

2013

Minding the Gap: Impact of Pre-College Gap Year on Transition to College

Julie M. Cline

Follow this and additional works at: <https://pillars.taylor.edu/mahe>



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cline, Julie M., "Minding the Gap: Impact of Pre-College Gap Year on Transition to College" (2013). *Master of Arts in Higher Education Theses*. 109.

<https://pillars.taylor.edu/mahe/109>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Pillars at Taylor University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master of Arts in Higher Education Theses by an authorized administrator of Pillars at Taylor University. For more information, please contact pillars@taylor.edu.

MINDING THE GAP: IMPACT OF PRE-COLLEGE GAP YEAR
ON TRANSITION TO COLLEGE

A thesis

Presented to

The School of Graduate Studies

Department of Higher Education and Student Development

Taylor University

Upland, Indiana

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

by

Julie Marie Cline

May 2013

© Julie Cline 2013

**Higher Education and Student Development
Taylor University
Upland, Indiana**

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Thesis of

Julie Marie Cline

entitled

Minding the Gap: Impact of Pre-College Gap Year on Transition to College

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the

Master of Arts degree
in Higher Education and Student Development

May 2013

Scott Moeschberger, Ph.D. Date
Thesis Supervisor

C. Skip Trudeau, Ed.D. Date
Member, Thesis Hearing Committee

Scott Gaier, Ph.D. Date
Member, Thesis Hearing Committee

Tim Herrmann, Ph.D. Date
Director, M.A. in Higher Education and Student Development

Abstract

This study was focused on the gap year taken between the completion of high school and entry to college, also known as a pre-college gap year. The goal of the research was to understand the growth that comes from the experience of a gap year as well as the transition process upon entering the university setting. The question used to guide the research is as follows: What is the impact of a pre-college gap year devoted to service on the student's transition into the first year experience as well as the overall impact on a student's college experience? Understanding student transition, particularly the gap year experience transition process, will help higher education professionals to better meet the needs of a growing population of students. A qualitative method was used to measure the development and progression of the students' transition to college following a pre-college gap year. There were a total of seven participants who were all female and in their freshman or sophomore year. Employing a grounded theory methodology, this research allowed for participants to speak freely in an interview format. The use of this method allowed the results to speak for themselves as themes emerged from the interview content (Glaser, 1992). The three main themes which emerged from the study were divided into subthemes and categories. Cultural awareness, identity development, and faith formation were themes that emerged as significant aspects of the gap year experience. Consequently the themes of expectation, college readiness, challenges and connection were themes important to the transition process itself. There are a number of key experiences that

develop positive characteristics in these students. The better higher education professionals can reach this growing population, the more equipped they will be to help students build on the growth that has already taken place during the gap year.

Acknowledgements

There are countless people I could acknowledge and thank for their help and support in this journey. This section only acknowledges a fraction of those who helped me along the way. I could not have gotten through this process without the help of my thesis supervisor Scott Moeschberger. Thank you Scott, for your endless mentorship, guidance, and support along the way, I will forever be grateful for your help throughout this process.

I would not be where I am today without the supervision of Sara Hightower and Lisa Barber. Thank you both for being patient with me, for asking thoughtful questions, for always listening to me, for continually believing in me, and for leading in such individualized ways that have helped me grow immensely.

This paper could not have been written without the help of Hayley Meredith. Thank you for your transcribing, editing, and endless encouragement. I am thankful for the surprise our friendship has been to me throughout the past two years.

Maria Lehr, thank you for editing my paper, encouraging, loving, and always advocating for me in this process. I cannot imagine what my Taylor experience would have been like without our friendship. You have taught me how to be a better friend, family member, and Christ follower.

This thesis and masters experience would not have been the same without Cohort Five, the professors of the MAHE program, and my friends. Thank you for inspiring me

to learn and teaching me in countless ways. To each of you, I will forever be grateful for your encouragement, support, and friendship.

Thank you to my family for supporting me, advocating for me, and always believing in me. Lastly, thank you to God for blessing me beyond what I could ever imagine or deserve. Without His unlimited grace and love I would have never achieved as much, nor had such incredible people alongside me throughout the journey.

Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements.....	v
List of Tables	ix
Chapter 1 Introduction	1
Gap Year Growing Trend	1
Definition	3
Importance of Research	4
Statement of Problem.....	4
Research Questions.....	4
Chapter 2 Literature Review	6
History of the Gap Year	6
Benefits of the Gap Year.....	7
Conclusion	8
Chapter 3 Methodology	13
Participants.....	13
Procedure	14
Data Analysis	15

Chapter 4 Results	17
Cultural Awareness	17
Broadened Perspective	17
Identity Development.....	25
Faith Formation.....	26
Transition	28
Conclusion	28
Chapter 5 Discussion	32
Implications for Practice	33
Limitations	38
Implications for Future Research.....	39
Conclusion	41
References.....	42
Appendix A: Initial E-Mail to Participants.....	55
Appendix B: Interview Questions.....	57
Appendix C: Informed Consent Form	58

List of Tables

Table 1. Summary of Themes23

Chapter 1

Introduction

Now more than ever, students are “minding the gap” and spending a year abroad prior to going to college. While the study abroad experience during college is increasing in popularity, the gap year experience is a relatively unexamined process. Given this obscurity, there is a lack of understanding as to what constitutes a gap year and the potential benefits of spending a year abroad prior to entering college. While research shows clear benefits to taking a gap year, these benefits are not completely known to the average American college student or administrator (Stehlik, 2010). The present study focused on the gap year taken between the completion of high school, but prior to college, also known as a pre-college gap year.

Gap Year as a Growing Trend

Despite the relatively new idea of a gap year to American students, traces of similar experiences date as far back as the late 17th century and the “Grand Tour.” For men of affluence in Britain, the Grand Tour was an extended time of learning and travel. Like today’s gap year, it was a year off before young men attended college in hopes of becoming more sophisticated and cultured (O’Shea, 2010). Over the past fifty years, the trend of taking a gap year in the UK and Australia has grown (Stehlik, 2010). Participation in study abroad programs has certainly increased in recent years and allowed room for students to consider a gap year experience. Dwyer’s (2004) discussion

in *More Is Better: The Impact of Study Abroad Program Duration* proves that the longer a person participates in study abroad, the more impactful the experience. While the gap year has been a growing movement overseas, in the United States the gap year has only recently emerged as an option for students after high school but prior to college. The first university to establish a gap year program in the United States was Princeton in 2009, allowing participants to take time before the start of formal studies and academic stresses to gain real world experience abroad (Arenson, 2008).

Definition

For the purpose of the present study, O'Shea's (2010) definition of a gap year provides a framework:

The gap year is a time out of formal education that a student takes before matriculation in a university, often to explore the world and her place within it. Many students choose to spend a considerable period—frequently 12 months engaging in international service such as teaching or community work. Because the pre-university gap year takes place at a significant transitional point in young people's lives and often in alien environments away from family, it provides fertile ground for exploring identity and character formation in young adults.

(p. 3)

It is important to the current study that the focus remain on the amount of time spent away and volunteering as a major component of the experiences abroad. By recognizing these pivotal experiences prior to college in a student's life, higher education practitioners can learn better methods to help students transition into an institution.

Importance of Research

Due to the limited research available which compares the transition to college for a student who has taken a gap year to a student who has not, this study sought to provide more clarity to the overall transition process for students that have taken a pre-college gap year. The transition experience as a whole is a vital component for consideration when studying college students. Tinto's (1993) research even suggested that student transition plays a dynamic role in retention.

College brings about many significant transitions for students throughout their four years (Evans, 2010), with one of the most prominent being the time students initially enter their university experience. Although extensive research has been done in the area of transition, there is limited awareness of adjustment for students returning from a gap year (About, 2012; Nicholls & Gardner, 2002; Tinto, 1993). The National Resource Center (About, 2012) focuses on first year in transition, providing free resources with information that both discuss and argue the importance of the transition experience. The present study explored student transition with particular focus on the gap year.

With regard to a gap year experience focused on volunteering, service, or ministry, there is an overall awareness of self that makes these experiences distinct from a simple travel opportunity. O'Shea (2011) found that "[v]olunteers also described becoming more aware of the larger world and international affairs, often feeling a greater sense of connection with humanity and global affairs" (p. 270). His research established the overall benefits of a volunteer experience. However, there is a lack of research exploring faith formation in students devoting a gap year to service. While faith

formation is not the sole focus of the research, it is an element that plays a role in the overall student transition into university (Arnett, 2006).

Statement of Problem

The gap year is a growing trend in the United States and throughout the world, impacting higher education; “The gap year’s growing popularity coincides with the rapid expansion of higher education...” (Heath, 2007, p. 91). Thus far, most of the research focuses on European countries and Australia. Therefore, the current research aimed at understanding the gap year from a United States perspective. With the increasing number of students choosing to observe a gap year, further research is needed in order to better understand the implications for university students. Such studies would allow for those who work in higher education to learn better strategies for engaging students who are coming away from a gap year experience and for facilitating the transition into more traditional forms of study. Higher education professionals should learn how to assist students in their transition from a gap year and foster growth throughout the four year college experience.

Providing a better understanding of the gap year for college administration, faculty, students, and parents may allow each group to consider more thoughtfully such experiences as meaningful options. If given the opportunity, more students might readily opt to take a year away from formal education in order to gain insight into the world around them. Ultimately, cultural awareness, personal development, and academic preparedness are just a few of the common trends found in the research of gap year students (Addley, 2000; Dwyer, 2004; Heath, 2007; O’Shea, 2011).

In order for administration, faculty, and student development personnel to have a better grasp of where students are, they must educate themselves on the entire college experience. Education should be approached from the student perspective, throughout their first year transition process and how that impacts their experience as a whole. College can bring about many transitions for students, one of the most prominent being the time they enter university. While extensive research has been done in the area of transition, there is limited awareness about the adjustment of students returning from a gap year.

It is important to recognize Schlossberg's definition, which states transition is "Any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (Goodman et al., 2006, p. 215). Students who have observed a gap year are often not experiencing the same type of transition as a student coming straight from high school, but given Schlossberg's definition, it is transition nonetheless. The present research sought to provide potential answers to the questions that surround transition from the return of a gap year abroad.

Research Question

The following question guided the current study: What is the impact of a pre-college gap year devoted to service on a student's transition into the first year experience as well as the overall impact on a student's college experience?

The gap year experience is a relatively new phenomenon; it is important for higher educational professionals to understand how students have benefited.

Additionally, it is important to integrate how to work more meaningfully with these

students in the classroom and university setting when they return from a gap year experience.

Further study in this area could strengthen and reveal the benefits of gap year programming and better improve the college student experience as a whole. Studies on how U.S. college students are directly affected by experiences abroad prior to attending university would be helpful. Additionally, a study evaluating the impact of a gap year solely devoted to volunteering or ministry would be particularly beneficial to Christian higher education professionals and students alike. Given this context, the following study sought to address some of the aforementioned needs in gap year research.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

There is a rich history of the gap year experience provided by European and Australian gap year observers. The following literature review provides some research from those backgrounds, providing clarity on the history, benefits, and trends in the gap year experience. Unfortunately, findings are limited for American student populations.

History of the Gap Year

The gap year as it is known today dates back to the 17th century, in what used to be known as The Grand Tour. During the Grand Tour, men of higher socioeconomic status would travel throughout Europe with the purpose of completing their education through international experience (Withey, 2007). For men from affluent backgrounds in Britain, the Grand Tour was an extended time of learning and travel. Like today's gap year, it was a time for young men to become more sophisticated and cultured while providing them with opportunities to prepare themselves for the professional world (Heath, 2007).

Throughout the past four hundred years, The Grand Tour has evolved into what we know today as a gap year. Australia and most European countries are familiar with young adults participating in a gap year experience (Stehlik, 2010). The start of this trend began with wealthy families utilizing gap years due to their capacity to fund extensive travel and cultural experiences. From this, a large industry developed within businesses

and organizations devoted to providing gap year experiences for all students. Gradually, families in the United States noticed the trend and found a growing number of organizations providing structured gap year experiences. Consequently, more students in the United States began to take advantage of these organized trips abroad (Heath, 2007).

Increasingly, colleges in the United States are giving the option of a gap year through flexible and enticing options. Along with Princeton University, Harvard also allows students to take time off and acquire a “taste of the real world.” Students at Harvard who have been offered admission are allowed to take a gap year prior to entering academia (Balakrishna, 2007). However, there is room for progress in making these offerings more of a cultural norm. One potential way to increase participation in a gap year is to educate individuals on both the benefits and outcomes of the experience.

Benefits of the Gap Year

Understanding the benefits of a gap year is a vital component in highlighting the importance of such a practice and its increasing popularity. It is also important to understand the gap year as a growing phenomenon and to be well versed in current discussion on the issue. The gap year provides opportunities for students to take a break from competitive study and, in turn, teaches lessons that cannot be obtained in the formal classroom setting (White, 2009). There are a plethora of communicated benefits in the literature devoted to the gap year. For the purpose of this study, only the three most prevalent benefits will be addressed: cultural awareness, personal development, and academic preparedness.

Cultural awareness. The first benefit of spending a year abroad at such a pivotal time is the development of a student’s cultural awareness, which typically develops out of

a student's engagement with a culture markedly distinct from their own. While challenges may arise, opportunity and growth frequently occur. Social development with people of different backgrounds is a major benefit (Blackburn, 2002). Engagement with a different society, economy, and, often, language provides hands-on growth and development that cannot be experienced in the classroom. Identity development, faith development, intercultural competency, academic appreciation, academic preparedness, soft skill development, and student transition are the main areas of benefit depicted by the literature. These areas of growth are explored in the following paragraphs.

Studies revealed that there are some key components to the "typical gapper." Women are more likely to take a gap year than men (Birch, 2007; Stehlik, 2010). At the same time, research found that those who come from middle class, independent schools are also more likely to take a gap year (Stehlik, 2010). Understanding the typical participant in the gap year experience contributes to the overall discernment of the themes on this topic.

Identity development. The second benefit of a person who observes a gap year is identity development. Identity development is fostered through increased maturity and self-awareness. Addley (2000) found that "93% of professionals told a recent survey that they believe a structured year out benefits students' personal development" (p. 1). Gap years provide more time for reflection and introspection for the student. Within this category falls the greater increase in maturity that "gappers" experience from independence overseas.

According to higher education literature, identity development plays a significant role in the life of the student including those students who participate in a gap year.

Student involvement refers to the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience. According to Astin's theory (1999), the greater the student's involvement in college the greater will be the amount of student learning and personal development.

Furthermore, the age in which most students enter university is a formative time when students establish their own identity apart from their parents. Arnett's (2006) research suggested that this is a time in which young people explore, examine, and establish views. When students encounter change and gain opportunity to question the world they are experiencing, it allows for a greater seriousness in decision making: "They examine the life possibilities open to them and gradually arrive at more enduring choices in love, work, and worldviews" (Arnett, 2006, p. 1).

Academic development. Within the area of identity development, there are two prominent ways in which students grow and expand their personhood—academically and socially. Academically, gap year students may not be engaging in the typical classroom experience; however, they are learning more about themselves and their place in the world. After observing a gap year, students become more self-aware and knowledgeable about what they want to pursue in life. Thus students are more involved overall, particularly in their area of study. Additionally, they are able to apply what they are learning in the classroom to how it will shape their future vocation, due to the student's reflection during the previous year (O'Shea, 2011).

This awareness is beneficial in considering student retention rates. Once students know what they want and have time to recognize and develop personal strengths, they are more likely to remain in school (Heath, 2007). These students adjust better to life at

university because they have another year of life, extensive experiences, and a more mature perspective. These students are not as caught up in the new-found freedoms, since they have already experienced a year away from parents and rules (Heath, 2007).

Social development. Students learn to adapt and acquire different social skills in comparison to the students coming into university right out of high school (White, 2009). Extensive research reveals that in order to fully mature, one must go through a crisis before reaching commitment. Marcia, one of the leading psychologists of identity development, is known for his studies in maturity, crisis, and commitment. Marcia's research provides the following stages through which adolescents must pass in order to reach maturity. In the first stage known as identity diffusion, adolescents have not been exposed to crisis and are unable to commit to anything. In the second stage known as identity foreclosure, they have not encountered a crisis but has developed a sense of commitment. Adolescents in the midst of crisis that lack full understanding of commitment are moving towards the next stage, identity moratorium. The ultimate goal is identity achievement in which these adolescents have experienced crisis and accomplished commitment (Santrock, 1996).

As a student participates in a gap year they will experience situations for which they cannot plan and therefore, will likely encounter crisis. This is valuable to their maturity process and social development. Each of these identity development stages are likely to be encountered throughout a student's time abroad. While a student will likely experience these identity development stages throughout their time abroad, this will be to their benefit when re-exposed to crisis upon entering university. With regard to the student experiencing a gap year, O'Shea (2011) noted that returning gap year students

were both self- and others-focused, assisting in the learning process abroad. Students who engage in gap year will begin to experience sacrifice, challenge, and the opportunity to overcome adversity.

Faith development. A third benefit to a gap year is the participant's faith development and growth. Consequently, Chickering (2006) noted that both spiritual and civic engagement are "synergistic," meaning they build off of one another and help one another grow. Students who take a year abroad to devote themselves to service have more time for introspection and self-reflection. This in turn allows them to apply a broader perspective and more significant amount of time to the assessment of what they believe. By the time these students enter university, they have had a year to develop their own faith as opposed to maintaining that of their parents. O'Shea (2011) suggested that volunteers observe religion or faith practices through a new lens and, because of that, develop a deeper appreciation of religion, understanding how religion assists in "sustaining personal and community life" (p. 570).

While research is limited in the faith formation of a student who observes a gap year, there was minimal information on the development of spirituality (O'Shea, 2011). Further research regarding the faith formation that takes place in the life of a gap year student would benefit the study of this subject.

Intercultural competency. An important aspect of not only self-discovery, but also independence and acceptance of diversity, is gaining an international perspective through experience. The fourth benefit to a gap year is intercultural competency. Students who spend a year abroad have the opportunity to grow in their personal views and perspectives of others. The students learn tolerance through the experience of living in a

new environment and culture. O'Shea (2011) noticed that "[o]verall, volunteers reported exposure to different ways of living and people of different backgrounds over their year led to a greater tolerance and appreciation of others" (p. 571). In Crane's (2011) study, a student reflected on the simple everyday resources that are often taken for granted by first year students in the United States: "Things that pass us by here—like hot water, plumbing, electricity—you learn to value them."

Not only do students who observe a gap year develop more of an appreciation for the opportunities they have, but they are also more culturally and civically engaged within the community where they are living. Volunteering at home after returning is more likely because of the emphasis on it while they were abroad (O'Shea, 2011).

Academic appreciation and preparedness. Students who come back and directly enter the classroom are better equipped to adapt and more prepared for life on their own (Heath, 2007). These students have learned to engage in another culture for a significant amount of time, which acts as a catalyst for extensive personal development. An area of growth for students who observe a year abroad prior to going to university is the ability to recognize the value and privilege of the opportunity for higher education. One student who participated in Harvard's gap year program reflected that, "I view [my education] much more as a privilege, and less as a responsibility" (Balakrishna, 2007, p. 1).

Additionally, these students realize that education is valuable and an opportunity, not an obligation (O'Shea, 2011). The National Survey of Student Engagement revealed that civic engagement throughout college is a strong proponent of involvement in the community and the ethical development of students (Chickering, 2006). O'Shea (2011)

suggested that volunteers were more globally informed of the world. Altogether, the experience allowed students to look beyond themselves to develop a global perspective on issues while developing a realization of the power of community service.

Soft skill development. The sixth area of growth for gap year students is in their soft skill development. There are certain experiences that students who participate in a gap year can learn in ways they cannot in the classroom. In her article, “Widening the gap: Pre-university gap years and the ‘economy of experience,’” Heath assessed specific qualities developed by these experiences. Communication, organization, and team-work are known as soft skills, qualities believed to be fostered through experience rather than developed in a formal classroom (Heath, 2007). Students living in a new culture are often forced to learn how to communicate in a new way. Living in a culture that requires speaking a foreign language, students quickly learn the value of communicating non-verbally and working around obstacles in communication. While those participating in time abroad miss the formalized education that university students receive, the gap year provides opportunity to develop soft skills through exposure to experience (Heath, 2007). Upon considering the ways a student is shaped by involvement in a gap year experience, it is important to assess how that will contribute to students’ adjustment to university.

Extensive research in the realm of experiential education revealed the learning benefits of travel, study abroad, and the gap year experience. Dwyer (2004) conducted a longitudinal study collecting over 50 years of research on the study abroad experience. His findings revealed that the longer a person stays abroad, the more effective the experience. Dwyer’s work suggested with much validation that study abroad has a major impact on the lives of students, specifically in the areas of language, communication,

intercultural and personal development, and vocational aspirations. Because Dwyer's (2004) study observed over 50 years of data, there was extensive time to observe and prove the validity of the research and significance of a gap year. Academic preparedness, cultural development, and personal growth progressively developed over the duration of a study abroad experience. The entire study emphasized the findings which suggested that the longer a person stays abroad, the greater the benefits they obtain (Dwyer, 2004).

Student transition to college. A final area of benefit for a gap year student is in the area of transition and ability to acclimate to an institution. As mentioned earlier, a student who has spent extensive time abroad is more apt for university preparedness. The gap year allows time for students to figure out what they really want out of life, as Heath (2007) concludes: "The gap year provides an opportunity for self-reflection, enhancing students' sense of perspective and facilitating better-informed decisions about their degree plans and future career options."

The overall student transition into college can be challenging with or without a gap year. Schlossberg developed a transition theory in 1984, which has expanded over the years. Student adjustment to the university setting is ultimately going to evoke change in the student. Once again this reveals the significance of Schlossberg's definition that essentially any type of change results in transition to some degree (Goodman et al., 2006).

Students who have observed a gap year do not often experience the same type of transition as students progressing straight from high school, but given Schlossberg's definition, it is a transition nonetheless. College students experience major transitions throughout their four year experience. Schlossberg determined that college students

encounter four main stages with regard to transition: situation, self, support, and strategies.

Freshman year, students are just starting to figure out how college life works. Understanding their current selves, their friends, and who they want to be are all essential parts of the first year. The transition into sophomore year provokes consequences of students dealing with personal problems and searching themselves, thus acquiring a realization of self. During the junior and senior years, students begin reciprocating support while providing differing areas of approach and strategies to problems (Evans, 2010).

A student who has observed a gap year, in many ways, has journeyed throughout this process and may be ready to reciprocate support by their first year. Transitioning to university from a gap year can be easier than the transition from high school to college (Blackburn, et al., 2005). O'Shea (2010) added that "[m]aturing due to the first year at university is quantitatively or qualitatively different from that obtained during the various types of gap year" (p. 4). However, it should also be noted that there can be a variety of unknowns in gap year experience, and the transition process could be considered negative.

Students who choose to observe a gap year often result in better retention rates within university. In addition, students commonly have more impressive academic performance (Birch, 2007). These students have taken the time to process and are more committed to selecting a major more fitting for their future goals (O'Shea, 2010). Along these lines, research shows that employers are more likely to hire people with international experience (Heath, 2007). Altogether, the impact of the gap year and how

that translates in a student's attendance and performance in college are vital components of the overall picture of this research.

Conclusion

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the adjustment into an institution after a gap year experience devoted to service. While there is a vast array of literature on identity, study abroad, and transition, there is little known about how these components play into the pre-college gap year. In looking at identity formation, intercultural competency, and the transition process of a gap year student, research revealed the prominence of these categories throughout the literature. Identity formation occurs through the development of soft skills that can be cultivated in natural everyday encounters during a student's time abroad (White, 2009). Additionally, student identity formation during a gap year occurs through academic, social, and faith formation (O'Shea, 2011). Intercultural competency is fostered for gap year students because their time away provides exposure to differing cultures, beliefs, and practices (O'Shea, 2011). Dwyer's (2004) research revealed that the longer the student is away, the more lasting the impact. Finally, gap year observers are better prepared for transition in the future (Heath, 2007). Taking into consideration what is currently known about student formation during a gap year and the overall transition process, there is an opportunity to connect the two phenomena. While this literature review demonstrates that gap years provide growth, the research is far from extensive.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This study was conducted at a small, Midwestern, residential, faith-based university focused on both local and international service with a student population of approximately 1,900. A qualitative method was used by the researcher to explore the development and progression of the student's transition to college following a pre-college gap year.

Using the grounded theory method, this research allowed for the participants to speak freely in an interview format, while at the same time, providing a structure and framework throughout the course of the processed approach (Creswell, 2008). Grounded theory values the interaction with people in order to better understand their overall experience (Creswell, 2008). The hope for this research was that it provided space to hear the students' stories, while at the same time, drew conclusions from the trends that emerged throughout the interviews. The use of this method allowed the results to speak for themselves as themes emerged from the interview content (Glaser, 1992); "In grounded theory, the researcher applies a set of coding procedures to the data until the provisional theory emerges inductively" (Magnotto, 1996, p. 1). In turn, the results provided a clear answer to the main research question.

Participants

A total of eight students participated in the interviews, out of which one was a pilot interview that was not included in the research. Thus, seven interviews formed the basis of the data and were transcribed and coded for themes. The initial goal was to have an even number of male and female participants in the study. However, as research reveals a greater number of women than men participating in gap year experiences, the researcher also found it problematic to seek such equality. Due to the difficulty in finding male participants, the remaining spots were filled with females. The majority of participant names provided were in their first and second years of their college experience, ensuring that the participants were reflecting on a recent transition process. While this was coincidental, the higher number of younger participants might suggest that the trend of gap year experience is on the rise.

Procedure

This was a volunteer-based study. Students were asked to participate without pressure to do so. The study required that participants meet the following four criteria to participate. First, participants must have participated in a gap year prior to entering college. Second, their gap year experience must have had a large service or volunteerism component. Third, their gap year should have been abroad or a location in which they were immersed in a culture different from than their own. Fourth, the participant must have spent a minimum of five months abroad.

Student participants were sought with the assistance of faculty and then were e-mailed by the researcher. The e-mail sent to request interviews with students is attached as Appendix A. The majority of participants were recommended from the Residence Life

Staff at the institution studied. Stratified convenience sampling was used once a list was generated of students who had participated in a gap year. The eight women selected randomly were then asked to participate. Upon receiving acceptance notifications from participants, the researcher set up interviews.

Confidentiality was highly valued through the execution of the study. While the risk to participants involved was minimal, the following protocol was taken to ensure security. With permission from the students, the interviews were recorded and kept locked in a safe drawer. Additionally, the interviews were transcribed by a professional who signed a waiver agreeing to keep that participants' privacy. The documents resulting from the data transcription were kept on a safe computer with a private login with additional passwords required to open transcribed documents.

Informed consent forms were provided to each of the participants prior to the interview (see Appendix C). This was the first objective met in the interview process. Students were then asked a series of questions in relation to their overall gap year experience (see Appendix B). This eventually funneled down into more specific questions based from their personal experiences.

A semi-structured interview was conducted in a safe environment in order to allow the student to have freedom in responses and reflections. This allowed for students to express themselves without the influence of others' experiences and opinions. Thus, allowing for the grounded theory method to be most effective. The moderator asked set questions, but also allowed room for the conversation to take shape organically. In this way, results were drawn upon and concluded without excessive interviewer influence.

Data Analysis

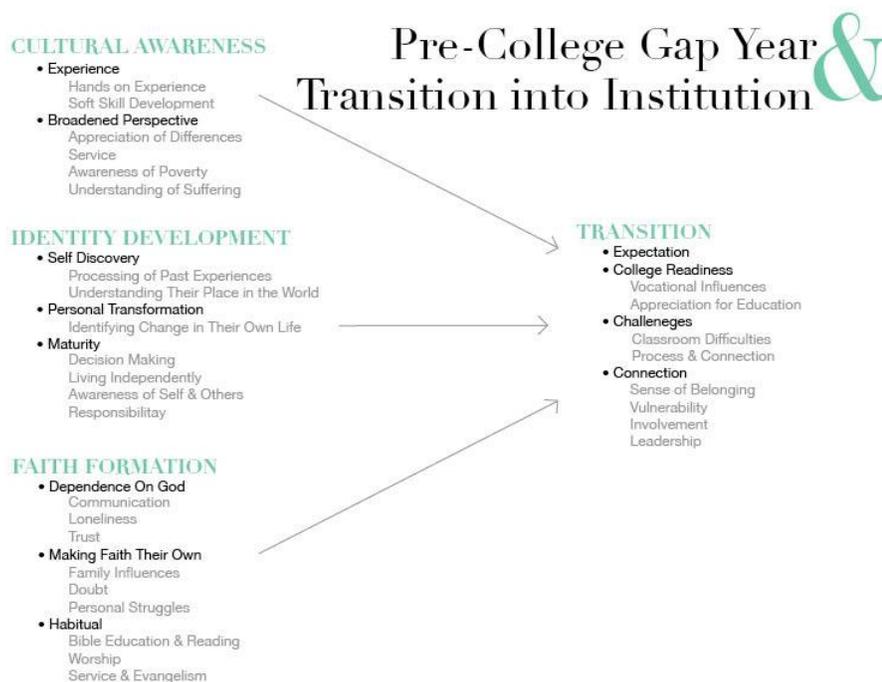
The process of analysis required categorizing the information given during the interview into themed categories (Creswell, 2008; Magnotto, 1996). Common trends found in the results helped to establish what the impact of transition and college experiences are on a gap year student. Grounded theory analysis allowed for comparison between the information that was already known with the information that was discovered in the interview process (Creswell, 2008). Constant comparison was used throughout the data analysis process to take personal stories and specific information and generate them into broad themes expressed on an overarching level (Creswell, 2008). Once the themes were formed and common trends discovered, there was an overall greater exposure to the gap year experience.

Chapter 4

Results

Students willingly shared their gap year experiences and were very willing to process their transition. Data analysis revealed a vast number of opportunities and experiences which directly or indirectly affected the transition process. The outlined model shown in Table 1 reflects a summary of the themes discovered and the impact those themes had on the overall transition process.

Table 1



The research asked each participant: “What did you gain from your experience abroad?”

Consequently, there were three prominent themes of influence abroad that contributed to

the students' transition processes. Cultural awareness, identity development, and faith formation were all contributing factors to the transition from their gap year experiences. In addition to these themes, there were connecting subthemes that developed throughout the coding process.

Interviews provided commonalities in three influential themes with regard to the transition process itself. Participant stories represented these themes in individualized ways; however there was a common thread of similarity within the responses collected. Expectation, college readiness, challenges, and connection were the four main categories that emerged in the transition phase of the gap year student. As modeled above, each of the individual themes incorporated subthemes, providing meaning and depth to the overall research. One participant expressed a general feeling common to all participants,

Sometimes it's hard to talk about my gap year because I feel like almost so overwhelmed by everything that it was that I don't know how to convey it with like a simple this is what I took away, you know? Like I feel like every area of my life has been deeply, deeply impacted by what happened on that year in some ways that I feel like I'm still learning.

Cultural Awareness

The majority of participants came from predominantly white, American, middle-to upper-class families. The cross-cultural opportunity provided participants with an insightful understanding of other communities. The majority of participants came from homes with a religious influence and conservative background. The opportunity to immerse oneself in another country for an extended period of time provided a significant experience and change in the participant's awareness of culture. Full immersion and

understanding of another culture while simultaneously discovering more of themselves created cultural awareness within participants. Within the theme of cultural awareness two subthemes emerged: hands-on experience and soft skill development.

Hands-on experience. The theme of hands-on experience emerged from each interview. New abilities were often developed through firsthand experience. Participants learned everything from managing finances to adaptability in a new environment. Each learned the importance of working in a team and a few learned how to communicate in a new language. Every participant expressed the influence of experience to some degree. There were varying degrees of opportunity to participate in service, evangelism, classes, or travel; however, in all situations participants mentioned the value of the experiences.

Soft skill development. Opportunities that cannot be observed in the classroom and build knowledge based from past experiences are called soft skills (Heath, 2007). Participants developed skills which could not have been gained in the classroom. Throughout the coding process, soft skill development and service were major subthemes that played into the overall theme of experience. Emma expressed,

I wouldn't give up for the world which is just realizing you just have life experience that people just don't have ... There's something really different about going with people you don't even know and I mean you just, giving up more and spending that much extended time where you don't even see your family and you're not even in communication with people I mean it just like there just is like no substitute for like experience like getting your hands dirty and just living and I think yeah I think the Lord just works a lot in those kind of situations.

Once again, gap year students often voiced a positive perspective into even the most negative situations experiences. Some participants experienced frustration with the agency they traveled with, while others struggled with being away from home. There were a few negative experiences shared. The main frustrations stemmed from the lack of organization and planning of the host establishment. All participants expressed both negative and positive experiences, however there was an accompanying perspective of gratefulness for all of the experiences.

When asked if they learned anything abroad that could not have been learned in the classroom setting, students commonly mentioned that living independently from their parents made them more than just financially mindful. Corrie, a participant who studied in England, placed invaluable life lessons learned throughout her gap year as a high priority.

I lived in a house with three other girls, and it was, I think we, I think the college rented it. So we had to pay for rent, we had to find our own utility. We had to set up the internet ourselves and so like nothing was really set up... I had to learn how to budget and actually have money ready to pay for rent, utility and internet and all that stuff... We lived in the city, so I would have to go grocery shopping... I had to buy tickets and learn how to travel and stuff like that.

Time away and alone from the States helped students obtain a better understanding of adulthood. The time spent away from what participants had previously understood as normal eventually became beneficial in that they learned new ways to understand the world. Corrie learned her place in the economic development of this world through

paying rent, buying groceries, and supporting the local economy where she lived during her gap year.

Time spent alone allowed participants to reflect and process. Gap year opportunities lent perspective to the way participants viewed time and rest. They often expressed an appreciation for the opportunities abroad, to reflect and process. Participants voiced that their host culture took time to sit back and embrace life. Rest and reflection opportunities were far more prominent abroad than in the States. Upon participants' return, they more clearly apprehended the busyness of America and missed the slower pace of their host country.

Individualized experiences resulted in a vast array of life lessons. Altogether the gap year experiences provided engagement with real life situations where participants were able to grasp understanding of life on their own without the influence of their parents. Experiences impacted individuals in such a way that each of them voiced that they will never be the same after their time abroad. Participants frequently expressed difficulty in talking about all they had learned during their time abroad. Fully being able to express experiences on the participant's end, coupled with the lack of experience and understanding others seemingly had upon their return, created minor communication interferences. Emma mentioned,

I'm not gonna begrudge someone like I don't know just because they haven't experienced something that I have but because I have experienced it means I can't plead ignorance anymore and as much as those are all really hard things like going into college after that is like it just it just turns your whole experience on its head really, in my opinion, and every single person I've ever talked to that's taken

a gap year has felt the same way. I've never met someone even if they had a really hard time over their gap year, they still wouldn't change it for the world especially going into college.

Participants also related how the experience abroad offered them tangible life skills as well as overall perspective and understanding of another culture.

Broadened Perspective

Participants commonly mentioned being able to think for themselves for the first time in their lives and not being limited to the views of their parents. They were able to think critically about a topic and decide for themselves how they felt about issues. They were challenged by the insights of those different from themselves and were changed by that influence. The participants voiced that the lens through which they viewed the world prior to their gap year was far narrower than the lens through which they currently saw the world. While their experiences heavily shaped the perspective from which participants viewed the world, they also further molded students' identity development.

Corrie mentioned one of the greatest benefits being a broadened perspective on life. She said,

I think the greatest benefits would be um just uh simply getting out of [Location] and like actually seeing more of the world. I think that you can definitely broaden your mind and kind of learn a lot more when you get that different perspective and get that different like lens to so through um so that was definitely a benefit.

Some participants, more than others, were able to articulate this awareness in a thoughtful way.

There were few interviews where broadened perspective was not articulated. However, those few participants still mentioned having a change in point of view or new insights gained as a result of being influenced by someone else. The influential factors of experience and broadened perspective, as well as an appreciation of differences, were dynamic contributors to the gap year experience and transition into an institution. In addition to these commonly found themes the paragraphs to follow provide more clarity as to how appreciation of differences, service, awareness of poverty, and understanding suffering impact cultural awareness gained through gap year opportunities.

Appreciation of differences. The broadened perspective allowed participants to wrestle with differing points of view. During the gap year individuals were forced to interact with ideas that were less than typical from that of their upbringing. Obtaining an understanding of culture provided participants with an ability to better accept others' points of view. Therefore, this developed an underlying appreciation of differences and ability to accept others' points of view based on awareness and experience. Several participants described gaining an ability to accept others in spite of their differing perspectives as a result of serving and caring for natives.

Service. Many of the participants reflected on formational opportunities engaging in varying degrees of volunteerism. Six of the seven participants had a large portion of their gap year experience dedicated to service. Serving those in need allowed for the participants to think outside of their previously narrow lenses to gain insight into the world around them.

Awareness of poverty. Depending upon location, participants were able to grasp poverty in a way that they could not without living in the midst of it. Half of the

participants served in orphanages and built relationships with children who had limited belongings to call their own. Libby, a participant who spent part of her time in Africa, experienced the effects of poverty firsthand. There were times when the organization she served struggled financially and took on too many volunteers. As a result, those serving experienced frustration and difficulty. Libby said,

We'd be without water for like a week. And they'd buy water bottles, but we couldn't shower or do dishes or anything. It was really unsanitary but and like we couldn't really call home ever, probably once a week for a couple of minutes. And it was really hard, but I did make a lot of good friends there.

Even in the midst of frustrations or unpleasant experiences the participants were able to step back and recognize the good of their experiences.

Understanding suffering. The interview content might suggest that participants were given experiences unavailable to them in the United States. They were able to see devastation and suffering in the lives of those they served and learned to care for. The majority of participants verbally expressed gaining a better understanding of poverty, suffering, and the world in general due to their experiences abroad. Cultural awareness was gained through the broadened perspective of witnessing poverty and suffering in other parts of the world. Service opportunities, when paired with learning to understand culture and self, were major influences in the collective transition process.

Understanding suffering in a new way was a dynamic influence to many of the participants' gap year experiences. Students were able to form relationships with people who had broken lives and unpleasant stories. This understanding of others allowed students to comprehend suffering in a way that may have never happened prior to their

experiences. While building relationships with those experiencing suffering, students learned to understand affliction in a new way.

Emma spent time in Capetown, South Africa serving in a hospital with premature babies and their mothers. The other half of her experience was spent serving in a “safe home” for women who were pregnant and giving their babies up for adoption. Much of Emma’s focus was on caring for those who had encountered suffering through traumatic events. She expressed that the women she worked with, “were so incredible wonderful but also so broken over like what they knew, I mean they felt the weight of what was going on... They knew that this child like they want to give it a better life.” She was able to counsel them and listen to their struggles, “They just felt, like, a heavy burden all the time and um and I like got to be with some of them...”

There was one story in particular that Emma shared where she connected with a mother who had a traumatic experience during delivery and was put under anesthesia. When the mother awoke, her uterus had been removed and the baby had been taken away. She was unable to give any sort of consent, and she was unable to say goodbye to her child. No one knew that the woman was there, and the only people who knew were people involved with the group Emma was serving alongside. Emma’s conclusion to the story was incredibly impactful to her. She said,

We were the only people that she called and so we got to be with her and cry with her and we snuck into the baby room and found her baby and took a picture of it for her and like which you would never be able to do here but just little things like that and just you know she just laid there and was like “I know that I need Jesus.

That's all I know." Just a lot of those things, I mean those were my day to day as crazy as it is.

Through the experience of suffering with this woman, Emma was able to show care and love in a way that she had never done before. The aforementioned story is just one example of many experiences shared throughout the interview process.

Identity Development

Students gained a better sense of self through the gap year experience. Not only was cultural awareness a major outcome of the gap year experience, but also was personal identity development. Participants consistently articulated that their gap year experience was a time in which they better gained a sense of self. In the midst of this time of growth, participants noted a period of self-discovery, personal transformation, and increased maturity. All of the participants expressed their personal formation particularly in the realm of identity development in unique and significant ways.

The processing of past experiences and difficulties in life was a key factor in the self-discovery process. Libby, Emma, Hannah, Brooke, Lindsey, and Kelly's gap year experiences focused heavily in the beginning on life experiences prior to the gap year. While most of them expected to go and change lives, they found instead that they were changed. Kelly expressed,

It's going to be all about God using me to minister to people at the base and on outreach and like that really flipped and like YWAM was a time of really like breaking me down. It was a hard time. It was a really hurtful process cause like all of the stuff in my past was dug up. All of the strongholds I had were brought to

the surface and God was really like this is the time that you need to let me set you free, so it was so hard but it was so good.

Personal transformation happened in the lives of every participant. Each referred to the gap year as a life changing experience.

An underlying awareness of not only self, but also of others was a prevalent theme in the gap year students' lives. Taking time to better understand themselves through processing difficulties from the past, while at the same time serving others in need, allowed students to learn to care for themselves and then for others.

Self-discovery, personal transformation, and awareness contributed to the maturation of those who took a gap year. Decision making as a result of living independently led to the internalization of responsibility in all of the participants' lives. They were all in a foreign country living independently of their parents and had to learn how to make wise, responsible choices. Some participants voiced that this took more work than expected. However, all felt that their transition to college was made easier because they had to learn firsthand responsibility during their gap year.

When asked about the major difference between her and the typical first year college student, Lindsey responded similarly to all other participants,

I think there is like a difference in like in maturity ... because I've ... experienced different things and I think if they would have done what I did they would be like more mature too...I have just like a different perspective about life I think because of what I experienced --- and if you come right out of high school you don't have that, which like is fine --- maybe you'll get there---I don't know.

Through experiencing life on their own and having to engage in a community that they had never known before, participants were forced to make a life of their own.

The participants learned responsibility from having to communicate and develop the aforementioned soft skills. The typical, everyday factors that participants faced during their year abroad deeply impacted the choices that they had to make the following year. The opportunity of living independently forced participants to learn decision making. Consequently, responsibility and maturity were further developed within the lives of gap year participants.

Through understanding their own personal identity development, participants were better able to care for others and themselves. The combination of awareness of self and others further created personal transformation within the lives of participants. These attributes collectively instilled maturity and aided in the identity development of those interviewed. In seeking to better understand self, participants frequently voiced the role of faith formation in their gap year. Faith formation was another commonly discovered trend accompanying the gap year experience that suggested significant contribution to the overall transition process.

Faith Formation

The most significant theme that emerged from the interview content was the faith formation of the individuals interviewed. All of those interviewed participated in organizations that were faith based. Time abroad allowed participants to fully depend upon God, make their faith their own, and develop habitual, healthy spiritual practices.

Dependence upon God. It was typical to participant experiences to have infrequent or unpredictable Internet and cell phone coverage, limiting their connections to

their homes. Unstable communication with friends and family fostered loneliness in the lives of all of the participants during their time away. Within the first few weeks of their time abroad, when they had not yet built trust with those in their community, they felt as if they had no one to turn to for support. It was regularly mentioned by participants that they learned how to trust and depend on God, because they felt as though they had no one else. While varying depths of insight were shared and the ability to articulate clearly affected this outcome, individuals expressed a collective reliance upon God throughout their time abroad.

Making faith their own. The influence of family often hindered the personal faith development of the individual gap year students. They were unable to both fully express and understand what they personally believed. Rather, they absorbed what their parents had taught them and either agreed or disagreed with theologies and philosophies. Exploring other insights and perspectives from their time aboard allowed students to discover their personal stances on religion and spirituality.

Personal struggles from the past were a common component of the struggles of faith and acceptance of parents' worldview. Brooke's pain from the past shaped the way she engaged and interacted with others throughout her first few months. She believed that she could not be loved nor could she love others because of all that she had gone through prior to the gap year. Brook said,

Everyone kept trying to and one of the first things was like Jesus loves you, and I was like he might love you but there's no way he can love me cause you don't know what I've done ... I just felt like I had experienced a lot more hardship than

a lot of other people which wasn't true because everyone has hardships...I had convinced myself that I can't be loved.

It took about a month and a half before Brooke understood love and acceptance from God and then from others. By learning to forgive herself during her gap year experience she was more willing to understand grace and freely extend it to others.

Similarly, Libby wrestled with doubts during her time in Africa,

I think I was really bitter towards God and I had a lot of questions. I liked accepting the positive aspects but I think I had a lot of questions like accepting the negative ones. Like some of my friends aren't Christians and they're probably not going to heaven and I think that made me really bitter but I think the year helped me to understand and to accept it and realize that it's not necessarily God being evil it's all about choice and stuff. So I think that helped me gain an understanding and a confidence in my faith and uh yeah those are probably the main ones.

Expressions of doubt due to personal struggles and family influences were a common reflection throughout the interview process. Students felt that the time they were given to freely discover their place in the world and process what they personally believed helped to solidify their faith and, in the end, strengthened it.

Habitual practices. A frequent occurrence in all of the gap year experiences was the incorporation of daily habitual practices. Each day of the week had specified duties, activities, classes, and service projects in which participants chose to participate.

Bible education was an inclusive part of the gap year experience through faith-based programs. Students were able to learn about the Bible in a new way and apply what they

were learning to their past experiences and their present service opportunities. They were given the time and space to read the Bible and be alone with the Lord. There were regular times of worship and, in some experiences, especially Lindsey's, evangelism was a regular activity.

Altogether these themes and subthemes contributed to the overarching theme of transition. As students became more culturally aware, established their personal identity, and discovered their faith they unknowingly prepared for their transition into institution.

Transition

The aforementioned themes revealed throughout the interview process led to the collective transition process for gap year students. The general components of the year abroad were major contributors to students' transitions into the institution.

Expectations. While expectations were not explicitly stated by each participant, based on the content of the interviews, they emerged as an overwhelming implicit theme. Thoughts regarding what was expected by each individual when they arrived at college were often different than the reality that they experienced. Often students went into university anticipating the transition would be somewhat difficult, but that they had already experienced the more difficult transition because they participated in a gap year. Six out of the seven participants had some time readjusting back to life in the United States prior to entering college. Most of them spent the summer between working and reflecting on their year away. Even though Hannah was able to gradually transition into an institution, it was still not easy walking through the transition process. She shared,

After I got back from Costa Rica, I went and worked at a camp for the whole summer... That was really hard, but it was also a really great summer to just kind of like build on what I learned in Costa Rica, and so I just had this time to myself to do that, and so that was awesome, and I think really prepared me for...the fall.

When students transitioned into the institution, a few expressed that it was, in many ways, a kind of culture shock. The expectation that it would be an easy transition was ultimately hindering for most of the participants.

College readiness. There was a contradictory connection for students between being thankful for education and being frustrated while wanting to be back in the real world or on the mission field. Another tension for the participants was their frustration in wanting to be overseas instead of being stateside for education. After spending a significant amount of time abroad in many countries with those who did not have the luxury of furthering their education with such ease, participants came back appreciating the importance of learning. This was a motivational factor for the participants.

Another guiding research question was: “How was participating in a gap year formative in shaping career and vocational choices for you?” All of the students commented on this to varying degrees; however, there were instances like Kelly’s that were greatly formative in shaping her hopes for the future. She said,

I thought I was going into Nursing and obviously that didn’t happen which I knew I wouldn’t like it. I hate blood and needles, so I guess just taking that year and um allowing God or giving myself time to allow God to speak to me and redirect me cause I would for sure have been at [School] this year if I didn’t take the gap year

so I guess just waiting and listening and praying a lot more. I had more time to do that because of the gap year, and I'm so glad I did.

Kelly's vocational expectations changed because of her gap year experience.

Another significant finding in the research was that gap year participants' experiences greatly helped in forming vocational goals. Every student expressed that the gap year helped her reflect upon life goals and aided to directing future vocational goals. All the participants willingly recognized the significance of their education and were committed to their vocation of choice. However, they also struggled with the transition back into the classroom.

Challenges. Consistently throughout the results, transitions revealed a positive disposition going in, which quickly turned to frustration and questioning. Entering back into the classroom was the leading frustration for the participants. Hannah's statement reflects common feelings shared by all of the participants,

Then coming back into like a system was really hard, and I remember calling my parents and like crying all the time and being like I'm not cut out for college I need to go back, but I'd say it took, it took like until middle of like spring semester last year for me to get back in the groove of like I had to try really hard, and now I don't feel like I have to try as hard as I did last year but yeah. And I think my teachers were all like very understanding.

The time away hindered students from the ease of transition into the academic portion of college. Although most of them were in Bible classes, there was infrequent writing and grading, and academic evaluation was minimal.

The sophomore participants felt on track with their peers by their second year, while it remains to be seen whether the same was true for the freshmen participants. The sophomores shared that the first couple of semesters back were difficult, but they felt on track with everyone else by their second year. Another frustration worth mentioning was the difficulty in transferring credit hours. Most of the participants mentioned the hassle of convincing the university to accept credits from their experiences abroad. These difficulties, coupled with the students' lack of connectedness, were negative contributing factors in the transition process for those involved in the study.

Connection. Lastly, a difficulty expressed by the participants was adapting to community life at the institution. Each had experienced close knit communities while they were abroad. Upon return, students were consumed with processing and grieving the loss of friends and their experiences. This process went on throughout the first few months for the majority of participants. However, after they were able to push past the initial transition of getting to know yet another new group of people, participants discovered a strong sense of community during their transition process. Brooke expressed,

The transition was pretty much up to you. Just for me, I just said hi to everybody and said yes to anything I got invited to and you know just had a good attitude about things and be really flexible cause living at home is really different than living here.

The majority of the students, like Brooke, made the most of their transition process. While some experiences were different than others, all of the participants voiced that they currently felt connected and had a strong sense of community at the institution.

Vulnerability and a sense of belonging played a significant role in the students' feelings of connectedness. Once students felt a sense of belonging within their newfound community and were able to be vulnerable, they became more involved. As a result, the participants became increasingly more involved with campus activities, with some taking advantage of leadership opportunities.

Conclusion

The student transition process was made easier among the study's participants as a result of cultural awareness, identity development, and faith formation throughout the gap year experience. Each of these themes played a dynamic role in the lives of the students as they were abroad and was a formative part of their later transition to college. Expectations, college readiness, challenges, and connection were themes that emerged as a part of the transition process. The expectations students had for their transition process often shaped their perspectives as students entered the university. Vocational aspirations were more established and there was a newfound appreciation for education that resulted from the participants' gap years. This ultimately influenced their transition in relationship to their college readiness. The challenges of re-entering the classroom, processing the year abroad, and connecting with others were common difficulties of a gap year student in transition. Finally, once students felt a sense of belonging, they became vulnerable, then sought to become more involved, and eventually participated in leadership throughout the campus. Overall the gap year experience played a formative role in the collective transition process for all of the participants interviewed.

Chapter 5

Discussion

Overall, the results of this study were consistent with the literature on gap year experiences. There were four prominent themes found within the literature, which corresponded directly to the current study; cultural awareness, soft skill development, identity development, and vocational discovery were themes commonly mentioned in the interviews that are also prevalent in the broader gap year research. Gap year experiences foster cultural awareness as a result of immersion in another culture, something O'Shea (2010) labeled intercultural competency. Similarly, in the present study, cultural awareness was a significant finding in gap year students as a result of their time abroad. Cultural immersion experiences have been researched frequently; however, understanding the influence they has on gap year students is limited. Closely related to O'Shea's research, from this study broadened prospective, experiences, and appreciation for differences developed as unique characteristics that result from cultural awareness facilitated through immersion experiences.

The development of soft skills during the gap year experience was frequently mentioned throughout White's (2009) and Heath's (2007) research on gap year experiences. Their research, much like the current study, suggested that students are able to expand their understanding of life skill development during their time abroad in ways that cannot be learned in the classroom. Participants frequently acknowledged learning

how to live independently from their parents in unfamiliar surroundings as a dynamic part of their experience. The soft skill development provided in these opportunities was often assumed by the participants and left up for interpretation by the researcher. Surprisingly, financial understanding and practical soft skills were not frequently mentioned in this study as a result of the ambiguity in students' responses.

The participants discussed developing a better understanding of themselves and the cultures in which they were immersed. Addley's (2000) research revealed that gap year students acquired a better understanding of self and a developing maturity. The research of Astin (1999) and Arnett (2006) specifically mention the significance of identity development as a primary outcome for college-aged student. The research presented here suggests that not only the age but also the environment fosters identity development. Given the research, gap year experiences may even endorse more consistent identity development and maturity than the typical college experience.

Lastly, the influence of vocational aspirations is a prevalent finding in the general gap year research as well as the research conducted in this study. While there is not a significant amount of research to support a gap year's strong vocational influence, O'Shea's (2010, 2011) research suggested vocational assurance as an influential outcome. Birch's (2007) research concluded that students who observe a gap year are more academically focused. Much like the results of O'Shea's research (2010, 2011), the present study revealed that students who observe a gap year are more likely to be committed to future aspirations. Time for reflection during their experiences abroad was a large contributing factor. The participants in this study had to put forth more effort in their studies and academics. Overall, the participants were more vocationally focused and

committed to academics as well as appreciative of their education as a result of their gap year experiences.

While these primary factors were consistent throughout the literature and also in the current research, the theme of faith formation was more significant and occurred more often within this study than previously the literature. Chickering's (2006) research suggested that spirituality emerges as a theme of service and civic engagement. Palmer and Lynn (1990) shared in their work, *Caring for the Commonwealth*, the tension between outward or civic participation and its relationship to inward or personal belief. Although Palmer and Lynn (1990) have done significant research on college student spirituality, it is mentioned sparsely throughout gap year literature. O'Shea's (2011) research revealed that volunteers observe religion or faith practices through a new lens and in turn develop a deeper appreciation of religion. Specifically with regard to faith formation, there was minimal literature, although it was a substantial reference point for the interviews conducted in the present study.

All of the students interviewed discussed their personal faith formation in depth. Participants said that the most significant growth throughout their time away was in faith development. Brooke made a faith commitment for the first time, a couple of months into her gap year. Emma and Libby voiced that while they had always grown up in a Christian home, they left feeling lost without a faith of their own. Each shared that they rediscovered their own faith, separate from that of their parents, during their gap year abroad. They were articulate in expressing how their time away formed their faith through opportunities both to reflect and understand the world in a new way. Participants repeatedly expressed that their gap year experiences directly shaped their worldview.

One of the most significant findings of the present study that was not found in the literature was the connection between gap year experiences and the transition process for those students. Schlossberg's well-developed transition theory and overall explanation of student adjustment is valuable to understanding this research. His suggestion that student adjustment to the university setting is ultimately going to evoke change in the student certainly connects to the gap year student (Goodman et al., 2006). Additionally as mentioned in the literature review, college-aged students are in a constant state of transition, one of the most prominent times being when they arrive to university (Tinto, 1993). However in order to better assist the gap year student transitioning into an institution, more specific research is needed.

The study revealed consistent factors in the students' time away that contributed directly to their overall transition process. Student expectations, college readiness, challenges, and connections are individual factors of the actual transition process and are vastly important. However, there are also trends from their time abroad that incorporated outside contributing factors which influenced the overall transition process. All of the participants voiced how important their opportunities abroad were in their transition into university. The students expressed a sense of wanting to know what to expect and anticipate during this transition. Lindsey's frustrations with not knowing what to expect upon returning to the States was common to many participants:

If I had to do it over again I would for sure do it over again! I would go back right now. Um I wish I had talked to some more people before I went... I wish I had a more realistic idea of what things were going to be hard. I just kind of thought I was going to show up and it was going to be great. Then I was going to come

home and go to school and like it was great...I wish I would have been more prepared for that like had talked to someone or something. I just wish I had a more realistic idea of what coming back would be like and feel like.

Implications for Practice

A wide-range of research has been conducted on college student transition. There is limited awareness about adjustment for students returning from a gap year. Acquiring a better understanding of the research Tinto (1993) and others in his field have done on transition should be of greater priority to higher education professionals. There should be more adequate insight not only into the philosophy of the transition process, but also practical solutions for ease of student transition. The better professionals are able to understand and walk alongside students during their time of transition, the more enhanced their overall college experience could be. A professional's ability to understand not only transition for the traditional college student, but also that of a gap year student, would better capitalize on the development that has already occurred.

Additionally, bringing more thoughtful programming to the institution for those who have experienced a gap year would help to foster transition for the students with that unique experience. Developing a gap year orientation program is one way that institutions could better serve their gap year students. Higher education professionals should consistently assess how to better capitalize on the growth that has occurred during the students' time abroad.

On a smaller scale, a practical application of this research would be specifically highlighting gap year students to resident directors and assistants. This would ensure that better questions were asked of these students with the hope that better processing could

occur. The more students were able to debrief the process, the better they could implement what they learned and the ways in which they developed in the years to follow.

Limitations

The limitations of this research are important to acknowledge in hopes of strengthening the study's credibility. The participant population and sample size must be acknowledged as a limitation. With only seven participants, this research is limited in its ability to explore the relative importance of the themes mentioned. In order to have an overall greater understanding, a greater number of participants would allow a broader understanding of gap year experiences. Diversity of perspective was another limitation in this study. Having both a male and female perspective would have helped to strengthen this research. Additionally, all participants were in their freshman and sophomore years, and all seven participants were Caucasian. Further research should aim for a more diverse racial population. However, these results might also suggest that there is an intersection of socioeconomic status and race which might impact which students are most likely to have access to or be encouraged to consider a gap year. Assessing transition from a larger number of perspectives would strengthen this research.

Recognizing that the questions asked were formulated from initial research limited the study. Formulating questions based on the topic prior to research could have created a biased approach in the question development. The research provides an automatic bias and slant toward the questions asked.

Lastly, all of the trips were faith-focused, which provides more accurate understanding to the significance of faith formation. All of the participants also chose to

attend a faith-based institution which indicates that, to some degree, the results are restricted based on the population of evangelical, religious perspective. Continued research with a more diverse religious population is highly suggested to create a better understanding of not only faith formation, but also the collective themes discovered in this study.

Implications for Future Research

The implications for future research on this topic are substantial because of the lack of research on this topic in the United States. With a growing number of countries adopting ideas, curriculum, and programs for gap year experiences, the potential for increased understanding may expand in the coming years. During the preliminary stages of research in the United States, it is important to keep in mind that there is still much to be understood. Collaboration with seasoned countries like Great Britain and Australia would benefit students in the United States and around the world.

Across the board, gap year experiences should be further studied. For the strengthening of this particular research, three additional suggestions have emerged. The relative importance of faith formation is difficult to distinguish because of the population sampled. Further research involving participants who have experienced gap year programs that are not faith based or interviewing those students who are matriculating into secular institutions could broaden future studies. Developing a longitudinal study on these students' maturity and the effects of the gap year throughout their college experience would enhance understanding of the lasting effects of a gap year. Formulating a question such as, "How much more mature are these same students in their junior and senior years as opposed to their freshman and sophomore years when compared with

their peers that have not participated in a gap year before entering college?,” or “Has the impact of what these students learned lasted beyond the initial years upon return?,” would greatly benefit gap year research.

Another suggestion for further research questioning could be, “How much more likely does the gap year experience prime students for study abroad and other travel opportunities?” Developing a better understanding of whether or not these students are able to apply what they have learned from their gap year experience to other cultural immersion experiences would only strengthen the benefits of a gap year experience. Other questions may be, “Are gap year students more likely than their peers to pursue study abroad opportunities?” and “Are these students able to implement their understanding of how they grew from their previous abroad experiences to their future opportunities?”

Conclusion

Gap year experiences are a growing trend throughout the world, particularly in the United States. Consequently, developing a better understanding of these experiences through research should be of growing importance to higher education professionals. Transition is an inevitable aspect of the college experience and often encompasses a variety of factors. A typical transition experience looks far different than that of an individual returning from a gap year. As discovered by this research, cultural awareness, identity development, and faith formation are the leading contributing factors in the gap year experience when it comes to the overall student transition into an institution.

Additionally, this study provided knowledge on themes developed in the transition process itself. Expectations, college readiness, challenges, and connection were

dynamic aspects to student transition into an institution following a gap year experience.

There are a number of key experiences that develop positive characteristics in these students. The better higher education professionals can reach this growing population, the better they can foster the growth that has already taken place in gap year students.

Finally, it would be of great benefit for Australia, Europe, and the United States to engage in collaborative research on this topic. The gap year experience can be one of the most impactful experiences in a person's life and often creates dynamic changes.

Learning how to best challenge and support these students has the potential to empower future campus and world leaders.

References

- Addley, E., & Crace, J. (2000, May 13). Time out. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.guardian.co.uk>
- Arenson, K. (2008, February 19). Princeton to help students spend “gap year” abroad. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com>
- Arnett, J. J., & Tanner, J. L. (2006). *Emerging adults in America: Coming of age in the 21st century*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Astin, A. W. (1999). Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. *Journal of College Student Development, 40*(5), 518-529.
- Balakrishna, A. (2007, May 14). Before college, a taste of the real world. *The Harvard Crimson*. Retrieved from <http://www.thecrimson.com/>
- Birch, E. R., & Miller, P. (2007). The characteristics of “gap-year” students and their tertiary academic outcomes. *Economic Record, 83*(262), 329–44.
- Blackburn, A., Clark, G., & Pilgrim, D. (2002). Maximizing the benefits of a pre-course gap year: Developing recommendations for prospective students and departments. *Lancaster University, Department of Geography*, 1-26.
- Blackburn, G., Clark, G., & Pilgrim, D. (2005). The gap year for geographers. *Geography, 90*(1), 32–41.
- Chickering, A. (2006). Strengthening spirituality and civic engagement in higher education. *Journal of College & Character, 8*(1), 1-5.

- Crane, A. H. (2011). Gap years: A chance to explore the world. *The Harvard Crimson*. Retrieved from <http://www.thecrimson.com/>
- Creswell, J. W. (2008). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. (3rd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Dwyer, M. M. (2004). More is better: The impact of study abroad program duration. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 10(4), 151-163.
- Evans, N. J., Forney, D. S., Guido, F. M., Patton, L. D., & Renn, K. A. (2010). *Student development in college: theory, research, and practice* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Glaser, B. G. (1992). *Basics of grounded theory analysis*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology.
- Goodman, J., Schlossberg, N.K., Anderson, M.L. (2006). *Counseling adults in transition* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Springer.
- Heath, S. (2007). Widening the gap: Pre-university gap years and the 'economy of experience.' *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 28(1), 89-103.
- Magnotto, J. N. (1996). Grounded theory: Research as praxis. *Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication*, Milwaukee, WI.
- Nicholls, G., & Gardner, J. (2002). *Pupils in transition moving between key stages*. London: Routledge.
- National Resource Center. (n.d.). About the Center. *University of South Carolina*. Retrieved from <http://www.sc.edu/fye/center/index.html>
- O'Shea, J. (2010). From florida state to oxford: Character, the Rhodes scholarship, and the gap year. *Journal of College & Character*, 11(2), 1-7.

- Palmer, P. J., & Lynn, R. W. (1990). *Caring for the commonwealth: Education for religious and public life*. Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press.
- Salisbury, M. (2012). We're Muddying the Message on Study Abroad - Commentary
The Chronicle of Higher Education. Home - The Chronicle of Higher Education.
Retrieved August 1, 2012, from <http://chronicle.com/article/Were-Muddying-the-Message-on/133211/>
- Santrock, J. W. (1996). *Lifespan development* (6th ed.). Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown.
- Stehlik, T. (2010). Mind the gap: school leaver aspirations and delayed pathways to further and higher education. *Journal of Education and Work*, 23(4), 363-376.
- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- White, K. (2009). *The complete guide to the gap year: the best things to do between high school and college*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Withey, L. (1997). *Grand tours and cooks' tours: A history of leisure travel, 1750-1915*. New York, NY: Morrow.

Appendix A

Initial E-Mail

Hello,

My name is Julie Cline, I am a graduate student in Taylor's Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development. I am currently conducting research entitled, "Minding the Gap: Impact of Pre-College Gap Year on Transition to College." I have been given names of students who have participated in pre-college gap years by current hall directors. I am really interested in this research and I hope to better understand the gap year experience and the impact it has on the transition into college. In order to best conduct my research I need participants who are willing to be interviewed on their experience. The interviews should take no longer than one hour. I would love to have all interviews completed during the month of January. If you are willing to participate please respond to this email at your earliest convenience, then we can set up a time to meet.

Thanks for your consideration,

Julie Cline

Julie Cline
Residence Life
Olson Assistant Hall Director
236 W. Reade Avenue
Upland, IN 46989
574.457.9013

Appendix B
Interview Questions

Warm up/Introduction:

Tell me a little about your gap year experience.

What organization were you with?

What did your day to day schedule and activities include?

As you reflect on this experience:

What did you gain from the experience?

What were some of the negatives of the experience?

What did you gain from participating in a service based gap year as opposed to attending college right out of high school?

As you have moved into university what has that transition looked like?

How do you think your transition into university was made easier based off of your experienced gap year?

How do you think your transition into university was made harder based off of your experienced gap year?

In your opinion, what were some of the major differences between you and the average college freshman straight out of high school?

How was participating in a gap year formative in shaping your vocational hopes for the future?

Conclusion:

Do you regret doing it?

If you had to do it over again would you?

Appendix C

Informed Consent

The purpose of this research is to understand the gap year experience and how it affected your transition into institution. You will be asked to answer a series of questions about your gap year experience, factors related to your transition to college and the influence your gap year has made. Interviews will last approximately sixty minutes, and will be recorded using a digital recorder.

The data collected will be transcribed and analyzed for corresponding themes. All interviews will be transcribed by Hayley Meredith, Rachel Morley, or myself. All data will be maintained as confidential; any direct quotes used in the presentation will utilize pseudonyms and no identifying information will be used in order to preserve anonymity. All data will be stored in a lock box in the researcher's home. Aside from the researcher's faculty advisor, Scott Moeschberger, and the transcriber, no one will have access to the raw data or identifying information. All audio files will be erased upon completion of the study.

The potential risks of this study are that you may recall stressful or emotional situations from your past. If this is the case, the university counseling center is available to meet with you and information on how to contact them will be provided.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time for any reason without penalty or prejudice from the

investigator. Please feel free to ask any questions of the investigator before signing the Informed Consent form and beginning the study, and at any time during the study.

I, _____, agree to participate in this research project entitled, “Minding the Gap: Impact of Pre-college Gap Year on Transition to College.” I have had the study explained to me and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have read the description of this project and give my consent to participate. I understand that I will receive a copy of this Informed Consent form to keep for future reference.

Participant’s Signature

Date

Principal Investigator’s Signature

Julie Cline, Graduate Student
Master of Arts in Higher Education
Upland, IN 46989
Telephone: (574) 457-9013
Email: julie_cline@taylor.edu

Faculty Advisor

Dr. Scott Moeschberger
Taylor University
Upland, IN 46989
Telephone: (765) 998-
Email: scmoeschberger@taylor.edu

