Experiencing a Gap Year:
Perceptions from Students in the United States

A thesis presented

by

Corinne Guidi

to
The School of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education

in the field of

Curriculum, Teaching, Learning, and Leadership

College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts

February 2018
Abstract

In the United States, going straight to college upon completing high school continues to be the generally accepted practice, but an increasing number of high school graduates are opting instead to take some time off from academics before going to college. This time off is known as a “gap year” where the “gap” is understood to be the time between high school graduation and college entrance. This study explored the lived experiences of high school graduates from the United States who elected to take time off before college. Using the qualitative approach of descriptive phenomenological analysis, seven individuals who experienced a gap between high school and college were interviewed to gain a deeper understanding of what it meant to experience a gap year. The participants discussed their high school experiences leading up to their choice to take a gap year and provided detailed accounts of their lives, particularly the activities, relationships, thoughts, and feelings they experienced during their gap year. Using Amedeo Giorgi’s (1985) psychological phenomenological method, the data collected were analyzed with the frame of a constructive-developmental theory to look closer at themes as they related to the students’ personal development and evolution of consciousness. The general structure that emerged was characterized by a relationship among seven constituents which included: (a) Making a conscious decision to postpone college, (b) Coming up with a plan, (c) Experiencing new feelings evoked by new environments, (d) Reflecting on the lives of others to gain focus on life-course, (e) College as the next step in life, (f) The absence of goals, and (g) Changes in the self. With regards to how the students felt changed, the stories revealed four sub-themes: (a) Self-confidence, (b) Self-reliance and responsibility, (c) New perspectives and greater appreciation, and (d) Life-course discovery.
Acknowledgements

What a privilege it has been to embark on this journey. I could not be where I am today without the unwavering support and love from my parents. Thank you for giving me the enormous gift of education, which I cherish so deeply. To my sisters, thank you for all of your unyielding love, encouragement, and patience over the past years whenever I had to prioritize this work.

To my dearest friend Sumer, thank you for always reminding me that “if it were easy, everyone would do it.” Thank you for sharing the belief that no dream is too big or crazy to pursue, and for the countless early morning conversations about changing the world.

To my yoga instructors Allison Modaferri Brewster and Kellie Jackson Daniel, I am so grateful for your teachings, your loving-kindness, and your encouragement. You kept me so grounded throughout this journey. Thank you for always reminding me to be kind to myself.

To my beautiful friends and instructors from Rasika Yoga School whom I met during the last six months of this work, you all came into my life at such a pivotal moment, and I cannot imagine not having your love and inspiration as I moved toward the finish line.

To my long-time mentors and former professors, Dr. Joseph Weyers and Dr. Concepción Godev, thank you for the countless letters of recommendations, for your constant support throughout my higher education journey, and for always believing in me as a scholar. I could not be here today without the knowledge, inspiration, and support you instilled in me and the foundation that you helped foment throughout my undergraduate and graduate degrees.

To my fellow cohort peers, and the staff at Northeastern University in Charlotte, thank you for your camaraderie and the countless pep talks which always gave me momentum to keep things going.
To my dear friend Dr. Sylvia Simard-Newman, thank you for so graciously dedicating time and attention to this work as my external reader. I am so happy that you could share a part of this journey with me.

To my second reader, Corliss Brown Thompson, thank you for all of your guidance and support throughout the program, for your time as my second reader, and most of all, for inspiring me to always think more deeply about my topic and beyond.

To my advisor, Dr. Karen Reiss Medwed, thank you so very much for your support and guidance from the beginning of my coursework throughout the entire dissertation process. Most of all, thank you for seeing me and believing this research and my vision for going forward and becoming an agent of change.

To the participants of this study, I am profoundly grateful for the way you so graciously shared your stories with me. Thank you for giving me this window into one of the most pivotal and delicate moments of your lives, for being vulnerable and opening yourselves up to me for a greater purpose. Without you, none of this would have been possible.

My last and most important acknowledgement goes to my loving life partner and best friend, Matthew, for your patience and your selflessness throughout this wild ride – thank you for all of the sacrifices that came with the past four years. I am indebted to your unwavering support, your ardent reassurances, and your loving-kindness that lifted my spirit during the difficult moments. Your support has been an immense contribution to this work.
Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................. 2
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................... 3

Chapter 1: Statement of the Problem .................................................................... 7
Research Problem ................................................................................................. 8
    Justification of the Research Problem .......................................................... 9
    Audiences ....................................................................................................... 11
Significance of the Research Problem ............................................................... 11
Positionality ......................................................................................................... 14
Research Question ............................................................................................... 17
Theoretical Framework ......................................................................................... 18
    Robert Kegan’s Constructive-Developmental Theory .................................. 18
    Constructive Developmental Theory and the Gap Year Phenomenon ...... 19

Chapter 2: Literature Review ............................................................................... 21
Overview ............................................................................................................. 20
Defining the Gap Year ......................................................................................... 25
    Gap Year Participants .........................................................................................
    Types of Gap Year ..........................................................................................
Gap Year Outcomes ............................................................................................ 29
The Gap Year in the United States: Seminal Research ........................................ 32

Chapter 3: Methodology ..................................................................................... 35
Research Design ................................................................................................. 35
Research Tradition of Phenomenology ............................................................. 35
Participants .......................................................................................................... 38
Recruitment and Access ..................................................................................... 38
Data Collection .................................................................................................... 39
Data Storage .......................................................................................................... 40
Data Analysis ........................................................................................................ 40
Trustworthiness .................................................................................................... 41

Chapter 4: Report of Research Findings ............................................................. 43
Primary Question .................................................................................................. 43
Description of Sample ........................................................................................ 45
    Individual Participant Summaries ................................................................. 48
    Participant 1: Nate .......................................................................................... 48
    Participant 2: Zoe ........................................................................................... 49
    Participant 3: Paige ......................................................................................... 49
    Participant 4: Alex ......................................................................................... 50
Participant 5: Florence ................................................................. 51
Participant 6: Rose ................................................................. 52
Participant 7: Sophie ................................................................. 53
The Essence of Experiencing a Pre-University Gap Year ................. 54
Elaboration of Constituents .......................................................... 54
Making a Conscious Decision to Postpone College ...................... 54
Coming up with a plan ................................................................. 58
Experiencing New Feelings Evoked by New Environments .......... 62
Reflecting on the Lives of Others to Gain Focus on Life Course .... 72
College as the Next Step ............................................................... 77
The Absence of Goals ................................................................. 82
Changes in the Self ...................................................................... 84
Self-confidence ........................................................................... 84
Self-reliance and responsibility .................................................... 86
New perspectives and greater appreciation .................................. 87
Life-course discovery ................................................................. 91
Summary .................................................................................... 94

Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings, Implications and Conclusions ... 96
Discussion in Relation to Theoretical Framework .......................... 97
Discussion in Relation to Literature .............................................. 98
The Gap Year Definition .............................................................. 98
Gap Year Participants ................................................................. 101
The Gap Year Experience ........................................................... 105
Implications for Practice ............................................................ 108
Students and Parents ................................................................. 108
High Schools and High School Counselors ................................. 109
Gap Year Providers ................................................................. 109
Colleges and Universities ......................................................... 110
Recommendations for Future Research ......................................... 110
Conclusion ................................................................................ 111
Personal Reflection .................................................................... 112

References .................................................................................. 114

Appendix A: Sample Recruitment Flier ........................................ 123
Appendix B: Sample Letter to Interview Participants .................... 124
Appendix C: Informed Consent Form ............................................ 125
Appendix D: Interview Protocol ................................................... 127
Appendix E: Participant Profiles ................................................... 128
Appendix F: Meaning Unit Analysis Table .................................... 130
Chapter 1: Statement of the Problem

At the onset of their senior year in high school, student across the United States are tasked with an enormous decision – the college decision. For most, it is an automatic next step and one that is accompanied by a myriad of personal, parental, and societal expectations. This ritual of going straight to college after high school continues to be the most common practice in the United States; however, recent trends have shown an increase in students who opt to wait before making the college choice. This study explored the experience of seven students from the United States who did not go straight to college, but who instead elected instead to take some time off.

When the time off before college lasts 24 months or less, it has commonly been called a “gap year.” This term is indeed broad and has been known to represent the time off that an individual takes from their normal life course at various life stages. The word *gap* in gap year is indicative of a space between two things; hence, it is popularly used to describe the period between high school graduation and college, or the period between college graduation and a starting new career. The term can also be associated with adult career breaks, which tend to be not so much gaps between two things but more akin to sabbaticals from the workforce for an undetermined amount of time. Nevertheless, ongoing trends and increasing media coverage of the gap year phenomenon have generally attributed the time between high school and college as most closely associated with the term “gap year” (Dickler, 2017; Hoder, 2014; Lieber, 2016; Strauss, 2016; Vanderkam, 2014). Among the most notable of recent trends was the day that Malia Obama, the daughter of former President Barack Obama, announced that she would be taking a gap year before attending Harvard University. On that day, according to official data in Google trends, the term “gap year” hit its peak popularity in online searches.
Students embark on a gap year for a multitude of reasons, and for some, it constitutes a time during which they can develop skills, perspectives, and traits that they felt were lacking in their high school experience (O’Shea, 2014). Gaining life experiences, traveling to experience other cultures, and wanting a break from academics were recently found to be the top motivations for taking a gap year, among 600 gap year alumni surveyed (Gap Year Association, 2015). However, research has asserted that not all types of postsecondary delay are the same and that different student characteristics are associated with different reasons for delay (Hoe, 2014). Other statistics have highlighted the heterogeneity among delayers and the varying reasons for delaying college enrollment, based on life course, academic preparation, and educational objectives (Horn, Cataldi & Sikora, 2005). For some, postponing college involves doing something intentional that will enrich an individual; for others, the choice is more influenced by life circumstances. To honor these unique experiences of college delay, this study defined the gap year as a period of up to 24 months during which a student took time off before enrolling in college, irrespective of what the student did during that time.

**Research Problem**

This research examined the gap year phenomenon as it was experienced by seven students from the United States. Several qualitative studies have focused on the student perspective in South Africa, England, and recently in the United States and China (Coetzee & Bester, 2009; King, 2011; Nieman, 2013; Tenser, 2015; Wu, Pearce, Huang, & Fan 2015). This research approached the experience of a gap year from within the framework of constructive-developmental theory to understand the significance of the gap year experience on social maturity or evolution of consciousness. The purpose of this study was to better understand the lived experiences of high school graduates who took a gap year before entering college to gain a
deeper understanding of what it means to experience this time off and how the experience imprinted the students’ personal development, social maturity, and meaning-making.

**Justification of the Research Problem**

In the United States, statistics show an increasing number of students are waiting before making the immediate transition to college. In 2015, 31% of students in the United States did not make the transition to college immediately after finishing high school (Kena, G., Hussar W., McFarland J., de Brey C., Musu-Gillette, L., Wang, X., Zhang, J., Rathbun, A., Wilkinson-Flicker, S., Diliberti M., Barmer, A., Bullock Mann, F., and Dunlop Velez, E, 2015). This statistic does not categorize the circumstances of this college delay, and the absence of this data set makes it difficult to determine what percent of this group delayed college intentionally and what percent did so out of necessity, disinterest in going to college, or other reasons. The term gap year is typically used to signify time off that is an intentional choice and that is indicative of a student’s intention to enroll in college after a pre-determined period of delay. In their 2011 study, Goldrick & Han (2011) took a closer look at the class gap among those who delayed intentionally and those who did not. They sought “to better understand if socioeconomically advantaged students were gaining an additional advantage during their time off while socioeconomically challenged students experienced delay for less positive reasons” (Goldrick & Han, 2001, p. 441). Other studies have sought to discover what type of students are most likely to delay college, the effect of this on degree completion, and factors contributing to delayed enrollment in college (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005). At a national level, demographic, enrollment, and attendance patterns of postsecondary delay have been studied to understand the differences in outcomes for those who delay versus those who enroll immediately in college (Horn et al., 2005). That particular report provided a baseline for understanding the incidence of
postsecondary delay in the United States and the motivations for doing so. The report confirmed that those who delay college are a heterogeneous group and are distinct in the amount of time they delayed college and the types of college they eventually attended (Horn et al., 2005).

Studies outside of the United States on the gap year phenomenon have reported on both the advantages and disadvantages of taking a gap year (Coetzee 2006; Nieman, 2013). What is known today about the gap year has emerged predominantly from the United Kingdom, Australia, Europe, and South Africa, countries where it is not as uncommon to postpone college. While the actual number is unknown, many who take gap years choose to participate in pre-arranged gap year programs run by private organizations. The interest of pre-arranged travel, work, or volunteer experiences has continued to grow and has created somewhat of a niche industry that caters to this population of students who opt for a break from formal education. In the United Kingdom, a 2004 report identified between 80 to 100 such program providers and some 50,000 placements for gap year takers (Jones, 2004). Researchers have suggested that such well-planned gap year experiences are giving an “edge” to students who take time off before college, both in choosing their intended career path and acquiring soft skills that many employers seek (Heath, 2007). Others have concluded that a gap year can help students gain clarity on their career choice, which in turn makes them more motivated to persevere academically in college (Nieman, 2013). This study informs the conversations in the field about the choice of a gap year option. By documenting the personal accounts of students who experienced a gap year, this research further explored how this time off was perceived by those who experienced it and the significance of their experience as it related to their social maturity and meaning-making.
Audiences

Many people stand to benefit from hearing the stories that were shared in this study. Among them are parents, students, gap year companies, high school counselors, and institutions of higher education. This research further informs the views that parents, students, and educational professionals have towards the practice of taking a gap year in the United States. In addition to this, this research informs the practices of current gap year companies and the future landscape of the gap year industry. The findings of this study contribute to the growing dialogue surrounding the gap year; however, most importantly, this study has the potential to have a direct impact on professionals who are working the front lines with students, gap year companies who want to better understand their participants, and high school students as they weigh out the pros and the cons of delaying college entrance.

Significance of the Research Problem

Students on an academic trajectory from high school to college are increasingly inserting a gap year amidst those experiences as they transition to the next chapter of their lives. According to some scholars, the gap year was likely a spawn of the British Grand Tour – a form of early tourism undertaken by aristocratic young men in the mid-17th Century (Heath, 2007; King, 2011; O’Shea, 2014). During the Grand Tour, young men spent up to three years traveling to learn and experience the cultural centers of Europe — particularly Germany, France, and Italy. Such trips were considered the pinnacle of one’s education and an indispensable part of elevating one’s status (Mead, 1914). The modern gap year phenomenon is thought to have flourished in the 1960’s in a post-war era where cultural exchanges emerged to create global awareness. From this period into the 1970’s, such travel had a volunteering component given that it was accompanied by the desire to go out and help others in need in lesser-developed parts of the
world. As travel became more accessible in the 1980’s and 1990’s, individuals set off on their own to travel or backpack, and they paved the way for the emergence of the gap year in the United Kingdom (Sherifi, 2018). From the United Kingdom, this phenomenon began to spread to other parts of the Anglosphere such as Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, and at the turn of the century, the tradition of taking a gap found its way to the United States.

From 2009 to 2013, the percentage of high school graduates who delayed college in the United States increased by 4% (Kena et al., 2015). As a whole, delayers postpone secondary education for a number of reasons, and, in 2005, reports found that 9% percent postponed college for just one year and eight percent took a break lasting two to four years (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Horn et. al, 2005). According to the generally adopted definition of the gap year, these delayers could be classified as gappers because the length of time they took off before college was between three and 24 months. This begs the question: What did these delayers do prior to enrolling in college, and what impact did the delay have on their lives?

Colleges are not turning their backs on these students who opt for a gap year; in fact, more and more are welcoming the option. College admission requirements vary from school to school, but some colleges that allow a gap year do so under the condition that the student stay in touch during their time off, provide a written request outlining his or her gap year plans, and agree to not take courses for credit elsewhere. Most schools prefer to see that a student participates in a “solid” program and that their request to take a gap year is based on a desire to engage in a meaningful learning experience. For universities, the value of a gap year rests less on fun and freedom and more on experiences that push the individual past the threshold of his or her comfort zone. This study gained insight into the post-high school plans of seven individuals and provided first-hand perspectives on their experiences. Their stories presented varying forms of
the gap year, from those who opted for organized gap year programming to others who did not even know such programs existed.

In view of this, catering to gappers is an industry made up of private for-profit and non-profit organizations dedicated to organizing and providing structured gap year programs. In 2004, a report on the provision of gap years in the U.K. identified six types of gap year providers which included specialist providers, domestic and overseas volunteering organizations, domestic and overseas paid work providers, and travel and leisure providers (Jones, 2004). It is difficult to assess just how many gap year providers are out there today, particularly due to the varying sizes and nature of different programs and organizations. Ethan Knight (personal communication, May 24, 2016), director of the Gap Year Association (GYA), speculated that there are approximately 150-200 organizations in the United States offering gap year programs. Specialist providers set themselves apart in that they cater specifically to the gap year participant and are focused on post-school and post-university gap years (Jones, 2004). The GYA was founded in 2012 as the first umbrella organization to oversee the practices of industry providers. On their website, the GYA stipulates that its mission is to clarify both what a gap year is and to whom they are best suited. It highlights the elements of volunteering, backcountry, internship, partnerships, and integrity as their standards of membership. The dozen organizations that have current accreditation describe their programs as ones that offer deep cultural immersion, meaningful service learning, life skills, personal development, and for some, even adventure. Much of the research commissioned by the GYA has related to students who participated in organized programs and was conducted through a national survey distributed through accredited members. It is important to note that the gap year phenomenon is not constrained to individuals who choose to participate in an organized program; it is also characterized by individuals who
create their own plan for what to do with their time off. These factors influenced the researcher’s choice to use descriptive phenomenology so that multiple perspectives could be heard to describe the essence of the gap year experience. The participant stories from distinct backgrounds in this research further inform these conversations and bolster the potential for parents, educators, and organizations to better cater to the developmental needs of young adults during their transition after high school.

**Positionality**

My years as both an adjunct instructor and high school teacher inspired me to take on this research. It became apparent to me that the goal of going immediately to college was the automatic expectation for most students. Through conversations with my high school students, I began to understand just how much their high school experience was shaped on academics that focused on achievement for better chances at college entry. I began to wonder why students were expected to go to college right away and why there is an evident stigma in the United States around the idea of not entering college immediately after high school. These questions led me toward the desire to learn more about the choice to take a gap year and to subsequently create a gap year program in my city.

Using the phenomenological research method made it necessary for me to disclose my relationship to the topic of the study. In a qualitative study, the researcher’s perspective is perhaps a paradoxical one: it is to be acutely tuned-in to the experiences and meaning systems of others and at the same time to be aware of how one’s own biases and preconceptions may be influencing what one is trying to understand. (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p. 123)
EXPERIENCING A GAP YEAR

With this in mind, I took note of my experience with the gap year topic and reflected on the opinions and bias I may have had before beginning this research.

Three years ago, I became an active member of the GYA research committee where I have learned a lot about the gap year industry, their goals, and their vision for promoting the gap year as another option for high school graduates. As part of the research committee, I coded the qualitative data from the GYA’s National Alumni Survey conducted in 2014. Through this task, I examined open-ended responses provided by 492 students who had participated in an organized gap year program. While this endeavor informed my ideas surrounding the gap year, I remain cognizant that those stories took place in specific contexts. The data I encountered informed some of the things I know about the outcomes of gap year programs, but it also reaffirmed to me that the gap year is a complex phenomenon about which we still have a lot to learn.

I recognize that my personal experiences impact the way I make meaning of things. My worldview is shaped by many of the places where I have traveled, lived, worked, or studied in the Americas, Western Europe, South America, and Africa. Understanding this is also important when carrying out qualitative research or interviews. O’Sullivan (2004) suggested that some researchers are better than others at being objective, stating that they are “more comfortable with an objective reality without personality quirks, emotional motivations, or individual idiosyncrasies” (p. 2). In accordance with her statement, I believe my experiences coupled with my background in pedagogy enhance my ability to be objective. In large, the social and cultural capital I have acquired through my experiences has been most valuable in helping me to connect with my participants and to be sensitive to their ethnic, cultural, socioeconomic differences. I believe the most beneficial part of this in the scope of research is how it informed my knowledge of the participants and how participants probably perceived me. Bourke (2014) affirmed this
notion, stating that both the researcher and the participants impact research. As researchers, we must be mindful of the ways in which our identities feed our perceptions and how in turn our participants’ identities influence the way they perceive us.

When choosing my research question, I understood that setting aside my beliefs was an essential component of the phenomenological method to assure that my participants’ voices remained the focus of the study. The two and most important steps in the phenomenological method are to assume the phenomenological attitude which means performing the *epoché* (or “bracketing”) and the phenomenological reduction, (Giorgi, 2009). According to Giorgi (2009):

To bracket means to put aside all knowledge of the phenomenon being explored or investigated that is not due to the actual instance of this phenomenon and all past knowledge derived from readings or other secondary sources, as well as one’s former personal experiences with the phenomenon, are meant to be excluded.” (p. 64)

I strived to fully remove my preconceptions and biases to keep my participants’ voices at the focal point of the study.

The descriptive phenomenological method aims at making the meanings of the participants’ expressions more precise and this also requires linguistic ability on the part of the participants and research analyst (Giorgi, 2009). With this in mind, I feel it is appropriate to highlight my academic and professional background in both foreign language and translation studies. At the very core of translation is hermeneutics, or the “art of interpretation” (Schleirmacher, 1998). In translation, one must approach a source text with a sensitivity to the intention and the meaning behind the words to fully know what the text is saying before attempting to translate it. In the same way, there is a hermeneutic process in qualitative research “through which scientific understanding occurs, through which we correct our prejudices or set
them aside and hear ‘what the text says to us’” (Gadamer, 1976, p. xviii). According to Van Manen (2016), an essential component of the phenomenological method is “a sensitivity to the subtle undertones of language, to the way language speaks when it allows the things themselves to speak” (p. 111). As a translator, I experienced this art first-hand which I believe has only strengthened my ability to conduct a phenomenologically sound thematic analysis. From the beginning of this research, my goal has been to adequately capture the experiences shared by the participants and to present the emergent themes in a way that was faithful to the experiences as they were.

**Research Question**

Qualitative research is a unique method of scientific inquiry that differs from quantitative research that often states a hypothesis. Indeed, “A phenomenological question explores what is given in moments of pre-reflective, pre-predicative experience—experiences as we live through them” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 27). The research question guiding this study was concerned with the human science question of the experience of the gap year. According to Moustakas (1994), “The human science question seeks to reveal the essences and meanings of human experience and uncover the qualitative factors in behavior and experience” (p. 105).

The main research question guiding this study is:

How do students in the United States perceive the experience of their pre-university gap year?

The sub-questions guiding this study are:

- How does a gap year imprint on a student’s development, social maturity, and meaning-making processes?
- How do students perceive themselves before their gap year and after their gap year?
The components of the main research question were “how,” “perceive,” “experience,” and “gap year.” Use of the word “how” showed an openness to anything that could emerge about the gap year experience during the interview with participants. (Moustakas, 1994). “In phenomenology, perception is regarded as the primary source of knowledge” (Moustakas, 1994, p.52). In this research question, the word “perceive” was used in accordance with this and was indicative of consciousness through time. The word “experience” indicated a commitment to obtaining comprehensive descriptions of experiences as they were depicted by the participants.

**Theoretical Framework**

**Robert Kegan’s Constructive-Developmental Theory**

Robert Kegan’s (1982, 1994) constructive-developmental theory, sometimes called theory of self-evolution, theory of social maturity, theory of meaning-making or theory of the evolution of consciousness framed the researcher’s analysis of this study. This section provides an overview of Kegan’s (1982, 1994) theory and offers a brief discussion about the usefulness of constructive-developmental theory to this study.

Kegan’s (1982, 1994) theory builds on the work of others in the constructivist school of thought namely Jean Piaget (1963), Erik Erickson (1963), William G. Perry (1970), and Lawrence Kohlberg (1984). Constructivist theories “emerged from the Piagetian tradition of positing universal structures of knowing that can evolve based on a person’s encounter with challenging environments and her or his subsequent accommodations to new ways of knowing” (Eriksen, 2006, p. 290). Kegan’s (1982, 1994) theory is seen as an extension of Piaget’s (1963) theory in which Piaget laid out stages of cognitive development from infancy to the age of 12. Kegan (1982, 1994), in turn, emphasized the period of adolescence to adulthood during which he stipulated that an individual’s way of knowing or processes of meaning-making goes through
various stages which he called orders of consciousness. Kegan (1994) numbered these orders of consciousness from 0 to 5, and they are the stages through which an individual’s meaning-making process evolves through time.

**Constructive Developmental Theory and the Gap Year Phenomenon**

Prior studies (Birch & Miller, 2007; Martin, 2010) have sought to understand the academic outcomes and quantifiable impacts of a gap year on the individuals who take them; however, the vast differences in gap year experiences make them inherently subjective and thus a complex phenomenon. The principles outlined in Kegan’s (1994) theory not only informed the researcher’s understanding of “how the participants thought but how they constructed experience more generally, including thinking, feeling, and social-relating” (p. 32). Kegan (1994) built on the work of Piaget by extending the breadth (beyond thinking to affective, interpersonal, and intrapersonal realms) and length (beyond childhood and adolescence to adulthood) of principles of mental organization. Kegan’s (1994) theory would suggest that gappers are likely in the third-order of consciousness in which one is able to “think abstractly, identify a complex internal psychological life, orient to the welfare of a human relationship, construct values and ideals self-consciously…and subordinate one’s own interests” (Kegan, 1994, p. 75). A “durable category” is a term Kegan (1994) used to identify the second principle of mental organization that children evolve between the ages of seven and 10 (p. 29). According to Kegan (1994), an individual evolves the third principle when the durable category moves from being the subject of one’s experiencing to the object of one’s experiencing (p. 32). In other words, an adolescent is said to arrive at the principle of cross-categorical knowing, a capacity to subordinate durable categories, which “makes their thinking abstract, their feelings a matter of inner states and self-reflection, and their social relating capable of loyalty and devotion to a community of people or ideas larger
than the self” (Kegan, 1994, p.29). The construction of values, ideals, and broad beliefs requires at least a cross-categorical principle of mental organization (Kegan, 1994, p.27).
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Overview

Since the inception of the 18\textsuperscript{th} Century Grand Tour, which is said to have given birth to the gap year movement, the phenomenon of the gap year has certainly evolved. Travel was central to the Grand Tour during which aristocratic youth traveled to the art and cultural centers of Europe in search of enlightenment and adventure. Anecdotal stories suggest the modern gap year jumpstarted in the 1960’s, “during a time when social and cultural revolution drove many to seek a more spiritual life and embark on a “hippy trail” to remote countries such as Nepal, India, and Pakistan” (Sherifi, 2018). The late 1970’s gave way to programs that facilitated volunteering opportunities for British youth and, in the decades to follow, backpacking and independent travel became more popular. Travel was seen as the essential component of the gap year, and, prior to the millennium, most research concerned itself with just this – travel, volunteer work, and the industry that organized those kinds of experiences. As the phenomenon spread from England across to Australia, its popularity gave way to growing interest in better understanding who took gap years, why they took them, and what they did during their gap years (Crawford & Cribb, 2012; Curtis, 2014; Curtis, Mlotkowski, & Lumsden, 2012; Jones, 2004). In the United States, the gap year is said to have flourished in 1980 when a school headmaster named Cornelius Bull witnessed the positive impact that a service project on a Navajo reservation had on his students and began to advocate for more of these types of experiences (Haigler, 2005). In 1980, Bull founded an organization called The Center for Interim Programs, whose mission would be to not only advocate for students to explore options for time-off, but to guide them through the process. Bull’s initiatives are said to have been the launching pad of the
American gap year experience. However, much like its British counterpart, this experience in the United States went relatively unexamined until the start of the millennium.

The period of time off known as a gap year has considerable gray areas that are attributed to questions surrounding what students do during their gap year and what distinguishes a gap year from mere postsecondary delay. What is often brought into question is why the student delays college and how long the student delays. Studies on postsecondary delay in the United States have laid the groundwork for exploring the ambiguity in the intersection of gap years and college delay (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Goldrick-Rab & Han, 2011; Heath, 2007; Hoe, 2014; Horn, et al., 2005; Stehlik, 2010). While statistics on post-secondary delay bring into focus the profile of students who delay postsecondary enrollment, they does not offer information about those who delayed intentionally versus circumstantially or the kinds of activities in which they engaged during their delay.

The gap year can take on many forms and individuals can embark on their year independently or participate in structured programs designed for gap year takers. Central to the discussion on what makes a gap year a gap year is whether or not the individual is doing something that will enhance his or her experience, knowledge, and skills. Some researchers have explored travel as a crucial piece to the gap year experience and have sought to understand the positive impacts it has for gap year takers (Flowers, 2015; Griffin, 2013; Hoe, 2014; O’Shea, 2011; Spenader, 2011). Other researchers have scrutinized the part of the gap year industry that promotes travel abroad and have used theoretically critical lenses to examine how some companies promote volunteer-tourism in third-world communities and the neoliberalist contexts within which the travel programs exist (Calkin, 2013; Hermann, 2013; Hermann, Peters, & Van Trijp, 2017; Lyons, Hanley, Wearing, & Neil, 2012; Simpson, 2004; Simpson, 2005a; Simpson,
While the topic of travel has received considerable attention in the gap year dialogue, the heterogeneity among gap year takers’ activities is also well-noted (Crawford & Cribb, 2012; Hango, 2011; Horn et al., 2005; Jones, 2004).

The substantial variation among gap year takers highlights the importance and appropriateness of qualitative research to learn more about the gap year phenomenon. In most recent years, qualitative studies have given way to a more accurate representation of the gap year’s outcomes while taking into consideration the heterogeneity that can exist among gap year takers. This was accomplished in this study by not limiting the participants solely to those with similar gap year experiences. To date, qualitative studies on the gap year have revealed how the gap year has impacted such things as personal growth and identity development, career adaptability, life-course, and the first-year of college experience (Flowers, 2015; Griffin, 2013; King, 2013; Nieman, 2013; O’Shea, 2011; Raibie & Naidoo, 2016; Spenader, 2011; Tenser, 2015; Vogt, 2018). What is notable is the geographical scope of these studies, highlighting gap year stories of participants from the United Kingdom, South Africa, the United States, and most recently, Norway.

The globalization of the gap year movement has not gone unnoticed, nor has the heterogeneity among participants and their gap year activities. In 2017, a move by the American Gap Association to change its name to the Gap Year Association (GYA) signified a shift in the organization’s mission towards encompassing a more global gap year movement and serving as a resource to students taking any type of gap year, whether structured or unstructured (Gap Year Association [GYA], 2018). The globalization of the gap year movement has not only occurred in practice, but also in the scope of research. The past decade has seen studies emerge from countries outside of the usual gap year dialogue (United Kingdom, United States, Canada,
Australia, and South Africa) such as Sweden, Finland, Norway, the Netherlands, Lithuania, and China (Hermann, 2013; Hermann et al., 2017; Holmlund, Liu, & Nordström Skans, 2008; Leonavičius & Ozolinčiūtė, 2015; Parker, Thoemmes, Duineveld, Salmela-Aro, & Eccles, 2015; Vogt, 2018; Wu et al., 2015). The inception of the gap year as part of the undergraduate curriculum at eight public universities in Malaysia at the start of 2017 added to this dialogue (Abdullah, 2017).

An increasing number of universities in the United States are encouraging gap years as well as providing deferral-friendly admissions options. Tufts University’s 1 + 4 Bridge Year, Princeton’s Bridge Year, the University of North Carolina’s Global Gap Year, Elon University’s Global Pathfinders, and St. Norbert’s College Gap Experience are in-house bridge year programs available to a limited number of incoming freshman who apply. Northeastern University’s NU.in program, though not termed a gap year or bridge year, is an opportunity to spend the first year of college abroad. Florida State University supports the gap year by offering $50,000 per year to gap year takers, and other universities such as Naropa College and Portland State University collaborate with third-party providers to offer accredited programs through which students can obtain college credit (Ethan Knight, personal communication, February 3, 2018).

The gap year industry is made up of a sizable number of providers all over the world with a predominant number of companies based in the United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States who also operate their programs in numerous countries abroad. Studies on the impacts of structured programs have revealed benefits of taking a gap year in terms of personal growth and development and future job satisfaction among others (Flowers, 2015; GYA, 2015; Hoe, 2014;). What is certain is that the outcomes of different gap year experiences need further scrutiny in order to understand if the benefits are attributed to specific gap year activities or can be attributed
to the gap year in its broader context. This research offers rich insight into the experiences of participants who spent their gap years in different ways by seeking to understand the psychological underpinnings of what occurs during a gap period.

This literature review continues with an additional overview of current research as it pertains to defining the gap year, gap year participants, and types of gap years. It then provides an overview of literature on gap year outcomes and culminates with an elaboration of the seminal research conducted to date in the United States. A final summation considers implications and areas for future research.

**Defining the Gap Year**

One of the most cited definitions of the gap year emerged from a report commissioned in 2003 by the Department of Education and Skills in the United Kingdom. Jones (2004) defined the gap year as “any period of time between 3 and 24 months in which an individual takes out of formal education, training or the workplace, and where the time out sits in the context of a longer career trajectory” (p. 8). Jones’ (2004) definition took into account the heterogeneity among individuals who re-started school at different points in the calendar year. For this reason, Jones (2004) suggested that it would be more appropriate to use the term “gap period” rather than “gap year.” Jones (2004) argued that the term “gap year” and “year out” are ambiguous in that they did not tightly define the phenomenon (p. 22). In another study which focused on individuals who had participated in structured gap year programs, Heath (2007) used a more precise definition of “15 months between the completion of A levels or equivalent and the commencement of higher education” (p. 89). According to Jones (2004), gap years are best classified according to the timing of a gap year and the relationship of the time off to education, training, or employment. This raises questions about whether or not a gap year is a gap year if
EXPERIENCING A GAP YEAR

higher education does not follow the individual’s time off. In Australia, a report commissioned by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations defined a gap year as being one to two years and emphasized that the concept of a gap year is not always related to the deferral of university acceptance (Curtis et al., 2012). They highlighted a distinction between those who do not continue to higher education and those that do, noting that those that do not continue to college are not classified as gappers. Curtis (2014) reaffirmed the distinction between the two terms stating that “gap-taking and deferral of university studies are related but different phenomena” (p. 108). Hence, when a student defers their college enrollment for 12 months or less, they are referred to as “gappers” because their time off is intentional, not due to overreaching circumstances, and it is deliberately planned out. Working with Swedish statistics, Holmlund et al. (2012) noted that gap years fell under one of five categories: (a) an investment in skills, (b) gaps as leisure, (c) gaps as waiting for better educational opportunities, (d) gaps as learning about ones’ preferences and/or ability, and (e) gaps as military service (p. 684).

**Gap Year Participants**

The pre-university gap year has received predominant attention in the United Kingdom and Australia where it is a relatively common practice. In 2005, the United States Department of Education turned its attention to the topic of post-secondary delay and conducted an analysis of educational statistics to better understand the demographics of undergraduates who delay college enrollment (Horn et al., 2005). These reports provided a foundation for understanding graduation, retention, and enrollment statistics of those who delayed college enrollment compared to those who went immediately to college. The report found that those who enroll immediately into college after high school graduation still remain the majority.

In 2012, 66% of students reported beginning college the following fall semester (34% attended four-year universities and 29% entered 2-year colleges) (Horn et al., 2005). The 34%
who postponed college enrollment did so for varying reasons that included being academically unprepared, family responsibilities, or financial motivations (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Horn et al., 2005). Furthermore, students who postponed college consisted of students whose delay was intentional and those whose delay was circumstantial. For those who elected to delay college for other reasons, the eventual enrollment in college was dependent upon the person’s life course (such as family formation or marriage) and socioeconomic status (SES).

A social class gap in the gap year exists where those in the bottom 20% of the socioeconomic distribution are six times more likely to delay post-secondary education than their more affluent peers (Goldrick-Rab & Han, 2011, p. 424). Goldrick-Rab & Han (2011) “sought to contribute to a better understanding of why students from different social class backgrounds engage in [delaying college] at such different rates” (p. 424). This research built on a prior study conducted by Bozick and DeLuca (2005) which was considered one of the first to examine the type of students most likely to delay college enrollment and what effects a delay would have on their degree completion. Goldrick-Rab & Han (2011) explicitly analyzed the significance of the socioeconomic factors that contributed to the decision in delaying college using the National Educational Longitudinal Survey of 1988 (NELS). Results showed that 16% of students delayed college and found an inverse correlation between the likelihood of college delay and socioeconomic background. In the sample, 31% of low SES students delayed college as opposed to 5% of high SES students (Goldrick-Rab & Han, 2011, p. 432). In the United States, the social gap in college delay was explained by “socioeconomic differences in family background, educational expectations, family formation, and academic course-taking” (Goldrick-Rab & Han, 2011, p. 440). Inversely, socioeconomically advantaged students are thought to be able to gain an upper hand during their time off while the delay can have adverse effects on
socioeconomically challenged students (Heath, 2007). In 2018, Vogt (2018) highlighted this similarity in the Norwegian context saying that a break before college was positively described as “gap year” and a break before vocational route is seen more negatively as a “dropout” (p.56). Drawing on “positional conflict theory” (Brown, Hesketh, & Williams, 2003), Heath (2007) argued that labor market shifts have created increased competition for middle-class sectors, hence, causing students to seek an “edge” over others. For middle to high-class gappers, taking time off to travel or join a volunteer initiative abroad means a broadening of their world view and offers an opportunity for self-development and personal growth. Cremin (2007) described the gap year as “enterprising” and related it to the needs of capital, stating that such experiences increase the subject’s employability (p. 529). This brings into question the “what” students are doing during their gap year and how those activities contribute to the individual’s acquisition of other forms of capital. There is criticism around whether a gap year in another country accurately broadens a student’s worldview or helps the participant to feel more “cosmopolitan” (Snee, 2013). Simpson (2004) suggested that pedagogy for social justice is needed so that students are encouraged to question why inequality exists rather than attesting inequality to sheer “luck.” She asserted that, for a gap year to be truly eye-opening, such pedagogy was needed to help Westerners to step out of this “us and them mentality” (Simpson, 2004).

**Types of Gap Year**

Traditionally, one of the most popular options for gap year takers is to travel abroad. Prior to Jones (2004) report, the academic research pertaining to gap years focused on issues of travel, volunteer work, and the industry that organized such experiences. While some may travel on their own, many others opt for an organized trip to a third-world country where they typically engage in some form of humanitarian work. This notion of “volunteer tourism” has received
some criticism for purveying experiences that combine the indulgence of tourism with the
benevolence of volunteerism (Simpson, 2004). Research has sought to examine the discourse
used in the way programs are promoted in their marketing materials and online. Simpson
(2004), Heath (2007) Lyons et al. (2012), and Helene Snee (2013) expanded the gap year rhetoric
even further, from one of leisurely time off to one that examines the commodity of the third-
world experiences marketed to gap year takers.

Discussing both the commodity of the gap year and the imbalance of cultural capital,
these studies raise the question of whether the commodification of the gap year influences the
participant’s perception of the other culture (Simpson, 2004; Snee, 2013). It is even suggested
that gap year companies create notions of the other and use representations of poverty and the
third world to frame the participant’s expectations of a meaningful experience (Simpson, 2004).
Heath (2007) argued that a hierarchy has emerged among gap year experiences “which positions
certain ‘types’ of gap years as more worthwhile than others” (p.91). For example, it has been
thought that taking time off to work and save money is not as highly regarded as engaging in
other gap year activities such as traveling abroad to do volunteer-tourism. It has also been
observed that when students are abroad, they are more framed by references of home and are
often there in a capacity that will be advantageous in their home context (Snee, 2013).

**Gap Year Outcomes**

Recent studies have sought to understand the impact of a gap year on higher education,
career outcomes, and personal development. (Birch & Miller, 2007; Coetzee & Bester, 2006;
Flowers, 2015; King, 2011; Martin, 2010; Nieman, 2013; O’Shea, 2011; Raibie & Naidoo, 2016,
Tenser, 2016). However, it is noteworthy that they have come from a limited number of contexts
across multiple cultures, specifically, the United Kingdom, South, Africa, and the United States.
With that in mind, differences in educational experiences must be taken into consideration. Qualitative research on the gap year in the United States is still limited, with a handful of studies that have examined the gap year in the contexts of language acculturation, the presumed benefits of travel, the impact on personal development, and the impact on the first-year transition to college (Flowers, 2015; Hoe, 2014; Spenader 2011; Tenser, 2015).

Within the context of academic outcomes in college, Birch and Miller (2007) and Martin (2010) used quantitative analysis to examine academic achievement differences between youth in Australia who had taken a gap year and those who had not. Findings showed that those who had taken a gap year had significantly higher marks in college than those who had entered college immediately (Birch and Miller, 2007). In addition to this, it was the low performing students who seemed to benefit the most. Both studies found correlations between post-school uncertainty and gap year intention, low motivation and post-school uncertainty, and the gap year as a predictor of academic motivation (Birch & Miller, 2007; Martin 2010). With that said, Martin (2010) underscored the complexity of the word motivation and the need to carefully define how it is measured through increased psycho-educational perspectives in the research. Claire Crawford and Jonathon Cribb (2012) used the Longitudinal Study of Young People of England to conduct one of the first quantitative studies about the long-term outcomes of the gap year. Their findings confirmed the importance of a shorter duration of delay for better chances at university completion. The authors asserted that it may be important to encourage gap year takers to apply to college before their gap year rather than talk them out of taking the gap year altogether (Crawford & Cribb, 2012).

Although qualitative studies do not provide numeric evidence on academic achievement, they do succeed in determining psychosocial outcomes among gap year takers that contribute to
a better understanding of the subjective experience. King’s (2011) sample of 23 participants in the UK extended research into the context of higher education. His findings indicated that significant identity work took place during the participants’ gap year in which they discussed finding confidence, maturity, and independence (King, 2011). King (2011) argued that the biggest impact of the gap year was the fact that students felt like they had control of their lives for the first time and were therefore accountable for their responsibilities and their actions during that time. King’s (2011) study also illuminated the question of “what” participants were doing during their gap year and how they were choosing activities that were making them more employable. One participant recounted feeling like an interviewer was tired of hearing the same story about students that had volunteered abroad. This resonates with Heath’s (2007) hierarchy of gap year activities and begs the question of whether certain types of activities are deemed more constructive than others.

Reasons cited for taking a gap year included taking a break from education and to finding clarity in career plans (Nieman, 2013; O’Shea, 2011). In her interviews of 34 South African college students, Nieman (2013) concluded that students found clarity in their career choice during their gap year and that this clarity made them more motivated to persevere academically in university. Nieman’s (2013) interviews resulted in nine key outcomes of gap year taking: gaining certainty about field of study, curing burn-out and getting refreshed, gaining higher levels of motivation, becoming more focused, asserting independence and finding oneself, acquiring intercultural competence, improving social relationships, facilitating adjustment to university, and personal growth and development. O’Shea (2011) interviewed 29 returned volunteers enrolled in university anywhere between their first and last year. While nearly all the students reported a life-altering impact after their gap year, O’Shea (2011) concluded that the
perceived outcomes were unique to each person. He captured several educational patterns consisting of: civic education, changing religious perspectives, appreciation for community and family life, intellectual development and decision-making, psychosocial development, and experiencing culture shock (O’Shea, 2011).

**The Gap Year in the United States: Seminal Research**

Anecdotal evidence has been more present than empirical evidence on the benefits of taking time off before college, with narratives appearing in magazines articles, trade books, and newspapers. One of the first empirical studies to highlight gap year outcomes was Spenader’s (2011) study on language acculturation which examined accounts of high school students and gap year takers who had participated in a cultural exchange in Sweden. Hoe (2014) expanded the dialogue around the differences in postsecondary delay. Her work comprised of three papers: two utilized quantitative methods and the Beginning Postsecondary Students study data, and the third used qualitative data from gap year takers who had traveled to examine how travel-related activities during a gap year might be beneficial (Hoe, 2014). Her conclusions revealed that delayers are different from immediate enrollers; not all types of delay are equal; and delaying for travel is brought on by and also leads to particular gains in attitudes, behaviors, and forms of capital.

Flowers (2015) conducted a qualitative study that brought under light the phenomenon of student participation in structured gap year programs between high school and college. She used survey responses from 100 students from a public university in the Northeast in addition to interviews with four respondents, and a case study of one informant. Her study sought to understand the critical features of the gap year experiences, how students perceived the impact their experiences coupled with their college expectations had on their personal development, and
what kind of factors surrounded the access to gap year programs (Flowers, 2015, p. 148).

Flowers’ study uncovered four critical features to the structured gap year experience: (a) access to unfamiliar environments, (b) the opportunity to form meaningful relationships and build the skills for such, (c) the opportunity to be on one’s own, and (d) responsibility for one’s own independence (p. 157). As a result of their gap year, these students stated they were better able to define their lifestyle preferences and their personal and professional passions. They also felt they were better equipped to build relationships and had expanded on their skills for responsibility, resilience, and independence. The access to gap year programs was reported to be reliant on financial supports; encouragement from family, friends, and other influential people in their lives; and receiving the guidance on how to access information about gap year programs.

Most recently, Tenser (2015) leaned the gap year conversation toward higher education through a qualitative study that explored the first-year college experience for students who had taken a gap year. Tenser devised the Gap Year Impact Model to delineate her findings that gap year encounters accelerated meaning-making which in turn lead to what she called “sovereign engagement” of the student during the first year of college. According to Tenser (2015), “sovereign engagement” was the result of the student engaging in behaviors or attitudes across six categories: (a) taking responsibility for their academic performance; (b) appreciating learning for the sake of learning; (c) pursuing authentic relationships with parents and peers; (d) recognizing and resisting FOMO (“Fear of Missing Out”); (e) valuing college as short-term and a privilege; and (f) making decisions congruent with their internal voice (Tenser, 2015, p. 129).

One of the most large-scale surveys on the effects of gap year experiences was launched in 2015 by the GYA. The survey was distributed nationwide through social media, program leaders, and word of mouth and remained open for 11 months. In total, 558 gap year alumni
completed the survey in its entirety. The survey was designed and hosted by Nina Hoe, Ph.D. and the Institute for Survey Research at Temple University. The survey found that among the top motivations for taking a gap year were the desire to gain life experiences, the desire to travel and experience other cultures, and wanting to take a break from the traditional academic track. The results showed that gappers who participated in international programs or took longer gap years experienced higher impacts. It also revealed that a higher proportion of gappers from families with an estimated income of more than $200,000 participated in such international programs (GYA, 2015). The results of the survey claimed that taking a gap year may help students be more deliberate in college and complete their studies faster than they otherwise would have. It stipulated that gappers reported more impacts to personal growth, career, and citizenship than academic impacts.

This study builds on these empirical studies conducted in the United States by offering a structural description of what it meant for students in the United States to experience a gap year. A descriptive phenomenological method was chosen for this research to focus on the experience itself so that the essences of said experience could be revealed. An advantage of conducting qualitative research is the ability to view the data across different frameworks, and future qualitative research is imperative to continuing the exploration of this phenomenon. The stories presented in this study expand the dialogues around the current literature and will hopefully inspire directions for future research.
Chapter 3: Methodology

**Research Design**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of seven individuals who took a pre-university gap year. According to Creswell (2013), “a phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (p. 76). This study examined the way multiple students experienced the phenomenon of the gap year, and it sought to reveal the essence of each participant’s experience as well as the general structure of the collective experience. Giorgi’s (2012) descriptive phenomenological psychological method best suited the objectives of the thesis research. Phenomenology is “more a method of questioning than answering, realizing that insights come to us in that mode of musing, reflective questioning, and being obsessed with sources and meanings of lived meaning” (Van Manen, 2016, p. 27). Moustakas (1994) asserted that the empirical phenomenological approach involves “a return to experience to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of the experience” (p. 13). Giorgi (1985) aimed to offer a rational method that was theoretically grounded in phenomenological philosophy of Husserl and yet that dealt in a practical procedural manner with empirically generated data (Van Manen, 2016, p. 210).

**Research Tradition of Phenomenology**

Edmund Husserl, thought to be the father of phenomenology, emphasized that phenomenological researchers search for the “essence” of the central underlying meaning of the experience (Creswell, 1998). Husserl was critical of the way psychology had attempted to apply methods of the natural sciences to human issues, believing instead that subjects not only react to stimuli, but they more importantly react to their own perceptions of what the stimuli mean.
Laverty (2003). Husserl asserted that it was possible to arrive at true meaning by deeply exploring a reality. Following Husserl’s abstract notions of phenomenology, subsequent writers turned to the more philosophical justifications for the use of phenomenology. “Others who have also used and substantially contributed to phenomenological ideas include Heidegger, Sartre, Schütz, de Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty, Berger and Luckmann, Ricoeur, Garfinkel, Bourdieu, Derrida, Giddens and Habermas” (Aspers, 2009). While other writers expressed variation in their philosophical assumptions, they had in common the aspect of the intentionality of consciousness. Husserlian phenomenology is based upon the phenomenological reduction, which is a descriptive mode as opposed to Heideggerian phenomenology, which never used the reduction and thus utilized an interpretive mode (Englander, 2012).

The interview is the main data collection procedure for a phenomenological study, and the selection of the participants is the initial step in the data gathering process. The researcher’s task is primarily to find participants who report having experienced the phenomenon. Englander (2012) asserted that the sampling size is of vital interest and emphasized that a large sample is irrelevant and not needed to arrive at the same generalizations that are often revered by quantitative studies. According to Englander (2012), a preliminary meeting with research participants prior to the actual interview can be an opportunity to establish trust with the participant, review ethical considerations, and complete consent forms. The interview questions should be descriptive in nature. According to Giorgi (2009) “what one seeks from a research interview in phenomenological research is as complete a description as possible of the experience that a participant has lived through” (p. 122). The last step in preparing an interview that has been recorded for analysis is transcribing the interview. The researcher should complete
this work alone, as it will assist her in obtaining a depth of understanding of the experience and will also help in the transition to the first step in the data analysis.

In phenomenology, the researcher begins the analysis with a description of his or her own experience of the phenomenon. According to Husserl, the researcher must bracket out the outer world as well as his or her individual biases to successfully connect with essences (Laverty, 2003). By bracketing out beliefs about the phenomenon, the researcher suspends his or her judgments to see the meaning more clearly. Klein and Westcott (1994) suggested that this is a three-fold process including intuition, imaginative variation, and synthesis.

Secondly, the researcher turns to the interviews and begins to look for significant statements about how the individuals experienced the phenomenon. Writing out these statements, the researcher can develop a list of non-repetitive, non-overlapping statements (Creswell, 1998). Extracting these statements allows the researcher to formulate meanings about them through his or her own interpretation and to cluster the meanings into a series of organized themes (Saldaña, 2009).

At the end of a phenomenological study, the researcher provides a series of rich descriptions that culminate into what the “essence” of the experience is. A textural description of the experience will approximate the reader to “what happened” and will highlight the textures of it through verbatim examples. Next, the researcher reflects on his or her own description of the meanings and perspectives and constructs a description of how the phenomenon was experienced. Finally, the researcher constructs an overall description of the essence of the experience (Creswell, 2013).
Participants

The participants in this study were college students or college-bound students who had taken time off between high school and college within the two years prior to being interviewed. The focus of this study was to understand the essence of what it meant to experience this “gap;” therefore, it was preferable that the participants were no more than two years out from the end of their gap year time. Participants had to be over 18-years-old and their gap year could have ranged in length from three to 24 months after high school graduation prior to their post-secondary studies. Participants also had to be enrolled or planning to enroll in their post-secondary studies either at community college or a four-year university.

Recruitment and Access

In accordance with Moustakas (1994), it was essential for this researcher to not only find participants who had experienced a gap year, but it was critical that they were “intensely interested in understanding its nature and meanings, willing to participate in a lengthy interview and (perhaps a follow-up interview), grant the investigator the right to tape-record, and publish the data in a dissertation” (p.107). For this reason, no remuneration was given to participants who elected to take part in this study. This gave the researcher more confidence that the individuals were sharing their stories because of a genuine interest in the gap year phenomenon.

The participants were recruited with an IRB-approved flier outlining the requirements for participating in the study (Appendix A). Word-of-mouth recruiting with the support of other people was used in the recruitment process to approach potential participants on the researcher’s behalf. Interested participants were invited to contact the researcher or to give permission for the researcher to initiate contact. Nobody was recruited face-to-face by the researcher to lower the risk of coercion.
Fliers were distributed in places such as coffee shops, college campuses, and local libraries where the desired population was likely to be found. Recruiting was also done through the social media outlets Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter using the IRB-approved flier. The researcher created ads on Facebook and Instagram to specifically target an audience that had expressed an interest in the gap year, was between the ages of 18 and 21, and was in the United States. The ad included the same information as the IRB-approved flier.

Once contact was initiated by a participant, the prospective participant was sent a recruitment letter via email (Appendix B) outlining the details of the study and providing assurances of confidentiality. Participants could then email the researcher if they wished to proceed. All the interviews took place over the phone due to the large geographical distance between the researcher and the participants.

**Data Collection**

The researcher conducted two semi-structured interviews with seven individuals. In the semi-structured interview, the researcher generally has a specific topic to learn about, prepares a limited number of questions in advance, and plans to ask follow-up questions (Rubin & Rubin, p.31). The first interview utilized an outlined interview protocol to get a robust picture of the experience. The second interview served as a vehicle for clarification of ideas and validation of some of the things understood by the researcher in the first interview. The interviews were recorded on a mobile device or computer where the conversation took place. During the interview, phones, radios, and Wi-Fi were turned off to avoid potential interruptions. The interviews were then transcribed by the researcher. After transcribing the first interviews, the researcher then re-listened to the conversations and redacted an analytic memo to accompany thoughts and questions to guide additional probes during the second interview. The second
EXPERIENCING A GAP YEAR

interview with each participant varied in length between 25 to 45 minutes. The second interview was then transcribed by the researcher after which the researcher re-listened to the audio and added thoughts to the analytic memo.

**Data Storage**

Interview data and transcripts were stored in password-encrypted folders on the hard drive of the researcher’s computer and on a password protected USB flash drive for back up. Files were encrypted with a password to prevent anyone from opening them without permission. The participant received a consent form which he or she was asked to sign. The consent form informed participants of how their data was going to be obtained and used. Should any third party need to see the interview transcripts, written consent will be obtained again. Once the analysis was complete and deemed no longer needed, all data were destroyed.

**Data Analysis**

The first step in the data analysis was to transcribe the interviews verbatim. Once the interviews were transcribed, the researcher read through each transcript to obtain a general sense of the whole. In the third step, the researcher assumed an attitude of scientific phenomenological reduction which meant that she “regarded everything from the perspective of consciousness and [looked] at all objects from the perspective of how they are experienced regardless of whether or not they actually are the way they are being experienced” (Giorgi, 2009, pp.87-88).

“All assuming the phenomenological attitude means to enter into the scientific phenomenological reduction, which means that all of the objects, persons, and states of affairs that the participant describes are taken to be phenomenal givens, that is, they are seen as subjectively construed givens, fully embedded within the subjective desires and interpretations within which the subject perceived and understood them.” (Giorgi, 2009,
Within the phenomenological attitude, the researcher also performed the epoché, setting aside all knowledge of the phenomenon being explored, to give critical attention to the experiences as they were presented. Maintaining the phenomenological attitude, the researcher then re-read the transcripts and began to look for psychological meaning units. Giorgi (2009) emphasized that, when performing this step, “the researcher must be especially sensitive to the meaning units where psychological richness exists” (p. 182). Once the meaning units were assigned to the transcripts, the researcher used free imaginative variation to transform them into psychological language that was more revelatory of the lived-through experience. Using free imaginative variation “means that one imaginatively varies different aspects of the phenomenon to which one is present in order to determine which aspects are essential to the appearance of the phenomenon and which are contingent” (Giorgi, 2009). The researcher’s last step was to identify the general structure of the experience by reviewing all of the meaning unit transformations to determine the essential ones. In this last step, the researcher employed both imaginative variation and eidetic intuitions to arrive at the general structure of the experience.

**Trustworthiness**

Because the findings are subject to the researcher’s interpretations, participants were asked to agree to two interviews, one semi-structured and the other to clarify interpretations and give the participant the chance to cross check their responses and add anything not shared the first time around. All measures were taken to protect participants before, during, and after the study. If perhaps there was anything negative that the student wished to talk about, they may have been hesitant to share it without knowing that all the information was going to be protected from beginning to end. Consent forms were utilized and delineated the researcher’s intention to
use pseudonyms for the participant, their school’s name, and the name of the gap year program in which they participated (if any).
Chapter 4: Report of Research Findings

This study explored the experience of taking a period of time off between high school and college as described by students in the United States. Prior research on the gap year has sought to understand the outcomes of gap years, who takes them, and what type of activities students are engaging in during their gap years. This research contributes to these growing dialogues by revealing what students lived and experienced during the time off they chose to take from the typical academic track. Using a qualitative framework, this study was designed using phenomenological research methods to guide data collection and analysis. The findings are the result of the students’ voices and offer a deep perspective into their lived experiences. Their voices capture the essence of the gap year phenomenon and provide a deeper understanding of how the experience of a gap year unfolds, what the experience of a gap year does, how it does what it does, and the significance of a gap year experience on consciousness. Kegan’s (1982) constructive-developmental theory informed and guided the researcher’s analysis, which was based a primary research question and two sub questions:

**Primary Question**

How do students in the United States perceive the experience of their pre-university gap year?

**Sub-questions:**

- How does a gap year imprint on a student’s development, social maturity and meaning-making processes?
- How do students perceive themselves before their gap year and after their gap year?
This chapter presents findings that emerged from data collected through interviews with a total sample of seven students from six different states within the United States. According to Giorgi (2009), a good interview in phenomenological research obtains “as complete description as possible of the experience that a participant has lived through” (p. 122). Hence, the interview protocol (Appendix D) was structured in a way that would provide rich portrayals of what the participants experienced during their gap year. A descriptive analysis of the raw data was conducted utilizing Giorgi’s (2009) five-step phenomenological method (Table 1). Following the interviews, the researcher transcribed the interviews verbatim, and the transcriptions became the raw data used in the analysis. After transcribing the interviews, the researcher then read through the entire transcription in order to get a sense of the big picture. After the initial reading, the researcher redacted memos to maintain a record of her initial thoughts and understandings of the participants’ descriptions. The next step, and probably the most crucial, was for the researcher to assume the phenomenological attitude. Remaining within the phenomenological attitude, the researcher re-read the transcripts, this time assigning meaning units to parts where she experienced a transition in meaning. Next, the researcher transformed the meaning units into expressions that highlighted the psychological meanings lived by the participants. The transformation of the meaning units into psychological language made it possible for the researcher to see factors that may have been implicit in the participants’ stories. The transformed meaning units allowed the researcher to identify unifying themes that would become the basis for describing the psychological structure of the experience.
Table 1

*Data Analysis Process*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td>R interviews P or obtains from P a description of a situation reflecting the phenomenon under study. If data collection was by means of an interview, R transcribes it verbatim.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td>R reads the entire transcription or description in order to grasp the basic sense of the whole situated description.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3</td>
<td>R assumes the attitude of the scientific phenomenological reduction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 4</td>
<td>R, remaining within the scientific phenomenological reduction, then creates parts by delineating psychological meaning units. A meaning unit is determined whenever R, in a psychological perspective and mindful of the phenomenon being researched, experiences a transition in meaning when he or she rereads the description from the beginning. Slashes are placed in the description at appropriate places.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 5</td>
<td>R, still within the scientific phenomenological reduction, then intuits and transforms P’s Lifeworld expressions into expressions that highlight the psychological meanings lived by P. This requires the use of free imaginative variation as well as rendering implicit factors explicit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Based upon the transformed meaning units, and still within the scientific phenomenological reduction, R uses the transformed meaning unit expressions as the basis for describing the psychological structure of the experience.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* R= Researcher  P=Participant. Adapted from Giorgi, Giorgi, and Morley (2017, p. 182).

**Description of the Sample**

The analysis of this study was based on data collected from seven phone interviews with individuals who met the criteria for the study. Englander (2012) asserted that the primary question for the selection of participants in phenomenological research is “do they have the experience that I am looking for?” (p. 19). In this study, the main criterion in the sample was that the individual had experienced a period of time off between high school and college of up to 24 months. The sample included only participants who (a) had experienced a gap year no more than two years prior to their participation, and (b) were attending college or planning to attend college.
The sample consisted of five females and two males ranging in age from 19 to 22 from Colorado, Georgia, Massachusetts, New York, Wisconsin, and North Carolina. Two of the participants graduated from private high schools and five participants graduated from public high schools. The participants self-identified their cultural and racial identity in a short questionnaire following the interviews (Table 2).

Table 2
*Participant Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Self-identified as</th>
<th>Home state</th>
<th>Type of high school attended</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nate</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White/European</td>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>Private School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoe</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White/Hispanic</td>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>Public School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paige</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Colorado</td>
<td>Public School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>Public School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florence</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
<td>Public School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>Public School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophie</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Wisconsin</td>
<td>Private School</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the time of their first interview, three participants were attending college, two participants were not yet attending college, and two participants had finished a year of college and were taking another break. At the time of the second interview, the two participants who had not started college had just begun their first semester at college (Table 3). Six participants started college in the fall semester following their gap, and one participant started in the spring semester. The timing of the interviews provided rich insight into what had transpired for them slightly beyond their gap year.
Table 3

*Duration of Pre-university Gap Year and Main Gap Year Activity*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Duration of gap year</th>
<th>Main gap year activities</th>
<th>At time of 1st interview</th>
<th>At time of 2nd interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nate</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>Short-term internship</td>
<td>Attending college and was studying abroad</td>
<td>Attending college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Lived and worked full-time in a different state in the USA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoe</td>
<td>6 months (July-Dec)</td>
<td>Time to recover from depression</td>
<td>Had attended 1 year of college and did not re-enroll</td>
<td>No plans to attend college in the next year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Spent time with family</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Worked full time in the USA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paige</td>
<td>6 months (Jan-June)</td>
<td>Participated in structured program overseas</td>
<td>Had attended 1 year of college and did not re-enroll</td>
<td>Planning to attend college overseas in the next year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>Worked full-time in the USA</td>
<td>Had not yet started college</td>
<td>Attending college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florence</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>Worked in the USA</td>
<td>Had not yet started college</td>
<td>Attending college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Participated in two structured programs overseas</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>Worked overseas</td>
<td>Attending college</td>
<td>Attending college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophie</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>Worked on organic farms overseas</td>
<td>Attending college</td>
<td>Attending college</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The participants responded to the researcher’s recruitment flier that they either saw on social media or from an email sent by someone who knew they likely fit the criteria. The participants took part in the study without remuneration which reinforced their deep interest in the subject of the study and, most importantly, a desire to share their story.

The participants’ activities along with the duration of their time off varied. Five participants experienced a pre-university gap year lasting one year and two participants took a gap that lasted six months. Three participants remained in the United States and worked during their gap, two participants worked part of the time in the United States and participated in
structured programs overseas, and two participants organized their own plans to work overseas, which were jobs teaching abroad and working on organic farms.

**Individual Participant Summaries**

**Participant 1: Nate.** Nate, a 22-year-old male, self-identified as White/European, and he graduated from a private high school in North Carolina in 2013. Nate’s gap year was both intentional and circumstantial in that he was accepted to his “dream college” as a spring admit; however, he wanted to start in the fall to have a traditional college experience. He deferred his admission for the next fall and decided to take a gap year. Nate used resources available to him to plan his gap year time and relied on family and friends while deciphering what he would do during this time off. He knew he wanted to go to out West where his family had a house. He got a job in a ski shop and lived on his own out West from November to May. Nate recalled the months following high school graduation as particularly difficult, citing he had nothing to look forward to. He mentioned feeling sad because he went from being one of the most social people he knew to doing absolutely nothing. In hindsight, Nate said that he would have started planning for those months earlier. Through an acquaintance, he eventually found an internship where he worked until he left to go out West. Nate saw this internship as a good experience because it taught him that he never wanted to go into that profession. Nate stated that he did not really set out to achieve anything in particular on his gap year and that the admissions decision from his dream college played the biggest role in his decision to do it. He mentioned that his sister had also taken a gap year and that she told him how much she matured from it. Reflecting on this, he noted that he had hoped to gain maturity and just general life skills. Nate said he felt that his gap year was all about getting to know himself. Nate started college in the fall of 2014 and felt that after his time off on his own that he was better equipped for the transition.
**Participant 2: Zoe.** Zoe, a 22-year-old female self-identified as White/Hispanic attended a large public high school in Georgia. As a consequence of suffering from depression, Zoe left high school a semester before her senior year ended. She still finished her high school diploma in time to attend college in the fall; however, she decided to take a gap semester from August 2015 to December 2015 to sort some things out in her life and because she did not feel ready for college. Zoe recalled switching schools a lot in elementary school. She fondly recalled her time in middle school at a private Montessori school. In high school, Zoe stated that she did not have many friends and did not consider herself very popular. During her senior year of college, her parents were getting a divorce, and she recalled that she was failing a lot of her classes. Zoe was afraid that, if she went off to college, she would also fail all of her college courses. She wanted to be 100% into whatever it was she was going to study in college. Zoe said that she felt a little bit sad to be doing something different than the majority of her peers. She spent her gap year living at home and working, which she described as a time during which she was “just trying to figure things out.” During her gap, she also started seeing a therapist. Zoe spoke a lot about her struggle with school and the way lessons were taught. She stated that she often felt like school was about tests and, to her, “tests aren’t learning, tests are passing.” She enrolled in college in the spring semester, and, while she said she felt happier, she only attended for one year. She decided not to re-enroll and is currently working in order to save money to purchase a car. Zoe, at the time of the interview, did not have plans to go back to college the following year.

**Participant 3: Paige.** Paige, a 20-year-old female, self-identified as White. She graduated a semester early from a public suburban high school in Colorado in December of 2014. Paige was accepted into a small liberal arts college, and she deferred her enrollment for
the fall semester of 2015. Since she graduated early, Paige liked the idea of using the spring semester as a gap semester because it meant she could stay on track and start college in the fall, at the same time as her peers. For Paige, high school felt more like a means to an end, and she expressed that she was not so bothered by missing out on traditional high school experiences like prom and graduation. Paige knew that she wanted to travel and do something active, so she started planning and discovered that there were so many options for going overseas with organized programs. Paige worked with a gap year consultant to narrow down her choices and organize her trip. She spent her gap in two different countries with organized gap year programs, though she enjoyed one more than the other and ended up leaving the second program early. When asked about a key experience that stood out to her, Paige spoke fondly of the newness of everything and being truly on her own for the first time. She enjoyed being the foreigner in another country and navigating the whole experience. After her gap semester, Paige enrolled in college; however, a trip during spring break reignited her wanderlust, and she decided to not reenroll for the second year. She started thinking about going back abroad to study in a foreign university. Paige spent her second time abroad time traveling, and she reunited with a friend whom she had met during her first gap year. During that time, they developed a romantic relationship, and, at the time of the interview, they were engaged to be married. Paige was planning on living overseas and was applying to a foreign university where she hoped to start in the next year.

**Participant 4: Alex.** Alex, a 19-year-old male who self-identified as Hispanic, graduated from a small public high school in Georgia in 2016. Upon graduating, Alex applied and was accepted to two colleges; however, he opted not to enroll due to transportation barriers and financial reasons. Because he was 17 when he graduated, Alex stated that he did not feel
mentally ready for college. Alex’s gap was from June of 2016 to August of 2017, and he said he used the first two months after graduation to decompress and then started looking for a job. He applied to a significant number of retail and restaurant jobs, but he eventually got a job through a family friend. Alex worked with a predominantly Hispanic population, many of whom were undocumented. He described this as being something that opened his eyes to the opportunities he had and motivated him even more to stay focused on his goal of going to college. He lived at home with his father and worked full time, often working forty to fifty hours a week. Alex’s job demanded a lot of his energy, and he was not used to working a job where he had to move around so much. Alex said he “didn’t want to get used to it;” instead, he said he “would rather go to school, get an education, and find another job where that was not so physically demanding.” Alex’s job was dedicated primarily to earning money. He paid rent, bought his own groceries, bought a car, and managed to save a little. Alex started college in the fall semester of 2017 and got a new part-time job. At the time of the interview, he was attending a 2-year community college in Georgia, one that appealed to him because it was more affordable and convenient than his previous choices, and he liked that it had a partnership with a large four-year research university. Alex expressed that he felt that his gap year was “really tough” and “exhausting, physically and mentally because it was a lot of thinking.” Overall, he considered it as a time to sort himself out mentally, and he ultimately saw it as “successful” since he had obtained his goal of attending college.

Participant 5: Florence. Florence, a 19-year-old female, self-identified as Italian, graduated from a medium sized public school in Massachusetts in 2016. Florence decided to take a gap year because she felt overwhelmed and needed a break from the educational treadmill. Florence applied for an early decision to a college where she was recruited to play her sport.
Wanting instead to take a gap year, she was able to defer her admission and keep her spot on the team. Florence’s gap was from June 2016 to June 2017, and she knew that she wanted to travel. Florence spent September to December 2016 overseas on an organized program and also did a different organized program abroad from late February to early April. In between the programs Florence worked to earn money and traveled with her family. On the first program, Florence did a group service project every week. She particularly enjoyed working at the public health center and seeing how easily the patients’ problems could be treated with modern medicine. Knowing she had an interest in medicine, she chose her second program in order to experience an internship abroad to learn about ancient medicine practices. Upon returning from the second program, she traveled with her family, got a job, and spent time volunteering. What Florence loved about her gap year was learning hands-on in a way that made a difference. She felt that her time abroad gave her a much-needed break from academics and helped her to gain perspective on her priorities in life. She started college the fall semester of 2017. Since taking her gap year, Florence said she felt more excited to learn and more capable of handling any situation she was thrown into.

**Participant 6: Rose.** Rose, a 20-year-old female who self-identified as Caucasian, graduated from a rural public high school in New York in June 2014. As the daughter of a pastor, Rose’s Christian faith shaped a great deal of her experience in high school, and she described herself as the “token Christian kid” at her school. Because her parents were moving, she doubled up on classes in order to graduate from her New York high school. Hence, she graduated an entire year early and had plans to go to college. During college visits, she felt that God was telling her it wasn’t the right time. She described being overcome with feelings that would just engulf her when she was on college campuses, and she could not really explain it.
When an opportunity to teach overseas presented itself through some family ties, she decided to apply and got the job. Rose had been accepted to many colleges and decided to defer her admission to three schools. Rose spent August of 2014 to June of 2015 overseas teaching drama in a small international school. Prior to her departure, Rose said she felt excitement and peace, and also a little bit of fear since she was heading to such a remote country. Once there, she worked full time and got to create her own curriculum, worksheets, tests, and lesson plans. She developed wonderful relationships with the students and her fellow teachers who were very supportive. She lived with her family members for a period, but she also lived with a local family for a couple of months which she described as “really cool” because it caused her to have to practice the language and be very mindful of their cultural differences. When she was not working, she had the opportunity to travel to other countries in the region where she lived. One of the most memorable parts of her experience included writing a book which was then published. Rose said she felt her experience gave her a greater respect for the world and for other people. She felt that she became an adult during her gap year and made a difference. When she got home, she spent the summer with her parents and started college in the fall semester of 2015 at a small, private Christian college in Pennsylvania.

**Participant 7: Sophie.** Sophie, a 19-year-old female who self-identified as Caucasian, graduated from a small private school in Wisconsin in 2016. Sophie said she felt that she wanted to travel and do something different and that she should do it before beginning college. She was accepted into college and deferred her admission to take a gap year. She self-organized and self-funded her gap year. After graduating from high school, she spent the next six months working in a restaurant in order to save money for her trip and did research about where she wanted to go. She used a couple of websites to look into “wwoofing” (Worldwide Opportunities on Organic
Farms) and finally narrowed down her choices. She planned two of her host families ahead of time and hoped to plan the others once she had arrived at the site. This proved to work well, and she raved about the subsequent experiences she had on a biodynamic farm and in an eco-village she discovered through word-of-mouth. Her travels started in January in her own town, and she subsequently worked on several farms in different countries for differing periods of time. The first host country she experienced was her favorite, and she spent considerably more time there than on the others, around three-and-a-half months. She fondly recalled a leisure trip she ended up doing alone because her friend had to cancel at the last minute. She visited a well-known city in a neighboring country and stayed in an Airbnb, and she loved exploring the city by herself. Sophie was very proud to share that her entire trip cost her only $5,000, and her expenditures would have been only $2,500-$3,000 if she had not done some traveling as a tourist. She emphasized the point that “pretty much anyone could do it if they really want to, and they can pay for it themselves.” Sophie reflected on her college choice during her gap year and decided that she would not attend the college she originally planned to attend, but rather another one that was more affordable. She started college in the fall semester of 2017 at a small, public 4-year university in Wisconsin.

The Essence of Experiencing a Pre-University Gap Year

Below is the general structure of the phenomenon that emerged as a result of analyzing the raw data from the interview transcripts. Following Giorgi’s psychological phenomenological method, the structure of the experience is what is left after the researcher has carefully intuited the meaning units and determined which of them are essential. This process involves asking oneself whether the structure would collapse if a potential constituent were removed and which ones are truly essential for the phenomenon to present itself to consciousness (Giorgi, 2009, p.
EXPERIENCING A GAP YEAR

199). The structure was achieved by examining the transformed meaning units (Appendix F) and using imaginative variation and eidetic intuitions to determine the most invariant constituent parts of the experience. The description of the structure does not finalize the research, but instead provides a deeper insight into the unity that exists across various gap year experiences. “The structure is meant to depict the lived experience of a phenomenon, which may also include aspects of the description of which the experiencer was unaware” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 166). Hence, the researcher returned to the raw data to elucidate variation and abstract points that may have been within the participants’ consciousness of their experiences, but not yet fully apparent.

The phenomenon studied was the experience of a pre-university gap year for students in the United States. In the description below, the letter P is used to represent the participant or an ideal. The essence of the gap year experience was found to be characterized by the relationship among seven constituents which included: (a) Making a conscious decision to postpone college; (b) Coming up with a plan; (c) Experiencing new feelings evoked by new environments; (d) Reflecting on the lives of others to gain focus on life-course; (e) College as the next step; (f) The absence of goals; and (g) Changes in the self.

For P, a gap year occurred immediately after he/she graduated from high school. Taking a gap year was the result of P’s conscious decision to not enroll immediately in college after high school. Once committed to the decision of taking a gap year, P had to determine what he/she wanted to do and come up with a plan of action. P’s time off approximated him/her to new environments through which he/she experienced new feelings and developed new relationships. P’s new relationships caused him/her to reflect on the way others chose to live their lives and invoked in P thoughts about his/her own life and future. Throughout the gap year, college was an eventuality and P considered college as the crucial next step in his/her life. P understood
his/her gap year as a time during which he/she changed, became more aware of himself/herself, and experienced personal growth.

**Elaboration of the Constituents**

**Making a Conscious Decision to Postpone College**

The decision to take a gap year was a conscious choice for all of the participants. Nearly all of them made the choice to take their gap year during their senior year of high school after they had received their college acceptance letters. The exception was Zoe, who had actually left high school the last semester of her senior year to recover from depression. Zoe managed to finish her courses from home and obtain her diploma in time to attend college in the fall; however, she evaluated the way she felt and made the decision to take the fall semester off. She described her reasoning by saying:

I wanted to take a break, to like, look at my college, and I was working at the time, I just took six months, I took a semester, I started college in the spring instead of the fall. I was afraid that if I went off to college I was just going to fail all my college courses and that sounded like a really big waste of money, so I wanted to make sure that I was one-hundred percent into whatever I was going into.

Though Zoe’s circumstances were unique, she was not the only one who experienced not feeling ready for college. Alex, who was also from Georgia, expressed a similar sentiment: “I think what really held me back was the fact that in the back of my head I didn’t feel like I was completely ready to go.”

For the others, the decision arose from tuning into their feelings and being cognizant of a need for something new and different. Feeling burned out from school, Florence noticed that she
was not excited to attend “accepted students’ day” at her future college. She described how the decision to take a gap year came about for her:

I said to someone how I wish I would take a gap year, or I could take a gap year, and they just said “why not” and that’s when I started looking into it to see if the college would let me and see what kinds of things were out there…I just really wanted to do something that was really different from where I was living.

Sophie experienced similar feelings and was motivated to take a gap year based on a similar desire to experience something new:

I wasn’t too excited to go to college, and I just thought that if I had the opportunity to see something else beforehand that I should take it because, once you graduate high school and go to college and you’re in college, then you have to wait until like you’re done to go and do anything.

Rose described feelings of disgust when she toured college campuses and said she was not really sure why she was experiencing these emotions because she had been planning for college all along. When asked where she thought the feelings came from, she responded:

I think it was a lot of God …I genuinely believe that it was God like pushing me away from college just for the experience to go overseas.

Nate knew he wanted to take a gap year; and he asserted that his decision was solidified when he was admitted to his dream college as a spring admit. The major driving factor for Nate was the fact that he wanted a traditional college experience and wanted to start college in the fall. He explained that “I wanted to have a traditional, you know, college experience …and on top of everything else, I, in the back of my head I knew I wanted to take a gap year.” Paige, who had yearned to travel since middle school, expressed: “I wanted to take a gap year in the sense that I
EXPERIENCING A GAP YEAR

wanted to travel, like the idea of going overseas was really alluring to me.” Because she graduated a semester early, she said she felt at ease because she figured she could take a gap semester and still start college “on time” in the fall, like the rest of her peers.

For Nate, Paige, Florence, Rose, and Sophie, who all deferred their college admission, acting on their feelings and desires opened the door to a finite period of time during which they could do something new and different. Alex and Zoe also acted on their feelings and needs but did not view their gap year as time off for exploration; rather, they considered time off more as an opportunity to think about whether college was the next step.

The students’ thought processes were evident as they considered whether to postpone college or not. They considered the implications of taking a gap year on the timing of college; they questioned whether or not a gap year was even feasible; and, most of all, they attuned themselves to their feelings around what they felt they needed. The participants’ motivations for taking a gap year varied; however, the decision was one they all considered and made consciously.

Coming Up with a Plan

Once they had solidified their decision to take a gap year, each participant experienced the need to come up with a plan for what to do. Paige, Florence, and Sophie all knew they wanted to travel abroad in some capacity. They all turned to the internet to explore what kind of options existed. While Paige and Florence looked for structured gap year programs, Sophie was more drawn to the concept of “woofing” (Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms) where she would be working on a farm in exchange for accommodations and meals. Paige and Florence partially funded their gap year activities and spent some time working when not abroad, and Sophie spent the first six months of her gap year working to completely fund it on her own.
While all of the girls experienced working in jobs in the United States during part of their gap years, these experiences were not described as a central experience of their gap year.

When considering a structured program, Paige knew that she wanted an immersive cultural experience and the element of independence. She described how her planning unfolded:

The whole process was that we were kind of unsure of different programs, and there’s so much stuff on the internet that you could choose from obviously, and so that’s how we found the consultant to see if she could offer a bit more guidance, so I went through a whole process of talking to her about my interests and did all the things you know, her procedures and everything and then she came back with a few different options, and some of them were volunteer, some of them were paid stuff you could do, and I ended up choosing an outdoor type course.

Florence’s plan was not only driven by her desire to experience something new, but she knew that she wanted to go to the country where her adopted sister was from. This made it relatively easy for her to find a structured program due to the limited number of programs that actually operated in the country where she wanted to travel. She explained:

I knew I wanted to go to a certain country. So, once I decided that, I only found two programs that went to that continent, and the program I chose was much better than the other one I felt. My sister is adopted from there, and I, I don’t know, I just really wanted to do something that was really very different from where I was living. And that continent, and just the culture of it, interested me more.

Sophie had heard about woofing from a friend she met in an environmental stewardship program she did during her senior year. They gave her the name of a website where she was able
to view woofing opportunities all over the world. She recalled playing around with different
itinerary ideas:

I thought about going to one country in October and then coming back for Christmas and
then going overseas in January, but I ended up, just, I got offered a higher position at my
job and I was also thinking about how much money it would cost to come back for
Christmas and all that. So, I just ended up staying home until January and cutting the first
idea out and going right to the overseas option. So, I went on this website and I planned
two of my host families before I left.

Sophie only planned her first two host families before she departed, and she discovered two other
farms where she worked while she was abroad through other people’s recommendations.

Nate, Alex, and Zoe all remained in the United States during their gap years. Upon
finishing high school, they each recalled experiencing a feeling of needing to feel productive or
useful. Nate had an idea to go out west and understood what resources he had in order to execute
his plan, but because his plans didn’t start until November, he expressed feeling confused about
what to do in the meantime:

I knew that I wanted to spend the winter the winter out west starting in December. And I
went out there and it's easy enough to find a job in a ski shop. uh, So I did that. So, I, the
first thing I figured out was December through May I had that locked down in like mid-
August. And then. I was like - holy shit what am I going to do from Mid-August until the
end of November?

Nate eventually found a short-term internship which he did for a month, and then he headed out
West to work in a ski shop.

Alex spent the first couple of months relaxing and looking for a job. When asked how he
decided what to do during his gap year, he responded:

I guess my first thought was like I guess I just have to find somewhere to work to occupy my time and be productive as well. And you know like everybody else, I didn't want to just spend a whole year not doing anything at all, at least progressing somewhere. You know getting some kind of experience and what not because, if I wasn't going to do school and if I wasn't going to work, then I guess you wouldn't be productive per se.

Zoe expressed a similar desire to feel useful and productive:

And then I decided that I should get a job because I never had a job in high school. And that's something that I wanted. You know to make myself feel useful and have money to spend on fun stuff.

Rose had no idea what she would do when she first thought about postponing college. As a devout Christian, Rose recalled turning to her faith for answers:

So, I started praying about what I should do. And I was like, OK, I'll look into maybe going overseas and homeschooling my cousins. But it wasn't something that I was super passionate about. It was more like I can't go to college, so what else am I going to do?

Rose also looked to resources she had, and she turned to her family to explore a feasible gap year plan:

So, I emailed my aunt and uncle, and they told me that they were actually sending their kids to a school that spoke English and that I should apply, so they sent me down this road of “I don’t really want to do this but let’s see what happens.” So, I looked on the school website and on their hiring page, and they were looking for a drama and speech teacher. And I was like ok great, I could actually get excited about this. So, I emailed the director, that principal, and I was like “Hey, I’m interested”, they took my resume, I
mean, I was sixteen years old and they took my resume, interviewed me over the phone, the whole board voted on it and I was voted in to be the head teacher of that class which was like crazy. Um, but because I’m me, I was like super excited, and I was like, oh my gosh, this is the best thing ever, so I started to get really pumped.

Rose’s plan unfolded quickly, but it was one she described as “being able to get really excited About.” She moved to a third-world country abroad where she taught speech and drama in a school full-time.

The unifying component of this theme was that each participant was required to negotiate his or her needs and desires to put forth a plan of action. Finishing high school and experiencing the notion of time differently was one of the first of many situations that caused the participants to experience new thoughts and emotions; hence, this theme was intricately tied to the next one. While the individual experiences varied throughout their gaps, every participant’s activities during their gap year approximated him or her to new situations and environments that continued to evoke new emotions. These situations and the emotions they provoked are discussed next in further detail.

**Experiencing New Feelings Evoked by New Environments**

Another strong theme that emerged from the data was the approximation to new environments that evoked new feelings in the participants. As mentioned before, the onset of the gap year was in itself a new situation in which the students had never found themselves. Their notion of time was challenged as they began to consider what they wanted or needed to do with their time. As they consciously explored their emotions, they each executed their plan. While their activities varied, they all found themselves in new surroundings that caused them to experience unique emotions.
For Nate, the drastic change in his social life left him feeling a bit low. When asked how it felt to be doing something different than everybody else, Nate proclaimed:

I'm not going to lie. Initially it kind of sucked, because I think it's because I was and still am but to a bit of a lesser extent, such a social person. And I was around my friends 24/7, all the time, and we were really close. We really got along. There was never any drama between our friend groups or anything. So, I went from being around my friends 24/7 to just being very alone, and at first, I hated that.

Nate’s plans to travel out west were several months away, and he described how difficult it was to suddenly have all the free time and nothing to do. The absence of interaction with his friends was something that he had never experienced before. Cognizant of his emotions, Nate described how he coped:

I had never felt that way before and I had no idea what to do with like the new wave of emotions I was feeling. I haven't felt that way before, and I haven't felt that way since, and I didn't know what to do. Um, I didn't really want to talk to anyone because all my friends were, you know, busy. My parents were, I didn't really want them to like get concerned or anything – not that they would have been concerned, but I just I just wrote everything down how I felt. Everything, what I did that day, what I hoped to do the next day, what I hoped to do next week, like every small detail because I didn't really have anyone to talk to. So, I just wrote everything down. And then. I stopped. I think. I don't I don't remember why I stopped. I don't know, I think I was really kind of over, it, maybe you know, maybe I was feeling a little bit better. But yeah, I kept a journal for like two weeks. It's the only time in my life I've ever done that.
Once he was out West working in his job, Nate continued to be cognizant of his new environment and the ways in which he would need to change to make acquaintances in a new town. He was conscious that his experience was perhaps distinct to the kind of experience his friends were having in college and that making friends in college was probably easier because everyone is in the same situation. He recognized that he had stepped into an atmosphere where people had long-established rapports and were also considerably older than him. Nate recalled that most of his challenges were related to his “social standpoint.” Not being in a tight-knit group of friends was something Nate described as “a very uncomfortable challenge” which required him to leave his comfort zone to make friends. In his words:

I guess this was the first time in my life where I had to actually go out of my way to, to meet people and to become accepted, and that's way easier to do in college because college is full of kids that are, you know, in a brand-new experience for the first time. But I was an outsider into previously established social norms, and it was really tough to break in initially. But I mean, once, it did take a while because I'm pretty shy when I don't really know anyone. But once I broke into everything it was really fun, and it was awesome.

Like Nate, Alex spent his gap year working full-time but he remained in his home state of Georgia. Alex also described experiencing a shift in his social life saying, “I was so used to seeing everybody all the time, so it was a major shift from not being able to see anybody conveniently.” Much like Nate, he also did not do much the first two months after graduation and spent time trying to find a job.

Alex found a job as a delivery assistant through a family friend, and his new work environment caused him to encounter feelings that influenced his decision to ultimately begin
college the next year. Alex recalls how working with a large population of undocumented workers opened his eyes to the chance he had to elevate his education and to appreciate this opportunity:

Working with undocumented people, it actually made me think more about my stuff and what I need to do for myself because I have an opportunity to do so, and you know, and I should take advantage of it because I can. I guess I feel mainly gratitude because I talked to people who had been working there maybe 14 or 15 years, and they just keep telling me that I should just go back to school because you know, they don’t want to see me in the same place they are, because they say they have it pretty rough.

Paige knew that a dramatically new environment awaited her on the other side of the Atlantic where she traveled to spend her gap semester. Paige experienced being out of her comfort zone in the sense that everything was new, and she was on her own truly for the first time. When asked about a key experience that stood out to her, she responded: “actually living in another country, being, you know, the foreigner, and to just navigate our whole experience definitely stands out.” Similar to Nate, Paige used writing as a tool for exploring her new surroundings and feelings:

I wrote mostly about the surroundings, you know like the observations about the exterior but also how I was feeling coping with it, and I think I remember one of the, I actually read it back recently to myself and realized that I was kind of like, I had expected it to be very exciting and exhilarating, and like it was in a lot of ways. But then also you realize that like you're still the same person that you are at home, and you still have the same baggage, I guess for lack of a better word. But like, you still have the same ups and downs and emotions and all of that. And you know and you're in a completely different
place, and so it's even more different to deal with those things than it is in a familiar place.

As she explored her feelings, Paige recognized that, while she was in a new place, she was still the same person in the aspect of what she was experiencing inside. Central to Paige’s experience were the new relationships she formed with other program participants. She described “more than a few of them” as being challenging. Paige shared:

> It was the first time that I had encountered real, you know, a person that really didn’t like me and that kind of thing, like I never really had to deal with that as much ‘cause in high school, I just laid-low, I had a pretty non-dramatic high school experience.

When asked how she handled the challenges, Paige responded:

> I think I handled it as best as I could. I’m like a very non-confrontational person so I would, whenever things would kind of get awkward, we lived in a little three-bedroom house, and I would just I would just pack my bags up, and I would go to a different part of the country for a little while, and I would stay in hostels to kind of get away from it.

When Paige finished her first program, she traveled to another country where she had planned on participating in her second organized program. Paige experienced unsettling emotions when she traveled to her second structured program in a neighboring country. She described exploring these emotions and what she felt was causing them:

> I was pretty, I’d say I was pretty depressed for lack of a better word, I was just like hyper anxious, leaving one country and having to transplant into a whole new situation again after the last one was kind of you know, tumultuous. Yeah it was hard. I hung out with the other English-speaking people; I was supposed to be doing the local language, and I had never studied that language before, but yea, coming off an outdoor course, coming into a
EXPERIENCING A GAP YEAR

... classroom setting and having to meet all these people all over again and not knowing the language and not being able to you know go out to bars and like do that kind of thing, and I was still feeling uncomfortable with like, very strange, like the whole thing I don't think – I didn't appreciate it because I was stuck still wanting to go back to the first country, and I had already made plans to go back anyway, but I wanted to go back sooner.

Florence, Rose, and Sophie also experienced living abroad in new environments that introduced them to different cultures. At the onset of her gap, Florence recalls the time leading up to her departure to go abroad and the many emotions she experienced. She described her emotions as being “different” than what she had experienced up to that point in her life and explained with conviction that it was “refreshing” that they were different. She described her feelings during the moments leading up to her departure:

I was nervous with every decision I made. There was a lot of stress, even different kinds of stress, still though not as overwhelming as school. Everything was so new. Like going on a group program, I was afraid that I wouldn’t like people, that it was so long, going so far, afraid for my health… but I think it was just a lot of emotions that were just different, but it was refreshing that they were different.

Florence participated in two separate structured programs and remembered some of the challenges she experienced while living in cultures different to her own:

Their standards on things are very much different, so I was put in situations that for anyone who grew up with the life I did would think was ok, and they didn’t, and they would judge me for it, so I was, like I could only talk to my parents on the phone at certain times of the day, so that was really hard.
In the second program, Florence recognized that her challenges were tied to her expectations. Florence expressed disappointment in the way the program was run by the locals and this caused her some frustration. In the end, Florence came to understand the importance of letting go of her expectations and just trusting their process and way of doing things:

The whole organization was run by local people so it was really challenging to work with them sometimes, but that was also important that I had to learn how to trust them, even when, even in difficult situations, I had to just forgive and still trust they’d make my experience worthwhile.

Though it was easy for Florence to recall the challenging emotions, she was also cognizant of the positive emotions she felt. She described points of the year where she felt “so happy and content,” more than she had ever felt in her life. She said, “it just felt so right, but it only lasted maybe an hour, but knowing that that’s possible was really good.”

As a 17-year-old who was teaching full-time overseas, Rose transplanted herself into a new place and a new culture where her teaching role required her to work and interact with colleagues who were significantly older than her. Rose described some of the things she was feeling as she began her journey:

It was such joy and such peace, with little pockets here and there, some self-doubt, especially in the classroom with some of the people only a year and a half younger than me, you know, wondering what’s the dynamic going to be like gaining these people’s respect, but also still not acting like I’m thirty years old, acting like I’m a seventeen-year-old who can handle this. And working alongside a team of adults who have taught for years and years, um. And kind of like figuring that whole dynamic out, but everyone was so wonderful, and I really fit in and it was just really great.
Rose described her time abroad as being the best year of her life, and she said she fully embraced her new relationships and the new culture she was experiencing. She noted how rich her teaching experience was because, in addition to taking on that role, she was continually learning:

I just jumped in and I loved it so much, started learning the language, got pretty fluent pretty quick, which was wonderful, and I started teaching about two weeks out after getting there. Um, which was, that was exciting, and I obviously started having these great relationships with everyone, pretty fast, and so it was kind of just like a normal school year in that we had like normal breaks, we had everything that this, being in a different culture, everyone coming from such a different background made it really rich, so the entire time was just learning about all of these other different places in the world and how to interact with these people on so many different levels.

Rose recalled having to be cognizant of her actions with respect to the local culture during the time she lived with a local family:

I lived with a local family, for a couple months, um, which was really cool, so that was like right there learning the language in the home, like always having to be like very cultural-minded because, when I lived with my aunt and uncle, we still had you know American traditions, we would do American things, but living with a local family you’re like always on, always thinking about what you’re doing, what you’re saying, that was really cool.

Though Rose’s experience was mostly positive, she occasionally experienced moments where she felt isolated because she was in such a remote place with limited internet access. Rose graduated early; therefore, her high school peers were finishing up their senior year while she
EXPERIENCING A GAP YEAR

was teaching abroad. When asked how it felt to be doing something different to her peers, she shared what it felt like when she had the chance to see what was happening back home:

There were times when it was really weird, like, obviously social media is all around the globe, and so watching all them and the class that I went all through school with was still in high school, so it was really weird to watch them like prepare for finals and tests and going on senior trips and stuff, and I’m like oh, I’m just chilling here or I’m going to go to Thailand for the week. And there were times when I felt like I was completely isolated, because I was in this country with very limited internet, and they’re doing all these things that are typical high school experiences, and I remember a couple teachers when I was done with school and deciding whether or not to go overseas, they kept telling me, don’t miss high school, you don’t want to grow up too fast, you don’t want to miss, these years are important years of your life, and I never believed them really, and because I had this amazing year, I didn’t regret it at all, didn’t regret it in the moment, but there were some times like, I’d see the things that they were doing that were like typical high school experiences, and I was kind of like “oh I don’t ever get that”…I never had a senior trip, I never won superlatives for the class that I graduated with, I wasn’t in the yearbook as a senior ever, I didn’t get to do anything senior, I just walked at graduation. There was a little bit of me that was disappointed in that, um, especially watching like all my really close friends, you know go through this whole thing, and staying in contact is ok, but again, with such limited internet, it really was like pretty isolated.

Sophie said it “felt really nice” to be doing something different than the rest of her peers who had gone off to college. She recalled feeling nervous before she left and described how it felt when she noticed that her worries had subsided:
All of my worries that I had, like while I was prepping for my trip, like once I was actually in the situation, even if it was a stressful one, like I wasn't thinking about how you know how scary it was or anything, I was just thinking that I needed to get to the next the next destination, like, and it didn't matter. It didn't matter that I was 18 or that I was, you know, by myself. I just, it was just like, I don't know, I don't really know how to explain it.

Sophie’s experiences on the homesteads were certainly physical, but Sophie stated that it was really hard to be discouraged about the physical work “because everyone around was so excited about doing it and they were really good at it.” But the mental part of living on a homestead, Sophie shared “was definitely hard.” She explained what it felt like adjusting to her new surroundings:

You know, first adjusting to being in someone's home. And I remember them telling me like horror stories of horrible guests that came and then ended up digging and seeing a pipeline or something, so like, at first, I felt like really kind of like I was walking on eggshells you know, I didn't want to break anything, and at the same time the kind of life that they're living, like in a village in the middle of nowhere, is that it's you have to be a lot more aware of things than, you know, me living in Wisconsin the United States of America. So, there were] a lot of times where I would do something, and they would kind of make fun of me, because it was like What are you doing? Modern age girl (laughs).

The participants’ stories were connected by new emotions they felt that emerged from new environments, new relationships, and new perceptions of time. This was one of the strongest themes giving meaning to the experiences, and the different activities in which the
students engaged created equal opportunities for them to experience new emotions. Not being in an academic environment was in and of itself a unifying component across all of their experiences, given that they were all experiencing this for the first time. No matter where they were or what they were doing, the new environments they were experiencing caused them to examine the lives of those around them and to reflect on their feelings and the decisions they were making for their own life-course.

**Reflecting on the Lives of Others to Gain Focus on Life Course**

Building on the theme of the new feelings brought on by their new environments, a particularly strong theme emerged which related to how all of the participants reflected on the lives of the people they encountered in their new surroundings. These reflections were particularly centered on two things: career trajectory and ways of living. The participants expressed how seeing the ways people lived and experiencing real work environments opened their eyes to other ways of living, which also brought them clarification about how they wanted to steer their lives. Nate shared what he learned from his short internship in an accounting department:

I was working an accounting internship, and it was like a good like exchange internship, but it was a boring job. I was surrounded by people my parents age that didn't really like their job. It was a really good experience because, from a professional standpoint, because like I learned I don't want to be in accounting – ever.

When Nate traveled out West to work in the ski shop, he developed new friendships with coworkers who were in their late 30s and early 40s. He described them as “a cast of characters” who were “wild” and “partied harder than 90% of the people I go to college with.” Nate shared that he had always assumed “everyone over 25 is like mature and drank four glasses of coffee
and listens to NPR every day.” Prior to his experience, Nate said “I never really thought about people like that, like you’re either my age, or my teacher or my parents.”

Nate’s new relationships broadened his view and opened his eyes to other people’s life views which was something he felt he really benefited from. Nate shared:

These people are 40 years old. Most, I'm 18, most people will just label them as ski bums. But like, I'm having the time of my life with these people, like I never thought that I would become friends with this crowd. But I found myself in that crowd, and I found myself just loving it, how unique everything was and the way their life views are just so different than mine. And I really benefited from being around them. And, had I not been taking a gap year, I never would have seen that side of life I guess.

For Nate, the idea of working in a ski shop forever did not cross his mind. He saw his gap year as merely “putting the real world on hold,” which meant he could work in a ski shop “without the stigma.” As he spoke of his coworkers, Nate commented that “there’s definitely a stigma to, you know, working essentially an unskilled job at a late age.” When asked why he said there was a social stigma around working in a ski shop, he replied:

Because that’s for the people that don’t go to college and get quote unquote “real jobs”.

That’s why, my boss too – you know he said, “you’re too smart, like if you ever come back and work here, I’m going to kick your ass.” He said that verbatim. He was like, “you’re too smart to just get caught up here,” there’s definitely a stigma.

Zoe observed others who worked with her at the fast-food restaurant and noticed how some people had been doing it for quite some time. Zoe shared: “I see that guy, and I see that he's not making money, and I realize that I don't want to work here forever.”
Alex worked full-time in what he called a “physically demanding” job and questioned “a lot” whether he wanted to keep doing his job. Reflecting on his coworkers and the physical nature of his job, he realized that it was not what he wanted to do for the rest of his life. Alex shared:

I see how much they work and how hard they work, and they’ve been doing this their whole lives, you’re just working all the time, you know, it’s hard, but uh, you know, it’s made me think, I don’t want to do this for the rest of my life, cause um, working, cause I work full time right now, I work 40 to 50 hours a week. I wasn’t used to working as hard. Working a job where you have to move around a lot. And I wasn’t used to that. So, now, I’m a little more used to it, but I still don’t want to get used to it, you know I’d rather go to school, and get an education, and find another job where it’s not as demanding energy wise.

Alex also found motivation to go to college as he reflected on his two older brothers, neither of whom went to college and were just working:

Um, so, my brothers, my two older brothers, they’ve graduated now, they did not go to college afterwards, so they’re just with their high school diplomas, working, um, I guess that’s what made me want to go to school a little bit more, I didn’t just not want to go to school and just work like they did. They seem to be in a good spot right now, but I just don’t want to be in the same exact steps as them, maybe, a little more, you know, better.

Paige, Florence, and Sophie were all inspired by the different ways of living they observed while abroad. Florence spoke about the lead instructor of her organized program abroad: “I was just very much inspired by her, and her life, and what she’s done with it, and it just opened my eyes to a different type of career you can choose, which I thought was cool.”
While living on the homesteads, Sophie developed a strong relationship with the homestead owners, but she also met people from all over the world that were also working on the farms. One of Sophie’s fellow workers on the farm had been there for some time, and she reflected on the story of his life that had brought him there:

The guy from Australia, he was actually an electrician making a bunch of money, an industrial electrician making a bunch of money, and then he had enough time saved up for paid vacation, and he actually planned this ahead of time. But like on his paid vacation, he quit his job and just stayed here in the end, he wooed for a while and he was just traveling around for like nine months or so, and then he found the couple with the farm and decided to stay with them for a year.

She described how her interactions brought her at ease about the choices she would have to make for her future:

I’d say that something I learned from being with all sorts of different people, what they’re doing with their lives, is that there are so many different ways to live. You know, there’s not just this one way that’s the right way, which is getting a job, or you make money, and then you get a house and then you have kids. So, I just saw so many alternative lifestyles, and it really took a lot of the pressure off that I had to, you know, lead a particular sort of life.

Paige came to a similar conclusion as she reflected on the way her boyfriend and her boyfriend’s family lived in their country overseas. Paige shares how she began to see that there were other ways of living and different types of careers in which one could be happy:

I had in mind a level of money or wealth that I wanted to accumulate in my life or whatever, and then when you go overseas, specifically the country where I was, it's just,
what's a lot of money there and what's a lot of money in my hometown is different obviously. My boyfriend's family, his parents are really modest, they have everything they could need or want, and they go on vacation and own their house, and do all that kind of stuff, but you know, his mom was an equestrian, and his dad was the carpenter. So those kinds of professions here get you a different lot in life, and so going over there and spending time with people that were still completely living comfortable lives and happy with everything they want, but not making crazy amounts of money or not feeling like they have to work all the time. I think that the pace was different and I realized, “oh I don't have to be stressed out. I don't have to work the way that my parents did, or I don't have to have exactly the same life that my parents did to be to be able to enjoy the same comforts, so that's been really nice, cause I went over there and there's a lot of like horticultural work outside, and just stuff that was that was slower pace, people that are instructors outdoors as a career, my boyfriend is one, he makes a living like that, he doesn't have a lot of money, but he doesn't have debt. He didn't have to go to college and pay all this money, you know, it's just kind of the difference there, you compare and you realize oh, there is a different kind of way to see this.

For the first time, the participants experienced relationships and people in environments that were non-academic. For some, it was the first time they had had a job; for others, it was the first time they had experienced new cultures overseas. For all of them, it was a time during which they met and mingled with people older than them, people who were in the middle of their careers, and people who were quite different than them. Reflecting on the lives of the people around them, the participants consciously reflected on their own career interests and discovered many different ways of life. For some, this reinforced their desire to get a college degree, and for
EXPERIENCING A GAP YEAR

others, it removed the pressure of leading a certain type of life prescribed by society. While the participants did not solidify their career choices, they all felt they had a better idea of what they wanted to do. For some, this clarity was the result of doing something that they loved, and, for others, it was the result of experiencing a job that they found out they would never want to do forever.

**College as the Next Step**

Throughout all of the participants’ stories, the theme of *College as the next step* clearly emerged. The eventual enrollment in college is inherent in the term gap year, and it is understood to be the distinguishing factor that makes the gap year a “gap” as opposed to a prolonged delay of or moratorium on education. Nate shared his belief in this area and described how he found comfort in the fact that his college admission was secured:

> To be totally honest, if I hadn’t had college to look forward to, it would have looked like me panicking a lot. I'm pretty future-oriented, and if I didn't have something in place next, I don't know what it would look like. Cause that's not a gap year, it's just a gap.

For Paige, who had also deferred her college admission, the choice to start college was not as clear as she had expected. She described that she had started high school early so that she could “stay on track” and start college in the same fall as her peers. While abroad on her gap year, she considered staying longer:

> Well, I had actually I had toyed with the idea of deferring my scholarship and not coming back. I was trying to stay overseas for longer, but the paperwork didn't work out, and I needed to be back in the States to sort it all out. So, I just decided to postpone that kind of thing and to just go into college and see how that goes. Um, I felt like comfortable with that idea. So, I started college. Um, and things were good. I really liked the school. I
think it was this idea that I have to go, I have to graduate, I have to go to college, I have to do it like this, and even though I wasn't really that type of person that was chasing a certain type of success, I felt like it was what you were supposed to do, and I felt as if I went on a gap year and waited to start college after everyone else, that I would be somehow behind, or that I would be doing it wrong. And like it was kind of more of a subconscious thing than a really conscious thing, but it definitely did drive the way that I thought about it. I wanted to graduate early because I knew that I could, and then thought, “I'll just do this, and I'll stay on track.”

Nate, Paige, Florence, Rose, and Sophie deferred their college admission prior to the onset of their gap. For them, college was not a question they pondered during their gap year: they knew when and where they would be attending college. For example, Rose shared: “I’d been accepted into lots of colleges; I deferred to like three colleges. When I got home, I spent the summer with my parents, and then I started college in, that fall, in August.

Florence, meanwhile, deferred her college admission despite being recruited to play a sport. She described that she thought this would prevent her from taking a gap year, but she was surprised to find that not only was she able to, she also kept her spot on the sports team on which she had been recruited to play at the college.

I didn’t think that I could take a gap year before college because I was recruited to play a sport at college, and I got in and applied early decision. But, I never looked into it, so I just assumed I couldn’t, and I didn’t know anyone who took a gap year. It didn’t occur to me that it was a possibility. Because no one had done it before, but I was excited that I was, I didn’t have to worry about picking classes or choosing a roommate or anything. I
was able to defer my admission, and I was still able to keep my spot on the team, which helped.

Alex had been accepted to two colleges during his senior year of high school. He described some challenges he experienced as he pondered his college options:

I wasn’t sure if I could afford it, because I didn’t get any scholarships either, so I decided to apply to a certain college because it was a little cheaper. Originally, I had wanted to go to a larger school, out of state, but uh, I realized how expensive that was, and so I had to change my idea of where I can go and what I can afford, and, even then, I just don’t think I had found everything out necessarily.

When Alex received his acceptances, he described making a choice but was conscious of his financial and transportation challenges:

I applied to two colleges, and I got accepted to both, and, from there, I made my decision: “I’m just going to go to there,” and then, after thinking about it, and I was thinking:

“How am I going to get there every day? Or if I stay on campus, I don’t think I can actually afford to do that either.”

Alex described the moment when he showed the acceptances to his parents who shared the same financial concerns:

I got back the acceptance letters. I showed that to them, but they didn’t, they didn’t seem too excited or anything, I think actually the first thing they asked me was, “You know uh, how are you going to afford this?” It didn’t seem, like, it seemed more of a negative tone than uh, oh, “I’m excited for you, how are you going to pay for this, you know?” So, I feel like that messed me up a little bit.
Having taken into consideration his financial and transportation challenges, Alex took no action with his acceptances. He “just decided to start working and let time go by.” Alex’s coworkers, whom were mostly Hispanic and undocumented, encouraged him to go to college. He shared:

When I first started working there, I was asked three or four times a week, “But you’re going back to school?” And every time they’d ask that, I’d have to explain that I was gonna take a little bit of time off then go back to school.

Throughout the year, Alex continued to think about college and began to reevaluate his options. Taking into consideration his financial and transportation needs, Alex described that he opted to attend a community college:

I actually changed my mind, and I’m not going to go to either one of those schools. And there’s a community college, that one is more so, I guess community college terms, it’s a two-year school, that one is more affordable than the other two, and it’s more, closer to where I live. So, it’s more convenient to go there and then transfer somewhere else after.

Alex and Zoe both described the feeling of needing to start college within a specific timeframe. Alex shared:

I’m really trying to push myself to go this year because I feel like, I feel like I’m still not one-hundred percent ready to go, but I feel like if I don’t go this year, I feel like it’s just going to lessen the time…I feel like if I don’t go now, I’m not going to go ever.

Zoe, meanwhile, shared:

I still felt pressured into it like I have to get a move on now because all my friends are going to graduate, and I don't want to go to high school to college as an old person and I'm going to have to go to college some time and I might as well start right now.
Sophie was accepted into college and deferred for one year, but while on her gap year, she decided not to go to that college because of financial reasons. She described the moment she had this realization, when she was abroad, and she emphasized that she vividly remembered it:

Well so, just like I had to pay for the gap year by myself, I have to pay for this by myself, for college by myself as well, so I was kind of, I actually remember this moment pretty specifically. I was walking down a street in one of the nearby cities, and I was thinking about how, once I came back and went to college, I wouldn’t be able to go out and do this for a really long time, because I’d have to get a job right away to start paying off student loans, and I was thinking, “I don’t know if going to one of the schools I really wanted to go to in a nice location away from home would be worth it.”

While she was abroad working on farms, Sophie recalled moments when she contemplated her reasons for going to college and shared a moment that inspired her to want to go even more:

Yes, um, always usually jokingly like “do I really need to go to college?” and a lot of people were all cool and living great lives, a bunch of them, and then there was one where I think it was something about maybe doing an apprenticeship or something. But then I opened my eyes. I just went back to thinking that I should go to college pretty much not just because of the work that I wanted to do. I remember having conversations around the dinner table, mostly about historical events, and I just knew so little. Like right now, I’m in a geography class right now because I want to know more, like want to be able to have conversations with people.

The eventuality of going to college was heavily present in all of the participants’ stories. Six of the participants had received acceptances to college prior to high school graduation, and five of them deferred their admission. One participant deferred her admission to three schools.
Three of those participants enrolled in the college where they deferred; one chose from three schools where she had deferred; and one changed her mind while abroad and applied to another college. One student who did not defer college admission decided to attend a community college after which he would transfer to its four-year partner university, and the other only took a half year off and started college in the Spring. The participants who had locked-in their college admission knew that the gap year would be a time-limited experience and leaned toward doing things that they knew they would enjoy. Alex and Zoe continued to think about college during their gap time because it was still something they needed to sort out if it was going to happen. Four of the participants reflected heavily on the cost of college and adjusted their college choices as a result of not wanting to be tied down by student debt upon finishing college. All of the participants saw college as this thing they had to get out of the way and spoke of it as a time during which they would be tied down and not really able to do anything else. It was clear that the students all experienced the expectation of going to college whether on a personal, parental, or societal level.

**The Absence of Goals**

Another theme that emerged was *The absence of goals* among the participants as they planned their gap time and throughout their gap experience. The participant stories revealed a common theme of wanting to be in the present, go with the flow, and not worry about setting forth specific goals to achieve something. Nate shared that he did not really “hope to achieve anything,” and he did not look into his options, thinking, “Oh I’m going to develop these skills.” Nate stated quite simply that he “didn’t really think too much about it.” Zoe was recovering from depression and consequently was taking a new medication. For Zoe, it was about “just taking that time to relax and recover from that.” Paige did not recall “ever having an end goal in
mind,” and Rose did not have specific goals because she did not want to create too many expectations. Rose shared that going in open-minded was the most important thing for her:

I didn't have any specific goals because, you know, when I kind of set goals, I’m either like disappointed or overwhelmed, and I'm like honestly, it's better if I just go in wanting to learn and to grow um so, I think that’s just what I wanted to achieve would be the best version of myself that I could be.

Florence emphasized her desire to have a break from academics:

I might have had goals, but I didn’t really think about them. I think I had to create goals in order for my parents to let me do it. But they weren’t relevant to, I think it was just because I was on the educational treadmill, and I just needed to step back from the traditional system.

Sophie purposefully left the door open for herself by only partially planning her trip before she left. Looking back on that, Sophie said she felt that the choice to do so taught her a lot:

“Something that I thought was really important and it might have made this trip cost a little bit more money but taught me a lot of things, was just go with the flow of things.”

Alex, meanwhile, who knew he was going to get a job, said there were no factors pulling him toward one thing over another. He shared:

Uh, well, when I decided I was going to take time off, I didn’t really have a plan of what I was going to do, you know, I heard about people not going to college. I thought I’m just gonna work, I think most of it was just working and saving. I didn’t really have an exact goal of what I was gonna do.

The lack of goals from the participants was not surprising given that one of their biggest motivations for taking a gap year was to have a break from school. Most important to the
participants was to experience something new and the need for a change of scenery. The absence of goals during the participants’ gap year highlighted their curiosity for experiences different to the usual academic track.

**Changes in the Self**

Each participant was asked to describe how they felt they were different today because of their gap year. Their responses revealed four predominant sub-themes: (a) *Self-confidence*, (b) *Self-reliance and responsibility*, (c) *New perspectives and appreciation*, and (d) *Life course discovery*. While these were the most unified sub-themes across the participants, it is notable to add that the participants experienced other changes that were unique to each experience, often depending on where he or she found themselves socially, emotionally, and physically at the onset of their gap year. The changes included increased motivation, humility, broader perspectives, and acquisition of life skills. It is also notable to mention that the sub-themes, though presented independently, are intricately interdependent.

**Self-confidence.** One of the biggest ways participants said they changed was that they became more confident. Nate described his gap year as being “all about the self.” Nate described a “eureka moment” when he realized that he had always looked for others to bring him to a happy place and relied so much on them for support. He realized that he “never had to look internally for any type of emotional support,” and that, over time during his gap year, he knew himself better and “didn’t need anyone else’s validation.” When asked how he was different, Nate responded:

I am more comfortable with myself. I'm more comfortable, I don't need other peoples’ validation as much as I used to. I still do, I'm still human. But. I used to kind of, I don't know, I would always just value myself, being like, I have so much fun with my friends.
Like I used to just kind of outsource self-esteem. I guess that's one way of putting it. And that totally changed.

Zoe shared that her time off gave her “more confidence and some responsibility” with respect to college. She shared:

I wasn’t responsible in high school, and now I feel like, I’m paying for my own college, I’m going to try harder, and I’m going to take more responsibility for my classes because it’s something that I want to do.

When Alex graduated, he stated that he felt less prepared to go to college than his friends. He explained those feelings:

They seemed like they had it all figured out, they were prepared for this next step, they just seemed very confident. And I feel like I didn’t have that same confidence. But I think that’s like what really held me back.

At the time of the second interview, Alex had found a new part-time job and had started college. He even left the job before he knew he was going to college because he realized he simply didn’t enjoy it. When asked how he had changed over the year, Alex responded:

I feel like I’ve grown more as a person, you know, I felt like I wasn’t fully prepared yet, you know and I’m not gonna lie, I still don’t feel 150% fully there yet, but I feel like I’ve grown enough to start going back to school and facing all these challenges on my own, maybe not on my own, maybe with some help. But I feel just a little more confident that I can do something like this without someone needing to hold my hand all the time.

Florence and Sophie expressed that they felt their time abroad really changed them for the better. Florence shared that she was “confident she can handle literally any situation she is
thrown into,” and Sophie said, “I feel like I gained a lot of knowledge and confidence and experience that I wouldn’t have otherwise.”

Paige had a similar experience, and she explained how she had become more confident:

It definitely added a huge element of independence to my life. I feel, I mean, I had always felt independent but I think it was a way to put it to the test in the sense to know that I was capable of traveling solo, of, you know, problem solving in crazy situations because that always happens when you travel, and um, I don't know, yea, it definitely, gave me more confidence to tackle pretty much anything at this point.

**Self-reliance and responsibility.** A strong sub-theme of *Self-reliance and responsibility* was revealed in the theme of how the students felt they had changed. Not only did the experiences encompass becoming more responsible and self-sufficient, they also embodied personal growth with regards to independence and self-care.

Nate described feeling more self-sufficient in terms of independence but also on an emotional level. Nate explained how he had changed:

Throughout the whole year I changed so much. And I grew so much. I became like way more self-sufficient, and I was still living with my parents at the time, like I was out getting groceries cooking meals, but like from a more like emotional level I just became very self-sufficient. I didn't need to hang out with friends to like, to feel validated or happy or anything. Towards the end of the year after I spent like more time alone. I became very comfortable being alone, and I actually prefer to be alone now.

Alex spoke about how he had changed in terms of his study habits and compared himself to how he used to be in high school. He shared that, during his gap year, he had been more responsible, independent, and mature. In responding to how he felt different, Alex shared:
I guess I’ve become a little more independent and responsible for myself – so in high school, I never studied. I wouldn’t say never, but I never made time to go and study and say oh, during this time I’m going to go study this, or until I get it, I’d just study a bit and say that’s enough. I guess now since I’ve been more responsible and independent and mature, I’ve taken these things more seriously and you know, made time and put effort into these things to try and study more and what not.

Zoe also learned responsibility as she examined her own actions. One of the things she learned was that she needed to stay organized and make a schedule for herself. Zoe shared:

I learned that I had to make a more rigid, like a more structured schedule for myself that I wasn't the kind of person that just stays up all night, or, like I had to put things into order. I was like OK well maybe I shouldn't watch TV all through the night.

**New perspectives and greater appreciation.** The participants’ experiences brought them new perspectives which were unique to most; however, these experiences were congruent in the way that they heightened the participants’ awareness toward something for which they developed greater appreciation. For many, this meant a greater appreciation of family and meaningful friendships; For those who went abroad, it was a greater appreciation for other cultures; and for those who were questioning their lives, it was appreciation for who they were and the opportunities they had.

Nate, Paige and Rose, and Sophie all described how great it felt to be somewhere completely new and to have a change of scenery from what they were used to seeing their whole lives. The time they spent away from home gave them space to be more independent, and it also meant spending time away from friends and family. Nate had spent his time out West and was far enough from home to be isolated from his close friends from high school. He recalled
reflecting on his own actions as he engaged with social media only to realize how superficial it was. Nate stated that he had gained this new perspective during his gap year:

Being separated from everything kind of give me a fresh perspective like when I update my Facebook profile picture and I get a certain amount of likes, I feel really good about myself. And then I'm like “Wait, that's like so superficial and shitty like, why am I feeling good about myself? That doesn't matter” So that's definitely a perspective that I gained during the gap year: I kind of realized how superficial a lot of things are.

Paige felt that her time overseas helped her to distinguish who were her close friends. She shared:

I had little interactions every now and then as people do on social media, like a superficial level, but yea, like that was another interesting thing too, the first time that I went overseas just realizing who is actually interested in keeping up with my life and who is you know a close friend and who's just someone that I knew at high school, and so yea, that was eye-opening.

Rose experienced a completely new environment abroad that brought her a lot of new perspectives. At the time of the first interview, Rose had already started college. She described the feelings she experienced as she started college, which made her realize how different she was from her freshman peers. Rose shared:

I got to college, and I realized just how different I was from most of the kids on campus. You know, these people who would come straight from high school. And, I mean, I had so many great friends who did come straight from high school. My best friends did come from high school, but it was definitely a feeling of – I’ve done these things, I’ve been a teacher, I’ve written a book, I’ve done all these different things that normally adults do,
and you’re still worried about how you’re going to do your makeup for the first day of school?

Sophie, who spent her time working on organic farms, came home with a greater appreciation for her family. Reflecting on this, Sophie shared:

I would say that my whole perspective on like my parents my family changed. I was feeling more appreciative of them, and when you meet new people and they ask about your family, and then you're, you know, describing them and telling stories about them, it kind of like gives you a different perspective. Kind of like you’re looking at them in rose-colored glasses. And I was with a bunch of people’s family and never with my own. So, it's pretty easy to get homesick because you know you're watching people interact with people that they love and stuff.

Rose and Florence both experienced new cultures abroad. When asked if she questioned her beliefs during her gap year, Florence said no, but she expressed an appreciation for being able to experience the traditions of the philosophy and culture where she lived:

I didn’t question them, I might have like, matured them. I really um, I really liked learning about their philosophy, I thought it was very, very interesting. I like some of the values from it. I’m not necessarily going to convert to it, but I thought it was, I was staying with a family and getting to experience a lot of their traditions, and I really appreciated that.

Rose described having “a greater respect for the world and for other people” She expressed how she had learned to slow down and take time for others, even if she had a thousand things to do. She shared how she grew to appreciate time and the importance of taking time to be there for others whenever they were in need. She said she also gained an appreciation for people’s
differences and learned how to accept cultural norms outside of what she was used to. Rose shared:

So, I think I have a great appreciation and respect for people, how everyone’s story is different. I have greater respect for time. I think a lot of that came from the gap year. In a society that’s not framed by time, you know, I became an adult in this country that is not ruled by time. Being an hour late – totally acceptable. It’s normal. It’s accepted. So, yea, having a respect for people in general, the time they put into things um, the work that they put in to different things as well. Just like a respect in consciousness, and also like awareness, like I learned a lot about myself that year.

Zoe used her gap time to recover from depression. She expressed what a big mental shift she made during her time leading up to college and just as she began college. Zoe had often pitied herself and felt like the world owed her something. She came to realize the positive things in her life and gained a greater appreciation for what she had. Zoe shared what this was like:

I had to make a big mental change, like adjustment. I had to, at the beginning, I felt like the world owed me something. And then, when I got really depressed, I had to make a change. I had to like to believe that the world didn't owe anything to me. And like I had to earn everything that I get and earn the privilege. And I don't know, before then I had this attitude of oh, I need this, or I don't get to go to this party, I'm so underprivileged. But really, I wasn't, I had a lot of good things. And then I changed it.

Rose and Florence stated that they gained a greater appreciation for learning because of their gap years. This became apparent to them as they began college. Florence also mentioned her appreciation for meaningful relationships. Rose, meanwhile, shared:
I think I have a greater appreciation from everything I'm learning in the classroom, for every relationship I'm forming at college because I, because I took a gap year, so I think that you do learn a lot about who you are when you're not confined just to living class by class by class to the next day.

Florence not only gained a greater appreciation for learning, she expressed how much she came to recognize and appreciate meaningful relationships. She shared:

I am more excited to learn, and I want to learn about more things. Like, taking classes is going to be exciting this time around instead of me dreading it. The transition to college has been interesting… I’m not into making “fake” friends because I’m used to having such meaningful relationships.

**Life-course discovery.** With college on the horizon, the students consciously reflected on what awaited them as they began their post-secondary education. Some made realizations about the kind of lifestyle they thought they might want, and others gained clarification on what career they were thinking they might want to pursue. Sophie, who had spent her gap year working on organic farms, found a preference for being outdoors. She shared:

I definitely know more about what I want to do and what I don't want to do, as far as my job. I think before college what I still have, a variety of like, I'm still pretty confused. I was thinking more about stuff like engineering and computer science, but now, through the experiences I had, I really realized that I have to be outside for a job.

At the time of the second interview, Paige had completed a year of college and had opted not to re-enroll for the next year to go abroad again. As she reflected on her first year of college and considered what she had done during her gap years, Paige shared:
I think I have more of an idea now than I did when I first started college. Like when I first started at college I was just doing political science because it was something that I had excelled at in high school in like a really broad sense, and I like to read and write. So, I felt like it was good for me, and I wasn't so much into the sciences, although I feel like I'm like competent in it, it just wasn't like something I was drawn to. But even in the last year through all the things that I've learned outside of school, I'm finding myself really drawn to a particular course about environment and energy. And I feel like the thing that I would feel would be most worthwhile to do would be something to do with the environment, the way that's going, like with climate change, and all that kind of stuff. Like I would definitely feel impassioned to get into that field, and, like, if that meant having really like a more traditional job, then I would feel comfortable in that but only if I felt like it was furthering um, you know it was it was like altruistic, and like furthering a goal kind of thing.

Zoe, meanwhile, gained perspective on the importance of structure and being in one place to make her feel stable: I used think that I could maybe just, like just live or just be anywhere, but I feel like I have to like, to have more structure in my life. To feel like, stable. On the contrary, Nate discovered a desire to move around and not tie himself down to one place. He made a comparison between him and his sister who both took gap years, and his brother, who did not:

I kind of see myself being more nomadic in that way, like not really staying in one place; whereas, my brother, he's about to buy a house in Dallas, and he’s 25, and he's going to stay in Dallas. But like, I think that I see myself spending two or three years in a city and moving, and I think that's largely in part due to the gap year that I took. And you can just
kind of look at my family tree, my sister is all over the place. My brother's going to stay put. Sister took a gap year, brother didn't. So yeah.

At the time of the second interview, Paige shared that she was engaged to be married and still living overseas, but she happened to be in the United States sorting some paperwork out. One of the biggest realizations Paige made was that she wanted to live overseas and did not see herself living in America. She described how her time had shown her just how many possibilities are out there, and that was such an important thing she had discovered. Paige explained:

In general, it's definitely I mean, I just realized the breadth of possibilities that are out there, and that that's a little overwhelming sometimes because I know that there's so much that I can do anything and that I have so many options. So it's narrowing down the options that's difficult, especially at the moment, but in general, it's opened me to everything else, and I think it's the most important thing ever. I definitely want, I think I want, to live overseas, like I don't really see myself, you know, raising a family in America or living there long-term, like that has been one major take away from the gap years.

Perhaps one of the most telling revelations of the participants’ stories were the way they described they felt different because of their gap year. All of the participants described experiencing personal growth as a result of their gap year. Their unique experiences imprinted similarly on their sense of self, their values, and their thoughts surrounding their life-course choices. Within the general structure of the gap year experience, the changes experienced by the participants evolved throughout the journey and were intricately connected to the participants’ conscious exploration of their thoughts and emotions. A telling revelation from these stories was
that the students reflected on their values and began to feel a greater appreciation for others, regardless of what they did during their gap year. The participants’ experiences and encounters with new people provided a catalyst for self-reflection and taking ownership of their own decisions.

**Summary**

This chapter presented the essential meaning of the gap year experience as it was described by seven students from the United States. Five females and two males shared their lifeworld experiences of their period of time off before college. Five of the participants took a period of time off lasting one year, and two participants took a period of time off lasting six months. The participants’ activities included working in the United States, involvement in a structured program overseas, working overseas, and woofing overseas. The data was analyzed using Giorgi’s (2009) psychological phenomenological method, which revealed a general structure comprised of an interrelationship among seven constituents. The seven constituents were: (a) Making a conscious decision to postpone college, (b) Coming up with a plan, (c) Experiencing new feelings evoked by new environments, (e) Reflecting on the lives of others to gain focus on life-course, (f) College as the next step, (g) The absence of goals, and (h) Changes in the self. The seventh constituent included four sub-themes that revealed the similar ways in which the individuals felt they had changed: (a) Self-confidence, (b) Self-reliance and responsibility, (c) New perspectives and greater appreciation, and (d) Life-course discovery.

What was most revealing was how the participants’ internal voices were present throughout their journeys. They engaged in conscious self-reflection, but also reflected on the lives of those around them as a way to explore their own realities and desires. The combination of new environments and new relationships gave way to new experiences and emotions that
caused them to become more self-aware, but also more aware of other people and their needs. From the beginning of their time off, the participants experienced themselves in a new spatial dimension under new constructs of time. For the first time, they had experienced themselves outside of the constraints of an academic calendar. According to the participants, this played an important role in teaching them to be in the present and to gain perspective on what was important in their lives.
Chapter 5: Discussion, Implications, and Conclusions

This study revealed the essence of the gap year phenomenon as it was experienced and described by seven students from the United States. It was guided by the main research question: How do students in the United States perceive the experience of their pre-university gap year? Two sub-questions were also utilized to remain within the constructive-developmental framework that guided the study. The sub-questions asked: (a) How does a gap year imprint on a student’s development, social maturity, and meaning-making? And (b) How do students perceive themselves before their gap year and after their gap year?

A descriptive phenomenological method was chosen for this study so that the essential elements, or general structure, of the gap year experience could emerge. Within the general structure, seven constituents were revealed to form the essential meaning of the experience: (a) Making a conscious decision to postpone college, (b) Coming up with a plan, (c) Experiencing new feelings evoked by new environments, (d) Reflecting on the lives of others to gain focus on life-course, (e) College as the next step, (f) The absence of goals, and (g) Personal growth. The last constituent, (h) Changes in the self, revealed four sub-themes with relation to the similarities in personal development experienced by the participants. These sub-themes were: (a) Self-confidence, (b) Self-reliance and responsibility, (c) New perspectives and greater appreciation, and (d) Life-course discovery.

This study allowed multiple perspectives to be considered and contributed to the literature by revealing more about the internal processes taking place from the culmination of high school until the students’ first day of college. The guiding framework for this study was Robert Kegan’s (1982) constructive-developmental theory which “concerns itself with regular, progressive changes in how individuals make meaning or ‘know’ epistemologically and people
are seen as ‘active organizers of their experience’” (Kegan, 1994, p. 29). The findings offer rich insight into the progression of personal development that accompanies the individual who experiences a gap year.

This concluding chapter discusses and elaborates on the variations within the constituents of the phenomenon and on their relationship to the current literature and theoretical framework that informed this study. It continues with a discussion of the practical implications of the study, makes recommendations for further research, and offers some final thoughts and reflections.

**Discussion in Relation to Theoretical Framework**

At the culmination of high school, students are thought to be in what Kegan (1982) referred to as the third stage or *interpersonal* stage of development. Other developmental theorists like Loevinger, Maslow, and Erikson used words such as “conformist” or “belongingness,” or “affiliation” to characterize this stage (Kegan, 1982, p. 164). Kegan (1982) described this stage as one embedded in mutuality and characterized by mutually reciprocal one-to-one relationships. More specifically, Kegan (1994) noted that the “deep structure of any principle of mental organization is the subject-object relationship” in which the “object” is constituted of things that people can “reflect on, handle, look at, be responsible for, relate to each other, take control of, internalize, assimilate, or otherwise operate on;” this “subject” involves things that people are “identified with, tied to, fused with, or embedded in” (p. 32). The basis for Kegan’s (1982) theory is that, as one progresses through stages of development, what is subject in one stage transitions to becoming object in the next phase. Hence, the mutuality, which is subject in the interpersonal stage, becomes object in the institutional stage. The third order is also known as the socialized mind because the expectations of interpersonal environments are what shape individuals the most.
The fourth level, called the institutional stage, is characterized by a culture of identity and self-authorship in which the individual develops a capacity for independence and self-definition. Other theorists may have used words such as “conscientious,” “self-esteem orientation,” and “identity” to describe this fourth stage of development (Kegan, 1982, p. 86). For a student to transition from stage three to stage four, they must have opportunities for “provisional identity” or “a time-limited participation in institutional life” such as four years of college (Kegan, 1982, p. 191). As Kegan’s theory suggests, the gap year was considered by all of the participants as a provisional time during which they adopted new ways of seeing, and hence, new ways of being. What the participants described gaining during their gap years indicated a movement toward independence and maturity. They became more self-aware and more aware of others; they began to wonder how others perceived them and to understand how they fit into the bigger picture. As they looked back on their experiences, none of the participants regretted their decision to take a gap year. Several of the participants commented on how much they enjoyed the interview for this study because it caused them to reflect on their gap year in a way they had not done before. All of the participants had started college at the time of their second interview. Thus, they were well positioned to comment on the role the gap year played in preparing them for that step. Many of the participants said that they felt they were more mature when comparing themselves to the other freshman in college. They looked back on their gap year with a kind of reverence and spoke of it as period of time in their lives that was both memorable and important.

Discussion in Relation to Literature

The Gap Year Definition

There is much debate about what makes a gap year a “gap year.” Its ambiguity is derived from a combination of the duration of the gap period, the activity that fills the gap period, and the
learning objectives or outcomes that result from it. In addition to this, defining the gap year is clouded by the subtle differences in how education systems are programmed in different countries. In the United Kingdom, the term gap year has long been understood in popular culture; in contrast, it is still gaining traction in the United States. When I speak about the gap year to people in the United States, people commonly ask me “What’s a gap year?” This question is often followed by “So, is it beneficial?” Neither of these questions have straightforward answers, but this research study is another step toward a better understanding of this phenomenon.

Hearing various perspectives from students who had different gap year experiences, it became clearer that the gap year refuses to be placed inside the box of a singular definition. The gap year phenomenon is distinctly characterized by the intricacies of the educational and social systems in which it is embedded. Students in the United States come from widely different secondary school experiences where disparities in social capital continue to raise questions surrounding equanimity. This research contributes a new way of thinking about the gap year by bringing forth the unifying components that, for the participants interviewed, made up the general structure and the essence of this experience. This researcher aimed to arrive at an understanding of the gap year experience that transcended these differences by looking at the psychological perspective, to understand how these students made meaning during their experience, irrespective of what they did.

The students’ perceptions of their experiences were connected by the deep personal reflection that took place at this pivotal moment in their lives. Each participant used his or her experience to make meaning of questions surrounding their personal identity, their life-course, and their decisions. The participants spent their gap years immersed in a number of activities,
and, throughout their gap time, each one of them made meaning of their lives and their choices from their distinct experiences. This reveals the possibilities of a gap year and the transformative potential it can have for students as emerging adults. Congruent with gap year definitions adopted by Heath (2007) and Jones (2004), participants in this study started college anywhere between six and 18 months after completing high school. Curtis (2014), however, made a distinction between a gap year and a delay, suggesting that a gap year is intentional and not circumstantial. If this research had adhered to this definition, several of the participants would not have been considered “gappers” simply because they didn’t have a deliberate plan in mind when deciding to take a gap year. The participants who remained in the United States and worked during their gap years described feeling more confident, responsible, and self-aware as they entered college. While they did not have plans to partake in a structured program or travel abroad, they were quite deliberate in the way they self-authored their lives. They negotiated their desires and adjusted them according to their reality. Across the multiple stories that were shared in this research, there were no distinguishing factors between the personal growth experienced by those who focused on employment domestically and those who traveled abroad.

This study has shown that a gap year is a time during which students enjoy some time outside of the classroom without goals, manage their own time, and keep college on the horizon. It approximates them to environments they have never experienced before. These new environments include new social structures, new relationships, new physical surroundings, and a new understanding of time. The interplay between these elements caused students in this study to reflect on their own lives, and, through others, they began to see themselves in new ways. Ultimately, experience in the real world contributed to these students’ ability to make value assessments, negotiate their priorities, and thus to develop their own values. When this
experience takes place between high school and college, students start college with a greater sense of self and a greater appreciation for the learning that awaits them in higher education.

All of the participants perceived their gap year as their “time before college,” and this emerged as one of the most unifying components of how they perceived their experience. To reiterate what one participant said, if college does not come next then “it’s not a gap year, it’s just a gap.” This is consistent with other notions that taking a gap year is different to simply delaying college (Curtis, 2014). Nate and Zoe were the two participants in this study who did not defer college admission at the time they decided to postpone college entrance. It was clear that their experiences were distinct to those who deferred their college admission because they did not perceive their gap time as fun nor as free time to explore themselves freely and without responsibilities. However, as they reflected on how they spent their time, it was clear that they internalized their experiences and made meaning from them as they began to look at their lives more objectively. Zoe’s and Alex’s gap years were not spent doing anything they found glamorous or fun; however, what they did turned out to be worthwhile for them, and they both knew that they had grown and matured because of it. It stands to reason that gap years are best defined by the profound personal development that is taking place in the lives of students during this pivotal transitional period.

**Gap Year Participants**

The participants in this study consciously chose to take a gap year, but their stories were unique and telling of where they came from and what kind of high school experience they had. One of the major elements in their choice was the role of college in the context of their decision. Five of the participants deferred their college admission which meant their decision was more so whether to enter college immediately or enter college the following year. For Alex and Zoe, the
participants who did not defer college admission, the choice to go to college lingered in the balance during their time off.

The participants gave a general description of their high school experience and the events leading up to their decision to take a gap year. All of the participants had intentions of going to college, but many of them were not aware of the feasibility of deferring their college admission. This required students to make inquiries and requests with the universities where they had been accepted. The participants had mixed ideas about what a gap year was, what they could actually do, and whether or not it was even feasible for them. Florence, who had been recruited to play a sport at her college, was surprised to learn that they allowed her to defer her admission and still keep her spot on the team. For Alex, deferral did not occur to him because he did not know what it meant to defer admission. Alex, who self-identified as Hispanic, and Zoe, who identified as White/Hispanic, went to predominantly Hispanic schools in Georgia. Alex had been accepted at two universities, and he had originally wanted to go to a larger four-year school. Alex had made his decision, but he was stopped in his tracks when he began to wonder how he would afford it, how he would get there, or if he could even live on campus. Alex did not have much support from his family and described how their somewhat negative reaction to his acceptance letters messed him up a little bit. Consequently, he took no enrollment action and no deferral action with his college acceptances. Zoe decided to take a semester to continue recovering from depression because she was scared she would fail her courses in college. Zoe expressed that she felt that a semester off would be beneficial because it was what she needed the most at that time in her life. As Zoe looked back on her gap year, she wished that things could have been different. She had a cousin who had taken a gap year and “had fun and traveled,” and she explained that she would have loved to have done something like that. Zoe was fond of her
middle school experience in a Montessori school. She spoke at length about her struggles to learn in her school environment, which she described as being very focused on taking tests. There was no question that Zoe was a hands-on learner, and she also described an aptitude for art. Zoe did get better in terms of her depression, but she still struggled with the college coursework and ultimately decided to leave and later attend an art-centered institute where she could pursue her interest in art. Zoe’s story raises the question of how she might have benefited from being in a more supported or creative environment with a focus on experiential learning. She clearly had a zest for learning things that were, as she described, “real” and “useful.”

Alex and Zoe’s stories aligned with the data that explains the social gaps in college delay, based on differences in a family’s socioeconomic background and educational expectations (Goldrick-Rab & Han, 2011).

All of the participants who were involved in structured programs expressed having their parents’ support; Nate, who stayed in the United States and worked, said his parents were really pushing him to take a gap year because his sister had taken one and had really matured as a result. Flowers (2015) highlighted the strong role that parents, coaches, and peers can play in the gap year decision. In this research, the participants made little reference to their parents when speaking of their decisions, but the five participants who deferred college described their parents as supporting their decisions to take time off. Consistent with Flowers (2015), the participants made no mention of teachers, administrators, or counselors that had influenced their decision to take a gap year. As they told the story of how their gap year unfolded, they nearly all made reference to their emotions and what they were feeling inside. Some understood the origin of their emotions, knowing that they simply wanted a break from school or wanted to travel and do
something new. Others did not really understand why they weren’t feeling excited about college, but something was telling them it was not at the time what they wanted to do.

Once they committed to taking a gap year, the participants had to determine what they would be doing next. The students who had travel in mind turned to the internet to explore programs in which they could participate. Paige discovered so many options that she hired a gap year consultant to assist her with narrowing down her choices and planning her gap year.

Consistent with Flowers (2016), this research revealed questions surrounding access in gap year planning and activities. Alex was highly involved in a youth leadership program that explored issues affecting the community and developed annual community events. Alex spoke fondly of his involvement, and it was clear that it played an important role in his high school experience. He also really enjoyed his internship with a state agency where he worked in the I.T. department. Alex said that he was not aware that structured gap year programs existed. Alex was 17 when he graduated, which was something that disoriented him a little bit and made him feel not completely ready for college. Alex also said he felt that he never really had a chance to learn about his interests in high school, which left him not knowing what to study in college, which led him to postpone college. Alex had a strong work ethic and worked 50 hours a week sometimes. However, Alex’s job was a means to an end. Several of the participants who traveled abroad also spent some time working before they traveled. Their stories suggested that their jobs did not play a central role in their gap year and were part of a larger gap year plan. This brings into question Alex’s social capital. If he had known about other options during some part of his 12-month delay, perhaps he could he have experienced broader social environments and further explored his interest in civic engagement or computing.
As they near the end of high school, students are increasingly asking themselves what they want to do next. Many of the participants in this study described that it felt strange to go to college without having a sense for what they wanted to do. As a researcher listening to their stories, I felt that it seemed unfair to not validate their concerns and their questions about this important next step in their lives. The young adults who shared their stories with me were curious and determined. Their decision to take a gap year showed an inclination toward self-authorship in and of itself. This research thus confirms other findings that gap year participants are not a homogenous group and that different students delay for different reasons (Hoe, 2014; Horn et al., 2005; Jones, 2004).

The Gap Year Experience

For the participants, a gap year was all about the self, a chance to experience the real world, an opportunity to travel, a really tough time with a lot of thinking, a chance to enjoy life before college, an opportunity to experience something new, and a positive experience. These are just some of the ways the participants perceived the experience of their gap year. In a way that was unique to each of them, the participants found themselves in unfamiliar environments that caused them to engage in meaningful self-reflection.

During the interviews, I did not probe about the participants’ family members’ involvement in their gap year decision, nor did I explicitly inquire about their parents’ socioeconomic level or the extent of their formal education. I felt it was important to allow these elements to emerge organically to bracket any bias and to keep the student perspective at the focal point of the study. The two students who participated in structured programs shared that their gap years were partially funded by their parents. The other five participants worked full-time during their gap year in some capacity. What was surprising was the lack of parental
involvement described in all of the participants’ stories. The participants described coming up with their plans in a way that indicated that they were acting on their own desires and making their own choices. Doing so meant having an understanding of the resources available to them to be able to carry out their plan. Some of the ways they demonstrated this was by living at home while working to save money and calling on relatives and friends for work opportunities. Many of them decided what to do based on the resources available to them. It became clear that those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds approached their jobs more as a necessity rather than something that played into a larger gap year plan. In the broader conversation, some might argue that merely working a full-time job is not the kind of thing that is “worthwhile” during a gap year because it does not provide the student with any distinction over others; in other words, it does not give them an “edge” (Heath, 2007). However, it is noteworthy that the students who remained in the United States and worked full-time discovered a great deal about their career interests by experiencing things that they did not enjoy. This is consistent with findings that the gap year is favorable in influencing career adaptability and career maturity (Coetzee, 2006; Nieman, 2013; Raibie & Nadoo, 2016). By doing something that they did not want to do, they actually learned more about what they did want. In addition to this, Tenser (2015) suggested that self-authorship is more likely to be enhanced for students who experience gap years with lesser guidance and less structure from others.

Goals, objectives, and achievements were not at the forefront of the participants’ minds as they embarked on their gap year. This is not surprising considering one of the main driving forces behind their decision was to take a break from academics. Experiencing things outside of the parameters of a school calendar reframed their understanding of time and gave them new things to focus on such as accountability and self-care. For the first time, they were responsible
for managing themselves and their time which in turn gave them a greater sense of responsibility and independence. Several participants described how they learned to just be in the present and go with the flow of things.

The greatest perception the participants had of their gap year was that it was a time in which they grew. In concordance with O’Shea’s (2011) findings, the perceived outcomes of their gap years were unique to each participant. As King (2011) suggested, significant identity work occurs during a gap year, but there were clear distinctions between the motivations for taking a gap year and the choices therein. One of these distinctions was that the participants in this study did not speak of their gap year activities as things that would make them more employable in the future or attractive to colleges. Due to the small sample size, further research would be needed to understand if perhaps this is a characteristic of American students’ gap years. With relation to the sample in this study, it was clear that the participants looked forward to not thinking about goals.

The experience of new environments was a critical feature of the participants’ gap years. In another recent study, critical features to the structured gap year experience included “access to unfamiliar environments, the opportunity to form meaningful relationships, the opportunity to be on one’s own, and responsibility for one’s independence” (Flowers, 2015). The stories in this research summon a ponderance of the ways in which these critical features show up in gap year experiences that do not include a structured program. Despite their unique gap year experiences, each student experienced new environments and had opportunities to develop meaningful relationships. Congruent with Tenser (2015), the participant stories in this study revealed that little distinction exists between the incidence of self-authorship between those who self-designed their gap years and those who participated in structured gap years.
The gap year is an opportunity for students to experience something new and something new is anything that does not resemble school which was the largest element shaping their notions of time and their senses of self until that point. Taking time off before college afforded these students the chance to become more self-aware, more aware of others, and to begin to examine their lives more objectively. What their experiences show us is that no matter where they were or what they were doing, there was a significant amount of meaning-making occurring during this pivotal moment in their lives. As the participants looked back on their experiences, they began to realize just how important that time had been for them.

**Implications for Practice**

**Students and Parents**

Students and parents are challenged to rethink the value that is placed around the immediate transition to college. Parents and guardians play an important role in the educational decisions of their children after high school; therefore, it is crucial that they be well-informed of the benefits that can come from time outside of the classroom and how it can help the student to gain self-awareness, become more responsible, and acquire a desire to learn that will take them to the finish line in college. The alarming reality is that the United States has one of the highest college drop-out rates compared to similar countries, and nearly four million undergraduates with federal student loan debt dropped out during fiscal years 2015 and 2016, or from the period between mid-2014 through mid-2016 (Barshay, 2017). The personal development experienced by the participants in this study offers insight into the possibilities for growth during a gap year and can encourage parents and students to think about the long-term outcomes associated with going to college unprepared or just for the sake of it.
High Schools and High School Counselors

The voices in this research challenge high schools to think deeply about the role that education is playing in their institution and the post-secondary pathways students are presented with upon graduation. Many of the stories in this research study suggested that schools remain largely focused on a college preparatory agenda, and college acceptance rates continue to be a measure for success in student preparation and college readiness. High schools are challenged to rethink the emphasis they place on the high school to college journey and the culture of celebration that takes place therein. This emphasis creates a sort of hierarchy of success where students may attribute not going to college immediately as failure. Counselors are encouraged to increase the dialogue surrounding the gap year possibility for all students as another option on the table. In addition to college admissions representatives, schools should consider welcoming gap year providers and gap year consultants to campus to further educate students on said possibilities.

Gap Year Providers

Structured gap year programming offers a deliberate choice to do something exciting, different, and enjoyable but that is also grounded in the tenets of experiential education. It is important for gap year promoters, advocates, educational consultants, and providers to recognize the vast possibilities that exist for all high school graduates who are not proceeding immediately to college. A considerable opportunity exists to create more equanimity across populations of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds through the innovation of low-cost, ad-hoc, and short-term options.
**Colleges and Universities**

The majority of participants in this study were unsure of the feasibility of taking a gap year and of the possibility of receiving deferrals at the colleges where they were accepted. Colleges and universities should consider the benefits of being more transparent about their deferral policies and options for students. In addition to this, colleges and universities are encouraged to further examine the existing in-house gap year programs or partnerships between universities and third-party gap year providers to explore the potential for future development of such bridge programs for incoming freshman.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

A myriad of opportunities could contribute to expanding this research in the future. Additional research should continue to explore the high school experiences that precede a gap year, higher education outcomes and persistence, and specific types of gap year experiences.

As this research has shown, a student’s high school experience can have significant impact on their decision to take a gap year. Further inquiry into the high school perspective leading up to a gap year could expand what is known about the reasons students in the United States are choosing to take a gap year. Such research should seek to illuminate the support systems and the action plans that are in place as students make their postsecondary plans. Particularly in the United States, where the gap year is less prevalent than in, for example, England and Australia, conversations with high school students and parents about their understanding of a gap year could add a much-needed layer to the conversation surrounding the educational culture in America.

Secondly, the landscape of the gap year in relation to higher education is a promising area for future research. Since college entrance is found to be a key constituent of the gap year
experience, longitudinal studies as well as studies that further explore the gapper’s higher education experience in comparison to non-gappers can continue to inform conversations surrounding the longitudinal impacts of the gap year in the trajectory of the student’s college experience. Participants in this study described noticing how different it was to be in a classroom after learning through the real world; thus, research conducted through educational or pedagogical lenses could prove useful in better understanding the gapper’s experience from the perspective of learning.

Finally, this research has confirmed the notion that not all gap years are created equal. Future studies might seek to replicate this study with a similar or selective group of participants, perhaps comparing the experiences and the outcomes. Given the lack of data on the prevalence of the gap year in the United States, a study designed to understand what students are doing during self-designed gap years could widen the gap year conversation and open it up to further practical implications.

**Conclusion**

In this study, the students’ motivations for taking a gap year and activities during that time informed the broader conversation surrounding postsecondary delay in the United States. This study included stories of seven individuals who had different gap year experiences, and it focused on the personal development that unfolded for each student. One of the key takeaways from this research is that the time off before college is valuable regardless of what the student does. While the participants’ motivations for taking a gap year and what they did were not put under scrutiny, they acted as important windows to the students’ levels of access and social capital. This research has offered insight into how a gap year can serve as a pivotal bridge before entering college. It reveals that gap year takers are a special group of people. Choosing to take
the path less traveled propelled these young adults into new spaces where they experienced themselves in wildly new contexts. The decision to take a gap year in and of itself suggests these individuals already had an inclination for self-authorship. One of the biggest contributions of this research is that this period of time off before college can be valuable in a number of different contexts. There was no indication that the students who had lived abroad and participated in structured programs experienced any greater impact than the ones who did not. Their experiences were different, but every participant experienced personal growth that was subjective to their life and their experience.

**Personal Reflection**

In a lot of ways, being a teacher felt like being a student. In the most obvious sense, my life as a teacher was characterized by a revolving door of semesters and summers. Prior to beginning my doctoral coursework, I had just stepped out of that revolving door and I found myself a bit disconnected from the world outside of the classroom. I had identified myself as a teacher for nearly a decade, and I never realized how hard it would be to separate myself from that which had been my reality for so long. After doing a lot of reflection, I began to wonder what it felt to be my students with the big expectation they face today of going straight to college after high school. I reflected on the fact that they know no other life than the one that is characterized by the academic schedule they have experienced for nearly 15 years. After 15 years on the merry-go-round of school, my students faced a tremendous decision as they juggled their own expectations, those of their parents, teachers, friends, and the pressures of society as a whole. I started to ask students: “Why do you want to go to college?” The most common answer was: “Because it’s what’s you’re supposed to do.” It was then that I began to question the “one
size fits all” approach and became more inquisitive about these young adults’ journey toward college.

Conducting this research has added several sheaths to my understanding of what high school graduates are experiencing today, and, as I move forward, it is my biggest hope to create a space where high school students will feel excited, challenged, and supported during their educational transition to college or the workforce. We live in a world too big, too bold, and too advanced for our students to not explore and discover their passions and pursue them in a way that makes educational and financial sense for them. It seems only fitting that we advocate for those who want to carefully weigh out the decision to go to college and that we inspire more students to explore their interests before making such a big educational investment. For many, it may make all the difference in how they persist in college and ultimately in their lives.
References


https://www.gapyearassociation.org/about.php


https://www.gapyear.com/articles/175601/the-history-of-the-gap-year


Vanderkam, L (2014, May 02). Put off college for a gap year. *USA Today*, p. 09A.


Appendix A

Sample Recruitment Letter

*Research Participants Needed*

*Did you take a pre-university gap year?*
Qualitative Study on the Gap Year Phenomenon

*Participant Eligibility*
Must be over eighteen years old.
Must have taken a gap year no more than 2 years ago.
Must be attending or planning to attend college.

*What will you have to do?*
Two seventy-five minute interviews about your gap year experience.

Email guidi.c@husky.neu.edu if you would like to participate and receive more information about the study.

This study is conducted under the direction of Karen Reiss Medwed, Ph.D. The protocol has been approved by Northeastern University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for human subjects in research.
Letter to Participants

The gap year phenomenon: Perspectives from students in the United States
Corinne Guidi, M.A., Student Researcher

Letter of Invitation to Participate in Research Study

I am a doctoral candidate in the College of Professional Studies at Northeastern University. My thesis research will be examining the gap year phenomenon in the United States. It is a qualitative study that will comprise of interviews with 15 participants. Its primary purpose is to learn more about the gap year phenomenon and how it is perceived and experienced by students who take them.

As someone who took a gap year, you are in an ideal position to give us valuable first-hand information from your own perspective. We are simply trying to capture your thoughts and perspectives on your gap year experience to better understand the essence of it.

Participation in this research will require that you join me for two interviews, each will be no longer than seventy-five minutes in length. The second interview will be mainly to check your statements and ensure that I have interpreted your responses correctly.

Your responses to the questions will be kept confidential as will your identity. Each interview will be assigned a number code to help ensure that personal identifiers are not revealed during the analysis and write up of findings. You will be given a pseudonym along with any organizations or institutions mentioned in the research.

There is no compensation for participating in this study. Participation is entirely voluntary. However, your participation will be a valuable addition to those who are working the front lines with students, gap year companies who want to better understand their participants, and high school students as they weigh out the pros and the cons of delaying college entrance.

If you are interested in participating or have any questions, please email me at guidi.c@husky.neu.edu and I will contact you for next steps.

Sincerely,

Corinne Guidi, M.A.

Ed.D. Candidate, Student Researcher
Informed Consent Form

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies
Principal Investigator: Dr. Karen Reiss Medwed
Student Researcher: Corinne Guidi, MA
Title of Project: The pre-university gap year: Perceptions from students in the United States

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research?
We are asking you to be in this study because you took a pre-university gap year.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this research is to help us better understand the essence of the gap year phenomenon and how students perceive their gap year experience.

What will I be asked to do and how much time will it take?
If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to take part in one semi-structured interview that will last no more than seventy-five minutes. A second interview lasting no more than seventy-five minutes will take place to follow up and cross-check the researcher’s findings. The total time for each participant is 2.5 hours.

Where will this take place?
Every effort will be made to accommodate a face-to-face interview with the participant at a time that is convenient for them. In-person interviews will take place in a location agreed upon by the researcher and participant. The researcher will allow the participant to choose the location and no interviews will be done in any of the student researcher’s workspaces.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
This research topic poses minimal risk to you. All measures will be taken to protect you as a participant before, during, and after the study. The researcher will use pseudonyms for all identifiers discussed to such as the participant name, their school name, and the name of the gap year program in which they participated (if any). The researcher will be the only person with access to the list of pseudonyms and will keep this list filed at home.

Will I benefit by being in this research?
Participants may not expect any benefits from their involvement in this research other than just taking personal interest in the subject and/or as a tool for self-reflection. This research does have the potential to influence the views that parents, students, and educational professionals have towards the practice of taking a gap year in the United States. The results of this study will contribute to the growing dialogue surrounding the gap year, but most importantly have a direct impact on professionals who are working the front lines with students, gap year companies who want to better understand their participants, and high school students as they weigh out the pros and the cons of delaying college entrance.
**Who will see information about me?**
Your identity as a participant in this research will be known only to the researcher. Your part in this study will be confidential and data will be safeguarded by the researcher. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or any individual as being of this project.

Interview data and transcripts will be stored in a password-encrypted folder on the hard drive of the researcher’s computer (not in cloud drives) and on a password protected USB flash drive for back up. The USB flash drive will be kept in the researcher’s locked file cabinet until after it is no longer needed. Files will be encrypted with a password to prevent anyone from opening the document or file without permission.

In some instances, authorized people may request to see research information about the study. This is done only to be sure that research is done properly. We would only permit people who are authorized by organizations such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board to see this information. All data collected for this research will be stored on the researcher’s primary computer.

The researcher will be the only person with access to the list of pseudonyms and will keep this list filed at home. Pseudonyms will be put into use from the transcription to coding. Data will be destroyed only after analysis has been completed and when the researcher no longer needs to access it. The audio recordings will be destroyed/deleted once they have been transcribed.

The pseudonym list of participants will be destroyed one year after the research is completed and signed consent documents will be stored in a file cabinet in the researcher’s home for three years following the end of the study.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?**
Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**
If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Corinne Guidi, guidi.c@husky.neu.edu, the person mainly responsible for this research. You can also contact Dr. Karen Reiss Medwed, k.reissmedwed@neu.edu, the Principal Investigator.

**Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?**
If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 490 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617-373-4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?**
Depending on the meeting location, the participant may incur cost for parking.

**Will I be paid for my participation?**
No remuneration will be offered to the participants of this research.

**Is there anything else I need to know?**
You must be at least eighteen years of age to participate. You must have taken your gap year within the past 2 years. You must be currently attending university or planning to attend.
Appendix D

Interview Protocol

Interview Questions

1) Tell me about your high school experience.

2) Tell me about your decision to take a gap year and how it came about.

3) How did it feel to be doing something different to the majority of your peers?

4) How did you decide what to do during your gap year?

5) What did you hope to achieve during your gap year?

6) Walk me through your gap year from beginning to end.

7) Describe a key experience that stands out in your memory.

8) Describe some of the key relationships that were a key part of your gap year.

9) Walk me through what happened after your gap year until now.

10) Describe for me how you feel you are different today because of your gap year.

11) Do you feel you achieved what you set out to do?

12) What advice would you give to someone who is considering a gap year?

13) Is there anything else you would like to share or add?
Appendix E

Participant Profiles

Nate graduated from a small private school in North Carolina in 2013. He took a gap year from August 2013 to May 2014. His decision to take a gap year was mostly due to the fact that he was accepted to his dream college as a Spring admit but he wanted a traditional fall start, so he deferred his enrollment and took a gap year. He spent his gap year living on his own and working in another state where his family had a second home. He enrolled in college in the fall semester of 2014 where he is still currently attending.

Zoe went to a large public high school in Georgia. As a consequence of suffering from depression, Zoe left high school a semester before her senior year ended. She still finished her diploma in time to attend college in the fall but decided to take a gap semester from August 2015 to December 2015 in order to sort some things out in her life and also because she didn’t feel ready for college. She enrolled in college in Spring semester of 2016. She spent her gap living at home and working. Zoe attended college for a year and is now on a pause to work and save money to purchase a car.

Alex graduated from a small public high school in Georgia in 2016. Alex applied to two colleges and was accepted to both but decided not to enroll due to transportation and financial reasons. Alex also did not feel mentally ready for college. Alex’s gap was from June of 2016 to August of 2017. During his gap, he did not do much the first two months after graduation but then got a job where he worked for a year. He lived at home with his father and worked full time and often worked forty to fifty hours a week. Alex started college the fall semester of 2017 and works part time in a new job. He is attending a 2-year community college that has a partnership with a large 4-year research university.

Paige graduated a semester early from a public suburban high school in Colorado in December of 2014. Paige was accepted into a small liberal arts college where she deferred her enrollment for the fall semester of 2015. Paige’s gap was from January 2015 to June 2015. Paige knew that she wanted to travel and discovered that there were so many options for going overseas. Paige worked with a gap year consultant in order to narrow down her choices and organize her trip. She spent her gap in two different countries with organized gap year programs. Paige attended college from August 2015 to May of 2016 but has since not returned opting instead to live overseas and apply to college in a foreign university.

Florence graduated from a medium sized public school in Massachusetts in 2016. Florence decided to take a gap year because she felt overwhelmed and needed a break from the educational treadmill. Florence applied early decision to college where she was recruited to play her sport. Wanting instead to take a gap year, she was able to defer her admission and keep her spot on the team. Florence’s gap was from June 2016 to June 2017. Florence spent September to December overseas on an organized program and also did an organized program overseas from late February to early April. In between the programs Florence worked to earn money and
traveled with her family. Upon returning from the second program, she traveled with her family, got a job and spent time volunteering. She started college the fall semester of 2017.

Rose graduated from a rural public high school in upstate New York in June 2014. She planned to go to college but felt that God was telling her it wasn’t the right time. When an opportunity to teach overseas appeared, she applied and got the job. Rose spent August of 2014 to June of 2015 overseas teaching drama in a small international school. When she wasn’t working, she had the opportunity to travel to other countries in the region where she lived. During her time abroad, she also wrote a book that has been published. She started college in the fall semester of 2015 at a small, private Christian college in Pennsylvania, where she is still currently attending.

Sophie graduated from a small private school in Wisconsin in 2016. Sophie felt that she wanted to travel and do something different and that she should do it before beginning college. She self-organized and self-funded her gap year. During the fall semester, she worked at a restaurant to save money and did research about where she wanted to go. She used a couple of websites to look into “woofing” (worldwide opportunities on organic farms) and finally narrowed down her choices. She traveled to Europe where she lived and worked on several farms for differing periods of time. While she was abroad, Sophie decided that she would not attend the college she originally planned to attend but instead another one that would be more affordable. She started college in the fall semester of 2017 at a small, public 4-year university in Wisconsin.
### Table 3. Psychological Meaning Unit Analysis for NATE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>P1 Meaning Unit</th>
<th>Meaning Unit Transformation</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Taking a gap year was always something that was on P1’s radar because his older sister took a gap year.</td>
<td>Taking a gap year was something P1 had considered because he was familiar with the concept.</td>
<td>Making the decision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The biggest reason P1 took a gap year, he was originally not going to even though his parents were pushing for him to, was because he got into his dream college but he was a spring admit meaning his first semester had to be in the spring. P1 didn’t want his first semester to be in the Spring, he wanted to have a traditional college experience. He wanted to live in the dorms.</td>
<td>P1 states that he was not originally going to take a gap year despite his parents encouraging it. P1 states that he got into his dream college and did not want to start college a semester later than the other students but rather he wanted to experience the traditional college experience of starting in the fall and wanted to live in the dormitories.</td>
<td>Making the decision, Applying to college before high school graduation, College acceptance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the back of his head, P1 knew that he wanted to take a gap year, so the biggest factor was the fact that he was a Spring admit but also it wasn’t a totally foreign concept to his family.</td>
<td>P1 states that in the back of his mind he had wanted to take a gap year. Not wanting to start college a semester later than typical incoming freshman was the biggest factor but P1 states that he was familiar with the practice of taking the year off.</td>
<td>Making the decision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The driving force was sort of an opportunity, P1 had a place to stay, had time, had youth, he had health.</td>
<td>When considering taking a gap year, P1 was encouraged by the thought that he had an opportunity because he had the time and accommodations and he was young and healthy.</td>
<td>Making the decision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P1’s parents were huge proponents of it (the gap year). P1’s mom still to this day she’s like ‘I told you that taking a gap year was good, I told you so’.</td>
<td>P1 states that his parents had positive feelings toward him taking a gap year. After his gap year, P1 recalls his mother reiterating to him what a good thing it was.</td>
<td>Parental support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initially it (the gap year) kind of sucked because P1 was and still is but to a bit of a lesser extent such a social person. P1 was around his friends 24/7 all the time and they were really close and really got along. So P1 went from being around his friends 24/7 to just being very alone and at first he hated that.</td>
<td>P1 expresses that the onset of his gap year was difficult because he was experiencing more solitude and less socialization with his friends than he had experienced in high school. P1 expressed that he disliked being alone in the beginning.</td>
<td>Experiencing time differently, Solitude, Change in social life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>P1 went from being one of the most social people he knew to just doing absolutely nothing.</strong> He went to a high school party and felt like a loser because he was like older than everyone and everyone was like ‘yo, what are you doing… did you not get into college?’</td>
<td><strong>P1 emphasized that his social life had dramatically changed.</strong> He recalls going to a high school party where others would inquire why he was there as opposed to college. This made P1 feel disappointed.</td>
<td><strong>Change in social life</strong> <strong>Grappling with outside opinions</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>P1 since grew to really like it (being along). This past summer he decided to go to Boston where he didn’t know anyone, this summer he’s going to be in Chicago, he didn’t know anyone, he didn’t know anyone going to Madrid this spring. It’s (being alone) it’s something P1 really did grow to like.</strong></td>
<td><strong>P1 states that he developed a favorable opinion of being by himself.</strong> P1 provides examples of experiences during which he traveled to big cities in the United States and one overseas with the knowledge that he didn’t know anyone in those places. P1 expresses that being by himself is something he has grown to like.</td>
<td><strong>Solitude</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Initially like it kind of sucked because P1 was working an internship and it was like a good exchange internship but it was a boring job. P1 was surrounded by people his parents’ age that didn’t really like their job.</strong></td>
<td><strong>P1 states that the onset of his gap year was not enjoyable because his internship was boring and he was surrounded by people older than him.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Work experience</strong> <strong>Unfavorable emotions</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>P1 had nothing to look forward to really like and that was the wrong attitude to have, but it was the attitude he had at the time, like of course he was taking a gap year, that’s an awesome thing, but he didn’t really realize that he would see his friends having fun on snapchat and he’d be like ‘this sucks’. P1 was just feeling pretty sad.</strong></td>
<td><strong>P1 recalls that he had nothing to look forward to. P1 is cognizant that that was the wrong attitude to have and also cognizant that taking a gap year was a great thing. P1 did not anticipate feeling sad when he would see on social media that his friends were having fun.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Unanticipated emotions</strong> <strong>Experiencing time differently</strong> <strong>Reflecting on one’s actions</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>P1’s friends were like doing all these like crazy college things and he would see it on like social media and be like ‘wow, like they’re having way more fun than me’</strong>.</td>
<td><strong>P1 compared his situation to that of his friends who seemed to be having more fun than him while at college.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Feelings of missing out</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Initially there was that, like that whole fear of missing out, it was like a recognition of missing out more so than a fear of missing out.</strong></td>
<td><strong>P1 recalls what he felt at the onset of his gap year. P1 states that he was cognizant that he was having a different experience than his friends.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Feelings of missing out</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>P1 knew that he wanted to spend the winter out west starting in December. And he went out there and it’s easy enough to find a job in a ski shop, so, he did that.</strong></td>
<td><strong>P1 states that he had a plan for what to do starting in December</strong></td>
<td><strong>Coming up with a plan</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The first thing P1 figured out was December through May, he had that locked down in like mid-August, and then, he was like ‘holy shit what am I going to do from mid-August until the end of November?’

P1 states that he made his plans but they wouldn’t begin for four months and this caused him to ask himself what he would do in the meantime.

Experiencing time differently
Need to feel useful/do something

P1 eventually found something, it started in like mid-September. He ended up working like, he didn’t know how, it must have been something like it was an acquaintance’s dad, and their parents were friends either, he doesn’t know how he figured it out, he thinks he sent out a lot of emails to people kind of shamelessly asking.

P1 couldn’t recall exactly how he figured out his internship saying that he possibly sent out emails to acquaintances shamelessly asking for it.

Finding work or activities

P1 worked like an accounting internship. It was really a good experience because from a professional standpoint because he learned that he doesn’t want to be in accounting ever.

P1 states that his internship was of an accounting nature. He considered it to be a good experience because it taught him that he never wanted to be in accounting.

Career clarification

From the time searching for something to when the thing started was the worst. Because the only thing P1 had to look forward to short term was, he’d go up and visit some of his friends at their college, and he did that for a weekend and it was fun or whatever but then he’d be like ‘shit, like I have no idea what I’m doing until December’.

P1 expressed feeling difficult emotions at the onset of his gap year while he was waiting to depart out west. P1 attributed his feelings to not having anything to look forward to other than occasionally visiting friends and feeling afterwards like he had nothing to do.

New unfamiliar emotions
Unfavorable emotions
Need to feel useful
Experiencing time differently

P1 literally didn’t know what to do. So, he taught himself web design, he tried to teach himself web design and like coding and stuff like that and he got like sort of far but he’s not that interested in it.

P1 expresses feeling uncertainty about what to do. P1 states that he explored teaching himself things such as web design and coding but discovered he was not that interested in it.

Uncertainty about what to do

P1 had never felt that way before and he had no idea what to do with like the new wave of emotions he was feeling. He hadn’t felt that way before and hasn’t felt that way since and he didn't know what to do.

P1 expresses uncertainty about what to do with new emotions he had never felt before.

New unfamiliar emotions
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>P1 didn’t really want to talk to anyone because all his friends were busy. His parents were, he didn’t really want them to like get concerned or anything not that they would have been concerned but he just wrote everything down how he felt. Everything he did, what he did, what he hoped to do the next day what he hoped to do next week like every small detail because he didn’t really have anyone to talk to.</th>
<th>P1 expresses not wanting to speak to anyone about his emotions. P1 states that he felt his friends were busy and expresses not wanting to concern his parents. P1 states that instead he turned to writing in a journal where he wrote about everything he did, what he did, what he planned to do. P1 states that he didn’t have anyone to speak to.</th>
<th>Coping with new emotions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>So, he just wrote everything down. And then he stopped. He thinks s, he doesn’t remember why he stopped. He thinks he was really kind of over it maybe you know maybe he was feeling a little bit better. But yeah, he kept a journal for like two weeks.</td>
<td>P1 states that he was journaling for two weeks and then just stopped for reasons unknown to him, he supposes it was because he was feeling more positive.</td>
<td>Coping with new emotions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P1 would start planning a lot earlier, that’s what he would have done differently. It’s tough because P1 knew that he was going to be out west so he knew if he was going to employers and be like ‘hey, look, I’m an eighteen-year-old kid, I’m here for August-November, P1 asked himself what use would he be to anyone really?</td>
<td>Reflecting on what he would do differently, P1 affirms that he would start planning for his gap year a lot earlier. P1 recognizes that leaving the planning too late made it more difficult to find an internship.</td>
<td>Reflecting on what he’d do differently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Throughout the whole year P1 changed so much, and he grew so much, he became like, way more self-sufficient and he was still living with his parents at the time, like he was getting groceries, cooking meals but like from a more emotional level P1 just became very self-sufficient.</td>
<td>P1 states that he changed throughout his gap year by becoming more self-sufficient. Despite being with his parents, he was getting groceries and cooking meals. P1 expresses that he became more self-sufficient at the emotional level.</td>
<td>Self-sufficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Towards the end of the year after P1 spent more time alone he became very comfortable being alone and he actually prefers to be alone now.</td>
<td>P1 states that he developed a preference for being alone once he became comfortable with it.</td>
<td>Self-awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoying solitude</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From a personal perspective, P1 grew so much because you kind of see who your true friends are.</td>
<td>P1 states that he grew personally by seeing who his true friends were.</td>
<td>Developing Values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P1 didn't really hope to achieve anything and he didn't look into it being like oh like he's going to develop these skills or anything. He didn't really think too much about it.</td>
<td>P1 states that he did not set out on his gap year with specific goals.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I hoped because my sister told me that she got way more mature so he guessed he hoped to gain maturity which he did, but he guessed he hoped to gain maturity and just general life skills.</td>
<td>P1 recalls his sister sharing with him that she had matured on her gap year, and states that because of this he hoped to gain maturity and just general life skills.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P1 would go back and he'd make himself dinner, and he would do laundry incorrectly and fuck up the dishwasher somehow. He had to choose what events and stuff he'd want to do on the weekends, he would do things like rarely on a weekend like on a social setting. So he was more so on my own socially. Like sixty percent literally but one-hundred percent socially.</td>
<td>While out west, P1 states that he did domestic tasks such as cooking, doing laundry, and doing dishes. P1 states that he often chose to be on his own socially and on the weekends.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The friends P1 developed out west were just a cast of characters they were so funny. They were all in their like late 30s early 40s. None of them had kids. And they like partied harder than ninety percent of the people P1 goes to college with. They were nuts. And, they were at, P1 didn’t know how appropriate this was but they were at some like big day drinking together. And P1 just got in there and was kind of looking around he was like ‘these people are some of my good friends’ ‘These people are 40 years old. P1 was eighteen, most people would just label them as ski bums. But like P was having the time of his life with these people, like he never thought that he would become friends with this you know, this crowd. But he found himself in that crowd and he found himself just loving it, how unique everything was and the way their life views were just so different than his. And he really benefited from being around them. And had he not taking a gap year he never would have seen that side of life he guessed.</td>
<td>P1 developed a unique group of friends who were much older than he. P1 became cognizant of how these individuals lived their lives and the different ways they viewed life (i.e. they did not have kids, they partied). P1 recalls a moment when he became cognizant that he had found good friends in these individuals despite the age difference. P1 states that being around these friends was beneficial to him and allowed him to see another side of life.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P1 was uncomfortably challenged for the first time in his life he wasn't like around, he wasn't in like a very tight knit friend group, that was a very uncomfortable challenge.</td>
<td>P1 states that it was new and challenging for him to not be around a close group of friends.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Not thinking about goals**

**Expectations for oneself**

**Choosing solitude**

**Self-care**

**Self-reliance**

**New relationships**

**Reflecting on one’s relationships**

**Seeing other ways of life**

**Experiencing new social setting**

**Socialization skills**
P1 just became friends with a totally different set of people. And like most of his challenges were all on a social standpoint. But, yeah that was, he definitely left his comfort zone becoming friends with those guys and he started hanging out with some kids on the Olympic ski team, the Olympic cross-country team. They took me on like some hikes and stuff and from a physical standpoint like that was I mean that was just an amazing experience. P1 hiked until he vomited like four times. haha Those kids were on a whole other level but, it's, it was just sort of, just putting himself out there for the first time.

Now that P1 thinks of it, he’d always just kind of been accepted and this was the first time in his life where he had to actually go out of his way to, to meet people and to become accepted. But P1 was an outsider into previously established social norms. And it was really tough to break in initially, it did take a while because P1 was pretty shy when he doesn’t really know anyone. But once he broke into everything it was really fun and it was awesome.

P1 is more comfortable with himself. He’s more comfortable. He doesn’t need another person’s validation as much as he used to. He still does, he’s still human. But, he used to kind of, he would always just value himself being like he had so much fun with his friends. Like he used to just kind of outsource self-esteem. He guessed that's one way of putting it. And that totally changed.

P1 went AWOL for a little bit, he deleted Instagram and Facebook and everything was very much in his own world and he was really at peace. It was really nice. He became a lot more comfortable with himself and who he actually was versus sort of just following what other people do because he had no one to follow. He had no one to follow you know like he had no one to imitate he had no trends to you know try to stay in tune with. He was just by himself. And it was really cool to see where that took him and it took him like, P1 is much more introverted than he was in high school.

| P1 states that he became friends with new people and doing so made him leave his comfort zone. Through is new friendships, he also got out of his comfort zone from a physical standpoint because some of them were athletes and he engaged in activities with them that pushed his physical limits. P1 affirms that leaving his comfort zone meant putting himself out there for the first time. | Socialization skills |
| P1 recognizes that he is more comfortable with himself which means that he does not need another person’s validation as much as before. P1 is cognizant that he has changed from being someone who looked to others for self-esteem to now being more comfortable with himself. | Self-awareness |
| Reflecting on his social nature, P1 states that he had always just been accepted and never had to go out of his way to meet people and gain their acceptance. P1 was cognizant that he was an outsider in the community and that he would need time to meet people. Once P1 overcame his shyness and met people, the experience was even more enjoyable. | Socialization skills |
| P1 recalls a period of time during his gap year when he kept to himself. He recalls removing himself from social media which he says was really nice and made him feel peace. P1 states that this brought him closer to himself and he became cognizant that he became comfortable with who he was because he had nobody to imitate. P1 recognized that this contributed to his becoming more introverted than he had been in high school. | Self-awareness |
P1 actually remembers it, he remembers his parents were gone and he was off work. He was fully alone out west, he had been in the groove of things. And he didn't really see anyone or talk to anyone for three days. Like the only times he'd talk to people was at the checkout at the grocery store and they'd say that's $10 and he'd say OK. And P1 was just feeling great. You know P remembers kind of just realizing how this is different than where he was six months ago, he’s not talking to anybody and he’s very happy not talking to anybody. It wasn't like a cognitive decision to just you know just shut himself off, he could have called or facetimed with his friends from college or his family or whoever would have talked me but he just realized that he was having a very good time without being around anyone.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>P1 vividly recalls a memory of being fully alone and actually enjoying it. P1 recalls that his parents were not present and that he did not have to be at work. P1 recalls three days during which he had minimal contact with people and became cognizant of the fact that he had changed from how he was six months prior. P1 recognized that he was happy not talking to anybody.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Self-awareness

Knowing how to be alone

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>P1 really does feel very comfortable with his peers and everything. Like he’s the class of 2018 in college. He’s a 2018 person, it just makes sense. In high school, he was 2013. But like, he never felt out of sync with his college classmates. He would say he has a better self-knowledge than most.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Favorable transition to college

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>P1 states that he feels comfortable with his college peers and does not feel out of sync with his college classmates except perhaps that he has better self-knowledge than most of them.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>P1 thinks he’s more truly open to alternate ways of living. And he thinks that's because he made friends with people that were like just in totally different situations to him. Like, older. Just like totally alternate perspectives. Like most people he grew up with you know going to his high school, they were all very much like on track like their parents are you know usually on track you know and everything is kind of by the book. But he became friends with these people that just approached life so much differently than he had seen it approached and he became more truly open to and accepting other ways of living life.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Seeing other ways of life

Becoming more open-minded

Learning through others

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>P1 states that he has become more open to alternate ways of living and attributes this to the different friends he made out west who had different lives and perspectives to his, were older, and approached life differently. P1 states that this contributed to his ability to be more open and accepting of other ways of living.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
P1 thinks what he needed was a change of scenery. He just needed to change scenery. He didn't want to be driving past the same things that he had driven past every day for his whole life, he needed a physical change of scenery because the first month or even month and a half out west, from a social perspective, were just as abysmal as it was in North Carolina just that it was still new like he was surrounded by mountains.

P1 states that he believed what he needed was to experience something new in his surroundings. P1 states that there were similarities in his social experiences during the first months of his gap year and his first months out west but a major difference was that out west he was surrounded by mountains so he was physically was experiencing a new environment.

The whole theme for P1, he thinks was all about the self. He guessed his eureka moment was he realized that like he had always looked for others to kind of bring him to a happy place and to, he relied on others like friends as well and like not so much his family, he just kind of relied on others as his support system so much. And he, he was always around such a tight group of people that he never had to look internally for any type of emotional support and when that disappeared, he guesses he started feeling bad and he didn't know how to cope with it. But there wasn't like one moment, he thinks over time, he just realized like he doesn't need anyone else’s validation as he’s happy and not you know obstructing other people's lives.

P1 states that his gap year was all about the self for him. P1 states that while on his gap year he became cognizant of the fact that he relied on others so much for support.

P1 became cognizant that he never had to look internally for any type of emotional support so when he experienced being alone he did not know how to cope with it.

P1 states that his change did not occur from any specific moment but over time he realized he was happy without needing others for validation.

Being separated from everything kind of gave P1 a fresh perspective like when he would update his Facebook profile picture and he’d get a certain number of likes, he felt really good about himself. And then he’s like ‘Wait that's like so superficial and shitty like why am I feeling good about myself that doesn't matter’. So that's definitely a perspective that P1 gained during the gap year, he kind of realized how superficial a lot of things are. But that being said, he still gets stuff like, he’s not above it, he just recognizes how shitty it is.

P1 states that being on his own allowed him to develop fresh perspectives that caused him to become cognizant of his own actions. He recalls how posting something on social media taught him to wonder why he felt good about getting ‘likes’ from people. P1 states that he began to recognize the superficiality of such things and what actually mattered.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Need for change of scenery</th>
<th>Experiencing a new environment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-awareness</td>
<td>Self-reliance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflecting on one’s actions</td>
<td>Developing Values</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It just makes so much sense to just take a year and kind of take a step back and like evaluate. And see if you like the path you're going down. See if you want to try anything else if you can get internships too because you can be like wow I hate this field and I was going to major in this like.

There's so many advantages to taking a gap year, like a lot of P1’s friends at school are international. And a lot of them took gap years as well, kids from England, Paris, Hong Kong, it's just normal for them.

P1 believes that it makes sense for someone to take a year to step back and evaluate their path or try a career on for size by doing an internship.

P1 believes there are advantages to taking a gap year and has met many international students for whom taking a gap year was the norm.

Positive opinion of the gap year

If P1 could do it over again he’d do the exact same thing, he’d take a gap year.

Reflecting on his experience, P1 would make the same decision again to take a gap year.

Positive opinion of the gap year

### Table 4. Psychological Meaning Unit Analysis – ZOE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>P2 Meaning Unit</th>
<th>Meaning Unit Transformation</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P2 didn't really know what she wanted to go to college for. You know like teachers and everyone they say you know like by your junior year you should be making plans for college, you know making the grade that you want to get into college sending in applications early admission, all that stuff. And P2 really didn't think that she needed to do that. She was like oh no her senior year because she didn't know what she wanted to do. There was nothing that called to her, she loved art but she wasn't prepared to jump into it. And she didn't know what she would do or where she would go.</td>
<td>P2 states that she did not know what she wanted to study in college or where she would go. P2 recalls the things teachers would say about making plans for college during junior year and making grades required to get in to a desired school or sending in applications for early admissions. P2 didn’t think it was necessary for her to do that and states that she just put it off to her senior year because she also did not know what kind of career she wanted to study. P2 states that nothing called to her, and while she had a passion for art, she wasn’t ready to jump into it either.</td>
<td>Uncertainty about the next step</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2 wanted to take a break to look at her college. And she was working at the time. She just took like six months, she took a semester, she started college in the spring instead of the fall.</td>
<td>P2 states that she wanted to take a break to think about college and spent time working. P2 took a semester and started college in the spring instead of the fall.</td>
<td>Needed a break from school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| In December of senior year she dropped out of high school. But then she started taking some classes that were, there was like a home school group where she just had to pass the final test so she did get her GED by that summer. | P2 states that she dropped out of high school and finished her final courses at home to obtain her GED by the summer. | Overcoming depression
Impact of mental health |
---|---|---|
| P2 left high school because she was going through depression and she had to start getting on medication pills. So she was just taking that time to relax and recover from that. | P2 states that she decided to leave high school because she was experiencing depression and began taking medication so she took time to relax and recover. | |
| P2 took a semester off because high school was really hard and she was feeling like she didn’t want to go back to a situation that was just like high school. She was failing a lot of her classes and she was afraid that if she went off to college she was just going to fail all her college courses and that sounded like a really big waste of money so she wanted to make sure that she was one-hundred percent into whatever she was going into. | When thinking about going to college, P2 states that she was cognizant of how hard high school was for her and she did not want to experience a similar situation in college. P2 was apprehensive about entering college because she feared the same failures she had in high school and wanted to be 100 percent sure she was into what she studied so that it would not be a waste of money. | Uncertainty about college
Feeling nervous about college
Feeling unprepared for college |
| P2’s cousin did it (a gap year) and she traveled around she stayed with people for a year. She visited relatives in South America. She had a fun time doing it. And P2 was just at home the whole time because she didn’t have a car. So she was just working and saving up for a smartphone because she didn’t have a smartphone. | P2 states that her cousin had taken a gap year and recognizes that her cousin’s gap year was different than hers in that she traveled and had fun. P2 was cognizant that her experience was different. P2 states that she was home a lot because she did not have a car and was working so that she could buy herself a smartphone. | Desire for different experience
Recognizing it could be different |
| P2 went and visited family after high school during the summer time, a lot of the time she spent helping her aunt move boxes because her aunt was moving so she would pay her like $50 a day to help her like pack up all the stuff in her house. And then P2 decided that she should get a job because she never had a job in high school and that’s something that she wanted, you know, to make herself feel useful and have money to spend on fun stuff. | P2 states that she spent time visiting family after high school and also helping a family member to move and made some money doing it. P2 states that she wanted to get a job because she had never had one in high school. P2 states that she wanted to feel useful and have money to spend on things she could enjoy. | Need to feel useful
Desire to make money |
| P2 started seeing a counselor. **Or kind of like a therapist. But she's technically she's a counselor and P2 went off to college and she took, you know, as far as depression goes, she got a lot happier, but then, she wasn't doing so well in her classes because she couldn't manage the course load and her classes, so she failed her classes again** | P2 states that she saw a therapist and went off to college where she got a lot happier but she could not manage the course load and this caused her to fail her classes again. | Coping with depression
Difficult transition to college |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>P2 did work on her social skills. She was a hostess so she greeted people and you know letting people in and saying &quot;Hi welcome, you can come right here with me, come sit down right here&quot; And P2 thinks before that she was more like awkward and awkward eye contact, she didn’t know where to look or what to say to you. So she feels like she grew in that way.</strong></td>
<td>P2 states that through her job she worked on her social skills by having to greet people and make eye contact. P2 is cognizant that before this she was more awkward in such situations and she feels that she grew by becoming better at it.</td>
<td>Social maturity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>And also more responsibility which she needed. Because before that she had like a two week job at and she was just late every day and then they fired her and then she was like ‘OK new job! Don't be late!’ and then she never was except for a little bit but they didn't fire her.</strong></td>
<td>P2 states that she grew more responsible which she recognized that she needed. P2 recalls having a job for just two weeks because she got fired for showing up late. Upon starting her next job, P2 recalls telling herself what to do to avoid getting fired.</td>
<td>Responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2’s counselor showed her that going through depression, like a journal is really important because she was forgetting the good things that she did and it was important for her to write down the way that she felt and things that she was doing. So she really didn't have one at that time but it would have been better for her if she did.</td>
<td>P2 states that her counselor emphasized the importance of keeping a journal through her depression in order to remember the good things she was doing and feeling. P2 states that she did not journal but recognizes it would have been better if she did.</td>
<td>Coping with depression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>P2 did feel like older and more capable then when she was in high school.</strong></td>
<td>P2 states that during her gap year she felt older and more capable than when she was in high school.</td>
<td>Personal growth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| But she still felt pressured into it like she had to get a move on now because all her friends are going to graduate and she didn’t want to go to college as an old person and she’s going to have to go to college some time and she might as well start right now. | P2 states that she still felt pressured into going to college because her friends were going to college and she didn’t want to be the old person in college. P2 has this notion that she has to go to college eventually. | Eventuality of college
Pressure to go to college |
| Gave her more confidence and some responsibility and she thinks that she wasn't responsible in high school and like now she feels like if she's paying for her own college she's going to try harder. And she's going to take more responsibility for her classes because it's something that she wants to do. | P2 states that her gap year gave her more confidence and responsibility that she didn't have when she was in high school. P2 believes that paying for her own college influences her to try harder and take more responsibility. | Confidence  
Responsibility |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P2 is working at this fast food place and she sees that guy and she sees that he's not making money and she realizes she doesn't want to work there forever. And then maybe she would pursue more of the things that she wanted to do and like take more responsibility.</td>
<td>P2 states that she looks at other people at the fast food place and realizes that she does not want to work in a fast food restaurant forever, she states that it has made her think about pursuing more of the things she wants to do.</td>
<td>Reflecting on career choices</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| P2 doesn’t think she was ready for college. | P2 states that she doesn’t think she was prepared to enter college. | Fear of entering college  
Being unprepared for college |
| P2 hadn't had a job in high school. She did not know the value of money. She just wanted to know more about things. | P2 states that she did not have a job in high school and therefore did not understand the value of money. | Learning value of money |
| After the summer, P2 did a lot of gardening, she helped her aunt move out of her house with some boxes. She learned that boxes were really heavy (laughter) and she felt pride, like she was doing something, strangely. | P2 states that she spent a lot of time gardening and helping a family member move. P2 recalls how heavy the boxes were and recalls feeling proud because she was doing something. | Feeling useful  
Having something to do |
| P2 had to make a big mental change, like adjustment. She had to at the beginning she felt like the world owed her something. And then when she got really depressed she had to make a change. And she had to decide that you know she wanted to be here. She had to make a conscious effort and do everything for herself. | P2 states that in order to be happy she had to adjust her way of thinking which was that the world owed her something. P2 recognized that she had to make conscious effort to do everything for herself. | Self-reliance  
Self-awareness |
| P2 had to believe that the world didn't owe anything to her. And she had to earn everything that she got and earn the privilege. Before then she had this attitude of oh, she needs this, or she doesn’t get to go to this party, she’s so underprivileged. .but really she wasn't, she had a lot of good things. | P2 states that she had to shift the way she understood her place in the world and that she had to earn the things and the privilege of having them. P2 states that she used to pity herself for not having what others had or being able to do the same things, but she became aware that she had a lot of good things. |  |
In the summer when she didn't know how to be happy, she just did a lot of stuff to make other people happy like bake cakes for her family members, she mailed a lot of cards to distant relatives. She did a lot of stuff for other people and it made her feel good to do stuff for other people.

P2 thought, she didn't want to do general education classes because she just came from high school and she just came from math and language arts, she wanted to go into art but she didn't know what she wanted to do with art yet. She thought maybe she would want to do some biology stuff because she did take an oceanography class which was really fun over the summer one summer. She didn't remember which summer. And that was a really cool trip.

P2 learned how much food really was. She learned that she had to make a more rigid, like a more structured schedule for herself that she wasn't the kind of person that just stays up all night, or, like she had to put things into order.

P2 wishes she could do it differently but doesn't know if she would succeed at it. She would have done it like better. She definitely would have done a lot more college research before she graduated high school and career research.

Table 5. Psychological Meaning Unit Analysis – PAIGE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>P3 Meaning Unit</th>
<th>Meaning Unit Transformation</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yeah that started actually pretty early on, as early as middle school P3 was kind of looking towards other options even for the high school years, she really wanted to go overseas.</td>
<td>P3 states that she was thinking about traveling overseas as early as middle school.</td>
<td>Desire to travel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For years P3 was looking at different programs to see how she could even go overseas before she graduated high school but then she thought about it and she thought if she went overseas for high school for a year and then she had to come back to the states she thought that she'd just hate it, she wanted to get done as soon as possible but she ended up graduating early from high school, a semester early in December, that was 2014 and she decided to take a gap year.

P3 had spent a considerable amount of time exploring ways that she could go overseas before high school but after more consideration, she wondered if she did that if she would dislike being at home.  P3 was eager to finish high school and graduated a semester early in December of 2014, and she decided to take a gap semester in the Spring.

The whole process was that they were kind of unsure of different programs and there’s so much stuff on the internet that you could choose from obviously and so that’s how they found the consultant to see if she could offer a bit more guidance so P3 went through a whole process of talking to the consultant about her interests and did all the things you know, her procedures and everything and then she came back with a few different options, and some of them were volunteer, some of them were paid stuff you could do and P3 ended up choosing an outdoor course overseas.

P3 states that the process of researching gap year programs was overwhelming so they found a consultant to get some guidance.  P3 went through a process with the consultant after which she received a few options that varied from volunteering to paid opportunities, but P3 ended up choosing an outdoor course.

P3 states that she had a different emphasis for her it wasn't so much like the whole high school experience idea as much as it was like a means to an end sort of thing like she had a different plan in mind and yeah it was more about what does she need to do right now to get her to where she wants to be and not so much like what is this experience here.

P3 states that she had a different emphasis in high school and for her it felt like a means to an end. P3 states that she had a different plan in mind which caused her to think more about what she needed to do to be able to travel rather than being focused on her high school experience.

So in the last semester or like the, what would be the first semester of P3’s senior year, she did all the applications and applied to like twelve or 13 schools which now just thinking back was so much overkill, when she went through the whole process and all that stuff, she applied to mostly private schools, she applied to, well the one that she ended up going to was her dad's alma mater which is a really small liberal arts school. But yeah most of the schools she applied to were similar to that kind of thing of liberal arts

P3 states that she applied to twelve or thirteen mostly private colleges at the onset of her senior year in high school.  She ended up choosing a liberal arts college which was her father’s alma mater.

P3 states that she applied to

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Desire to travel</th>
<th>Making the decision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Context of College</td>
<td>Applying to college before high school graduation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### EXPERIENCING A GAP YEAR

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>P3 didn't really have a whole lot of an idea of what she wanted. In that sense, she was just going for like a high caliber school and you know something that would get her, the money was a big factor in it, you know, she needed scholarships.</strong></th>
<th><strong>P3 did not know what she wanted in a college other than she thought it should be a high caliber school where one of the biggest factors was that she could get scholarships.</strong></th>
<th><strong>Applying to college before high school graduation</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>P3 thought she wanted a gap year in the sense that she wanted to travel. Like the idea of going overseas was really alluring to her. But the reason she thinks that she graduated early as opposed to just graduating on time and going, you know, taking a whole year out was like she kind of wanted to get a jumpstart on it but she also didn't want to be behind the rest of her class. It's like P3 felt very disconnected from her senior class or whatever but at the same time she didn't, she really liked the idea of graduating and then waiting a whole year to go to college while everyone else was going.</strong></td>
<td><strong>P3 thought she wanted to take a gap year because she wanted to travel. This idea was alluring to her. The reason she thinks she graduated early instead of on time and taking a whole gap year was so that she wouldn't be behind the rest of her class starting college. P3 states that she felt disconnected from her senior class but also didn't, she would have been ok with graduating with her class and taking a whole year while everyone was starting college.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Coming up with a plan</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>P3 thought if she just goes in December she can go for a whole six months or so while everyone is in school. She didn’t mind missing prom, you know, she didn’t mind missing all these things and she could be overseas and then go to college on time. She had this kind of time frame in mind which seems silly to her now you know she’s done a lot of mind changing in that time.</strong></td>
<td><strong>P3 states that she was weighing out the pros and cons of graduating high school early. She didn’t mind missing high school traditions in exchange for the chance to go overseas and return in time to start college at the same time as her peers. Reflecting on this, P3 is cognizant that she had a certain time frame in mind which seems silly to her now after all she has done.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Graduating high school early</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>P3 thinks it also had something to do with like being far away from home as well like she didn't necessarily just want to go away to college because that's what everyone was doing. P3 thought she wanted to be set apart a little bit and she wanted to go overseas because her dad had done it.</strong></td>
<td><strong>P3 states that taking a gap year had something to do with being away from home but expresses that it’s more than the kind of thing one feels when going to college, P3 wanted to be set apart and do something different.</strong></td>
<td><strong>Timing of the gap year</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>P3 didn't really care so much about the details. P3 was more just like 'yep I want to do this I want to go and I want it to be and I wanted it to be for you know, a period of time'.</strong></td>
<td><strong>P3 states that the details didn’t matter to her so much, she had it in her mind that a gap year was happening for her and that it would be for a period of time.</strong></td>
<td><strong>College context</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Need for a change of scenery** | **Experience a new environment** | **Desire for independence** | **Parental support** | **Making the decision** | **Parental support** | **Making the decision** | **Parental support** |

---
| P3 wanted that element of independence too like she didn’t like the idea so much the idea of going with a group as much as she liked the idea of being, or like she didn’t want to be with a bunch of other Americans. She wanted to be uh, kind of immersed in whatever she was doing she wanted it to be immersive. | P3 wanted the element of independence in whatever she chose to do, she wanted to experience being with people different to her. She wanted an immersive experience. | Desire for independence  
Coming up with a plan  
Choosing a structured program  
Reflecting on what one wants |
|---|---|---|
| P3 flew to another country, she flew to the capital and she was, the place that it was going to take place was three hours north on and on the north coast, it was going to be an outdoor program. She arrived in early January and we went up to where the program was which is a small part of country like more rural and not there's not as many big cities up there. People don't really know about it. | P3 flew overseas to where she would do the outdoor program. She arrived in early January and went up to where the program was taking place. The setting was rural and she described it as being unknown to most people. | Traveling alone  
New surroundings  
Starting a structured program |
| P3 went up there and the course was, there were like eight other non-local people on one side of the course and then the other half of the course had about twenty-five local people on course. So there was like a good mix of native people and non-native people and like we got really close because the town was small. | P3 states that there were eight other non-local people on her course and twenty-five local people on the course. She liked that there was a mix of outsiders and locals. | Favorable impression of a structured program  
Meeting new people |
| P3 started out living in a hostel with all of the other non-American people. And then as time went on she got to know more people in the course and actually moved in with two girls that were from the host country and they got a house together and lived out there. | P3 states that she lived in a hostel with the individuals who were local to the community where the program was taking place. P3 got to know more people on the course and eventually she lived in a house with two local girls from the program. | Socialization  
New living environment  
Sharing space with others  
Independence |
| P3 met a lot of Local people, she felt immersed like she was hoping to be immersed in the culture. You know she got to do a lot of things that she probably wouldn’t have gotten to do had she not been surrounded by all these local people. | P3 states that she met a lot of local people and felt immersed in the culture. P3 believes she was able to do a lot of things thanks to being around the locals. | Experiencing a new culture  
New relationships  
Cross-cultural socialization  
New experiences |
Mostly just the surroundings, you know like the observations about the exterior but also how she was feeling coping with it and she remembers one of the, she actually read it back recently to herself and realized that she was kind of like she had expected it to be very exciting and exhilarating and like it was in a lot of ways. But then also she realized that like one is still the same person that they are at home and one still has the same baggage. You still have the same ups and downs and emotions and all of that. And you know and you're in a completely different place and so it's even more different to deal with those things than it is in a familiar place.

P3 states that she wrote in a journal about her surroundings, the observations of the exterior but also how she was feeling coping with it. Reading it back to herself, she realized that the reality didn't really match her expectations. P3 states that it was exciting as she expected but was cognizant that one still feels the same emotions and carries the same baggage they would have at home. P3 was cognizant that she was dealing with the same internal issues in a different place.

Just because the town was small, you know, and drinking is a big part of the culture there and like, that's what you do. And P3 was young, you know she was seventeen when she got there and turned eighteen while she was there. So that was her first experience in bars and you know going out in that sense because it’s just, you know they don’t have the same culture obviously in the States. You just get to know people in different ways.

P3 states that drinking was a big part of the culture in the host country and since she was seventeen when she arrived, she had her first experience in bars while she was there. P3 reflected on this experience and how it allowed her to get to know people.

P3 had such a non-dramatic high school experience she was so, you know, low key about everything so, this was the first time that she had encountered real, you know, a person that really didn’t like her and that kind of thing like she had never really had to deal with that as much because she just laid low. But um, yea, the girls she moved in with and it's like one of them is awesome and they're still good friends, but the other one, they just had their challenges and she was, just didn’t think the best of P3, it's hard to explain. P3 thinks she handled it as best as she could. She’s like a very non-confrontational person and so she would, whenever things would kind of get awkward, they lived in a little three-bedroom house and P3 would just pack her bags up and she would go to a different part of the country for a little while and she would stay in hostels to kind of get away from it.

P3 states that she was non-confrontational in high school and not the dramatic type. While on her program, P3 states that she encountered an individual who had an unfavorable opinion of her and P3 was unsure of how to deal with those feelings.

P3 states that she coped with this by avoiding confrontation and traveling to a different part of the country for a while when things got awkward.
The program was great, the program had finished before P3 went to the second program. She did leave and then come back and that was like the program had finished by then and she was kind of just doing her own thing. She had a lot of spare time and she was just, you know, reading and writing and you know biking around and doing her exploring but she wasn't she wasn't in any kind of organized program at that point.

P3 states that she has a favorable opinion of the program. When P3 returned to the first country, the program had ended and P3 spent time reading, writing, biking around and exploring.

They did the course, the course itself, about three months long and then P3 went, she had a second component planned with the gap year consultant, like way in advance to go to another country after that and do like some language courses. She stuck with that and so and she was pretty sad to leave and so after the courses ended she left, went to the next country and stayed for about two weeks trying to do the language courses but after being outside every day and doing all that kind of stuff, she, you know, to be jumping right back into the classroom eight hours a day and it was like very intensive.

P3 states that her course last about 3 months after which she went to another country to participate in language courses which was the second component she had planned with the consultant.

P3 states that she decided to stick to her plan but discovered that she was feeling sad to leave the country she was currently living in.

P3 states that she only stayed in the second program for two weeks because it was too difficult to shift from being in an outside environment all day to doing eight hours of language courses.

P3 had never studied that language before and they were just only speaking it to her. P3 had no idea what was going on, she stayed with a host lady who also only spoke the language and that lasted for about two weeks and she realized that it was just like the juxtaposition of the two courses was just not really ideal.

P3 states that she had never studied the language she was learning in the second program. She felt lost. She stayed with a host lady who also was only speaking the foreign language to her.

P3 states that she found it difficult to transition to this new environment after having been mostly outdoors and with people who spoke her language.
P3 was pretty, she’d say she was pretty depressed for lack of a better word, she was just like hyper anxious which I'm kind of that way anyway, leaving overseas to come out of that whole, having to transplant into a whole new situation again after the last one was kind of you know tumultuous. Yeah it was hard. She hung out with the other English speaking people, she was supposed to be doing language lessons and she had never studied that language before, but yea, coming off an outdoor course, coming into a classroom setting, having to meet all these people all over again and not you know not knowing the language and not being able to you know go out to bars and like do that kind of and she was still feeling uncomfortable with the whole thing, she didn't appreciate it because she was stuck still wanting to go back to the first country and she had already made plans to go back anyway but she wanted to go back sooner.

P3 states that she felt depressed and anxious as a result of leaving the first program and shifting into the second program which was dramatically different in nature. To cope, P3 hung out with people similar to her with whom she could communicate in her own language. P3 states that the drastic difference in the two programs threw her off balance and she was uncomfortable with the sudden change. P3 recognizes that she probably didn’t appreciate it because she had developed an attachment to the previous country which caused her mind to be fixated on that experience as opposed to being in the present.

| P3 had no way of knowing that's how it was going to be, they planned it almost a year before that. And so, she ended up leaving that course and she traveled around on the trains and she had met some friends through a few friends from the program she went and stayed with them in their countries and did some things, so she took basically the train from one side of the continent to the other and back up for a couple weeks. And then she went back to the first country for the month of May. She stayed there for another month and then she ended up going home in June. |
| P3 states that she had no way of knowing the second program would not be a good fit for her. P3 made the decision to leave the second course and then spent some time traveling by train for a couple of weeks. P3 decided to go back to the country where the first program took place where she spent another month. |
| Managing expectations |
| Managing adversity |
| Coping with anxiety |
| Coping with unfamiliar environment / change |
| Changing the plans |
| Evaluating one’s desires |
| Making a decision for oneself |
P3 went to college in August and she was excited about it. Well, she had actually she had toyed with the idea of deferring her scholarship and not coming back. She was trying to stay overseas for longer but the paperwork didn’t work out and she needed to be back in the States to sort it all out. Uh, so she just decided to postpone that kind of thing and to just go into college and see how it went. She felt like comfortable with that idea. So, she started college. Um, and things were good. She really liked the school. So, yea, it was like, it was cool and P3 liked it a lot, and she really enjoy school and academics and stuff. So, she was doing political science mostly.

P3 states that she was excited when she went to college in August although she admits being tempted to defer her scholarship and wait longer before starting. P3 had wanted to stay overseas but the paperwork didn’t work out so she returned to the United States. She decided to start college and felt comfortable with the idea and really liked the school. P3 states that college was cool and she liked it a lot and was studying political science mostly.

Towards March time like during spring break P3 went on a trip because she really was missing the traveling and she was wanting to you know get back out there and do some more of it. So, she went to a neighboring country for the spring break and stayed in hostels and stuff and she had a mini like throwback to the whole travelling overseas and she was just like pretty sad to go back to school and didn’t really feel as much into it.

P3 states that she traveled to a nearby country for spring break where she got a bad case of wanderlust. P3 states that this caused her to feel sad about returning to school and diminished her interest in being there.

And so P3 finished up the year, and then this …she was talking to her dad about it and you know she had a lot of scholarships but not as much as she thought she was going to get and so they were still paying about a third of the classes for the school. Her parents are divorced but they’re splitting the cost and she had taken out some loans and had some Pell Grants and stuff like that but she was just kind of realizing that it was already mounting up and she was chatting to her dad about it and he just kind of threw the idea out there and he said – Why don’t you just go overseas and try to go to college there, or you know they do college for free over there for international students so she started looking at that idea.

P3 states that she finished her first year of college after which she engaged in a conversation with her father about the cost of continuing her college education there.

P3 states that her father suggested perhaps going to college overseas in order to pay less for school.

P3 states that she then started exploring the option of college overseas.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>P3 realized later she had missed the deadlines, she had just kind of really quickly decided that she was going to leave her college or at least take a hiatus for a year and see what happened. She decided that in June of last year and then worked for the summer left in August and she’s been gone since.</th>
<th>P3 states that she missed deadlines to apply to colleges overseas, but despite this she decided to leave her college to take another hiatus for a year.</th>
<th>Leaving college</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P3 was just craving like a new set of people and scenery and just like a new adventure basically didn't really feel like she was getting that as much in college.</td>
<td>P3 states that she was craving interaction with different people and scenery and a new adventure which she did not feel she was getting that much of in college.</td>
<td>Rationalizing one’s decision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The whole concept is the newness like you know just getting away out of her comfort zone in that sense. And being on her own for the first time truly like Living in another country, being you know, the foreigner and to just navigate the whole experience definitely tends to stand out.</td>
<td>P3 states that something that stood out for her after her gap year was the whole concept of experiencing something new such as being out of her comfort zone, living in another country and navigating the whole experience.</td>
<td>New experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That was one of the reasons that P3 wanted to go on the gap year in the first place because she worked so hard in high school back to back on everything and she felt like it was a race to the end and then she didn't even know really what to do with myself with all the free time that she had overseas and that she thinks that was a huge thing to grapple with, like she had felt for the longest time that she had been always busy.</td>
<td>P3 states that one of the reasons she wanted to go on the gap year was to have a break from school. P3 states that she felt school was like a race to a predetermined destination so when she was overseas she grappled with what to do with her free time because she had never experienced that.</td>
<td>Experiencing time differently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well it definitely added a huge element of independence to P3’s life, she feels, she had always felt independent but she thinks it was a way to put it to the test in the sense to know that she was capable of traveling solo, of, you know, problem solving in crazy situations because that always happens when you travel, it definitely, gave her more confidence to tackle pretty much anything at this point</td>
<td>P3 states that taking gap year made her more independent by allowing her to put her independence to the test by traveling alone and problem solving in crazy situations. P3 states that her gap year gave more her confidence.</td>
<td>Confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It also taught P3 a lot about the way that she interacts with people and maybe some of her social pitfalls.</td>
<td>P3 states that taking a gap year taught her about the way she interacts with people and what some of her social pitfalls are.</td>
<td>Self-awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When P3 first went overseas, she wasn't expecting to stay for longer than she was supposed to, she was supposed to stay for three months and then she was going to leave in April but just through the connections that she made and the fact that she really liked being over there and she started to shift a little bit and think or maybe she should defer, maybe she should stay.</td>
<td>When P3 first went overseas, she didn’t expect to stay as long as she did. As P3 realized how much she enjoyed being overseas, her thoughts began to shift and she began to question whether or not she should defer college for longer and stay overseas.</td>
<td>Discovering one’s place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>But then at the same time P3 felt like, you know, what would be the purpose of that like she doesn’t have a support system overseas yet, she doesn’t have, you know, a way to earn money and so what would be the point you know. And so she was definitely just, school was the focus and she thought oh well she’ll do school, she’ll get that done you know maybe she’ll study abroad during college or whatever but and then after that she’ll try to travel again. But like this would be her little stint before she just hunkers down and does her degree.</td>
<td>When considering her choice to stay overseas, P3 considered that she had a lack of support system overseas and the inability to work so she decided to start college. P3 imagined she would finish college and perhaps study abroad during college. She considered her gap year as a little stint she would enjoy before starting college and focusing on her degree.</td>
<td>Rationalizing one’s decision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3 doesn’t really talk to that many people from the states anymore she’s on Facebook and she sees people’s stuff and she has little interactions every now and then as people do on social media like a superficial level but yea, like that was another interesting thing too even the first time that she went overseas like just realizing who was actually interested in keeping up with her life and who was you know a close friend who was just someone that she knew at high school and so yea, that was eye-opening.</td>
<td>P3 states that she doesn’t really talk to many people from the states anymore. P3 states that she recognizes the superficiality of friendships and interactions on social media. P3 asserts that going overseas made her realize who her true friends were which was very eye-opening for her.</td>
<td>Developing values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She thinks it’s been really beneficial. She doesn’t know if she ever had like an end goal in mind and she still wakes up and feels like what’s going on. She definitely wouldn’t change anything about how the last couple of years have gone down and, but she definitely wants, she thinks she wants to live overseas, she doesn’t really see herself raising a family in America or living there long term, like that has been one major take away from the gap years.</td>
<td>P3 believes her gap year has been beneficial. She doesn’t know if she had an end goal in mind and occasionally thinks to herself what is going on. She would not change anything about how her life has transpired the past two years. P3 states that one of the major takeaways of her gap year is discovering that she wants to live overseas and that she doesn’t see herself living in America.</td>
<td>Positive opinion of gap year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Discovering one’s place</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| P3 thinks everyone should do it, she thinks it should be required. (chuckles) Especially coming from America. She thinks that we're just kind of isolated and depending on where you grow up obviously it's different but the fact that most people don't learn a second language and we just don't really have a great concept of what is going on in the rest of the world, she thinks it's a pity. | P3 opines that everyone should experience a gap year and that she thinks it should even be required. P3 states that depending on where one grows up they can be isolated and don't have a great concept of what’s going on in the world. | Positive opinion of gap year
| I saw that the pace was different and I realized oh I don't have to be stressed out I don't have to work the way that my parents did or I don't have to have exactly the same life that my parents did to be to be able to enjoy the same comforts, so that's been really nice, cause I went over there and there's a lot of like horticultural work outside and just stuff that was that was slower pace. People don’t have debt, they don’t have, they don’t have to go to college and pay all this money, you know it's just kind of the difference there, you compare and you realize oh, there is a different kind of way to see this. | P3 saw that the pace of life was different in the country she visited overseas. She made comparisons between the life her parents did and other ways of life she observed. She saw things like horticultural work which had a slower pace, she noticed people didn’t have debt or the need to go to college and pay so much money. P3 recognizes that as a major difference there, she compares it and realizes that there is a different way to approach life. | Experiencing new ways of life
| P3 states that the timing of her gap year was dictated by a broader idea that she had to start college at the same time as her peers. P3 states that she felt like she would be behind or doing it wrong if she did it any other way. P3 states that she thought it would be ideal to graduate early so that she could stay “on track” and go to college “on time”. | P3 states that taking a gap year felt like the right decision. | Positive opinion of gap year
| P3 definitely felt like it was the right decision. |
She thinks that she’d have been in a much darker head state had she not left college because she thinks she was pretty unhappy without even realizing that she was while she was there.

If P3 had not left college after the first year, she believes she would have been in a darker, unfavorable state of mind because she believes she would have been unconscious of her own unhappiness.

Confidence in one’s decisions
Looking at oneself objectively

You know like she had this weird kind of thing and the ultimate goal was to go a nice private school and she got that wish and that was a great experience and it was really high level of academics and everything, she enjoyed it but it wasn’t what she was thinking it was going to be.

P3 had a preconceived notion of what college was going to be like, and in many ways, it was a great experience which she enjoyed but P3 admits it wasn’t what she was thinking it was going to be.

Managing expectations

P3 realized the breadth of possibilities that are out there and that that is a little overwhelming sometimes because she knows that there’s so much that she can do, anything and that she has so many options, so it's narrowing down the options that's difficult especially at the moment but in general it's opened her to everything else and she thinks it's the most important thing ever.

P3 states that one of the most important thing her gap year did for her was open her eyes to the breadth of possibilities that exist for her life which she admits can be overwhelming and the most difficult part is narrowing down the options.

Realizing the possibilities in life

When P3 goes down to her former college to hang out with her friends down there it's still fun. She can go and have a good time and just catch up. But it's not real life. They’re just kind of going through a whole different thing, and P3 feels she can’t wait to leave in the end because she doesn’t feel like that is her place anymore.

P3 explains that when she goes to visit her old friends from college, she has a good time but she doesn’t consider it to be “real life”. P3 states that she is usually excited to leave because she doesn’t feel like she belongs there.

Discovering one’s place

Table 6. Psychological Meaning Unit Analysis – P4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>P4 Meaning Unit</th>
<th>Meaning Unit Transformation</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| So, senior year, his last year, the last few months, everybody was applying to college and everybody was asking about who is going where, and initially P4 was going to go ahead and go to college cause if he’s not going to go to school what is he going to do? | P4 states that during his senior year of high school the focus for everybody was on college. P4 states that initially he was going to go to college and says that he wondered to himself if he didn’t go to college what else was he going to do? | Uncertainty about the next step
Uncertainty about college
College context |
| So he applied to two colleges, and he got accepted to both and from then he made his decision that he’s just going to go to this one. | P4 states that he applied to two college and got accepted to both, he had picked the one he wanted to attend. | College acceptance before high school graduation
College decision |
|---|---|---|
| P4 got back the acceptance letters, he showed them to his parents but they didn’t seem too excited or anything, he thinks actually the first thing they asked him was, you know uh, how are you going to afford this? It didn’t seem, like, it seemed more of a negative tone than oh they’re excited for him, it was, how are you going to pay for this, you know… So, P4 feels like that messed him up a little bit. | When P4 received his college acceptance letters he recalls showing them to his parents who he described as showing little excitement to his news, P4 states that their first question was how was he going to afford it. P4 states that his parents seemed to almost have a negative tone and that had an impact on him. | Considering the college decision
Lack of parental support
Mixed emotions about college |
| Then after thinking about it and he was thinking – how was he going to get there everyday? or if he stayed on campus, he didn’t think he could actually afford to do that either. | P4 states that he went through a thought process on what going to college would look like for him. He asked himself questions like how he was going to get there every day and would he be able to afford staying on campus. | Considering the college decision
Rationalizing one’s decision
Evaluating one’s options |
| And but, he thought what really held him back going last year was the fact that in the back of his head he didn’t feel like he was completely ready to go. | Reflecting on his decision to postpone college, P4 states that in the back of his mind what held him back the most was a feeling of not being completely ready to go. | Not feeling ready for college |
| P4 thought if uh, really just in his head like everybody graduating at like eighteen, him and few others they graduated and they were still seventeen and he felt like that just messed with his head and he was just too young. He felt like, he couldn’t, he wouldn’t be able to keep up with everybody else. | P4 pondered the fact that most of his peers were eighteen when they graduated high school and he was only seventeen, for some reason he felt he was still too young and that he wouldn’t be able to keep up with everybody else. | Considering the college decision
Not feeling ready for college
Feeling too young for college |
| Academically he was doing ok, he wasn’t doing the best, he guessed you could say the most trouble he had was like writing essays and what not, so he felt like that would play a huge role in you know, in college and he felt like he wasn’t, you know, ready for that. | P4 reflected on his high school academic performance saying he was doing ok but not his best. P4 recognized that he had difficult with things like essays which he felt would play a big role in college and he did not feel prepared for that. | Not feeling prepared for college |
P4’s close friends, they were all going to school and they all seemed to be doing fine and he was fine too, you know like, he got accepted into two schools and but uh, they seemed like they had it all figured out, they were prepared for this next step. They just seemed very confident. And P4 felt like he didn’t have that same confidence. He thinks that’s what really held him back.

P4 describes how his two older brothers did not go to college and are just working. This inspires P4 to go to school more because he does not want to in the same situation as his brothers but perhaps doing something different and ‘better’.

P4 states that it felt different to not be able to see his friends as easily as he could during high school.

P4 states that he spent the first months after graduating high school not doing much and eventually trying to find a job. P4 describes how difficult it was to find a job so he didn’t work the first two months after graduating high school.

And then P4 found a job, he started, well he didn’t really find a job, um, his friends mom was just telling him that he should just work where she worked because they pay pretty alright and he’s been working there for actually a year now to this day.

P4 guesses his first thought was like he just has to find somewhere to work to occupy his time and be productive as well. And you know like everybody else he didn’t want to just spend a whole year not doing anything at all and at least progressing somewhere.

P4 states that one of his first thoughts was that he should find a job to occupy his time so that he was at least being productive. P4 was cognizant that he did not want to spend a year not doing anything at all. P4 felt that a job meant at least he was progressing.
P4 is really trying to push himself to go this year (to college) because he feels like, uh, he feels like he’s still not 100 ready to go, but he feels like if he doesn’t go this year, he feels like it’s just going to lessen the time...he feels like if he doesn’t go now, he’s not going to go ever.

P4 states that he put pressure on himself to start college after the year even though he still did not feel one-hundred percent ready to go. P4 feared that if he didn’t go to college at the end of the gap year that time would pass and he would never go.

Keeping college on the radar
Fear of putting off college too long

P4 actually changed his mind and he’s not going to go to either one of those schools. ...... And there’s, a community college, that one is more so, I guess community college terms, it’s a 2 year school, that one is more affordable than the other two, and it’s closer to where he lives. So it’s more convenient to go there and then transfer somewhere else after.

P4 states that he changed his mind about which college to attend and chose to attend a 2-year community college instead. P4 rationalizes his decision by saying it is more affordable and closer to where he lives. P4 concluded that is more convenient to attend that school and transfer somewhere after.

Reevaluating one’s college choice
Evaluating the cost of college

P4 started working with that company, the thing is, he felt like it has pushed him to want to go to school more. Like ninety-eight percent Hispanics work there, he’d say maybe half or seventy-five percent of them are actually undocumented, so, it really changed his views on people that don’t have the same opportunity as him working with so many undocumented people coming from mainly Mexico, like when he first started working there he was asked 3 or 4 times a week, but you’re going back to school? And every time they’d ask that he’d have to explain that he was gonna take a little bit of time off then go back to school.

P4 states that working where he has worked has pushed him to want to further his education. One of the reasons is that he worked with predominantly Hispanic people whom he said seventy-five percent were undocumented. P4 states that this has impacted him by changing his views on people that don’t have the same opportunities as he does.

Gratitude for one’s opportunities
New relationships
Seeing different ways of life
Empathy for others

P4 sees how much they work and how hard they work and they’ve been doing this their whole lives, you’re just working all the time you know, it’s hard, but uh, you know, it’s made him think, he doesn’t want to do this for the rest of his life, cause um, working, cause he works full time right now, he works forty to fifty hours a week.

P4 states that he observed how hard the other people worked and reflected on how they had been doing so for a long time. P4 envisioned himself doing the same and concluded that he did not want to do that job for the rest of his life.

Career clarification
When he started working there he was still seventeen. So, when he started working there it was pretty rough for him. Cause he wasn’t used to working as hard. Working a job where you have to move around a lot. And he wasn’t used to that. So, now he’s a little more used to it but he still doesn’t want to get used to it, you know he’d rather go to school, and get an education, and find another job where it’s not as demanding energy wise.

P4 states that he was only seventeen when he started working his job after high school and that it was difficult for him because it was a physically demanding job which he wasn’t used to. P4 recognized that he did not want to get used to what he was doing and that he was driven to go to school, learn more and find a job that required more mental energy than physical energy.

P4 has not a clear idea of what he wants to do, there’s a few things that he’s always liked, in my last year of high school, he would get into coding, websites and um, he would get into photo shop or digital design, and then he would also do his art on the other side and he got to do IT work, because he was in a program his senior year, for – it was an internship, with a state agency and they put me in the IT department which was really cool because he got to actually be hands on software, hardware, replace parts, so, he thinks in his senior year, he found all these interests that he does like, he doesn’t really know exactly what he wants to do, he has some idea of what he would like to do but not an exact clear idea.

P4 states that he has some idea but not a clear idea of what he wants to do. P4 recalled things he discovered in high school that he enjoyed such as coding, websites and graphic design. P4 states that he really enjoyed an internship that he had during his senior year in the IT department of a state agency.

The job he’s been working for the past twelve months has been more physically demanding you know it’s been more physical labor than anything else really, like it doesn’t involve counting you know it’s pretty basic. And he’d say the internship he did was more critical thinking you know, you have to be on your feet, like what are you going to do with this problem.

P4 compares his current job to an internship he had senior year recognizing that his job was more physical labor and the internship was more critical thinking and problem solving.

P4’s beliefs, morals, he guesses they stayed the same or got bigger, working with undocumented people, it made him think more about his stuff and what he needs to do for himself because he has an opportunity to do so, and you know, and he should take advantage of it because he can.

P4 states that his beliefs did not change during his gap year but that they grew in that he developed gratitude for the opportunity he had to go to college compared to others with whom he worked who did not have the same opportunities.
P4 feels like he’s grown more as a person, you know, he felt like he wasn’t fully prepared yet, you know and he’s not gonna lie, he still doesn’t feel one-hundred percent fully there yet, but he feels like he’s grown enough to start going back to school and facing all these challenges on his own, maybe not on his own maybe with some help. He feels just a little more confident that he can do something like this without someone needing to hold my hand all the time.

| P4 feels like he’s grown more as a person, you know, he felt like he wasn’t fully prepared yet, you know and he’s not gonna lie, he still doesn’t feel one-hundred percent fully there yet, but he feels like he’s grown enough to start going back to school and facing all these challenges on his own, maybe not on his own maybe with some help. He feels just a little more confident that he can do something like this without someone needing to hold my hand all the time. | P4 states feeling like he has grown as a person and while he still doesn’t feel fully ready he believes it’s enough to start college and start facing all the challenges on his own. He recognizes he may need some help along the way. P4 states that he feels a little more confident enough to go to college without someone needing to hold his hand. | Personal growth  
Developing Confidence  
Courage to go to college |

When P4 decided he was going to take time off he didn’t really have a plan of what he was going to do, um, you know, he heard about people not going, he’s just gonna work, yea, he thought most of it was just working and saving, he didn’t really have an exact goal of what he was gonna do. So he was still kind of lost, and he feels like he still didn’t really have a goal, like of what he was planning to do with his life, he just decided to start working and um, let time go by.

| When P4 decided he was going to take time off he didn’t really have a plan of what he was going to do, um, you know, he heard about people not going, he’s just gonna work, yea, he thought most of it was just working and saving, he didn’t really have an exact goal of what he was gonna do. So he was still kind of lost, and he feels like he still didn’t really have a goal, like of what he was planning to do with his life, he just decided to start working and um, let time go by. | P4 states that he didn’t have a plan for what he was going to do when he decided to take time off. He didn’t feel like he was the only one because he had heard about other people not going to college as well. P4 states that his only thought was he’d work and save money. P4 states that he was kind of lost at that time and didn’t really have a goal for what he was planning to do with his life so he started working and just let time pass. | Going in without a plan  
Uncertainty about one’s path / career  
Staying in the present |

Actually, well right now he’s just doing requirements. So he hasn’t picked out a major yet. So he’s just the general studies. But he’s planning for spring semester well before spring semester starts. He’ll talk to his academic advisor and they’ll change his major to maybe computer science.

| Actually, well right now he’s just doing requirements. So he hasn’t picked out a major yet. So he’s just the general studies. But he’s planning for spring semester well before spring semester starts. He’ll talk to his academic advisor and they’ll change his major to maybe computer science. | P4 describes that he is starting college and that he will start off doing general requirements. He is looking forward to spring when he’ll speak to his advisor and has plans to declare his major to perhaps computer science. | The transition to college |

He didn’t really look to anyone, he just kind of stuck to himself most of the time.

| He didn’t really look to anyone, he just kind of stuck to himself most of the time. | P4 states that during his gap year he really didn’t look to anyone and stuck to himself most of the time. | Solitude |
So there was this negative stigma towards going to community college and everyone preferred to go to a 4-year college and so, P4 thought the same way back then but you know when you think like that you’re not thinking clearly about everything, but once you put thought into it, it makes more sense, because it’s cheaper, it’s closer, it’s more accessible, yea that’s pretty much it. So once he actually thought about it made more sense to start off somewhere smaller and cheaper than wasting more money somewhere else where he could do that exact thing. It was a small campus but it was basically the same thing just a smaller version of it. So P4 didn’t understand the stigma, it was basically the same thing, that same feeling, the environment. you know people walking around, studying.

P4 states that there was always a negative stigma associated with attending the community college. Reflecting on this P4 recognizes that he felt the same way but has since found a lot of clarity in his decision to complete his first two years at community college. After putting thought into it, P4 concluded it was cheaper, closer, and more accessible for him so it made sense. He also evaluated the cost and realized it was more cost effective to complete his general requirements there where it would be much cheaper. He didn’t understand the stigma because he noticed everything was the same as a 4-year college, only smaller.

Rationalizing one’s decision
Evaluating cost of college
Reevaluating college choice
Making a new college choice

It was just a way to sort himself out mentally. Cause it was really, all in his head of that he wasn't ready. Um, when he started this semester he just tried, he kept telling himself that you know he’s not, that to not think that way, to stay open minded to what’s to come and what these classes are going to be all about, you know just try not to have a negative attitude towards everything. And be a little more optimistic about the situation.

P4 describes his gap year as a way to sort himself out mentally. Looking back, he knows it was just all in his head that he wasn’t ready. As he’s transitioned to college, P4 reminds himself to stay positive and to stay open minded for what’s to come and what he’ll learn.

Developing more optimism
Preparing oneself mentally for college

He saved a little bit, but um, some of it went to him buying a car and just uh, maintaining it, but he saved a little bit, but some went to the car and he’d buy my own groceries, pay rent, and stuff.

P4 states that he saved some of his money but also bought a car and would also buy his own groceries and pay rent.

Working as a necessity
Self-reliance
P4 has become a little more independent and responsible for himself – so in high school he never studied, he wouldn’t say never, but he never made time to go and study and say oh, during this time he’s going to go study this, or until he gets it, he’d just study a bit and say that’s enough. He guesses now since he’s been more responsible and independent and mature, he’s taken these things more seriously and you know, made time and put effort into these things to try and study more and what not.

P4 states that he has become more independent and responsible for himself. Reflecting on his meager study habits in high school, he now feels more responsible, independent and mature which has made him take things, particularly his studies, more seriously.

Independence
Maturity
Responsibility

P4 questioned it a lot. Because it was so physically demanding that he was questioning himself everyday if he really wanted to do this, but he guessed after his full year, he decided that he did not want to do it anymore, and he quit before he was even accepted to the community college, but since he was accepted to the other schools he was pretty sure he would get in, to this school so, he didn’t want to work there anymore, he was quitting regardless of his getting into the school or not, because he was a little fed up with it.

P4 states that when he was in his job he second guessed it all the time. After a year, even before he was accepted to college, he knew he didn’t want to work there anymore and took action on his feelings by quitting the job.

Making decisions for oneself
Acting on one’s emotions/desires
Listening to oneself

P4 guesses you could say it was very … really tough. He guesses you could say it was exhausting, physically and mentally because it was a lot of thinking. But he guesses you could say it was pretty successful since he’s in school now.

P4 describes his gap year as really tough. P4 attributes this to the fact that he was working a physically exhausting job but also to the fact that he did a lot of thinking.

Thinking about one’s future
Positive opinion of the gap year

Table 7. Psychological Meaning Unit Analysis – P5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>P5 Meaning Unit</th>
<th>Meaning Unit Transformation</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P5 had decided that she wanted to take a gap year “after” college because she just really loved to travel and she just wanted that time to take a break. But she didn’t think that she could take it before college because she was recruited to play a sport at college and she got in and applied early decision. But she never looked into it so she just assumed she couldn’t and she didn’t know anyone who took a gap year.</td>
<td>P5 states that she didn’t think she could take a gap year because she was recruited to play a sport in college and committed to her early decision acceptance.</td>
<td>Making the decision College acceptance before graduation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The thought of doing more schoolwork at college overwhelmed P5 and there were already so many things she had to do for school that she was just averse to it.  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>The thought of doing more schoolwork at college overwhelmed P5 and there were already so many things she had to do for school that she was just averse to it.</strong></th>
<th>P5 states that she was overwhelmed at the thought of doing more schoolwork in college after everything she had done senior year.</th>
<th>Needing a break from school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Doing something different than everybody else didn’t bother P5. It didn’t occur to her that it was a possibility.</strong> Because no one had done it before but she was excited that she was, she didn’t have to worry about picking classes or choosing a roommate or anything.</td>
<td>P5 states that she wasn’t bothered that she was doing something different than everyone else. P5 felt excitement that she was taking a gap year and not having to think about college classes or choosing a roommate.</td>
<td>Uncertainty of being able to take a gap year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>P5 was talking to someone about how she hated “accepted students” day at XYZ College, and she really didn’t want to go, and she said to someone how she wished she could take a gap year, and they just said, “why not”, and that’s when she started looking into it. To see if XYZ College would let her and see what kinds of things were out there.</strong> Cause she hadn’t heard of any gap year programs either.</td>
<td>P5 recalled a conversation she had with a friend during which she expressed apathy towards her orientation day at college and expressed that she wished she could take a gap year. When her friend replied, “why not” she was compelled to start looking into it.</td>
<td>Exploring the gap year possibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>P5 knew she wanted to go overseas. So, once she decided that, she only found two programs that went overseas where she wanted to go, and the program she chose was much better than the other one she felt.</strong></td>
<td>P5 states that she knew she wanted to go overseas to a specific continent. She only found two programs that went to the specific locations she was interested in so she narrowed it down to one.</td>
<td>Coming up with a plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>She just really wanted to do something that was really really different from where she was living.</strong></td>
<td>P5 states that she desired doing something that was completely different from what she had always known.</td>
<td>Experiencing something new</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>P5 went to another country for a month and a half in March, end of February, through beginning of April. And that was with a program.</strong></td>
<td>P5 went to a second program for a month and a half from late February through April.</td>
<td>Traveling overseas</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
P5 went to one continent, that was just September to December so that took up the whole fall. And then she got home, and when she was first home in December she just spent time with her family because she had been away for so long and it was the holidays. So, she really didn’t do anything, and then, she was a nanny for four weeks and then she traveled with her grandfather and with her stepmom and then to the second program for a month and half and she studied ancient medicine there and then she came home, took some time to spend with her family again, and she got a job and now she’s volunteering.

P5 states that she spent most of the fall on the first program and returned home in December. She spent time with her family during the holidays and also was a nanny for four weeks and enjoyed traveling with her grandfather and her stepmom. In her second organized program, P5 studied ancient medicine overseas and then came home where she spent more time with her family, got a job and also volunteered.

Well it’s all about experiential education so every project that they did, they’d discuss it beforehand, they’d read about where they were going, why they were going there, what the projects were, what the issues were. And they’d have discussions throughout the week and a follow-up session at the end, so she got a lot out of it.

P5 states that her first organized program was all about experiential education which meant they discussed their projects and learned about the places and the issues they were tackling. P5 states that she got a lot out of the discussions and follow-up sessions that took place throughout the week.

P5 just really loved working at the public health center, because the problems they were coming in with were just so simple but if you just gave them ibuprofen or an antibiotic it could change their life, kids were coming in with eye infections and when they’d give them an antibiotic, and their sight would be saved.

P5 states that loved working at the public health center. P5 began to understand that the problems people were coming in for were so simple that they were often treated with ibuprofen or antibiotics. P5 recognized how something so little could make such a big difference.

P5 kept a very detailed journal, she also kept a blog for her family. P5 didn’t reflect as much because she didn’t really know how to, but she guesses she learned how to do that more on the trip. So that was an important thing she got out of it.

P5 reflected some by keeping a detailed journal and a blog for her family. P5 feels that she didn’t know how to reflect but that the trip helped her learn how to do it.
On P5’s blog, she mostly just wrote what they did. Most of the time she would write about the craziest things that happened because she knew her family back home would appreciate that. She didn’t write about any dangerous things, but like there was like one day they were chasing a chicken that they were going to catch and eat so she wrote about that. In her journal, she wrote about everything that happened in the day so, it’s a very detailed record of her trip.

On her blog, P5 wrote about her daily activities especially the ones that were out of the ordinary. She didn’t write about any dangerous things, but enjoying sharing things like the day they caught a chicken that they were going to eat. P5 described her journal as a very detailed record of her trip.

P5 was just very much inspired by her instructor and her life and what she’s done with it and it just opened P5’s eyes to a different type of career one can choose which she thought was cool.

P5 states that she was inspired by her course instructor and pondered the fact that she had chosen such a fun career.

In the second country, the whole organization was run by local people so it was really challenging to work with them sometimes but that was also important that P5 had to learn how to trust them, even when, even in difficult situations she had to just forgive and still trust they’d make her experience worthwhile.

P5 states that the second program in which she participated was run by local people and it was challenging for her to work with them. P5 recognized it as an opportunity to learn to trust them and open herself up to the differences she was experiencing.

While she was there, she was staying with a host family that didn’t speak English, so establishing a relationship with them without words, was important and cool.

P5 states that on the second program she couldn’t communicate in English with the host family so she learned how to communicate with them without words which she found to be important thing she learned.

The support network P5 had while she was in one program was amazing, because everyone was going through the same thing so they could all talk about the common things and that was really helpful. In the other program, she was completely on her own, so it was really hard for her to find a support network, like the local people just didn’t understand why she was affected by the things she was affected by.

P5 compared the two overseas programs in which she participated saying that the first was organized and had a lot of people with whom she could connect. By contrast, P5 felt more on her own in the second program and had a more difficult time finding a support network. Because it was run by locals, she felt they didn’t understand some of the things that were affecting her.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>New experiences</th>
<th>Reflecting on experiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New experiences</td>
<td>Reflecting on experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeing other ways of living</td>
<td>Managing challenging relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialization</td>
<td>Cross-cultural understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing expectations</td>
<td>New relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing emotions</td>
<td>Favorable impression of a structured program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unfavorable impression of a structured program</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5 made a lot of great friends on the first program because they were all together for so long, there’s a lot of different kinds of people than people she’d meet otherwise which was kind of cool, so many different types of friends. In the second program, she found that the foreigners she did meet she was more similar to than expected because only a certain type of person goes and does that, so that was cool.</td>
<td>P5 states that she made many friends on the first structured program and attests this to the longer duration of the program. P5 enjoyed meeting different kinds of people who she felt she wouldn’t have met otherwise. What she enjoyed about her second program was that she had more in common with the other participants due to the nature of the program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5 didn’t question her beliefs, she might have matured them. She really liked learning about the local religion, she thought it was very very interesting, she likes some of the values from it, she’s not necessarily going to convert to it, but she thought it was, she was staying with a family of that faith and got to experience a lot of their traditions and she really appreciated that.</td>
<td>P5 states that she may have matured her beliefs but never questioned them. She enjoyed learning about the local religion and found it interesting and likes some of the values from it, she enjoyed experiencing some of the family’s traditions and she appreciated it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5 is confident that she can handle literally any situation that she’s thrown into. She supposes that she just knows how to step back and see that it’s not as big a deal, she knows the difference between, being in physical danger now because she was in physical danger at some points, so as long as she’s not in physical danger she knows that she can get through anything. Which she thinks is very valuable.</td>
<td>P5 states that after her gap year she is confident that she can handle anything she is thrown into. P5 states that one of the valuable things she learned was the difference between being in physical danger and not and learning how to handle that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5 is more excited to learn and she wants to learn about more things. Like, taking classes is going to be exciting this time around instead of her dreading it.</td>
<td>P5 states that she is more excited to learn and has developed a desire to learn even more. She is looking forward to college instead of dreading it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5 thinks she had to create goals in order for my parents to let her do it. But they weren’t relevant to, she thinks it was just because she was on the educational treadmill and she just needed to step back from the traditional system.</td>
<td>P5 states that she didn’t really set out with goals but felt like she had to put some forth for her parents to allow her to take the gap year. She affirms that the main driving force was her need to step back from academics and take a break.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There was points of the year where P5 was so happy and content, like more than she’s ever been in her life, like it just felt so right, but it only lasted maybe an hour. But knowing that that’s possible was really good, she really liked that.</td>
<td>P5 recalls a moment when she felt what she described as pure happiness, though she said it was short-lived, she learned that feeling that way was possible and she liked that.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
P5 was nervous with every decision she made. There was a lot of stress, even different kinds of stress, still though not as overwhelming as school.

|                  | P5 states that every decision she made her nervous and stressed. Despite this, she compares it to the kind of stress she experienced in school and said it was not as overwhelming. | Nervous about making decisions
|                  | Experiencing stress about decisions |
| Everything was so new. Like going on a group program, P5 was afraid that she wouldn’t like people, that it was so long, going so far, afraid for her health… but she thinks it was just a lot of emotions that were just different but it was refreshing that they were different. | P5 states that everything on her group program was so new, she wondered if she would get along with people, she feared she may get sick, she thought about being far from home for so long. She was experiencing new emotions and she found this refreshing. | Experiencing new emotions |
| It’s hard to not be learning hands on in a way that makes a difference. P5 found her priorities are in check since she now knows that how she does on one math test won’t affect the rest of her life, so she’s more at ease. | P5 states that it was hard to shift to college because she was not learning hands on the same way she was overseas. P5 states that she has a better understanding of her priorities after her experience and doesn’t see things in such a finite way. | Transition to college
|                    | Broader perspective
|                    | Understanding priorities |
| The transition to college has been interesting… she’s not into making “fake” friends because she’s used to having such meaningful relationships. College doesn’t offer the material she wants to learn about simply because it’s a privileged white school that ignores the real-world problems so that’s been frustrating. She’s happy to be in a place with so many cool opportunities and cool people though so she’d say it’s going better than she expected it to. | P5 describes the transition to college as ‘interesting’. P5 states a disinterest in making ‘fake’ friends because she has always had meaningful relationships. P5 feels that her college ignores real-world problems and labels it a privileged white school. Despite this, she is happy to be in a place with cool opportunities and people. | The transition to college
|                    | Developing values
|                    | Recognizing meaningful relationships
|                    | Looking beyond the self |

Table 8. Psychological Meaning Unit Analysis – P6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>P6 Meaning Unit</th>
<th>Meaning Unit Transformation</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| When P6 was in 11th grade her father decided to work in a new sector so she had to make this decision of whether she wanted to try to graduate early and finish high school in New York or if she wanted to do senior year in a new school which ended up being in another state and she decided she did not want to do that. P6 doubled up on classes, graduated a year early, and planned on going to college. | P6 describes the circumstances of her junior year of high school during which she learned that her father would be changing jobs and moving to a new state. This meant P6 had to decide if she wanted to graduate early and finish high school in her home state or if she wanted to finish high school in a new school. She decided to graduate early and also began planning for college. | Making the decision
| | Applying to colleges during high school |
She has family overseas doing medical work. So, her mom had mentioned a couple times she should go and home school they're kids. And she was like ‘crap no Mom I'm going to go to college’. And so that was totally her idea she was going to go to college.

| | EXperiencing a gap year
<p>| P6’s mother mentioned to her that she had relatives living overseas doing medical work and suggested maybe she could home school their children. P6 responded affirmatively that she was not doing that but definitely going to college. | Parental support |
| But this whole crazy college process, the deadlines were coming up, it was halfway through the year, and, but every time P6 stepped foot on a college campus she felt like disgusting and she was like ‘this is not where she can be right now’. And she thought maybe it’s just this college. So, she traveled all over the United States looking at different colleges and each one she just felt disgusting and she felt she just couldn’t be there…there's no way she could do it. She absolutely couldn’t do it at all. | P6 recalls the college application process as one that was crazy and riddled with deadlines. She was touring colleges and describes the sensation she felt when she visited college campuses. She could not explain what it was she was feeling, just that she felt disgust and that she simply couldn’t be there. Something inside of her was telling her that she shouldn’t do it. | Questioning decision to attend college |
| P6 started praying about what she should do. And she was like OK she’ll look into maybe going overseas and homeschooling her cousins. But it wasn’t something that she was super passionate about. It was more like she couldn’t go to college, so what else is she going to do? | Not knowing what to do with her adverse feelings about college, P6 turned to her faith for answers. She felt compelled to look into going overseas as her mom had suggested. She wasn’t passionate about the prospect of homeschooling her cousins but she also knew she simply couldn’t go to college. | Coming up with a plan |
| P6 emailed her relatives and they told her that they were actually sending their kids to a school that spoke English and that she should apply, so they sent her down this road of “I don’t really want to do this but let’s see what happens”. So, she looked on the school website and on their hiring page, and they were looking for a drama and speech teacher. And she thought ok great, she could actually get excited about this. | P6 emailed her relatives and they made a suggestion that P6 wasn’t crazy about but she pursued the suggestion which was to apply to be a teacher at a local English-speaking school in the foreign country where they were living. P6 got excited about the prospect of teaching drama or speech over there. | Exploring options |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>She emailed the director, that principal, and she was like ‘Hey, I’m interested, they took her resume, she was sixteen years old, they took her resume, interviewed her over the phone, the whole board voted on it and she was voted in to be the head teacher of that class which was like crazy. Um, but because she was her, she was like super excited, and she was like oh my gosh this is the best thing ever, so she started to get really pumped.</th>
<th>P6 emailed the director of the school abroad and sent them her resume. She was cognizant of her age which was just sixteen years old but recalls how that they took her resume, interviewed her, and she was voted to be the teacher of the class. She felt that most people would have been astonished and nervous but because of her nature, she states that she was excited and couldn’t wait for it.</th>
<th>Stepping into an adult role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When P6 was getting ready to go over there they also asked if she could teach science and choir and then if she could do kindergarten for one student so kind of like home school her and if she could teach English to local children, and she was like “OK, sure whatever she’ll see what happens”. So, as time progressed, she got super excited about it, um, she packed up all her stuff, her family moved to another state, and she moved overseas.</td>
<td>P6 states that when she was getting ready to go overseas, the school asked her if she would be willing to take on more responsibilities. P6 accepted and went in open-minded. When P6’s family moved to the new state, P6 packed her bags and traveled overseas.</td>
<td>Responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6 thinks it was a lot of God, of just the year that she spent overseas was the best year of her life so far. And she loved it and she was it was really impactful for her and it was also really cool to be in a situation with all those kids and getting to impact them from a level of she’s only eight years older than some of those people, but she did have more experience in some areas. So that was really cool, and all the opportunities she got in the country, like talking to locals and everything. So, she really like genuinely believed that it was God like pushing her away from college just for the experience to go overseas.</td>
<td>P6 attests a lot of what transpired during her gap year to God. She has fond memories of her time there and it impacted her life to be teaching kids and having an impact on them especially since she was only eight years older than some of them. She loved the community and interacting with the locals where she was living. As she reflects on the memories, she believes God was pushing her away from college so that she could have that experience overseas.</td>
<td>Strengthening one’s faith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Having an impact on others</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A lot of it was excitement and peace. P6 had so much peace overseas like there was no question in her mind that that’s where she should be for that year and getting ready for it, she was so excited, she looked for different curriculums to use for her job there and especially the drama and speech one but they didn’t have any, she found stuff for science, but for drama teacher she got to create her own curriculum, and all the worksheets and all the tests, the lesson plans and everything was like one-hundred percent from scratch, um, it was just so fun, so there was a lot of excitement about that.

And there was some, there was a little bit of fear just because of where she was going. Especially being seventeen and moving overseas and kind of saying “sayonara family” it was a little bit - there was a little bit of fear in that. But she was so excited again and such peace when she got there. There was only one time the entire year that she wanted to go home and it was when she was like completely sick, like throwing up like all the time because she had eaten something bad, and there’s no toilet so, you just find a garden somewhere. So, like that was the only time that she ever wanted to go home.

Cause yea, it was such joy and such peace, with little pockets here and there, some self-doubt, especially in the classroom with some of the people only a year and a half younger than me, you know, wondering what’s the dynamic going to be like gaining these people’s respect but also still not acting like she’s thirty years old, but acting like a seventeen-year-old who can handle this. And working alongside a team of adults who had taught for years and years, and kind of like figuring that whole dynamic out but everyone was so wonderful and she really fit in and it was just really great.

<p>| A lot of it was excitement and peace. P6 had so much peace overseas like there was no question in her mind that that’s where she should be for that year and getting ready for it, she was so excited, she looked for different curriculums to use for her job there and especially the drama and speech one but they didn’t have any, she found stuff for science, but for drama teacher she got to create her own curriculum, and all the worksheets and all the tests, the lesson plans and everything was like one-hundred percent from scratch, um, it was just so fun, so there was a lot of excitement about that. | P6 states that she felt mostly excitement and peace when she was living overseas. She never second-guessed her decision. She rose to the challenge of becoming a teacher. | Responsibility Working overseas |
| And there was some, there was a little bit of fear just because of where she was going. Especially being seventeen and moving overseas and kind of saying “sayonara family” it was a little bit - there was a little bit of fear in that. But she was so excited again and such peace when she got there. There was only one time the entire year that she wanted to go home and it was when she was like completely sick, like throwing up like all the time because she had eaten something bad, and there’s no toilet so, you just find a garden somewhere. So, like that was the only time that she ever wanted to go home. | P6 states that there was a little big of fear just before going as she was just seventeen and about to move so far from her family. Her fear disappeared when she arrived overseas and she felt excited and peaceful. She recalls only one time wishing she could go home because she was very sick and had to get through it in third world living conditions. | Nervousness and fear about new environment |
| Cause yea, it was such joy and such peace, with little pockets here and there, some self-doubt, especially in the classroom with some of the people only a year and a half younger than me, you know, wondering what’s the dynamic going to be like gaining these people’s respect but also still not acting like she’s thirty years old, but acting like a seventeen-year-old who can handle this. And working alongside a team of adults who had taught for years and years, and kind of like figuring that whole dynamic out but everyone was so wonderful and she really fit in and it was just really great. | P6 state that she occasionally experienced some self-doubt as she took on a new role as teacher to students who were not that much younger than her. She wondered what the dynamic would be like with her students and hoped she could handle the role and that she would gain their respect. She wondered how she would be treated by seasoned teachers and was pleasantly surprised at how wonderful everyone was and how she was able to fit in. | Feelings of self-doubt in a new role Managing new relationships |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experiencing a new culture</td>
<td>P6 states that she jumped into a new culture and fell in love with all of the different traditions they had. She recognized that people had so much less than what she was used to back home and noticed their generosity when they would invite her in their homes and offer her all they had.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appreciation for a new culture</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeing how others lived</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiencing a new culture</td>
<td>P6 lived with a local family overseas for a couple of months, she was cognizant that she had to be very sensitive to the new culture and their lifestyle and traditions. She states that she had to be always cognizant of what she was doing and saying.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding how one’s actions are perceived by others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensitivity to another culture</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeing how others lived</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Started college in the fall</td>
<td>When P6 got home, she spent time with her parents before starting college in August.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spending time with family</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed a personal project</td>
<td>P6 wrote a book during her gap year which was one of her most memorable experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completed a personal project</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengthened faith</td>
<td>P6 states that her time abroad was really strengthening because she was surrounded by spiritual warfare, so for her it was a strengthening experience in her own faith.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

P6 was kind of jumping in the culture and falling in love with everything about the culture, with the really conservative dress code, with, these bizarre religious traditions that everyone had which were super oily foods, because everyone is so poor that they have to have this really bad for you food, which, just to sustain energy, so like falling in love with everything and just the people have absolutely nothing, and you know, from the very first day she would walk down the street and they were like “oh my gosh, come in, come in and have tea” and they would make me tea and give me all the cookies they would have in the house and you know so it’s just kind of this super wonderful culture.

P6 lived with a local family, for couple months, um, which was really cool, so that was like right there learning the language in the home like always having to be like very cultural minded because when she lived with her relatives they still had you know American traditions they would do American things but living with a local family was very much like always on, always thinking about what she was doing, what she was saying, that was really cool.

When she got home she spent the summer with her parents and then she started college in, that fall in August.

She wrote a book in that year, so that was kind of a whole, going through the whole process, and figuring out what she, like if she was going to write this thing, how to write it, and then having the support from the entire community, it was just a really cool process, figuring it all out, learning how to put all of her thoughts into a book. So, very cool.

So, it was really a strengthening experience. There was a lot of spiritual warfare. There was a lot of difficulty but it was definitely strengthening in her faith.
And then she got to college and she realized just how different she was from most of the kids on campus. You know, these people who would come straight from high school. And she had so many great friends who did come straight from high school, but it was definitely a feeling of – she had done these things, she had been a teacher, she had written a book, she had done all these different things that normally adults do, and they’re still worried about how they’re going to do their makeup for the first day of school? Like ok, she thought about that too, that’s fun, but it was just like that’s all they would think about – so there definitely was a discord in that and figuring out how to interact with these people who didn’t, who hadn’t, some of them hadn’t left the state and a lot of people at the school were from right around there at the college, and some people had never left the state.

When P6 got to college she states that she realized she was different than most of the kids on campus that had come straight from high school. P6 experienced feeling different in that she had been a teacher, she had written a book, she had done things normal adults do and her peers still worried about how to do their makeup for the first day of school. P6 felt a discord in the perspectives she had and the perspectives the other freshman had, she was cognizant that she had had experiences that they probably couldn’t fathom because some of them grew up near the college and had never even left their home state.

Reflecting on one’s differences
Reflecting on one’s maturity

Upon starting college, P6 reflected on the fact that she had been to 20 countries and reflected on all of the experiences she had and the ways she made an impact on other people’s lives in a third world country. P6 recognized that her experiences had challenged her and changed her in ways that high school simply doesn’t. In college P6 was able to connect with other people who had taken gap years which helped her process things. She was cognizant that she was experiencing culture shock.

Experiencing culture shock
Adjusting to college
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comments</th>
<th>Extracted Text</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P6 thinks she has a greater respect for the world and for other people. Um, yea she thinks there’s definitely like this respect of understanding that wherever she is, whatever she is doing, it’s important to help someone, but it’s not going to change the entire world. It’s not going to ruin anything huge you know. I mean that the world is such a big place. There’s so much you can do just by being loving by when a neighbor comes over needing to talk, sitting down and talking with them even if you have a thousand things need to do for the next day.</td>
<td>P6 states that her gap year gave her a greater respect for the world and for other people. She learned the importance of helping others while keeping in perspective that even the smallest actions can make a difference even if it doesn’t change the world. P6 realized the importance of offering one’s time to someone in need and putting herself second.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect for others</td>
<td>Respect for the world</td>
<td>Developing Selflessness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect for time</td>
<td>Respect for people</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect for people</td>
<td>Appreciation of diversity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6 thinks she has a greater appreciation and respect for people, how everyone’s story is different. She has greater respect for time.</td>
<td>P6 states that the has a greater appreciation of time and respect for people and how everyone’s story is different.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6 thinks it’s a huge part of her education, now as she approaches college, knowing that she had a different experience, and there were a lot of people that she’s working with and mentoring, they did and all they know is school.</td>
<td>P6 sees her gap year as a huge part of her education as she approaches college and she is conscious that she has had a different experience to most people starting college who know only school.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appeciation for learning</td>
<td>Appreciation for learning outside the classroom</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other than wanting to be a good teacher, P6 didn’t set out with any specific goals because she felt like goals led to feeling overwhelmed or disappointed. P6 preferred to approach her gap year hoping to be the best version of herself she could be.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6 wanted to be a good teacher. She wanted to make a difference in any way but she wanted to learn and she wanted to grow. But she didn’t have any specific goals because you know when she sets goals she’s either disappointed or overwhelmed and she’s better if she just goes in wanting to learn and to grow, so she thinks that’s just what she wanted to achieve would be the best version of herself that she could be.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A time without goals</td>
<td>Keeping an open mind</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6 definitely grew, she definitely grew. Whether that’s because she got older, or because she had to be an adult because of the experience she’s not sure, um, but she definitely grew – she definitely did make a difference which sounds like a super egotistical thing, but she still gets emails from some of my students like, there’s something that she said in class …. So, she does think she did achieve what she set out to do without even having necessarily goals.</td>
<td>P6 states that she grew during her gap year and feels like she made a difference, getting emails from her former students makes P6 feel like she achieved what she set out to do even though she didn’t set out with specific goals.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making a difference to others</td>
<td>Growing as a person</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
You're not going to come out the same person. And even if it's just like a gap year working at home, you still become more of an adult.

P6 states that anyone who takes a gap year will likely change during their time off. She believes that even a gap year spent working will mature someone.

And P6 thinks she has a greater appreciation from everything she’s learning in the classroom, for every relationship she’s forming at college because she took a gap year, so she thinks that you do learn a lot about who you are when you're not confined just to living class by class to the next day.

P6 states that because of her gap year she has a greater appreciation for what she’s learning and every relationship she is forming at college. She states that one learns a lot about oneself when not confined to a classroom.

Table 9. Psychological Meaning Unit Analysis – P7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>P7 Meaning Unit</th>
<th>Meaning Unit Transformation</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The idea kind of stemmed from a program P7 did that was her senior year of high school and as she was applying for colleges and stuff she just like she wasn't too excited to go to college and she just thought that if she had the opportunity to see something else beforehand that she should take it because like once one graduates high school and goes to college and they’re in college then they have to wait until like after they’re done to go and do anything.</td>
<td>During her senior year P7 participated in a special program where she had had conversations with people about not being too excited for college and wishing she could do something else before getting tied down by college.</td>
<td>Making the decision, Grappling with finiteness of college years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P7 went to a college preparatory school. They were just really drilling it into them, about going to college and getting into a really good school and their counselors would recommend these schools and they were all so expensive and like a lot of her friends were able to look at those schools and see it as a reasonable thing to go to them. But it's like unless she got like thousands and thousands of dollars in scholarship money it didn't seem worth it. Everyone who was getting into the schools was like being really happy about it and P7 was kind of like, it wasn't her thing to do.</td>
<td>P7 states that her school was drilling college into its students and pushing them to go to really good schools many of which were expensive and not really within P7’s financial reach. P7 didn't think it would be worth unless she had thousands of dollars in scholarship money. P7 noticed how everyone was getting into schools was happier than she was, she just felt like it wasn’t her thing to do.</td>
<td>Considering the cost of college, Evaluating college decision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>P7</strong></td>
<td><strong>Before her departure</strong></td>
<td><strong>Coming up with a plan</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P7 was freaking out because she only had 2 of her host plans planned out. And then also she was also nervous about making a plane ride across the ocean, like this is really impractical thing like her mind going through, what if this happens, what if this happens, what if this happens. … And she kind of she was kind of nervous that like something happened to her family while she was gone.</td>
<td>Before her departure P7 was nervous because she only planned a part of her stay. She was also nervous about making the plane ride across the ocean and running hypothetical situations through her mind about the unknown. She even thought about her family and felt nervous that something could happen to them while she was gone.</td>
<td><strong>Nervous about the unknown</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before P7 left, she was working and planning but she’s not that good of a planner so, she was working in a restaurant. She was bussing and also serving. And yeah, she wasn’t that good of a planner so she would say only like one third of her trip was planned.</td>
<td>P7 was working in a restaurant before she left on her trip. She admits she wasn’t a great planner so before she departed only one third of her trip was planned.</td>
<td><strong>Traveling alone, leaving family</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She was really excited and nervous and there was like so much, she really had no idea what she was getting into.</td>
<td>P7 states that she was both excited and nervous and had no idea what to expect.</td>
<td><strong>New emotions</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It was very confusing, she went to the airport and she landed in once country and then she had to get to another city. So yeah, she ended up spending the night in the first country, and taking the train the next day, and then she spent the night in the other city for a night and then she took a bus and then another bus to this city where her host picked me up because the place she was staying at was a village with only like 40 people who lived there.</td>
<td>Upon arriving overseas, P7 had to get herself to the village by taking a couple of buses. The village was small with very few inhabitants.</td>
<td><strong>Experiencing a new environment</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P7 stayed there for about four weeks and then she had her second job or work way thing already set. But even when she set it like months before she had a feeling that it was too soon. So, she actually ended up asking her host family if she could come back after she went to the second job.</td>
<td>P7 stayed at her first work way for four weeks after which she had to head to the next experience she had planned. As she had expected, she wasn’t ready to leave the first work way so she asked if she could return after her second experience.</td>
<td><strong>Making decisions for oneself</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It was through a program called X and you teach English so we were teaching English too. There were volunteers from all over the world and they were between like 19 and 25, and they were teaching kids that were between twelve and eighteen and that was a weeklong program and it was in another country.</td>
<td>P7 describes the second program she participated in where she was teaching English with other volunteers from around the world. They were teaching kids who were between twelve and eighteen and it was in another country.</td>
<td><strong>Taking on a new role</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>EXPERIENCING A GAP YEAR</strong></th>
<th><strong>New relationships</strong></th>
<th><strong>Responsibility</strong></th>
<th><strong>Evaluating one’s desires</strong></th>
<th><strong>Work experience</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Coming up with a plan</strong></td>
<td><strong>Nervous about the unknown</strong></td>
<td><strong>Traveling alone, leaving family</strong></td>
<td><strong>Nervous about the unknown</strong></td>
<td><strong>Coming up with a plan</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>New emotions</strong></td>
<td><strong>Anticipating the unknown</strong></td>
<td><strong>Experiencing a new environment</strong></td>
<td><strong>Traveling alone</strong></td>
<td><strong>Coming up with a plan</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Making decisions for oneself</strong></td>
<td><strong>Taking on a new role</strong></td>
<td><strong>Taking on a new role</strong></td>
<td><strong>Evaluating one’s desires</strong></td>
<td><strong>Taking on a new role</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Taking on a new role</strong></td>
<td><strong>Responsibility</strong></td>
<td><strong>Responsibility</strong></td>
<td><strong>New relationships</strong></td>
<td><strong>Responsibility</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>New relationships</strong></td>
<td><strong>New relationships</strong></td>
<td><strong>New relationships</strong></td>
<td><strong>New relationships</strong></td>
<td><strong>New relationships</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It was really cool. All the kids were so sweet and well at first it was kind of scary because it was an English immersion program so they weren't supposed to speak their native language at all and some of them were not comfortable and they weren't comfortable with us either. They didn't even know who they were. So, the first few days were definitely a little awkward especially with the younger kids definitely like liked her a lot. But some of the older like teenage boys you know they were definitely more reluctant to just open up to her and especially because they might have been embarrassed because they couldn't speak English very well you know but by the end of it everyone you know the last day everyone was crying, she wasn’t crying but all the kids were crying and taking pictures with them and adding them on Facebook and asking them for their snap chat and all that. So, it was really cool.

P7 describes her experience teaching English as really cool and recalls how sweet the kids were and how scary learning English was for them at first. She recalls that it took them some time to get comfortable especially some of the older teenage boys. By the end of it, P7 states that all the kids were crying and taking pictures with them and adding them on social media.

Managing relationships
Making an impact on others
New experiences

When P7 returned to the first country she enjoyed getting to practice the foreign language she had spent six years learning in middle school and high school. She states that her hosts were great at immersing her in the culture and teaching her regional phrases in their language. P7’s first work way was her favorite thus she stayed there the longest.

Practicing foreign language
Experiencing a new culture

P7 didn’t do volunteering the whole time she did volunteering for the most part and then she also just stayed in bnb’s by herself as a tourist. A friend actually canceled on her after they bought the Airbnb and her ticket and everything. So, she just was in another country for a week by herself. And that was really fun because she had an Airbnb and she was used to staying in hostels or something or just like staying at someone’s house where you have to you know work for your stay there. So, it was pretty relaxing and she just got there like she went to the National Art Gallery and just toured.

P7 didn’t do volunteering the whole time but also traveled and toured. A friend cancelled on her one time so she proceeded to travel to the city by herself for a week. She enjoyed staying in an air bnb by herself which felt like a nice treat compared to hostels and her work way where she had to work for her stay. She states it was relaxing and toured and did things like art galleries.

Spending time alone
Traveling alone
Taking time to relax
P7 tried to keep a journal every day. There was a lot of times where she was like a month behind in her journal. That was mostly when she was in in the first country. She was not alone that much like they were working a lot and when they weren't working they were like cooking or drinking or going out. They spent a lot of time partying and playing music and going on walks and stuff. So, by the time she was in bed ready to write she was exhausted. She also kept like an artistic journal like a sketch book. And she also took a Polaroid camera with her so those were like three ways she was documenting her travels.

When P7 was alone she would a lot of times be looking up stuff for her next destination you know places to go how she was going to get there. Like looking on Google maps looking up to get that kind of stuff that actually took up a considerable amount of time because she was looking for the cheapest tickets and that kind of stuff

When P7 had time alone, she spent time looking up where her next destination would be and figuring out how she was going to get there. She used things like Google maps to explore and states that it took considerable time since she was looking for the cheapest tickets.

P7 was accepted into College and she had deferred a year. She told them she was taking a gap year. But then while she was on her gap year it was probably only like a month after she was in the first country. She decided not to go to that college because of financial reasons.

P7 was accepted into college before graduating high school and deferred her admission for a year. But while she was on her gap year, a month into her trip, she decided not to attend that college because she felt it was too expensive.
P7 had to pay for the gap year by herself, she had to pay for college by herself as well so she was kind of - she actually remembers this moment pretty specifically she was walking down she was walking down a street in one of the nearby cities and she was thinking about how you know once she came back and went to college she wouldn’t be able to go out and do this for a really long time because she’d have to get a job right away to start paying off student loans and she was saying she didn’t know if going to one of the schools she really wanted to go to and a nice location and away from home because the other school was out of state, she’d only been there once. It was like one of her favorite places ever. But she didn’t think it would be worth it.

Her whole high school career she was always thinking she’s got to get away from home she’s got to get away from home. She thought she’s got to go out and see the world. P7 felt like four more years will be worth you know being able to go out and see the world for the rest of her life because she’s not tied down to tens of thousands of dollars of loans.

P7 has a vivid recollection of the moment she decided not to attend the college she originally planned to attend. She began to think about the notion of going to college and afterwards having to pay off her student loans and began wondering if it would be worth it just because she really liked the school.

P7 felt that she could handle four years of college, that it would be worth it as long as she didn’t have tens of thousands of dollars to pay back. She wanted to be able to get back out and see the world after college.

The village was honestly out of a fairy tale book or something like every single person she met had just like there are there are all characters you know, they all had something special about them. And they all really liked her for some reason, she made a really good impression with them. And she thinks it’s because like her attitude or her demeanor was something that they weren’t used to like this village is filled with most people are over the age of fifty you know and then some eighteen-year-old little girl comes in who likes to draw and smile … my whole family, my host dad and my host mom. They were all super awesome.

P7 described the village where she lived as something out of a fairy tale. She described the people as characters who were all special in some way. She felt like the people in the village, who were much older, enjoyed her presence. She wondered about how the others might perceive her. She had a favorable experience with her host family as well.

Evaluating one’s college choice
Evaluating the cost of college
Rationalizing one’s decisions

Experiencing a new culture
Experiencing a new environment
New relationships
Seeing different ways of life
It was awesome, they would wake up around 9:30 and everyone would have breakfast and coffee and then they’d go out. She remembers like maybe the first day she was she was painting like the inside of the mountain house - and in winter she was there winter and that was mostly pruning the olive trees and the almond trees. It wasn’t until like early spring and then when she came back later in May that they were working on the vineyard. But we also she did a lot of like firewood collecting. They did indoor construction. She killed a chicken.

P7 describes what a typical day was like for her at her work way and some of the things she did. They would wake up around 9:30 and everyone would have breakfast and coffee and then they’d go out. She remembers painting the inside of the house one day and pruning the olive almond trees. In early spring when she returned she worked on the vineyard. She states that she also did firewood collecting, indoor construction and she even once killed a chicken.

For the physical, it was it was really hard to be discouraged or anything because everyone around her was so excited about doing the work and they were also really good at it. But the mental, it was definitely hard, you know first adjusting to being in someone's home. And like she remembers them telling her horror stories of horrible guests that came and then ended up digging and seeing a pipeline or something so at first, she felt like really kind of like she was walking on eggshells you know she didn’t want to break anything, and at the same time the kind of life that they’re living like in a village in the middle of nowhere is that it’s you have to be a lot more aware of things than you know her living in the United States of America.

P7 states that physically it was hard to be discouraged because others were so excited about doing the work and they were good at it. Mentally, she states, it was definitely hard such as adjusting to being in someone’s home and feeling like you’re walking on eggshells in the beginning. She was cognizant that she was living somewhere completely different than home and would need to be more aware of things.

P7 was just happy that she was doing what she wanted to do. Instead of a lot of people who she knew would say they wished they could do something like that or they wished their parents would let them do that or blah blah blah blah blah. So, she was glad that she was actually doing it.

P7 states that she was just happy to be doing what she wanted to do instead of others who said they wished they could or wished their parents would let them, so P7 felt happy that she was actually doing it.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>New experiences</th>
<th>Adjusting to a new environment</th>
<th>Minding one’s actions</th>
<th>Learning new customs</th>
<th>Respect for others</th>
<th>Listening to oneself</th>
<th>Being happy with one’s decision</th>
<th>Feeling empowered</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
P7 didn’t believe she was actually doing it until she was doing it. And the funny thing is, is that all of her worries that she had like while she was prepping for her trip like once she was actually in the situation even if it was a stressful one she wasn't thinking about how you know how scary it was or anything, she was just thinking that she needed to get to the next the next destination like and it didn't matter. It didn't matter that she was eighteen or that she was by herself, she just it was just like … she doesn’t really know how to explain it.

P7 states that it didn’t seem real that she was taking a gap year and carrying out her plans until she was actual doing it. She realized that once he got there all the worries she had while preparing for her trip, she realized even if it was scary or stressful, she would just focus on the present moment to get through it. She didn’t focus so much on the fact that she was eighteen or alone, she doesn’t really know how to explain it.

P7 definitely feels more confident. She feels a little sad because she is just stuck in her hometown right now. But she feels happy that she knows people from seven different countries all over the world that she can visit again someday. So that's cool. P7 feels like she gained a lot of knowledge and confidence and experience that she wouldn't have otherwise. And she feels proud of herself that she made it back in one piece and was able to make so many great connections with people and have so many positive impacts on people.

P7 states that she definitely feels more confident. She also feels sad because she is stuck in her hometown right now. Despite this, she feels happy that she knows people from seven different countries all over the world and that she can visit again someday. P7 feels like she gained a lot of knowledge and confidence and experience that she wouldn’t have otherwise. She feels proud of herself for taking care of herself and making it home safely and that she

P7’s total trip only cost her like $5000. Which pretty much could have been split in half if she didn’t like tour all the countries she was going to if she just mostly stuck to like maybe added one more homestead. It could have been like maybe 2500-3000. She just wanted to add that – like pretty much anyone could do it if they really want to and they can pay for it themselves.

P7’s total trip cost around $5000, she states this could have been half the price if she hadn’t toured and stuck to her homesteads. She thinks it could have cost more like $2500-$3000 if she had. She states that pretty much anyone can do it if they just have the desire and if they can pay for it.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Experience</strong></th>
<th><strong>Feeling</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Confidence</strong></td>
<td><strong>Being in the present moment</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>New knowledge</strong></td>
<td><strong>New experiences</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pride for what one’s done</strong></td>
<td><strong>New relationships</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Making an impact on others</strong></td>
<td><strong>Pride for funding her own trip</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Belief that anyone can do it</strong></td>
<td><strong>Positive opinion of the gap year</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
P7 thought was really important and it might have made this trip cost a little bit more money but taught her a lot of things was just go with the flow of things like she only planned her first two homesteads. And just by meeting people and hearing where they had been and hearing what they recommended and all that sort of stuff like it has led her to other places like the place she stayed in the last country. A woman in the village actually told her about it because when she was woofing she went there and she really liked it.

P7 states that it’s really important for her to share something that she learned a lot from. She is cognizant that it may have made her trip cost more, but she adopted the attitude of just go with the flow and by meeting people and hearing where they had been and getting their recommendations, it led to her choosing the other homesteads. One of the homesteads she went to she learned about from a woman in the village because the woman had had a great experience there and recommended it.

P7’s parents know that she’s pretty independent person in some sense but they also were excited for her to be forced to be more independent because she kind of did rely on like her sister and her parents for a lot of things. Mostly likely rides and stuff like that but they were excited that she was organizing it all and doing this on her own and she thinks they were kind of worried about her sense of responsibility and stuff but they definitely thought, like when she came back and her stepdad was like he could already tell she really matured.

P7 states that her parents have knowledge of her independence but they were excited for her to be forced to be more independent because she did rely on her sister and her parents for a lot of things. They felt excited that she was organizing her trip on her own and P7 thinks they may have worried about her sense of responsibility, they definitely thought she had matured when she returned home.

When P7 got home it wasn’t like she needed to get back into routine. It wasn’t until like a month of summer of her just sitting around and working and then she was like Ok, now she’s ready to get into school. Being eighteen and traveling around like even though she got a lot of compliments from people and stuff saying she was mature and blah blah blah, she still definitely felt like there was a lot for her to learn. Of course, through life experiences too, but just like going to school and learning other stuff about other countries and cultures and stuff like that.

P7 states that when she got home from her trip, she began to get excited to go back to school after about a month and a half after being home during which she was sitting around and working. P7 felt ready to get back into school. P7 states that while she was traveling she got compliments from others about how mature she was, but in her mind, she still had a lot to learn. She recognizes that there is a lot more to learn through life experiences, but she was cognizant that there was a lot to learn at school about other countries and cultures.
P7 learned a lot about perseverance she would say, so getting through something even though things are hard, she’d also say that just like her overall sense of maturity just communicating with other people might be greater than an incoming freshman or she’s also a year older. But as if she was an incoming freshman last year and she’d probably be a little more nervous talking to people.

P7 learned from being with all sorts of different people what they’re doing with their lives and that there are so many different ways to live. You know, there’s not just this one way that’s the right way, which is getting a job or you make money and then you get a house and then you have kids. So, she just saw so many alternative lifestyles and it really took a lot of the pressure off she had to you know lead a particular sort of life. So that’s cool.

P7 was feeling more appreciative of them (her family), and when she’d meet new people and they’d ask her about her family and then she’d you know describe them and tell stories about them it kind of like gives one a different perspective. Kind of like you’re looking at them in rose-colored glasses. And she was with a bunch of people’s family and never with her own. So, it's pretty easy to get homesick because you’re watching people interact with people that they love and stuff.

P7 remembers having conversations around the dinner table, mostly about historical events and she just knew so little. Like right now she’s in a geography class right now because she wants to know more, and wants to be able to have conversations with people.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perseverance</th>
<th>Maturity</th>
<th>Socialization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P7 learned a lot about perseverance during her gap year. She learned how to get through something even though it’s hard. She feels she has grown more mature in the way she is able to communicate with others compared to other incoming freshman.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P7 states that she learned just how many ways one can live their life. She realized that there is not just one way that’s the right way, or the prescriptive way known as getting a job, making money, buying a house and having kids. She was able to see so many alternative lifestyles that it took pressure off her feeling like she had to lead a certain type of life.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P7 was feeling more appreciative of her family while on her gap year. Telling stories about them gave her a new perspective and sometimes nostalgia.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P7 recalls having conversations around the dinner table where others were talking about historical events and she felt she knew so little. She realized how much more she could learn.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater appreciation for family</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to learn more</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P7 definitely knows more about what she wants to do and what she doesn’t want to do as far as her job. She thinks before college while she still had an idea, she was still pretty confused. But she was thinking more about stuff like engineering and computer science. But now through the experiences she had, she really realized that she has to be outside for a job.</td>
<td>P7 states that she has a better idea of what she wants to do as a job. She states that she used to think about studying computer science or engineering but because of her gap year experiences, she realized that she wants a job that is outdoors.</td>
<td>Career clarification</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>