey data were collected over 27 years, and the participants were parents, teachers, nurses, and eventually adolescents (who began as infants, and were aged 19-20 at the conclusion of the study). Based on work of several other researchers, this study relied on a model of five domains of positive psychosocial development: social competence, life satisfaction, trust, tolerance of others,

and civic engagement. The authors noted that social relationships are an influential factor in adolescent development, noting that relevant studies "emphasize the importance of interactions between the individual and their social context, highlighting the relevance of strong relationships with others for successful development" (O'Connor, et al., 2011, p. 863). Their analysis of the 13 waves of survey data yielded their conclusions that positive development during emerging adulthood could be predicted by such factors as strong relationships with both peers and parents, engagement in the community, and higher socioeconomic status.

Another group of studies placed greater emphasis on the environmental and social factors that contribute to the transition of first-year students. In a comparison of the experiences of students who persisted in college with those who withdrew after the first year, Wilcox et al. (2005) considered the way that levels of social support and social integration impacted these students' decisions. When they arrived at the university, these 22 students reported a desire to establish themselves socially: "in this transitional phase students have an urgent need to belong, to identify with others, to find a safe place and to negotiate their new identities as university students…" (Wilcox, et al., 2005, p. 713). As students developed meaningful friendships during the first year, they gradually reduced their reliance on support from family. On campus, the students typically found the greatest level of social support with students in their residence halls. While social integration was a stronger determinant of student satisfaction than was academic integration, engagement with the academic experience also provided an opportunity for students to feel supported by advisors at the university.

Holmbeck and Wandrei (1993) also considered the adjustment of college students during the first year, assessing 286 first-year students on such factors and family cohesiveness, attachment to parents, self-esteem and social support. Through a series of self-reported questionnaire responses, this study concluded that both men and women adjusted positively to college if they had strong relationships with their family members (Holmbeck & Wandrei, 1993, p. 77). Not surprisingly, high levels of adaptability to change were correlated with a comfortable adjustment during the first year of college. According to this study, males who had more difficulty adjusting were those who lacked strong social support, while females who struggled with the transition were more likely to have experienced some separation anxiety.

In a study focused on the concept of thriving during the first year, Nelson and Vetter (2012) analyzed 908 student responses to a questionnaire that assesses the "Thriving Quotient." This study performed six different regression analyses to identify the factors most clearly predictive of student thriving during the first year of college. According to the authors, thriving students tend to perform well academically, have clear intentions to graduate, and express feeling positive about their choice of institution (Nelson & Vetter, 2012, p. 45). Three predictive factors emerged from their analysis: educational aspirations, campus involvement, and feeling a sense of community. The results allowed the authors to provide a road map for higher education practitioners who want to support thriving on their campuses.

A study by Bowman (2010) looked at the psychological well-being of first-year college students, using data from the national Wabash Study of Liberal Arts Education. Using a scale developed by Ryff, Bowman looked at six dimensions of psychological well-

being based on such psychological theories as self-actualization and individuation.   The researchers examined student responses for evidence of (a) autonomous functioning and decision making, (b) mastery of one's environment, (c) seeking opportunities for personal growth, (d) maintaining positive relations with others, (e) having a sense of purpose in life, and (f) accepting and thinking positively about oneself (Bowman, 2010, p. 180).   The results suggest that all six dimensions of psychological well-being [PWB] during the first year are influenced both by the student's prior experiences and by the college environment.   In particular, "even when controlling for a host of college experiences, PWB gains during the first year are positively related to several pre-college attributes, including being a non-first-generation student, female, being older than the traditional college age, and having high academic achievement" (p. 193).   This underscores the need to explore the pre-college conditions and in-college experiences of gap-year students, to determine the factors that both enhance and inhibit their first-year experience.

Clark (2005) sought to explore the strategies that students use to negotiate the first college year, and conducted interviews with eight second-semester first-year students at a public urban college to learn more about their experiences.   The findings suggest that students were adept at creating strategies to address the challenges they faced during their first year.   They devised strategies in response to four different categories of situations they encountered: overcoming obstacles, seizing opportunity, adapting to change, or pursuing a goal.   Because students were faced with different constellations of challenges, success "often meant devising multiple strategies, which linked to form intricate webs of interrelated decisions and behaviors, incorporating internal and external influences" (Clark, 2005, p.

307). While the group of participants was small, this study highlights the interrelationship of personal circumstances, student behaviors, and the college environment.

In another examination into the transition to college, Reynolds and Weigand (2010) explored the resilience, motivation, and self-efficacy of first year students. This study surveyed undergraduate students who were enrolled in a one credit first-year experience course, and analyzed their responses to four different instruments designed to measure academic motivation, college self-efficacy, and perceptions about the college environment. According to their findings, students who became academically and socially engaged on campus were more likely to cope with the challenges they face. However, students with high levels of engagement were not necessarily found to have higher GPAs during their first semester, contradicting the expectation that they would display higher levels of academic achievement than other students. In their discussion, the authors caution that using "such a short-term indicator as first-semester GPA" (Reynolds & Weigand, 2010, p. 187) as a single measure of academic achievement may have confounded the results. In terms of self-efficacy, the authors concluded that "[w]hen first-year students feel out of control concerning their academic possibilities, they are more negative about the future and their ability to succeed" (Reynolds & Weigand, 2010, p. 188). Notably, the results indicate that internally-motivated students appear to have greater tolerance for the obstacles they encounter during the transition to college.

Palmer et al. (2009) looked at student transitions into college life through the lens of the concept of "in-between-ness," or liminality, which describes the transition an individual experiences when moving between one place (or set of experiences) and another, and they suggest that new students are at the "threshold" between their former and new environments,

and therefore may feel that they lack a sense of place or belonging (Palmer, et al., 2009, p. 38). Their research looked at the turning points that students encountered and how these were associated with feelings of both inclusion and exclusion as new college students. While most students feel a sense of disequilibrium in the process of making this transition, gap-year students may be considered as having a prolonged experience of standing at the threshold. The turning points in their lives are multiple and complex, and therefore worthy of exploration.

Palmer's work on liminality is also consonant with Tinto's seminal work on student persistence in college. Although Tinto's research focuses primarily on behaviors and conditions leading to college student departure and attrition, his theories are often used to consider the conditions that support student persistence and retention. In describing the processes of integration into the college environment, Tinto talks about the need for students to "separate from past associations" as they transition into college (Tinto, 1975, 1987). How might this transition be different for gap-year students, who have gone through such a separation during the intervening year between high school and college? For example, students may encounter isolation or incongruence when the college environment does not match or meet their needs (Tinto, 2003). Gap-year students seeking community find themselves straddling several different systems, and like most students, their "intentions and commitments are subsequently modified and reformulated on a continuing basis" through their experiences within and outside the academic institution (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 54).

This sense of liminality is also reflected in Arnett's descriptions of "Emerging Adulthood," which he describes as an "age of feeling in-between" (Arnett, 2004, p. 14),

during which individuals begin to become more self-sufficient and gain both additional responsibility and greater freedoms. Arnett explains that the criteria that young people might use to determine whether they feel they have reached adulthood — those of responsibility, independent decision-making, and financial independence "are gradual, so their feeling of becoming an adult is gradual, too" (Arnett, 2004, p.15). Varying degrees of self-sufficiency and independence are impacted by the life roles that emerging adults embrace. In fact, Arnett contends that "the sense of being in-between occurs when emerging adults continue to rely on their parents in some ways, so that their movement toward self-sufficiency is incomplete" (Arnett, 2004, p. 217). It might be said that gap-year students have begun the gradual process of approaching adulthood if one or more of these criteria describes their experience during the year, and that when they begin college, they may relinquish some of the independence they had enjoyed.

When they arrive at college as first-year students, gap-year students are likely to be one year older than -- and in many cases seem qualitatively different from -- traditional first-year students in their class. They may, indeed, appear to be better equipped to handle the adjustment to the college experience during their first year. Gap-year students, in contrast to other students whose circumstances prevent their immediate access to college, seem to be a somewhat more privileged group, whose goals for an interim year between high school and college are linked to their broader educational and personal objectives.

Cultural Capital and the Decision to Elect a Gap Year

The work of these researchers naturally leads to further questions about the factors that set gap-year students apart from their peers. To what extent, for example, do personal

circumstances connect to the opportunities and experiences of gap-year students? What are the common antecedents of a gap-year decision? There may be several interrelated answers to these questions, and the work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu helps to elucidate the complex interplay of life experience and post-secondary opportunities. In *Forms of Capital*, Bourdieu talks about the ways in which human interactions are constrained by the interplay of rules, actions, and societal practices. The forms of capital he describes are the driving force that Bourdieu says is at the core of the "immanent structures of the social world" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 242).

In drawing the distinctions between the forms of capital, Bourdieu explains that *economic capital* refers specifically to elements of status (or societal rank) and material possession that can be converted directly into financial success. *Cultural capital* describes access to cultural resources such as viewing art or attending concerts, and may be related to economic capital through such possessions as academic credentials. And finally, Bourdieu talks about *social capital*, which describes personal and social connections and conditions that may also lead to economic capital. Not all members of society have the same access to the three forms of capital, cautions Bourdieu. According to Swartz, "Bourdieu points to an unequal distribution of cultural capital. Social classes differ greatly in levels of educational attainment and patterns of cultural consumption (Swartz, 1997, p. 198)." Bourdieu's focus on education and opportunity helps to elucidate his perspectives on the unequal distribution of capital. For example, Bourdieu describes the "embodied" state of cultural capital as being significantly influenced by one's social class, family composition, and historical context. His work suggests that the conditions that privilege certain students clearly disadvantage others, and appear to replicate the existing inequalities in society.

Annette Lareau's research echoes these themes from the work of Bourdieu. She establishes that the level of educational or economic aspiration an individual high school student may have is likely to vary greatly depending upon the student's circumstances and life experiences. Lareau talks specifically about cultivated capital – namely, the form of cultural capital that can be acquired or enhanced with intentional effort (Lareau, 2003). Similarly, according to Swartz, children's aspirations are structurally determined based upon the internalized cultural subculture, or habitus, that Bourdieu describes (Swartz, 1997, p. 197).

Bourdieu's notion of habitus, and Lareau's notion of social location, both attempt to describe the context within which a young person develops and experiences the world. Lareau talks specifically about parenting styles that differ by social class: "concerted cultivation" – in which middle-class (mostly) parents take an active interest in their children's growth and development, planning their afterschool activities and developing their skills and talents; and "accomplishment of natural growth" – in which lower SES families allow for the child's natural skills and talents to develop as long as their basic needs are provided for and they are given time to figure things out on their own. She describes the children in these scripted, over-scheduled middle class families as "exhausted," with schedules of rehearsals, games and practices that are disruptive to family routines such as family dinner. In contrast, the children in the working class families she studied had considerably more free time, did not encounter boredom, and had "boundless energy" (Lareau, 2003, p. 242).

Coleman (1988) relates social capital to the actions of individuals, and describes the ties between and among members of a community. Social capital, as Coleman describes it, is

one of three factors that comprise what is commonly referred to as "family background," and also connects with financial capital and human capital. He describes qualities of a community that lead to levels of social capital, including trustworthiness, obligations to one another, and both economic and non-economic outcomes. Social capital, then, is related to power and influence, to access to information, and to the options available to particular groups of students.

Young people who complete high school successfully may encounter a range of options and opportunities, and it is evident that this range may be bounded by the levels of capital – economic, cultural, and social – to which a student has had access. In their study of high school students' expectations about completing a four-year college degree, Johnson and Reynolds (2013) found that educational expectations were shaped significantly by socioeconomic status, and that "those who lived in a two-parent family where at least one parent had a graduate/professional degree were the most likely to hold high stable expectations to earn a bachelor's degree" (Johnson & Reynolds, 2013, p. 825).

Family background, habitus or social location, and social or community support, while somewhat difficult to define, are among the factors that determine what choices are available to a high school graduate. This is related, of course, to the research on delay of college entrance, reviewed above, and leads us to consider the connection between these factors and the growing popularity of the gap year.

Researching the Gap-Year Phenomenon

Very little of the research looking specifically at the gap year as the explanation for a delay in the start of a student's post-secondary education has been conducted in the United

States. A number of existing studies do consider the conditions that allow students to decide to take a gap year before going to college, and several touch on economic advantage and cultural or social capital as salient factors.

In the United Kingdom and in Australia, where the gap year has been a popular option for many years, Stehlick (2010) and others have examined the gap year trends among young adults. Stehlick has concluded that one common feature of the gap year decision is "that it is economically determined and limited to those who can afford it, and generally an experience available mainly to those from socially advantaged backgrounds" (Stehlick, 2010, p. 367).

Another British researcher, Heath (2007), looked at recent trends among British college students, and concluded that gap-year students "gain the edge" over traditional students at universities and colleges in the U.K. According to Heath, the numbers of students in England who chose to "take a year out" before attending university nearly doubled from 1994 to 2004, due in large part to the presumed benefits of doing so. Relying on studies and articles prepared primarily by gap-year organizations, Heath described the characteristics of gap-year students, and explored the relative popularity of certain chosen gap-year experiences. She was careful to point out that "in the absence of much existing academic research on the gap year, many of the claims of the gap-year industry concerning the presumed benefits of taking a year out are based on perceptions rather than on solid evidence" (Heath, 2007, p.100). Although she compellingly suggests that taking a gap year further stratifies privileged students from those less privileged, this article does not provide any studies of sample populations of gap-year students.

A number of researchers have studied the choices that high school students make in terms of how their personal experiences, socioeconomic class, and/or family involvement impacts the opportunities available to them. Some studies have explicitly considered the notion of "cultural capital" in relation to these choices.

One such example is Amaury Nora's 2004 study, which explores the access, transition, and persistence in college of a group of Latina students. In this study, Nora developed survey questions designed to explore "the underlying dimensionalities of the psychosocial constructs of habitus and cultural capital" in the students' experiences (Nora, 2004, p. 184). The results appear to indicate that such variables as family encouragement, approval from others, early precollege influences, and family expectations are predictors of student satisfaction in college. The findings also suggest that psychosocial factors may be more relevant predictors of college choice during the final stages of decision-making than other significant preparatory factors, such as prior academic performance, academic interests, and scores on standardized tests. Nora suggests that these conditions further predict the persistence of minority students, in particular, once they begin attending the college of their choice.

Another study by Leese (2010) looks at the transition of British students during their first year of university. In light of increasing diversity among college student populations, this study attempts to demonstrate the factors that may lead to increased isolation or hardship for new university students, especially if their experience "does not fit with the dominant discourse within the university" (p. 243). More than 70% of the students who participated were working off-campus in addition to studying, and many found it difficult to adjust to the expectations of the institution. Leese recognizes the need for particular support during the

"critical first semester," and for awareness of how institutional practices may not be sensitive enough to students from working-class backgrounds.

By contrast, it also may be a dimension of cultural capital that propels gap-year students from their high school into the gap year and then on to the first year of college. One mention in the *New York Times* proposes that a gap year interrupts an otherwise inevitable "'cradle to college to cubicle to cemetery cycle'" (Ruiz, 2011, para. 16). This implies that one component of the phenomenon of the post-high school gap year is the feeling of exhaustion that middle and upper-class students feel after a childhood filled with "cultivation" of their skills and talents, as suggested by Lareau's research. If such students do not feel ready to continue on with their schooling immediately after high school, it may be less because they are uninterested in learning or furthering their education, and more because they are motivated to experience and learn from a more unscripted life.

Motivation may be a significant factor in a student's desire to pursue further education, or to take time off. A recent study by Martin (2010) looks at the gap year in Australia through a psychosocial lens. Specifically, the author was looking at motivation and high school performance as predictors of decision to take a gap year. There is prior research, he explains, that suggests that "school leavers" lack motivation and performed poorly in high school. He cites prior articles that specifically focus on the gap year and which consider who has the choice in these situations. Martin concludes that taking a gap year may "resolve motivational deficits" (Martin, 2010, p. 570), and in many cases helps to improve academic performance at the university level. The "deficits" that Martin considers seem inextricably linked to the pre-college conditions that impact the choices available to students.

Few peer-reviewed studies attempt to understand or define the ways that taking a gap year has an impact on the students themselves once they begin the first year in college. As described in Chapter One, the existing research has been sponsored largely by consultants or organizations that promote gap-year programs, attempting to capture self-reported outcomes of students' gap-year experiences.

In one independent study, O'Shea (2011) examined the educational value of taking a gap year focused on volunteering, focusing primarily on programs designed by a prominent gap-year organization in the United Kingdom. Through this particular program, students are placed into international settings where they perform volunteer duties in rural communities for 12 months prior to entrance into a British university. Notably, O'Shea found that a year of volunteering overseas before attending college resulted in tremendous psychosocial development, and that "the gap-year experience accelerated this development by presenting challenges in unique environments to the learner" (O'Shea, 2011, p. 575). Students reported feeling that they were better at making decisions, more open to different cultures and perspectives, and had a greater appreciation for family and community as a result of their gap years. While the study did not go into great detail about the specific impact that these developmental gains had on their transition to college, some students are identified as having "difficulties adjusting to academic and social life at university" (O'Shea, 2011, p. 572).

Another study by Birch and Miller (2007) looked at Australian gap-year students to understand both the antecedents to their decisions and the academic outcomes in terms of grades once they reach the university. The study analyzed available data about students' scores on entrance exams and grades, characteristics such as gender, languages spoken at home, family composition, high school attendance, and socioeconomic status. Using a series

of statistical equations modeled on the factors they considered, the authors ran several analyses to draw conclusions about motivation to take a gap year and student academic performance after the gap year. Among their findings, Birch and Miller conclude that, in light of their analysis, "it is possible to suggest that taking a 1-year break between high school and university for travel or work appears to motivate students for study when they commence university" (Birch & Miller, 2007, p. 341).

Conditions Supporting the Proliferation of Gap-Year Programs

With the persistent popularity of the gap year in the United Kingdom, and its growing appeal in the United States, the industry of gap-year organizations has grown appreciably in recent years. Despite the paucity of conclusive research, gap-year promoters state definitively that their programs have measurable outcomes. Therefore, it is relevant to explore the conditions in place that support this expanded landscape of available programs.

As previously described, family support is a favorable condition for high school students who are interested in pursuing a gap year. In making a determination about delaying the start of college, students considering taking a gap year are focused on the options that seem financially and logistically viable, influenced by the emphases placed on certain decisions by the school and family, and steered by the perceived inevitability of attending college after the gap year.

Perhaps, in part, organized gap-year programs have met with such success because they bridge the gap between students' need to stop out and parents' need to continue their conscientious cultivation. In essence, this is a way of scripting the unscripted year -- filling the "gap" in a way that is consistent with the parents' approach. This allows the student to

identify an opportunity that does not differ so far from his parents' goals for him, but still stretch the opportunity for natural growth, something that he may consciously or subconsciously feel has been lacking in his life.

Establishing gap year options that satisfy both the student and the parents is a brilliant plan from a marketing standpoint – and the more these programs can legitimize their outcomes and demonstrate their purpose, the more attractive these will be to such families. Most of the programs are, after all, profit-making organizations despite what might be legitimate and supportable educational objectives. There exists now a thriving marketplace of gap-year experiences, offering a wide array of working, volunteering, teaching, traveling, studying, language immersion, outdoor adventures, and personal exploration. This marketplace appears to be targeted toward, and available to, a very narrow group of young people and high school communities, and do not appear to be intended for families who are likely to lack cultural capital or occupy lower socioeconomic strata.

Indeed, in families where cultural, social or economic capital is lacking, these gap-year programs are likely to seem less attractive because they require an additional investment – of time, money and effort – that only serves to delay the acquisition of a degree. Children in such families who have succeeded and are supported in their desire to go to college, particularly if the parents did not, may be more eager to go directly to college and begin to prove themselves intellectually. A college degree, of course, would eventually lead to an increase in capital for that student and family.

Appealing to the sensibilities and concerns of students and parents may be a goal of the gap-year programs. What other conditions appear to support the growth of this industry?

Although this question has not been studied, our collective experience with the current landscape of secondary and higher education offers some possible insights.

First, with the rising costs associated with college attendance, students want to be absolutely certain that they are ready for higher education. Add to that the mounting pressure of the college search and application process, including increased emphasis on standardized test scores and evidence of extracurricular involvement during high school, and it is not surprising that young people may find themselves exhausted and needing a break before pursuing a college degree. Next, high schools have an increased emphasis on community service, heightening students' awareness of societal issues they might address during a gap year of volunteering or interning. In addition, a number of colleges and universities have begun to mandate a gap year or gap semester for some students (Middlebury College and Harvard, among others), so that more students find themselves exploring their options.

Our increased global connectivity, made possible through electronic media ranging from basic live television to cutting-edge social media tools, has become a platform for exchange of information across the country and the world. Blogs and websites are used to transmit stories about students' gap-year experiences, and increase the intrigue of a gap year. Technology also has produced an impetus for greater understanding and awareness across geographic and cultural divides, not the least of which is the globalization of higher education, supporting the notion of incorporating international travel into a gap-year plan. All of these conditions have begun to make gap years less unusual and more accessible. Hence, gap-year programs have a broad foundation upon which to expand and flourish.

Theoretical Framework

A study of the gap-year phenomenon might approach analysis using any number of theoretical lenses. In light of the present study's research questions, along with the relevant research literature reviewed above, the central underlying themes regarding gap-year students relate to their growth and development. Therefore, a number of theoretical frames are applicable to this study. Several in particular connect most directly to the liminality and development that gap-year students experience during the first year of college. This section will review Bronfenbrenner's Ecology Model, Baxter Magolda's Self-Authorship Model, and indices of Relational Health, studied by Miller, Liang and others.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecology Model

An examination of the lives of gap-year students can be understood through the theoretical lens of Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecology model, which describes a set of nested layers – or systems – of human experience. Because students learn about themselves and the world around them through their interactions with others, and through the spheres in which they live and develop, Bronfenbrenner's Process-Person-Context-Time model is a useful frame for understanding first-year student experience. The interactions that occur between individuals and their immediate environments (affected by more distant environments) are called *proximal processes* (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). Bronfenbrenner refers to proximal processes as "enduring patterns of interaction between the person and his or her immediate environment" (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, 633).

In his model, Bronfenbrenner (1993) defined the spheres of interaction between an individual and his environment by describing them as interconnected, or nested, systems: the

microsystem (or the closest system to the individual, such as a family or peer group); the

mesosystem (what Bronfenbrenner describes as the "linkages and processes" that occur

among the microsystems of an individual); the *exosystem* (the systems outside the

microsystem, which may include school or work environments); and the *macrosystem* (the

broadest context, describing such areas as culture or historical circumstances). In later

iterations of his research (2005), Bronfenbrenner added the concept of the *chronosystem*,

which is an overlay of time that connects the individual to the interconnected systems. The

concept of time, in fact, seemed particularly relevant to the present research because of the

interruption that a gap year presents to a students' "cradle to college to cubicle to cemetery"

cycle (Ruiz, 2011), and for the way this chronosystem sets them apart from many of their

peers. "The accumulation of life experiences over time is a lasting effect of the

chronosystem on the individual, and students arrive at college with unique characteristics

shaped by common social forces and by individual experiences" (Renn & Arnold, 2003, page

273).

In their examination of the impact of peer culture on college student development,

Renn and Arnold (2003) provided a persuasive argument that the ecology model can be used

to help explain students' development in college. "A major tenet of Bronfenbrenner's model

holds that in order for development to occur, the individual must engage in increasingly

complex actions and tasks" (Renn & Arnold, 2003, page 267). In understanding this model,

it is important to consider Bronfenbrenner's concept of developmentally-instigative

characteristics, which "influence how an individual will experience an environment and how

the environment will respond to that individual" (Evans, et al., 2010, p. 162). Specifically,

gap-year students may possess some developmentally-instigative characteristics that helped

lead to their decision to take a gap year in the first place, and may continue to impact their interactions and decisions when they arrive at college.

Bryan and Simmons (2009) used Bronfenbrenner's model in their examination of first-generation students at Appalachian Kentucky University. In their qualitative analysis of a series of interviews with ten first-generation students, the researchers concluded that the students were influenced by their immediate family culture, and also by their *mesosystems* and *exosystems*. Since their parents had not attended college, their ability to influence the students' decisions, or even understand the decisions they faced, was limited. The authors concluded that "it is important to acknowledge these multiple layers of influence as they forge ahead, making decisions about their lives and careers" (Bryan & Simmons, 2009, p. 404). While the socioeoconomic situations of these Appalachian students were markedly different than is likely to be evident among most gap-year students, this ecological framework is nevertheless similarly relevant.

Although they did not claim to rely on the PPCT model, Reason, et al. (2006) considered a variety of cultures and experiences as influential in students' academic performance during the first two years of college. In fact, their narrative suggested the overlapping systems that Bronfenbrenner described:

[S]tudents come to college with a range of demographic, personal, and academic characteristics and experiences. These traits shape students' engagement with various aspects of their institution, and those involvements, in turn, are shaped by a variety of curricular, classroom, and out-of-class experiences and conditions. All of these dynamics occur within, and are themselves shaped by, an often-over-looked fourth domain, the institutional context, comprising an institution's organizational

characteristics, structures, practices, and policies, and the campus's faculty and peer

cultures and environments (Reason, et al., 2006, p. 153).

By analyzing student responses to the National Survey of Student engagement (NSSE), this

study concluded that multiple forces are at play as students gain competence during college.

The role of personal perception becomes extremely important in this theoretical

framework. Two first-year students may experience the same event or occurrence in very

different ways, and the PPCT model provides guidance to illustrate how each of their stories

during college is impacted by their micro, meso-, macro-, exo- and chrono-systems. The

gap-year students' own perceptions of their transition during the first year in college had the

potential to provide very rich data. As the findings will show in Chapters Four, Five and Six,

greater complexity in experience during the gap year caused participants to develop into

more self-authored college students.

Baxter Magolda's Theory of Self-Authorship

Considerable research has examined the meaning-making capacity of college

students. Marcia Baxter Magolda is at the forefront of this developmental work, basing her

theories on Kegan's (1994) orders of consciousness, his pivotal theory exploring individual

interpretation of events and relationships. The term "self-authorship" was drawn from

Kegan's theories, which he described as "the personal unfolding ways of organizing

experience that are not simply replaced as we grow but subsumed into more complex systems

of mind" (Kegan, 1994, p. 9).

By expanding on Kegan's theories, Baxter Magolda has broadened the scholarly

discussion about "the process of development toward increasingly complex orders of

consciousness most often found among traditional-age college students (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 99). That is, Baxter Magolda has applied this framework to college students specifically, tracing their meaning-making capacity through several developmental domains. Kegan (1994) made a distinction between "independence" and "autonomy," explaining that "the self-authorizing capacity to 'decide for myself' does not also have to implicate the stylistic preference to 'decide by myself'" (Kegan, 1994, p. 219). In Baxter Magolda's research, self-authorship is portrayed as "continuous and cyclical" (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012, p. 8) and reflects the movement of students from primarily external to primarily internal processes of meaning-making.

Baxter Magolda identified three discrete elements of meaning making, centered around cognitive, interpersonal and interpersonal development. Over time, and as a result of increased complexity of experience, student capacity for meaning making progresses from reliance primarily on external influences, through a crossroads, or combination of external and internal influences, and eventually to a reliance on beliefs that are mostly internally-defined (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012). The authors go on to explain that "[a] key aspect of this developmental cycle is the interplay between transition (the process of differentiation) and consolidation (the process of integration)" (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012, p. 9)

The cycles of differentiation and integration experienced by emerging adults are built around several key questions that Baxter Magolda uses to frame the way the capacity for meaning making leads individuals along the path to self-authorship. For example, cognitive and/or epistemological development occurs as individuals grapple with what to believe and why, asking the question, "How do I know?" Intrapersonal development happens as people examine how they see themselves, seeing answers to the question, "Who Am I?" And

finally, interpersonal development takes place as individuals consider themselves in relationship, exploring the question, "How do I relate to others?" (Baxter Magolda, 2004; Baxter Magolda & King, 2012). Baxter Magolda and King make it clear that, "[I]n each dimension, people actively construct their perspectives by interpreting their experiences" (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012, p. 5).

It is during the process of entering and leaving what Baxter Magolda and her colleagues have termed the "Crossroads" that a significant shift takes place. As it become more apparent that there may be a wide range of answers to these evocative questions, individuals at the Crossroads recognize the tension between what they have learned through external sources and what they are starting to define for themselves. Indeed, awareness of this dilemma is the first step in beginning to construct one's own way of making meaning, and cultivating one's internal voice (Baxter Magolda, 2004; Baxter Magolda & King, 2012).

Their answers to the three pivotal questions begin to evolve, and some strongly-held perspectives may be shed to make room for new meaning making to emerge. "It is differentiation, after all," wrote Kegan, "that creates the possibility of a new relationship to that with which one was formerly fused" (Kegan, 1994, p. 222). As young people begin to move through the Crossroads and start relying to a greater extent on their internally-defined values and beliefs, their relationships with others also begin to change. According to Baxter Magolda, the resulting self-authorship is "an ability to construct knowledge in a contextual world, an ability to construct an internal identity separate from external influences, and an ability to engage in relationships without losing one's internal identity" (Baxter Magolda, 1999, p. 12).

Relational Health

According to Evans, et al. (2010), self-authorship enhances relationships. "As people become more confident and clear about who they are, they are able to relate to others in a more honest and open manner" (Evans, et al., 2010, p. 187). At times of transition, people look to others to help them make sense of new and different information, a decidedly relational approach in which individuals are focused on their sense of belonging, and on making connections with others. It is an intensely relational process. In Baxter Magolda's work on self-authorship, "[t]he interpersonal domain refers to how people define their relationships with others, specifically whether they define themselves in relation to others or through their relationships with others" (Jones & Abes, 2013, p. 99). Therefore, in studying the transition of gap-year students into the college environment, I paid particular attention to the ways the students negotiated the transition through the formation and reconfiguration of their relationships.

Relational-cultural theory, developed by Miller, Jordan and others at the Wellesley Centers for Women (Jordan, 2008; Jordan, et al, 1991; Miller, 1986), grew out of research into women's psychological development, and the theory crystallizes the idea that healthy relationships involve both cognitive (thoughts) and emotional (feelings) dimensions between individuals. This approach began to give voice to the idea that mutuality, rather than power imbalance, was an essential platform for connection. In relationships that foster growth, "[e]ach person's thoughts and feelings are in motion, and simultaneously each experiences and knows more from the progress of that motion" (Miller, 1986, p. 4). The characteristics of growth-fostering relationships were described by Miller as "(a) mutual engagement, defined as mutual involvement, commitment, and sensitivity to the relationship; (b)

authenticity, defined as the freedom to be genuine in the relationship; (c) empowerment, defined as the capacity for action and sense of personal strength that emerges from the relationship; and (d) the ability to deal with conflict, defined as the ability to express, receive, and process diversity in the relationship" (Liang, et al., 2002a). Since the concept of relational health is based on the presence of these four growth-fostering qualities in a relationship, Liang and her colleagues developed an instrument called the Relational Health Index (RHI) to measure "growth fostering qualities across three domains: close friend, mentor, and community" (Liang et al., 2007, p. 37).

When students head to college, they are likely to seek and cultivate relationships across these three domains. Because authentic and empowering relationships must be nurtured over time, it can be especially meaningful for a first-year student to feel a sense of belonging in the community on campus. According to Liang's research, "a sense of belonging in a larger community may do more to reduce stress and feelings of loss during school transition than connections with one close friend or mentor" (Liang, et al., 2002, p. 32). For gap-year students, the experience of belonging to the community may be heavily influenced by their genuine interest in developing relationships with others and, as will be discussed in Chapter Six, related to their ability to listen to their internal voices as they make the transition.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Overview

This qualitative study used a phenomenological approach to learn about gap-year students' transition to college during the first year. Qualitative methodology is known to be an excellent technique for "studying an area in which little is known, to allow for unexpected responses" (Arnett & Tanner, 2006, p. 326). Phenomenology allows for research of maximum depth into a largely unstudied area of student experience, so this method has allowed me as a researcher get to the essence of the experiences of a small group of gap-year students during their first semester of college. According to Rossman and Rallis, phenomenological studies seek "to understand the deep meaning of a person's experiences and how she articulates these experiences" (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 97). To gain such understanding, Patton explains, "one must undertake in-depth interviews with people who have directly experienced the phenomenon of interest; that is, they have 'lived experience' as opposed to secondhand experience" (Patton, 2002, p. 104).

The analysis, therefore, was both deductive – informed in particular by the theories of Bronfenbrenner, Baxter Magolda and Liang – and inductive – emerging from the way the students themselves told their stories and focused on what they found to be significant or meaningful to them. Both concept mapping and periodic participant checking offered valuable feedback to the coding process, and also allowed students to become involved in further reflection about their experiences as gap-year students.

As introduced in Chapter One and explored in Chapter Two, the following primary research question and sub-questions have guided this study:

Research Question: How do gap-year students experience the transition to college during their first semester?

- **Subquestion 1**: What patterns or issues are evident in the academic, social, and personal adjustment to college made by gap-year students?

- **Subquestion 2**: To what extent do gap-year students identify their own experience during the first semester of college as different from those of traditional first-year students?

- **Subquestion 3**: What are the common antecedent conditions and gap-year experiences that shape the students' transition to the college environment?

To gather as much of the direct experience as possible in the students' own words, I designed a series of instruments to enable both individual reflection and group discussion. Through these interactions with the student participants, this design offered me the opportunity to interpret and understand the "meaning of events and interactions to ordinary people in particular situations" (Bogdan & Biklin, 2007, p. 25). Asking the students themselves about their own experiences allowed me to learn about their lives as they were living them, as a phenomenological approach invites the participants to reflect and report on their experiences.

Through several different interviewing techniques, the participants were invited to share reflections of their lives as college students with the researcher, allowing me "to enter into the other person's perspective" (Patton, 2002, p, 340) as their experiences in college began to take shape. It was important, therefore, for me to handle the interviews with both integrity and warmth, and to acknowledge my own biases during the process of getting to

know my participants. As Fontana and Frey remind us, "to learn about people we must remember to treat them as people, and they will uncover their lives to us" (Fontana & Frey, 1994, p. 374).

Data Collection and Timeline

Table 3a below illustrates the methods of data collection, with approximate time-frames for each stage of the study. For example, individual interviews with the 12 student participants were held at the start of the Fall semester 2013, and then again after they completed the Fall semester and received their final grades, in February or early March 2014. This allowed me to gather data at regular intervals, and also offered an opportunity for cumulative reflection. Additional details about data collection are included below in Table 3b.

Student participants were sent written prompts twice during their first semester – once each in October and December. In both instances, the students were asked to respond to the same brief prompt (see Appendix E) using a document sent as an email attachment. They either typed or hand-wrote their answers, added images when they felt inspired to do so, and sent their responses back to me electronically, as a .pdf attachment.

Web-based virtual focus groups were held using Google Hangout™ and took place in early November (see Tables 3a and 3b below). A Google Hangout™ is a live on-line chat with multiple people, similar to a Skype™ call. Two separate focus groups were conducted electronically on Sunday evening, November 24.

The final interview for each participant took place in February or early March 2014, once each of the students had begun the Spring semester, to allow the gap-year students to

reflect on their first college semester. This interview was in part a follow-up to the participants' responses during the initial interview, the written prompts, and the focus groups, and also provided a forum to check with them on some of the initial emerging themes. Table 3a (below) offers a timeline depicting the points of data collection.

September 2013	October 2013	November 2013	December 2013	January-February 2014
Initial Interview	Written Prompt #1	Focus Groups	Written Prompt #2	Final Interview
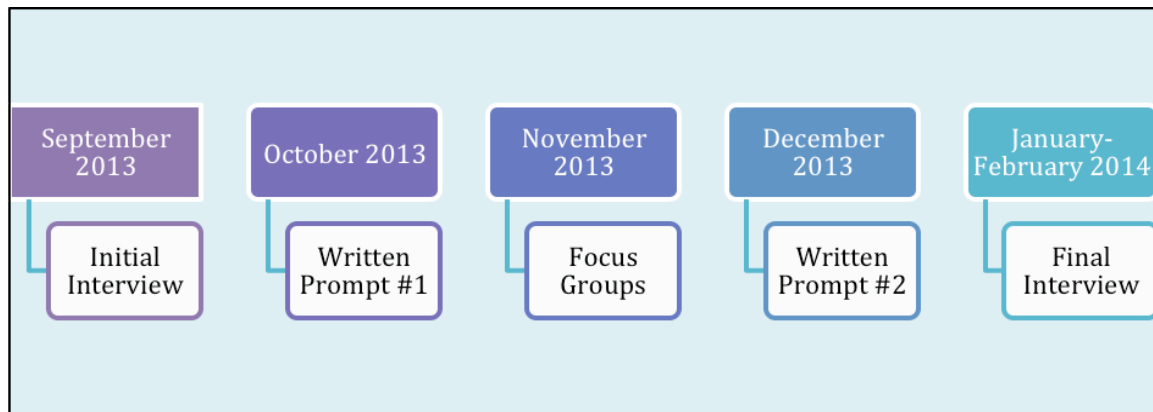
Table 3a: Sequence of Data Collection

Data Source	Number	Description	Timing
Interviews (Two 90-minute individual interviews with each student)	Two (2) per student, in the Fall and Spring, for a total of 24 interviews	In-depth interviews with four first-year student participants at each of three different institutions in the Northeastern US	September 2013 and February 2014
Focus Groups (60-minute group discussions)	Two (2) groups of students	Two focus groups involving 11 of the 12 participants were conducted during the Fall semester, to provide additional data and to improve validity through member checking	November 2013
Written responses	Two (2) per student, for a total of 24 written responses	Each participant was asked to respond in writing to written prompts	Once per month in October 2013 and December 2013

Table 3b: Data Collection Details

Institutional Sites

To recruit participants for this study, I collaborated with the Dean of Admission at each of the three schools to solicit volunteers for the study, which allowed me to identify four interested students on each of three campuses for a total of 12 student participants for this study. The following information explains the rationale and strategies for identifying participants.

The sites for this study were drawn from three different higher education institution types in the greater Boston area: a small, private, liberal arts college; an Ivy League university; and a technically-focused research university. In addition to their geographic proximity to me as a researcher and to each other, these schools are all highly-selective, nationally-known, private institutions, and all three attract a cohort of gap-year students into the first-year class each Fall. All three schools are predominantly residential, with the majority of undergraduates living in campus housing. Choosing these particular schools is an example of purposive sampling, as Patton (2002) would suggest, and also reflects the fact that I have relatively convenient access to these campuses. Choosing students from these three institutions also allowed for maximum structural variation, which Patton reminds us "avoids one-sidedness of representation of the topic" (Patton, 2002, p. 109), as they brought perspectives from their different campuses to the study, in addition to their diverse perspectives as gap-year students. I did not use my own campus as a research site.

For the purposes of this study, I used the following names for these schools (see Appendix D for further information):

- *Archer Polytechnical Institute (API)* is a medium-sized, technically-focused research university with about 4,500 undergraduate students, along with a majority population of about 6,800 graduate students.

- *Darcy University (DU)* is a medium-sized Ivy League research university with an undergraduate student population of about 6,500 students, along with about 2,600 graduate students in a variety of doctoral degree-granting programs.

- *Satis College (SC)* is a small, coeducational liberal arts college. The student body is approximately 1,800 students, and there are no graduate programs or graduate students on the campus.

Participants

The unit of analysis of this study was the student. Rather than attempting to survey a large number of gap-year students, this study was limited to just 12 student participants, following Patton's suggestion that identifying the number of participants purposefully allows the researcher "to select information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study" (Patton, 2002, p. 46).

The number of participants was purposefully small, to allow for both depth and saturation. O'Reilly and Parker (2013) examined the notion of saturation, which has been used as an evaluative criterion of qualitative research. Because sampling is concerned with "the richness of information" (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013, p. 192), an adequate number of participants is related to the specific research questions and the appropriateness of the sample. These authors argue that many researchers are confused about the meaning of saturation, and the ways it can be applied to qualitative research. They also point to the

notion of transparency as an essential element in qualitative research. With these concerns in mind, both saturation and transparency were goals of my research design.

Collaborating with the Deans of Admission on the three campuses, I invited student participants, in an attempt to satisfy several basic criteria, including:

a) Identifying four students from each of three different institutions;

b) Working with three institutions in the same general geographic area, representing different student body sizes and different institutional foci;

c) Including roughly an equal number of men and women;

d) Including students from each of three different kinds of hometown settings: Urban, Suburban, and Rural;

e) Including students from each of three different kinds of high school academic experiences: public, private, and religiously-affiliated; and

f) Ensuring representation of the widest possible range of gap-year experiences, across all participants in the study.

These selection criteria were central to the selection of the participants because they provided an opportunity to compare certain characteristics; I wondered as a researcher whether there might be some differences related to a student's high school experience, or gender, for example. Perhaps in reviewing the data I would see some trends that seemed to cluster around particular personal characteristics. While I hesitate to draw any clear conclusions along these particular lines, my reflections on the group of participants will be discussed in Chapter Seven, under limitations and implications for further research.

After receiving initial agreement from the Deans of Admission at all three institutions, I requested a Site Permission Letter for this study from the Institutional Research

departments at each of the schools. My request was to be granted approval to contact

students from their database of members of the incoming Class of 2017 who had taken a gap

year after graduating from high school in Spring 2012. I asked for permission to invite the

students to participate in all three segments of the study: individual interviews, focus groups,

and responses to written prompts. In order to find four participants from each of the schools,

it was necessary to invite a larger number at the outset, to allow for some to decline the

invitation and for some attrition for other reasons. Once I had submitted the Site Permission

Letters from all three schools, the study was approved by the Institutional Review Board.

 Immediately upon receiving approval from the IRB at Boston College and support

from each of the individual institutions in July 2013, I worked directly with the Admissions

staff at each school to identify and invite the students to participate. Since it would not have

been appropriate for the schools to give me access to students without their consent, I drafted

a letter (see Appendix A) that described the purpose of the study, and asked each Dean to

send the letter via email to the first-year students on campus who had elected to take a gap

year before matriculating. This allowed the schools to maintain control over their student

information, without disclosing names or contact information directly to me. Included in the

letter was a link to a brief Qualtrics^{TM} survey (see Appendix B), which interested students

were asked to complete. It is important to note here that one of the institutions in the study,

Darcy University, also admits a cohort of students annually who are required to take a year

off before starting as a first-year student; these students were excluded from this study

because the decision to take a gap year was not theirs initially. During the month of August,

these invitation letters were sent via email by the Deans of Admissions at all three schools to

incoming students. Students who were interested filled out the Qualtrics™ survey, and I was able to track their responses.

With initial responses from 31 interested students, I began to contact students who expressed interest in being a part of the study. It was at this point that I made some determinations based on gender, high school, hometown, and gap-year experiences. I wrote to every student who responded to thank them for their interest, and then followed up subsequently with students who would help me create a well-balance cohort.

Although I had not planned to include international students in the pool of participants, my initial interest survey (Appendix B) was too general to allow me to identify the internationals within the group. Based on the limited information I received in the initial survey, I began by contacting the first two males and two females at each school. Once the students agreed to participate according to the timeline and description I shared during our phone conversation, I added them to the final list of participants. Indeed, once I contacted the students by phone for a preliminary conversation about participating in the study, the excitement in their voices (and the very interesting things they did during their gap years) made it difficult for me to turn anyone down. And because not every student I attempted to contact was responsive, I decided in the end to include the two international students who had responded, and they ended up bringing additional elements of richness to the study.   I scheduled brief telephone conversations with each potential final participant, to be sure they were fully aware of the purpose and nature of the study, and to ascertain their level of enthusiasm.   Once we agreed on the details, each student was asked to read and sign an informed consent form (see Appendix F) before taking part in the first individual interview.

The 12 students who agreed to take part in the study were informed before the first interview that they would receive incentives for their participation. The total value of these incentives was $100 per participant. The schedule of incentives was as follows:

After initial 90-minute interview	$10 Amazon giftcard (via email)
After first written response	$10 Amazon giftcard (via email)
After focus group	$20 Amazon giftcard (via email)
After second written response	$10 Amazon giftcard (via email)
At the end of the final 90-minute interview	$50 Amazon giftcard (in person)

After the initial interview, each student received a $10 Amazon gift card. After each of the written responses, each student received another $10 gift card, which I sent electronically to each student along with a note of appreciation. A $20 gift card was sent to the 11 students who participated in the focus groups. When we met for the final interview, each participant received a $50 gift card to Amazon. The funds on the cards could be applied by the students to school supplies or books, in support of the students' educational goals.

Research Design

In Chapter Two, I described the phenomenon of the gap-year student and the prominence this idea has gained in the popular press during the past 20 years. Limited research has been done in this country about gap-year students, and overall the existing research to date has looked at certain markers (GPA, satisfaction with gap year, etc. – cite)

but has not delved into how these students experience the transition back into a structured educational environment after having taking this time off. Therefore, rather than gathering quantitative data about the numbers of gap-year students or their performance in college, or focusing on a summary of the activities gap-year students choose to pursue during the gap year itself, I chose a qualitative methodology for this study, with a focus on the students' own insights into their transition during the first college year, after having pursued a gap year. It is through their personal stories that begin to understand how gap-year students make their way as they adjust to the college environment, and I believe this is an important contribution to the field.

Qualitative methodologies were used to collect, analyze, and report the findings of this study. Collection, as detailed above, involved three means of listening to the stories that gap-year students tell about their process of adjusting to the first year of college. To make sense of and code the data, I used several modes of coding, as described by Strauss and Corbin (1990). The process involved open coding, in which a researcher looks at the data to see what themes emerge; axial coding, in which a researcher finds relationships among the themes; and selective coding, in which a researcher focuses on certain aspects of the data, often using a pre-determined theoretical lens. In reporting my findings, I have made a concerted effort to retain the authentic perspectives of the participants.

The coding process was also done in stages, because during the coding process, the initial set of theoretical frames I had been using to shape my observations (including Bronfenbrenner's Ecology Theory) seemed somewhat less complete than I had initially expected. Rather, through open and axial coding, clear themes of self-authorship began to emerge. Therefore, I returned to my data analysis after initially completing the coding

process, to look more specifically at the key ingredients of self-authorship as defined by Baxter Magolda, and also to pay more careful attention to evidence of relational health, as described in the work of Liang and others.

Data for this study were collected in three separate, but intersecting, ways: Individual Interviews, Focus Groups, and responses to Written Prompts.

Individual Interviews

Interviews are an established primary method of gathering data in phenomenological studies. Researchers recognize that interviews "vary in the degree to which they are structured" (Bogdan & Biklin, 2007, p. 104). Because I was interested in comparing data across the 12 subjects, I used the same semi-structured interview protocol with each participant. To encourage the subjects to tell their stories and shape the discussion, I also allowed the conversations to develop around their answers and ideas.

The individual interviews took place twice: once at the start of the Fall semester (September-early October 2013) and then again at the start of the Spring semester (February-early March 2014), and involved all 12 students. I traveled to their campuses to meet them on their own turf, arranging to meet them in private spaces in campus buildings. Each student was questioned one-on-one by the researcher about his or her experience as a first-year student, in two personal, semi-structured interviews of approximately 90 minutes each. The semi-structured interview protocols for both September and February are attached (see Appendix A).

Focus Groups

Video-based focus groups with the gap-year students were held in November, when the students had just passed the midpoint of their first semester. Bogdan and Biklin suggest that focus groups offer qualitative researchers the chance to learn about a range of views, or to encourage discussion around "a topic that informants might not be able to talk so thoughtfully about in individual interviews" (Bogdan & Biklin, 2007, p. 109). Similarly, Rosman and Rallis suggest that young adults in focus groups may "find a group setting more conducive to talking about their lives" (Rosman & Rallis, 2003, p. 194). Student participants in the focus groups were asked to talk about how they were adjusting as first-year students during their first semester in college. These discussions were designed to encourage dialogue among the student participants, and to identify some shared perceptions of their experiences as first-year students. Coding of the data from these two focus groups generated some themes and concepts drawn from the students' own experience. Focus group protocols are attached as Appendix D.

I opted to hold the focus groups using Google Hangouts™ because the students in my study attended three different institutions, in the same geographic region but not near each other. I also felt this approach showed respect for their very busy lives, utilizing available technology with which students are typically quite comfortable. Participants were informed during the planning process that implicit in their willingness to participate in the Hangouts was an understanding that their identities would be disclosed somewhat to other students involved in the study. For example, the students' first names and current schools were used during introductions, and through Google Plus they could view other participants' email addresses. They were given the chance to opt out if they so desired.

While I had hoped to involve six students in each of the two focus groups, the students' own schedules resulted in 11 students participating: four in the first focus group, and seven in the second one. All three schools were represented in each of the focus groups. The Google Hangout[TM] technology was not glitch-free, and at times the discussion was hampered by technological challenges such as unintentionally-muted microphones, or loss of connectivity, which occasionally led to someone dropping out and then rejoining the conversation. Each focus group was audio recorded.

The focus groups followed a semi-structured format, with the goals of sparking dialogue among the participants. Once the conversations began, I encouraged the students to ask questions of one another, and to follow threads of discussion that felt important or interesting to them. With occasional interjections from me as the researcher, the focus groups explored some useful themes, which will be discussed in later chapters.

Responses to Written Prompts

As noted on the timeline, in both October 2013 and December 2013, each participant was sent by email an open-ended written prompt. The prompt was the same both times, and participants were encouraged to spend just a few minutes crafting creative written responses to the prompts and sending them back to the researcher electronically. The text for the written prompts is attached as Appendix E.

Students were asked to provide written responses in hopes that these might elicit some thoughts and reactions from participants that were different than what was shared in individual interviews or focus groups. This method of data collection is also respectful of the

participants' time (rather than asking them to take part in monthly interviews during their entire first semester) and also was hoped to provide an added dimension of insight.

Uses of Technology

This study made use of current technology in several important ways:

1) Qualtrics^{TM} survey collected initial information from interested gap-year students.

2) Google Hangouts^{TM} were used to create virtual focus groups while students were on their own campuses, often in their own residence hall rooms.

3) Written prompts were sent to students electronically (as an electronic attachments); students responded to them and returned them to the researcher as an electronic attachment.

4) Two of the final interviews were held via Google Hangout^{TM}, because scheduling challenges made it difficult for us to connect in person on their campuses.

5) Doodle^{TM} polls were used to identify students' availability for individual interviews and Google Hangouts.

What is most significant about the technology is that it provided opportunities for interaction that would not have otherwise been available; it enabled me as a researcher to arrange for the collection of data without having to be physically present on three different college campuses at five different times during the academic year. In addition, I was able to connect with students through a platform that is familiar and comfortable to them. It certainly did not replace or fully replicate face-to-face interactions, but served as an important data-gathering technique. The written reflections, in particular, provided a format for some students to express themselves differently than they might have in an interview

setting. They used italics or capital letters, and graphics or photos in a few instances, to express their thoughts and feelings. The prompt, while open-ended, allowed for reflections that were specific and genuine, coming directly from the hearts and minds of the student participants.

The focus groups were the most challenging aspect of data collection. Because students were on three different campuses, it would not have been realistic to expect them to be able to get together in person on a given day. Since many students are familiar with video chat interfaces such as Skype^{TM} and FaceTime^{TM}, looked for a way to offer a live video chat for a group. Google Hangout^{TM} was the best option I found — it allowed for up to ten people to join the chat at one time. Therefore, I arranged two consecutive Google Hangouts^{TM}, hoping to have students equally split between the two focus groups.

Anonymity vs. Confidentiality

Guidelines for research with human subjects set important ethical principles for treating participants in any study with dignity and respect. (Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1979). At the outset of any qualitative research study, it is imperative that the researcher inform the participants of their right to confidentiality. The informed consent form is designed to spell out the details of the study and the ways in which the results will be shared. The standard clause from Boston College's Informed Consent Form indicates that "in any sort of report we may publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you" (see Appendix F). That is, participants will not be recognizable as individuals in the finished manuscript.

Recently, however, behavioral researchers have begun to draw distinctions between dichotomous and continuous approaches to confidentiality. Participants, says Iphofen (2009), have the right to be identified if they want to be, and we as researchers should not presume to protect them from their own identities. In addition, Iphofen draws a distinction between anonymity, which is dichotomous, and confidentiality, which is a variable dimension. With this perspective in mind, it was my obligation as a researcher "not to compromise pre-agreed levels of confidentiality and anonymity" (Iphofen, 2009, p. 92).

My initial analysis of data from the first round of interviews taught me several things about this tension between anonymity and confidentiality. First, I had begun to detect some connective themes across all the participants, so decided I would need to do some participant checking to see if these themes resonated with them. The focus groups, which would put them in contact with one another, seemed to be an ideal chance to have the students discuss the themes. Next, I found that the students' stories were rich and fascinating and thick with detail (Geertz, 1973) so I became concerned that obscuring some details would dilute the true meaning and importance of what they had shared with me.

In the end, I collaborated with my participants to decide jointly the level of accurate detail I should include, something short of iron-clad confidentiality. At the conclusion of the final interview, I included the following explanation:

In the agreement you signed in the fall, I promised to obscure your identity in my finished dissertation. It read: "The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report we may publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you."

The challenge for me as a qualitative researcher is to protect the confidentiality of my participants, but without losing the essence of their stories. I want to be able to talk about what each of you brings to the discussion, and sometimes your particular experiences or characteristics are quite relevant. However, your story is your story. I don't want to presume the level of confidentiality that you desire, so I would like to involve you in the process of determining which facts about you will be obscured.

At this point in our conversations, I asked for their help. I had developed a supplemental confidentiality agreement, which included a clause promising that I would not presume to know how they felt and would share my preliminary findings with them so they can give input or change their mind before I finalized my dissertation. Together with each participant, we reviewed a worksheet that I had compiled, identifying some key facets of each person's story that he or she might feel would make that individual recognizable to readers of the dissertation. We decided together which characteristics should be preserved accurately, and which should be modified in some way to protect their identities. We discussed the possibility that, if someone they know well happened to read this dissertation, they might be able identify them based upon some of the descriptions and quotes that have been included. I incorporated the students' input into the way I have reported their stories, and the level of detail I have provided in the tables and discussion in Chapters Four, Five, Six and Seven.

In most cases, the students genuinely appreciated being asked and rarely seemed concerned about anything they had shared with me finding its way into the finished

dissertation. Along with the names of the institutions, I have changed each student's name (most, in fact, chose their own pseudonyms) and did not specifically identify such details as their hometown or school. In some instances, based upon the participant's request, I have modified other, less critical details such as number of siblings, or their home state. When I had sufficiently revised my findings, I shared a draft of the findings with the participants and invited their feedback. Three of the 12 participants gave me some minor feedback.

It may be seen as unconventional to invite participants to help craft the presentation of their stories in a qualitative study. It is my hope, however, that the "gold standard" of qualitative research will be revised to allow subjects to have a chance to give input into the level of anonymity that researchers purport to provide. Iphofen (2011) reminded us that "[w]e should celebrate and encourage the diversity and inventiveness one finds in qualitative research, and the flexibility and thoughtfulness about those being studied that qualitative researchers frequently demonstrate alongside their methodological innovations." (Iphofen, 2011, p. 445) The willingness of participants in this study to partner with me in determining the best way to share their stories allows me to feel confident that I have handled the data thoughtfully and appropriately.

Analysis and Reliability

Analysis of the large volume of qualitative data from multiple interactions with my participants required a careful approach. I gained inspiration for the qualitative content analysis of the focus groups, written responses, and individual interviews from the work of both Spradley (1979), whose work focused on domain and taxonomic analysis, and Glaser and Straus (1967), who provided an explanation of grounded theory. I used Glaser and

Straus's concepts of open, axial and selective coding to analyze and report my findings. This involved a process of developing categories, identifying connections, and noticing thematic relationships, in an effort to get to a deeper level of understanding of the data. As I generated a coding system from the interview, focus group, and written response data, I started from an emic perspective – that is, using the language and concepts raised by the students themselves — to begin to organize the data into categories and themes. This allowed the students' own ideas to guide the process, and "[s]imilarities and convergences can be established after the analytic core of categories has emerged" (Glaser & Straus, 1967, p. 37).

All of the student responses, including the focus group conversations, were recorded, transcribed and loaded into HyperResearch™, a qualitative data analysis program which allows for coding and sorting of qualitative data. Using HyperResearch™, I was able to code the data based on the themes that emerged initially from the students' words and stories (a process of open coding, as described by Charmaz, 2005). In addition, after completing an initial analysis based on my preliminary coding scheme, I returned to the data and did additional coding based on some of the concepts relevant to my initial findings, relying on a process of constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Straus, 1967) to integrate these data and identify emerging themes. To best capture the essence of the lived experience of these students, I also invited my participants to give me feedback on the initial codes and emergent themes prior to finalizing the findings.

A table showing the full range of codes, along with the "clusters" that emerged after several rounds of analysis, is included as Figure 3. Further details demonstrating how the Gap Year Impact Model emerged from the codes and clusters is included in Appendix G.

Greater detail about how the coding process led to the development of the Gap Year Impact Model will be discussed in Chapter Four.

To provide inter-rater reliability, I asked a colleague who is both a professional in the field of higher education and a doctoral student in the Higher Education program at Boston College to code excerpts of interviews using my initial system of codes and clusters. We then met to compare our coding results. According to Patton (2002), a second reviewer of qualitative coding should find that the initial coder's categories are a good fit for the data. The process of comparison revealed that the data, indeed, were appropriately captured by the coding categories. In addition, perhaps because my colleague was guided by the codes and clusters that had emerged from my process of coding, he detected with remarkable specificity several of the sub-themes that I had identified. This helped to support the reliability of the analysis.

During the final round of individual interviews, I asked each student participant to react to some initial themes I had begun to identify in my review of the earlier interview, focus group, and written response data, as a means of member-checking (Creswell & Clark, 2007; Patton, 2002). The findings described in Chapters Four, Five and Six were informed by the students' positive, negative, and neutral responses to those initial themes, and by my colleague's coding results.

Both in-depth interviewing and focus groups are qualitative research methods carefully described by Fontana and Frey (1994). By combining these strategies with an opportunity for participants to provide responses in writing, I avoided some of the challenges that each of them separately may have presented. For example, a "group think" mentality may have emerged from solely focus group discussions, so the individual interviews

provided comparative data. In addition, the written responses allowed participants to document their thoughts and feelings during the course of the first semester, rather than just at the start of the Fall semester and the start of the Spring semester. Finally, I also used part of the final interview to review the participants' previous comments and ask them to provide further reflection about the themes they had heard during the focus group.

The collection of data gleaned from interviews, focus groups, and written responses to prompts provided a triangulation that allowed me to conduct a multifaceted comparison of the lives of this group of gap-year students. The focus groups also offered additional insight through member checking, which helped with the depth of the coding process and supported the overall validity of my analysis. After the initial draft of my findings chapter, I also offered all 12 participants the opportunity to read and react to the data I had collected, which provided a final round of member-checking before completing the final draft of this dissertation.

As noted by Creswell and Clark (2007), validity in qualitative research rests with the participants, which suggests that reviewing my findings with the students in my study (member-checking) was an important aspect of analyzing the data. "In qualitative research, the inquirer is interested in the accuracy of the final report or account. To this end, the themes may be taken back to participants … or the researcher may use multiple sources of information to provide evidence for a theme" (Creswell & Clark, 2007, p. 31). This sentiment is echoed by Patton (2002), who asserted that a set of coding categories "should be credible to the persons who provided the information which the set is presumed to assimilate" (p. 466).

While it is not possible to generalize from a qualitative study (Creswell, 2007), essentially, the value of this study was tied to my ability to enhance the way we understand the experiences of the first-year students who participated. Maxwell (1992) offers some helpful insights into the need to consider five levels of validity in qualitative research: descriptive validity, interpretive validity, theoretical validity, generalizability, and evaluative validity. Throughout the data collection and analysis, my responsibility as a researcher has been to strive to avoid inference during the descriptive parts of my analysis [descriptive validity]; to apply an emic approach in support of the interpretive validity of the study; to apply a theoretical understanding that is truly applicable to the student experiences I studied [theoretical validity]; to consider carefully any suggestion that this research is generalizable to other students or groups of students (linking especially to existing literature on first-year college students); and finally, to do my best to examine the results of each element of my study in connection to the other results, as a means of better understanding the students' experience [evaluative validity]. Overall, it has been essential for me to engage reflexively with my research, and to acknowledge the limitations in my ability to fully eliminate any threat to the validity of this work.

Perhaps most significantly, it has been important for me to honor the stories, accomplishments, and challenges of each of the participants in this study. My analysis of their experiences was done thoughtfully and with great care to maintain respect for them as individuals, and for the personal reflections they have shared with me.

Gap Year Planning, Preparation and Feasibility	Gap year Encounters	Changing Relationships	Self-Authorship	Adjusting to College
Gap Year Decision making	Challenge leads to growth	Dating/ boyfriend/ girlfriend	Important to Me	Academic engagement
Expectations about going to college	Relationships during the gap year	Developing friendships	Confidence	Enthusiasm for school
Family influence	Freedom	Affinity Groups	FOMO	Extracurricular Engagement
Family support	Responsibility	Family contact	Relevance	Opportunities and Encouragement?
Finances	Goals for gap year	Friendships during HS	Self	Free Time
Getting away	Independence	High School friends	Self-Efficacy	Freedom
Goals for gap year	Job/working	Maintaining Friendships	Agency	FOMO
Timing	Nervous/worried	Meeting other gap year students	Self-Authorship	Goals for college
High school background	Internship	Family relationships	Meaning Making	Nervous/worried
HS Academics	Travel	Relationships during the gap year	Maturity	Thinking about the gap year
Advice	Expectations	Relationships with HS teachers	Living in the Present	Talking about the gap year
College Search Process	Language	Support	Changes noticed by others	Studying/working in school
Reactions to gap year idea	Real Life	Mentors	Knowing myself	Noticing distinctions between gappers and nons
Stress in HS	Service	Social Pressure	Worldview/ perspective	Courses
Sports in HS	Sense of time	Siblings	How I changed	Academic performance
Social Pressure in HS	Contact with family	Extended family	Goals for future	Transition to college
Planning		Family support	Privacy	Timing
Parents' Education				Success
				Stress
				Social Pressure
				Sense of Belonging
				Privilege
				Relevance
				Contact with family
				College courses
				Preparing for college

Figure 3: Codes to Clusters

CHAPTER FOUR:

SAMPLE, MODEL OVERVIEW, AND GAP YEAR ANTECEDENTS

Introduction

As previously described, a number of popular books and trade articles about gap-year students suggest that taking a gap year helps students do better in school, or generally be more successful, when they arrive at college. Experts promoting gap years, including Holly Bull (2006), and Karl Haegler and Rae Nelson (2005, 2013), suggest that when gap-year students arrive at college, they are likely to be better students, and earn better grades. A thoughtful listener or reader might ask, "better than what?" It is unclear what benchmarks are being used to stake this claim. As discussed in Chapter Two, some existing research suggests that gap-year students tend to have higher GPAs than students who have not taken a gap year, even as the studies acknowledge that there may be some confounding factors of parents' education and socioeconomic background (Clagett, 2013, personal communication). This is used to further extrapolate that gap-year students arrive at college more academically-focused, perhaps than other students, or perhaps than they would have been if they had gone directly to college after high school.

Despite this limited prior research, I maintain it is not possible to measure whether gap-year students earn better grades in college than they would have if they had not taken a gap year. As these findings will illustrate, I assert that not only is this impossible to ascertain, but it also is not the essential question.

Rather, this study reveals that students who have taken a gap year arrive at college more likely to demonstrate "Sovereign Engagement" in their experiences. In other words, gap-year students are predisposed to begin college with a heightened sense of self-authorship, which in turn allows them to make thoughtful and authentic choices as they transition during the first year. In some instances, this may translate into excellent grades and focused attention to academic work. In others, it may mean that the student is acutely focused on his or her personal goals — which may or may not include outstanding academic performance.

This chapter describes the findings of this study, tracing the data analysis that has led to this conclusion and to the concept of "Sovereign Engagement." The Gap Year Impact Model (Figure 4) has been designed to encapsulate these results, and the next two chapters will also review the findings about making the transition to college after having taken a gap year.

As described in Chapter Three, these findings are the result of the collection and analysis of qualitative data. The research question and subquestions sought to explore the experience of 12 first-year students who had taken a gap year after high school and before college, to pursue other interests. The students were recruited to participate from three different New England institutions, based on their willingness to be involved in the study, and also according to several criteria that helped to maximize the variation in the sample.

A qualitative study of this kind, which seeks to describe in detail the common and disparate experiences of a small group of individuals, should look for specific threads of connection among participants. Therefore, the 12 participants shared some key characteristics, including their attendance at one of three highly-selective institutions in the

northeast, and their status as first-year students at the time the study began. If threads of connection exist beyond those similarities and across a variety of experiences, I surmised, perhaps greater insights could be drawn.

All twelve students persisted through the sequence of five study interactions, from September 2013 through February 2014. Therefore, I had a continuity of communication with them, and felt that I came to understand them and their stories well. Each participant was, in her or his own ways, intelligent, introspective, personable, ambitious, and pleasant. A table introducing the twelve students participating in the study is included below as Table 4a. A brief biographical sketch of each participant is also included as Appendix J.

Overview of the Findings

Chapters Four, Five and Six are organized by several major themes that emerged through the analysis of the data, using the students' own thoughts and reflections to provide depth and richness to the findings. According to their own descriptions, gap-year students participating in this study developed a greater sense of responsibility for their own decisions once they arrived at their respective colleges. In these three chapters, I describe the derivation of the "Gap Year Impact Model" from the process of coding interview, focus group and written prompt data. These chapters also analyze the students' processes of deciding to take a gap year, their experiences during their gap years, and their transitions to college during their first several months on campus.

This study found that, despite the wide variety of activities that students pursued during their gap years, and despite their disparate personal stories, there were some common outcomes in terms of gap year students' adjustment to the first year of college. Most

significantly, gap-year students approach their first year of college with a strong propensity toward sovereign engagement, less commonly attributable to their first-year peers.

As described earlier, this study posed a primary research question: "How do gap-year students experience the transition to college during their first semester?", and three important subquestions: "What patterns or issues are evident in the academic, social, and personal adjustment to college made by gap-year students?"; "To what extent do gap-year students identify their own experience during the first semester of college as different from those of traditional first-year students?"; and "What are the common antecedent conditions and gap-year experiences that shape the students' transition to the college environment?"

To answer these questions, I conducted a thorough analysis of the five sets of participant data collected from September 2013 through March 2014. Each student participated in a 90-minute initial interview, submitted a written response to a written prompt in October, participated in a virtual focus group (via Google Hangout^{TM}) in November, submitted a written response to a written prompt in December, and participated in a 90-minute final interview in February or early March. In addition, I coded and analyzed all the field notes and research journals that I had produced during this six-month period.

The Gap Year Impact Model grew out of careful analysis of the initial raw data. Coded data from interviews, focus groups, and written responses to prompts was grouped into categories, or clusters, of similar themes. A more detailed description of the process of coding the data is included in Chapter Three, including a table (Figure 3) showing the full range of codes, along with the clusters that emerged after several rounds of analysis. For example, descriptions of the range of activities that comprised the students' gap-year experiences, including their reflections on what was significant or important about those

experiences, were grouped together into a category called "Gap Year Encounters." As it

became more clear that these encounters were the source of developmental growth, these

stories of encounters formed the basis of the "Encounter" portion of the Gap Year Impact

Model. For further clarity, Appendix G shows the way these clusters eventually became

discrete elements of the Model, including sample comments from the participants that

demonstrate the way the Gap Year Impact Model emerged from the clusters.

Gap Year Study Participants

Name	Gender	School*	Hometown	High school type	Gap year activities
Andy	M	API	Urban PA	Private	Worked for a small start-up tech company in Silicon Valley
Daniel	M	API	Suburban MA	Religious	Studied at a Yeshiva in Israel
Jackie	F	DU	Rural NJ	Private boarding	Lived and took classes in Europe, attended cooking school, WWOOFing[a], learned to sail
Julie	F	DU	Urban CA	Public	Worked two minimum wage jobs, lived in Turkey and attended school there
Layla	F	SC	Urban NY	Private	Interned at a non-profit, lived and volunteered in India
Lena	F	DU	Suburban PA	Public	Taught in an urban middle school through City Year
Maria	F	API	Rural WV	Public, affiliated with local university	Worked two minimum wage jobs, traveled to South America to learn Spanish and do research
Mark	M	SC	Suburban NY	Public	Went on a NOLS[b] mountaineering trip, studied music, trained for athletics
Paulina	F	SC	Urban Latin America	Private	Volunteered, took post-high school classes, interned in medicine and business
Peter	M	DU	Urban Europe	Private international school	Worked, traveled, spent time at home and volunteered abroad
Tessa	F	API	Urban NY	Religious	Tutored through national service program in Israel
Vinny	M	SC	Suburban AZ	Public	Trained for athletics, researched at local med center, hiked

Note. School names are pseudonyms (see Chapter 3). DU = Darcy University, an Ivy-League university in the northeast US; SC = Satis College, a small liberal arts college in the northeast US; API = Archer Polytechnical Institute, a technological research university in the northeast US

[a] World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms

[b] National Outdoor Leadership School

Table 4a: Gap Year Study Participants

Study Participants

Before meeting with the student participants in person, I had begun to gather information about them that became the foundation for my familiarity with them and their stories. Through the initial survey they had completed, I knew their names, their genders, their birthdates, and the kinds of high schools they had attended. I had also asked briefly about the activities they had engaged in during their gap years, which allowed me to select participants who represented the widest possible range of experiences. I also spoke with each student by phone before confirming their participation.

During our initial interviews, the participants were encouraged to explain the who-what-where-when-why of each component of the year. Specifically, I wanted to hear them talk about the decisions they had made, the people with whom they had spent their time, the things they had learned, the ways in which they had stayed connected to their families or friends from home. Their descriptions were rich and thick with detail; students loved talking about how they spent their year and seemed eager to spend more of our time together discussing the gap year itself, so pivotal were their encounters. In several cases, I had to cut short the descriptions of the gap-year experiences so that there was enough time remaining to explore the other questions I had prepared.

The students as a group were a bright and interesting mix of backgrounds and lives. Collectively, these seven young women and five young men spoke eight different languages and had come from seven states and two countries outside of the US. Five had attended public high schools, five had attended private secular high schools, and two had attended religiously-sponsored high schools. During their gap years, they had done internships, worked in minimum wage jobs, worked in high paying jobs, volunteered their time, farmed,

sailed, taught English to schoolchildren, learned to cook, studied scripture, traveled to new places, gained proficiency in new languages, formed new lasting friendships, lived with family members, lived with host families, and lived alone. We could have spent all our time discussing the details of their gap years, and I believe the students would have welcomed the chance to do so. However, because the focus of my research was their transition during the first year of college, we used the majority of our time together to consider the gap-year experiences retrospectively, and in light of their adjustment to the college environment.

Andy, Daniel, Jackie, Julie, Layla, Lena, Maria, Mark, Paulina, Peter, Tessa and Vinny became my pen pals and frequent companions during the course of this study. They were very open with me about the ups and downs of their first months as college students, sometimes discovering as we talked some new clarity or realization about how their gap-year encounters were impacting their transitions.   As I gathered their accounts and insights, I came to appreciate their distinctive individual stories, and at the same time found strong ribbons of connection between their seemingly disparate experiences. The Gap Year Impact Model (Figure 4) seeks to demonstrate those connections.
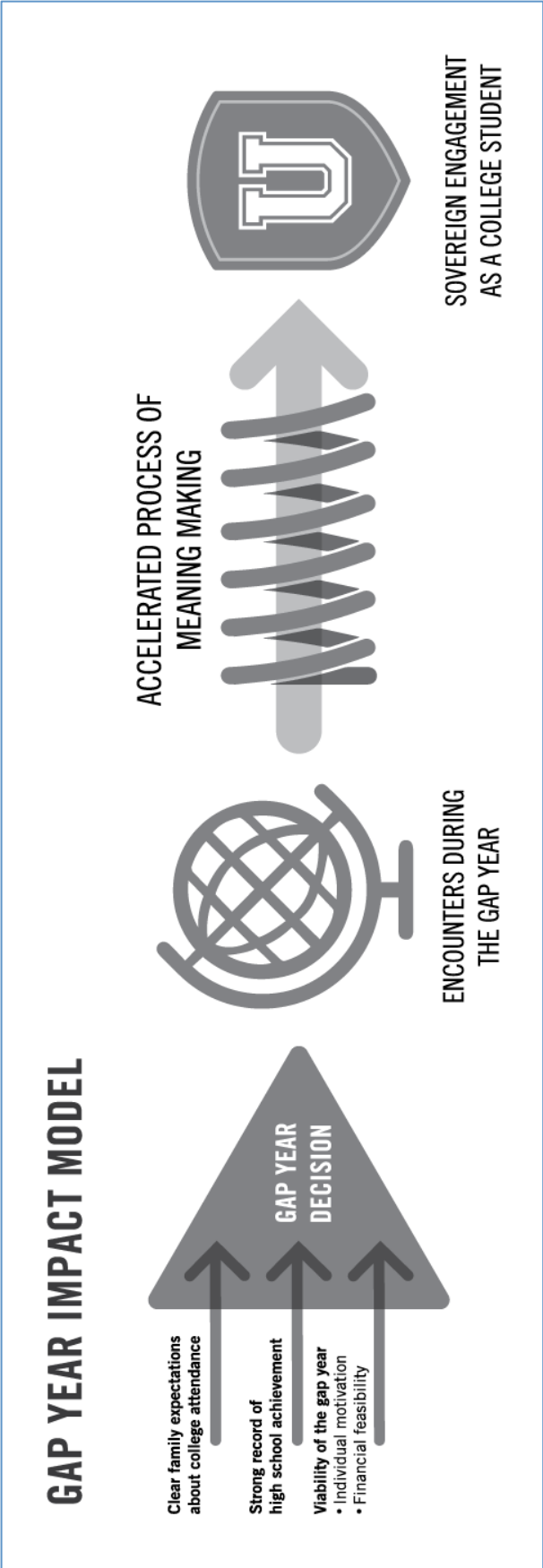
Figure 4: Gap Year Impact Model

Overview of the Gap Year Impact Model

A visual representation of the proposed pathway tracing a student's experience from the decision to take a gap year and leading to "Sovereign Engagement" during the first year of college is provided in Figure 4, a graphic of the "Gap Year Impact Model." According to this model, experiences and/or challenges that students faced during their gap year [*Encounters*] led to, and appear to have hastened or accelerated, greater personal growth and increased evidence of self-authorship [*Meaning Making*], which in turn resulted in greater agency in the transition to college during the first year [*Sovereign Engagement*].

Included on the left side of this diagram are the antecedent conditions upon which a student's ability to take a gap year rely. These are: "Clear Family Expectations about College Attendance," "Strong Record of High School Achievement," and "Viability of the Gap Year" (based upon the components of "Financial Feasibility" and "Individual Motivation"). Each of these factors (a) influences the decisions students make about how to use their gap year, and (b) has further implications as students move through their gap year and begin their first year of college. While the impact of these conditions is strongest at the Encounters phase of this model, it also is apparent that these factors continue to have some effect on the students' processes of Meaning Making in response to the Encounters, and further contributes to the Sovereign Engagement of the students during their first year of college.

Student participants in this study engaged in a wide variety of activities during their gap years. Data analysis from the five interactions I had with each student during the course of their first year gleaned several thematic threads, which I have compiled into a category called "Encounters," in an effort to capture a common array of challenges that students were

faced with during the gap year. Because my data analysis has led me to focus on the cognitive, interpersonal and intrapersonal aspects of students' growth, the Encounters category identifies experiences that helped students make progress on the path to increased self-authorship. It is not designed to be an all-encompassing category of challenges students may have encountered during the gap year.

In essence, then, the Encounters portion of this model includes challenges that fostered meaning-making among the participants, according to their own accounts. The developmentally-effective challenges that emerged from their stories are: independent decision-making; introspection, including spiritual and personal reflection; pushing physical limits; multigenerational interactions; living and/or traveling independently; earning money and/or handling expenses; mastery of new skills and concepts; and immersion in a new/different culture.

These challenges, and a more in-depth explanation of the "Encounters" portion of the Gap Year Impact Model, will be discussed later in this chapter. Based upon the number of students who faced each of these challenges, Figure 5 illustrates the commonality of this range of encounters.

The Meaning Making process of the model, depicted as a spiral to reflect the multiple cycles of differentiation and integration, focuses on the enhanced self-authorship that was explained by the participants in their comments and reflections. Essentially, the students began to enter the crossroads of internally-constructed meaning, as their Encounters during the gap year hastened their propensity to question external authority and begin to construct, listen to, and eventually cultivate their internal voices. In addition, the participants were often particularly cognizant of shifting and deepening relationships with others in their lives.

They were, in effect, asking themselves the fundamental intrapersonal, cognitive, and interpersonal questions identified by Baxter Magolda (2008, 2009):

- Who Am I?

- How Do I Know?

- How Do I Relate to Others?

For the participants in this study, self-authorship was accelerated by the intensity and number of challenging encounters that students encountered during the gap year, which is captured in the Encounter portion of this model. Students entered what Baxter Magolda and King (2012) described as the "Crossroads of Self-Authorship," in which individuals move from an initial step of beginning to question the external voice to actively cultivating the internal voice. This accelerated process of Meaning Making will be described in further detail later in this chapter.

Finally, at the end of the journey from Encounters and the accelerated process of Meaning Making is the experience of Sovereign Engagement during the first year of college, shown as the conclusion of the Gap Year Impact Model. To be transparent, not all the students were engaged to the same degree, or achieved similar kinds of measurable accomplishment during their first year — whether in terms of grades, campus involvement, or personal satisfaction. And yet, this is precisely how the term Sovereign Engagement emerges from the data: while there were vast differences in the students' academic performance, in the extent to which they became involved in campus activities and social networks, and in their satisfaction with the campus experience, all of the students seemed to be making thoughtful, internally-driven choices. They described both their successes and their missteps as the results of their own effort, without levying blame or doubt on other

people or circumstances. In particular, the data analysis revealed that, when they got to

college, all 12 students in this study:

- ▪ Took responsibility for their academic performance;

- ▪ Appreciated learning for the sake of learning;

- ▪ Pursued authentic relationships with parents and peers;

- ▪ Recognized and resisted FOMO ("Fear of Missing Out");

- ▪ Valued college as short-term and a privilege; and

- ▪ Made decisions congruent with their internal voice.

Examples of evidence of Sovereign Engagement among the participants will be

shared later in this chapter. It is now important to return to the first part of the Gap Year

Impact Model, and use the students' own words and stories to illustrate these findings.
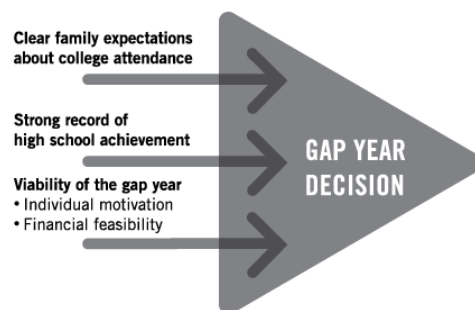
Before the Gap Year Decision

To place this study and the participants into context, and to understand how the gap

year impacted the students' lived experiences during their first year of college, it is relevant

to trace the participants' paths — from high school to gap year to the first year of college.

Certainly, the 12 student participants made a wide array of choices about how to use their

time during their gap year, and their journeys do not neatly map onto one another. However,

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in the final analysis, the relationships, experiences, and values that were a part of each student's gap year journey also significantly shaped their transition to college during the first year. Such factors can be said to have been heavily influenced by the conditions that led to the decision to take a gap year, and therefore it is important that a segment of the initial interview was spent exploring the students family, high school, and personal backgrounds prior to the gap year.

Despite the wide variation in gap-year activities in which these students were engaged, there is a natural inclination to wonder, who are gap-year students, and what ties them together? What about their experience might allow us to draw some conclusions and gain some insight? Therefore, while perhaps somewhat ancillary to the core of this study's pivotal questions regarding the impact of the gap year, it is essential to consider the common factors leading to the participants' decisions to pursue a gap year, and to provide an overview of the elements of experience that gap-year students share.

These common factors are captured in the preliminary part of the proposed Gap Year Impact Model. Each participant was influenced by a number of different people — family members, peers, consultants, teachers, siblings, advisors — and interests — travel, athletics, spirituality, language learning, work experience, community service, all of which provided a platform for a wide array of gap year choices. For these participants, three overarching common denominators emerged: family expectations about going to college, strong high school achievement, and the viability of the gap year.

Clear family expectations about college attendance — the first common denominator

This study revealed that in every case there was a strong family expectation that the student would attend college. After assuming thorough clustering of the initial open codes related to all mentions of family and family expectations about college attendance, it was clear that there had been significant family influence over the students' thought processes regarding college. For example, all 12 participants came from families where at least one, and in most cases both, of their parents had finished college. In many cases, one or both of the parents had also attended graduate or professional school. The students described the ways in which their families had been adamant about the importance of education, and had conveyed either implicit or explicit expectations about going to college (or a combination of the two). This is consistent with studies suggesting that cultural subcultures are internalized, and naturally influence a young person's aspirations (Swartz, 1997), as described in Chapter Two.

All of the student participants were clear that their families had held unambiguous expectations that they would attend college. Each of the students indicated that the messages were particularly clear when they were growing up, and that at least a college education, if not also a graduate degree, was expected of them. Therefore, college attendance was not seen by these students as a choice: they were expected to attend and did not question or doubt that they would. Within those parameters, the students could decide where and when they would apply, and what school they would attend. None of these individuals felt they had to decide whether to go to college.

During the initial interviews, participants were explicitly questioned about the messages that were conveyed by their parents and families regarding the importance of education. Specifically, students were asked to talk about the educational background of their parents, and to go into further detail about whether there was a family expectation that they would attend college. The probe was, "Would you say that in your family/household there was an expectation that the children (or you in particular) would go to college?" Once the participant indicated that there was such an expectation, I then probed further to understand how those expectations may have been conveyed.

In response to this question, most of the participants indicated awareness of an incontrovertible expectation that they would attend college, and a high value placed on both learning and degree attainment. "Absolutely," said Julie, "and obtain advanced degrees." She added that "they took pains to inculcate this love of learning, this focus. Very conscious efforts on their part." A similar message came through for Paulina, who said, "Yeah, in my family, it is not an option that we don't go to college. Oh yeah, no question." In Paulina's family, there was also an expectation that each subsequent generation would do better than the previous generation, so she felt both pressure and encouragement to to so.

For several students, the messages about education were often exceptionally strong throughout their childhood, as in Daniel's case. He said, "I think that my parents made it very clear from a relatively young age that, you know, I needed to do well in school." While other students he knew were rewarded by their families for getting good grades on their report cards, Daniel indicated that this was not the case in his family. He explained, "that was the expectation," adding that falling below the family's expectation would have been problematic, but meeting it "was just what should happen." Lena found going to college to

be so clearly embedded in her upbringing that it was difficult to identify the source. "I don't remember. I don't know," she said. "I guess it was largely such an expectation that it didn't need to be said. And in the school that I was going to it was assumed everyone would go to college." Maria also felt that her family was a strong influence: "Dad went to college, mom went to college, it was just expected."

In several cases, the students recognized that the messages about going to college had been conveyed both by their families and by the schools they attended. Layla indicated that the assumption she would attend college came through in messages from both her school and her family: "Not just from my family – also the school that I went to, it was always an assumption that you would go to college," said Layla, "yeah, there was never question of not going to college for me, and for my siblings as well." This was also true for Andy, who said, "it was just sort of inevitability, it was like just something that just everyone assumed . . . not only my parents, but just my family and everyone in my school." He added that "my grandparents feel very strongly that I should go to college, and a college education is, like, really important." For Daniel, some very strong messages came through both his religious school and the Jewish community. He explained that "in the modern Orthodox community in America, it's pretty common for people graduating high school to go to Israel for a year or two years, it's like almost universal."

At other points during the study, students made further allusions to their families' expectations about college attendance. And in some broader, less specific sense, those expectations were an underlying assumption throughout the study. To choose not to attend college would, in fact, have been an anomaly in each of these families. Choosing to do the gap year, in some sense, challenged the expectation that college would be the next logical

step, immediately after high school graduation. In certain cases, however, the students' families encouraged or even suggested the gap year as an interim step.

What is the significance of the prevalence of strong family messaging with regard to college attendance within the participant group? In part, it is related to their own conviction — and that of their families — that they would attend college. In 11 out of the 12 student stories, the plans had been in place: the students had applied to, and been accepted to, a prestigious college or university before embarking on the gap year. Paulina was the only exception to this, as she used her gap year in part to apply to schools. At the time of this study, each of the students was attending the school to which they had made a commitment during the spring or summer, just prior to the gap year. These expectations, then, were an underlying common factor, informing the thought processes of the students as they made their gap year plans, and having an impact on their experiences during the first year of college, as well.

In addition, 11 of the 12 students in my study had attended high schools from which the overwhelming majority of students were headed to college; by contrast, Maria said that her high school had a somewhat lower rate of college-going graduates. In the stories of these students, the gap year decision is tied, at least in part, to the students' parental levels of educational attainment, and certainly is a very significant contextual factor. These students, including Maria, decided on different paths than the majority of their peers and classmates. However, they did not let go of their plan to attend college, as their family and school acculturation had prepared them to do.

Because of these strongly internalized messages, the students' decisions to step off the conveyor belt were always framed as choosing an interim period — or moratorium — before college, not as a time to discern whether to continue on to higher education.

Strong record of high school achievement — the second common denominator

According to their own reports, and as evidenced by their acceptance into the highly-selective institutions that they attended during their first year, students participating in this study had strong records of academic performance during high school. Whether they had attended a private preparatory high school, as five participants did, a large public high school, as did five others in the study, or a religious high school, as did the remaining two participants, all of the students had been successful high school students, as measured by the normative tools of grades and test scores. In turn, their high school performance was sufficient to help them gain access into highly selective colleges and universities, including the ones they eventually attended. Clearly, this common denominator is tied into family expectations about going to college, since the students' high school performance was very much identified as a predictor or precursor to college acceptance and attendance. The students reported that they had impressive records of high school achievement, with good grades, strong test scores, and extensive extracurricular involvement.

Along with standardized test scores, high school performance is what determines a student's eligibility for admission into college. More specifically, high school achievement and accomplishments, measured both by grades and by involvement in extracurricular activities, are essential factors in getting accepted to the three highly-selective institutions

from which the participants were drawn. Once accepted, the students in this study contacted the admission departments at their respective schools, to request a one-year deferral.

In discussing their high school accomplishments, most of the participants identified themselves as strong and engaged students, using descriptions like "very studious," "very involved," and got "very good grades." Lena mentioned that, although her public high school "wasn't as academically challenging" as she might have liked, she "was still really involved in my school work and did all of it, and was just that kind of person that everybody thinks is an overachiever and knows is doing all of these things."

Unlike several other students in the study, Andy did not feel that his high school grades were exceptionally strong, but acknowledged that his record of interesting technology projects was the key to his admission. "I had this pretty impressive résumé of stuff I had done. But I had kind of average or good grades, but not great, you know. Most [API] students like do pretty well in high school, get pretty great grades."

While the other student participants had applied to and were accepted to college before embarking on their gap years, Paulina was the only student in the study who had applied to colleges during, rather than before, her gap year. In contrast to the other students, Paulina used her year in part to improve her test-taking skills and to prepare her college applications to schools in the US, because her high school in Latin America had not provided adequate guidance about the US application processes. It was also exceptionally small, with just six students in her graduating class. "I wasn't ready after being in a small high school," said Paulina, "like being with the six people and going by myself to another country with a thousand of people, that will be kind of shocking." While her sequence of events was slightly different than the others in the study, Paulina's experience still reflects and supports

the notion that both strong academic performance and strong family expectations correlate with the gap year decision.

With these conditions of family expectations and strong high school performance as a common foundation, the viability of taking a gap year then comes into play. Two key conditions emerged from the participants' comments about their gap year decisions: individual motivation, and financial feasibility.

Viability of the gap year — the third common denominator

There was another important theme throughout all the preliminary interviews, which were held in September or October 2013, at the start of the students' first semester in college. During this interview, the students were asked a number of questions about how they arrived at the decision to take a gap year, and further how they determined what they would be doing during the year. Their responses coalesced into what I have referred to in the preliminary part of the model as "viability of the gap year," identifying the circumstances that made a gap year possible for them.

A record of strong achievement in high school and clear family expectations that a college education is essential do not necessarily or obviously lead to the decision to take a gap year. From such circumstances, most students continue directly to college from high school. As discussed in Chapter Two, there exist a number of barriers or disincentives to taking a year off between high school and college. How might it be, therefore, a viable option for the student to take a gap year in the first place? My data analysis reveals that, for the participants in my study, the viability of the gap year built on two pertinent features:

individual motivation (often inspired by role models or other influences in their lives) and financial feasibility (which may be based on family resources, earned income, or exterior sources of funding). This does not necessarily imply family encouragement, as four of the students talked about one or more family members who disapproved or were skeptical of the plan.

All 12 of the participants expressed that they were individually motivated to find and pursue gap year options. Some did most of the legwork on their own, four had worked with consultants, most took advice from teachers or family friends, and some had strong parental involvement in their decisions. All of them were responsible for planning their gap years, in terms of identifying and arranging the specific activities. In other words, the decision was theirs. They were not pushed or cajoled into taking a gap year. Nor were they required by their colleges to take a gap year, although the Admission Offices at all three schools are happy to support, and in some cases promote, gap years. Indeed, according to its Admission Office, one of the schools (DU) does admit about 50 students each year on a deferred enrollment model – in effect, mandating a gap year for a cohort of students who may not otherwise seem ready for the college experience.

The idea of viability encompasses two specific conditions that make it possible for students to choose a gap year, and to select the particular components of their gap-year experience: financial feasibility and individual motivation.

Viability: Financial feasibility

Regardless of socioeconomic status, each student had a discussion with family members about how to finance the gap year. In some cases, the students' families were

willing and financially able to support the year without hardship. For Layla and for Jackie, for example, it was this stability that allowed them each to pursue volunteer and travel experiences without having to contribute financially. Other students received financial support from their families after determining expected costs of their gap year. For instance, Daniel discussed with his family that a year at a yeshiva would cost substantially less than a year of college, and they were willing to fund the experience. Maria spent part of the year earning money to help finance the time that she interned and traveled in South America, an agreement she had worked out with her parents. "I didn't have enough saved up to cover everything, and it was basically based on how much I worked over the summer, determined how long I could stay," she explained. She worked two minimum-wage jobs for the first half of the year.

Lena's teaching job through City Year was funded by the program, so she was compensated for her basic living expenses. "I knew it wouldn't be a ton of money," said Lena, "but it's totally possible to live on the stipend… I totally made it work and, I mean it was definitely less expensive than a year of college." And Andy earned a sufficiently large salary working in Silicon Valley to cover his living costs and save money to pay his subsequent college expenses. The generous financial incentive made it a particular challenging decision, explained Andy, because in addition to the professional encouragement he was receiving from his employers, "they also offered me a very large amount of money … some of it in cash, and some of it in equity in the company, and I could choose how much I wanted of each. So, it was a really tough decision for me."

Julie had been fascinated by Turkey since first seeing a guidebook about the country in ninth grade. She had done some research and determined that it would cost her about

$15,000 to fund a trip to Turkey during her gap year. That was not an amount her family would have been willing to pay, "but then I heard about these scholarship programs," said Julie. "A hundred percent paid for by the state department, and I was like, that's the ticket."

Finances also were a big factor in Tessa's decision. She knew she wanted to spend the year in Israel, and many students from her high school went to study in a yeshiva there before college. However, her sense was that yeshivas tend to be expensive, and she wasn't sure that was how she wanted to spend the year. The service program she joined offered a monthly stipend for living expenses, so Tessa was only responsible for her travel expenses. She explained that this made it possible for her to embark on the year. "I paid for my flight, but then I got a stipend for groceries every month," said Tessa. "So that was convenient and that was definitely a big factor in my decision."

In each case, the students needed to determine what expenses they would incur, and how these would be covered. While students like Jackie and Mark (who said, "the finances weren't an issue") were able to rely fully on their parents for support, others like Julie and Vinny researched their options on their own, and came up with plans that felt both responsible and realistic to their parents. Vinny, for example, was living at home, volunteering as a researcher in a lab, and training for athletics. He explained that he did not incur many expenses during the year: "it was the same expense as the year before, really."

Viability: Individual motivation

In various ways, each student in this study was motivated by one or more personal goals, desires, or realizations. The viability of the gap year, whether it had been suggested or supported by others, hinged on their own desire to create a plan.

During our initial interviews, I asked the students what they had hoped to accomplish by taking a gap year. In many cases, they expressed that they had felt somehow "burned out" from high school, exhausted from the constant pressure to strive and achieve (in order make it into a good college). However, many capable high school students are reported to feel "burned out" and yet relatively few make a decision to pursue a gap year. Therefore, these students show evidence of a catalyst — a spark that emboldened them to pursue the gap year. Sometimes the spark was tied into something the student wanted to learn or improve. For Vinny, it was becoming a better competitive athlete; for Julie, it was fulfillment of her dream of living in Turkey. The spark may have come from either an outside source, such as Tessa's stepfather, who encouraged her to pursue national service in Israel, or an alumnae panel for seniors in high school, like the one that helped to inspire Layla to explore the chance to go to India. Layla explained that after hearing an alum speak about her own gap year experience, "frankly, I knew I wanted to take a gap year, like long before I knew where I wanted to go to college. Like, from that moment, I kind of wanted to work that into my plan."

The initial catalysts, then, frequently included role models, such as others in their family or school or friend group who had taken a gap year or believed in doing so. For the two students who attended religious high schools, the fact that the gap year was the norm created a kind of collective push toward taking a gap year.

For Paulina, the motivation came from her desire "to prepare myself for college, like mentally and psychologically." Unlike most of her peers, she was interested in attending college in the US, but "I needed to find myself before that," said Paulina. I couldn't just come here." Layla remembered being excited about having the chance to use her gap year to travel and do service, but that "at some points people were like, 'Oh, don't you want to go to

college, like, don't you feel ready for college?' And I was like, 'college will be there, I want to do something else first.'"

Using the gap year to travel was also important to Peter, who grew up in Eastern Europe, and had originally expected to attend college there. He said he had known since about ninth grade that he wanted to take a gap year. "I knew that I wanted to spend a year after high school in South America learning Spanish, and of course I also thought, or I guess I assumed, I was going to go to university in [my home city], because that's what you do."

Lena researched the City Year program on her own and then, she explained, "I pretty much told my dad, 'this is what I'm going to do.'" She felt that she wanted to use her gap year to explore "all the ways I could push myself to become more interesting or more effective, more of a fearless, confident, competent person. And so I, like, figured that a gap year would hold a lot of opportunities for me to be able to do that."

For Daniel, the opportunity to live and study in Israel was both a chance to immerse himself in Orthodox Jewish culture and study, and "an opportunity for spiritual growth, a time to keep worrying not about homework and grades, but rather about myself, about like who I am as a person rather than how am going to do on this next exam."

Mark said he was excited about going on a rugged NOLS course for several months, in part because he wanted to "get away from all those distractions, like TV and cell phones, and like even sometimes other people, and, like, live away from that. And I'm always trying to, like, live in the present more, and I feel like there's no better way to do that than to get away from all those distractions." Vinny indicated that he was motivated by athletics and the chance to get some work experience, but mostly "I felt ready for college, but I didn't feel as

ready as I could be. I still felt kind of, like, burnt out from high school, and I didn't feel like if I went, I would be the best student I could be."

These comments illustrate a range of personal reasons for taking a gap year, but a common strength of individual motivation can be detected throughout. Despite what may have been the prevailing attitudes in their high schools or their families, these 12 individuals had deep convictions about the value of taking a gap year. Rather than simply avoiding or delaying college, they seemed to be focused on pursuing something else that was important to them, that would allow them the opportunity to grow and change in important ways.

Once arriving at college, the participants had interactions with peers at their institutions that support the finding that individual motivation was a salient factor. When meeting classmates, participants found their peers to be impressed that they had chosen to take a gap year. Three participants specifically described having met other students who said they couldn't have imagined themselves taking a gap year, either because there was a particular barrier, or because they lacked the individual motivation to do so. In contrast, the students in this study did have the motivation to choose a gap year before going to college.

Gap Year Decision Making

The decision to take a gap year, then, is influenced by family expectations, high school achievement, financial feasibility and individual motivation. With all these conditions solidly in place, the students participating in this study still had to grapple with certain aspects of the plan. Is this the right decision? Can I find an experience or set of experiences that seem worthwhile? Will my family support the plan? Will the college grant me a one-

year deferral? Students consulted with family members, friends, trusted teachers and school guidance counselors as they explored their options and built their arguments for taking a gap year. In some cases, there was a lot of support, and in others students' plans were met with resistance or skepticism. Of course, in the end, each of these 12 students came to the conclusion that taking the gap year would be beneficial to them, even if someone close to them was less than supportive.

Some students were influenced by others in their lives, or individuals whom they had met while they were in high school. For example, Mark has two older siblings who had taken gap years, so his mother posed the gap year question to him around the time he was preparing his college applications. He said, "my main thought process was like, there's never gonna be another time in my life when it's this easy to just take a year off and kinda do whatever I want. And since I'm not in a rush to go to college, I see no reason to not take advantage of that." Mark found the SC Admission staff to be quite receptive to the idea, as well, when he called to request a deferral from Fall 2012 to Fall 2013, which made the plan that much simpler to enact.

When Maria's family hosted an exchange student from Europe while she was in high school, she began thinking that taking a year off after high school and traveling to a different country would be a great experience for her, as well. Her family was supportive, but expected Maria to share responsibility for financing the year, so she built into her plans several months living at home and working two retail jobs to earn money to fund her travel to South America.

Like Maria, Layla began thinking about a gap year during her junior year of high school. She had attended an alumni panel and heard a former student talking about her own

gap-year experience, and felt inspired to do her own journey. "Frankly, I knew I wanted to take a gap year long before I knew where I wanted to go to college," Layla said. "From that moment, I kind of wanted to work that into my plan."

When people around him in high school suggested to Andy that he should take a gap year, he was initially resistant. "I told them I didn't want to, and I thought it wasn't a good idea, because if I took a gap year, I would never want to go to school again." According to Andy, he was already doing what he calls "cool tech stuff," so people who knew him thought he should get some experience in the tech world and pursue those interests before starting college. Andy had been working for a high tech firm during the summer after high school, and was confronted with the decision about taking a gap year when he was offered an opportunity to stay on with the company for an additional year. During our focus group, he commented, with some degree of irony, that "people say if you take a gap year, and you spend a year like away from education, when you get there, you'll be more focused, you'll know more about what you wanna do sort of with your life, or just sort of maybe even just what you're interested in, and what you like doing, and that'll help you be focused in college – that's something that people say a lot." In the end, Andy's decision was a financially lucrative one for him. Not only did he incur minimal expenses during his gap year, but the firm that had hired him paid him a significant salary, which could be used to pay for subsequent expenses, including college.

Two students in this study were greatly influenced by their religious and school communities. Daniel, who had independently chosen to attend a Jewish day school near his home, was drawn to the gap year because he had learned that a large percentage of students in "the modern Orthodox Jewish community" in the US spend a year or more in Israel before

going to college. His family, however, was initially resistant, and his grandparents did not support the idea. "Both my mom's parents went to college and they were very adamantly opposed to me taking a gap year," Daniel told me. He added that when the idea first came up, "my parents were discouraging me from doing it for the most part," but after much discussion, they came to the conclusion that "if this is something that I think is good for me, they are going to trust me, they're going to let me go through with it."

Tessa had also attended a Jewish day school, where a large percentage of her classmates spent a year in Israel after high school. Rather than study in a yeshiva, however, she was eager to find another way to experience living in Israel. She accepted help from her stepfather, who is an Israeli citizen, researching opportunities with an Israeli national service program, which led to her year of teaching in a school, and living with other Israelis.

For students who had specific goals for their gap years, their internal motivation was a driving force for structuring the year. Vinny, for example, was very motivated to improve his athletic skills so that he would be a better competitive athlete when he got to college. When he found a position in a lab close to home, it seemed feasible for him to live at home, do intensive athletic training, and work in the lab. Because she was motivated to carve out a life that was even better than that of her parents, Paulina wanted to improve her chances of attending a highly-selective college in the US — which could lead to greater opportunity — and to explore some possible career paths. She identified several specific activities that would allow her to hone her test-taking skills and also gather some relevant internship experience in medicine and business. Lena was very excited about teaching kids in an inner-city school through City Year, because she wanted to see what it was like to do social justice work in a high-need community. She added, "I think my desire to do that came out of an

interest in public education, but also just like a desire to challenge myself and to do something different that I didn't think I necessarily could do, or that I wasn't sure I would be good at. But just like, also something different."

That quest for something different was shared, in fact, by several of the participants. Whether the "something different" was simply not attending school full-time as they had been for the previous 12 years, or heading to a new country, or tackling a new set of skills, the students all rejected the commonly-followed trajectory to pursue their particular passions and goals. Therefore, it is important to look at what happens to gap-year students once they make that less popular choice, using the Gap Year Impact Model as a guide.

Conclusion

This chapter has traced the findings of this study, guided by a visual and textual model that initially elucidates the factors leading to a decision to take a gap year. I then used the students' own words and stories to illustrate how a student's gap year Encounters hastened Meaning Making, which in turn lead to Sovereign Engagement of the student during the first college year. Chapters Five and Six will explain the core components of the Gap Year Impact Model, with specific examples of Encounters, Meaning Making and Sovereign Engagement shared by the student participants. In Chapter Seven, I discuss several of these findings through another lens, with an eye toward possible future research and implications for practice in the field of higher education.

CHAPTER FIVE: GAP YEAR ENCOUNTERS AND MEANING MAKING
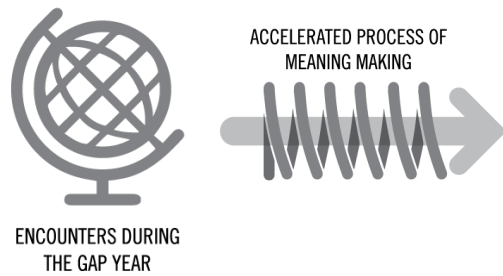
Introduction

The term "Encounters" is the portion of the Gap Year Impact Model that describes challenges which fostered "Meaning Making" among the participants. Students involved in this study engaged in a range of activities, the majority of which were significantly different than their prior experience of attending high school and participating in various extracurricular activities. The range of activities and interactions the students encountered constituted what King et al. (2009) called "developmentally effective experiences," noting that these help to promote self-authorship in college students.

Gap Year Impact Model: Encounters

During the first round of interviews I invited the students to "walk me through the year," giving as much detail as they would like about how they spent their time between high school and college. Through these discussions, I learned that the participants were involved in a wide array of gap-year activities, some of which they had planned on their own, and others that had been planned in part, or completely, by others. The range of activities included community service; athletic training; working for pay in a minimum-wage, modest or high-paying position; studying and learning a new skill or language; domestic or

international travel; intensive religious study; teaching; internships; farming; living at home; and living away from home. As they spoke of these activities, the students recalled with great detail the events that provoked moments of introspection or growth during the gap year.

Figure 5 illustrates the range of encounters in which these students engaged during their gap years, and the frequency of each type of encounter among the group of participants. This chart abstracts the particular details of each of their individual years -- such as working at KMart or living in India -- in order to capture the experiences and group the encounters into common categories. As an example, all 12 of the participants found themselves in some way immersed in a new and/or different culture -- whether a different country with a dominant language other than the one in which they were raised, or a work environment in which the student needed to learn and adopt the practices and terminology of the organization. This cultural immersion is reflected in the chart as a feature that was common to all 12 participants.

ENCOUNTERS DURING THE GAP YEAR

- Immersion in a new/different culture (12)
- Mastery of new skills and concepts (12)
- Introspection, including spiritual and personal reflection (12)
- Independent decision-making (11)
- Multigenerational interactions (11)
- Living and/or traveling independently (9)
- Earning money and/or handling expenses (8)
- Service/Civic Engagement (6)
- Pushing physical limits (3)

Figure 5: Participants' Gap Year Encounters

Though the specific gap year activities varied from person to person, some clear themes emerged. The interview transcripts, written responses, and focus group data revealed that the participants' processes of making meaning, enhanced by the particular encounters they had during their gap year, hastened their route to self-authorship. That is, the more experiences students had that challenged them, and the more challenging the experience, the greater the acceleration from external to internal meaning-making. In addition, challenges that were most different from their high school experiences seem to have produced the most significant development.   This is evidence that such experiences were developmentally effective.

Bronfenbrenner (1989, 1993) described these encounters as "proximal processes," in reference to the developmentally significant experiences that a person may have. Proximal processes are encounters inviting increased complexity of thought and understanding. As explored in Chapter 2, Bronfenbrenner was interested in the interaction of the person, the process, the context and the time (PPCT). Indeed, the participants in this study were able to articulate ways in which their encounters led to self-reflection and a deeper understanding of themselves and the world around them. My analysis suggests that gap-year students are likely to have encounters that serve as profound proximal processes, and therefore accelerate the process of making meaning out of their experience.

As mentioned previously, all 12 of the students in this study were immersed in a new and different culture, whether that meant moving to a different part of the country or of the world, joining a work environment, or engaging with a new process of learning. The students had ventured off of the "conveyor belt" — or the typical educational trajectory — and, to various degrees, sought out a new cultural context. In many cases, this meant living

away from home, which all but one of the students did for at least part of their gap year. In most cases, the students chose to engage in something that might be considered "out of their comfort zone," not because they were necessarily pushing themselves to extraordinary limits, but typically because they had chosen an experience that was in some ways new and different to them. These are examples of increased complexity in their interactions with the world around them. No longer immersed in a homogeneous, familiar, or comfortable environment, the gap-year students were engaged in encounters that allowed or required them to engage more intentionally in their own experience.

All 12 of the students also used at least a portion of their gap year to master a new skill or concept, whether or not this had been an articulated goal for the year. The skill may have been as simple as doing laundry regularly, as Layla did, or as complex as Andy's negotiation of the dynamics of a fast-paced workplace environment. In addition, all 12 participants reported that they spent time during the gap year engaged in some kind of personal or spiritual reflection. This was especially true for Julie, in large part because she was an American Christian young woman living in a predominantly Muslim society. It was also true for Maria, whose volunteer and work experiences — and distance from her high school cohort — provided ample opportunity for independent introspection.

One interesting factor that emerged from the students' accounts of their gap years is that 11 of the 12 the students had been living and/or working in multigenerational environments. With the exception of Daniel (who had studied in an Israeli yeshiva with many other young men his own age), most of the time spent by these participants during their gap years was not with peers, but with children, or with working adults, or with families. During some of the encounters, the students spent time with other people their own age.

Even then, those were not the same sets of peers they had encountered in high school or would eventually meet when they got to college. A great deal of perspective seems to have emerged from the time spent developing relationships with others, which contributes to the finding that the "Encounter" leads to enhanced "Meaning Making." During the focus groups, some of the students' discussions centered on the multigenerational aspect of the gap-year experience, the ease they found making new friends when they arrived at college, and their reactions to having returned to a same-age-peer environment.

The multigenerational encounters, in fact, appeared to be among the most crucial in terms of making meaning out of the gap-year experience. In other words, students' interactions with individuals who were not their generational peers — and the development of personal relationships with these individuals — brought enhanced perspective to the gap-year students as they reflected on their own values and priorities. Because this factor is such a departure from the normal educational trajectory (in which students tend to spend the majority of their time and energy in same-age peer groups), I point to it as a remarkable ingredient in enhancing students' ability to explore the questions at the Crossroads of Self-Authorship (Baxter Magolda, 2004; Baxter Magolda & King, 2012). When their primary social interactions are no longer with a group of peers, individuals are more likely to encounter a range of perspectives that are different from their own. Not all of the students were able to articulate the significance of this factor, and not all of them expressed appreciation for their multigenerational relationships.

Maria felt rather lonely during the months of her internship, as she was working long days and commuting to and from the house where she was renting a room. Over time, she developed relationships with her coworkers, from a range of ages. "By the end of my time

there, we would like, some nights, we'd leave work together and all go see a movie, or just go out to eat for lunch," Maria remembered.

While she was in India, Layla lived for part of her time in a volunteer home that housed people from a number of different countries. She was living in a multigenerational, international home and spending her days volunteering with young girls in an afterschool program. Of her housemates, she remembered that "there was one woman who was like 50 – maybe she was closer to 60 – so there were like, it was diverse, even though the median age was probably like early 20's. And so I lived with those people."

Lena said she felt conflicted, at times, about the absence of a same-age peer group during her gap year. Her days teaching were long and exhausting. She explained that, "I would think like, well I feel like I'm 28 years old but I haven't had any of the fun of college or of having really established friends that people who are 28 have. And so I'm doing like all of the work of being a 28-year-old without any of the fun."

Several student participants spent all or part of their gap year living at home while pursuing internships or other activities. Looking back on the part of his year living at home with his family, Peter felt grateful, especially because he had attended a private boarding school for the previous two years. As he began to notice how infrequently he was in contact with his family once he started college, Peter reflected that "it was very, very good that I spent such large amount of time with my family last year. So I am just, all of these thoughts just reinforce that it was really good to spend time with my family last year and it was really important."

Peter's ability to recognize the significance of shifting relationships helps to illustrate the value of stepping away from the same-age peer group and gaining perspective by investing in other, multigenerational relationships.

Stories about Encounters

Mark loves to tell the story of the first day his group went mountaineering. He remembers arriving at the base of the mountain around noon, and finding out that the campground was full -- there was no room for their group to stay overnight at the base camp, as had been their plan. They had expected to sleep there and then spend the following day hiking the three-plus miles up to the top. At 2:45 pm, they decided there was no choice but to start hiking. Their packs were loaded down with ten days of food rations, heavy hiking equipment and camping gear. The hike took seven hours.

Mark was pushed beyond any physical limits he had encountered before. He continued, "so I remember being like, after hiking for five hours with 70 pounds on my back, up like an extremely steep hill, I remember thinking 'I'm cold, sweaty, tired, hungry, I have to go to the bathroom, I'm dehydrated, and I just wanna go to sleep right now.' But I couldn't, I had to keep walking, and it seemed like it wasn't gonna stop." Near the top of the mountain, the group was forced to make a treacherous crossing of a fast-moving stream. "So that was the only time in my [NOLS course] I thought, like, 'I might die right now,'" said Mark. Eventually, they made it safely to the camp.

There is an arc to the way Mark tells the story, as if he is back on the mountain again. He pauses for a moment, and it's clear he can feel the cold and exhaustion and sense of

accomplishment all over again. "So that night really drove home that point that I can really push myself a lot farther than I think or even feel like I can," he explained.

Mark's story is an example of a gap-year encounter that promoted, or accelerated, his ability to cultivate his internal voice as he made meaning of his experience – or, as described by Baxter Magolda, King, and others (2004, 2008, 2012), he experienced "developmental progression in entering the crossroads." It was through encounters like this one during his gap year that Mark began to trust his internal voice, and began to develop into the sovereign college student he was to become when he began his first year as a student at SC.

This theme of cultivating self-authorship emerged strongly in the stories of all 12 participants in this study. They made meaning out of their experiences with a strong sense of self – in terms of academic performance, developing or maintaining relationships, or involvement in other activities during their first semester – and not one of them seemed to hold anyone else responsible for their circumstances. Instead, like Mark, they found ways to recognize their own abilities, draw on their inner strength, and choose the path that was right for them.

Julie is a budding anthropologist who often felt isolated during her gap-year experience living in Turkey. She thought about that as she settled into the first semester at DU, as she wrote in her December reflection that her time abroad "forced me to draw upon an inner source of comfort in times of loneliness or struggle, and that is still with me when I walk around the dining hall looking for somewhere to sit, or ask someone if they want to hang out with me."

Indeed, Julie felt that her gap-year experience caused her to become more self-sufficient and at the same time deeply appreciative of others. Her greater sense of self

seemed to strengthen her ability to thrive, and to explore new relationships as wonderful possibilities. "I approach things with this knowledge," she wrote, "and so ANYONE who wants to be friends with me is a blessing, even more so if I like them back." (Emphases are hers.)

Lena, who volunteered with CityYear during her gap year, thought often during her first year of college about what she learned through some of the most challenging kids she taught at an inner-city Baltimore middle school. One boy, in particular, Darnell, seemed to respond to her encouragement when she worked with him one-on-one. It was Lena's sense that Darnell was very bright, but that, like many of his classmates, he didn't see the value of education. She began to recognize that there were limits to her ability to have an impact on his academic success, and further, that she cannot control everything about her experience, or ensure that things will turn out the way she envisions they should.

"I had really high expectations for him because I knew that he could do it. *He* didn't know he could do it. Somebody wasn't always pushing him to come to school." Lena learned during her first semester at DU that Darnell had been held back at school for the second time, despite her hopes for his success. "And I'm worried because I don't know if there's anybody who's pushing him," said Lena, "because I think a lot of times they give up on the kids who were held back, especially like the kids who want you to think they're scary, when in fact they're not really scary."

Her experience working with Darnell helped Lena to learn that, although she was investing in the student and making it clear that she believed he could be successful, she was not able to control whether he would be motivated to achieve. She said, "as much as I

wanted to help him and expected really great things from him, he…he needs to be the one to believe in himself and make things happen."

Lena made some important connections between the work she was doing with students like Darnell, and the context of their experience. She also thought deeply about her own level of privilege in comparison to theirs. "[T]hey heard all the time that education is so important, but I got the sense that nobody they really knew personally had directly benefitted from a good education, and when I said things like that to that effect, or when their teachers said things like that … I could just see them in their head, 'Yeah, but you're white. That's why education works for you.' And that's hard – like, you can't really argue against that because they're right."

While Lena's insights may have been unanticipated outcomes of her work with CityYear, Daniel describes his journey during his gap year as one of intentional religious transformation. "(T)he connection I made with Israel is something that I didn't think it was going to happen necessarily but it was very welcome and it was definitely life changing," said Daniel during our first interview. He explained that, after his year there, Israel felt even more like home to him than the US.

Life-changing experiences do not necessarily have to take a student to a new country or region of the world. One of the experiences that Peter had during his gap year was working at a government agency while he lived at home. He described this as "probably the most formal work setting you can have," and explained that he woke up early every day, wore a suit and tie to work, and typically did not get home until seven in the evening. This experience had a tremendous influence on Peter's perspective on work, as he "absolutely didn't like" the routine. He began to examine this further because "when I told people about

it they started laughing, because well, that's what you are going to do for the rest of your life." It was an important insight for Peter, who used the experience in part to refine his thoughts about his career aspirations. He also learned to appreciate weekends, during which he was not expected to work.

Peter's subsequent experience, however, was in South America, working for Habitat for Humanity, a place where the employees worked long hours not because they were required to but because they loved their jobs. This was an important contrast in terms of working conditions, and Peter seemed to be wrestling with it during our initial interview. "I think I never really thought about it so consciously," Peter said, "but comparing these two experiences is really important." He explained that "overall these very different experiences I had in my gap year will dramatically influence decisions I would take in the future."

Some students found themselves faced with a challenging experience that was not built into the design of their gap year. For instance, Mark had planned to spend about three months studying music at a small music school in North Carolina, and he moved there to study music full-time for the second part of his gap year. However, it turned out not to offer some of the components he had expected. He talked with the director of the school and they attempted to work out a more enjoyable experience for him, but Mark still wasn't happy with what he was learning, and recognized that he needed to trust his own feelings about the situation. "I gave it a couple weeks and it wasn't really getting better, and … well, there was a better way to spend the next five months of my gap year, than dreading going to music school every day." Mark shortened his stay at the school and did some research into other options for studying music closer to home, explaining that he signed up for some other courses that were "exactly what I wanted."

Encounters Lead to Meaning Making

In the Gap Year Impact Model, the "Encounter" represents one of a number of developmentally-effective experiences that provide a platform for personal growth. I have described these experiences as challenges, because they demanded that the students expand or develop a set of skills and approaches that they had not previously fully honed. Although this group of 12 students represent a tremendously varied set of gap-year activities, the concept of the "Encounter" conveys the ways that the students were using their time in one or more activities that do not replicate either high school or college.

It is the cycles of differentiation and integration that these "Encounters" demanded that pushed and promoted increased self-authorship in the students, and helped them to make meaning out of their experiences.

Gap Year Impact Model: Accelerated Process of Meaning Making

Through the encounters they had during their gap years, these students learned a great deal about themselves and what felt important to them. They learned to consider and evaluate the world around them by interpreting their experiences, many of which were departures from their previous progressions through structured school-based activities. As a result, they entered and moved through the "Crossroads of Self-Authorship," as described by Baxter Magolda (2004, 2009). According to Baxter Magolda, "[a]s young adults begin to compose their own realities and recenter into adult contexts, they renegotiate the relationship of their internal voices and external influence." (2009, p. 625). Through their encounters, gap-year students' approaches to making meaning repeatedly shifted and realigned. That is, they experienced significant growth that moved them along the continuum from externally-

defined to internally-defined validation and meaning. In essence, the principles formerly guiding their decision-making no longer provided a sufficient framework for the students' relationships and choices.

As they developed stronger self-authoring perspectives, they began to "define their beliefs and act using criteria that are internally rather than externally derived." (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012, p. 5). In other words, gap year students were inspired to focus on their own values and belief systems, because their encounters forced awareness and reflected that hastened their ability to construct meaning out of their experiences. They also refined their sense of purpose, whether in terms of their educational goals, their personal convictions, or their future career paths. Perhaps most importantly, the encounters they had during their gap years provoked the students to disassemble and reassemble their bases of understanding. Such processes are described by student development theorists and researchers as cycles of "differentiation and integration" or "transition and consolidation" (Jones & Abes, 2013; Baxter Magolda, 2008, 2009; Magolda & King, 2012; King et al., 2009; ASHE, 2012).

Despite previous research concluding that the majority of students on college campuses are externally oriented (King et al., 2009), this group of students demonstrated a heightened capacity for internal definition. The encounters they had during their gap years instigated multiple cycles of differentiation and integration, which resulted in an accelerated process of meaning making. During their gap years, these students needed to become comfortable with new and different cultural lenses that sometimes required them to let go of prior assumptions, associations, and aspirations. They had to make use of the tools at hand to accomplish things. They made more decisions on a daily basis, learning to trust their own judgment about where to go, how to get there, how to spend their money, what to eat, whom

to trust, and with whom to spend their time. Most of these decisions had not been required of them before the gap year, and the complexity of these encounters led them to cultivate their internal voices.

In their own accounts of their transitions to college during the first year, the students revealed evidence of their own growth and development, and often were able to attribute that growth directly to their gap year encounters. This reflects a more internally-driven perspective that Baxter Magolda and King suggested "provides a guide for determining what to pay attention to, whose advice to listen to, what can be gleaned from a positive or negative experience, and in general how to navigate complex environments, including college campuses" (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012, p. 4).

In terms of cognitive growth (Baxter Magolda's expression of developing insights into the question, "How do I know?"), the students became acutely aware of the ways that their previously-formed perspectives did not fully align with their newly-acquired understanding of the world. Each time they faced a dissonant experience, they had to find a way to reconcile it with their previous understanding, sometimes needing to reconcile a closely-held tenet of their prior contexts.

Greater responsibility for decision-making leads to cognitive growth, as well. During their gap year, the students often were not able to rely on others to make decisions, as many needed to prepare their own meals, handle travel plans, or manage their finances. Therefore, encounters that pushed students to make responsible decisions and handle the consequences of those decisions led to the students' cognitive development in the form of more complex meaning-making and internal locus of validation and decision-making. They began to find their own answers to questions and gain perspective and evidence through their choices. The

students had time for meaningful reflection during the course of the year, a condition that both allowed for and enhanced cognitive changes.

In terms of interpersonal growth ("How do I relate to others?"), each of the students met new people, developed new relationships, and considered the dynamics of their existing relationships. In particular, all but one of the students spent time during their gap year in multigenerational setting — whether in a work environment, living situation, or another aspect of their experience. This is another way in which departing from the traditional educational path became a truly significant encounter. The students began to see themselves in different contexts, not only among their peers, but in many cases also with children, young adults, and older adults, whose life experiences were very different from their own. As noted above, these multigenerational interactions were among the richest for this cohort in terms of the students' processes of clarifying their values and senses of purpose.

Some, like Layla and Jackie, met people from different socioeconomic backgrounds; others, like Maria and Peter, interacted with others from different countries; and some, like Julie, got to know people of different religious backgrounds. As a result, their interpersonal growth took place in a fertile environment for developing relationships across generational or other socially-constructed lines. This is salient for two explicit reasons. First, because they saw how rich and meaningful those relationships can be; and second, because it helped them learn that they can be capable and confident in unfamiliar social situations, and that each new person is interesting and has worth.

For Andy, the gap year was a chance to develop relationships with some family friends he had not previously known but who were willing to house him during his year working in California. He got along with them very well, and "I sort of had, like, two little

sisters for the year, which was really fun." In his workplace, Andy had direct, regular contact with a small group of young men who held various positions within the company. And during the year, he got to know a number of other young people in the Silicon Valley area, many of whom had ties to or interest in the hi-tech world. These relationships were important to him, in large part because they filled his social needs, and also because he found new sources of personal support for the decision he had made to spend the year there.

Lastly, and most importantly, profound intrapersonal growth ("Who Am I?") was evident in multiple and complex ways for all participants. In the face of specific challenges or moments of dissonance, the students found they increased their capacity for self-reliance. Whether wholly anticipated or utterly unplanned, the encounters that comprised their gap-year experiences became the catalysts for making sense of themselves in new contexts. In my estimation, this was the most dramatic aspect of development for all 12 of them, and in turn led to the most significant shift toward self-authorship.

For example, in addition to a rigorous athletic schedule and full-time work in a medical lab, Vinny faced some personal hardships during his gap year: his father was ill for several months, his girlfriend broke up with him, and his dog of 12 years died. In terms of handling all of this, Vinny reflected, he spent a lot of time processing his feelings internally, without many external sources of support. "But I think by doing that on my own, I grew," said Vinny, "like, I can take on any challenge that college throws at me now, like I don't think anything is gonna be as rough as that was."

For example, Jackie wrote with tremendous passion in her December reflections (the capital letter emphases are hers): "More than anything, it has taught me that I CAN MAKE THINGS HAPPEN IN MY LIFE. I AM IN CONTROL (but only because my circumstances

allow me to be). I can become the person I want to become – I am not locked into who I have been. I am allowed to define myself." She wrote at some length about the extent to which she recognizes she is at the helm of the things she chooses to study, the people with whom she chooses to interact, and the ways in which her identity takes shape.   The process of reflecting on her gap year once she arrived at college allowed Jackie to recognize that, when she was in high school, she was highly influenced by the opinions of others, and that she had been afraid of being judged for her actions or choices. She continued: "My gap year helped me to realize that no one is stopping me from being the person I want to be but myself."

Daniel made meaning out of his experience in Israel by examining his spiritual development, a deeply intrapersonal journey. When he decided to take a gap year, he had hoped and expected to deepen his relationship with Judaism and spirituality. As he made the transition to college, he recognized that his perspective was significantly impacted by the encounters he had during his year in Israel. "In the religious community," said Daniel, "we use a term called *Hashkafo,* which means like, I guess, the best way to translate it would be world view, like your outlook on Judaism. And I definitely figured that out much more than I had ever before … I think it [the year in Israel] definitely contributed to the way I perceive things and my outlook on Judaism."   He added that another change was determining for himself "how to maintain a religious lifestyle when you are not in an environment where it is provided for you." As he began to experience living religiously within the secular environment of API, Daniel relied more intensively on his internal sense of what is important and meaningful, explaining "if hadn't gone to Israel, I wouldn't have been enough prepared to face the challenges I am facing right now religiously."

Meaning Making: How They Changed

One of the questions posed to each participant during the initial interview was, "How are you different now than you were before your gap year?" I wanted to hear the students articulate any growth or change they had seen in themselves, or that they might report others had noticed in them, as they started their college careers. This was a question that elicited a number of insightful and contemplative responses, with evidence that a shift in meaning making orientation had been hastened by their gap-year encounters.

For example, in response to this question, Paulina expressed an observation that, since her gap year, she has a more secure sense of what is right for her. She said, "I'm stronger. I know what I want. I know my values." Paulina went on to explain that she had been incorporating these closely-held values into the choices she was making in college, but "not because my family or my country wants me to behave like that, like my culture wants me to behave (laughs). So I'm pretty confident in who I am right now."

While he did not express feeling significantly more confident, Vinny felt that he had developed some different ways of approaching things during his gap year. He said his gap year "was an experience that was . . . less learning about academic things and more learning about worldly things." When pressed to elaborate on what he had gained, he reflected that "I think that just comes back to the motivation thing, like the emotional strength, like thinking like I can handle anything that this year throws at me."

Reflecting on her experience, Julie was certain that the encounters she had during her gap year "forced me to draw upon an inner source of comfort in times of loneliness or struggle." She indicated that "I learned how to be self-sufficient and who I really am."

Such change was clearly felt but difficult to define for Mark, who said that after his gap year, others had commented that they noticed a change in him. "I don't know if I have become more mature or more easy-going or any number of other things," said Mark. "All that I know is that I am different."

Jackie recognized that some of her personal development may have happened during college even without taking a gap year, but she said "I think it just gave me like a very strong sense of independence and, like, a conviction." During her first semester in college, Jackie felt more capable and self-assured in social situations than she had in high school, when she was concerned about impressing others or fitting in to a social group. For Jackie, getting away from the high school social scene for a year before starting college "felt very empowering and self-affirming. Like, okay, this is me not in relation to just my setting or everybody that I know. I just like feel like I know myself and I can be sure of that wherever I go."

Daniel reflected on his year as a process of gaining competence, and increasing his awareness of himself in different contexts. "I think it was a very important year of change in my life — both religiously and growing up, and developing a connection to Israel — that I would not have otherwise, being able to live in a foreign country and being able to being my own person there," he said. "That is really cool to me, and I cannot have that experience in any other way."

In our final interview, Layla said that one of the most significant revelations she had during her gap year was that she wants to pursue a "life serving others. I think that that's like the most important thing you can do, in my opinion. But I also recognized that, like, you have to be doing it for, you know, for what you are doing not for recognition and I think

that's, I think that I've come into a lot of that. That's come up I think in my life here in many ways, too." By the start of the second semester, Layla had moved into some leadership roles with titles, and she found it important to note that her decision to become in involved at that level came from her desire to make contributions to her campus community, and that she was "not doing things to get recognition," she said.

Layla said she recognized that "a lot of people go from high school to college because that's like what they're supposed to do, and they never stopped to think 'well, why am I doing this?' And I had a whole year thinking about it." She added, "I think that being here is not just part of a plan, it's like an active choice that I make like every day, and then I love it. Like, I love it and I want to make it last as long as I can possibly make it last."

Paulina commented, during her September interview, that "I think that a year was really helpful for me, because I kind of grew up from being that kid at high school that had to depend on all of these other people that didn't like her, and how to fit in and how to behave in a certain way because she had to, to start discovering, 'okay, who is [Paulina], what do I care about, what is really important for me?'"

In her written reflections in December, Lena shared that while she had always been concerned about the plight of people in American cities, her gap year helped her identify what she cares about most. "Those things are structural oppression, urban education, and other urban social issues. I don't think I would have felt comfortable talking about or studying race in America to the extent that I have this semester and expect to as an Africana concentrator if I hadn't taken my gap year and worked in a predominantly Black community and school. I feel a strong sense of being able to relate to people across social categories, and that's because I did so much of that last year."

In our final interview, Jackie said: "And I think also I had all these assumptions about, like, 'oh, well, that's not my thing, I haven't expressed past interest in it so I can't express interest in it now.' And I think doing my gap year was just very much like proving to myself, like, No. If you want to do something else, do it. It doesn't matter that you haven't done it before; you can just go do it, like you don't have to be pre-qualified for everything that you do in life. And I think it just helped me to understand that if you're interested in something, you can do it. You don't have to be have doing it for the past five years."

One of Jackie's comments in her written reflection was perhaps the most insightful and reflective of all of the participants, showing a high degree of self-authorship that she attributed to her gap year:

> This is the greatest thing I have learned. I just need to make a move to become the person I want to be – my identity is not at the whim of what I feel others have encouraged or wanted me to be. I think I felt that way through a lot of high school. I thought that if I did this or that, people would think I was trying to be someone I wasn't, or not being genuine. I had a big fear of that.

The students also maintained that they are able to value college more holistically, with a focus on their own intellectual and personal growth, feeling fortunate that they had the chance to take advantage of the many opportunities and resources that are available on their campuses. Many expressed feeling grateful and appreciative for the privilege of being in college.

CHAPTER SIX: SOVEREIGN ENGAGEMENT IN COLLEGE

SOVEREIGN ENGAGEMENT
AS A COLLEGE STUDENT

Introduction

As a result of the Meaning Making that emerges from the Encounters students have during their gap year, they arrive at college ready to approach their first year with gusto. Some prevalent themes emerged from the process of coding the interview, focus group, and written response data. While not every student arrives feeling academically confident, or emotionally prepared, to attend college, all the participants in this study indicated they felt ready to begin the next chapter in their lives. In particular, there was compelling evidence in the students' descriptions of their transition to college during the first year that they had developed an ability to rely on their stronger internal voices, which had been cultivated through their gap-year encounters.

Evidence of Sovereign Engagement in College

Students make the most pronounced growth in self-authorship during gap years that challenge them to make decisions and handle the consequences; when they are pushed to a greater level of independence than they had in high school; when they have the chance to interact with people of different ages and backgrounds. This, in turn, leads to an approach to the first year of college that I have termed "Sovereign Engagement."

The term "Sovereign Engagement" is intended to capture a dimension of student experience that reflects the significance of having stepped off that proverbial conveyor belt: the move away from the conventional educational path and into encounters that were clearly developmentally provocative for them. "Sovereign Engagement" refers to self-authored understanding and behavior, in which individuals find meaning and validation within themselves and cease basing their decisions on external messages and social scripts. Having spent a year removed from prior habits, social groups, and cultural contexts, gap-year students demonstrate a keenly deliberate approach to their decisions when they began their first year in college. They are able to recognize this as a new phase of their experience, and one that they have reached intentionally, rather than by default. In most cases, they are also able to articulate with acuity how they intended to make the most of their first year.

In developing the term "Sovereign Engagement," I was inspired by Walker Percy's classic essay, *The Loss of the Creature* (1975). In this essay, Percy explores his concept of sovereignty of the knower, exhorting educators and students to avoid the tendency to yield a level of authentic knowing to an outside expert who crafts or provides the context for what we know. Using the example of a sightseer visiting the Grand Canyon for the first time, Percy suggests that there is a danger that the traveler will "surrender the present to the past or future," by comparing the experience to others' accounts of the Grand Canyon, rather than engaging with "the thing to be known" (Percy, p. 48), such as truly seeing the Grand Canyon in all its remarkable dimensions. "Sovereign Engagement" as a descriptive term honors the way that the students in this study have chosen not to surrender the present to the past or the future, but who have become what Percy refers to as "sovereign wayfarers," engaging enthusiastically in the things they want to know. For them, "Sovereign Engagement" means

these students take full ownership of their choices and their performance, without

consternation or blame. Additional information about Percy's essay, and its relevance to this

topic, is included as Appendix I.

In the Gap Year Impact Model, *Sovereign Engagemen*t indicates a number of

representative behaviors and attitudes that reflect both the developmentally-effective gap-

year *Encounters* and the *Meaning Making* that ensued. Despite some variation in their

specific activities and the level of self-authorship they achieved, all twelve of the students in

my study demonstrated attitudes or behaviors in each of the categories that this aspect of the

model suggests. The following pages offer examples of how these students:

- Took responsibility for their academic performance;

- Appreciated learning for the sake of learning;

- Pursued authentic relationships with parents and peers;

- Recognized and resisted FOMO ("Fear of Missing Out");

- Valued college as short-term and a privilege; and

- Made decisions congruent with their internal voice.

Analysis of the data in terms of students' adjustment to college revealed evidence of

the most significant growth in the students who had had the widest range of gap-year

encounters. That is, when their encounters pushed them in multiple dimensions, and

especially when those encounters were markedly different than what they are likely to have

experienced had they moved directly from high school to the first year of college, they

described the most significant change in themselves. As the Gap Year Impact Model shown

in Figure 4b suggests, this led to an acceleration in the process of self-authorship, and to

evidence of "Sovereign Engagement" in their college experience.

While most of the students were extremely excited about finally getting to college after having been engaged in other activities for a year, for several the transition was, according to their own assessment, made more difficult in some ways by having taken the gap year. Specifically, some felt unprepared or out of practice academically, some were missing the people and experiences from their gap year, and others felt just plain apprehensive about starting college. It is often a sense of liminality, of existing between worlds, that makes the transition to college more complicated for some gap-year students. Having moved to more complex levels of meaning making as a result of their gap-year Encounters, these students showed increased self-authorship in college, as the following pages demonstrate.

Taking Responsibility for Academic Performance

Whatever their level of academic preparedness, the students in this study took responsibility for their academic performance in their college courses. For Andy, the gap year made the transition to college very difficult because he had not been academically engaged during the previous year. Andy attitude was ambivalent, at best, when he began the Fall semester. He said, "it was tough going back to academics and partially because I forgot the material, partially because I wasn't super into it, partially because I was just sort of not used to the rigor of like focusing on classes and doing homework after not doing that for a while."

In November, during one of the Google hangout focus groups, Andy said, "I think I would be a much better student if I hadn't taken the gap year … I feel like the gap year kind of unconditioned me from focusing on my school work." Andy felt that he had outside

responsibilities that demanded his time and attention, and felt more important than his coursework. "And then also just like the focus and then also having like motivation to do things that sometimes I am not as interested in can be tough, especially when I have something that I am very interested in that I could be spending time on."

The transition to college-level academics was also difficult for Daniel. During our final interview, Daniel reflected on his academic performance, which he felt was not up to par. "I am struggling to pass my classes and these people are developing apps and curing cancer, this is like a fairly common among API freshmen, is that there are people coming in who have already done these amazing things." He observed his sense that others were able to get good grades without a great deal of effort, and his need to accept that reality, as he perceived it. "The idea, the fact that there are people like that and I struggle just to get by like that and that's really hard, so I think that's a low, and I am continuing to feel this, I don't think that's going to change, I am never going to be on the top third of intelligence of API or even the top half probably, so it's just feeling that, that's hard."

Daniel had to pause during the first semester and think about whether his academic performance should be the most important measure. He said, "I need to realize from the outset that I am not going to be an A student here. And when I get those tests back next week and they are not – and I didn't get As on that, and I am probably and hopefully pass them, that's the goal, passing is the goal." He hoped that once he decided on his major and began taking more specialized courses, he might try to improve his grades a bit, "but these are my goals right now and I think that for me is a very, very new idea because I was never a B student. I probably got one B if anything at all in high school. He added, "That's very new but it's also I think it's healthy. I think failing is a healthy thing to do at some point in

life." Arriving at college after a gap year also required students like Daniel to recalibrate, as they left behind some conditions that had supported their process of development.

Not all of their decisions necessarily resulted in the students' academic success. In fact, several of the participants talked about choosing not to put their energy into a particular course because it felt less important than some other priorities. And others had to come to terms with a different set of initial courses than they might otherwise have taken, or a level of performance on the first round of graded work that was not consistent with their previous achievement. Vinny, for example, seemed unfazed by his final grade of B in Chemistry, though he accepted full responsibility for that outcome. "It was just a B. That was my lowest grade and I was just disinterested. I had no interest in the class and didn't try really because I didn't have any motivation to try."

While she did have motivation to try hard during her first semester, Maria was not disappointed about her early performance in her courses at API. She also did not mind taking some courses that were essentially review for her, saying, "if I had come straight here from high school, I would have tried to transfer credit for my advanced classes and probably would not have done as well, since I would not have remembered all of the foundational material in the advanced classes. Seeing this material again, I understand it much better and also understand the reasons behind the laws and theorems that I see."

The initial adjustment was difficult for Lena, who took all humanities courses during her first semester, so found herself saddled with 500 pages of reading each week. In one class, she found that the first assignment "has had me so scared and stressed for the past four days, it's just so hard. And I just feel really stupid because I, like, can't figure out how to write it in the right way."

Similarly, Layla reflected during our final interview on her experience of writing papers during her first semester. She found that her writing skills had been "rusty," and that her writing at the beginning of her first college semester "was not as good as the writing that I did at the end of my senior year." This was difficult for Layla, "especially because I felt like it wasn't as hard for my friends, since they had just come out of high school and it was easy for them. So they would write a paper in one night or two nights, and I would spend like the whole week working on them."

After spending time away from school during her gap year, with infrequent practice speaking and using English, Paulina had some difficulty making the transition to her first year of college, which she described during our initial interview. "When I came [to SC], the transition between the Spanish and English was kind of difficult." She laughed as she talked about getting accustomed to using and hearing English, both in interactions with peers and in her classes. Paulina's parents accompanied her to campus and stayed local for her first several days at SC, she explained, "so I had to fix my brain to both of the languages at the same time."

When Mark arrived, he found himself somewhat intimidated by the other students in his classes first semester. Despite his confidence in his high school English class, he found that in his English class at SC, "people were saying what I thought were the smartest things, and I had no idea what to say about it." When he got to SC, said Mark, "I was like, damn, people are smart!"

Learning for the Sake of Learning

Wherever the students landed on the spectrum of academic performance, the value of learning for the sake of learning became a thread of connection among the participants. For example, Tessa was energized by her courses in the first semester at API, and she expressed her frustration with other students' obsession with grades and exams. "I don't care if I got this grade versus that grade if I learn to approach a problem in a new way and think about it in a different way," said Tessa. "And I want to. That's why I am here, not necessarily for the grades."

This same sentiment was expressed by Layla, who said during our first interview (before she had even completed graded work in her Fall classes) that "above all, I am here for the knowledge to be gained from my classes. Hopefully, I will absorb and display that knowledge in such a way that it leads to good grades, but for me grades are a by-product of the learning, not the other way around."

Despite the fact that he had been completely away from school during his gap year, Vinny was very excited about his courses when he began his first semester at SC. In fact, by the end of his gap year, "I was really like, man, I wanna be in class right now. And that was just a feeling I hadn't had in years, like I haven't wanted to go to class and been excited for school in so long, really."

During our final interview, Vinny talked enthusiastically about his academic experience in the first semester, explaining that he had not struggled academically despite the fact that he had not done homework or written a paper for a full year. "But then I got into the swing of things just pretty immediately," said Vinny. "I was engaged in most of the things I

was doing – especially this semester all my classes, even more, I take them specifically because I wanted to see what they are about and all that stuff, it's cool."

Jackie enjoyed virtually everything about her first semester, and was delighted that her deep engagement with the learning process resulted in excellent grades. "I'm quite proud of the academic products and of how much I learned, as well as my grades," Jackie wrote in December. "But the reason I loved finals was definitely not the grades I earned—they are just a happy side benefit." And Paulina summed up her sense of the value of learning for the sake of learning in a straightforward way, explaining that "the gap year gave me the perspective that success is not measured in grades, but measured in knowledge and experience."

Viewing College as Short-Term and a Privilege

With an interim year of encounters behind them, students sensed that college was an important next phase of their lives, but also recognized the relatively brief portion it represents. They began their first year valuing college as short-term and a privilege. Layla summed it up particularly well; it was her gap year that allowed Layla to recognize that "four years is a long time to be in college, but at the same time it's very short in, like, your lifespan. So I have this sort of dual perception of like college is now, and college is important, but it's also temporary, and there's a lot of life that will happen after college as well. So that kinda makes me wanna like really appreciate where I am and like get the most out of it, for sure." This was also a theme for Julie, who described college as a "temporal bubble," and said "you know, both in a good way and in a bad way, like its temporary, this isn't real life. I am trying to say, like, awareness of the shortness of college."

Students seemed to recognize and appreciate the passage of time in new ways as a result of their gap-year experiences. Many of them felt that through their gap-year encounters, they had learned to slow down, to appreciate the moment, to pay attention to and take pride in their decisions. Simultaneously, they expressed recognition that there was more to come beyond college.

Mark attributed some of his appreciation for the relative short span of time that college represents to his NOLS course. He explained that "one of the things that they say is, 'slow days, fast weeks,' where like the days go by really slowly but then you will realize that, shit, it's Monday again. So I realized you don't realize how fast time is moving." He found it important to live in the present, and tried to remember "that don't forget about what's in front of you type deal." Andy's perspective, however, was somewhat different. His feelings about spending time in college were related to his restlessness during his first year. "I do feel like college is something I am doing right now," said Andy, "but it's not the be-all, end-all, and if something else came up that is more important then I can go to that."

"I am enjoying every minute that I am here really but I do view it as kind of a stepping stone," Tessa said during our final interview. She explained that each segment of her life so far seemed to follow a natural sequence, "but it's not like I can't see past college. It's not like I am not conscious of the fact that this is one more step but there is stuff that comes afterwards." To Maria, arriving at college "feels like a new phase of my life instead of a continuation of the last fourteen years of education."

While their first-year peers were treating college as the most important part of their lives, these students had a different perspective. "I don't want college to be the best four years of my life," said Layla.

Letting Go of "FOMO"

The students use the term "Fear of Missing Out" — commonly known as FOMO — to describe the sense that others around you must be doing something better, or more exciting, and that if you don't participate you will be missing out on something vitally important that others will share. This concept was explored spontaneously by several participants, especially notable because I had not introduced the term in my questions. Rather, several of the students discussed either some FOMO tension they felt during the first year (wanting to do what they wanted, but also wondering if they might be missing out on something else) or outright resistance to FOMO (preferring to choose to do something with friends rather than attend some party that had gotten a lot of hype, for example). The ability to recognize, and in many instances, resist FOMO, developed out of the self-reliance and cultural dissonance students had faced during their gap years. After spending a year in Turkey, for example, Jackie recognized that "what I learned [during my gap year] was how to be outside of the system … not buy in to all the cultural norms and cultural rules of a given society." This is compelling evidence of students cultivating the internal voice, a key element of the Crossroads of Self-Authorship as described by Baxter Magolda (2004, 2009).

The students who did discuss FOMO, for the most part, found themselves opting into the events that they found interesting, and also just as frequently choosing to spend time alone or with a select group of friends when a larger or more well-publicized event was less appealing to them. They also were able to attribute their decisions to their ability to listen to their internal voices.

Many students in this study spent all or part of their gap year engaged in very independently-driven activities within some new cultural contexts. They had traveled or lived on their own, or were responsible for shopping for groceries or managing their finances. In some instances, they became commuters, or punched a clock at work, or designed lessons and activities for children who relied on them. Through these encounters, students began to recognize themselves as both independent and interdependent. In some ways, coming to college resulted in a loss of independence for these gap-year students, a shift that was at once both welcome and unwelcome.

While she was in DC, Lena cooked all her own vegan meals, so adjusting to eating in a campus dining hall was difficult. It brought on feelings of loss of control that she hadn't expected. According to Maria, however, the gap year helped her to feel more independent and capable. "And just more mature," she said. "Like, I understand that — yes — it could cost three bucks to do a load of laundry and — yeah — cooking for yourself is hard when you cook for one person. And I know how to cook."

As a result of his experiences, Peter also was able to make connections between what he was studying and what he had encountered in the real world. During one of the focus groups, Peter talked about the way he was thinking about material being covered in his Political Science class at DU. "I feel like I can relate to it much more, just because I've seen more parts of the world, and, just having seen more — just one year more of reality and not just of the school world."

When Paulina did poorly on an exam early in the first semester, she decided that she needed to increase her efforts to take advantage of campus academic support resources. She briefly felt upset about her performance, but as a result of her gap year, Paulina said, "I

learned life is like that, college is like that. Now I have experience and know how to handle it, I know how to get help even if I didn't before, I know now what my strengths are, and I know that I don't want that to happen anymore."

In contrast to some others involved in this study, Mark, who had lived at home for the latter half of his gap year, found that arriving at college gave him a tremendous feeling of freedom. "The best thing is the freedom I have to do pretty much whatever I want." During the summer before his gap year began, a coworker who was already in college asked Mark if he felt sad that he wasn't going to be starting college in the fall. "I remember saying, like, I'm not necessarily sad, but like I told him that everyone always says college is the best, and like, I just wanna find out why they keep saying that," remembers Mark. This coworker emphasized the feeling of freedom in college, telling Mark that he would enjoy making decisions without having to clear it with anyone else — like opting into spontaneous plans. "You can always be like, 'Yes. I want to go to McDonald's at 2:45 in the morning.'"

Although this had been alluring to him, Mark said during our final interview that he had not gone to McDonald's at 2:45 in the morning. However, he said, "I just like being able to go wherever I want whenever I want."

The concept of FOMO, then, is related to fluctuating levels of freedom and responsibility. As they negotiate this new environment, it is appealing, several admit, to slide back into the comfort of defined standards for their thought and behavior. Nice, too, to live among so many peers and to have, in most cases, fewer responsibilities than they had had during their gap year. This sometimes meant that students struggled in response to strong external influences, evidence of some peer pressure that had not plagued them during the gap year.

Tessa was one of the students who was very cognizant of the FOMO phenomenon. Her take on fear of missing out was that she should make choices consistent with her own desires, rather than what others might think. She also recognized that her approach to FOMO was different than what she had observed in other first-year students at API. In our final interview, Tessa shared, "People will joke around, like, I am having such FOMO right now, I should be doing XYZ. But, why should you be doing it, if you don't really want to?"

While other students seemed to have successfully cultivated their internal voice, Lena seemed to be truly vacillating between several approaches to decisions in her life, and sometimes conflicted about what is right for her. At the start of the spring semester, Lena reflected on the tension she was feeling, because she was able to observe the social pressures on first-year students and at the same time step back to make sense of her reactions to what is going on around her. "Okay, here it is," said Lena, after struggling to find a way of describing this tension, "this semester [I've experienced] sort of like an intense fear of missing out and also like sometimes if I'm not paying attention, I tend to really let social pressures act on me in a way that I am not always happy with." Her description perfectly captured the essence of FOMO: "I feel like I should go out tonight so I guess I'm going to go out tonight, but maybe I would rather stay in. Or, I feel like I should go to this event or I feel like what I'm supposed to be doing in college is this."

The ability to recognize, and at times resist, the pressure of FOMO illustrates that these students were feeling some tension between being a 'typical' college student and at the same time drawing on their recent gap-year experiences. As a result, they felt they were less likely than other students to be swayed by the opinions of others. Noticing the culture of

social pressure in college, the students felt that their year of "real life" provided a stronger platform for making good, internally-driven decisions.

Pursuit of Authentic Relationships

As discussed in Chapter Two, the relational-cultural model identifies four growth-fostering components of relational health — mutual engagement, authenticity, empowerment, and ability to deal with conflict (Liang, et al., 2002a; 2007). Because students chose an alternative path than their high school peers, I wondered how those existing relationships would evolve, and how the students would pursue new relationships when they entered the college environment after having had the gap year. In other words, I wanted to know in what ways their relational health had been impacted by their gap year. The building and maintenance of relationships before, during and after the gap year was a common thread through many of the stories that were shared with me by the student participants.

Three primary perspectives on evolving relationships emerged from the data:

1. Existing relationships with high school friends, mentors, and family members had changed through the processes of deciding to go, pursuing the gap year, and then starting college;

2. Multigenerational relationships during the gap year had expanded or awakened students' capacity for interpersonal connection; and

3. Emerging relationships with people they met during the first year of college, especially with traditional first-year students, other gap-year students, and upperclass students, were a welcome and empowering part of their transition.

Across these relationship categories, it was evident that the students' relational health was tied in large part to their levels of self-authorship, and that this impacted the relationships they maintained and developed during college. Of the growth-fostering components of relational health, the one that was most consistently evident in their comments was authenticity. In fact, the greater their reliance on an internal voice, the more likely the students were to describe actively seeking authenticity in their relationships once they got to college. This finding is also quite consistent with Bowman's 2010 study on the psychological well-being of first-year college students (described in Chapter Two), which identified such contributing factors as autonomous decision-making and maintaining positive relations with others. It has been suggested that when relationships are strong, students are likely to adjust more readily to college, since "authentic and empowering relational connections may serve a protective function for college students in helping them cope with attachment insecurity and decreased parental emotional support" (Frey, et al., 2006, p. 306). These gap-year students arrive don college campuses having already negotiated some shifts in their existing relationships, along with the experience of fostering and nurturing new relationships. In other words, they had had more opportunity than their peers to consider themselves in relation to others.

The most obvious thread of continuity about relationships throughout this study is the desire for authenticity in relationships, apparent in the reflections of all participants. This was evident in the way students talked about their relationships with their family members, with their existing friends from high school, with individuals they met through their gap-year encounters, and with those they once they began their first year of college. The "Meaning Making" process, depicted in the Gap Year Impact Model as a series of overlapping cycles of

differentiation and integration, captures the students' recognition of their deepening

relationships. This reflects the interpersonal growth that was hastened by the students' gap-

year Encounters (exploring the question "How Do I Relate to Others?"), and is evident in the

way students describe their relationships once they get to college. The students frequently

described themselves in relation to others, and identified their relationships as pivotal aspects

of their adjustment during the first year.

Authenticity in Existing Relationships

In terms of changing relationships with high school friends, mentors, and family

members, the processes of deciding to go, pursuing the gap year, and then starting college

caused a shift in relationships for the participants in this study. As described in the Gap Year

Impact Model, the process of decision-making related to the gap year required a level of

individual motivation that in many cases brought new dimension to relationships with

parents, in particular. Choosing this unconventional path also meant that these students had

to talk with their friends and teachers about their conviction that taking a gap year was right

for them, regardless of the reactions they might have received. In addition, conversations

about the viability of the gap year required students to articulate their intentions, demonstrate

their persistence and attention to details, and negotiate finances in consultation with parents

or other adults. This is initial evidence of moving toward self-authorship, which we have

seen develops more fully through students' gap-year Encounters.

Lena remembers that, before she began the gap year, her high school friends had been

concerned that "'you're not gonna be interested in being friends with us anymore cause

you're gonna change so much.'" She found that, given the intensity of her teaching

experience with City Year, her focus during the year was not on making many new friends. When she returned and headed off to DU, her high school friendships were still strong, despite the fact that most of those friends had cultivated new relationships with people they had met in college.

Some students saw their relationships with family members evolve and, in some cases, improve. Perhaps because they were in different places for the first time, Daniel and his twin brother ended up speaking on the phone frequently and "he wanted to know what was going on in my life, and I wanted to know what was going on in his life, because we were both going through very new and very different experiences." Similarly, when she returned from the overseas portion of her gap year, Layla felt that her relationship with her family had changed. "I think that my parents have begun to respect my autonomy, like as they probably should, considering I lived on my own for 5 months," she said, adding that her relationships with her siblings had changed as well. She also made an effort to express more appreciation of the things her parents did for her and her siblings.

Authenticity in Relationships During the Gap Year

All students left behind some relationships and developed new ones as the result of the gap year. Particularly prevalent in their stories were significant multi-generational relationships. In fact, 11 of the 12 students spent a significant portion of their gap year in an experience or environment where the majority of the people they interacted with on a daily basis were not their peers in terms of age. All 12 participants left the realm of a familiar, peer-driven school context and entered unfamiliar spaces and environments in which they were establishing and strengthening new relationships. They were interacting regularly with

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coworkers, children, host families, supervisors, and/or grandparents, whose influences were deeply felt by the students. As they pursued these new relationships, students gained the perspective that comes from knowing and understanding the world through the eyes of someone new. Their increased self-authorship — especially in terms of interpersonal development — certainly comes in part from these relationships. The relationships seem to have been essential catalysts for the cycles of differentiation and integration that were so central to the students' experiences. Also evident in their descriptions of these relationships was a sense of gratitude and respect for the people they met.

Paulina spent part of her gap year living with her grandparents, so became very close with them, and at the same time found that while she was away, her relationship with her parents shifted. This became clearer to Paulina once she arrived at SC. "Now I depend less upon them, yeah, in my decisions I don't depend on them that much, I have learned to make my own decisions. I depend them in the way that I talk to them because they are my family but I feel that I can handle more by myself, my life."

While Layla was interning at a non-profit agency, she developed a close friendship with another intern who was 28, ten years older than Layla. She lived with a host family during part of her time in India, and also spent her days working with people from different generations at various times. "There was one woman who was like 50 – maybe she was closer to 60 – so it was diverse, even though the median age was probably like early 20's." While she was there, Layla also worked in an after-school program for young girls, playing games and teaching them some basic science and English, learning to work with children and gaining important cross-cultural insights about elementary education. She had very few interactions with people her own age during her gap year.

When she got to college, Layla was able to reflect on how those relationships had been important to her, even as she appreciated her new peers. "I'm glad that I did it, and I think that it definitely helped me mature in a lot of ways, but it's also nice to just be able to be with the people of your same age," Layla said during our focus group discussion.

Several of the students had experiences living with host families, and those Encounters were important to their development even when they were not the most satisfying or supportive. For example, for several months Maria lived with a couple whose children were grown and had moved out of the house, so she felt rather lonely while she was there. Toward the end of her stay, however, she began frequenting a local cafe that served American food, and developed a meaningful relationship with one of the regular staff members. Maria explained that eventually this individual "was like a surrogate dad to me. I ate Thanksgiving with the people from the café, I had Christmas dinner there – it was just a lot of fun."

Andy also noticed the difference being among peers when he arrived at API. He shared with other participants during our focus group that "I was working at this awesome company with a bunch of people who I do like, but they were all in their 20s and 30s." In addition to those relationships, he spent the year living with some family friends and getting to know them better. He felt that they became a second family to him over the course of the year.

These relationships across generational lines proved to be deeply meaningful to the students. The students became close with individuals they met, learning to appreciate their varied perspectives, and often finding them to be refreshingly genuine.

Authenticity in New Relationships

When they arrive at college after the gap year, first-year students have the chance to form new relationships with peers and others on campus. With the exception of Daniel, who was surrounded by his peers during his gap year, the participants found themselves both pleased and unnerved by immersion into a peer-focused environment. The tension of in(ter)dependence described by Smith, et al. (2006) as a common aspect of socialization for first-year college students seems to play out in complex ways for gap-year students.

Even as they appreciated entering a community of peers who may share their interests and enthusiasm for being in college, many participants in this study noticed differences between themselves and the other first-year students they met. For instance, when she met other first-year students during her first semester at SC, Paulina noticed a difference in terms of their most recent frames of reference. She said, "everyone is comparing high school with college, and I'm not comparing high school with college." In Paulina's mind, high school was far behind in her past, "so it is weird like when they are talking about their proms." She added that, when first-year college students start talking about high school, they are holding onto their own "little world" -- one which Paulina felt she had left behind much earlier. Lena seemed to agree with Paulina. In describing her decision to break up with a young man she met at DU who seemed unable to manage his time and commitments, she commented that "I think that I'm definitely more mature than most of the other freshmen that I know."

These students commented on the fact that, once they arrived at college after the gap year, they valued that they were able to select their friends, rather than being thrown into relationships because of either convenience or luck. For example, in September, Peter was thinking about how he could make meaningful friendships at DU, a much larger community

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than his high school of 200 students. He found it distasteful that most of his early friendships were "interactions determined by chance," and spent time evaluating his satisfaction with those relationships. "But I realized here that you can influence or choose who you will interact with by creating filters," he shared. "So, by choosing which classes you take, which clubs you do, which activities you do, you create filters and then you meet people there, and then to me it seems okay to become friends with them because that filter brought you together."

Julie felt that she was approaching relationships in college differently than she sensed her peers were. Thinking back on first semester, she said, "I was really conscious about it. I was trying to learn from all my friends, and if it is not someone who is feeding me as much as I feel like I am feeding into the relationship, then maybe it's not a good relationship."

Julie also reflected on her approach to relationships, which she felt had become more nuanced and deliberate. She referred to high school friends as "friends of convenience," and explained that her time in Turkey was far less social than college had been during her first semester. College, said Julie, is "awesome, it's so much fun, and they're your own age, and so they want to do the same things. So I feel like I've just been aware of that, of what maybe a real friendship is, so I've found some people that I really consider real friends at DU so far." Rather than seeking to get to know a particular group of people, Julie indicated that was intentional about meeting people "that are going to push me to be a better person, and help me be a better and more mature person. And so that's how I look for my friends."

When she got to API, Tessa also found herself looking for meaningful friendships, and beginning to let go of some high school friendships. "Well, when you get some distance from people you realize, I don't know -- it sounds bad, but you realize who you are friends

with because of proximity, and who you are friends with based upon real reasons." Although she had remained in touch with many high school friends during her gap year, Tessa began to realize that "for the most part I am in contact with my other friends not because I feel like I have to be but because I want to be, while the other people who I might have not realized that I was friends with just because they are all the same circle, I don't really feel guilty about kind of letting those slide."

The students also found themselves to be socially confident. During the focus groups, student participants agreed with one another that they had arrived at college with a greater facility than most of their peers to interact with strangers. Their personal stories reveal that during their gap years, developing and/or cultivating relationships with new people, especially those from different generations, required them to hone their interpersonal skills. They brought this confidence with them to college. Julie, who had spent her gap year in Turkey, offered a commentary that describes not just her experience, but many others, at least metaphorically, as well: "I'm in my native tongue, my native culture. I know the rules here. I know the rules, and I can break the rules if I want to, here."

Andy appreciated the multigenerational relationships he had had during his gap year, but found it exciting to join a community of his peers when he got to college. "It's really cool for me to be able to be here and just, like, have relationships with people who are my age and just be a mature college student sometimes. I like that," he said during the focus group.

During the first semester, Maria was not hesitant to talk to new people. She said, "If I don't know anyone in the room, I'll pick the friendliest-looking person in the room that's sitting by themselves and sit in front of them. So I got to know a lot of people that way."

Similarly, social confidence played out for Julie who said, "I was comfortable talking to everyone and I was disregarding the social rules of 'you are captain of the crew team … oh, I could never talk to you.' I don't care. I just came back from a foreign country where everyone was a lot more scary."

Coupled with confidence was a sense of gratitude. "My friends did not have the kind of experiences I did, but that makes them no less exceptional," said Layla, "and I am constantly learning and growing from them. The best thing about [Satis], in my opinion, is that everyone here is so smart and so curious."

Sharing Their Stories

As they developed new relationships, one tension revolved around the extent to which the students shared their gap-year stories with students around them. During the data gathering phase of this study, the students were most animated and engaged when they were discussing the encounters they had during the gap year. It was evident that they had had few opportunities to describe their activities in great detail, and in fact some explained that their peers did not seem particularly interested. Several students expressed a deep desire to talk about what they felt were extremely significant encounters during their gap year, and appreciated the chance to talk about their experiences.

There was also some ambivalence among the participants about when and how comprehensively to discuss the gap year. In some cases, students were concerned that talking about their gap year would somehow create distance between themselves and others they met when they arrived at college. Layla explained that, at the start of her first semester,

"I was very cautious. I'm very aware of it, because I don't wanna be that person — that, 'oh, like that girl that went to India' — I don't want to talk about it all the time."

A similar concern about not wanting to sound arrogant by talking about the gap year was raised by Jackie, whose gap year included spending several months in two different European countries. She explained that she found it awkward to have other students think she was "cool" or "amazing" for doing something that she recognized was a privilege, and she didn't want to draw attention to herself because of it. As a matter of fact, Jackie felt uncomfortable being praised for having spent a year in Europe after high school. "That's not a reflection on me," said Jackie, "that's a reflection of me being really lucky."

In contrast to Layla and Jackie, Vinny did not feel concerned about disclosing the fact that he had taken a gap year. He was comfortable with his choices and did not feel at all self-conscious. Vinny said, "It's not really a secret or anything at all, it's just something that comes up. And it's not, like, important – I mean it's not important to tell other people … it doesn't change their perception of me or anything -- it's just a little thing, a little tidbit of information."

For Maria, mention of the gap year came up frequently in conversation at the beginning of the year, often because API students would often discuss their courses, which were heavily dependent upon placement results at the start of the semester. Although she had taken advanced math courses, including calculus, during high school, Maria placed into an introductory calculus course when she arrived at API. Maria explained, "I'm taking [this course] because I took a gap year and forgot most everything.'" She added, "It's like 'yes, I had these classes, but I took a gap year,' and then they're like, 'what did you do in your gap

year?' And then . . . I mean I've had this conversation probably 30 times in the last three weeks."

Peter felt that most people he met were not particularly interested in knowing the details of his gap year. When it came up in conversation as he met people during the first semester, students would ask, 'What did you do?,' in a rather perfunctory way, so Peter had formulated what he called a "standard sentence" in response. He explained that he no longer spent much time formulating his answer, but just repeated the rehearsed sentence. He added, "The interesting thing is that regardless of what you say in the sentence, they are not going to say anything anyway. I think … the standard response is that people don't really care very much."

Lena felt that her gap-year experience – teaching at an inner-city middle school – shaped her tremendously, and yet, during her first semester at DU she sometimes felt unsure about whether or when to bring it up with others. She said, "I think it comes up earlier if the person is older." When she met an upperclass student, Lena, realized, she was more likely to mention the gap year to provide a frame of reference for her age and situation. "I don't always want to do that, but that is my impulse when I meet people that are older." She went on to explain that, while she often hesitated to call attention to the fact that she took a gap year, "… it's a big piece of the context, and who I am right now. It maybe won't be in a few years, but for now it definitely really is."

Mark shared a similar concern at the start of his first semester at SC. When asked at what point he might tell someone he met about his gap year, he responded, "I never force it into the conversation." However, if there was a natural reason to share a story that made it feel relevant and appropriate, "I'll say, like, 'so I took a gap year, and I went on a camping

trip there, and during that trip this happened.'" He added that "most of the people that I hang out with know that I took a gap year, just from talking with them."

For Tessa, her gap year often came up when her peers at API were discussing something relating to high school, or relating to their ages. "It's interesting because sometimes I will say, 'Oh, did you hear?, right, some people do it,' or they will say 'what did you do?' and I will say 'teaching,' and then it will end there." When she did get some follow-up questions, Tessa would elaborate "based on the person's interest or if they are asking for more details."

In deciding when or whether to disclose details of their gap years, these students were concerned that they might appear smug, or sound arrogant (despite the fact that, as Layla put it, they were sometimes reminded by others not to think they are better than anyone else because they took a gap year). As they sought to develop and redefine authentic relationships with others, the students found themselves negotiating the liminality of listening to (perhaps presumed) external voices and trusting their internal voices. When their relationships provided more of the indicators of relational health, students were more likely to feel comfortable fully disclosing their gap-year stories.

Making Decisions Congruent with Internal Voice

What Paulina recognized when she got to college was that she had become more sure of herself, and of her values, as a result of the gap year. "I'm stronger. I know what I want. I know my values, the values that I respect, so I know how to behave, because I want to behave like that, and I know that is correct for me." This realization made her more certain about her own sense of right and wrong, which she felt was independent of her upbringing

and the cultural context in which she was raised. Her choices were made because of her internal voice, and "not because my family or my country wants me to behave like that, like, my culture wants me to behave. So I'm pretty confident (with) who I am right now." Like Paulina, Lena felt she was making decisions and setting goals that were consistent with her greater understanding of herself. "I'm a lot more articulated and focused about the things I'm thinking about," said Lena, "because I've had experience with some of the issues that I'm thinking about." And Tessa recognized that she was making choices that reflected her own interests, not external influences, explaining that "whatever I want to do I will do it; if I don't want to do it, at the end of the day it's not going to happen."

When asked in September to talk about how he felt the gap year impacted his transition to college, Vinny said that as a result of his year, he had gained the most in terms of self-confidence and determination. "I think that just comes back to the motivation thing," he said, like the emotional strength, like thinking like I can handle anything that this year throws at me." And in December, Vinny wrote about the "astronomical amount of work" he had to do at the end of the semester. His effort was rewarded when he was praised by his English professor for his final paper, an outcome which he described as "not only one of the highs of my month, but also of my academic career as a whole." He explained that "I worked a lot harder these few weeks than I had at any point in high school, and I believe that my gap year and the maturity that came along with it had a lot to do with it."

Baxter Magolda and King reminded us that "[w]ithout developing the capacity to understand and learn from one's experiences, students are at a loss to know how to make intentional choices about what to believe and how to act" (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012, p. 3). Since they understand themselves more as a result of the meaning making that took place

during their gap years, several students were able to recognize a difference in the way that they approached decisions when they arrived at college. Layla, for example, felt that her gap year provided the context she needed to consider how she makes choices, and move beyond superficial reasons. She explained that her encounters "sort of stripped away that layer of ego a lot, and I think that's obviously come from my gap year, not from anywhere else." In college, Layla sensed that other new students seemed to feel the need to prove themselves to others, but she did not feel such pressure because "you know, I've kind of proven myself in a very different context."

During our final interview, Andy said that he had been thinking about his use of time during his first several months in college, and how that may have been different from what other first-year students were managing. Because he was maintaining his outside projects, and developing new apps with a couple of other friends, he often did not feel fully focused on his schoolwork. He found himself trying to determine what he is truly passionate about "because I spend time doing things that you know working on projects and stuff and like answering emails and all these crazy stuff that a lot of people in my class don't have to deal with, but I still have to do all the work that they have to do in order to take the same classes.

At the start of the Fall semester Daniel said,

So far I have been pretty much maintaining a similar level of religious observance as I maintained in Israel, with the exception of that I am not going to, I am not praying with the minyan three times a day because there isn't one and things like that. But as far as, like, I have observance of Kashrut and observance of Shabbat, I've definitely been on the same place as I have been in the past. Maybe a few weeks after maybe I am a little more lenient about but I am still very much observant and I think that's

something that changes a lot of people that in the freshman year, the API people who

have come from religious backgrounds, so that's going to be an interesting thing to

see. I want to stay religious because it means a lot to me.

In October, Daniel wrote that "[o]verall, the last month has shown an improvement in my

college experience, but things are not perfect, which at least to some degree is due to the fact

that I took a gap year."

These students' stories demonstrate that their transitions were influenced by the

sequence of encounters in their lives, and by the need to reintegrate into the structured

educational setting of a residential college environment, after having experienced multiple

cycles of differentiation and integration during the gap year.

Living in the Real World

There was one more pervasive thread throughout the interviews, written responses

and focus groups: recurring references to the concept of "real life" or the "real world." What

students mean by these terms may differ, but most of them made a distinction between being

in college and having "real life" experiences; they were acutely aware of their encounters

with the world beyond college. For example, during one of the Google hangout focus

groups, one student participant asked the rest of group what they had been noticing in terms

of differences between themselves and other first-year students. Andy replied that the year at

his technology company "prepared me less for college and prepared me more for working in

the real world. And so, I feel very much when I'm here that I kind of one foot out the door

because there are so many awesome things going on."

Layla indicated during one of our focus groups that "while I definitely got invaluable things from my gap year. I wouldn't say that I was like more or less prepared for college. I might feel like more or less prepared for life in some ways because I feel like I saw a little bit more of it," and she continued to reflect that "I felt like I was prepared for life, but college itself isn't exactly the same thing."

Because Julie had spent time both outside and within the US, working and living in several multigenerational settings, she became a keen observer of the college experience, which she described as "very much a bubble" that she had seen from the outside. "It's just like, I saw a lot of life. And it's just, like, this is not real life. It's just so college and so young." In October, when asked to reflect on the ways in which she had been thinking about her gap year during the semester, Julie wrote that she was very excited about all the courses that were available to her at DU, explaining, "I want to maximize and also enjoy these four years of studying, because real life really isn't like this."

Vinny made a distinction between learning in the classroom and learning to manage tasks he encountered during his gap year, such as using his time effectively and enduring some difficult family issues. He said his gap year was "less learning about academic things and more learning about worldly things."

Peter also emphasized that he values his gap year for providing him with some greater perspective. "If I had gone straight to university from high school," he said, "I would have been ready for life in an academic sense, but in this gap year I had many, many, many real-life experiences." Maria's reflections were consistent with Peter's: "I feel that my gap year is helping me have more distance from and closure to high school. Having had the gap year,

it feels like a new phase of my life instead of a continuation of the last fourteen years of

education."

CHAPTER SEVEN: DISCUSSION

Introduction

The transition from high school to college is usually viewed as a passage – a single transition filled with challenge – and certainly much has been written about first-year students and their adjustment to the college environment (Christie & Dinham, 1991; Evans, et al., 2010; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Skipper, 2005; Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005). Gap year students face two or more transitions: first, out of high school and into one or more different gap year experiences, and then from the gap year into college. By the time they arrive on campus, they have moved in and out of multiple cycles of differentiation and integration, and have become more adept at making meaning out of their own experiences. As a result of this departure from the normative trajectory, the transition to college is likely to be somewhat more complex for gap-year students than what is typically experienced by traditional first-year students. This study demonstrates that these gap-year students approached the first year of college from a perspective of sovereign engagement.

Students in this study did not seem to have any illusions about the challenges they might face, either during the gap year or subsequently. They began their journeys with personal goals in mind, felt certain that they would go to college the following year, and expected growth and change precisely because they were taking a needed a break from the intensity of high school. The stories they shared, and the reflections they offered, provide important answers to the questions about who gap-year students are, how they make sense of their experiences of the world around them, and how they relate to others.

Gap Year Students: Who Are They?

The findings suggest that when they become college students, gap-year students are likely to be engaged in a more sovereign way than their peers, making decisions that are congruent with their internal voices. These participants reported seeking authentic relationships with others, and engaging in learning for its own sake. More than their first-year peers, they know who they are and what they believe because of their encounters during the gap year – intrapersonal, interpersonal, physical, intellectual, cultural, and emotional – that challenge and stretch their notions of themselves and the world around them. And finally, they relate to others through an enhanced lens of self-knowing; they seek authenticity in their relationships with others and have a greater sense of what they want and need from those relationships.

Some of these students excelled academically during their first year of college; others did not. In fact, while Clagett (2013, personal communication) and others have sought to establish a correlation between gap year students and higher GPAs, my research shows that these conclusions are flawed. Their self-authored approach to college, in the form of sovereign engagement, means that this group of gap-year students felt empowered to decide whether the criteria colleges set — in terms of requirements and grading, for example — are personally meaningful.   They were more selective about how and whether to meet these criteria.

This study demonstrates that it is insufficient and misleading to examine whether young people become better college students after a gap year. First, student performance during college has been shown to correlate quite significantly with high school performance and levels of education in the household (U.S. Department of Education, 2010), two of the

key antecedents to the gap year decision. If gap-year students earn better grades than their peers, it is likely to be because they had such a strong academic foundation prior to their interim year.

Second, academic performance is related directly to sovereign engagement, the result of an accelerated process of meaning making during the gap year. As the students themselves articulated, the central outcomes of the gap year are developmental. A gap year is about becoming a motivated, self-aware person, gaining greater perspective, taking time for thoughtful, critical reflection, developing more authentic relationships, and learning to make decisions that are congruent with more carefully-examined values. These outcomes are not measurable by GPA, and in some ways may be at odds with the structured college experience. Perhaps, as several participants suggested, the gap year makes students more ready for life. But does that mean more ready for college?

Much of the extant gap-year information suggests that students who take a gap year between high school and college will arrive for their first year ready to learn, refreshed, and prepared for college. Students' grades in college undeniably demonstrate a set of skills and competencies related to excelling in academic environments. For some college students (for example, those who are planning graduate study) this is extremely important, and enormously validating. However, as the richly introspective descriptions provided by the students in this study indicate, the lived experience of a gap-year student creates a shift in perspective. They engaged in the college experience from a new vantage point that they would not have possessed without their gap-year encounters. Now seen more as a measure of their compliance with external expectations, their grades are less of an indication of their meaningful engagement in a course or understanding of a concept. Not all of them found

academic performance to be an essential goal. In fact, the majority of them wanted to delve

into the learning process much more, and were somewhat less motivated by grades than they

had been before. One such student found himself retreating from the structured academic

expectations and eventually chose to leave school in favor of pursuing other interests that had

been ignited by his gap year. Students largely found that their motivation to act or engage

was internal, rather than external, which was consistent with their sovereignty as learners.

At the start of this project, I had anticipated hearing from participants that they felt

"out of step" with traditional students, or that they felt they were in a liminal state, perhaps

not knowing where they belonged socially, or in the context of making progress toward their

degrees. Instead, I heard that they don't mind slowing down slightly, and that they may

indeed have a different sense of time -- and particularly the timeframe that college implies.

They see college as one phase of their lives, a time defined both by freedom and

responsibility. And they are selective about how they use their time, and with whom they

spend it. However, time was not the dominant theme for these students. Rather, the students

talked about recognizing their own agency, and that of others.

It's What They Do With It

Students' ability to recognize agency in themselves and others is the result of layers

of experience, interaction, and reflection over time. There was tremendous variability of

gap-year experiences, even within this small sample — and certainly this is true of the larger

pool of gap-year students nationwide. In fact, the constellation of encounters seemed to be

more important than the fact that the students had taken a gap year in and of itself. In other

words, the key issue is not just a year away from school, though that is part of the story.

More salient, however, it is what they did with it: the level of challenge, the details of the experiences, the amount of responsibility each individual had for her or his own basic needs and decisions, that made the year significant. These encounters led to the cycles of differentiation and integration that were so pivotal in the students' development. Might the students have found opportunities to take on challenges in similar ways had they gone directly to college after high school? The students in this study do not believe that would have been true for them. Whether working in an office, or honing a talent, or traveling alone in a new place, the students found meaning in their lives through their time away from the normative path.

There are three particular aspects of the students reflections that helped me to understand that their development would not have been as profound without their gap year experiences. First, the participants talked about the need to be self-reliant in the face of challenge or adversity – such as Mark's decision to leave the music school he had begun attending, or Vinny's experience of supporting his father when he became ill – that spurred their own growth. They felt the choices and challenges that comprised their gap years were important catalysts that had value in their journey to increased self-authorship. Second, development was hastened by the experience of managing their lives in an environment away from their peers and other common support systems. This was evident in their descriptions of building relationships with people outside of their previous networks, particularly outside of their same-age peer groups. And third, built into the gap year, either intentionally or unintentionally (or both) was time. These students had the gift of time to reflect on their Encounters, think about their growth and development, and to connect with their values. In other words, their gap year experiences related directly to deliberate and significant meaning

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making, in ways that the students feel would not have occurred had they continued directly to college after completing high school.

This shift in meaning making is the direct result of the "developmentally effective experiences for promoting self-authorship," that King, et al. (2009) and others have recommended as intentional learning outcomes for colleges. Unlike their first-year peers who come directly to college after high school, when gap-year students arrive at college they have already had multiple opportunities to develop self-authorship.

With this new clarity, gap-year students in this study are able to see the *evanescence* and *iridescence* of college, and for some, the *obsolescence*. It is *evanescent* because they recognize with great clarity that their undergraduate experience represents just a short timespan, a period of growth and exploration between the gap year and the rest of their lives. They see college as a time that is important, meaningful, and brief. To these students, college is also *iridescent,* because they are able to see all of the alluring variations in color and light — of learning, of possibility, of potential — that college presents to them, with a more discerning eye than they feel they might have had if they had gone directly to college from high school. They are cognizant of the enormous privilege it is to attend college, to benefit from all of the opportunities it provides, and at the same time have relatively few responsibilities. And for some, it is *obsolescent* – because college no longer represents the only or best path to lifelong fulfillment, and is becoming less relevant to them. They have developed this level of awareness through a year of encounters that challenge and push them along developmentally.

Limitations

This study has a number of limitations, associated with the participants involved, my role as a researcher, and the landscape of related research. Most importantly, this study is deliberately limited in scope, and therefore it is not possible to draw conclusions about causality. The students' stories indicate that gap year experiences and meaning making were strongly associated. However, it is very possible that these particular outcomes were related to the same characteristics that caused these 12 students to choose this less common path. Without a control group, it is not possible to say that the changes were caused by the gap year, or to conclude that such development would not have happened anyway.

Participants

Because I have used a phenomenological approach, the sample size of 12 is intentionally small. This allowed me to spend time getting to know the participants, and connecting with them regularly during the course of several months. However, the sample was constrained by potential participants' willingness to participate, and at least in part by their availability to meet with me at the start of the Fall semester, when the study began. In addition, all of the participants share certain characteristics which impact the results: they come from educated households, decided on their own to embark on a gap year, and were attending highly-selective colleges as full-time first-year students during the course of the study.

Delayed entry to college of low-income students is based on an entirely different set of factors and constraints (Rowan-Kenyon, 2007). Higher levels of education among parents have been associated with socioeconomic status and college-going behaviors of adolescents

(Horn, Cataldi and Sikora, 2005). The widespread belief that gap-year students emerge disproportionately from families with higher socioeconomic status has been conjectured and seems likely, but has not been well-studied. Though some of their answers revealed information from which some inferences could be drawn, these participants were not asked to disclose any details of their families' socioeconomic status, and this study did not attempt to capture or examine this aspect of the gap-year phenomenon. There also was not a wide representation of racial or ethnic backgrounds among these participants.

As a group, the student participants appeared to possess significant levels of financial, social, and/or cultural capital. While some developmental effects of taking time off between high school and college may occur for students who encounter barriers to direct entrance to college, such students typically are not designing or selecting the encounters they have during the time out of school (Rowan-Kenyon, 2007). Instead, those students are often contending with other demands, such as caring for family members or earning money for the household, and their educational goals are often impeded by these other expectations. In addition, the overwhelming family assumption that college is the next step — a very strong ingredient for gap-year students — may not be there for other students who delay entrance to college.

What is clear about the essence of experience for this particular group of students is that they showed evidence of sovereign engagement during their first year of college after having taken a gap year.

My role as a researcher

My dual roles as both a qualitative researcher and a professional in the field of higher education had the potential to impact the way that participants responded to me, so it was incumbent upon me to acknowledge and minimize the extent to which my position influenced the interactions with the students. In addition, to reduce the possibility that this study might uncover unexpected information, or in some way upset one or more of the participants, I attempted to create a climate of mutual trust and respect with my participants.

All of the participants were asked to sign Informed Consent Forms, and I made every effort to help them understand the purpose of my study before, during, and after their participation. In her critique of the idea of "informed consent," Malone noted that "[t]he inductive, emergent nature of qualitative design precludes researchers being able to predict where the study will take them" (Malone, 2003, p. 800).

Certainly, the level of trust and rapport a researcher can establish with her participants influences how willing the participants are to share their stories. At the same time, there is a delicate balance to strike. "Close rapport with respondents opens doors to more informed research, but it may also create problems, as the researcher may become a spokesperson for the group studied, losing his or her distance and objectivity, or may 'go native' and become a member of the group and forgo the academic role." (Fontana & Frey, 1994, p. 367). In my interactions with the participants, I attempted to maintain an appropriate distance, with both transparency and genuine interest.

I was concerned at the outset that my involvement with these students as they made their transitions during the first year would have an impact on how they experienced those transitions. In fact, a number of students did express appreciation for having the chance to

speak with me and process their experiences. It is possible that participation in this study provided an additional layer of self-reflection that impacted their ability to make meaning as they were transitioning into their college environments.

Landscape of related research

Because there is so little scholarly research regarding gap-year students, it was necessary for me to study a small sample in depth. I chose to focus on their adjustment to college during the first year, and spent time with them over the course of approximately seven months. While the process of engaging in this series of conversations promoted some valuable self-reflection, and provided a platform for the students to discuss their transition to college as they were experiencing it, there was not ample time to delve more deeply into the nuance of their experiences. There are, in fact, many other directions this study could have gone in exploring the way that students' gap-year experiences shape their lives as college students. As a researcher, I limited my study to the students' processes of adjustment to college during those first several critical months. I did not have the luxury of looking back on the year with them once the first year was complete.

There also was a limit to the amount of information I was able to gather, even with five interactions with each participant. Initially, I had proposed a third sub-question: "In what ways do gap-year students develop relationships with their peers, faculty members, and others in the college or university community, and how do these impact their experience during the first college semester?" Upon analysis, this question did not seem sufficiently answered through the data-gathering process, and therefore I did not include this in the

discussion of my findings in Chapter Four. Rather than pursuing this as an explicit sub-question, the theme of developing relationships over time became one of the threads of inquiry. Throughout the study, students were encouraged to talk about their evolving relationships with parents, teachers, high school friends, gap-year friends, and college friends.

Given the dearth of relevant research into the gap-year phenomenon, this study provides only a preliminary glimpse into the complex and multifaceted experiences of gap-year students once they arrive at American colleges and universities. It raises many questions that might be explored by other researchers who are curious about these students and their presence on college campuses.

Implications for Further Research

There is a lot more to discover about gap-year students. The remaining and emerging questions about gap-year students could provide a platform for many future studies. Gap-year students are a heterogenous group and this sample is only a small, particular subgroup, all of whom were motivated to research and design their own gap years. Additional research about gap-year students should further explore the interrelationship of individual, family, and encounters that produces the developmental outcomes suggested by the Gap Year Impact Model. What they do have in common is that these students create their own narratives.

This study shows that the existing literature on the gap year focuses on the wrong outcomes, and is overly generalized.   As the Gap Year Impact Model indicates, the significant outcomes of taking a self-designed gap year are developmental, not academic. When they arrive on college campuses, gap-year students are adept at negotiating new

contexts and relationships, they are confident and perceptive, and they approach college

through the lens of sovereign engagement with themselves and the world around them.

It is my hope that higher education researchers will continue to gather information

about gap-year students, and then share the salient results with college and university

professionals and with the public. Specifically, I suggest that researchers focus on several

key areas of interest: the prevalence of gap-year students in the US, a broader understanding

of gap-year students on campus, and comparisons of gap-year students with other groups of

students.

Gap Year Prevalence in the US

First and foremost, to date there has been no comprehensive attempt to find out how

widespread the phenomenon of taking a gap year might be in the United States. Such data

would be invaluable in beginning to understand the gap year's increasing popularity. The

annual Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) study, administered for decades

through UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), annually collects information

about entering college students on hundreds of campuses nationwide (Eagan, et al., 2013).

To date, this study has not captured information about time off between high school and

college (although it does ask respondents to indicate the year they graduated high school), so

does not provide any reliable data about the percentage of students who have taken a gap

year. Nor does it allow for a comparison between gap-year students and traditional first-year

students. A few additional questions on this widely-administered survey could provide

valuable information about the prevalence of taking a gap year, and might lead to additional

lines of inquiry.

In addition, to begin to grasp the issue of causality on a wider scale, longitudinal studies with larger samples of students should examine more thoroughly the antecedent conditions discussed here. Future studies also should attempt to provide comparisons between students who do and do not choose to take a gap year, and to ascertain the applicability of the Gap Year Impact Model with different groups of such students.

Broader understanding of gap-year students on campus

Now that some colleges and universities have begun to track the numbers of gap-year students arriving on their campuses each year, and a number require newly-accepted students to take time off before beginning their first year, researchers have an opportunity to collaborate with professionals on campus to learn more about how gap-year students fare once they are on campus. While this study looked only at the participants' early adjustment to college, it is important to recognize that longer-term outcomes are also critical to consider. In other words, after a gap year, the transition to the first year of college will not likely be less complicated — in fact, it may be more complicated — but over time, the students may get more out of their education because of their patterns of sovereign engagement. Perhaps a longitudinal study of gap-year students would prove interesting, as it could capture their experiences and reflections at different times during their college years.

Pursuant to this line of inquiry, future studies should examine the ways that different gap year experiences might impact the students' adjustment to college. The developmental outcomes of self-designed gap years, formally structured gap years, and comparable year off based on income-related delays should be compared and understood. Such studies could

further examine factors such as motivation, gap year viability, and other underlying factors that relate to the ways the students experience the transition to college.

Even as I advocate for additional research, I believe that we should let go of the notion that gap-year students will earn better grades in college. This study did not attempt to capture any specific test scores or grades for the participants, as it was not the main focus of this study, and obscures what seem to be the most significant outcomes of taking a gap year. However, in the future perhaps a qualitative study could be paired with some corresponding quantitative data (e.g. SAT, ACT, AP and IB scores, high school grades, first-year college grades) to see if patterns emerge.

Finally, this dissertation briefly surveyed some of the claims made by gap-year organizations. It would be useful to conduct a study that thoroughly examines the marketing materials for packaged gap-year programs, to look at what they promising, and how promoters suggest the outcomes of their programs can be measured. The Gap Year Impact Model provides a rubric for analyzing gap-year programs, to identify components that are likely to promote the kinds of developmental growth experienced by the participants in this study.

Comparisons of gap-year students with other groups of students

In selecting students for this study, I deliberately excluded students who had been required by their institution to take a gap year. Their experiences may have been similar to those who had elected to take a gap year, but these results should not be generalized to suggest that those who are required to take a gap year are impacted in precisely the same

ways as students who elect to do so. It would be interesting to attempt to compare those experiences, and draw conclusions based on those different student experiences.

Additionally, the institutions in this study from which participants were drawn were limited to one region of the country, and one level of selectivity. How might such students' experiences differ in other parts of the country, or at different institutions? A number of other comparisons might be considered worthy of further research, as gap-year students become a significant cohort on more college campuses. Such studies might be modeled on other research that attempts to understand the lives of smaller sub-populations, such as students with disabilities, or commuter students on a residential campus.

Finally, a researcher who finds value in the present study might create a measure of "sovereign engagement" that can be assessed and compared across different student populations. This would help to ascertain the true impact of taking a gap year on the students who arrive as first-year students on college campuses each year.

Implications for Practice

This study demonstrates that to be truly transformational, a gap year must include a stimulus or catalyst that provides meaningful challenge and concomitant support. The transformation is based on a combination of developing self-reliance, with reduced reliance on existing support structures, and on interactions within a new cultural environment of some kind. Pre-packaged gap-year experiences may not provide the same opportunities for such development to occur, because the students are relying on others to guide them to and through the moments of discovery. While guidance and structure may have tremendous value, it is unlikely that self-authorship will be enhanced to the same extent. And to what

extent will students arrive at college with a heightened sense of ownership of their education? To demonstrate that such sovereign engagement adds value to the student experience and enriches the community, there must be encouragement and support for students who choose to take a gap year — particularly if they are motivated to design their own set of experiences.

I hope that students, parents, and educators will think together, in an intentional way, about the purpose and reasons for the gap year. Engaging students in substantive discussions about what they hope to gain, how they will chronicle their experiences, and how they expect to grow and/or change, is in and of itself a transformative experience. In addition, the process of establishing criteria (such as finances, distance, communication patterns) can be a tremendously developmental shared process. The stories of these student participants suggest that when the gap year is researched and designed, at least in part, by the student him or herself, the potential for transformation — and therefore sovereign engagement in the college experience — is increased.

Once gap-year students arrive on college campuses, their stories must be recognized as significant to them and to the communities they are joining.

Implications for Students

As the cost of a college education in the US continues to rise, choosing to go to college has become an extraordinary investment for students and their families. Similarly, as the value of a college education is relentlessly called into question by the media and by government agencies, students are faced with a complex set of choices about the right next steps after high school. Perhaps, as a result of these conditions, and as more gap-year students share their stories, gap years will continue to gain popularity.

A gap year is not the right choice for every student, certainly; nor is it viable for every family. Still, the more high school students from a variety of backgrounds are exposed to the concept of a gap year, the less unusual a choice to take a gap year will become. Students or parents may worry that what begins as an intended gap year may lead to a decision to delay college indefinitely, or decide against college altogether, and these possible outcomes should be carefully discussed. However, including consideration of a gap year in the process of determining what comes next after high school may provide students with an important opportunity to clarify their reasons to pursue their post-secondary goals.

Implications for High School Guidance Counselors, Parents, College Consultants

During high school, students should be introduced to the concept of taking a gap year, along with options for determining the viability of such a choice, as described in Figure 4b. Does the cultivation of self-authorship enter into the discussions that guidance counselors have with students and parents who are preparing for the daunting process of applying to college? This study suggests that taking a gap year helps young people clarify their goals and take ownership over their educational experience. Guidance counselors and college consultants should be including these outcomes in the range of considerations they present to students and their families.

Because gap years are gradually gaining in popularity, and because they hold some genuine appeal, new programs have been cropping up recently. Some of these programs are organized and sponsored by universities, and are designed to introduce students to a particular aspect of global citizenship or community service (for example, Princeton's Bridge Year Program, UNC's Global Year Fellowship, and the new Tufts 1 + 4 program focused on

service). While these programs undoubtedly can be valuable experiences that open students'

eyes and minds, the structure of the programs suggests that some pivotal encounters, which

have the potential to accelerate a student's journey to self-authorship, are missing from these

experiences. Interestingly, they also require an application and selection process that is quite

similar (or, in fact, connected) to the process of gaining acceptance into college. Less of a

departure, perhaps, than what gap-year students might experience by researching and

developing their own plan for a year of exploration and discovery.

The importance of such "pre-packaged" gap-year experiences may be the fact that

they do not expose students to as much risk or ambiguity. This should not be

underestimated, particularly because they are expensive to run and have the potential for a

great deal of good will — both within the university community and between the institution

and the sites to which the participating students may travel or work. Yet, the developmental

aspects of the gap year that seem connected to the sovereign engagement of first-year

students in this study are less likely to occur within the structure of a gap-year experience

that has been designed for them. While this is not meant to be a commentary on the nature of

organized gap-year programs, nor an attempt to critique or endorse any particular plan for

taking or utilizing a gap year prior to the start of the first year of college, it is worthy of

further consideration. Perhaps a future study, tracking the experiences of the students who

have participated in such organized programs, would shed more light on the value of those

experiences in contrast to ones that students research and design on their own. Those schools

that do invest resources in their own pre-packaged programs must be transparent about their

goals for the programs, and should invest intentionally in support of the developmentally-

effective components that were so meaningful to the students in this study.

Implications for Colleges and Universities

Once they arrive on campus, gap-year students must be welcomed and valued by the community. Students in this study initially hoped that others would be interested in their stories, and subsequently they resigned themselves to the fact that few of their peers seemed to care. This research indicates that their stories do matter, and can provide valuable insight into how these students can contribute to the classroom and the student experience. A student who has had relevant work experience, for example, could be granted an opportunity to deviate from a particular course sequence. Someone who has lived abroad might be tapped as a peer mentor for students thinking about international study. This means that the communication pipeline on campus should be well-designed: professionals in the Admission Office should provide information to those in Student Affairs and Academic Affairs, so incoming first-year students may be identified and tapped for their unique perspective. In turn, academic advisors and peer mentors should be made aware of gap year students in their midst, and encouraged to speak with the students about their experiences during the year.

This study also reveals that common measures of student success, such as persistence or GPA, lack sufficient nuance to understand the gap-year student experience. A tradition of assessing student success according to these markers "has not provided higher education with an effective repertoire of interventions to enable more students to reach their educational goals. Instead, a broader vision of student success is needed." (Schreiner, et al., 2012, p. 2). Gap-year students may or may not excel in the ways that have been commonly measured, but their striking sovereign engagement should be recognized and investigated, as their presence places new demands on higher education institutions.

On some campuses with idiosyncratic missions and cultures, sovereign engagement of gap-year students may present unique challenges. For example, a religiously-affiliated university or one with a very rigid undergraduate core curriculum is unlikely to leave room for students who wish to exercise their sovereign engagement by deviating from the school's expectations for behavior or academic progress. Rather than deny accepted students the chance to defer matriculation in favor of a gap-year experience, such schools must prepare to welcome them to campus and offer some additional guidance about returning to a highly-structured educational setting.

Gap year students on some campuses are invited to gather during Orientation week or early in the first semester, as was the case at two of the three institutions included in this study. Such gatherings provide a chance for the students to meet one another, to share their stories, and perhaps form some bonds with other gap-year students who may have had similarly transformative experiences. At schools where students are invited to make presentations or give talks about their own experiences, gap-year students might be encouraged to collaborate on a session describing the impact of their gap years. Administrators in higher education should be tracking these students, and identifying ways to both support and harness their sovereign engagement in the community.

Finally, gap-year students are likely to become worthy role models for their college peers, demonstrating a heightened self-authorship that enhances their ability to make decisions that are consistent with their own values and aspirations. They also are unique in their ability to cross over other boundaries within the student body, so that attempting to lump them in with a particular class year, intended major, or other defined group may not feel relevant to their experience. Instead, the presence of gap-year students on campus offers

practitioners the chance to think beyond usual parameters, and to consider ways of encouraging relationships and partnerships across other categories.

Conclusion

Rather than experiencing the year away from school as a time of idleness or lost productivity, gap-year students are likely to talk about their time between high school and college as a year on, rather than a year off — a year of tremendous intensity and personal development. In my professional life, I often hear gap-year students say that they favor the term "bridge year," because the very term "gap year" suggests a void or an absence of something substantive, and they feel instead that it is pivotally transformative. One gap-year proponent talks of the gap year as an "intervention" that helps students clarify a sense of purpose before heading to college (Pendoley, 2014). Existing organizations, such as Global Citizen Year, Dynamy Internship Year, and the Center for Interim Programs, use specific language that captures the focus of the activities they promote. Purposeful terminology that includes the widest range of endeavors might focus on the enrichment, the intentionality, or the potential enlightenment of a gap year. Other possible terms include "year of intention," which Nichole Fazio-Veigel of the University of Tennessee has used to refer to post-college experiences (Fazio-Veigel, personal communication, March 27, 2015); "enrichment year," or, in light of the present research, "year of sovereignty."

Just as plausibly, a newer term may emerge, capturing the true essence of gap-year student experience in all its many facets. Or perhaps, if taking time off before college

becomes more common in this country, the need for a discrete term to describe it will be diluted or phased out altogether.

Regardless of the terminology, it is clear that gap-year students bring an important richness of experience and perspective with them to college campuses. Their participation on campus in classes and activities reflects the growth and development they have experienced during the year, some in more positive ways than others. Among the participants in this study, all demonstrated a pattern of sovereign engagement in the college experience, allowing them to identify the ways they wanted to be involved as college students. The first year of college was shaped quite remarkably by the encounters these students had during their gap year, by the self-authorship that developed as they made meaning out of those encounters, and by their sovereign engagement when they began school again.

It is evident that young people experience tremendous personal growth during a year of encounters between high school and college, and that the process of returning to the world of structured education may instigate meaningful thoughts, relationships, and perspectives on the purpose of college. The mutual process of education and development between student and institution provides an opportunity for mindful development and continual integration. "The highest role of the educator," wrote Walker Percy, "is the maieutic role of Socrates: to help the student come to himself not as a consumer of experience but as a sovereign individual." (Percy, 1975, page 63). As more gap-year students arrive on college campuses each year, their sovereign engagement will bring new voices into the conversations about higher education.

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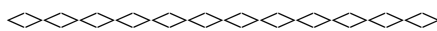
Appendix A: Initial Invitation to Potential Participants

Note: This email message was sent jointly by the researcher and the Dean of Admissions at each of the three institutions, to all incoming gap-year students. Interested students were asked to complete a brief survey, which was used to yield a total of four participants from each institution.

Dear Student,

Congratulations on starting your first year at [institution]!

We would like to invite you to participate in a research study that looks at how gap-year students experience the first semester of college. This would involve an interaction with the researcher once per month from September through January, for a total of approximately 5 hours of your time over the course of the study.

Because you have had the unique experience of taking a gap year before arriving at [institution], we hope you'll consider taking part in this study. We hope the findings will help us better understand the needs and perspectives of gap-year students like you. Your participation in the study is completely voluntary, and if you indicate your interest, you will receive additional information before the research begins.

If you are interested, please click on the link below to reach a brief, confidential demographic survey that will help the research team learn a little bit more about you: [*link to Qualtrics survey inserted here*]

Many thanks for your time. Have a great semester!

Sincerely,

Dean of Admission   and Lori Tenser, Doctoral Student Researcher

Appendix B: Qualtrics Survey

Default Question Block

Thank you for your interest in participating in my study about gap-year students. Please answer these brief demographic questions to share a bit about yourself. Your answers will help me to identify the widest range of participant characteristics and to keep track of responses at a later point. When you're done please click the "submit" button.

Feel free to contact me with any concerns or questions you may have.

Take care,
Lori Tenser
ltenser@wellesley.edu

Demographic Questions

What is your date of birth?
Month
Day
Year

What kind of high school did you attend?

○ Public High school

○ Private Religiously-Affiliated High School

○ Private Secular High School (no religious affiliation)

○ Home-Schooled

○ Other (please describe)

Which of the following best describes the area you live in?

○ Urban

○ Suburban

○ Rural

What is your gender?

○ Female

○ Male

○ Other

What did you do during your Gap year (choose all that apply)

☐ Had a job

☐ Had an internship

☐ Volunteered or did community service

☐ Traveled in the U.S.

☐ Traveled abroad

☐ Studied a language

☐ Took classes

☐ Other (please describe)

Please use the space below to share any additional information you would like me to know, or to post your questions.

Please contact support@surveyz.com if you have any questions regarding this survey.

Appendix C: Interview Protocols

I. Initial Interview Protocol – September 2013

Intro: Hello, and thanks for spending time with me today. I'd like to start by getting to know a little bit about you and your background, and then conduct the interview in three distinct sections. First we'll talk about the factors that led to your decision to take a gap year before starting college, then we'll move briefly to how you spent your gap year, and finally we'll spend the bulk of our time together discussing your aspirations for your first year at [name of college or university], and your experiences so far.

First, let's talk about some general things about you.

1.   Tell me about your background, your family, and where you grew up.

Probes: What was your high school experience like? How would you describe your neighborhood or community? Talk to me about the influences and experiences that led you to what you were like before your gap year.

2.   Tell me a little bit more about your family.

Probes: Have other people in your family attended college? Growing up, which members of your family did you depend upon for help and support?

3.   Looking back on your high school experience, how would you describe the kind of person you were then?

Probes: Could you talk about what some of your strengths were? Your weaknesses? Your interests at the time? With whom did you spend most of your time?

Deciding to take a gap year

4.   Tell me about how and when you decided to take a gap year? Did you apply to college and then defer?

Probes: What factors did you consider as you were exploring the option of taking a gap year? Who and/or what were influential? Were there specific considerations that were more important than others? Did you encounter a range of reactions? How did your family react initially to the idea? Your siblings? Your high school guidance counselor? The College or University?

5.   Ultimately, what would you say were your main reasons for your decision to take a gap year? What, if any, specific goals did you have for the year?

Probes: What were the most compelling reasons for and against taking a gap year? Were those reasons clear to you when you made your decision, or have they become clearer to you in retrospect? Whom did you have to convince?

6.   What were the biggest concerns you had? The biggest challenges you faced?

Probes: Who were your best allies? What were your best resources? How much planning was involved? For example, was it difficult to find the financial resources to pursue your interests for the year?   Were you worried about "losing time" in terms of getting your college degree? Did you have any concerns about what it would be like to start your first year of college after taking the gap year?

Spending the gap year

7.   Now I'd like to hear about how you spent your gap year. Please describe where and how you spent the year after high school graduation.

Probes: Were you in several different places? Do you think of your gap year as beginning immediately after high school?

8. Can you talk about the activities you were engaged in when you were

[in _____] or [working for _____] or [doing _____]? What was that experience like for you?

Note: If student had more than one experience, this question and the subsequent ones in this section may have been treated separately for each experience.

Probes: Were you learning new skills? Using skills you had already developed? Were these the things you had expected to be doing?

9. Did engaging in these activities help you to achieve the goals you had for your gap year experience? In what ways?

10. How are you a different person now than you were before you took your gap year?

Probes: In what ways do you feel you changed or developed during the past year? How do you know? Is this what you expected to happen? Could you have predicted these changes?

Coming to College

11. This brings us to your arrival at [name of school]. What has it been like so far?

Probes: How did you feel about getting ready to come to [college or University] after your gap year experience? Do you feel ready to start as a first-year student? Why or why not? What are you excited about? What goals do you have? Do you have any concerns about your preparation for college, or about your transition into this environment?

12. What has it been like getting to know other students since you have arrived? Do you feel a sense of belonging here?

Probes: Are you finding it easy or difficult to make friends?   How will you determine whether you and another student will hit it off? Do you feel you have many things in common with other new students? Why or why not?

13. Have you been thinking about your gap year experience during these first weeks at [school]? If so, in what context?

Probes: Do you feel (or expect to feel) the impact of your gap year in your academic experience, personal interactions, other activities on campus?

14. What concerns and challenges – academic, personal or social – do you have as a first-year student?

Probes: In what ways did your gap year experience contribute to these challenges, if at all? In what ways did your gap year experience have an impact on the way you viewed and/or handled these challenges?

15. In what ways do you think you might grow or change during your first year?

Probes: To what extent are these similar expectations to the ones you had during your gap year? How will you define what it means to have a successful first year at [school]?

16. To what extent are the things on your mind just like those of traditional first-year students – those who did not take a gap year? To what extent are the things on your mind different than those of traditional first-year students? Why?

Closing remarks:

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. Is there anything else you would like to add that we did not already discuss?

II. Interview Protocol – February

Introduction:

Now that you have completed one semester at [name of institution], and are about to begin your second semester, I'd like to ask you some questions about how you experienced your first semester in college.

1.   What were the highs and lows of your Fall semester?

Probes: What stands out for you? How did you describe your semester to folks when you were home during the break?

2.   How did you do in your courses?

Probes: Did you enjoy your classes? Did you feel engaged with the material? Do you feel your grades reflect your understanding of the material and are representative of your academic potential?   Why or why not?

3.   Tell me about the relationships you developed during the first semester.

Probes: Did you develop some close friendships? How much time and energy did you put into your relationships outside of [school]? Who were the people with whom you developed the best relationships? To what extent did your relationships with family members change since the start of the fall semester?

4. Did you spend much time thinking about your gap-year experience during your first semester at [school]? If so, in what context(s)? If not, why not?

Probes: How, if at all, did you feel the impact of your gap year in your academic experience, personal interactions, other activities on campus?

5.   To what extent were the things on your mind just like those (or not) of

traditional first-year students – those who did not take a gap year? Why?

6.   How have you grown and changed since we spoke in September? How do

you know?

Probes: What effect do you feel your gap year has had on your experience as a first-

year student?

7.   Now that you have the luxury of looking back, if you had it to do all over

again, would you do a gap year?

Probes: Why or why not? Would you do it exactly the same way, or would you

change some things?

8.   I've spent some time reviewing the interviews, focus groups, and written

prompts we did in the Fall, and I would like to share some of the themes I've begun

to notice. Would you please react to the following ideas? This will help me to check

my analysis against your experience, which will improve the validity of this study.

[use preliminary analysis of data to generate list of themes and concepts to review

with the participants]

Closing remarks:

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. Is there anything else you would like

to add that we did not already discuss?

Appendix D: Focus Group Protocol

Note: Two focus groups were held via Google Hangout[TM], with students from all three campuses, in November 2013. Both focus groups used the following protocol.

Introduction

Thanks to all of you for joining this discussion today. As you know, no one has written about what it's like to be a gap-year student as you transition into the first year of college, so I hope that your insights will help me to capture and explain your experience. Let's start with some introductions.

All of you are currently first-year students, and all of you took a gap year after high school. Why don't you introduce yourself to me, and to each other, by name, where you're from, what you did during your gap year, and where you are in school now (or what you're hoping to study). [Students introduce themselves.]

Thanks, everyone. Our time together today will be guided mostly by what you'd like to discuss, although I have some initial questions to get us started. I'm interested in knowing more about your experiences as first-year college students who have taken a gap year, and it will be helpful for me to hear the things you feel you have in common with one another, if any. I'm also interested in knowing the ways you are experiencing your lives as students now.

1. What are the advantages and challenges for you? What factors are making your experience easier or harder for you to get comfortable as a student on your campus?

Probes: Has it been easy to make friends? Have you developed friendships with other gap-year students? Do you think you fit in with other traditional students on your campus? Why or why not?

2. In what ways have you felt successful or capable so far this semester?

3. To what extent do you believe the things that are on your mind now are just the same as those of other first-year students – those who did not take a gap year? To what extent do you believe the things that are on your mind are different than those of other first-year students? Why?

> *Probes*: How does your gap-year experience tie into your mindset now? What effect do you feel taking a gap year is having on you now, in terms of academics? Your social interactions? Your confidence?

4. In what ways did your gap-year experience shape who you are, as a college student and as an individual?

> *Probes*: How did you change during your gap year? What do you think were the factors that led to this change? Do you think you are a different kind of student now than you would have been had you gone directly from high school to college?

5. To what extent, if any, have you been drawing on your gap year experience during your first semester at [school]?

> *Probes:* Do you expect to feel/have you felt the impact of your gap year as you pursue your academic goals, develop friendships, and become involved in activities on campus?

6. What has been easiest for you so far? What has been difficult?

7. Since you started the semester, which of your relationships have been easiest to pursue or sustain? Who are the people you feel really understand and support you?

    Probes: What are people doing that allows you to feel a sense of belonging here? To feel valued and known? Do folks on campus explicitly know this about you?

8. As you discuss your thoughts and feelings, in this group setting, do you find yourselves expressing similar perspectives? Why or why not?

9. What advice would you have for other new students coming to school after a gap year? Is there any advice that you wish someone had told you before you got to school?

10. Is there anything else would you like to share or discuss?

Appendix E: Monthly Written Prompts

The following prompt were sent to all participants twice during the Fall semester (once in October and once in December 2013) as an attachment to an email message:

Please use as much space as you'd like to respond to this question; we welcome your thoughts, feelings, reflections, and questions. You may also attach an image or graphic representation as part of your response. Feel free to use your creativity.

What have been the highs and lows for you this past month? These could be related to your academic work, your relationships, or your overall life as a college student so far. How (if at all) do you feel your gap year is impacting your college experience?

Appendix F: Revised Informed Consent Form

Boston College Lynch School of Education Consent Form

Informed Consent to participate in
Off the Conveyor Belt and Back on Again:
How Taking a Gap Year Impacts the Experience of First-Year College Students
Researcher: Lori I. Tenser
Type of Consent : Adult Consent Form

Introduction
- You are being asked to participate in a research study of gap-year students in their first semester of college.
- You were selected to be in the study because you took a gap year before matriculating as a first-year student at [Institution A, B or C].
- Please read this form. Ask any questions that you may have before you agree to be in the study.

Purpose of Study:
- The purpose of this study is to get to know a small group of first-year students who took a gap year before coming to college. We are interested in knowing how each of you experiences the transition to college during the first semester, and how or whether your gap year has an impact on your adjustment.
- People in this study are from three different selective colleges in the Northeast.

What will happen in the study:
- If you agree to be in this study, you will participate in two 90-minute interviews, one in September 2013 and one in January 2014. You will also respond in writing to a written prompt twice during the fall semester (October and December). Finally, you will participate in a focus group via web interface with other gap-year students in early November.

Risks and Discomforts of Being in the Study:
- There are no expected risks. This study may include risks that are unknown at this time.

Benefits of Being in the Study:
- The benefits of being in this study are limited. We hope that you will value the opportunity to talk about your experience, and to reflect on the impact of your gap year on your adjustment to college. You may also find it valuable to meet and speak with other gap-year students about their experiences. You will be offered an opportunity to review and learn more about the results.

Payments:
- You will receive the following payment in appreciation for participating in the study: A $10 gift card to Amazon.com or your college bookstore for the initial interview; a $10 gift card for each of the two written prompts; a $20 gift card for your participation in the focus group; and a $50 gift card at the conclusion of the final interview. In sum, the compensation you will receive totals $100 in gift cards.

Costs:
- There is no cost to you to be in this research study.

Confidentiality:
- **The records of this study will be kept private. During our final interview, you (the participant) and I (the researcher) identified specific aspects of your story that should be modified and other aspects that should be reported accurately, despite the fact that these may make it possible for a reader to identify you. As the**

researcher, I agree to share with you drafts of any written portions which describe you or specific aspects of your experience, and to give you the opportunity to request that some information be deleted or further obscured prior to publication of my dissertation.

- All electronic information will be coded and secured using a password-protected file. Any recordings of our interviews and focus group will be used only for the purpose of this study. They will be transcribed in full, and the original recordings will be deleted after the conclusion of the study.
- Mainly just the researchers will have access to information; however, please note that in exceptional circumstances a few other key people may also have access. These might include government agencies. Also, the Institutional Review Board at Boston College and internal Boston College auditors may review the research records.

Choosing to be in the study and choosing to quit the study:

- Choosing to be in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to be in this study, it will not affect your current or future relations with your institution, or with Boston College.
- You are free to quit at any time, for whatever reason., or to decline to respond to any particular question.
- There is no penalty or loss of benefits for not taking part or for quitting.
- During the research process, you will be notified of any new findings from the research that may make you decide that you want to stop being in the study.

Getting Dismissed from the study:

- The researcher may dismiss you from the study at any time for the following reasons: (1) it is in your best interests (e.g. side effects or distress have resulted), or (2) you have failed to comply with the study rules.

Contacts and Questions:

- The researcher conducting this study is Lori Tenser. For questions or more information concerning this research you may contact her at ltenser@wellesley.edu or 781.752.6356. The faculty advisor for the study is Karen Arnold, who may be reached at karen.arnold@bc.edu or 617.552.2649.
- If you believe you may have suffered a research related injury, contact Lori Tenser for further instructions.
- If you have any questions about your rights as a person in this research study, you may contact: Director, Office for Research Protections, Boston College at (617) 552-4778, or irb@bc.edu.

Copy of Consent Form:

- You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records and future reference.

Statement of Consent:

- I have read (or have had read to me) the contents of this consent form. I have been encouraged to ask questions. I have received answers to my questions. I give my consent to be in this study. I have received (or will receive) a copy of this form.

Signatures/Dates

Study Participant (Print Name) : _____   Date _____

Witness/Auditor (Signature):   _____   Date _____

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Appendix G: Derivation of Gap Year Impact Model

Gap Year Impact Model Concept: Gap Year Decision
(High school achievement, Family expectations about college attendance, viability of the gap year – including individual motivation and financial feasibility)

Analysis Cluster	Included codes	Sample key comments/ phrases
Gap Year Planning, Preparation and Feasibility	• Advice • College search process • Expectations about going to college • Family influence • Family support • Finances • Gap year decision-making • Getting away • Goals for the gap year • High school academics • High School background • High school background • Parents' education • Planning • Social pressure in high school • Sports in high school • Stress in high school • Timing	"I guess it was largely such an expectation that it didn't need to be said. And the school that I was going to it was assumed everyone would go to college." "My grandparents feel very strongly that I should go to college, and a college education is like really important." "And especially by the end of my senior year, I was definitely feeling that I was heading towards burnout – I needed to stop, take a break, reevaluate. " "So I became really interested in seeing all the ways I could go as a person and all the ways I could push myself to become more interesting or more effective, less, more like of a fearless, confident, competent person." "So mom and dad paid for the plane tickets, and the tuition for the [language] academy the first semester, and I paid for all my living expenses the second semester."

Gap Year Impact Model Concept: Encounter

Analysis Cluster	Included codes	Sample key comments/ phrases
Gap Year Encounters	• Challenge leads to growth • Contact with family • Freedom • Goals for the gap year • Independence • Internship • Expectations • Job/working • Language • Nervous/worried • Real life • Relationships during the gap year • Responsibility • Sense of time • Service • Travel	"I learned a lot about the industry, and I learned a lot about technology and how startups work, you know, I guess what I set out to do." "While I was in Lima, I felt pretty isolated, because I would go to work, come home from work, and then it was like, what do I do?" "I mean you wouldn't think about it, but whenever a kid comes home with a little heart that has like a little message on it there is someone that makes that." "[My year] taught me a lot about waiting before you make commitments to things and being really judicious about where you put your time, and realizing that, like, re-charge time is super important." "When you're traveling on your own … you just have to be conscious of everything. You know, you gotta have everything figured out – your tickets, your safety, you've gotta know where you're going, you've gotta be in touch with the right people, and all this stuff." "So I got up real early, I was in a suit the entire day, it was a very formal environment. Get home at seven in the evening. … it was a really important insight, like, this is how work life can look." "I think it was a very important year of change in my life both religiously and growing up and developing a connection to Israel that I would not have otherwise, being able to live in a foreign country and being able to being my own person there."

Gap Year Impact Model Concept: Meaning Making

Analysis Cluster	Included codes	Sample key comments/ phrases
Self-Authorship	• Agency • Changes noticed by others • Confidence • Fear of Missing Out • Goals for the future • How I changed • Important to me • Knowing myself • Living in the present • Maturity • Meaning making • Privacy • Relevance • Self • Self-efficacy • Worldview/perspective	"I just need to make a move to become the person I want to be – my identity is not at the whim of what I feel others have encouraged or wanted me to be. I think I felt that way through a lot of high school." "And what I learned [during my gap year] was how to be outside of the system … not buy in to all the cultural norms and cultural rules of a given society." "Taking a gap year requires a certain kind of thinking … because you need to organize things by yourself, you need to be able to live by yourself or you need to just be, I think, more mature." "My gap year experience has definitely made the college experience different. It has allowed me to stay more connected to my religious beliefs and practices in a secular environment." "My gap year puts things into perspective. I appreciate so much that I don't have to make my own food. I know how it is to only live with your family for months, and have very little interaction with people of the same age." "I think it's one of the best lessons of the whole thing was just like, if you want to do something, it's up to you to do it. You can't wait for someone else to tell you to do it or for it to fall into your lap. You have to be the one to make an action. "

Gap Year Impact Model Concept: Sovereign Engagement

Analysis Cluster	Included codes	Sample coded comments/ phrases
Adjusting to College	• Academic engagement • Academic performance • Contact with family • Enthusiasm for school • Extracurricular engagement • Fear of Missing Out • Free time • Goals for college • Nervous/worried • Noticing distinctions between gappers and non-gappers • Privilege • Relevance • Sense of belonging • Social pressure • Stress • Success • Talking about the gap year • Thinking about the gap year • Timing • Transition to college	"For me grades are a by-product of the learning, not the other way around." "The writing I did at the beginning of this year was not as good as the writing that I did at the end of my senior year, because … it's a skill that will get rusty just like anything else." "I feel like I am the best student I could be in college. Like I've been doing all my homework, turning everything in, studying, like getting good grades on everything I've done so far." "I just feel like the gap year itself was such a positive experience that it is worth the rough time that I have had since." "I think that the gap year made the transition harder." "My gap year helped me to calm down, it wasn't like the stress of high school and going right away to college…. I can refresh, I can do this." "I was still very nervous, but I had a lot less sadness, and a lot less anxiety, frustration. Like, a lot of my friends, they were very excited to go to the school, but at the same time they were really saddened by everything they were leaving behind, you know, high school and their family and their friends. Whereas for me, I'd already lived this year." "People will joke around, like, I am such FOMO right now, I should be doing XYZ. But why should you be doing it if you don't really want to?" "If I create my life as a series of intentional choices then it is not possible that time just passes by, because everything is intentional."
		"During my gap year, I forgot all the calculus and physics I learned in high school. So now I'm here taking very basic intro-level classes, that are also really hard … But it's also really boring because as soon as I see this thing, I'm like oh, I remember that, I already learned that two years ago, and so it's not interesting." "[This perspective] may be both the function of people who choose to take a gap year and a function of what happens during the gap year that comes with you when you start school." "I truly believe that the gap year has a lot to do with my balancing of both [athletics] and school work so far, and I believe it will continue to help as the year goes on and [my team's] season starts to really be a burden." "I think doing my gap year was just very much like proving to myself, like, no if you want to do something else, do it. It doesn't matter that you haven't done it before you can just go do it, like you don't have to be prequalified for everything that you do in life."

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Gap Year Impact Concept: Changing Relationships
[not explicitly included in graphic but reflected in each phase of the Model]

Analysis Cluster	Included codes	Sample key comments/ phrases
Changing Relationships	• Affinity groups • Dating/boyfriend/girlfriend • Developing friendships • Extended family • Family contact • Family relationships • Maintaining friendships • Meeting other gap year students • Mentors • Relationships during the gap year • Relationships with high school friends • Relationships with high school teachers • Siblings • Social pressure • Support	"I think a gap year helps you know yourself better, which allows you to have healthier friendships." "I have a very good relationship with my parents … my parents were always there and they were usually very helpful." "When you have real friends, and not friends you just think are cool because they were cool in high school or whatever, when you have real friends, it's an incredible, deep experience." "The people that I find myself drawn to here are people who … have a more developed sense of empathy, and I think that comes with a better understanding of the world, and of what it's like to be someone who isn't you." "Honestly, the main high point of this month has been deepening my relationships with all my friends. I know better who is my true friend and who is not—and that can be painful when someone you thought was a close friend or was going to be a close friend turns out not to be. That's not a low, just a moment of learning, because the high is HAVING such true friends." "The people I want to be in touch with I am in touch with, it's not like I am losing control of the situation or anything."

Appendix H: Institutional names

I decided early on, and agreed with the participants, that I would not use the actual names of either the students or the colleges who participated in my study.

When I met with each participant and discussed the identifying information that would be included or modified in my final dissertation, one student mentioned that if she were choosing pseudonyms, she would be inspired by the characters in "Pride and Prejudice." When I returned to this aspect of drafting the written study, I came back to this idea. My decision was to choose a name from each of three great works of fiction, all of which deal in some way with a coming of age story: *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen , *The Age of Innocence* by Edith Wharton, and *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens. The references, however, are not otherwise more symbolic than that. For one thing, neither the characters themselves nor the plot of the novels have any direct relevance to this study. Next, several appealing literary names are already connected with existing colleges or universities, in the US or abroad, so these were eliminated. Still, much like the participants who enjoyed coming up with their own pseudonyms, I enjoyed the process of determining the new names for the institutions. Eventually, I settled on the following names:

- Archer Polytechnical Institute (API) – a technological research university in the northeast

- Darcy University (DU) – Ivy-League university in the northeast

- Satis College (SC) -- small liberal arts college in the northeast

Throughout my discussion of the findings in Chapter 4, I refer to the schools with these names, or – more frequently – their abbreviations (API, DU, SC). In addition, I have altered direct quotes to include these names, rather than the actual names of the institutions.

Appendix I: Reflections on Walker Percy's *The Loss of the Creature* (1975)

During the process of searching for journal articles and reading through published dissertations, I came across an obscure reference to Walker Percy's essay "The Loss of the Creature" and found it worthy of exploration. I read the essay over and over again until I understood what Percy was trying to convey. It turned out to be a pivotal moment in my research.

Percy was a Southern American physician-turned-writer. "The Loss of the Creature" is an essay included in Percy's 1975 book, *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One Has to Do With the Other.* This essay is also featured in a compilation of essays, "Ways of Reading," (Bartholomae & Petrosky, 2011) that is used to teach close reading strategies to undergraduate and graduate students.

In this essay, Percy explores his concept of sovereignty of the knower through a series of examples of missed opportunities for true engagement with a thing or being or experience to be known. He describes a troubling loss of sovereignty, in which a person (or a student) surrenders a level of authentic knowing to an outside expert who crafts or provides the context for what s/he knows. For example, in describing the fact that learning about a Shakespeare sonnet in English class is tainted by the teacher, the classroom, the way the book smells and the way its pages feel, Percy states: "It is only the hardiest and cleverest of students who can salvage the sonnet from this many-tissued package. It is only the rarest student who knows that the sonnet must be salvaged from the package." (Percy, 1975, p. 57).

Catalogs, websites, other students, extended family, and other external forces all play a role in the traditional student's impression about what college will be like. It might be said

that many students who stay on the conveyor belt are relinquishing control of their education and their process as learners. In contrast, the gap-year student is more likely to be aware of all that, and to see the college experience as it presently exists for them, salvaging it from its many-tissued package. As Percy writes:

> However it may come about, we notice two traits of the second situation: (1) an openness of the thing before one - instead of being an exercise to be learned according to an approved mode, it is a garden of delights which beckons to one; (2) a sovereignty of the knower - instead of being a consumer of a prepared experience, I am a sovereign wayfarer, a wanderer in the neighborhood of being who stumbles into the garden. (Percy, 1975, p. 60).

I was inspired to use Percy's concept of sovereignty to describe gap-year students' experiences during the first year of college because these students are awakened by the gap year, often in profound ways. They recognize more about themselves and about their own agency in their educational experience. They decide where to put their energy, and what outcomes are acceptable to them, and they begin to hold their own perspective in higher regard than the views of others. No longer consumers of a prepared experience, gap-year students are able arrive at college prepared to engage in a sovereign way with things to be known.

Participant Profile: Andy

Andy is a male student from urban Pennsylvania. He attended a private high school and both of his parents have college degrees. It was not part of Andy's original plan to take a gap year. In fact, he was very excited about the opportunities to further his computer science knowledge at API and was thrilled when he was accepted. During the summer after his senior year of high school, he worked for a small hi-tech firm in Silicon Valley. Once there, Andy's work was highly valued by the management team. He was asked to stay on for the year, and was offered him a large sum of money to do so.

Initially, Andy's family was not thrilled with the idea, as they were concerned that he might not end up attending college once he became swept up in the hi-tech world. His grandparents, with whom Andy has had a very close relationship, were quite upset, as they had offered to fund his education at API.

During his gap year, Andy lived with family friends in California and developed very close relationships with the parents and children in the family. He worked in an office environment with driven, young adult coworkers who shared his passion for computers and coding.   Because he spent most of his time at work, and was living with a family, Andy was well-fed and did not have major responsibilities for preparing his own meals or paying rent.

When he arrived at API, Andy was consumed with developing and marketing his own entrepreneurial product, which he had been working on during his gap year. Because he had been away from academics for a year, Andy did not perform well on a number of required entrance examinations, so he placed into courses that he found uninteresting. Consequently,

he had difficulty seeing the relevance of his coursework, and in fact attended classes only sporadically. He did, however, enjoy meeting new people and making friends with students on his hall and through other computer-focused activities.

Andy's academic performance during the fall semester was poor, barely passing three of his four courses. In the spring, despite his fall record, he managed to convince his academic advisor that he should take 5 courses (an overload at API) because there were some that he actually was very eager to take.

After his first year, Andy took a leave of absence from API, so that he could pursue a fellowship opportunity to focus on his own technology enterprise.

Participant Profile: Daniel

Daniel grew up in suburban Massachusetts, in a household which included two parents with advanced degrees, and where there was a very strong emphasis on education. Although he does not describe his family as particularly religious, both Daniel and his twin brother decided to attend a Jewish high school in Massachusetts, rather than the local public school. There, Daniel began to deepen his spiritual side, and he was exposed to the fact that many graduates of the school spend a year or two in Israel, often studying at a yeshiva, prior to attending college. A yeshiva is a school focused on the study of religious texts, and the one that Daniel chose to attend, like many, is only open to men.

Daniel chose to pursue a year at the yeshiva because he wanted to focus on his own religious transformation. His twin brother did not choose to take a gap year, going directly to an Ivy League college.

When he started school at API after his gap year, Daniel felt unsure about a number of things. He was apprehensive about his ability to keep up with the rigorous academic courses, especially given his year away from typical academic work. And — in a more visceral way — he was concerned about being able to maintain his observant Jewish lifestyle and traditions within the context of a secular, scientifically-focused, institution. Most of the personal connections he made during his first semester were with other Jewish students, whom he met in his kosher living area, or through the Jewish fraternity that he pledged. After his first semester, Daniel began to feel more comfortable pursuing relationships with students who were not Jewish.

The transition to college was difficult for Daniel, and he found himself questioning whether API was the right place for him. At times he felt he should have attended another school with a higher proportion of Jewish students, but felt that it was unacceptable to choose that school over API despite the fact that he thought he'd be happier there, because its reputation was not as impressive. His brother, a sophomore at an Ivy League school in another state, was really enjoying that experience.

Participant Profile: Jackie

Jackie grew up in a rural but affluent part of New Jersey, and attended an elite, private high school in a neighboring state. She has 3 siblings, and both of her parents have graduate degrees.

The idea of taking a gap year presented itself to Jackie when she and her family were on vacation in Europe, and they began to chat casually about how exciting it would be to

spend a year abroad studying and creating art. With the help of a gap year consultant, Jackie decided to research her options.

Jackie worked with the consultant to identify programs that would allow her to pursue the things that she wanted to explore: travel, art, slow food, farming, sailing. While she planned the European portion of her trip quite carefully, it was during the gap year that the domestic components came into focus. She also was able to contact the consultant while she was overseas, so she found and booked those other adventures just months or even weeks before she began them. Jackie was fortunate that her family was able to fully fund all the components of her gap year.

During her year, Jackie lived in a number of different environments, few of which included other students in her age bracket. In Italy, there were a number of college-age students in her program. In Ireland, however, Jackie lived and worked at cooking school with its own sustainable farm, where there were few people and the others were adults. And while she was wwoofing(a) and sailing, she was among groups of people of varying ages — typically she was the youngest.

When she arrived at DU, Jackie was excited about starting classes and becoming immersed in an academic environment again, with a bit more structure and purpose than she had during her gap year. She felt that having taken a gap year was more self-indulgent than impressive, so was uncomfortable when other students were impressed by her gap year experiences. And she was very excited about the chance to form lasting relationships with peers, an aspect which had been missing from her gap year.

At the end of her first semester, Jackie's mother became ill, and her life and perspective changed dramatically. The family's energy and attention shifted to her mother's health and well-being, and drew them all closer together.

Participant Profile: Julie

Julie grew up in an urban neighborhood in northern California. She attended a large public high school, where was very involved with music, taking private lessons and performing with several school ensembles. During much of high school, she felt socially awkward and had difficulty making friends, often preferring to immerse herself in her studies and other activities.

After a travel book on the family coffee table had inspired Julie to travel to Turkey, she spent time and energy during her high school years researching ways to accomplish that. She was specifically fascinated by the fact that Turkey is a stable, democratic state that is also predominantly Muslim. Eventually she discovered that the US State Department would fund trips to certain parts of the world, so she diligently pursued and secured the funding for her dream trip to Turkey. Acceptance into this program meant that Julie would live in a home with a Turkish family and attend a local high school.

Because she did not know Turkish when she arrived there, and since the program limits contact with family or friends at home, the experience was completely immersive in a number of ways. Living in a patriarchal, religious country with very clear moral and societal rules forced Julie to confront and consider her own values and religious beliefs. She was encouraged to remember, "It's not good. It's not bad. It's just different."

Before leaving for Turkey, and after she returned home, Jackie worked in a handful of minimum-wage jobs, to gain work experience and to earn money. Her perspective on relationships and education were shaped considerably by her interactions with fellow employees, and also by the people she met in Turkey.

Julie experienced significant culture shock upon her return to the US, and her subsequent arrival at DU. She aspires to be a sociologist or anthropologist, and her orientation to the world around her is inquisitive and observant. During the first semester, she was keenly aware of her reaction to the "hook-up culture" and the gendered dynamics between male and female students. While her academic performance in her Fall courses was excellent, and she enjoyed the learning process tremendously, a medical issue prevented her from returning to DU for the spring semester.

Participant Profile: Maria

Maria attended a public high school in her rural West Virginia community. The school had a terrific partnership with a local university, so that talented students who maxed out on the high school curriculum were given the opportunity to take college-level courses, and Maria took full advantage of this option. She was a high-achieving student who also was very involved in extracurriculars like marching band and the volleyball team, so her schedule was quite demanding.

When Maria was in high school, her family hosted an exchange student from Europe, and she became intrigued with the idea of taking a gap year herself. She could see the value of taking a break from her rigorous academic trajectory to pursue some other interests and improve her Spanish fluency before going to college. Her family was supportive, but her

parents expected her to fund a good portion of her travel expenses. As a result, Maria secured two minimum-wage jobs for the first three months, working retail to earn the money she would need to travel to South America.

Maria spent the first half of her time abroad in one South American city, studying immersive Spanish at a language institute, and living with a host family. For the second half of her gap year, Maria moved to a different city to pursue an internship with a local non-profit organization. Maria sometimes felt very isolated while she was there, and began to make an effort to develop relationships with people she had met, some of which became very important to her.

Taking the gap year meant that Maria's foundation in some basic subjects had eroded by the time she arrived at API. Therefore, she needed to take some more foundational courses before moving into more complex courses. The classes were difficult, and at times she doubted her ability to stick with it, but overall Maria really enjoyed her first semester, academically and socially. She felt the gap year made her bolder, more outgoing, and more confident when she started her first year.

Participant Profile: Mark

Mark is a student from suburban New York. He attended a public high school with an innovative curriculum, and both of his parents have college degrees. He has two older siblings who also attended Satis College, and both had done gap years before they started school. So when Mark was accepted to Satis, his mom asked him if he wanted to do a gap year. He decided that he did.

The year had a few distinct segments. First, Mark went to the pacific northwest with the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) for three months of sleeping outdoors and doing a sequence of four very rugged outdoor activities. He traveled with a group of 9 young people, and during the trip they were not able to use any electronic devices. Although he didn't feel enormously deprived of that contact while he was away, it did make the few times he was able to call home very special.

For the second part of his gap year, Mark had planned to attend a small music school in a different state, but after being there a short time he felt it was the wrong experience for him. He decided instead, to shorten his stay at the school, and return to New York area, where he could have access to excellent music education classes. He lived with his mom and commuted several days a week into the city. It was a much better experience for him.

When Mark returned to his hometown and resumed his former job working with kids, some people from his workplace commented to his mom that he seemed more confident and well-rounded, and even that he was better at his job.

At SC, Mark at first felt apprehensive about his ability to make friends, keep u with the academics, and find time for himself. The recurring theme for Mark was freedom to make his own decisions, something that he kept coming back to and seems to value highly.

Participant Profile: Layla

Layla grew up in New York City, where she attended a private, all-girls' high school. When she attended a panel of recent graduates during her junior year of high school, one student on the panel had talked very enthusiastically about her experience during a gap year. At that point, Layla realized this was something she wanted to do. Her family was

supportive of the idea, but wanted Layla to take the lead on coming up with a good plan for her time. She felt fortunate that her family was able and willing to finance the year.

During the first part of her gap year, Layla was working for a non-profit arm of a small corporation, and living at home with her family. She learned what it felt like to have a work routine, including a daily city commute. After the internship, she then lived and volunteered in three different cities in India. Part of her goal for going to India was to have a service-volunteer experience, to feel like she was giving back to people. Upon reflection, she had some interesting thoughts and reflections about what she had wanted out of her experience in India and what she actually got out of it — and how that changed her perspective on many things.

Participant Profile: Lena

Lena grew up in suburban Pennsylvania. Her mom died when Lena was 15, and this left her with a lasting sense of grief and longing. During middle school and high school, Lena was involved with a number of organizations that introduced her to issues of social justice, which, along with theater, became her passion. While she did not have much helpful input from her school guidance counselor or her dad, her decision to take a gap year was supported by a trusted advisor whom she had met through some of her lobbying and social justice activities.

During her gap year, Lena chose to work with City Year in hopes that she would make a difference in the lives of young people, and learn more about herself in the process. She was not expecting the placement into a troubled inner-city Baltimore middle school. The work, she found, was grueling in its intensity, leaving her feeling exhausted at the end of

each day. In addition, she lived in an apartment and needed to prepare her own meals and manage her own bills. She had very little free time for socializing or cultural activities. Through her City Year experiences, Lena learned a great deal about the educational system, about the dynamics of working in a team, and about her own limits and abilities.

When she arrived at DU, Lena felt very confident, and less intimidated than other students seemed to be about the level of academic challenge. In contrast to her gap year, she could not imagine that college would feel difficult at all. However, during the course of her first year, Lena found herself struggling to find her niche. She missed some of the autonomy she had during her gap year, and was initially overwhelmed with the difficulty of the academics at DU. She began to recognize and analyze the tension she felt between trusting her internal voice and integrating into the campus culture.

Participant Profile: Peter

Peter grew up in Eastern Europe, and attended a United World College school in Canada prior to his gap year, so he had lived away from home before deciding to take a gap year. His gap year was sort of unconventional in part because it wasn't carefully scripted. In selecting specific experiences for the year, Peter used his UWC connections and his own intuition to set up the year the way he thought would work best.

Because he had been away from home for the previous two years, one of Peter's primary goals was to go home and spend time with his family. He has a much younger sibling with whom he was eager to spend time, and wanted to live at home for a time before going to college. Therefore, after spending the summer working to promote the UWC organization in Mexico, Peter headed home to Europe, where he lived with his family and

worked for a government agency for several months. The last portion of his year, Peter traveled to South America to pursue another, very different internship and hone his Spanish skills.

Peter arrived at DU eager to take challenging classes, and also to develop a social network. His exposure to several Latin American countries and fluency in Spanish influenced the courses he chose and the campus events he attended. However, both because he was an international student and because of his gap year, Peter found that it took him longer than other students to become acclimated to the campus culture. He also put an effort into finding friends that he felt shared his interests and values. Peter recognized that the people he met at DU could become lifelong friends and also potentially influential connections in business or politics.

During the first semester, Peter earned good grades despite what he felt was insufficient effort in several classes, including barely skimming much of the reading. He chalked his performance up to his genuine interest in the material, and in his confidence with regard to speaking in class.

Participant Profile: Paulina

Paulina is an international student from Latin America, who took her gap year for several reasons. First, she learned too late in her high school career that American colleges require students to take standardized admission tests. Second, she wanted to get some work experience in a few different settings, so that when she got to college she would have a stronger sense of direction. And finally, Paulina is the one student in the pool who had not applied and then deferred her acceptance to college; rather, she spent some of her time during

the gap-year completing her college applications.

Paulina decided to spend part of her gap year attending an academy where she could hone her English and Math skills before taking the SATs. She won a scholarship that supported her tuition, and lived nearby with her grandparents so did not have many living expenses. Prior to attending the academy, Paulina did an internship in a doctor's office, learning first-hand about medical treatment; after the academy, she did an internship with the Latin American office of a large American manufacturer to learn how businesses function. Throughout the year, she volunteered with a few different organizations - accompanying physicians to provide medical care in isolated communities, and building a new library in a local town where most children did not have access to books.

Paulina found both teachers and peers to be critical of her decision to take a gap year, telling her she would be wasting a year of her life, and that the schools at home were good enough. Her parents, however, were extremely supportive an encouraging.

Paulina's transition to the environment at SC was impacted both by her gap year and by her status as an international student living in the US for the first time. She arrived at SC excited to begin her college career but also nervous. She felt her command of English, her second language, was not as strong as it should have been, and she missed her family, with whom she is extremely close. She spoke with them every day throughout the year.

In hopes of gaining acceptance into medical school, Paulina began her college career with high expectations for her academic performance. First semester, she took a slate of demanding courses, three of which were in math and science. With a boyfriend at another school, and a sense of purpose, Paulina chose not to invest much time in becoming involved with extracurricular activities. She lived on an all-female, substance-free floor, which she

appreciated, and began to develop some important friendships. In addition to her academic efforts, she spent much of the first year learning more about American culture.

Participant Profile: Tessa

Tessa grew up near New York City. Her mom and stepdad decided to move the family into the city to make it more convenient for Tessa and her siblings to attend the Jewish day schools they wanted. This decision reflected her family's strong belief in education, and in living according to Jewish values.

Tessa's high school encouraged students to spend a gap year in Israel prior to going to college, and she knew many classmates who chose to study at a seminary for the year. However, while she felt drawn to Israel for personal and religious reasons, it did not appeal to Tessa to spend a year focused on the study of biblical texts. Instead, she chose to spend her year working with an Israeli national service program, volunteering with children in a school and a community center near Tel Aviv. The children in the community included a large group of immigrants to Israel from Ethiopia, who were learning to adjust to their new country.

In Israel, Tessa was given a room in an apartment with 14 other young women, all Israelis, sharing six bedrooms and one kitchen. Because they lived locally, most of the others went home on the weekends, and Tessa needed to decide how to spend her free time. She learned to navigate public transportation, learned to cook without an oven, and dramatically improved her fluency in Hebrew. She also made a checklist of important sites to see in Israel, and convinced her apartment-mates to join her in some weekend adventures.

When she arrived at API, Tessa felt ready to be a student again. While she was concerned about the rigor of her courses, she was confident both in her high school preparation and in her ability to balance the workload with her other interests. She lived in a suite with other students who keep Kosher, but also branched out and developed friendships with students she met through her classes and other activities.

Tessa's first semester grades were very strong, and she felt proud of her performance. However, she expressed very clearly that the grades were a by-product of her desire to learn the material in her courses. She found it frustrating that other students seemed more motivated by grades than by the joy of learning.

Participant Profile: Vinny

Vinny grew up in suburban Arizona, where he was slightly younger than many of the high school classmates in his grade. A competitive athlete, he found it personally fulfilling to be part of a team and push himself physically. Vinny's parents are divorced and he lives in Arizona with his dad, while his mom lives in another state. He attended a public high school with a reputation for excellence, and enjoyed his courses there.

In high school, Vinny was a strong student but lacked some social confidence. He thought about taking a gap year when his athletic coaches suggested he would be an even more formidable athlete if he spent a year in intensive training after high school. This idea, combined with his interest in working in a medical research lab, began to provide the structure of his gap year. He lived at home with his dad and had very few expenses during

the year, but did find time to pursue some other scholarship sources to supplement his financial aid package from SC.

During the course of the year, as Vinny was improving his physical strength and learning about lab procedures, several personal challenges, including his father becoming very ill, took center stage. Vinny felt a strong sense of responsibility to work through his own feelings, support his family members, and still maintain his commitment to his primary activities.

When he arrived at Satis College, Vinny felt he could handle just about anything. He was very excited about his courses, and about joining the athletic team there. His year off had helped him grow stronger and improve his physical performance, so he felt like a good contributor to the team. He had also learned a lot about the impact of diet and nutrition on physical health and agility, so stayed focused on that as he made the transition to eating in the college dining halls. In addition, he found his courses to be engaging and interesting, and really enjoyed the social scene. Being among a group of peers was a refreshing change from his gap year, so he made an effort to meet as many people as he could.

Vinny's grades were strong at the end of the first semester, and he got some positive feedback from his English professor, which gave him a tremendous amount of satisfaction. He also expressed pride in his athletic performance, along with his ability to keep his academics, social life, and physical well-being in good balance. He credited his gap year for helping to enhance his maturity and sense of responsibility.

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