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Students' Meaning-Making Journeys Towards Self-Authorship Through Self-Designed Gap  
Year Experiences

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A dissertation

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership, concentration in Higher Education

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by

Erin Garcia

December 2020

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Dr. Jill Channing, Chair

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Keywords: gap year, experiential learning, self-directed learning, meaning-making, self-authorship, student-centered learning

## ABSTRACT

Students' Meaning-Making Journeys Towards Self-Authorship Through Self-Designed Gap

Year Experiences

by

Erin Garcia

This phenomenological, qualitative study addressed student perceptions of their meaning-making process towards self-authorship in a self-designed gap year experience and was conducted in a public higher educational institution in the Southeast. Data was gathered through interviews from a purposeful sample of gap year program participants and program administrators. Emerging themes and categories were identified by coding and analyzing the interview data, such as continual reflection reinforces the value of individual meaning-making, self-expectations versus self-worth, the influence of societal expectations are minimized, and self-designed learning helps to solidify changes in self-authorship. The data showed a strong connection between multiple meaning-making contexts for students and an enhancement in their authorship, as well as multiple-identities. The findings may be useful in gap year program reflection and redesign, and provide implications for self-design in experiential learning opportunities and gap year outcomes.

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## DEDICATION

For M.T.C, P.S.W., C.B. and Mom

*The very basic core of a man's living spirit is his passion for adventure.*

*The joy of life comes from our encounters with new experiences and*

*hence there is no greater joy than to have an endlessly changing*

*horizon, for each day to have a new and different sun.*

-CHRISTOPHER MCCANDLESS

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## Chapter 1. Introduction

After high school graduation all students are faced with making their own decisions and growing into adulthood. Some of these students choose to take time off from college in the form of a gap year for personal, professional, or situational reasons. Many colleges and universities support students deferring their start for a year, while other institutions have established gap year programming within their own organizational structure (Goetz, 2017). A student may take a gap year to seek out something “new” or “different” while another student may wish to take a gap year to explore new skills and career interests (O’Shea, 2014, p. 13). Situational motivations arise for students in economic difficulties. A 2020 College Savings Foundation survey reported 37% of high school student plans would be modified to take a gap year or attend community college due to economic constraints put on families from the coronavirus pandemic (Grant, 2020).

“A gap year is a period of time a student takes as a break from formal education to travel, volunteer, study, or work” (Haigler & Nelson, 2012, “Chapter 2”, para. 15). Lassels (1670) coined the phrase the *Grand Tour* to describe this type of experience in his book *Voyage of Italy*. The author helped to explain how “...the independence and self-reliance wrought by travel would equip the young man with the necessary qualities of masculinity” (Sweet, 2012, p. 23). This term became a prominent method for the British elite in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a way for young British aristocratic men to enhance their educational experience by learning about culture, art, and history on their travels throughout Europe (Haigler & Nelson, 2012). This trend continued through the Vietnam War and Free Love social movement of the 1960s and 1970s, as students had the ability to learn about themselves through counterculture experiences (Haigler & Nelson, 2012). Gap year students today have a variety of options, but regardless of the programs,

there are always themes of personal growth, cross-cultural experience, and global perspective present (Jones, 2005). The gap year trend continues to grow, and there is concern that the spread of experiential education has been uneven among the classes (O’Shea, 2014). The gap year potentially benefits students from all backgrounds due to its opportunities to enhance their social, cultural, and economic capital. This opens many doors in the career and educational realms as a student progresses throughout their lives (Martin, 2010).

Due to the advantages and concerns related to the gap year, over a dozen colleges and universities have implemented their own form of gap year programming. Other colleges and universities have developed simple policies supporting gap year students by allowing them to defer enrollment for a prescribed amount of time. The Gap Year Alumni Survey occurs every five years to study national trends in students taking a gap year; the most recent one was conducted in May 2020 (data is yet to be released). Data from the 2015 survey revealed between 30,000 and 40,000 students decide to take a gap year in the United States, which is a 22% increase from the previous year (Gap Year Association, 2015). Programs aid in supporting students from all social classes. This can be done in a variety of ways. “Some gap year providers are able to offer lower cost options by subsidizing the volunteers’ costs with funding from grants or even the developing country’s government” (O’Shea, 2014, p. 4).

Educational theorists struggle to create an all-encompassing paradigm to describe the gap year experience. Earlier researchers have focused on analyzing student experiences through the lens of Kegan’s Constructive-Developmental Theory. O’Shea (2014) developed this theory by focusing on the idea of experiential meaning-making as it, “provides the fundamental conceptual bridge that unifies the volunteers’ narrative of their gap years” (p. 119). This approach focuses on the processes through which we make meaning to understand our world. Kolb’s (1984)

Experiential Learning Cycle also analyzed learning as a process and labeled it as a transformative experience; thus, it is important to use this cycle in analyzing the gap year experience from the participant's perspective. Kolb's four learning styles and different stages of the Experiential Learning Cycle help explain learning within the gap year experiential learning paradigm.

Students start this transformative journey for a variety of reasons: "burnout" from their K-12 education, wanting to serve or contribute to a cause bigger than themselves, fulfilling a specific goal or passion, or being introduced to it by a parent or teacher. These opportunities to volunteer, study, intern, work, explore, or travel are difficult to give up, as they have the potential to impact student confidence, their passion to learn, perspective, organizational and practical skills, and the ability to learn to work under pressure (O'Shea, 2014). Colleges and universities need to provide learning environments that promote learning and personal development in today's global economy. Gappers gain interpersonal skills from working with others and understanding their perspectives is (Wellons, 2013).

### **Statement of the Problem**

It is the responsibility of the institution to properly provide equal opportunities to students of varying backgrounds. Students from middle or higher social classes are more likely to take part in a gap year than those from a lower economic status due to the financial support of parents, family, and friends.

The type of student who takes a gap year has evolved, and these changes are seen by comparing data from a variety of sources. The traditional and average gap year participant were primarily a white female from a more affluent environment who was geographically located at an educational institution in the Southeastern United States. There was little representation of those

from ethnic backgrounds, with those participating having a higher likelihood to have attended a private school (Jones, 2004). The 2015 National Alumni Survey produced a change in a variety of these results (GYA, 2015). The sample population still demonstrated a higher number of females at 70%, while 29% were male (GYA, 2015). These results were similar to the GYA survey with survey participants identifying as 84% White, 4% Hispanic, 1% Black or African American, 3% Asian, and 5% identifying as more than one race. The difference appeared in students attending private high schools at only 35%, and 65% attending public (neighborhood, charter or magnet) (GYA, 2015). The oversaturation of the *typical* student diminished with the growth in participation among young people from state schools, those incoming from more diverse backgrounds, and less of those coming from the Southeast (Hoe, 2014; Jones 2004). There is a slow increase in the diversity of gap year participants. This suggests a need to “conduct studies with more diverse groups of participants, in terms of socioeconomic background, ethnicity and other variables” (O’Shea, 2014, p. 167).

A variety of factors help set the stage for each gap year participant’s experience. The meaning-making process of a gap year is made up of a student’s individuality, earlier knowledge and experiences, and chosen gap experience. There is a significant lack of understanding about the theoretical constructs surrounding the experience of taking a gap year. The gap year is a meaning-making process, and a new theoretical approach must encompass this in creating a “new, more complex structure through the process of *accommodation*” (O’Shea, 2014, p. 120). There are a variety of different gap year options for students to take, which makes the theoretical approach even more complex and situational. Students have the option to work with a gap year company (for-profit or non-profit), to apply for gap year programming at institutions with the option, or to create their own program without institutional guidance.

Gap year programming gives students the choice to take a pre-designed gap year by an institution or design their own experience. The goal of an educational setting is to teach students how to think critically, reason, and grow as a person. Students' personal and professional growth towards critical thinking and reasoning could be stifled if they do not have the opportunity to make decisions based on their internal voices. Student voice is the culmination of student feelings, visions, actions and thoughts, with the sum of all of these being student-centered learning (Nakula & Toshalis, 2012). The choices and voices of students are fundamental to these programs and play a role in how each improve within the program and the student experience (Friends Council on Education, 2017).

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study was to examine student perceptions of their meaning-making process towards self-authorship in a self-directed gap year opportunity at a public higher educational institution in the Southeast. For the purposes of this study, the definition of the term meaning-making will be how individuals perceive objects, relationships, events, and situations in combination with their previous experiences and knowledge (Brinkmann & Zittoun, 2012).

### **Significance of the Study**

This research may be significant as it could strengthen the theoretical framework surrounding the gap year style of experiential learning. The importance of self-directed learning and the implications on the self-authorship process could enhance the educational areas of student growth, institutional responsibility, self-reflection, skill growth, and student learning. Results may potentially serve as a foundation for the study of students from more diverse ethnic



backgrounds. Studying the gap year will potentially deepen the understanding of its implications on the experiential learning paradigm and add value to the gap year as an educational tool.

This study is significant to profit, non-profit, and institutional gap year programs. This study may add data and analysis to programs focused on self-design and an institutional gap year for program and administrative evaluation. This research is significant for students taking a gap year because it provides an intrinsic view into gap year programming and the importance of student-centered learning. The gap year is even more important amongst the Coronavirus pandemic, as there is a movement for students to take a variety of online courses for the sake of their health (Whitford, 2020). This study is even more significant, as many students are opting to take a gap year and engage in service learning (Grant, 2020).

### **Research Site**

The research site for this study was a gap year program at a public higher education institution in the Southeast. The university was founded over 200 years ago and has over 25,000 students. Academic programs range from undergraduate to graduate and professional studies, with a strong focus on diversity. The program under examination aims to have a widely diverse class of students each year, and this is represented through student gender, ethnicity, race, first-generation status, socioeconomic status, and academic focus. All students must be 18 years of age and be recent high school graduates to apply. Eight cohorts of 48 students have successfully completed their gap years since the program's foundation in 2011. Students can use an \$8,000 stipend to design their own gap year at a variety of sites internationally through private donations.

The gap year application process begins with students accepted in early admission receiving an email inviting them to apply for the program. Each year, the program receives about 75

applicants prior to the summer. Students are required to submit a letter of recommendation from their guidance counselor(s), résumé, and a completed application. If students receive an invitation to the finalist weekend, they then attend a two-week summer institute to design their gap year proposal and take related workshops. As of this year, students must take an associated one-credit online course, which focuses on individual reflection and growth and building an online community between the gappers and their cohort.

### **Research Questions**

The following central research question guided this study:

Central Research Question: What are student perceptions of self-directing their own gap year program, meaning-making, and self-authorship during their gap year experience?

Supporting Questions:

RQ1: What are student perceptions regarding the value of their individual meaning-making process towards growth in a self-designed gap year?

RQ2: What are student perceptions of their personal growth throughout the individual meaning-making process of their gap experience?

RQ3: What are student perceptions of their previous knowledge and experiences of the meaning-making process of participating in a self-directed gap year?

RQ4: What are student perceptions of how self-directing their gap year experience influenced the development of their self-authorship?

### **Definitions**

**Alternative Spring Break:** Group or team-based, organized projects done on a university or college's annual spring break (Beatty et al., 2016)

**Gap Year:** A semester or year-long experiential learning opportunity that provides students the ability to grow professionally and personally through volunteering (GYA, *What is*, 2019)

**Gapper:** The term used to represent an individual who takes time off from formal education to take a traditional gap year, whose experiences, coping and leadership skills and maturity tend to be ahead of their classmates (Haigler & Nelson, 2012)

**Meaning-making:** A process that happens throughout one's lifetime from infancy to adulthood, where individuals shape contextual meaning through inner and outer experiences (Kegan 1982, 1994)

**Self-authorship:** An idea or internalized identity where individuals create and integrate their own sets of beliefs, values, generalizations, convictions, interpersonal and intrapersonal dimensions and ideals, which is representative in individuals before and after the gap year experience (Kegan, 1994)

**Self-directed learning:** The process where students take initiative of their own learning, with or without guidance, by focusing on the aspects of "self," being purposeful, and the process of learning (Knowles, 1975; Mentz & Oosthuizen, 2016)

**Voluntourism:** Also known as volunteer tourism, is using a designated amount of time and money to help others in need by travelling from one's regular environment (Bailey & Russell, 2012)

### **Delimitations & Limitations**

The phenomenological nature of this study requires participants who have experienced the phenomenon, so that analysis was developed that reveal the essences of their experiences and provide applicable insights for others (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I took appropriate steps to ensure interview data gathered from personal interviews was trustworthy, as well as appropriately

addressed the research questions. I have assumed that all participants responded honestly when discussing their perception of their experiences with the gap year phenomenon, but there is a limitation in their comfort level. Limitations include data analysis, as there can be a reduction of assumptions, bias, and preconceived notions that were reduced. However, these can be difficult to detect overall and reflexivity attempted to reduce these, but they remain a challenge.

There are also limitations in the sample size and sampling method chosen for this research topic due to choosing one program to analyze. Having a limited number of participants, some of which are from diverse backgrounds limits the sample pool. The current age of student participants will vary, as the requirement for the sample is to have completed the program in what would have been their freshman year due to the age of the program. Administrative participants are also a limitation, as the program is small and only a small number of individuals aid in administering the program.

Delimitations of this study apply to both participants groups of the gap year program. I have excluded participants within that current program or at other institutional or for-profit programs from this study. Participants within this area of study had the greatest knowledge in self-directed learning in a gap year program within the necessary demographic constructs.

### **Chapter Summary**

The purpose of this study was to explore student perceptions of the meaning-making process at a public higher education institution by examining their reported participation in a self-designed gap year program experience. Chapter 1 presents the research through an introduction, statement of the problem, research questions, and limitations and delimitations of the study. Chapter 2 addresses a review of the literature. Chapter 3 gives a description of the

method and design; Chapter 4 presents the acquired data; and Chapter 5 includes a summary of the findings, conclusions of the study, and implications for further research.

## **Chapter 2. Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study was to examine student perceptions of their meaning-making process towards self-authorship in a self-directed gap year opportunity at a public higher education institution in the Southeast. The analysis details the gap year phenomenon, the meaning-making process taken by students towards self-authorship, and self-designed learning through a student-centered paradigm to understand how all three relate to student perceptions of their gap year experiences. The gap year within this study is strictly analyzed from an international perspective throughout the literature review. Regardless of their chosen route, students are making a transition to self-authorship. Kegan (1994) found self-authorship to be an individual's personal identity and understanding the process of its creation is important to understanding growth within the gap year. Students often rely on people in authoritative positions to give them perspective.

A gap year provides students with opportunities to shift their critical thinking and reasoning skills and develop their own perspectives. This experience aims to give students “the ability to use multiple cultural frames . . . involving sense of identity . . . and the capacity to create an internal sense of self...” (Barber et al., 2013, p. 868). It is these forms of making meaning that create a complex and culturally mature self-authorship (Barber et al., 2013). Due to the Coronavirus global pandemic, which forced people to self-quarantine in their homes for safety, students are now taking gap years for different reasons, such as financial uncertainty, online learning, and travel restrictions (Burke, 2020). In an online and in person educational landscape, it is more important to explore all possible avenues for students to learn and grow, as

well as to create a more student-centered classroom. The organization of the literature review below is by theme beginning with the history, theories, and models of the gap year.

## **Gap Year**

### **History**

The *Big Year Off*, or the gap year, is an experience aimed at providing students with a sense of purpose by targeting their minds, hearts, and souls (Hanley & Lyons, 2012; O’Shea, 2014). This phenomenon primarily has European roots but has grown dramatically in the United States since the 1980s. The former president of Harvard, Lawrence Summers, wished that all entering first-year students would have the opportunity to spend a year abroad studying or volunteering (GYA, 2017). Students need this experience for reasons such as a self-reflection, a relief from the competitive world of college applications, and a desire to immerse themselves in a new culture (Knight, 2018).

A tradition seen throughout history is the idea of taking time off with an intentional purpose. Australians have been taking *walkabouts* to renew and cleanse their spirits for hundreds of years, while Germans took part in a wandering year or *wanderjahr* (Haigler & Nelson, 2012). In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, society saw Western Europe’s elite and noble youth taking a *Grand Tour*, which represented their transition from one stage of life to another. Other realms of Anglo-American culture also feature this gap year-a year out- as an opportunity provided by an institution (Snee, 2013). Mark Twain wrote about the trend of young people traveling to Europe in his book *The Innocents Abroad*. Written in the 1860s, Twain discussed the joys of international travel (Haigler & Nelson, 2012).

The counter culturalism of the sixties and seventies grew the gap year as youth rebelled against mainstream society (O’Shea, 2014). Though gaining a bachelor’s degree has been

important to the career sector of Western society since World War II, a disruption occurred when post-war efforts saw the creation of the New Left movement (Lynch & Wells, 2012; O’Shea, 2014). Also, after the war, came the requirement in Great Britain for all men at age 18 to sign up for two years of National Service. This forced young men to be away from home for the first time, grow up, and become independent. After the completion of their services, professors noticed these students were more mature than their counterparts. Between the years of 1957 and 1963, this trend phased out, however, the headmaster of Wellington College, Frank Fisher, began the creation of Gap Activity Projects (GAP) (GYA, *A short*, 2019). These projects consisted of structured activities created to fill the space in time between a student’s final exam and the beginning of the semester and aimed to serve both the student and their community (GYA, *A short*, 2019; Winterline 2017). This trend spread to other schools by the beginning of the 1970s (GYA, *A short*, 2019).

At the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s, the trend slowly began to make its way into the lives of students in the United States. Americans that were fortunate enough to travel, spent their summers traveling across Europe by backpacking and staying in hostels. They hoped by leaving home to finally experience new and different ways of living (Haigler & Nelson, 2012; O’Shea, 2014). The counterculture believed that society was trying to suppress their individualism, and the New Left promoted gaining self-actualization through experiential means. An opportunity for self-realization abroad is what students sought and found to be very valuable to their development. By experiencing this “rite of passage” phenomena, were then ready to return to normal everyday life as an adult. Whether it meant they became deeper people or viewed life with a superior attitude to their societal counterparts, students grew through these volunteer experiences in ways the normal classroom could not provide (Hickel, 2013). During



this period, taking time off was associated with dropouts, those who got off the beaten track, or rejected the system completely. Self-proclaimed *hippies* celebrated the anti-establishmentarianism by focusing on their inner and authentic desires by driving a wedge between themselves as individuals and mainstream society (O'Shea, 2014).

Gap years officially made their way to the United States in the 1980s through the work of Cornelius H. Bull, the creator of the Center for Interim Programs (Winterline, 2017). He saw the need for students to have an education that focused on hands-on-learning and real-world experience. He compiled a list of unique program offerings throughout the world into a database. The Center now acts in an independent gap year counseling role to help students effectively transition from high school to college and to create college and post-college outcomes (Center for Interim Programs, 2018).

With the 1990s era came the guilt conscious society, and the idea of the gap year became mainstream and served as a solution to *buy out* the guilt (Hanley & Lyons, 2012; Hickel, 2013). The guilt stemmed from social classes justifying the privilege of how they lived, and these classes helped to rid themselves of this guilt through the action of volunteer tourism (Hanley & Lyons, 2012). Moving from an outcast perspective to the mainstream lens, society found a way to neutralize this phenomenon and monetize the experience. This began to fit into the neoliberal agenda, making what used to be rebellious now conformist and capitalist. Therefore, since this was now a marketed commodity, it became less authentic. Since the neoliberalist movement, society neutralized the stigma, made it an educational trend, and marketed it back to society (Hickel, 2013; O'Shea, 2014). The educational trend of the gap year is a modernized version of Erikson's (1968) institutional moratorium, which occurs for students as they transition to adulthood through an approved social interruption where they learn about

themselves in a multitude of ways (Duineveld et al., 2015). Students explore their inner selves by pushing their personal comfort zones in challenging ways and discovering their own capabilities (GYA, 2020).

### **Karl Haigler's Independent Study on the Gap Year**

In a study conducted by researcher Karl Haigler (2013), 300 gap year alumni filled out an online survey about their perceptions of the ways the gap year changed them as individuals. He also with conducted over 60 follow-up interviews with students and parents in a structured environment. About 80% of those surveyed took a traditional gap year before college, with 77% of students applying to college before a gap year and 56% receiving a deferral after being admitted. For those taking a year off, 90% returned to college within one year, 80% within six months and 5% within two years, while 82% of those graduated in four years or less. Sixty-six percent of gap year students believed their gap year put them on their career or academic path, with 46% taking a gap year to solely explore these pathways.

An increase in global awareness was reported by 82% of those surveyed and 94% who went abroad perceived themselves to have a better understanding of other people, cultures, and ways people lived. Cost was a factor for 65% of gappers surveyed, and 66% believed it made them more financially aware. Benefits of the gap year were reported in areas of developing moral sensibility, increasing cultural connectedness, seeing the world from a new perspective, and finding common ground with other cultures. Of those surveyed, 84% spoke frequently or recommended a gap year to others (Haigler, 2013).

### **Volunteer Tourism**

The idea of volunteer tourism stemmed from the paradigm of 'alternative tourism,' founded on criticisms of those in society who were frustrated with the negative impacts of

tourism through dependencies from local economies and the flagrant views of tourists on local cultures (Griffin, 2013). This local volunteering opportunity aims at providing participants with an interactive and educational experience using a variety of programming (Fennell, 2008). The question of whether volunteering helps to develop nations on a poorer scale is one often asked by a variety of stakeholders (Griffin, 2013; Palacios, 2010). Volunteer tourism has a mirrored impact of forcing its own perceptions on developing nations, as Great Britain did through colonial conquests for centuries (Griffin, 2013). This becomes more important when looking at the gap year, as this type of programming serves in a similar capacity. In a 2011 survey, British think-tank group Demos argued that such programs have the potential to perpetuate westernized colonialization through negative stereotypes, as well as giving western nations more cause to assert their own power (Birdwell, 2011).

Often called “voluntourism,” this type of travel aims to create mutual respect and relationships between the volunteer and the community they are serving, which benefited both parties. Volunteer tourists are not only seeking to grow personally, but they are seeking to make a difference (Bailey & Russell, 2012). The results of Rubin’s (2008) longitudinal study at the University of California Los Angeles showed that high school students who became involved in their communities were more likely to carry this behavior beyond college, thus, preparing them for a lifetime of service. Whether these opportunities are domestic or international, volunteering through travel influences all stakeholders involved. Though 70% of gap year programs send gappers overseas, domestic programs can have great outcomes, as they promote smaller-scale experiences emphasizing education and cultural interaction (Griffin, 2013; Knight, 2018).

## **Colonialism in the Gap Year**

There are traditional neo-colonial structures in place in the gap year, as seen in traditional tourism (Project Volunteer Nepal, 2017). The paradigms of imperialism and colonialism create a structure known as the “third world,” providing a reason to travel and to understand the “truths” that are able to preside in this new reality (Simpson, 2006). The gap year is rooted in the historical conquest of lands and the truths of how the world works; this is seen in the relationship between gappers and the “helpless” individuals they encounter through gap year program placements (Project Volunteer Nepal, 2017; Simpson, 2006). “They label their volunteers as active givers, whereas local people are stigmatized as passive receivers. This binary view leads to disparities by enhancing neo-colonial stereotypes and patterns of thought” (Project Volunteer Nepal, 2017). The traditional separation between individuals serving and those in “need” are similar to the stereotypes of colonialism (Simpson, 2006).

## **Perceptions of Gap Year**

For the sake of this study, the definition of a gap year uses institutional norms ranging from a semester to a year-long endeavor. However, Jones (2004) defined a gap year as, “any period of time between three and 24 months which an individual takes ‘out’ of formal education, training, or the workplace, and where the time out sits in the context of a longer career trajectory” (p. 8). In many contexts, a gap year can be as short as two months, yet its purpose remains for gappers to experiment with career prospects, to increase self-awareness, and to gain an education from different cultures (American Gap Association, [AGA], 2012; Johan, 2014). Each experience must have structure and flexibility. Additionally, it must include a social and solitary pursuit of learning and growth through worldly experiences (Haigler & Nelson, 2012).

The gap year market gives a variety of opportunities to students merely taking time off “to hang out.” Students can start small by taking an Alternative Spring Break in the United States, which is team-based project promoting active citizenship through service learning performed on a traditional college Spring Break (Beatty et al., 2016). Many colleges and universities offer common programming on campuses such as bridge programming, study abroad, or internship opportunities in domestic or international settings. Study abroad normally consists of a student studying for a semester through programs such as the National Outdoor Leadership School or ACCENT International. Bridge programming and internships can happen through their college campuses or through programs like AmeriCorps, which sees 50,000 participants each year (Haigler & Nelson, 2012). Volunteering domestically builds on earlier experiences with fewer cultural boundaries. This provides parents with a sense of security as their children are in safer placements. Volunteering internationally provides opportunities for volunteers to get out of their comfort zones and make personal connections with those in other cultures, especially in the southeastern portion of the world (Haigler & Nelson, 2012; Hanley & Lyons, 2012).

The Gap Year Association created the first set of standards for program accreditation in 2013. The most recent standards were released in 2018. The accreditation process is vigorous and is recognized by the United States Trade Commission and the United States Department of Justice (Gap Year Association, *Standards*, 2019). Though programs do not have to be accredited to operate, achieving accreditation demonstrates their willingness to be current with national education trends and provide meaningful evaluation each time they are updated. Whether an organization is non-profit or for-profit, it has a distinct mission and set of goals. These define program outcomes and determine how volunteers will be shaped (O’Shea, 2014). The type of

placement a student embarks on determines the outcomes and objectives, as both are determined by the length they decide to serve. Short-term placements are less costly and have a long history of success in promoting acculturation and technology transfer, but they can impact continuity of service (Lough et al., 2008). Long-term placements are criticized by society as a way for students to drop out or escape their futures, but they actually give students greater potential for development through the exchange of knowledge with other volunteers and the communities they serve (Hanley & Lyons, 2012; Lough et al., 2008).

Opinions differ on whether or not gap years should be a requirement for all students attending a higher educational institution. Zimmerman (2020) believed that making service-learning required for all students would take away the *elitist* persona given to the gap year. Colleges are working for the greater good of the country students are serving and their practices are in effect at many colleges, as they already give academic credit for study abroad, internships, and other forms of service learning. Due to the impact of these practices on retention, graduation rates, and student engagement, it would be beneficial to students to be civic-minded as they begin college instead of later during their junior or senior year (Falik & Frey, 2018). Global Citizen Year (2020) lists a few disadvantages to gap years, such as fear of being left behind, losing momentum, and financial cost. However, learning the skills of diversity, power, identity, and equity can only come from experiencing real-world setting, and there is no cost to that type of learning (Falik & Frey, 2018). Organized gap years receive criticism for removing the planning and work for students when they are designing their gap years, but the gap year is still a powerful tool in their overall development (Economides, 2020; Falik & Frey, 2020).

### ***Perceptions of the Gap Year During the Coronavirus Pandemic***

Due to the Coronavirus pandemic, one in five students is now unsure of their plans for college, and if they should enroll/re-enroll or not even attend in fall 2020 (American Council on Education, 2020). Students are worried about leaving home, while others cannot defer enrollment and take classes elsewhere closer to home (Syruga, 2020). A survey conducted by the Art and Science Group in Baltimore, Maryland, found that 17% of students changed college plans, 17% of students would wait until 2021 to take classes, and 16% of students would take a gap year (Goebel et al., 2020). Gap year programs are modifying programs to the current climate by adjusting their gap year offerings. Companies like AMIGOS are replacing their gap year with *Civic Action Gap Semester*, a fully online program that offers different courses in areas such as leadership or language. Global Citizen Year is leaving its door open for the spring semester for those who are interested (Zhu, 2020). There is concern over whether these experiences are worth the money, but if a student dedicates the time, then the opportunity could potentially deliver (Horton, 2020).

### **The Role of the Gap Year in Educational Institutions**

Colleges and universities came around to viewing the gap year as a helpful tool for students to figure out their passions. They have adopted policies allowing students to defer their start-date for a year (Falik & Frey, 2018). Institutions understand the investment students make when taking a gap year, as well as the impact it has on their employability, community-mindset, and educational investment (Gap Year Association, 2015). The Pew Research Center (2012) reported that 60% of college students are less prepared than students over a decade ago. As of 2019, the percent of students who met ACT the benchmarks for both math and English were at its lowest in 15 years with only 37 % meeting three of the four benchmarks, which demonstrated

college readiness is dropping (Johnson, 2019). Many students rely on institutions to take on the role of *acting parent*, but it is important for students to learn how to make choices for themselves to become productive members in society (Kolb, 2011). To support economic and academic viability, institutions must constantly measure and assess themselves in every regard. With the advent of gap years, unprepared students can prosper in a global economy by becoming more employable and developing themselves more fully (O'Shea, 2014). Though this is not a substitute for higher education, many individuals and institutions are aiming to shape opportunities to match outcomes both in and out of the classroom (Lough et al., 2008; O'Shea, 2014).

Traditionally, gap year deferrals have not been accommodated by administrators on college campuses, but this is changing as gap years have increased global citizenship for students (Hanley & Lyons, 2012; O'Shea, 2014). Extracurricular academic activity, such as taking part in clubs, extracurricular and co-curricular activities, sports, and acts of service, is important on a student's college application. Continuing these types of activities on college campuses allows students to take full advantage of their educational experience, as students have learned to foster their independence by getting an opportunity to look at the world (O'Shea, 2014; Rubin, 2008). A key performance indicator of a gap year program's success was in the retention of the overall student body of an institution from a student's first to second year. In 2015, the Gap Year Association estimated 90% return to college the following year (GYA, 2015).

Many institutional programs have paired with Global Citizen Year (GCY) to expand their offerings. In a 2017 alumni survey, GCY interviewed 700 former gap year participants from their program and found that 95% reenrolled or completed their college degree. Students found they could apply cross-cultural skills and become engaged citizens after their gap experiences.



Eighty-six percent of alumni reported a sense of civic responsibility, while only 46% admit a civic responsibility. Also, 70% of alumni say that their gap year experience at GCY helped them choose their career path after college (Global Citizen Year, 2017).

## **Agencies**

Gap year agencies frame this experience as a way for students to mature, learn, and grow through the development of their skills at a pivotal transitional time (Snee, 2014). Students crave a *real* and *authentic* international experience, which is an experience that provides them a full cultural immersion. Agencies fulfill this need by having students work with organizations and communities in need or what Hickel (2013) described as a post-colonial group of savages. Many agencies market themselves as being separate from the *commercial model*, as students aim for authenticity; however, the experience becomes less about poverty alleviation and more about the volunteer experience (Hickel, 2013). Agencies are at events, such as those by the USA Gap Years Fair, which includes 35 different agencies and gap year options (Flowers, 2015). Independent and government agencies aim for students to gain an education in the real world, outside of the classroom. The Peace Corp has more applicants than it can place each year, but it can serve as a gap year experience since it provides participants with a well-rounded volunteer experience and colleges allow deferments (Coyne, 2013).

Though the potential for a gap year is high, the bulk of these programs can cost upwards of \$20,000 (Flowers, 2015). Whether a program is for-profit or non-profit, it is important for students to vet all their choices thoroughly for quality, length of time in business, staff qualifications, and quality of the itinerary (White, 2019). Because the point of commercial agencies is to make a profit, they do little to serve the communities they claim or the volunteers they send. These companies must economically sustain themselves in the neoliberal market, so

commodifying the gap year experience is necessary for the company's economic and financial success (Hanley & Lyons, 2012). These for-profit programs offer a way for participants to buy out their own feelings of guilt surrounding their privilege, and there is no guarantee that the interests of these programs follow any sort of guiding principles (Butcher & Smith, 2010; Hanley & Lyons, 2012). In other words, if there were no profit, then the programs would potentially cease to exist, as they are a for-profit business.

The need for monetary gain suggests a lack of empirical evidence to inform best practices for these programs. This lack of evidence has massive implications on the quality and effectiveness of these programs, as the current gap year program perpetuates similar inequalities seen within colonialism (Hanley & Lyons, 2012). However, there are benefits to gap year agencies, depending on what a student is aiming to gain from the program experience. Global Citizen Year (GCY) aims for students to come from a variety of backgrounds with 49% of alumni coming from low income backgrounds and 45% identify as students of color (Global Citizen Year, 2017).

### **Higher Educational Institutions**

Colleges and universities are now implementing gap year programming and allowing deferral acceptance for students. Higher educational institutions that use opportunities to teach self-authorship promote student involvement in their own decision-making, success pathways, and academic learning (Brzycki & Brzycki, 2016). However, there is little support from institutions to provide any type of experience that truly challenges students and pushes them to develop new constructs of themselves (O'Shea, 2014). Students who possess the skills of self-authorship have developed the capacity to make meaning at levels that are complex and integrate their own beliefs, relationships, and identities within an environment in which they live, think,

and behave on their own terms (Fussell & Gocial, 2012). It is the responsibility of higher educational departments to provide these opportunities for students. For example, the Career Services department should pair appropriate experiential learning opportunities and academic majors that enhance career and educational pathways. Students having plans that are individualized to their learning, gives them opportunities in a variety of areas, such as scholarships and experiential learning (Brzycki, 2016).

The Gap Year Association (2015) listings show every state has at least one college that allows deferment for students taking a gap year. Schools like Tufts University and Elon University have created their own gap year departments on campus. Princeton University started their Bridge Year programming in 2009 with 20 students. This program covers all expenses and gives stipends for funding based on the individual needs of each student (Hulstrand, 2010). Because institution-sponsored gap years are newer to colleges and universities, there has been little research done on this type of programming in the educational paradigm (Coder et al., 2018; Haigler & Nelson, 2012).

Students can defer a year with many colleges and universities, by outlining their plans and setting goals and objectives (Coder et al., 2018). The downside to programming, whether the experiences are on or off-campus, is that some colleges do not offer college credit. Instead, programs *sell* the experience as a bridge for students to gain confidence, self-confidence, and motivation and provide gappers with the opportunity to reflect on their plans after college (Martin, 2010). Students must be accepted and enrolled in their college to defer for a gap year, while many institutions are establishing their own departmental gap year programs on campus. One Southeastern private college offers between \$5,000 and \$15,000 in financial support while another gives each gap year fellow a flat rate of \$5,000. One program has five different site

locations in areas of Asia and South America, and other programs allow for a variety of choices for one experience. All programs have established reflection as a key portion of their program model through collaborative projects, blog posts, and virtual and written assignments. Relatedly, some institutions have established courses for gappers to take during or after their gap year (White, 2017).

### **Gap Year Participants**

In the United Kingdom, a gap year, or *snap* gap as it is often called, has about 250,000 participants. With the boom now moving beyond Europe, countries such as the United States, Australia, and New Zealand are seeing an increase of gappers on college campuses (Hickel, 2013). The gap year opportunity used to be primarily available only to the elite, and that notion is still represented in a lot of gap year data. About 18% of students report their parents make over \$200,000 a year and contribute 63% to their gap year expenses, with only 3% reporting their parents make less than \$25,000 a year and contribute only 38% (GYA, 2015).

The area of concern lies in the lack of data on students from lower-income backgrounds and students that have already begun to create their own ways of self-authoring prior to entering higher education (O'Shea, 2014). Students from higher income backgrounds do not have the same necessity to create their own success formulas towards self-authorship. They tend to have excessive supports at home, often leaving them without fully developing their self-authorship upon entering college (O'Shea, 2014; Pizzolato, 2003). Colleges and universities need to focus on the variables of a student's self-authorship instead of other factors, such as income, that are often used to explain retention issues. Students are at higher risk of dropping out of college if they are from disadvantaged environments, yet it is shown that college graduates decrease the income gap (Todorova, 2019). Thus, facilitating meaningful reflection opportunities allows for

students to facilitate their own learning in high impact practice areas like global learning (Brzycki, 2016). Prep schools for the elite train their pupils to present a version of themselves to society and future employers that shows quality (Hickel, 2013).

In current gap year trends, administrators support diversity through recruitment of students from low-economic statuses, through preparation of composites through income measurements, and through analyzation of parental occupation and education (Lynch & Wells, 2012; O’Shea, 2014). The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015) reported that 38% of college graduates had volunteered, and those with a higher education were more likely to volunteer than those with less education. Ethnic minorities who take a gap year tend to be involved in volunteer work within their own communities and be of the same working class (Gray, 2010). There is an underrepresentation of students with disabilities. Low-income students have a variety of techniques to raise the necessary funds, which in turn leads to higher appreciation of the experience overall, but these profiles make a difference in the effectiveness of the volunteer experience (Lough et al., 2008; O’Shea, 2014). However, the lower the amount of funds spent, the lower the quality, service, and outcomes achieved for the gapper (O’Shea, 2014). These students perform a cost-benefit analysis and, in turn, face obstacles, receive no help from their parents, and are more likely to delay enrollment (Fitzgerald, 2004). Though they experience more disadvantages than the traditional gapper, they do tend to develop self-authorship earlier (Lynch & Wells, 2012). This is due to the lack of support structures at home needed to overcome obstacles in life; thus, lower-income students must devise their own “formulas for success” to make the best decisions for themselves (Olson & Pizzolato, 2016, p. 413).

The profile of the traditional gap year participant has slowly changed since 2000, and the different gap year programs have realized the necessity for diversity. These programs structure

themselves to produce outcomes for students from varying backgrounds. Gappers tend to be white, female, affluent, primarily from private school backgrounds, and non-first generation students (O’Shea, 2014). The gap year is a way for students from this class to separate themselves from the status quo (Snee, 2014). Gap year students choose this experience because it sets them apart by gaining an edge over their competition in the job market, and it provides them a longer period of financial support from parents. They have the benefit of having more opportunities online to choose from, heightened awareness of global problems, and less concern about their career paths than previous generations (Hanley & Lyons, 2012).

### **Motivations for Taking a Gap Year**

Reasons for taking a gap year vary depending on the individual. Many students need time off due to the high school burn out, stress, and the intense pressure to find the right college (Haigler & Nelson, 2012). Many students want to get off the common trajectory they see so many of their classmates take, so they believe that by cultivating a different version of self, they can become connected with potential career trajectories (Hickel, 2013; O’Shea, 2014). “Students who have struggled academically appreciate a gap year that gives them a chance to find strengths outside of academia or to study in a new environment that will prepare them for success in college” (White, 2017, p. 14). Getting parents to see the value in the process can be difficult although some see it as a way for their children to grow (O’Shea, 2014). Gappers can gain cultural capital through a variety of volunteering themes, such as increased self-interest, gained ingenuity, and increased authenticity (Hickel, 2013; Snee, 2014). Because this experience can put students a year behind on the road to graduation, the different options and program designs allow any type of student to pick a gap year experience perfectly suited to them, especially when the experience is aligned with their institutional goals (O’Shea, 2014).

The burnout from the social and academic pressures of college admissions is a common feeling among high school students. For those yearning to know more about themselves and interact with new cultures, the gap year becomes a motivating factor (Knight, 2018). Becoming global citizens and gaining cultural tolerance through understanding and openness is a way for students to experience cosmopolitanism (Snee, 2013). Students aim to emerge as a fully formed person, ready to come back into the homes they were striving to get away from. Though the relationships back home can be difficult for students to manage at first, there is value in students separating themselves to gain a fresh perspective (Hickel, 2013). Spurring this separation from the familiar is an urge to become less materialistic and separate themselves from the western world and only to return with a higher level of cultural proficiency (Lough et al., 2008; O'Shea, 2014). Students are motivated by the potential a gap year can have on their career pathways, as future employers want employees with confidence and the capability to communicate with others across different cultures (Sherifi, 2018).

## **Issues**

### ***Motivations***

The excessive costs of gap year programming can inhibit students from taking part in the experience (O'Shea, 2014). Students can delay college based on internalized beliefs created from their immediate environment (*habitus*), which could impact the effectiveness of the gap year experience, and cause them to come home early. Delaying entry can decrease a student's motivation of completing a bachelor's degree by 64%, and completion rates drop the longer the delay (Lynch & Wells, 2012). Post-school delay can also narrow the opportunities for students who do not make the transition in a reasonable amount of time. This can lead students to work in unskilled ways and contradicts gap year research (Duineveld et al., 2015).

**Student roles.** Haigler and Nelson (2012) suggested a seven-step plan for students preparing to take a gap year: communicate with parents, agree on roles and responsibilities, develop a timeline, research, establish priorities, stay on top of planning, and reflect. Agencies do the brunt of the work for students, but through training, gappers must take individual responsibility to make the most of the experience and stand out from the crowd. Yet, Snee (2014) believed there is little evidence that gappers become critically self-aware, as they control the skills and knowledge gained, how others are helped, and how fun is had. In most gap programs, students are completely in control of the stipends or funds they receive for the experience itself, which can lead to running out of funds much more quickly (Lough et al., 2008).

### ***Organizations***

For-profit organizations have similar goals and objectives to institutional and non-profit gap programs; however, their bottom line is in maximizing profits. Some of their efforts are geared towards maximizing gappers' learning, but the public relations truly control the experience due to the necessity to adapt to trends in the market. There is only so much a program can control, as the motivations and experiences change with the individual. If organizations impose too much control, it could deter potential volunteers, restrict exploration of volunteers, and reduce challenges that could lead to growth (O'Shea, 2014). If not managed carefully, projects can have the potential for the reinforcement of cultural stereotypes and cultural misunderstandings (Hanley & Lyons, 2012). Organizations do not provide experiences geared specifically to the emerging adult, as the framing of the benefits are in a safe zone (Duineveld et al., 2015). In other words, gap organizations do not market themselves to someone growing into adulthood or the true emerging adult. Programs are designed to be safe, and their benefits play on the safe side.



## **Outcomes of a Gap Year**

### ***Positive Implications***

The Gap Year Association (2015) reports that students benefit from taking a gap year in areas such as determining an academic major, choosing a career path, developing maturity and cross-cultural understanding, problem solving and critical thinking skills, creating an individual version of “success,” and evaluating personal values. Satisfaction with life and career prospects were also important outcomes. Birch and Miller (2007) found that those taking time off before college had higher levels of achievement, especially males. Graduation and dropout rates also reflected a greater attainment of positive outcomes (O’Shea, 2014).

Many changes occur in gap year participants; for example: intrapersonal, interpersonal, civic, religious, and intellectual enhancements (O’Shea, 2014). Global citizenship is an important outcome, which the globalization process helps the student achieve (Hanley & Lyons, 2012). This promotes greater international cooperation and makes students a model for global and civic engagement (Lough et al., 2008). Hall and Raymond (2008) do not believe that understanding cross-culturally is a given outcome due to the potential for program mismanagement or reinforcement of cultural stereotypes. The Intercultural Development Continuum shows how participants gain acculturation. Student growth continues from cultural disengagement all the way to full adaptation and immersion. Gap years are a way to increase cultural capital, identity, and employability (The Global Gap Year Fellowship, 2016; Snee, 2013).

The outcome of enhancing students’ worldview is a selling point for many gap year agencies. These programs believe the amount of cross-cultural opportunities a student experiences influences the amount of learning outcomes achieved. Higher amounts of these

experiences improve cultural norm awareness, language development of the volunteer, psychological supports provided to the local communities, and specific community needs fulfilled by volunteers (O’Shea, 2014). The potential for reciprocal benefits for both host communities and the volunteers are possible if there are respectful relations (O’Shea, 2014; Lough et al., 2008).

Self-authorship is a desired developmental outcome for any gap year experience, as it helps students create new ways of making sense of themselves and the world around them (Baker et al., 2006). Gap year outcomes aim to shift the cultural experiences and adapt the behaviors of their participants, which allows them to create a narrative of self (The Global Gap Year Fellowship, 2016; Hanley & Lyons, 2012). The design of a gap year program includes self-reflection in hopes for students to determine their strengths and weaknesses through the self-authorship process (Hickel, 2013; Lough et al., 2008). O’Shea (2014) found that “an intense, sustained, active, and experiential modality of engagement is required” for meaning-making (p. 124). A program can be designed in order to facilitate participants’ embracing diversity, gaining confidence, experiencing new cultures, and developing transferable skills (Hickel, 2013; Lough et al., 2008; O’Shea, 2014).

### ***Negative Implications***

However, Sin (as cited in Hanley & Lyons, 2012) contended gappers have more of an urge to travel than to give back. Though gappers gain a sense of social responsibility in the corporate world, this can result in an increased emotional distance from their peers (Hanley & Lyons, 2012; Hickel, 2013). The environmental outcomes are a focus for many groups, but the results of their impact are unclear (Lough et al., 2008). According to Duineveld et al. (2015), there is no differences in growth for goal commitment, expectations of attainment, effort, or

university enrollment than those who enter college straight after high school. Gappers are more likely to drop out of a university degree, as there is no difference in their futures.

Students from low-income backgrounds have the benefit of creating self-authorship prior to entering school, due to the number of obstacles and hardships they face in their lives. However, many students do not have this option as educational institutions seek to fill the role as a parent or mentor; therefore, creating self-authorship at a traditional college or university can only happen in the classroom (O’Shea, 2014). When applying for jobs at the end of college or after graduation, students will have to explain to employers the gap in their schooling that resulted from taking a gap year. This is not necessarily a deal breaker for every situation, but students will have to sell their experience and the benefits gained during the interview (Thottam, 2016).

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Experiential Learning Theory and Model**

Kolb (1984) first introduced Experiential Learning Theory and was inspired by the work of John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, Jean Piaget, and others (Johan, 2014). There are four stages of the experiential learning cycle: concrete experience (actual learner experience), reflective observation (reflecting and observing on actual experience), abstract conceptualization (abstract concept creation of first two stages), and active experimentation (using abstract concepts as a guide for future experimentation) (Johan, 2014; Kolb, 1984). These four stages are represented by students immersing themselves into the new domestic or international environment,, observing, and reflecting on the culture, making sense of that experience, and using that experience to help with future cultural immersions.

Kolb's (1984) theory can be applied to the gap year process as students observe, reflect, and make sense of their surroundings and apply this new knowledge to future experiences. However, the learning process is internalized and, often not observable. Students in a gap experience are prepared by their program and sent to their chosen destinations where it is almost impossible for the programs to observe their experiences. Therefore, through internalized reflection, as well as structured program reflection, students must observe, reflect and make sense of their surroundings on their own. Because the experiences are subjective (only the individual can understand the experiences themselves), the subject is forced to be open to sharing in these new experiences. When gappers apply their new knowledge to future experiences, they openly share to gain the most from their experiences and reflection. Understanding and interpreting are pivotal to the student's success, but he or she does so at his or her own time and pace, so giving necessary reflection time is pivotal for success.

### **Kolb's Four Learning Styles**

Kolb (1984) also suggested four learning styles, which demonstrates metacognition where a student has the ability to analyze their own thinking. A student's ability to watch or feel is the learning style of diverging. When a gapper enters the proposal stage and their chosen gap year destinations, they observe in this learning style. Observation is the first impression in any new experience. The student's ability to simultaneously process how they watch and feel is an important facet to becoming acclimated to their new situations. The second learning style is accommodating, which is doing and feeling. Gappers begin to participate and feel a variety of emotions in their gap year experience, and through this style, they begin to adapt to their surrounding cultures.

The third learning style is converging, better described as doing or thinking. After accommodation and learning the cultures, gappers begin to act in new ways to fit into their new cultures. The fourth style is assimilating, which is one's ability to watch or think. In the assimilation learning style, gappers process their observations by thinking through their new experiences. Because Experiential Learning Theory has its basis on experiences, the gap year experience provides a mixture of opportunities for reflection and growth. Learning through an experience happens as the student immerses themselves into new economic, political, cultural, and social settings.

### **The Meaning-Making Process Towards Self-Authorship**

The meaning-making process is shaped through different environmental and personal contexts for each individual, which provides an internal view of one's self, relationships, and knowledge (Baxter Magolda & Welkener, 2014). Gappers attain their self-authorship through the meaning-making process, but each participant has different ways of making meaning. Because institutions tend to provide formulas for success, one of the ways to make authentic meaning is through questioning and criticizing these formulas by turning inwards and identifying ones' own values, beliefs, and goals (Olson & Pizzolato, 2016).

### **The Self-Authorship Work of Baxter Magolda**

The *Constructivist Perspective* (theory) assumes that the construction of understandings and knowledge of reality occurs between interactions of the world and the individuals in them. However, this perspective does not address the presence of oppression, power, and privilege. Through voluntourism, the constructivist perspective demonstrates the impact volunteers have on the communities in which they serve by encouraging volunteers to develop internal growth through their experiences.

The communities served by volunteers in an outdated, colonialist way need to be taken into account. If individuals are able to identify either of those three perspectives (oppression, power, and privilege) as part of their reality, then they have recognized their role within these communities. It is difficult for many gappers to not have privilege as a part of their identity, especially underlying privilege. The lens of Baxter Magolda's study and constructivism can be applied to the gap year as gappers can use their internal voices to respond to external information and construct their understandings and knowledge of reality through the constructive experience. This becomes an issue because Baxter Magolda's study sample consisted of mostly White participants (Perez, 2019).

### ***The Evolution of Self-Authorship***

Baxter Magolda was able to create a definition for self-authorship through Kegan's (1994) work, where he developed three different transitions to self-authorship: cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. As individuals continue to distance themselves from external beliefs, identities, and social relationships, self-authorship can begin (Baxter Magolda, 2008). The first step focuses on following external formula. During this step, people rely on others to help construct their own identity and build relationships. This can be seen in a gap year when gappers rely on their host communities to integrate into their volunteering experiences and develop relationships in their new environments. The second stage is crossroads, which is a transitional step. Though individuals rely on others for support at this stage, they begin to realize their own values and demands come into conflict with their supports. The gap year experience encourages students to find freedom in developing their own internal voice and not rely on others for validation. The final stage of self-authorship is where individuals can uniquely express their own internal voice, demonstrate their values and beliefs, and trust their internal foundation

(Baxter Magolda et al., 2010). Overcoming obstacles and reintegrating back home is where gappers begin to truly trust their internal foundations.

*The Learner Partnership Model*, also created by Baxter Magolda (2004), provides options for guiding students to find their internal authorship. Three assumptions related to self-authoring are the following: knowledge is complex and socially constructed, the self is central to constructing knowledge, and expertise and authority share in constructing knowledge with peers. These assumptions demonstrate the ways each individual construct knowledge to create meaning. Past individual experiences are central to each person's perceptions of knowledge, but these experiences still have an influence through their social environments. The construction of an individual's knowledge creates expertise and determines how they share this knowledge with others. In a gap experience, the construction of knowledge is a foundation in the development of learning outcomes for most programming. Through each experience, the goal is for participants to use past experiences to construct knowledge in new situations, and through self-reflection, they can learn how to effectively relay the newly constructed knowledge to their peers (Baxter Magolda, 2004).

Baxter Magolda (2001) developed three principles related to self-authorship, which can be applied to a gap year and occur throughout the experience. Validating the learner's capacity to know occurs through the choosing of each student's gap year program as well as self-reflection and preparation before the participant begins their placement. The gap year program requirements, student goals, outcomes within the host setting, and duties within the experience are where the learners' experience occurs. Defining learning as mutually constructing meaning through the act of volunteering and learning from peers and community members is essential to students' development. Understanding how they learn and create meaning aids in the reflection

process. Reflecting promotes self-authorship and shows gappers their capacity for learning. All three of these principles are important for a gapper when developing their self-authorship, especially as they reintegrate back home.

The limitations to the Learner Partnership Model are found in the individual themselves, instead of the contexts in which students' realities are shaped. There are a multitude of possibilities to reconceptualize self-authorship and development, but the dismissal of the constructivist perspective by researchers is one that is believed to not belong (Abes & Hernandez, 2016). A model created by the Wabash National Study for Liberal Arts Education extended the analysis of the Learner Partnership Model. They extended upon the constructive-developmental and self-authorship theories by applying self-authorship to diverse student populations and recognized that students who enter college do so with a variety of characteristics they have acquired prior that influence them during college. These acquired characteristics relate to views on the world, personal histories, and social abilities (Abes & Hernandez, 2016). The Wabash model helps to find a balance by focusing on students' diversity, previous knowledge, and experiences; experiences, roles, and knowledge learned are all selected by the students.

### ***Shifts to Self-Authorship***

In the shift to self-authorship for gappers, Perez (2019) describes six themes self-authorship phenomena:

- Building identity development through the gap year experience
- Challenging gappers to evaluate their knowledge and personal beliefs
- Having a feeling of belonging as an important support for the community
- Encountering diverse and new cultures in their experiences that cause them to reevaluate their perspectives



- Exposing themselves to obstacles or intense personal challenges that require a shift in perspective
- Working through complex relationships built in their gap experience

It is important to have meaningful experiences and for gappers to put themselves in roles that demand an internal voice. The literature suggests revising existing campus experiences and roles, shaping encounters with diversity, and structuring an increase supports for students to promote self-authorship (Perez, 2019).

Because emotional engagement is important to remaking meaning, O'Shea (2014) suggested that a prerequisite to shift through the meaning-making process is for people to place themselves in another person's world. The shift in meaning-making towards self-authorship happens more, the longer the gap year experience. The shorter the time devoted to the project, the more likely the gapper will be selfish and have a voluntourism mindset with the destination taking precedence over the project (Hanley & Lyons, 2012).

### ***Assessing Self-Authorship***

Individuals in a gap experience are exposed to added information and experiences. They create new, multiple identities, known as cognitive dissonance (O'Shea, 2014). To properly analyze their transition to self-authorship, they create a new framework of understanding in a process called *accommodation* because new knowledge does not fit into their current existing frameworks. Two types of dissonance can lead to self-authorship: identity dissonance and relational dissonance. Identity dissonance occurs when the participant and characteristics of their identities do not match while relational dissonance arises through decisions in the meaning-making process by students struggling to find a balance between various consequences

(relational, personal, cultural). Dissonance leads to reflection internally, and individuals use it as a mechanism for change towards self-authorship (Olson & Pizzolato, 2016).

The process of measuring and assessing the meaning-making process to self-authorship requires knowing exactly how people make meaning, instead of knowing their values or beliefs. The individual's growth towards self-authorship gradually progresses through the influence of personal and environmental factors (Baxter Magolda & Welkener, 2014). Gap year programs use the Global Perspectives Inventory, an instrument used to assess a holistic and global view of student development, to measure program outcomes (Coder et al., 2018). Determining the links to self-authorship is helpful in critically analyzing and evaluating self-concept formation, appreciation of diversity, and ability to consider multiple perspectives (Barber et al., 2013).

### ***Service-Learning Impact on Self-Authorship***

Abes and Jones (2004) found that service learning is integral to the creation of a new self within the areas of privilege, commitments at home, open-mindedness of new people, and experiencing new ideas. This study helped to solidify service learning's significant impact on identity construction. Structured supports can help promote self-authorship and enhance an individual's meaning-making process when overcoming obstacles in a service-learning environment (Baxter Magolda, 2008). Through service learning, students engage in the community and apply lessons they have learned from their coursework (Andrew et al., 2016). Expanding on the framework, Iverson and James (2013) examined the role of service-learning had on students' civic identities in relation to their self-authorship and found they learned deeper meanings of citizenship, and citizenship efficacy and developed an increased awareness of themselves in relation to the communities they experienced (Iverson & James, 2013).

Throughout the meaning-making process, a participant will experience a variety of narratives. The four types of narrative dimensions surrounding the gap year experience include metanarrative, public narrative, ontological narrative, and conceptual narrative. All of these dimensions help to show the gap year experience, its' factors, and the influences through narratives of the gappers and those who study the gap year (Baker, 2015; Griffin, 2013). Higher Education institutions highlight the specific skills that service-learning outcomes can provide to promote self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 1998). As college campuses invest additional time and energy into service learning, a more in-depth understanding of the parts related to desired outcomes surrounding self-authorship becomes more important (Andrew, 2016).

### ***The Value of Self-Authorship in a Gap Year***

The inherent value of developing self-authorship are the changes gappers make in the ways they create meaning, in which each process is different for each person. The work of Baxter Magolda can be applied to the gap year, as students create meaning towards a new self-authorship. In a 25-year study, Baxter Magolda (2008) created three elements that aid in this process, which can only happen in the appropriate meaning-making environment. Trusting the internal voice happens first. This is where participants realize they cannot control the reality of their gap year experience, but they can control their reactions to the new culture. Tenser (2015) found that the more challenging the gap year experience, the greater the student's meaning-making process from external to internal. Building an internal foundation happens when they create a foundational reaction to the newfound realities of their host communities. At the final stage, gappers secure internal commitments and adapt to ways they wish to live (Baxter Magolda & Welkener, 2014). Students noticed the real world provided them with greater opportunities to make positive, internal decisions, as opposed to the culture of a college campus (Tenser, 2015).

The goal of the gap year experience is to provide an educational experience that allows students to develop self-authorship out of necessity, as it takes them out of their comfort zones, allows them to think critically, develops maturity in a cultural context, and makes them active citizens and leaders. However, after developing their self-authorship, gappers sometimes struggle to integrate their third-world perspective into their first-world homes. Re-entering back into society is a process that students do not fully comprehend when they first leave for their gap year, so it is important for students to give themselves some ‘buffer’ time when they return home (Polanco, 2017). The process of “reverse culture shock” is similar to culture shock but focuses on the challenges and stresses one encounters upon re-entry into their own culture after living in another culture (Gaw, 2000).

Diversity Abroad (2019) lists the following as symptoms of reverse culture shock: oversimplifying their international experience, isolation, and a shift in personal attitudes towards their home country. The program suggests students rely on supports such as community, campus resources, or paying it forward in response to this shock (Diversity Abroad, 2019). The programming entities unfortunately lack the necessary understanding of how to address these issues, even though re-entry can impact a student’s adaptation and adjustment (O’Shea, 2014; Presbitero, 2016). Many gap year programs have re-entry policies in place for returning gappers, yet there are still not enough supports done beyond the gap year for many of these students. Students who took a gap year are better able to cope with daily life stressors over students who did not take a gap year (Presbitero, 2016).

### **Self-Directed Learning**

Self-directed learning underscores the ways individual learners are autonomous in their processes (Leach & Zepke, 2002). Researchers such as Carl Rogers, Malcolm Knowles, and

Allen Tough contributed to this paradigm, which focuses on taking control of the learning from the teacher and giving it to the student. Self-directed learning focuses on putting the student in the forefront of their own education, allowing them to be in control of the decision-making process. Rogers (1969) argued if learning is to be meaningful, then learners must self-initiate their own learning. Students aim to solve their own educational dilemmas, such as problem-solving with the guidance of their teacher through internal realizations. As their educational experience is designed, teachers unconditionally accept the student's perspective in a positive manner and use past experience guide the design process. The goal of the gap year is to provide students with a choice of educational strategies and the freedom to choose their own pathways when working with teachers (Sirazeeva, 2015).

Knowles (1970; 1975) is known for popularizing andragogy, as well as the self-directed learning model. All adults expect to take responsibility for their own decisions as they grow, and adult learning must take that into account. Andragogy is a paradigm focused solely on the teaching of adult learners. The design of this style of learning focuses on a problem-solving approach, the need for experiential opportunities, purpose in content, and immediate relevancy and value of a topic (Knowles, 1970). In the self-directed learning model, the guide has three different parts: the teacher, the learner, and learning resources both parties use in collaboration (Knowles, 1975).

Tough (1979) focused his efforts on *Adult Learning Projects*, which discusses how and why adults learn best. He was one of the first researchers to study how adults learn and apply his findings to professionals. Through these learning projects, adults were able to occupy hundreds of hours of their time towards learning a year in an intentional way through self-planned learning, classes, and conferences. Being at the center of their own learning is important for

students, and they accomplish this by being in the “planner” role and having responsibility for their decision-making process. Self-directed learning has roots in this type of methodology, “To refer to a project where the learner himself is clearly the planner, we will use the term *self-planned* learning project” (p.79).

### ***Self-Directed Learning Theory***

Self-directed learning theory has its roots in three different assumptions: learners are human and have the capability to learn; learners are able to master learning contents; and learners are able to attempt to manage the process independently, even if monitored at a certain stage. Though experiences are personal, they cannot be generalizable and must take second place to reality. Yet, the story changes for each telling. These stories all change based on why they are told, thus stunting reflection. Experiential learning determines growth based on personal narratives, as each story is individualized. Everyone’s experience seems universal and not realistic. As gappers narratives become their own version of reality second to actual reality. Many adults do not want to take control of their learning either, as the idea of teacher-centered learning has been with them since childhood. The meaning-making process in self-directed learning assumes there are multiple meanings for individuals and constructed for any experience. This seems more relativist than rationalist, as it is not possible as there can only be one justified belief (Leach & Zepke, 2002).

### ***Student and Teacher-Centered Learning in the Gap Year***

Student-centered learning is where the experience and power are with the student. In contrast, teacher-centered learning is where the teacher has the power role. In self-directed learning, the learner is the one who processes information rather than the educator. Only the learner can speak on his or her own behalf by posing questions, investigating, experimenting,

constructing meaning, and solving problems (Estes, 2004). In a self-directed gap experience, the gapper is guided by the program to design their own learning outcomes, goals, and experience. Students who design their own learning grow confidence, study skills, and the ability to self-direct their learning (Clerkin, 2012).

In teacher-centered, the student learner is passive and absorbs knowledge and skills, which is why this method becomes the way students prefer to learn (Estes, 2004). In this realm, standardized tests and assessments measure student progress. In self-directed gap programs, students control their learning. Though it is a steady growth until the completion of the program. The implementation of self-directed learning is to have learners take control of their own learning and be less dependent on their instructors. This process forces individuals to take initiative with or without the help of others in ways the teacher would normally provide. Areas such as creating learning goals, diagnosing learning needs, choosing the right learning strategies, assessing learning outcomes, and finding appropriate resources for learning, all place an emphasis on facets of the self. In other words, through the program, they learn to design a gap experience that emphasizes their own versions of *self*. It is important for students to explore the world around them in a new occupation and to understand their role within their chosen field. The emphasis of self-directed learning is to be purposeful; thus, the learner goes through the planning, implementing, and reflections stages, just like in any transformative learning experience. This type of learning usually takes place with supports, as the teacher or the program acts in a mentor-role (Leach & Zepke, 2002).

### ***Student-Centered Learning in Student-Designed Programming***

It is no longer the standard practice for students to simply master knowledge and skills with the expectation to implement this knowledge effectively in the real world. In learner-

centered course design, students own their learning by developing syllabi, choosing topics, establishing accountability among peers, teaching classes, and evaluating their progress in an ongoing way. Hains and Smith (2012) found that faculty and students' confidence levels went up when the students developed their own courses. By designing their own gap program, students gain the confidence and direction to set learning outcomes, goals, and their futures. Self-authorship literature emphasized giving students challenges beyond the normal formula and challenging them to create their own narratives through critical reflection (Eriksen, 2009; O'Shea, 2014). Through reflection of values, judgment effectiveness, leadership authenticity, and leadership effectiveness, they can develop a plan to improve effectiveness and improve their leadership authenticity (Eriksen, 2009). In a gap year setting, students hone these skills through interacting with the community, critical thinking, and problem-solving opportunities.

### ***Institutional and Host-Country Responsibilities in Self-Directed Learning***

Institutions are providing students with the ability to solve problems too quickly through formulas to success. With provided answers, students do not have to develop their own ways of thinking (O'Shea, 2014). Institutions facilitate student-learner growth by integrating education that allows for meaning-making processes for students through cross-cultural opportunities. Students then develop expanded world views from previously encountered ones. The institution and host country serve as the *teacher*, while the gapper serves as the learner. The ways that institutions influence the capacity of an individual shape the impacts of a volunteer action (O'Shea, 2014).

There has been little movement towards self-authorship as colleges provided easy access to these formulas in overly structured environments, which inhibits their self-authorship development in a self-directed learning environment (Olson & Pizzolato, 2016). According to



Lough et al. (2008), institutions should play a minor role in determining objectives, selecting the volunteers and activity, and supervising the volunteer experience, but they should do so at a distance. Gap year models need more emphasis on internal reflection, to give students identities, formulas developed through their meaning-making, and the ability to inwardly reflect and determine their own values and belief systems (Olson & Pizzolato, 2016).

### **Summary**

A variety of lenses can be of use in the study of the gap year phenomena. The experiential learning cycle shows Kolb's four stages and learning styles, which address student learning through cultural immersion and self-growth through a variety of reflection methods (Kolb, 1984). The process of self-growth for any student happens in and out of the classroom; however, the meaning-making process (how students create meaning) towards self-authorship (a student's internal identity) occurs in a different context in a gap program. Baxter Magolda's (2008) 25-year study created three elements that help students in their personal growth towards self-authorship. The constructivist lens, which assumes knowledge and understandings are constructed between individuals and their interactions with the world, and Baxter Magolda's study are applicable to the process of gap year participants discovering their true internal voices (Perez, 2019). Gap year participants assume knowledge and understanding as they experience and interact with new cultures in their gap year, while the Learner Partnership Model created by Magolda (2004) provides students with three options to discover their internal self-authorship.

Gap year programs are often designed and structured by the programs themselves, but when students self-direct (self-design) their programs, they have more influential outcomes (Clerkin, 2012). Students being taken from teacher-centered learning to student-centered,

provides a basis for the assumptions of the self-directed learning theory which outlines a belief that the learning experience is individualized and not generalizable (Leach & Zepke, 2002).

## **Chapter 3. Research Methodology**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological research study was to examine student perceptions of their meaning-making process towards self-authorship in a self-directed gap year opportunity at a public higher education institution in the Southeast. The intent of a gap year is to enhance the ways in which students make meaning toward their own self-authorship. According to Haigler and Nelson (2012), “For a number of these students, a gap year plan may make the difference between graduating successfully from college with a strategy for life beyond and floating uncertainly on a path of young adulthood...” (para. 1). The proposal students built in this process can be even more influential through self-directed learning, as students play the role of *driver* in their own learning process (Van der Walt, 2016). More specifically, this study examined student and administrator perceptions of their personal growth and the value in their experiential learning opportunity. This chapter details the associated research questions, instrumentation, data collection procedures and management, and data analysis.

### **Research Design**

Even when gap year experiences are designed similarly, the meaning-making process towards self-authorship is unique for every student participant. The research approach used provided this study with the scope necessary view individual experiences through a broader lens. Qualitative research looks to research, analyze, and interpret the process of meaning-making. The phenomenological approach looks to understand how people experience a particular phenomenon, “how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others” (Patton, 2015, p. 115). The way a gap year participant enters

their experience, what happens while they volunteer, preexisting knowledge, and the sense they make of the situation in their own world is different for each person.

### **Qualitative Inquiry**

Qualitative research sets me as the researcher in the world I am studying by providing me with a set of practices for interpretation. In natural environments, qualitative researchers interpret phenomena by the ways people bring meaning to the phenomenon itself (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Key factors for choosing to use the qualitative approach for this study included the individuality of the gap year phenomenon and the need to understand how participants brought meaning to their experience. Students in a gap year program have uniquely individualized experiences within this phenomenon, even though many of the aspects are the same and seen through common themes and characteristics.

Daiute (2014) says there are four types of patterns for meaning-making in qualitative inquiry: change, coherence, differences, and similarities. Each pattern is important to this study, as participants experience each at different times throughout the gap year phenomenon. Bodily meaning-making happens as students enter a new culture with a variety of different ethnicities and races, while evaluative meaning-making is how each student determines what is meaningful to themselves individually. How students choose to attach meaning to the physical objects they encounter when they go abroad for their gap year is another form of meaning-making. Interpretation of these meaning-making opportunities through a qualitative lens allows researchers to study how groups and individuals construct meaning.

### ***Phenomenological Inquiry***

The definition of phenomenological inquiry is the description of individuals' experiences and consciousness of a particular phenomenon or their lived experience (Christiansen &

Johnson, 2014; Patton, 2015). This approach is applicable because research is gained through the perspective of the gappers' lived experience and attempts to understand their personal meanings. The value of this approach lies in its prioritizing and investigating how people experience the world, as well as the emphasis it places on the single phenomena or idea under examination (Creswell & Poth, 2014; Patton, 2015). Data comes from "persons who have experienced the phenomenon and develops a composite of the essence of the experience for all of the individuals" (Creswell & Poth, 2014, p. 165).

Because each student self-designs their gap year experience, this approach will focus on describing the multiple meanings that emerge from the participants as they experience the phenomenon of a gap year (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Differences and commonalities in these experiences emerge through the coding process of qualitative inquiry. To understand the differences among each student's unique experience, it is important to look for commonalities in the human experience through themes; this aids the in finding the *essence* of the gap year experience as a whole (Christiansen & Johnson, 2014). Phenomenological inquiry seeks to develop a composite of the essence of the experience for all individuals involved; therefore, having perspectives of administrators who work with the program and its students are important in creating a detailed description of the *how* and *what* of an experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). In other words, it "turns on the lived experiences of individuals and how they have both subjective experiences of the phenomenon and objective experiences of something in common with other people" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 1690-170). The phenomenological approach used in this study looks to reduce each participant's individual experience with the gap year phenomenon to a broad description of its *essence* (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## Trustworthiness

All data was collected, analyzed and presented with thorough description.

Trustworthiness is ensured for all data collected by ensuring consistency and dependability, and having all data available in the necessary locations. I analyzed all participant data thoroughly, enabling me to be as unbiased as possible. “The qualitative analyst owns and is reflective about her or his own voice and perspective; a credible voice conveys authenticity and trustworthiness... understanding and depicting the world *authentically* in all its complexity...” (Patton, 2015, p. 603). Participant language, themes, and data provided the most accurate results possible by providing rich and individual descriptions.

Dependability of this study was exhibited by providing recorded interviews, storing interview transcripts in a safe location, and using a reliable third-party transcription service. I showed confirmability by analyzing participant interviews in multiple coding stages. In an effort to mitigate bias, I provided participants with a copy of their interview transcripts to check for errors as a form of member checking. Both dependability and confirmability were established through auditing the research process, which was done by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Transferability of this study was provided by the evidence in this study. Not all themes or categories are relevant to other contexts. However, by providing a rich, and thorough description of the gap year phenomenon, I have provided enough evidence to transfer to other areas such as education, experiential learning, student-centered learning, and self-designed learning (Patton, 2015). Transferability in the phenomenological setting focuses on the ability to transfer shared traits or characteristics from the findings to other settings and areas of study. Using “thick description,” I provided enough information about the study and emerging themes for these ideas to be easily applied and transferred to other settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 462).

## Research Questions

The following central research question guided this study:

Central Research Question: What are student perceptions of self-directing their own gap year program, meaning-making, and self-authorship during their gap year experience?

Supporting research questions:

RQ1: What are student perceptions regarding the value of their individual meaning-making process towards growth in a self-designed gap year?

RQ2: What are student perceptions of their personal growth throughout the individual meaning-making process of their gap experience?

RQ3: What are student perceptions of their previous knowledge and experiences of the meaning-making process of participating in a self-directed gap year?

RQ4: What are student perceptions of how self-directing their gap year experience influenced the development of their self-authorship?

Christiansen and Johnson (2014) reported that qualitative research questions seek to explore an issue, phenomenon, or process.

## Role of the Researcher

In the qualitative tradition, researchers must be *reflexive agents* who make appropriate decisions about their sampling strategies in relation to the frame of their studies (Patton, 2015). Due to the nature of the phenomenological approach, I tried to mitigate bias through the coding and transcription process, bracketing any firsthand experiences with the study. It was difficult for me to separate my own assumptions from the topic, but these were mitigated by explaining my prior experiences associated with the gap year with all participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The role of gatekeeper was the director of the university's gap year program by serving as the communicator for student participants who wished to take part in the study, as well as providing a list of names of program administrators, including herself. Because I served as the reflexive agent throughout this study, participants were clear of the power dynamics and were open to every person in the study. I served as a *nonparticipant or observer as participant* because I was outside the group that was under study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I created all interview questions and performed all data analysis. I discussed with all the participants how I positioned myself in this study through an explanation of my background in the initial stages.

In the past, I worked in a variety of teaching capacities at the secondary and post-secondary level and performed volunteer placement for high school seniors. This informed my view of experiential learning and the importance of learning outside the classroom. When I was younger I grew up internationally, which played a pivotal role in creating multiple identities. I am half Hispanic and half English, middle class, educated, female, and is in my thirties. Creswell and Poth (2018) acknowledge this type of background can inform and influence the researcher's interpretation and what they can potentially gain from the study.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The design and implementation of this study was to ensure credibility and dependability. Weis and Fine (2000) asked researchers to consider their roles as insiders and outsiders, to establish supportive relationships with participants without stereotyping, to assess issues that may be feared to discuss, and to disclose how their voices will be used in the final study. The protection of participants' rights occurred by minimizing all possible risks, using pseudonyms, asking broad interview questions, and ensuring storage of interview data.



Yet, there are psychological risks of participants becoming emotional and causing minimal stress. For example, answering questions about obstacles they had to overcome could have causation for these risks to be potentially higher. Therefore, the nature of this study falls in line with the guidelines of minimal risk. To maintain the foundation of minimal risk for participants, all data analysis was confidential. I was aware of all participant names and applied pseudonyms soon after collection. I am more interested in learning student perceptions than in participant's actions (Patton, 2015). From the earliest stages of gathering participants to the reporting of data, all information was held in a private storage area only available to me.

IRB approval was received through East Tennessee State University's campus. The site of the study had a separate IRB process, but I did not have to gain approval as the school did not play a direct role in the study. Proper protocol was followed to gain clearance to communicate with the director of the program, program administrators, and program participants.

### **Population**

All participants in this study either took part in the gap year program at the site institution within the past eight years or served in an administrative role with the gap year program. The researcher contacted each participant via email inviting them to take part in a confidential interview. Only students who successfully completed their gap year program and administrators who worked directly with the gap year program were a part of this study. Students ranged in age, gender, and ethnicity. Although the administrative group ranged in age and ethnicity, all were female in gender. Interviews occurred off campus using Zoom and ranged from 45 to 60 minutes in length. The method of sampling chosen truly embodied the phenomenon of the research study.

## **Sampling**

In purposeful sampling, a researcher targets a population with a specific set of characteristics in a chosen population and tries to locate individuals with those characteristics (Christiansen & Johnson, 2014). The sample population of students ranged in gender and ethnicity and were from a full list of all students who have gone through the program. The administrative sample population worked directly with students who have experienced the self-designed gap year program. Therefore, taking an “information rich” approach and aiming to gain insight to the phenomenon was a key reason for using this method of sampling (Patton, 2015, p. 46). I chose this approach based on the design of the site since the director of the program had contact information for all students who have gone through the program in the past eight years. This method focused on the shared themes and characteristics of the sample population rather than the whole group.

Qualitative phenomenological sampling sizes tend to be smaller at 10 to 12 participants. Due to the large population, I used a purposeful sample. The size of the sample has the potential to achieve saturation because the only factors separating participants is their role in relation to the program, gender, and ethnicity. As no relevant or new information emerged with the group of ten participants, this study had deep and meaningful data with this sample size (Christiansen & Johnson, 2014; Creswell & Poth 2018).

## **Data Collection**

In qualitative inquiry, the researcher collects data from participants who have experienced the phenomenon and then begins to develop a composite based on themes of the experience acquired from the individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data collection for the study occurred for the ten individual participant interviews between November 2019 and March 2020.

Interview protocols were different for the two participant groups and templates are in the Appendix of the study. I interviewed the former gap year student and Gap Year program administrator interviews, as well as managed the data.

A letter went to all former participants of the gap year program inviting them to participate in individual interviews; similarly, a letter was sent to administrators of the program requesting their participation in individual interviews. Voluntary participants took part in interviews either at the institution of study or over Zoom, with gap year participants having a different set of interview questions than gap year administrators. All identities were kept confidential by providing participants with pseudonyms. Each interview consisted of open-ended questions that “lead to a textual and structural description of the experiences, and ultimately provide an understanding of the common experiences of the participants” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 174). I recorded the interviews using a digital recorder and used an approved third-party transcription service. A reputable and reliable third-party company transcribed the interview data, and each was compared with original audio from the interviews by the researcher to ensure transcription dependability. After the completion of the data collection and transcription services, I analyzed the interview transcriptions for themes and categories and copies of each interview went to participants for member checking.

### **Data Analysis**

I used an inductive analysis to analyze the data. “Analysis begins with immersion in the details and specifics of the inquiry to discover patterns, themes, and interrelationships; exploration and attention to what emerges is followed by confirmatory inquiry” (Patton, 2015, p. 46). I used triangulation to cross-check important information by using two different groups of participants, the administrators and gappers, to determine if there was convergence or divergence

in the information relayed (Christiansen & Johnson, 2014). Interview questions were designed that aligned with the research questions for both participant groups in an effort to begin to create a framework depicting relationships. A third-party company transcribed the interviews, and the data was coded for overlying themes, characteristics, and commonalities.

### **Summary**

The chapter introduced all major points of rationale for a phenomenological qualitative approach to the gap year research topic. Looking for multiple emerging meanings in a phenomenological approach gives the study the lens it needs to fully grasp all participant experiences. Focusing on this phenomenon, I thoroughly thought out and analyzed each part of the research design to provide the most applicable approach. The population sample was chosen to directly coincide with the program under study. Participant confidentiality and ethical considerations were of use to protect all participants. Analysis of the role of the researcher for bias, reflexivity, and trustworthiness occurred.

## **Chapter 4. Analysis of the Data**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study was to examine student perceptions of their meaning-making process towards self-authorship in a self-directed gap year opportunity at a public higher education institution in the Southeast. The central question of the study: What are student perceptions of self-directing their own gap year program, meaning-making, and self-authorship towards growth in a self-designed gap year? There are four supporting research questions to further inform this qualitative, phenomenological study.

### **Introduction**

Research findings for this phenomenological study used a process of qualitative inquiry to analyze the data. In this inquiry, the researcher must determine when a category reaches saturation and the theory has enough data to support it (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I coded the qualitative data from both participant groups into themes and categories. The design of the interview questions for both participant groups associated directly with the designed research questions for this study. Program administrators and gap year participants detailed their perceptions through the gap year lens on the areas of meaning-making, self-directed learning, self-authorship, and previous knowledge and experiences. Objects, experiences, and events can have different meanings to different people, such as one person viewing the same event differently based on a variety of factors (Christensen & Johnson, 2014). Therefore, the importance of having both administrators and gap year participants' perspectives was even more important to the phenomenological approach to demonstrate how the essence of both experiences presents similar themes and categories.

Using the two different data sources (the participant group and the administrative group) to support the emerging themes as seen in structural corroboration is evidence of research study

credibility. Data saturation occurred when interview transcripts were analyzed a second time and emerging themes and categories began to be the same. Reaching data saturation is important for credibility because it demonstrates that the weight of the evidence is strong (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Eisner, 1991). I coded the qualitative data from both participant groups into themes and categories without losing the important structural and contextual elements of participant stories (Patton, 2015). Interview questions and participant responses throughout the study were hand-coded.

During the first round of coding, two lists of emerging themes and categories were created. This process allowed me to categorize the lists into more broad groupings, as well as to pair them with the relevant research questions. The second round of coding allowed any missed data to be gathered and to solidify the data's grouping process.

All interview transcriptions went to the corresponding participants for their records, as well as for them to review for further credibility and to serve as member checking. Pseudonyms were of use as well, as there was in-depth information about the small number of participants discussed (Christensen & Johnson, 2014). The research findings of these semi-structured interviews and the presentation of the analysis are in this chapter.

## **Participant Profiles**

The study's ten participants were associated with the public institution's gap year program but were grouped into two different groups. A description of participants' individual demographics, as well as their roles in the study are described in this section of the research. Criterion sampling was pivotal to this study, as I aimed to have participants who had all experienced the phenomenon, even though both groups experienced the program from two different perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All ten participants were part of this type of purposeful sampling, as they all had experiences, though different, with the gap year program under study. Erica, Brittany, Andrew, Charlie, Patrick and Rachel collectively represent the six former gappers, whom have already completed their self-designed gap years at the public institution. All in this group attended public high school, attended a public university, were raised in the Southeast, and took their gap years right after high school. This group consisted of three males and three females. Lauren, Amanda, Emily and Melissa collectively represent the four individuals who served in an administrative role for the program. All four in this group are female and were pivotal in the program's foundation, implementation, and reflection since its creation. Below is a table of the gap year participant demographics:

**Table 1*****Participant Demographics***

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Participant Group/Position</b>
Erica	Female	Gap Year Participant
Brittany	Female	Gap Year Participant
Andrew	Male	Gap Year Participant
Charlie	Male	Gap Year Participant
Patrick	Male	Gap Year Participant
Rachel	Female	Gap Year Participant
Lauren	Female	Campus Y Communications Manager
Amanda	Female	Director of Community Engaged Learning and Student Development at Campus Y
Emily	Female	Former Gapper/Helped Establish Program
Melissa	Female	Gap Year Program Director



## Gap Year Participants

Erica is a former gapper, whose gap year took place in India, France, Rome, and Hungary from 2011 to 2012. She attended public high school in the South, after attending Montessori school for her primary education. Having grown up in a divorced household with three other siblings, she spent time at both parents' households equally. There was parental involvement early on with her education, but as she got older there was limited oversight with her taking the initiative in her nine college applications. She chose her alma mater due to its thriving activities and tuition help upon receiving the Covenant Scholarship. The Gap Year Fellowship Program peaked her interest when she first received the email after early acceptance, and she decided to take her chances and apply. Erica completed her virtual interview for the gap year study through Zoom in January 2020.

Brittany took her gap year with the program from 2013 to 2014 in Greece, New Zealand, Ghana, and Nicaragua. She attended public high school in the rural South and had a total graduating class of 120. Her parents were very involved in her education early on and instilled in her to view education as a job. After applying early action to her chosen institution, she chose to apply to the gap year program through their initial advertising email and having heard positive reviews from others' gap experiences. Brittany currently works in a similar field in which she did during her gap year and completed her virtual interview for the gap year study through Zoom in November 2019.

Andrew is a former gap year participant, who took his gap year from 2013 to 2014 in Thailand, Madagascar, Spain, Bolivia, and Peru. His high school experience took place in the public sector in a large city in the South. Though Andrew struggled with dyscalculia in math classes, he was in the school's IB program and excelled in classes such as literature and history.

Andrew felt more authentic his junior year after he came out as gay, which made it easier for people to relate to who he was as a person and made it easier for him to build authentic relationships. His parents were involved in his education but sheltered him from the competitive mindset of the Ivy League, system. His parents' concerns of his lack of submitting assignments pushed them to suggest a leadership experience. The decision to take a gap year came from the foundation of a leadership experience he had during his senior year of high school. Andrew is currently teaching English as a Second Language in Greece and completed his interview for the gap year study over Zoom in November 2019.

Charlie took his gap year from 2013 to 2014 in both Ecuador and Thailand. Having attended public high school in an upper-middle class area of an urban city in the South, where he had access to resources, and his focus on schoolwork became all-consuming. His parents are uneducated Middle Eastern immigrants who saw their children's education as top priority. However, they were hands off in the education process, so Charlie and his three older siblings had to teach themselves the educational system and relationships with teachers. Due to the stress and burnout by graduation, as well as a life-changing Ted Talk he saw while visiting a college campus, he decided a good way to fulfill his desire to travel was to apply to the gap year program. Charlie currently works in sustainability doing life cycle assessments and completed his interview for the gap year study over Zoom in November 2019.

Rachel is a former gapper who went to France, Thailand, and Myanmar from 2011 to 2012. Having gone to public high school in the rural South, but received an agricultural "education" by growing up on her family farm. Both her parents graduated from college, pushed her through intellectual conversations, and instilled the value of learning. This provided her with a supportive environment for learning and pushed her to work hard throughout her high school

career. She was a self-described ‘Type-A’ student and began saving for a gap year because she knew that she would need a break post-graduation. Struggling with anxiety and extreme self-discipline, she decided to take the gap year opportunity through her chosen institution was an easy choice. Rachel is currently taking some time to better her health and working part-time while working on a farm and for a family. She completed her interview for the gap year study through Zoom in January 2020.

Patrick took his gap year from 2012 to 2013 in the Galapagos Islands, Costa Rica, Peru, Spain, and Hungary. He attended public high school in a large city in the South, taking AP classes, and pushing himself academically. His family was very active in his and his two older sisters’ education. His mom was a former teacher, and when she decided to stay home, it gave him even more of a push to succeed in school, as she made sure he was pulled for high achieving classes and on top of his schoolwork. When he received the email from the gap year program upon early acceptance, he decided to apply because he felt his previous experiences had left little room for him to think of life beyond the set societal formula he was expected to fit. Patrick completed his interview for the gap year study over Zoom in November 2019.

### **Administrative Participants**

Lauren currently works in the administrative role of Campus Y Communications Manager, the location gap year program within the Campus Y. She is responsible for managing 3 programs (including the gap year program), 31 student committees, leading workshops during the gap year program’s 2-week Summer Institute and engaging with students on their gap year through the blogging portal. Though the gap year program is just part of her full-time job, Lauren helps the director of the program with marketing from posters to brochures. Lauren completed her interview for the gap year study through Zoom in February 2020.

Amanda is the Director of Community Engaged Learning and Student Development at the Campus Y. Currently, one of her responsibilities is working with students in the field. She checks in with them over Facetime through one-on-one meetings and helps to address any concerns that might arise. Also, she is responsible for designing and implementing the new one-credit online course gap year students must take while abroad. The goal of the course is to help students make meaning of their experiences while they are abroad. The course begins with the Summer Institute and then is online when abroad, completing a variety of assignments and blogging for reflection. Her work with students continues through face-to-face meetings for transitional issues and connecting students with opportunities at the university. Amanda completed her interview for the gap year study through Zoom in February 2020.

Emily served in an administrative role, was a former gapper, and helped to establish the gap year program at the chosen institution. Having taken her gap year in 2009 in Dresden, Germany, Emily and other students who had taken gap years worked with campus administrators to establish the current program by consulting and participating in areas of application, interviews, orientation and reflection. She attended public high school in the rural South and was part of the International Baccalaureate program. Her parents were very hands on in her education and prioritized her education. She chose to take a gap year because her mother urged her to take advantage of a family connection in Germany. Emily currently works in learning and development for a technology company in San Francisco and completed her interview for the gap year study through Zoom in January 2020.

Melissa has been the current director of the entire gap year program on campus for four years and is its only full-time employee. She manages the program from recruitment and application to implementation and reintegration back to campus. The design of the program is to

“meet students where they are at” both academically and personally. Empowering students to self-design their own gap year program helps to provide the necessary individual structure, which was important to gapper Rachel. Through the application and interview process to the Summer Institute, Rachel makes sure that each student proposes a gap year that aligns with each of their individual goals and that they are learning the necessary skills for success during and after the gap year. Rachel completed her interview for the gap year study through Zoom in February 2020.

### **Researcher’s Notes and Memos**

Memos were written throughout the semi-structured interviews held from November 2019 to March 2020. While a third-party service transcribed all the recorded interviews, I began to compile notes, memos, and thoughts and then organized and coded based upon the emerging themes and categories. I found that all of those interviewed had a positive experience with the gap year program, regardless of whether they had taken a gap year or were administrators for the program. Notes and memos also included detailed statements from both participants during the individual interviews.

I noted in the memos that all who took a gap year mentioned perceived “negative” experiences, yet all responses seemed to show a change in attitude after reflection upon these experiences and reintegration back home. Charlie’s interview response helped to support my understanding of how perceived “negative” meaning-making experiences lead to positive outcomes:

Charlie’s values seem to coincide with a reflective pattern of learning. As he describes each instance he has been through, from his family to having his laptop stolen in Ecuador, there is a growth seen, as in many participants . . . the act of ‘overcoming’ the

hardship allowed him and others to use these experiences as a way to prepare for future occurrences and to lessen the amount of shame that was created.

Overcoming hardships building a foundation for self-authorship was a common theme throughout these interviews. Discussing both the gap year and their individual selves was an easy task for every participant, as they seemed to enjoy the nostalgia from discussing their gap year. Andrew's interview response supported my understanding of overcoming hardships, developing new skills, and gaining appreciation. Andrew stated:

My gap year experiences allowed me to legitimize through, like, hard evidence, the parts of myself that I liked best and felt happiest with... those parts of me, were like, forced open constantly on my gap year, at first, in a way that made me uncomfortable and were hard. But later, it was, like, all those parts of me that I thought were there and suspected were there, but that hadn't been brought out, were challenged and stimulated . . .

Andrew's perspective on his own growth, in his own words, legitimizes the change in attitude from negative to positive, through overcoming obstacles with tenacity and reflection. His answer represents themes in the five other participants interviewed who took gap years. Without these experiences, the gappers would have struggled to make connections with how their previous knowledge and experiences influenced their overall growth and meaning-making after reintegration from their gap year.

Analysis of all ten participant interviews led me to note that students self-designing their own gap year experience was highly influential on the meaningful growth of their self-authorship. I also noted the importance of self-reflection in this growth process. Erica, Brittany, Andrew, Charlie, Patrick, and Rachel viewed the two-year summer institute as a growing experience not only to build their proposals for gap year approval, but to build personal

responsibility in areas such as budgeting and self-reliance. Rachel's response supported my perception of the self-design process on meaning and growth during the gap year experience.

Rachel stated:

I mean, maybe it made me feel more responsible because I had chosen these things. So if I was unhappy in a certain place, like maybe I would feel more obligated to dig deeper and try to make the best of it . . . I don't think I was obligated to find joy on my gap year, but I think I just felt almost the freedom. Like I felt so free to find meaning. Like it was this gift...

The notes showed the freedom participants felt to make meaning to be a key theme present throughout all six of the gappers interviews. While the role of the administrative group was different in perspective, I noted that the interviews with Lauren, Amanda, Emily and Melissa supported the same theme. During the final interview transcription with Amanda, I noted:

All of the participants in the administrative groups helped to build a 'well-oiled machine' of support for the students taking a gap year in this program. Helping them from beginning to end is pivotal to each student's success, but also aids in the program's own reflection. As each year goes by, the program not only aims to provide students with the most well-rounded gap experience possible, but they use feedback and reflection each year to grow as a program. It is almost as if they are living the same reflection-process they ask of the participants and that they create meaning through experiences and reflection upon these experiences. In a sense, they have lived their own gap year.

The way the administrative staff run a gap year program, is a reflection of the type of experience a student will have when on their gap year. If all administrators know their role and how to provide students with a great experience, then when any issue arises they will be able to

overcome it easily. Through constant reflection, administrators of the program changed and adapted, which is what students do on their gap years. The program changes its identity every year.

Additionally, I noted the commonality in themes seen in the literature about the meaning-making process towards self-authorship, experiential learning theory, and motivations for taking a gap year. All six participants who took a gap year noted a significant change in their self-authorship through the meaning-making that happened during their gap year while all four in an administrative role interviewed reported that students demonstrate and report self-growth from the proposal stage all the way through to reintegration. Lauren stated:

...it also allows me a chance to kind of meet them where they are. So, we're better able to understand you know, where growth is possible and how to design a gap year that will help them in that way...empowering them to make those really important decisions, that's where the real growth happens. And when they come back to school, they are just, you know, so far ahead of their peers as far as taking care of themselves.

Upon hearing Lauren's response to this interview question, I noted:

There is a significant benefit it seems, in the program acting as a 'guide on the side' instead of a 'sage on the stage, as is commonly heard in the classroom. This is a prime example of student versus teacher-centered learning and the power of self-designed learning.

I noted a theme of the power of experiential learning, as all ten participants discussed experiential learning as the theme of using skills learned in the classroom in a real-world setting.

I noted:



The gap year program seems to follow the exact path of the experiential learning model. From immersion into a new culture or experience to reflecting and making sense of that experience in the lives of the gap year students.

The summer institute serves as the classroom in this sense, making students the captain at the helm of their own learning and helping them to prepare for immersion into their gap year. The gap year and the online reflective course they now take helps students to observe, reflect, and make sense of the culture they have immersed. Then the reintegration retreat, as well as the on-campus course, helps students to make sense of how to use their experience to help with future cultural immersions.

My notes also indicate the motivations of students taking a gap year and the influence their previous knowledge and experiences had on that life-changing decision. When the discussion moves to motivations for taking a gap year, Erica described herself as a hardworking student. Though Andrew succeeded, he needed to find a purpose in the work he was doing. Motivating both were experiences they had at outside leadership programs, helping to provide them with a new leadership identity and to open their eyes to the world outside their communities. Erica, Charlie, Patrick, and Rachel all cited a motivation of ‘high school burnout’ and ‘getting off the societal treadmill’ as similar reasons for the gap year gaging their interest.

Charlie stated:

I just became so focused on, like, my schoolwork, but also kind of too much to the extent that it became all-consuming . . . And that came back to bite me. My junior and senior year, especially my senior year, where I felt like I was really living to meet deadlines as a student. And I took a step back and really thought about, you know, to what extent is this worth it? And I felt so burnt out by the end of senior year as well...I was really a result of

the expectations that society puts on you, like in an academic setting. And that was my narrow-minded vision of success...And so that year, senior year, because of all the stress and all the hours I was putting in, I started to consider a gap year when I first heard about it...

Along with the desire to travel, to make a difference and several other responses, the six participants looked back at their high school experiences as a foundation of reasoning for taking their gap years. During the coding process of Charlie's interview transcription, I noted:

Within the realm of each of these students lies an innate desire to use their high school experiences as a catapult for further growth and meaning-making. Though each motivation differs in each participant's experience, the journey to self-authorship and self-discovery is on a common trajectory. A trajectory that is created by themselves.

This desire to travel was a common theme for all six participants, but each self-designed experience was different. Thus, all motivations could be the same for gappers, but they would have a much different take away each time. The collection of all qualitative data collected through the ten participant interviews allowed me to analyze how gap year participants create meaning towards their own self-authorship through self-designing their own gap year experience. These interviews gave insight into the gap year experience and how each participant created meaning in this particular phenomenon. This next section includes an analysis of interview data.

### **Interview Results**

This section uses the research questions to organize the presentation of findings for the phenomenological study and are presented in congruence with the categories and themes that emerged through the semi-structured interview process. The following themes emerged from the central research and four corresponding research questions:

- Self-reliance enhanced through multiple meaning-making contexts created by student
- Self-designed gap year creates valuable growth
- Continual reflection reinforces the value of individual meaning-making
- Self-expectations versus self-worth
- Reinforcement and discovery of new skills and interests
- Influence of societal expectations minimized
- Self-design proposal helps to solidify changes in self-authorship

To increase credibility, this section includes direct quotes from these interviews and rich descriptions to support the evidence for the emerging themes and categories for each research question of the study. Chapter 5 includes a summary of the study, analysis, conclusions, and recommendations.

**Central Research Question:** What are student perceptions of self-directing their own gap year program, meaning-making, and self-authorship during their gap year experience?

***Self-Reliance Enhanced Through Multiple Meaning-Making Contexts Created by Student***

A theme that was clear throughout the interview process was the necessity for students to have multiple ways to create meaning. The structure of many of these opportunities were structured by the gap year program, as well as discovered by the students themselves throughout these experiences abroad. All six participants noted an increase in not only confidence but in their abilities to rely on themselves more than they ever had before, building their reliance on themselves. This came from self-designing an entire gap year, and this was echoed by Rachel:

In a way, it's made me feel now that I can be happy anywhere basically and knowing that has allowed me to take more risks, I think than if I didn't know that...kind of knowing that I can trust myself. And that when that isn't enough, that you can call on other people

for help has really been a big thing for me. It's helped me in so many ways. I think the gap year has had such a big impact on just my sense of the world, because you know it, is so big and because there are so many places where I know I can be happy anywhere, as long as I have people that I can connect with. It's almost allowed me to stop worrying about all the possibilities.

The shifting or transition towards one's self-authorship shows through the building of self-reliance in the gap year process. The six themes of transition to self-authorship were present in Rachel's experience. She developed identity by knowing she could be happy anywhere; evaluated her own perspective by knowing she can trust herself; gained a sense of belonging by being able to acclimate in new environments; encountered new cultures by taking her gap year; exposed herself to new challenges by placing herself in unknown cultures; and worked through complex relationships by understanding that is what makes her happy (Perez, 2019). The ability to self-reflect and build a voice within herself was a narrative similar to other participants. She built self-reliance through self-reflection and building relationships in complex environments, which shows that having multiple meaning-making contexts was helpful towards the development of her self-authorship.

Gappers learned to change their own self-perceptions by self-designing their gap year, as well as being able to rely on their own inner voices. All six participants echoed that they found new versions of themselves, thus learning to trust themselves in new ways. Having grown up in a large household, Charlie used the gap year experience to reflect on his past and future:

Yeah, I think the fact that it was even just, like, a self-design program was kind of the first glimpses of me in a way, like reclaiming my voice that I lost at home. It was a really exciting position to be in because you can go almost anywhere, but at the same time

overwhelming. And this is where I had to trust myself and really think about, ‘Okay, what do I want out of this gap year?’

The gap year created an opening for students to discover new facets of their personalities they were unaware were there, as well as develop their internal voices. Charlie demonstrated his ability to think through his goals for his outcomes based on his ability to regain his voice. The process was overwhelming for him, but he learned to trust himself. Magolda and Welkener (2014) contended it is important for educators to understand the complex ways students make meaning, in order to allow them to generate an internal view of themselves, to build relationships, to grow knowledge, and to self-author. Charlie transitioned towards his own self-authorship through multiple meaning-making contexts, such as self-reflection while Rachel grew through personal connections with others. Erica was able to develop the skill of self-authoring through simple gains in knowledge. When asked how designing her own gap year influenced how she created meaning, Erica discussed the ways that simple tasks, such as how deciding what to eat for lunch, led to the creation of these opportunities:

So, I wound up, like very grateful and thankful for the experiences that I was able to find in a lot more forgiving of moments where I wasn't living in the best of environments . . . You can kind of, like, rise above that and create meaning for yourself in that moment of kind of like overcoming something very small.

Through simple moments of overcoming day to day issues, Erica was able to create significant meaning, which helped to discover her authentic self. Through overcoming something so small, she learned the skill of perseverance and tenacity. Through her self-designed gap year, she had to accept that she had placed herself in this environment. Thus, through student-centered learning used in an experiential learning setting, she used reflection and the guidance of the

program provided an impactful experience (Estes, 2004). Erica gained these new skills when she showed self-reliance and ownership of her feelings by accepting the situations, which she had created for herself, through the designing of her own gap year program. Students need structured support systems to act as “guides on the side” versus a “sage on the stage.” This is important for students, so they gain the most from these experiences. The gap year program aims to act in a mentor-type role, empowering them to make their own decisions, thus, instilling self-reliance in the students, and giving them the confidence to make their own decisions.

Gap year administrator Lauren reinforced this idea:

It’s everything they feel, like, they are making the decision where to go and what to do. It just, like, really amplifies the idea that you’re not in high school anymore and you’re not being told, you know, where to go and what to do.

All four administrators interviewed echoed this sentiment, believing that students being on their own for the first time and travelling in that period gives an extra boost of opportunity for growth. Through the structure of the program, students get the support they need to dig deep and make decisions true to themselves. When asked how she perceived the self-directing gap year influenced their individual growth, administrator Amanda responded, “In other words, if there are issues, they troubleshoot, they ask for help in troubleshooting, but they don’t just complain and abandon those placements, which sometimes happens for students who are just handed a placement.”

Amanda reiterated the importance of student’s owning their decisions and trusting their inner voices by discussing arising issues, and Amanda described how gappers troubleshoot those problems. Because the student self-designed their own program, they are able to reach out to administrators for help but are more motivated to “overcome,” as they got to make their own

decisions. The ability to own their own feelings is what makes the self-design process influence a student's ability to become more self-reliant. There are several principles for self-directed learning that differentiate this gap year experience from others. By giving students the ability to control their learning environment, emotions, supports and collaborations, critical thinking opportunities, creation of objectives, and designing and planning of their own learning, they will then thrive (Knowles, 1970, 1975; Leach & Zepke, 2002).

Administrator Melissa echoed this statement, "Working with these students to plan their budget, to create their itinerary, we empower them to reach out to the nonprofits to make those connections." The guided structure allowed these students to create meaning in their own ways, as well as to discover how to rely on themselves. Overcoming obstacles and using the tools they learned in the summer institute created opportunities for students to see their internal capabilities. Gap year participant Patrick stated:

I think designing my own experience, like it made me have to make all the decisions...And for me, I think that as I've talked about this over the last, you know, however long, I've talked a lot about how having the independence really to, I think, growth.

Having students build their own proposals coincides with the suggested learning contracts of self-directed learning theory (Knowles, 1970, 1975; Leach & Zepke, 2002). Students having the structure to develop their own gap year proposals allows for them to create meaning in new ways. They can see what they are capable of and, thus, grow as individuals.

**Research Question 1:** What are student perceptions regarding the value of their individual meaning-making process towards growth in a self-designed gap year?

***Self-Designed Gap Year Creates Valuable Growth***

Through self-design, all six gap year participants noted an increase in confidence, value-added experience, and potential growth. From Baxter Magolda's (2008) work, the student growth that students go through towards their self-authorship occurs throughout the entire gap year experience (Baxter Magolda, 2008). Emily voiced the element of trusting one's inner voice:

And, so, I think because of that when I got back from that, I was like, *Why wouldn't I apply for this internship?* . . . And I think that now, as an adult, where I still sort of see some of the remnants of that are how when things got really hard, how I sort of resource plan and how I come up with a plan of action.

When obstacles got in her way, she had to decide how she would react. She learned to trust herself enough to be able to decide when she should make things happen or when she needed to let them go and live life how she deemed appropriate, which is an important aspect of developing self-authorship and confidence (Baxter Magolda, 2008). Gap year programs use the language of increased self-confidence to pique the interest of prospective gappers (Martin, 2010). Not only did her confidence increase, but so did her ability to critically think, problem solve, lead and judge, which are all benefits of student-centered learning (Eriksen, 2009). The meaning-making opportunity of the gap year encouraged Emily to develop her self-authorship through an increase in confidence, as well as increased freedom in her own decision-making skills.

The next element of self-authorship is building an internal foundation and is important in a gap year because it allows students to accept and trust themselves. Andrew accepted himself and began to find his own purpose:



And just the agency that you gain from designing your own gap year, I don't want to speak for everyone, but it taught me how to make decisions and own them . . . And I think that was the first time where I learned how to be comfortable with the idea that you can make a mistake . . .

Through obstacles and making mistakes, Andrew was able to be comfortable with his own decisions and be who he wanted in this world. He began to incorporate these mistakes into his new world and found every learning opportunity to be freeing. The third element of self-authorship, securing internal commitments, occurs when gappers have the innate ability to strengthen their internal foundation and it becomes second nature to them (Baxter Magolda, 2008). This valuable growth for Patrick happened in the self-design process when he felt pressured to make all of his own decisions from the proposal stage to reintegration back home after his gap year:

I think designing my own experience, like it made me have to make all the decisions. It made me have to choose where I wanted to go. It made me have to learn all of these very like, tactical skills.

Patrick perceived there to be an intrinsic value in being able to own your decisions, especially when it comes to your own learning. Patrick could decide where he wanted to go, as well as take into consideration his own values and goals during the proposal process. This is an important moniker of success for Patrick and the other participants. He was not only able to be firm and confident in his decisions, but he saw value in this growth and its relationship to the self-design process. All students who enter the program come in at different readiness levels, as well as having different needs. It is important for students to push themselves beyond the norm. Yet, this is difficult because students do not feel pushed beyond their comfort zones and are given

formulas for success (Baxter Magolda, 2001; Olson & Pizzolato, 2016). Gap year administrator Melissa discussed the need for students to have the self-design process for meaningful growth:

So, I think it really comes from having in those two weeks, me having a chance to get to know them, as well as our staff and helping them, like I said, literally meeting them where they are. So, I think having a self-designed program allows us to really customize it to help them grow in the ways they want to for success.

The program's ability to "meet students where they are at" is the crux of the student-centered learning paradigm. Students are at the center of the learning experience, using their previous knowledge and experiences to guide their decision-making, while the program acts as the teacher helping to guide them through the activity (Wright, 2011). The ability for students to dig deep within themselves and create proposals is a valuable tool for growth. Overly-structured learning environments can potentially stifle students' learning and the development of their self-authorship (Olson & Pizzolato, 2016).

All participants perceived the essence of the self-designed process to be impactful and meaningful, which was characterized by the students. Gapper Rachel discussed how the self-design process helped her to let go, "It's almost allowed me to stop worrying so much about all the possibilities." Rachel was able to control her own learning and understand a more structured approach to figuring out her interests, all due to the student-centered learning approach of the gap year. Students creating meaning from self-designing their own gap year is evident when Patrick discusses his experience in comparison with classmates who did other programs, "I didn't feel like they ended up being pushed nearly as far as I felt I was pushed personally." Gappers moving away from the teacher-centered educational model, allowing deeper understanding in a gap experience than other traditional programming. These new gap

experiences promoted students to develop self-authorship towards new and different ways of meaning-making (O'Shea, 2014).

### ***Continual Reflection Reinforces the Value of Individual Meaning-Making***

Reflection was a theme seen in every response of the interview questions for all ten participants. As stated in the beginning of the chapter, reflection for the program is just as important as it is for the students themselves. Experiential Learning Theory uses reflection throughout its cycle and is at every stage of a student's gap year. From reflecting on their own learning and ways of meaning-making in the proposal stage at the summer institute to reflecting in the online class during their gap year, reflection is a key piece for students to truly grasp their new life experiences and the values they can potentially bring to their lives. All six participants reiterated the importance of reflection both individually and collaboratively. There are a variety of ways that students express themselves when reflecting, whether it be internally or externally. Concrete experience happens primarily in the beginning of the gap year program, but gappers are constantly experiencing throughout the entire process. As the gappers begin putting together their proposals, using reflective observation is important (Kolb, 1984). Gap year director Melissa stated:

You know, whether or not we explicitly ask them like what way they best, you know, make meaning or how they process, that tends to come out in those early discussions and workshops and things like that. So, you know, we obviously have some students who are more reflective, some students who journal, some students who are creative and artistic. And we try to allow them in the reflection that we do as a group to express themselves in whatever way works best for them if that makes sense.

Students knowing how they learn best is an important aspect think about, as reflection is more effective if individualized. Students use these external reflections they must do for the program as ways to dig deeper and reflection on the internal reflections they are experiencing on their gap year. It is important for each participant to understand how they create meaning to properly reflect. Andrew demonstrates the abstract conceptualization stage of the cycle by learning from his experiences (Kolb, 1984). He demonstrates this below:

I read books constantly. And usually, it's fiction. And for me, I develop a really strong relationship with the fiction books I read at different times in my life. So, when I think about my life, often, time periods are associated with books or series. I even have tattoos from my favorite books all over my body. So I love books as a way of creating meaning and stories. Also, storytelling with other people. I'm more of an external processor than an internal processor. So I have to write or talk and converse with people. And usually I like to create narratives. I think those are the biggest things.

Through reading, Andrew created meaning, as well as built relationships with others through storytelling. Not only has he used reading to reflect, but the tattoos he has on his body reflect these experiences to him every day. He uses these past experiences as a positive reminder of the lessons he learned during his gap year. This is like Erica, who is an accommodating learner, who does best by doing and feeling (Kolb, 1984). She stated, "Then I'm a reflective learner, so how I process my own experiences or my own emotions or the way that people are impacting me or the way that I'm impacting people or situations has always been through reflection."

Reflecting is a way for Erica to express her emotions through a variety of media. The actual process of reflecting is a way for her to process through situations physically and mentally with others, emotions, and past experiences. Gappers having opportunities and the time to reflect is

important in a gap year, and it is especially important for faculty to provide similar intellectually stimulating learning opportunities that integrate similar types of reflection (Brzycki & Brzycki, 2016; O'Shea, 2014). Engaging students in real-world learning, as well as reflection that is tied to academic goals, allows students to be successful in a variety of areas, such as gaining a new perspective or serving others (O'Shea, 2014).

Like others, Brittany reflects through relationships with others, "I would say very close relationships with people for sure and also just now I really feel like taking an opportunity and travelling somewhere else and getting very hands on experience with something." Brittany demonstrated being a convergent learner by doing and thinking, which is important in allowing life lessons to become second nature (Kolb, 1984). Brittany made life lessons become a part of her identity by fully experiencing a change, an emotion, or an opportunity. Building relationships with others is a way she reflects as well, as she learns through dialogue and emotional interactions. Charlie showed this same notion as well:

We're social creatures, and we learn through talking with others and through being with others and interacting with others. And so that has become a part of my life that I've given a lot more importance post-college, post to being a student.

Rachel demonstrated being an assimilated learner by watching or thinking, "I think it's a majority of spending quality time with people and then reflecting along. I think I kind of need both of those." She perceived that she learned best by interacting with others and reflecting during the experiences themselves. Patrick went deeper to state, "It's a connection in some way. I don't think that it's necessarily through people. Like it could be something like an introspective piece where I connect with something like in my environment." Not only does Patrick connect with others in building relationships, but he builds reflective connections through relationships

with the environment around him. The host community is a new environment for Patrick, but the influence of his previous knowledge and experiences have built a foundation going into this experience. The influence of the participants' peers, family, and society encourages students to develop their self-knowledge and self-authorship out of the social process (Scheffler, 1985).

The program aims for individual reflection to be creatively up to each participant, on top of the mandatory blogging they must do for the class. Reflection was very much individualized for each student and even though the new course aims to structure that more, the goal is still to reinforce the value of meaning-making through continual reflection. It is important for students to not only reflect on their lives in the gap year, but also on their lives back home (O'Shea, 2014). All administrators have a hands-on approach in the students' reflection process.

The cohort-style now part of the program, has only been in effect this year; therefore, none of these participants were a part of it, as they have all finished their gap year program. Being that the addition of the course is to structure reflection for the students, it is only a value-added piece for future gap year students started in the fall of 2019. Broderick et al. (2001) contended that cohorts serve as a space for dynamic transition and can help learners make use of one another by providing challenges, support, and encouragement. Gap year administrator Amanda said the course serves the same purpose to, "Help them make meaning of their experiences and reflect. . . to do things that they wouldn't do on their own necessarily."

And that really, this is the whole idea behind this course, is to help them make meaning of their experiences and reflect on it and also them assignments that really stretch them to do things that they wouldn't do on their own necessarily." Melissa reiterates this point, "But the purpose of this course is to really give them the tools they need to succeed, but also to kind of create more structure around their reflection and literally their meaning-making...she's created ways for

students to customize how they reflect.” Self-designed learning takes place from the proposal stage to the way the students reflect in the new course. The goal of the program aims to provide students with the necessary pieces of the puzzle to create their own gap years and to manage them on their own as much as possible.

**Research Question 2:** What are student perceptions of their personal growth throughout the individual meaning-making process throughout their gap experience?

### *Self-Expectations Versus Self-Worth*

All six participants noted there was a strong connection between what they expected of themselves and how they valued their own worth, both before and after their gap years. However, the relationship between the two changed during the gap year experience because creating new meaning allowed them to find out more about themselves. When asked how he grew during his gap year, Andrew stated:

Well, I don't think it was so much a process of adding things to myself as it was a process of subtracting things and, kind of, like, just gaining clarity about what I'm doing in the world and what it feels like to live a happy life. I mean, that was one huge thing is learning to trust my gut. Like, subtracting some of the ideas that are wasted on you about how to be happy and how to be fulfilled, and realizing, like, I felt so happy during my time working in Peru. And nobody could take that from me.

Andrew used the metaphor of adding and subtracting aspects of his own identity. He subtracted the self-doubt of making his own decisions and added trusting his gut. Through this process, he was able to define what happiness truly means to himself. There is an emphasis in all participant responses, in which students learning to trust themselves seems like a foreign idea. Not only did they learn self-reliance, but they learned their purpose, goals, likes and dislikes, and

this was all done through experiential meaning-making. Through self-design, reflection and reintegration, the gappers experience what has been described as the Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb, 1984). Students progress through this cycle in a gap year and develop various levels of self-authorship and meaning-making opportunities.

Baxter Magolda (2008) argued the transition to self-authorship begins with people constructing their own identity by distancing themselves from others. Erica demonstrates this by learning about herself away from society's expectations:

But what are, like, the norms that I hold myself to, or ways of behavior that I hold myself to, because they are just part of me versus what I think I should be in the world. I think that one of the biggest ways I grew was I genuinely felt like I shed this entire layer or crust of social norms and behaviors that had been implicit and explicit.

Through the gap year experience, Erica was able to shed her outer layer of previous self-identity based on societal expectations and norms. After the gap experience, she valued her own thoughts and values about her life above previous supports, and all this was gained through growth into her new self.

At the summer institute, students received encouragement to examine themselves while making their proposals, which helped to set a foundation for growth in the gap year experience. All six participants discussed how the growth they experienced taught them, that many of the obstacles they were facing were related to the development of their identities. Charlie stated, "And so, I would really say before this gap year, I was hindered by myself and my inability to, like, speak out and yeah, share. . ." Charlie held himself back based on society's expectations, but through the experience he discovered who he truly is.

Rachel reiterated a similar lesson learned:



I just was like very type A in high school. I had to have perfect grades. It was a little bit obsessive, but I definitely, like pushed myself...And it's like, Rachel, it's high school.

You don't really need to work that hard, like, you can chill out.

These are important to the pressures students face in high school of being on the academic treadmill, which is a large motivator for students to take a gap year. "Burn out" is a problem by the time students begin the college admissions process, and many lack a true internal voice. These students expressed finding their own internal voice and realizing the values and beliefs that are part of their foundation (Baxter Magolda, 2008). All found an interest in valuing their own voices in determining their own value and their own internal expectations, instead of worrying about societal norms.

### ***Reinforcement and Discovery of New Skills and Interests***

In addition to perseverance, all participants noted an increase in their skillsets and a more defined focus on their personal, professional, and academic interests. In student-centered learning, there is an increase in not only confidence, but critical thinking, problem solving, leadership, and judgment (Eriksen, 2009). By self-designing a gap year, the gapper's maturity level increase. Students analyze their own values and growth during and after their gap year. After graduation, Brittany explored the values she had developed in her gap year through designing her own experiences:

This summer I did an internship in D.C. and I was in downtown D.C., policy internship, and I was in an office every single day and I was, like, *I knew I would hate this*. And I hated being in an office. In my job right now I'm outside. There's no inside portion of my job, even when I teach everything outside. I was like, *Okay, yep. Really glad I didn't waste all four years of college working towards an inside job*.

Without the gap year experience, Brittany would have potentially not had the pre-existing knowledge to know that she disliked certain job environments. Andrew experienced similar growth when discussing his development from the summer institute to reintegration back home:

We did like journaling and letters to ourselves, and, you know, all that stuff. And it was really helpful because I think examining your life is something that you can really benefit from when you have to be an adult and make your own choices.

Students' examination of their lives in a gap year is important, as they are becoming adults. Many of them have never had the ability to make many of their own decisions, so giving them a self-designed gap year opportunity thrusts them into the world of being an adult and lets them look at all the choices they made and reflect on those choices. All student narratives are different, and all show the ways the gap year experiences mold participants (Griffin, 2013). Andrew used a former self-narrative to analyze his own life and his personal growth. Without this particular knowledge, he may not have developed his self-authorship to the degree he had.

Administrator Amanda aided students in finding matching clubs and opportunities on campus for students when they reintegrate back to campus. She found it to be a way for students to continue the lessons they had learned, as well as to discover new interests, to dig deeper into current interests, and to build their skillset. It is important for colleges and universities to define outcomes that address specific skills to promote student self-authorship. Amanda used this as a way to aid in pairing students with areas on campus since students created their own outcomes and goals during the proposal stage (Baxter Magolda, 1998). She reflected on building these areas:

They see value in them going forward and creating a portfolio of things that they can then look back on, that kind of creates a body of work and kind of captures their experiences in unique ways.

Gappers have attained lessons, skills, and a sense of accomplishment after returning from their gap year. Students gain a new global perspective through the growth process. An important determinant of growth is valuing diversity and having the ability to see through multiple perspectives. The ability to work cross-culturally is an important skill to potential future employers. This is achieved through maturity, which is built through building cross-cultural relationships. Melissa perceived that students gained maturity from their gap year experiences:

Their maturity, their ability to work with people from different backgrounds, from diverse backgrounds, their ability to kind of see things with this new global perspective that maybe they didn't have before, I think that is really, really powerful.

The skills associated with this growth towards self-authorship are linked to their growth in critical thinking and evaluation (Barber et al., 2013).

**Research Question 3:** What are student perceptions of how their previous knowledge and experiences influenced the meaning-making process of participating in a self-directed gap year?

### ***Influence of Societal Expectations Minimized***

All six gap year participants believed that societal pressures and the way others see them were at a minimum after completion of their gap year. Since the *Grand Tour*, society played a huge role in determining who was able to take a year off to discover themselves. Staying on the aforementioned “academic treadmill” is society’s way of keeping students in the prescribed formula of the four-year college experience. Even though society might view a gap year as a way for students to escape their future, the gap year provides a way for students to give back and

grow (Hanley & Lyons, 2012; Lough et al., 2008). Brittany best described this about herself prior to taking her gap year:

In a lot of ways, I really struggled with that in college, but pre-gap year, I would describe myself very small town, very involved in things, but still pretty naïve about the world around me, a lot less involved . . . I would say I was your average small-town student who did really well in school.

Brittany described herself as being naïve, *small town* and *average*, which is how four out of six gap year participants described themselves. She performed well in school and was involved in school activities. It is typical for students to believe they must do as their parents did and follow in the norm of society; however, the gap year really pushed students to discover new and interesting parts of themselves. Post-gap year, societal pressures were very different for Brittany:

I was always by the books and here I'm on my gap year. I have total freedom, and it's like I just felt such freedom that I had never felt before...and I could go anywhere as long as I could plan it and pay for it and I just made friends.

Gaining freedom to think, grow, reflect, and learn are the most common themes seen among participants when discussing societal pressures on their lives. It is important for students to not only make choices for themselves, but to lead when they reincorporate being into society (Kolb, 2011). Students have difficulty Reintegrating back into their normal lives becomes difficult even though it has been their normal most of their lives. Leading others is a skill gappers learn through their gap year, and they can continue to use these skills for the rest of their lives. Through these gap year opportunities, Brittany learned leadership skills and learned to trust her inner voice. She created meaning through the freedom and ability to make her own decisions.

According to gapper Erica:

I came back with this amazing freedom of, like, being who I wanted to be in real life . . . It's ultimately what people think about you, but I would bring it more broadly just, like, society at large and it was my gap year that gave me that freedom, and it is probably a thing I'm most thankful for if I look back now, almost a decade later.

Not only did she learn she had the freedoms to be herself, but she believes it to be the most valuable piece she gained from her gap experience. Erica was able to transform her mindset through a systematic and fundamental awareness of others and herself. The ability to be herself and to understand the different facets of that self help impact her body, mind, and soul, leading towards a higher level of self-actualization (Brzycki & Brzycki, 2012). Society's opinion of her is important to a degree, but that is not as important post-gap year. She still values this internal growth almost a decade later and realizes the depths society's expectations had on her life then and now.

**Research Question 4:** What are student perceptions of how self-directing their own gap year experience influenced the development of their self-authorship?

#### ***Self-Design Proposal Helps to Solidify Changes in Self-Authorship***

Upon entry to the gap year program, participants attend a two-week summer institute to design their entire gap year. This is where the self-design process takes place, so the students must become acclimated to the idea of making their own decisions and reflecting deeply.

Administrator Amanda described the proposal process below:

The first component is their summer institute when they come here for two weeks, where they have a lot of training, they have a lot of introductions to campus. We talk a lot about ethical service, and you know white privilege, things like that. So, a lot of kind of

preparatory things. There's a workshop on safety, lots of different aspects that really help them think through.

The training and introductions to campus serve as a way for gappers to learn all the areas they may encounter when on their gap year. The summer institute serves as a way for students to take the learned information and apply it to their own self-designed program. Areas such as white privilege and safety impact many of the gappers; thus, they need to apply this information to their own unique situations. These are important areas related to voluntourism for gappers to cover, as the relationship between the gapper and the host community happens after they leave for their gap experience.

Because gap years are on the rise, it is important to analyze and learn about the complexities of the relationships of all three stakeholders (Hanley & Lyons, 2012). All six participants agreed that self-designing their own gap year experiences heavily influenced the development of their self-authorship, though some of their meaning-making opportunities were different. Erica best echoed this by saying:

When you design your own experiences, and then you're in those experiences, you're less critical of those experiences...So, I wound up, like, very grateful and thankful for those experiences that I was able to find in a lot more forgiving of moments where I wasn't living in the best of environments.

Goals and outcomes had been set by all gap year participants in the proposal stage during the summer institute prior to taking their gap year. Designing these experiences brought up immense feelings for some and opportunities for growth for all of those involved. The student's intended purpose for their gap year is important, as all participants used their motivations in the summer institute to discover their purpose for their goals and outcomes. Charlie reiterated this point

below when discussing how his goals led to his passion and how the structure of the program was imperative to its influence on his life:

But what I cared about was exploring subjects of interest. I was interested in environmental science. And so that's partly the reason why I chose to go work in a greenhouse to get hands-on experience . . . I think with a more structured program, I think the amount of intent you can put into your decision of, like, where to go is much more limited is one of the things I recently discovered about my gap year and how it connects to my life now.

Charlie's ability to determine his own purpose and reason for the proposal he created is what is so influential on his growth. The intention he put into his program demonstrates his connections and passions in life. Having certain structures in place allowed him to build a proposal that was efficient and effective, but it was not so structured that he felt limited. Charlie having hands-on experience in the design of his program shows the effectiveness of the Experiential Learning Model. Building his proposal benefited him during the reintegration stage, as the final active experimentation stage allows him to use what he learned in real world scenarios.

The way the gap year program influenced Charlie's capacity for learning helped to shape the impact Charlie made on his gap year experience (O'Shea, 2014). Brittany reiterates this same point, "I mean, I think having the ability to choose yourself is very important, as opposed to somebody setting up the entire thing for you." This point identifies the usefulness of self-directed learning as opposed to students simply being placed in a country. Students having the ability to make their own decisions and acknowledging that freedom creates promotes their inner voices.

Goals and objectives defined in the proposal stage helped students to construct their identities throughout in their gap years and these are guided by structured supports in the program. Not

only do students think deeply about who they are as people, but they begin to think about themselves beyond the present. Erica stated, “On my gap year, I have three distinctive goals. I was trying to be *intentional*.” Intentionality and purpose force gappers to use their current self-identities and previous knowledge and experiences to make decisions as adults. Understanding intentionality was important to Erica because she was able to create a meaningful gap year experience that was true to herself at that time. Service learning has an impact on the construction of an identity. Not only because the learners’ environment is their classroom but the students themselves create their own identity through purposeful and intentional decision-making. The appropriate supports helped to enhance the meaning-making process towards self-authorship and the gap year programs serve as these supports for the students to create their own gap year journey (Baxter Magolda, 2008). Erica’s intentionality helped her to grow spiritually and to feel fulfilled because she was able to reach her goal with the help of the self-directed gap year.

Setting goals is not only an important process to promote student motivation, but it helps students to begin the process of developing their self-authorship. Lauren reinforced the idea of turning goals into a meaning-making process that fully encompasses building towards ones’ own self-authorship:

I think the gap year is much more meaningful because they are putting their identity and passion into designing where they want to go and what they want to do. I think it helps them learn so much more about who they are because these are their decisions in where to go and what to do are their own.

The design of the gap year program is influential on student development because the students play a role in their own learning and the creation of their own identity. When students



create the proposal goals and outcomes driven by their passions, they learn valuable lessons. These opportunities for self-directed learning create meaning, as attaining a goal adds more value to the experience (Ames, 1992).

Administrator Lauren associates the student success with the proposal as well, “But I think self-design is what makes these programs so special and what creates the, like, extraordinary students that we end up having as alumni.” Not only does the student-centered learning environment push students to internally reflect, but using the constructivist approach allows students to create their own learning solutions based on what works best for them. This process allows students to move to levels of understanding that are deeper, which influences their lives long-term (Ariyawong & Phongsatha, 2017; Brown, 2008).

### **Summary of Data Analysis**

My role as researcher within phenomenological qualitative research was to find commonalities among participants who experience the same phenomenon. An authorized third-party company transcribed all ten interviews. I checked each transcription against the original recorded interview for accuracy. As the principal investigator, I hand-coded each transcription twice, looking for emerging categories and themes, organizing them based on the research questions created solely for this study. Both groups of participants, gappers and gap year program administrators, provided quality narrative data to analyze.

The first round of coding occurred by highlighting based on five different categories relevant to the five different research questions. During the first stage of coding, the data was read and assigned to one of the five different categories. Then the transcripts were read again to determine if there were statements that fit into the five original categories or if new categories emerged. I then looked for emerging patterns and themes by creating subcategories and

organizing all of the data. The conclusion of the data occurred once saturation was reached during the third round of coding. The data was reviewed continuously for coding of the emerging themes and categories, then organized accordingly.

## **Chapter 5. Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations**

### **Introduction**

In the first three chapters of the study, the following were introduced: an introduction to the topic, significance of the study, a description of the phenomenological approach to qualitative inquiry, the data collection process, literature review, and the research methodology of the study. Chapter 4 described the emerging themes and categories from the phenomenological study, results and analysis of the semi-structured interview data within each research question, and a summary of the data analysis. The data from this qualitative study provided me with a thorough analysis of the research questions. Themes and categories that emerged were matched with the corresponding research questions focused on meaning-making, self-authorship, and self-design. This concluding chapter includes the conclusions of the research questions, recommendations for practice and future research, and concluding summaries are contained within this chapter.

### **Conclusions**

Guiding this phenomenological qualitative inquiry into research was guided by one overarching and four supporting research questions, which helped to guide the study. Both group interviews, as well as my notes and memos helped me to derive the necessary data to capture a well-rounded view of the participants' experience in relation to the phenomenon of a self-designed gap year and its relation to meaningful growth towards self-authorship. Findings and conclusions of this research may help to inform future practice and research and can apply to the areas of self-directed and experiential learning and gap year programming. Considerations of the implications of this study could help both for-profit and non-profit (institutional or foundational) improve their best practices and processes, but also to reiterate the importance of student-

centered learning in an educational paradigm. I was able to capture a relevant and accurate portrayal of all ten participants experience with the phenomenon of the gap year using phenomenological qualitative inquiry. All data transcribed from the participant interviews provided me, as the principal investigator, with thorough and in-depth data of gap year participant and administrator perceptions, in relation to the gap year experience of creating meaning towards self-authorship in a self-designed gap year. This section includes the conclusions for each research question of the study.

**Central Research Question:** What are student perceptions of self-directing their own gap year program, meaning-making, and self-authorship during their gap year experience?

Each of the six participants interviewed for this study reported a positive perception of how self-directing their own gap year led to individual growth towards their self-authorship. They held the perception that students in programs with less student-involvement lacked the same self-reliance they had during their own gap years. The four gap year program administrators perceived that the structure of the program helped to guide students in their program proposals but not too involved, so they were able to self-design it themselves. If students have exposure to self-directed learning by programs intentionally, then it allows students to have deeper understandings of concepts (Bledsoe & Kranzow, 2017). All participants perceived that the structure and design of the gap year program promoted students to analyze their own meaning-making processes while providing them with the appropriate support(s) when needed. Also, there was the perception that it is through this minimal structure and that students were able to learn higher levels of self-reliance through their own meaning-making experiences. These experiences took place before and during their gap year, as well as during the reintegration stage. Gap year participants connected the belief that they can be happy anywhere they are

because they have designed and chosen to be within that experience. They perceived that the confidence in their own decision-making has increased since high school because during the proposal stage at the summer institute, with encouragement, students make their own decision from the beginning of the process.

Their own self-perceptions altered as they created meaning towards a new self-authorship since they began to rely on their own inner voices, finding new versions of themselves. All ten participants agreed that mentor-type support of the program, instead of a traditional teacher-centered educational paradigm, was more empowering to the gap year experience. The responsibility of learning shifts to the learner themselves in a student-centered learning environment, as they are responsible for their own learning by being actively involved in the process (Wright, 2011). Thus, structured supports as a guide helps to promote student growth. All six gap year participants discussed that the structured support pushed them to reach out for help when needed but to self-reflect and handle situations on their own as well. They also perceived that encountering obstacles gave them the opportunity to hold themselves accountable for making the decisions to be in their chosen environments. This is evidence that overcoming obstacles is important to create meaning. Overcoming adversity brings a sense of clarity to what one is capable of enduring (Ryff, 2015). Pushing through these instances of adversity, participants on their gap years to discover new meaning-making contexts. Three out of the four gap year administrators perceived the program went through a similar meaning-making journey, as it overcomes obstacles each year and uses these instances to reflect and provide further appropriate supports for students as it grows.

**Research Question 1:** What are student perceptions regarding the value of their individual meaning-making process towards growth in a self-designed gap year?

All six gap year participants interviewed noted an increase in confidence, value-added experience, and potential growth. They held the belief that their gap year had translated into their lives with an increase in self-confidence in going after experiences they would not have previously felt the confidence to attain. Gapper Andrew noted how the gap year instilled a value of perseverance. He and the other five gappers noted that making mistakes did not seem as life-ending as they had in high school. This built increased their self-reliance and value in their meaning-making experiences. All six noted the independence and freedom to make their own decisions were two of the most valuable aspects of the self-design process. They perceived that having this freedom was new to them, especially when in comparison with their high school experiences. Starting from the proposal stage to reintegration, all six participants reiterated the theme of the value of freedom to make their own decisions in relation to the self-design process. They received encouragement to take into consideration their own value-systems, as well as their own needs and desires. This has translated into a shift in their self-authorship and a new meaning-making context for all of them. Gap year Director Melissa believed that they use the structure of the program to “meet students where they are at.” It is this category that allows for students to create their own self-authorship through the design of their own gap year program.

The four administrators interviewed all agree that continual reflection reinforces the value of individual meaning-making in a gap year experience. As Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning model demonstrates, reflection is key to student’s successfully learning and implementing these lessons in their future lives. In this model, four stages happen as students observe, reflect, make sense of their environment, and apply this knowledge to future experiences. In a gap year, students use reflection at every point to process these new experiences. Administrators believe it is important to reflect and evaluate their own gap year

program. They have now added a course for students to take during and after their gap year for further in-depth reflection. All six gap year participants interviewed agreed that the reflective pieces they did (though different in the medium for many of the participants) were pivotal to their future success. Students perceived these external reflections, whether written or a creative piece, helped them to make sense of their internal reflections. All six participants mentioned building relationships as an important meaning-making context of reflection while storytelling, listening to music, and journaling were all important to different means of reflection to different participants. All six participants reiterated the importance of making sense of the world around them through reflection. Erica, Brittany, Charlie, and Rachel all used relationships to reflect and create order within themselves.

Since the creation of the program, administrators perceived that each person in the program participates in reflection with the gap year participants, whether it be during the summer institute, online blogging, phone calls, or reintegration. Due to program evaluations, the program has added a new one-credit course for students to individualize their reflection in a cohort-type setting. This course added individualized attention and a necessary reflection structure to the gappers while they are abroad. The perception of three of the four administrators was that this course will help future gap year participants to dig deeper into themselves than ever before. Most of the six gap year participants interviewed found lessons learned upon reflection happening at different times after their gap year. Each gapper had a preferred method of reflection that they perceived was most impactful for them. Therefore, students reflecting at different times in their gap years is expected because they are each different people.

**Research Question 2:** What are student perceptions of their personal growth throughout the individual meaning-making process throughout their gap experience?

The interview questions associated with Research Question 3 aligned with the literature that discussed the meaning-making process towards self-authorship. Both participant groups perceived there was an increase in personal growth through the individualized approach of the self-designed gap year program. These individuals had a different approach for each gap year experience; thus, there was personal growth during the self-design process as well as the gap year itself.

All six gap year participants felt that there was a strong connection before and after their gap years in relation to what they expected of themselves and how they valued their own worth. This relationship changed, however, after the gap year, in relation to both. All six participants reported that they lost many of the negative aspects of themselves and added many positive attributes. All held a sense of belief on what it meant to be happy by themselves and in different situations, as well as discovering more about themselves without the pressures of American society. Their self-worth transformed, which was then measured by themselves as opposed to those around them who were in positions of power. The expectations of themselves seemed to grow as their self-reliance grew. They were the obstacles in their own way. Administrators reiterated the importance of this lesson by discussing in their responses their aim to be there for students in times of hardship.

The coding of the transcripts led to the reinforcement and discovery of new skills and interests from interviews with both groups. All groups noticed an increase in gappers' skill sets and a more defined focus on their interests and passions. Gap year participants discovered areas of themselves they did not like, as well as areas of interest changed or grew after their gap year.

Administrator responses reiterated their role from the structured program was to help reinforce this growth by providing students with opportunities to use these skills once back to



campus. All four administrators believed that students come back to campus far ahead of other students with a higher level of maturity and new view of the world. The administrators believe students are more successful on and off campus, as well as being more prepared for life.

**Research Question 3:** What are student perceptions of how their previous knowledge and experiences influenced the meaning-making process of participating in a self-directed gap year?

Data derived from all six gap year participant interviews showed several commonalities among them. All six attended public high school, were academically successful, and demonstrated interest in taking a gap year after several life experiences. The three female participants all attended high school in a rural area, and the three males attended high school in more urban environments in larger cities. Of the six participants, all four stated motivation for taking a gap year to be related to “burnout,” while both Erica and Andrew stated they wanted to take a gap year after they had attended a leadership event. All six participants relayed the theme of having an internal desire for growth as a motivator for taking a gap year. These motivators stem from a multitude of areas, but all associated with the desire to grow in a way that the prescribed four-year college experience could not provide. Guomei and Wei (2017) list nine motivations for taking a gap year, and all six participants motivations were among his reasons such as exploring new cultures, volunteering, or obtaining new skills. The gappers wanted to explore their spirituality, passions, and desires, and to grow as people. Several participants echoed obstacles such as parental approval, self-doubt, societal pressures and norms, and low self-confidence.

The influence of social expectations was a theme prevalent through interviews with both gap year participants and program administrators. All gap year participants interviewed believed that societal pressures minimized post-gap year, as they no longer felt the need to please anyone

but themselves. Students viewed the path as a “treadmill” they needed to depart from and the gap year the opportunity to discover a new pathway to success. All six agreed that they felt a sense of freedom, once they shed some of the societal norms, as well as having less of a sense of care of how others felt about their own decisions. All six believed that these lessons were still intact for them today.

**Research Question 4:** What are student perceptions of how self-directing their own gap year experience influenced the development of their self-authorship?

During interviews with administrators, they carefully laid out and explained the self-design process. Administrators described the summer institute and the ways the proposal stage helps to prepare students in a variety of factors. Not only does it instill in gappers the decision-making freedoms many of them have yet to discover, but it teaches them about budgeting, safety, organization, planning, writing, and collaboration. All ten participant interviews echoed that self-design helped and solidified changes in self-authorship. All six gap year participants agreed that the meaning-making journeys were different, but that self-designing their own gap years instilled freedom, tenacity, perseverance, and discovery of their true selves. Students who designed their own experiences were more accepting of their decisions and demonstrated an increase in follow-through.

All six gap year participants believed that creating their own goals and outcomes in the proposal stage was influential in making their gap year experience that impactful. Ashgar and Rashid (2016) noted that using a variety of tools such as software, applications, blogging, and other resources promotes self-directed learning, as well as deeper connections. This study showed that students self-designing their own program through the proposal process have an even deeper connection with their gap year experience. Three of the six participants described

the experience as bringing up uncomfortable feelings, but all six agreed that they grew from designing their own experience. All ten participants agree that having an intended purpose for their gap year was pivotal to demonstrating meaningful growth. Many of the six gap year participants believed their gap year experiences influenced their chosen passions, whether it be career or academic.

Administrators echoed the gap year participant's responses in their belief that writing down one's goals aids in creating meaning towards their self-authorship. They hold the belief that the gappers' ownership of their decisions in the proposal stage is imperative to shaping their identity post-gap year. They also believed that this stage taught valuable skills beyond the gap year experience itself. Since not everything goes as planned, it forced students to rely on themselves and the supports of the program. At one point during their interviews, all ten participants mentioned going through hardships and overcoming obstacles being where they truly saw growth.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Data collected for this phenomenological qualitative study provides evidence for the following four recommendations for practice about the importance of including the self-design process to create deeper meaning towards students' self-authorship in a gap year experience:

- Increased examination of all public higher educational institutions with gap year program evaluation to provide more student access to gap year opportunities
- Re-design of all gap year programming at public higher educational institutions to adapt to a more student-centered educational paradigm and instill self-directed methodology into their best practices

- Quarterly reflection and analysis of gap year programming at all public higher educational institutions, especially in relation to areas promoting student-centered learning and self-reliance of students
- Development of non-traditional reflection standards for all educational institutions, whether public or private, for all students who take a gap year in order to show meaningful growth
- Further development and research of best practices for non-traditional, virtual, or domestic gap year options for students in situations such as the Coronavirus pandemic

The basis for each of the four recommendations for practice above are based on the study findings and available for achieving at the institutional level. Though many of these changes can occur at state and federal levels, it must start at each institution, as each program is different, and each state has different educational standards. Redesigning gap year programs to a more student-centered paradigm allows for students to be in control of their own learning and apply real world lessons in and out of the classroom. Whether the gap year program is for-profit or non-profit or institutional, all should aim to meet the same standards, to ensure quality and access for the students who take a gap year.

All gap year programs, especially institutional, rely upon one another for feedback and growth. This feedback is an ample opportunity for testing measurements of rigor when reflecting on the design of the program. By redesigning programming at higher educational institutions, as well as quarterly reflection and analysis of these programs, programming will constantly be growing and changing, adapting with educational trends, and providing students with a well-rounded gap year experience. Properly analyzing gap year programming

and the related promotion of student-reliance and student-centered learning gives students and programs the highest likelihood for success.

Gap year options for students during the Coronavirus pandemic is an important step for colleges and universities when enrollment numbers begin to decrease. Further research into the best practices of non-traditional, virtual, or domestic gap year options would help develop programs for students. This simultaneously will help students who are unable to attend college due to personal hardships, as well as provides access for more students to take a gap year.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This study's findings lead to a proposal of further research that is related to the importance of self-directed learning, as well as the need for further research in the areas of successful reflection in self-designed learning, in regard to the experiential learning model.

- Studies on self-directed learning on the best practices at post-secondary education level
- Studies on student perspectives of how self-designed learning, study abroad, or other related international opportunities influences their own college experience
- Research on the role of self-reflection in self-directed learning, in relation to the experiential learning model
- Research on growth of students in a self-designed gap year experience in comparison with other volunteer opportunities

After reviewing the scholarly researcher available, future studies based on self-directed learning on the best practices at the higher educational level is necessary. Research on self-directed learning demonstrates the positive implications of student-centered learning, yet there is no direct literature on this type of learning at a post-secondary level. Not only is this lacking in

the literature, but there is no evidence of studies that focus on self-directed learning of students in an experiential-style environment. Additional studies on student perspectives of how self-designed learning influences their own college experience or on study abroad or other international opportunities would add to the gap in the literature on self-designed programming in an experiential learning environment.

As the principal investigator, I would also recommend further research on the role of reflection in self-directed learning, in relation to the experiential learning model. The experiential learning model research has been of use to study the areas of international volunteerism, study abroad, and domestic volunteer opportunities. However, there is a gap in the literature with regard to students in an international, self-designed learning setting. Pedagogy about self-designed volunteer opportunities could provide influential data for gap year programming, suggesting that student-centered learning is impactful on student growth than the traditional gap year program.

Though there is significant literature to suggest that students grow in a traditional volunteer opportunity, there is no evidence to suggest that it is more impactful than a self-designed learning opportunity. Further study could occur by using multiple gap year programs; comparing for-profit programs to institutional programs or public versus private institutions; and conducting studies using mixed or quantitative methodologies. Studies could focus on analyzing student reflections and observations or use a quantitative analysis to survey the gap year student experience. More in-depth research in this area could lead to deeper student learning, gap year program success, growth of the gap year market, increases to student retention, higher graduation rates, and the effectiveness of virtual student gap years due to the Coronavirus pandemic.

Elements of this study are transferable to all educational paradigms, as the gap year phenomena uses classroom and real-world experience to promote student growth. Areas such as professional development, training, experiential learning, and the social sciences could all benefit from the findings of this study as well. Transferability of themes presented could be applied to the contexts of areas of project-based learning, self-directed learning, experiential learning, college retention, first year studies, online learning, and dual enrollment. Gap years are intended to encourage students to use the experience to discover their passions, to grow and mature, and to use reflection to apply these lessons to their new lives.

### **Concluding Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine student perceptions of their meaning-making process towards self-authorship in a self-directed gap year opportunity at a public higher educational institution in the Southeast. Chapter 1 introduced the need for this gap year research, statement of the problem, research questions, significant term definitions, and the limitations and delimitations of this study. Chapter 2 presented a well-rounded review of the literature with the prominent themes of the gap year, meaning-making, self-authorship, and self-directed learning. Chapter 3 described the research methodology and the study design, including the role of the researcher, ethical considerations, setting, population, sampling strategy, data collection procedures, measures of rigor, and data analysis. Chapter 4 gave my interpretation of the data from the study, including participant profiles, researcher notes and memos, interview results for all research questions by providing emerging themes and categories, and a data analysis summary. Chapter 5 presents the gap year phenomenon from not only the perspective of the gap year participants themselves, but the administrators who aid in the program's implementation. This chapter aimed to conclude the study and summarize the key points of the

study in relation to all research questions and suggestions for recommendations for further practice and research.

This study does not generalize all gap year programming, but it is obvious that further study needs to be done to ensure gap year participants are gaining the most learning and socio-emotional growth from their experiences. In a changing educational landscape with new and different needs for both educator and student, it becomes even more important to move to a student-centered and student-directed style of learning. This study presented ways students make meaning toward their self-authorship, which are key to creating and defining an impactful and effective gap experience. Until the self-design process applies to more gap year programming, students in these experiences will lack the full depth of possibilities.



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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Gap Year Participant Interview Protocol

**Time of Interview:**

**Date:**

**Place:**

**Interviewer:**

**Interviewee:**

**Grade of Interviewee:**

**Introduction:** *"Thank you so much for being a part of this qualitative study. Today you will be asked questions to gauge your perspective on how you grew throughout your gap year experience as a college freshman. More specifically, I will be asking questions about how your experience has influenced how you created meaningful growth, as well as how it helped to develop who you are as a person today. The aspect of designing your own gap year experience will also be discussed, as is what makes the program unique."*

**Questions:**

1. What was your educational experience like prior to entering college? (4)
2. What role did your family play in your education? (4)
3. Why did you choose to take a gap year? (4)
4. Who were you as a person prior to taking a gap year? (Self-authorship) (3)
5. In what ways do you grow (or create meaning) most as a person or student? (2)
6. How did designing your own gap year experience influence how you create meaning during your gap year? (2) (1)
7. Do you think creating meaning is an important process for students to think about when designing their own gap year experience? (3)
8. How do you perceive you personally grew as an individual throughout the meaning-making process during your gap year? (3)
9. How much do you think your previous knowledge and experiences influenced how you created meaning in your gap year experience? (4)
10. How did designing your own gap year experience influence how you developed into who you are today? (5)(1)

**Conclusion:**



## Appendix B: Gap Year Administrator Interview Protocol

**Time of Interview:**

**Date:**

**Place:**

**Interviewer:**

**Interviewee:**

**Grade of Interviewee:**

**Introduction:** *“Thank you so much for being a part of this qualitative study. Today you will be asked questions to gauge your perspective on how you believe participants in the Gap Year Fellowship Program benefited from their experience. More specifically, I will be asking questions about how you believe their experiences have influenced how they created meaningful growth, as well as how it helped to develop who they are as a person today. The aspect of designing their own gap year experience will also be discussed, as is what makes the program unique.”*

**Questions:**

1. What is your role in relation to the Gap Year Fellowship Program? (1)
2. What are your perceptions of the extent to which participant’s families and prior educational experiences influences their choice to take a gap year? (4)
3. What are your perceptions of how self-directing their own gap year program influenced their individual growth? (1)(5)
4. How much does the individual student’s meaning making process play into the self-design process of their gap year? (2)(1)
5. How much do you perceive students grow throughout the meaning making process of their gap year experience? (2)
6. How much do you perceive that students designing their own gap year experience influenced the development of their self-authorship? (1)(5)
7. What role does reflection throughout the gap year experience play while a student is in their self-designed gap year? (3)
8. What is your perception of how much the reintegration process influences a student’s meaning making process towards self-authorship? (3)(5)
9. What do you perceive is the biggest influence of student’s designing their own gap year? (1)(5)

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