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Exploration of COVID-19's Impact on Communication and Decision-Making of First-Year College Students' Enrollment for Fall 2020 and Their Final Postsecondary Plans

Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the extent that the COVID-19 pandemic had on first-year college enrollments for the fall 2020 semester and the alternate plans that were made by Northeastern United States students. The general research question was, "What motivating factors contributed to recent high-school students' decisions to take a gap year during the COVID-19 global pandemic?" To build an answer, this study was conducted to identify and explore the perceptions of 10 young adults who were accepted and committed to a 4-year college or university after high-school graduation, but they did not accomplish enrollment for the fall 2020 semester, and they took a gap year from schooling during this time. The results of this study found that 4-year institutions were inconsistent in their communication with first-year college students for the fall 2020 semester. No change in cost and fear of missing out (FOMO) dissonance were major factors that influenced nonenrollments. As a result, confidence in decision-making on post-secondary plans flourished among young adults, aged 18–22. The recommendations for stakeholders and institutions, including colleges, universities, and other nonprofit organizations that issue mass-communication efforts, is that they engage in two-way communication practices to ensure the intended information is received. Also, it is important to acknowledge that the first-year college student's FOMO experience in the midst of a global pandemic was unique and their experiences should continue to be collected in their own words.

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Exploration of COVID-19's Impact on Communication and Decision-Making of First-Year
College Students' Enrollment for Fall 2020 and Their Final Postsecondary Plans

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
EdD in Executive Leadership

Supervised by

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Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education

St. John Fisher College

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Dedication

This entire “dissertjourney” is dedicated to my children, JOBELRYE. Thank you to my husband for your love and support during this exciting, yet difficult, time. You and our family sacrificed so much, and I cherish our journey together, while adding adventures along the way. Alexander, it’s good to see your face. I’ll be here to support you when you’re sitting in this same spot.

I want to acknowledge my parents for instilling the importance of an education at such a young age. From tiny achievements to firsts, I was celebrated and encouraged “to keep going.” To my brothers, thank you for your support and love. To Ana, thank you for being my rock—you’re a great friend. To Jamesa, thank you for always being like a sister and making yourself available to listen or take action—with no hesitation. To my CEOs, Randi and Jill, thanks for the support, encouragement, and mentorships you have provided to me during this long journey—you may not have known, but every piece of advice weighed heavily. Team DREDD—Wow. No one did branding quite like us—we had our very own crest, a banner, pens, stickers, team-designed jerseys, quotes, designated colors, and a personal touch in catering services. We showed up as a corporation and left a lasting mark. I couldn’t imagine doing this entire journey with a different set of individuals. Whoever led the construction of group dynamics for our cohort—bravo to you! The support my team had for one another during our highs and lows, inside and outside the classroom, created such a bond I could never shake—we will always be family. Jonathan, thank you for always checking in and ensuring I was moving

forward—your commitment and support does not go unrecognized. Finally, to all the educators, especially Ms. Bruno, the schoolteacher who took a shy, self-conscious, bullied, young girl and positioned her to begin digging deeply into writing and also exposed her to different career fields and volunteerism. When a person unrelated to you or your story finds you so intriguing, it really does make a difference. Lastly, thank you to the two educators who provided guidance, patience, and fostered growth during this experience, Dr. Bil and Dr. Kelly.

Biographical Sketch

Ritza Santiago is currently a program director at Jawonio. Ms. Santiago attended John Jay College of Criminal Justice from 2000 to 2006 and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Forensic Psychology. She attended the College of New Rochelle from 2008 to 2010 and graduated with a Master of Sciences degree in Career Development. She came to St. John Fisher College in the summer of 2016 and began doctoral studies in the EdD Program in Executive Leadership. Ms. Santiago pursued her research of first-year college students and their postsecondary plans under the guidance of Dr. Bil Leipold and Dr. Janice Kelly and received the EdD degree in 2021.

Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the extent that the COVID-19 pandemic had on first-year college enrollments for the fall 2020 semester and the alternate plans that were made by Northeastern United States students. The general research question was, “What motivating factors contributed to recent high-school students’ decisions to take a gap year during the COVID-19 global pandemic?”

To build an answer, this study was conducted to identify and explore the perceptions of 10 young adults who were accepted and committed to a 4-year college or university after high-school graduation, but they did not accomplish enrollment for the fall 2020 semester, and they took a gap year from schooling during this time.

The results of this study found that 4-year institutions were inconsistent in their communication with first-year college students for the fall 2020 semester. No change in cost and fear of missing out (FOMO) dissonance were major factors that influenced non-enrollments. As a result, confidence in decision-making on post-secondary plans flourished among young adults, aged 18–22.

The recommendations for stakeholders and institutions, including colleges, universities, and other nonprofit organizations that issue mass-communication efforts, is that they engage in two-way communication practices to ensure the intended information is received. Also, it is important to acknowledge that the first-year college student’s FOMO experience in the midst of a global pandemic was unique and their experiences should continue to be collected in their own words.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In the early months of 2020, the United States confirmed that the “2019 novel coronavirus” (COVID-19) cases had reached the United States. By the second week of March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, and President Donald Trump declared a national emergency, triggering states to begin shutting down schools, places of worship, and nonessential businesses (ABC News, 2020). Local school districts and universities across the United States migrated from in-person teaching to online and virtual teaching. Changes that would have traditionally taken years to roll out happened in a matter of weeks (Li & Lalani, 2020). In mid-March and early-April 2020, colleges and universities were sending students home for the remainder of the semester across the nation (Malani, 2020). Society was witnessing history of a worldwide pandemic for the first time since 1918 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2018). In the weeks and months that followed the initial cases of COVID-19 in early March 2020, news outlets reported increasing numbers of positive COVID-19 cases and COVID-19-related deaths (Douglas-Gabriel, 2020). With the onset of April 2020, COVID-19 cases in the United States rose to more than 216,000, with over 5,000 deaths (Winsor et al., 2020). As of June 1, 2020, the United States reported more than 1.8 million cases of COVID-19 and approximately 105,000 deaths (Watts, 2020). Americans were submerged in COVID-19-related news (CDC, 2020) with keywords being used repeatedly in the media: increases, decreases, closures, warnings, travel advisories, safety measures, recommendations, mandates,

suggested gathering sizes, gloves, missed milestones, and so much more. Universities and colleges, following public health guidance with the rising COVID-19 cases, struggled to implement and communicate plans for fall 2020 (Gross, 2020).

As a result of COVID-19, many first-year college students (FYCSs) chose nontraditional, postsecondary plans, including taking a gap year. Jones (2004) defined a gap year as “any period of time between 3 and 24 months which an individual takes ‘out’ of formal education, training or the workplace” (p. 8). Similarly, Torpey (2009) defined a gap year as a more flexible time period, which can be more than a year’s time or a state of mind. Furthermore, Martin (2010) defined the gap year as “volunteer tourism” (p. 566). According to O’Shea (2013), “gappers” create a year of nonstop exploration in the form of work, volunteer, and noncredited studies. The definitions of Martin (2010), Torpey (2009), and O’Shea (2013) help to determine why one might engage in a gap year with the idea of utilizing the time off to explore outside of traditional educational instruction.

Problem Statement

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, universities across the nation saw a record number of students deferring for a gap year. Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), which typically has 1% of the admitted class defer their admission, saw their deferring number jump to 8% (Krantz & Fernandez, 2020). The increasing number of gappers was the result of colleges and universities not being forthcoming regarding their upcoming fall itinerary, leaving many questions unanswered (McLoon & Berke, 2020). Information was slow in coming and not clear, resulting in the reliability of the less renowned rumor mill (Santoro, 2020). Higher education was limited with their

options to roll out the semester, and students, along with their families, were taking notice (Gross, 2020).

As such, FYCSs were the largest group not enrolled in college for fall 2020 (Shapiro, 2020). Students questioned if the fall semester would be 100% online, but the schools never quite confirmed until it was too late (Quintana, 2020). From March 2020 to May 2020, the Northeast region of the United States was impacted with high numbers of COVID-19 cases and, as a result, schools were closed (ABC News, 2020). As a result of the many changes caused by COVID-19, for the first time ever, colleges and universities nationwide extended the national decision day to June 1, 2020 (Redden, 2020). Still, committing to schools was challenging to FYCSs in June 2020, because they did not know what was expected for the fall 2020 semester given the lack of clarity from their choice schools (Fields, 2020). There was an overall 21.7% decline in college enrollment for the fall 2020 semester (Nadworny, 2020) because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and this was concerning for colleges and universities across the United States.

Upon massive announcements that universities and colleges across the nation would take their fall 2020 classes online, many college admission offices were forced to scramble to hold onto the dwindling number of newly admitted students. During the initial communication and planning for fall 2020, families and students were advised that learning would occur in-person with newly adopted public health guidance, but plans reversed quickly in mid-summer to remote learning due to rising COVID-19 cases (O'Shaughnessy, 2020). Colleges and universities that made the decision to house students on campus had to enact more restrictive policies based on public health guidance around COVID-19 (CDC, 2020). Another reason for the decline in first-year students,

according to St. Amour (2020) was that the cost of tuition for online education was not reduced or discounted to the students/families. The pandemic and poor communication from college administrations caused college students from all socioeconomic backgrounds to consider a gap year.

In an ideal society, all youth have equal opportunities and exposure to career advancement (Devlin, 2006). Not all youth are equally aware of their options. According to DeBacker and Routon (2017), exposure to gap-year options is minimized when a child is from a lower socioeconomic household. This is important as it supports the notion that only privileged youths take a gap year. Most youth are encouraged to begin college immediately upon high school graduation (Castleman et al., 2016). Researchers believe gap-year participation is transformative to young adults. Jones (2014) stated that both taking a gap year and continuing through university studies helps increase independence; however, gap-year individuals acquire independence more rapidly. Furthermore, Lumsden and Stanwick (2012) noted that there appears to be a limited amount of research in studying the reasoning why American students choose to take a gap year.

Theoretical Rationale

The theoretical rationale for this study is based on decision-making theory. The theoretical construct may help explain why some students decided to take a gap year during the pandemic. Decision-making theory explores how one's decisions are based on uncertainty and anxiety, great or small. There are three stages in the decision-making process: intelligence (identify the problem), design (weighing all options), and choice (solution). With the new and emerging realities relating to college and universities' COVID-19 plans for fall 2020, high school graduates faced anxiety and the challenges of

making life-altering decisions about their future plans. Their anxiety was increased because of misinformation or limited information regarding their previously finalized plans.

Decision-Making Theory

In 1947, Herbert Simon first introduced the decision-making theory for executives in corporations who were using an economic model. Upon further engagement, he realized that decision input should be open to all levels of a corporation. He began to include all levels of organizations in the decision-making process, and then he finally included all individuals to provide input. Simon (1947/1997) felt that all input was necessary and paramount to arriving at proper decision-making conclusions. Simon originally concentrated on individual decision-making within organizational decision-making, but he quickly realized that, collectively, all individual input is valid. He later introduced the term “satisfice” or “satisficing” (Simon, 1947, p. 212), which is defined as a behavior of a decision maker under pressure to provide alternatives that can be or cannot be obtained but which are not the most sought-after outcomes (Brown, 2004) referred by many as his seminal piece on decision-making (Pomerol & Adam, 2004). Although noted as the pioneer for this specific theory, the interdisciplinary fields of psychology, economics, and political science allowed Simon (1947/1997) to provide insight for many other theories, including organizational, artificial intelligence, and information processing. Simon believed that information is not fully acquired to make decisions; therefore, individuals rely on the information they do have to make the most adequate decision—hoping it will result in the best outcome. This theory derived from Simon’s (1947) economic teachings and teachings on organizational behavior.

Carucci (2020) posited that decision-making in Simon's (1947/1997) terms looks within the individual decision makers rather than at the task at hand, negatively affecting the need to gather information in the first place. Carucci further stated that governance systems need to be in the spotlight so that a results-based approach is paramount. Carucci (2020) did not fully disagree with Simon (1947), as he complimented the inclusion of all levels in the decision-making process of an organization. However, Carucci added that the decision-makers' roles do not need to be all inclusive, they are just needed for limited, specific input. Carucci (2020) agreed with Lunenburg (2010) to the extent that he found that group decision-making tends to be driven by the social pressure to conform to undesirable compromises and lack of individuality on key decisions and goals. Time was also deemed to be a potential waste, as proper and efficient decision-making members should be orchestrated for the best outcome (Lunenburg, 2010).

Linear Model of Communication

According to Shannon and Weaver (1949), models of communication theory is the process of sending and receiving information. The Shannon and Weaver study focused on one-way communication from the author of the message to the audience with no reply or discussion, also known as the linear model of communication. The method relies on intended messages being transferred; however, poor communication may result with the receiver not obtaining the necessary message. In 1949, forms of communication were limited, such as using the U.S. Post Office-mailed letters, which differed from the mass communication of emails, texts, and social media in 2020. These models of communication helped to identify the miscommunication being fed to incoming college freshmen by college administrators and national media in the midst of the COVID-19

pandemic. Mix this confusion with the expectation of starting a new chapter in a young adult's life and the level of uncertainty is high. Bateson (1979) believed communication should be a collaboration; however, FYCSs experience the opposite with a linear model of communication—all while still structured to share with the masses (Valkenburg et al., 1999).

Both decision-making and the linear model of communication helped FYCSs determine, via college and university communications, what worked best for their fall 2020 plans in terms of exploratory options with a gap year. With access to a gap year, this researcher was interested in studying why participants in the fall 2020 semester took a COVID-19 gap year. Taking a gap year is still relatively new to the United States student, making it an already challenging decision. Skillings (2021) showed when children are in nontraditional situations and outside of their norm, the results in lasting independence prove to make more proper life choices at any age, including career paths. According to Parsons (1909), individuals are satisfied when their chosen decision meets their overall interests. According to O'Shea (2013), gappers created personal sets of time of nonstop exploration in the form of work, volunteerism, and noncredited studies.

Statement of Purpose

This qualitative study explored the perceptions of FYCSs who resided in the Northeast Region of the United States who applied, were accepted, and were committed to a 4-year college or university, but they never followed through with enrollment for the fall 2020 semester. This study gained insight into the college enrollment process during the height of the COVID-19 global pandemic. A qualitative study will help to give a

better understanding of the decision-making factors of students taking an official gap year during COVID-19.

Research Question

With COVID-19 having an impact on new student enrollment in college and universities for fall 2020, many students chose to take an official COVID-19 gap year. The COVID-19 gap year is specific to the 2020 health pandemic and the impact it had on college campuses and communities. Taking a gap year allowed students to stay active in their interests while being creative in their choices of concentrated study under structured guidance by using gap-year programs. As the result of COVID-19, students were given the freedom to partake in some time off from matriculated study.

The research question was designed to investigate the decision-making strategy and future planning of today's youth, at the time of this study, while in the midst of a global pandemic. The main research question for this study:

What motivating factors contributed to recent high school graduates' decisions to take a gap year during the COVID-19 global pandemic?

The subquestions that helped to answer the main research question:

1. Who, if anyone, influenced recent high school graduates in the midst of the COVID-19 global pandemic to not enroll in college/university for fall 2020?
2. What plans do first-year college students, who deferred in fall 2020 due to COVID-19, have to enroll in college/university in the future?

Potential Significance of the Study

The historical lack of data on decision-making factors for gap-year participants is necessary at a time when the Gap Year Association (2020) recorded its highest website

traffic, and colleges and universities across the United States are reporting a large decline in their fall 2020 enrollment totals (Douglas-Gabriel, 2020; Gap Year Association, 2020). This researcher investigated the reasons why a newly admitted first-year college or university student would choose to participate in a gap-year program during a global pandemic.

The significance of this study is that it relies on a decision-making approach by focusing on factors regarding choice evaluation specifically amidst a pandemic (Davidoff & Reiner, 2008). The findings that will result from this study may assist institutions, parents, high school graduates, and college peers in successfully navigating their postsecondary plans that were affected by COVID-19. Currently, there is limited data on the COVID-19 gap year, and this study will help reframe the research from a traditional gap year to focus on a widely participated COVID-19 gap year and its attributes to the young adult community.

Gap year researchers agree that taking a gap year matters (Coetzee & Bester., 2009; Hoe, 2014b). Traditionally, a gap year was beneficial to young adults who chose to take a break from postsecondary education by interning, obtaining life experiences, and gaining independence. However, taking a COVID-19 gap year has been defined as an option to help “wait out” the pandemic and not be enrolled in accredited courses of study associated with taking a gap year, normally, due to COVID-19. This study will add data to the topic. Oztunc (2011) stated that independence is the power of autonomy from the influence of others. The phenomenon of American students taking a gap year was the basis for two studies by Hsieh et al. (2007) and Tenser (2015). This researcher

investigated the gap-year enrollment and participation amid the COVID-19 era through action research.

Definitions of Terms

College enrollment – any first-year student admitted to a 4-year institution (private or public), who has deposited or committed to the 4-year institution, but who did not attend for fall 2020 due to COVID-19.

COVID-19 – widely used acronym created from the term “2019 novel coronavirus” to describe the global pandemic of 2020 (CDC, 2020)

COVID-19 gap year – students who were accepted in their chosen college/university but deferred admission to participating in a gap year because of the closures of traditional college campuses and activities because of the COVID-19 pandemic (Gap Year Association, 2020).

FYCS (first-year college student) – individuals who graduated from high school in the late spring and summer of 2020 and who were anticipating the beginning of their first year of academic enrollment and who were accepted into their respective college or university of choice (Inside Higher Ed., 2020).

FOMO (fear of missing out) dissonance – an individual’s fear of missing out based on experiences encountered in the COVID-19 pandemic era. This differs from pre-pandemic FOMO because the pandemic-experiencing individuals were the first to navigate as FYCSs, trying to make sense of their expectations in a global pandemic.

Four-year college or university – a public or private educational institution that offers bachelor's degrees.

Gapper – an individual who partakes in a gap year that includes the creation of a year of nonstop exploration in the form of work, volunteerism, and noncredit studies (O’Shea, 2013). Also known as a gap year participant.

Gap year – any period of time between 3 and 24 months in which an individual takes “out” of a formal education, training, or workplace (Jones, 2004), or a flexible time period in which participants can take off for more than a year’s time (Torpey, 2009).

Gap year participant – an individual who partakes in a gap year that includes the creation of a year of nonstop exploration in the form of work, volunteerism, and noncredited studies (O’Shea, 2013). Also known as a gapper.

Gap year program – a paid organization that maps out the gap year experience for their participants (Gap Year Association, 2020).

Gap Year Association – a nonprofit organization that focuses on the gap year movement, providing information, gap year opportunities, research, and help to link prospective participants to gap year programs (Gap Year Association, 2020).

Pandemic – an outbreak of a disease that affects the majority of a country or countries, resulting in a large number of confirmed cases of deaths (WHO, 2020).

Semester – a time period in an academic calendar, mostly referring to the mainstream months of the fall and spring months, for at least 15 weeks (New York State Higher Education Services Corporation [HESC], 2020).

Socioeconomic status – defined broadly as one’s access to financial, social, cultural, and human capital resources as defined by the Free Application for Federal Assistance ([FAFSA], n.d-a).

Young adult – traditional college-aged students who recently graduated from high school, typically 18 to 22 years old (Simpson, 2018).

Chapter Summary

This chapter demonstrated the importance of the impact COVID-19 has had on college student enrollment and on the students decision-making process. In addition, this chapter focused on the overall purpose of the researcher's interest in the topic and to improve the understanding of individuals who decide to take a gap year during COVID-19. There are both intentional and unintentional factors that result in taking a gap year. COVID-19 will change the definition of a gap year with its options and opportunities relating to first-year college individuals in 2020.

This research paper has five chapters. The first chapter reviewed the research problem, the purpose of the study, the research question, and the potential significance of a study examining the experiences and perceptions of FYCSs for the fall 2020 semester. The chapter concluded with definitions of terms and the chapter summary pertinent to this study. A review of the literature regarding taking a gap year and decision-making is presented in Chapter 2. The research design, methodology, and analysis is discussed in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 presents a detailed analysis of the results and findings, and Chapter 5 discusses the findings, implications, and recommendations for future research and practice.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction and Background

The literature review chapter summarizes the history of the American gap year, the benefits of taking a gap year, how elusive it may be for those of lower socioeconomic status, and the newly referred “COVID gap year.” The idea of a pause in educational studies right after high school is important because the age group relates to the development of individuals transferring from being a child to becoming an adult (Minuchin, 1985), and the students mature rapidly as they transition to college from high school (Sutton et al., 2013). Ozuntc (2011) stated that independence is the power of autonomy from the influence of others. The traditional gap year is now being challenged by the COVID-19 gap year in which students participated for a variety of reasons to include the limitations within a global pandemic (Douglas-Gabriel, 2020).

Purpose

This qualitative study, using randomly selected FYCSs from the Northeast Region of the United States who had applied, were accepted, and were committed to a 4-year college or university, but they never followed through with their enrollment for the fall 2020 semester. This study provides insight on the college enrollment process during the height of the global pandemic known as COVID-19. From March to August 2020, FYCSs’ timelines were disrupted and there was no guidance or lived experiences to support what the next steps would be for FYCSs in the fall of 2020. In less than 6 months, a decision on postsecondary plans needed to be made after the world was halted

from the effects of COVID-19. This qualitative study was conducted to help identify the FYCSs' reasoning behind the decision-making factors of taking a COVID-19 gap year.

Background on a Gap Year

The phenomenon of American students taking a gap year was the basis for two studies by Hsieh et al. (2007) and Tenser (2015). These researchers conducted studies and discovered five recurring themes in the literature: (a) student backgrounds, (b) types of student delays, (c) motivation for taking a gap year, (d) in-service learning while partaking in a gap year, and (e) why does a student choose to take a gap year? The researcher of this study was confident the themes would also be evident in this study, however, with a concentration on the decision-making themes that resulted in first-year students taking a COVID-19 gap year.

Information on a gap year can provide opportunities that may not otherwise be explored, and the youth can appropriately weigh their options (Hoe, 2014a). Jones (2014) stated that both taking a gap year and continuing through university studies helps increase independence; however, with gap-year individuals, they acquire independence more rapidly than those who do not take a gap year. Furthermore, Lumsden and Stanwick (2012) noted that there appears to be a gap in studying the reasoning why American students choose to take a gap year. This study will help to fill the gap on what led American students to take a COVID gap year.

According to Dover and Lawrence (2010), a gap year refers to the year between high school and the first year of college in which an individual decides to “engage in a world that is exciting and personally transformative” (p. 306) through volunteering,

working, or taking noncredited studies. Dover and Lawrence found the respite of a gap year benefits those who take a break from their daily routine for other life experiences.

For the purposes of this review, the focus will be on young adults who plan or have taken a gap year. The idea of a pause in educational studies right after high school is important because the age group relates to the development of individuals transferring from childhood (Minuchin, 1985). Also, Erikson (1963) added that adolescents' self-discovery during these years provides a phenomenal opportunity for them to discover where their interests may lead. According to Coetzee and Bester (2009), the results of taking a gap year were subjective and measured personal growth.

Hoe (2014a) conducted a mixed-methods study on American and Canadian students who participated in a gap year. Surveys were distributed to participants electronically via popular apps for person-to-person referrals with an ongoing time of 11 months. A total of 863 students were qualified to participate in the study; however, the final number was 558 students who participated in a gap year. The findings indicate that the higher the parental income, the more likely the child would participate in a gap year. Hoe (2014a) found that parents' educational levels mattered, in that 24% of all gappers listed their parents as an influence to taking a year off. Of the 558 participants, 77% took a gap year between high school and college, and of the 77% gappers, 92% yearned to gain new life experiences and personal growth. The findings also indicate there was no delay in graduating, once a gapper was in college, with the average graduation time of 4 years. When career ready, 86% of gappers found overall satisfaction at work. Hoe (2014a) found similar findings to Jones (2004) in which young males were underrepresented in gap-year participation. According to Hoe (2014a), there was more

widespread participation if the schools were more receptive to the idea of a gap year and provided information to students. One limitation of the Hoe (2014a) study included that the researcher's sponsor was the American Gap Association, which could have been a bias. Another limitation was that the researcher had participants from the United States and Canada, with no specific focus on a country but on North America as a whole.

Torpey (2009) concentrated on the decision process of the student and emphasized high school seniors choosing to participate in a gap year through a variety of options. The researcher highlighted some drawbacks that were overlooked, such as parental involvement.

Several studies referred to the gap year as "volunteer tourism." However, the term is often defined inconsistently (Martin, 2010; O'Shea, 2013; Torpey, 2009). According to Torpey (2009), a gap year is defined as an option to find one's self through service, while Martin (2010) defined a gap year as unstructured activities while having time off. There is a strong probability that a random student would fall into one of those definitions. Further research is needed to discover the reasoning behind the choice of taking a gap year.

Young adults are accepted into gap year programs to volunteer their time in other countries for the experience (Cipolle, 2004). Cipolle (2004) encouraged community service and involvement. However, the researcher stated that community service and involvement can sometimes do more harm than good. Rather than help those in need, the act may be counterproductive with those assisting, feeling powerful over the misfortunes of others. Cipolle (2004) argued that "feeling good" (p. 20) when doing good in helping others, may be the sole motivation for some: "Nothing is more insulting in a multicultural

placement than poorly prepared, culturally uninformed service learners, who descend on a community armed only with stereotypes” (Cipolle, 2004, p. 15).

Wu et al. (2015) studied the gap year phenomenon in China and subscribed to 103 blogs to study the trends. The 18 participants in a gap year were interviewed. This mixed-methods study utilized ethnographic studies as a main tool. It was determined that the increase of blogs contributed to the increased participation of China’s gap year. The researchers found that the Chinese participants were mainly taking breaks during their careers. While Westerners typically take a gap year between their studies (in their late teens and early 20s), Chinese participants’ ages tended to be in their late 20s and early 30s. One factor that discouraged academic gap years was the competitive state to enroll in the university on time and complete rapidly. The concept of taking a gap year in China was not as long as the Westerners; the average length of time for Chinese citizens to partake in a gap year was 142 days, with 14 days being the minimum taken, which contradicts Jones’ (2004) gap year definition of 3 to 24 months. Chinese gappers also organized their breaks alone, without an organization’s help or fees. Chinese individuals tended to use their designated gap year to travel. Unlike other studies, volunteerism was not a focus when choosing to partake in a gap year. One limitation was the researchers had minimum access to the gap year participants during their university studies.

Griffin (2013) conducted a qualitative study with an interview/narrative method with individuals who participated in a gap year and recorded their experiences. The participants were young adults who ranged in ages from 18 to 25 years, and they were all from Great Britain. The participants’ average trip duration for volunteering overseas was 5.5 months. To assist with a uniformed approach, each person’s interview started off with

the same question: "Tell me more about your gap year experience." The researcher found that volunteers reflected on initially wanting to make a difference in the lives of the less fortunate; however, most of the participants did not feel helpful or that they added value to the host community. The stories that followed were similar in that all volunteers believed they were providing growth to those they served, but they felt unappreciated. One recurring theme found in the narratives was the motivation to participate in tourist activities but the importance of being known by others as a volunteer, not a tourist. This was especially important in the matter of self-identity; the participants believed their role was more than a tourist. The researcher found that the participant feedback was crucial to finding what worked in this type of program. One limitation was that the participants' host communities were not also interviewed and given a chance to voice their perception of the volunteers.

Parker et al. (2015) conducted a quantitative study on standing data that was based on two studies to measure the benefits of undertaking a gap year versus directly entering university. The first study followed 384 students, 279 direct entrants, 105 gappers. Scales were given to participants to self-measure goals, success, commitment, and effort. The researchers found gappers were less committed to their goals; however, they showed no difference in university enrollment success regarding the students entering the university right after high school or waiting 1 year. The second study sampled 2,228 students in which 1,723 went right into postsecondary studies, and 505 were gappers. The data were collected in waves from students in Australia and Finland from year 10 to post-college graduation (4 and 5 years after high school). Goal attainment was considered a priority in year 12 for most. The researchers were interested in finding

any differences between the two groups, and initially no significant data stood out. However, the college dropout was measured to be 5% higher in the gappers than the direct entrants. Parker et al. (2015) focused on finding evidence that one path was more beneficial. One limitation was the differences in admittance in universities across both countries. In Finland, college acceptance is known to be difficult for the average student in comparison to Australia. Comparing the students in these two countries was a disadvantage for the researchers as the results may have been skewed.

King (2011) focused on a group of 23 southern England individuals who participated in a gap year prior to college-level studies all within the past 5 years. This qualitative study examined gap-year participants' experiences on the matter of belonging versus exclusion. Data was collected via interviews. King (2011) referred to the gap year as "identity work during young people's transition to adulthood" (p. 345). This study paid close attention to the different perceptions and definitions of a gap year, even suggesting it be replaced with wording such as "taking a break." The change of word appeared to attract a new realm of participants—for instance, re-testers and military recruits. The King (2011) study focused on students who took a gap year before university enrollment and how they did so in a planned and responsible manner. Students who took 1 year off. They ensured it was done with purpose as they all had similar goals—to enroll in the university the following fall. The responsibilities experienced during their time off were reported to be the main culprit of their enhanced independence and maturity from the study participants. A limitation of this study was the closed definition, which limited the number of participants the researcher could include in this study.

Lumsden and Stanwick (2012) completed a quantitative study with Australian teenagers. The researchers delved into different definitions of a gap year. The gap year was specifically defined as “an individual who commenced university one to two years after completing year 12” (Lumsden & Stanwick, 2012, p. 2). The quantitative study was conducted with Australian students ages 15 to 25 and obtained data from participant narratives from a completed questionnaire. The study found 51% of students spent their gap year working full time, while only 6% traveled. The study supports that those less academically inclined are more likely to partake in a gap year. The Lumsden and Stanwick findings showed that only 9.7% intended to take a gap year; however, the rate increased to 24% with those who truly did participate in a gap year. The data show gap years are not always planned. One limitation of the Lumsden and Stanwick (2012) study was that the Australian government provides a university subsidy to individuals who work 2+ years after high school. This phenomenon affects the study and the alternative reasoning behind taking a gap year.

O’Shea (2011) conducted a qualitative, longitudinal case study involving the oldest gap year organization in the United Kingdom (UK). The organization at the center of the study was the primary source of placement for pre-university students participating in 12 months of volunteering. The researcher interviewed 29 gap-year returners, who enrolled in undergraduate studies at the time of O’Shea’s (2011) study. Via narrative techniques, O’Shea (2011) found that almost all returners reported life-changing self-awareness through their experiences. The returners learned through developing skills, adapting, and problem-solving independently. The new skills they learned were reported to be useful through the returners’ university studies and 1 to 2 years after the completion

of the gap year. Trust in others, especially strangers, came second nature. Overall, returned gappers reported increased intellect and independence because of their gap year. The researcher found that gap year participation helped to build character and helped the returners to apply what was learned to successful university studies. One limitation is that the study limited its focus on the UK gapper population (O'Shea, 2011).

As stated by Walsh (2016), taking a gap year is not as accessible to less-advantaged youth. Also, he noted that Florida University is one of the few institutions that offers a financial aid package to support those choosing to partake in a gap year (Walsh, 2016). Other options include joining gap year organizations, which are mainly self-funded, and this option limits those who are unable to pay the out-of-pocket costs for college. Although students are deemed eligible for financial aid funds, the U.S. government does not recognize gap year expenses in award letters (FAFSA, n.d-b).

Participants Who Are Likely to Take a Gap Year

Jones (2004) was one of the few researchers that helped define and constitute an exact definition of a gap year: “any period between 3 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. 24). He focused on the gap year with respect to UK students, 16 to 25 years old. Jones (2004) conducted a qualitative study in which nine gappers were interviewed along with two administrators. The researcher was interested in breaking down the possible gap-year options: volunteering, working, learning, traveling, and leisure. The Jones study examined an underrepresented groups, young males, and sought ways to include students who were more likely to not be exposed to a gap-year concept. The findings show that motivation is an indicator of

students who participated in volunteering and “giving back.” Secondly, gappers were also motivated by the travel aspect and were likely to sign up where they can work during the day but explore openly during off hours, which can also be classified as volunteer tourism. Jones (2004) found that those who participated gained greater independence, and problem solving, leadership, and interpersonal skills. One limitation of this study was that the gap year participant pool consisted of nine participants, which was relatively small for the popularity of a gap year within the UK population.

In the qualitative study conducted by Paterson-Brown et al. (2015), the researchers reviewed second-year medical students in the UK and recorded their perceptions, via a questionnaire, of taking a gap year. The questionnaire was sent electronically to gain as many participants as possible. Due to the electronic nature of distribution, the exact number of students who received the questionnaire was unknown; however, 184 second-year medical students responded, in which 79 were deemed school leavers and 105 were not considered school leavers. Of the students who participated in a gap year, 63.3% were planned, while 29.1% occurred due to unsuccessful medical school applications. Specifically, the way time was spent was reported to be at 82.3% studying abroad and 59% also partaking in volunteer work. Responses also captured how the medical students viewed a gap year. School leavers benefited through maturity and independence while nonparticipants felt it was unnecessary to delay this line of study (Paterson-Brown et al. (2015). A question regarding the difficulty in reentering their studies upon gap year conclusion was found to be no different than a student going straight through from the university to specifically medical school. One factor that stood out was the subject of gap year expenses. School leavers reported the real expense was

saving up for medical school, while 11.8% who took no deferment, believed the gap year would be too expensive for their budget. This finding is significant because, in previous studies, the main reason for lack of gap-year participation was often listed as high financial costs. Findings from this study indicate that almost all school leavers reported positive, beneficial experiences, and recommend its participation to others. A few limitations to note with the Paterson-Brown et al. (2015) study was that the gap year was considered a year off between undergraduate and medical school, the measure of maturity differs from gapper participation after high school, the study only focused on 2nd year medical students and the settings in the UK, where exposure of the gap year is widely known. Results may differ if the same study is conducted with the U.S. population.

In a qualitative study conducted by Curtis (2014), he found that gapper participation jumped from 10% to 25% in Australia. In this study, a gapper was considered anyone who left school for 1-2 years, any school leavers for more than 2 years were not included in the survey. Using 2,514 gappers under the age of 25 across four cohorts, Curtis considered achievement scores compared to non-gappers as well as common factors that motivated participating in a gap year. The researcher found that gappers were more likely to be female, English speaking, originally from non-metropolitan areas, and they obtained low entrance scores. The main activity for a gapper's time was found to be working (40%). Once gappers began at the university, their dropout rates did not appear to be higher than non-gappers. Curtis (2014) found that non-gappers were more likely to be higher achievers and appreciate school more than gappers. The results found that students who participated in a gap year were more likely to be delayed in the workforce and hold non-prestigious career positions. One limitation

was that although the study was published in 2014, the data was from cohorts as far back as 1995 (Curtis, 2014).

Hsieh et al. (2007) conducted a quantitative study using 112 undergraduate participants in good (52) standing and probationary (60) standing. The study focused on the students' perception of self-efficacy and goal attainment measured through a survey. The study also covered career development factors and the underlying reasons for personal success, such as a gap-year participation or a college student. The research saw a direct correlation between higher self-efficacy, more goal orientation, and high grade point averages (GPAs). When the students on academic probation answered the questionnaire, it was found, in addition to lower self-efficacy, they also lacked proper learning goals, meaning the lower their personal expectations, the less they would succeed. The study was significant due to the personal insight and perception for what each individual student thought about themselves, thus an indicator on one's drive to succeed. Another significant finding was the higher risk of dropping out with students who adopt performance-avoidance goals. These students avoid seeking help and negatively tie assistance with failure or appearing to be a failure or disappointment. One limitation includes the participant pool to be composed of students across all year levels at one university in the southwest region of the United States. The study may have been more insightful if each year was researched independently.

Many studies included gap-year participants (Jones, 2004; Coetzee & Bester, 2009; Hoe, 2014a; King, 2011; Lumsden & Stanwick, 2012; Paterson-Brown et al., 2015; Tenser, 2015) and they were focused on the reasoning behind taking a gap year. They found that participants wanted to aid those in need and gain personal growth (Cipolle,

2004). In all studies, gappers reported initial expectations of taking a gap year and then immediately enrolling in university. Hoe (2014a) found no delay in those wishing to continue their education after taking a gap year. The type of gap year obtained does not change the outcomes of the study; for example, a break between high school and university resulted similarly for those breaking between undergrad and medical schools. Dover and Lawrence (2010) reported that students who participated in a pause in education benefited greatly and more than those who went right into the next level of study. Ultimately, the participants reported great pride in taking a gap year.

Socioeconomic Background for Potential Gap-Year Participants

DeBacker and Routon (2017) were interested in exploring the educational outcomes of students based on advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds. The researchers measured the expectations of the students through their parents, using socioeconomic status. This was interesting because factors known in the study as human capital determined the financial investment parents made into their children. They found that the likelihood of graduating from high school by age 20 decreased when the head of the household had minimal education, which typically ties with the limitations to human capital. The advantaged individuals were more likely to influence their children with financial support as well as high expectations. DeBacker and Routon (2017) found that parents in less advantaged households, who expected more educationally from their children, assisted with the student's increased determination to complete high school and go on to college. Data were derived from a survey by the Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics, which is completed annually. The survey was quantitative in nature and included 8,894 students and parents from 1997-2011, measuring their expectations.

They found students, in general, were optimistic about their future. However, the DeBacker and Routon (2017) the study found that parents with lower education were more likely to be overly optimistic about their child's future when compared to more educated parents. One limitation included the one-time survey and no follow through with high school or college graduates.

Researchers Castleman et al. (2016) coined the phrase "summer melt" (p. 113) in which there is a transition from primary and secondary education, and the phenomenon of teens abruptly deciding college is no longer desired. To obtain a better understanding, the researchers focused on 1,602 New Mexico public school students who were admitted to the University of New Mexico, given direct counselor access from both their primary and secondary schools, and conducted a quantitative study as experimental research. The study measured the support the underrepresented individuals received from high school to college environments and the institutions' efforts to curb college dropout rates. The study focused on the underrepresentation of Hispanic males. The findings showed that grades were increased with better access to counselors (Castleman et al., 2016). One limitation was how the data logs were recorded in meetings. Because the students and counselors were left anonymous, the study was unable to match the counselors' support given to a student or group.

Heath (2007) conducted a systematic review on taking a gap year. The researcher found that the studies reviewed on the topic differed in the definition of a gap year. For example, Heath defined the gap year as 15 months between secondary and university yet acknowledged Jones's definition of "any period between three and 24 months" (Heath, 2007, p. 8). Heath (2007) found that the gap year provided self-reflection and rich

experiences all through structured gap years. The researcher also found that not all individuals are equally exposed to the gap year and it is rather limited to wealth and privilege. It was also found that the UK values work experience from a gap year to be applied to university studies as well as future careers. The researcher noted that the available studies were limited to pre-university gap years and acknowledged the growing population of post-university gap years and the lack of research (Heath, 2007). One limitation was the fact the researcher limited her concentration on studies solely done in the UK.

Leonavičius and Ozolinčiūtė (2015) conducted a qualitative study using triangulation research methods. The researchers interviewed 10 Lithuania students using the snowball method, who were between the ages of 18 and 22 who had taken time off from school within a 3- to 24-month period. The difference with that population's gap year, or known in Lithuania as "study break," is that it was typically unheard of, and at the time of Leonavičius and Ozolinčiūtė's study, it was beginning to gain attention. Like the United States, guardians of the young adults worried that a gap year would deter a continuance in their education. However, some parents of the gappers, themselves, completed gap years, although not with a clear plan. Graduation exams also had a distinct correlation as to who was more likely to participate in a gap year; the higher the grade on a graduation exam, the more likely one would participate in a gap year. One limitation of this study was the low number of participants. Leonavičius and Ozolinčiūtė (2015) also reverted to referral-based selection, also known as snowball selection, which translates to most, if not all for the participants, knew one another and, in turn, the researchers received similar feedback.

As shown by Castleman et al. (2016) and DeBacker and Routon (2017), family backgrounds matter in determining the likely path an offspring chooses to take. The socioeconomic status of one's parents(s) can help map out the opportunities and support an individual receives after high school. The educational backgrounds of parents are a major factor in the support of taking a gap year. The more educated parents are, the more likely they would support a child taking a gap year. These studies also show that support outside of the home can help contribute to a student's success (intervention programs, financial assistance). According to by Castleman et al. (2016) and DeBacker and Routon (2017), more attention should be paid to the underrepresented populations that require extra support on nontraditional academic paths.

Motivation For Taking a Gap Year

Martin (2010) conducted a two-part quantitative study that looked at the motivation and performance factors when determining to take a gap year. The first part of the study measured the post-school uncertainty, while the second part of the study measured the actual gap-year participation. Students were given numeric values to answer yes or no questions regarding the intention of taking a gap year. Martin utilized confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation modeling (SEM) to complete their studies. The study looked at 2,502 Australian students' intentions and the 338 students who participated in the gap year. The significance of this study is the combination of interest focused on the intentions of students and the additional inquiry into those who participated in the gap study. The study supported that the higher the post-school uncertainty, the higher the intention of taking a gap year, and the lower the motivation and performance predicted post school uncertainty. Some limitations found

were the use of all college-year students and, again, a non-U.S. student population (Martin, 2010).

According to Coetzee and Bester (2009), the results of taking a gap year were subjective and measured by personal growth. The researchers conducted a qualitative study in South Africa with three participants who took a gap year. The participants were selected via convenience sampling. The study concluded that all three endured negative feelings about school, and the lack of guidance helped motivate their gap-year participation. Exposure to different careers during the gappers time off led to gainful employment. According to Coetzee and Bester, gap-year participants were more likely to experience the opposite of their initial expectations. The study found that each participant struggled during their time off with issues such as finances, long-distance relationships, and loneliness. However, each participant expressed that they never regretted taking the gap year. One result that came from the study was personal growth. One limitation of this study was the small pool of participants (Coetzee & Bester, 2009).

Louis (2016) stated, “you have to make sure your sample is appropriately selected if you expect representativeness and therefore some level of population generalizability. This was done using a convenience sample. You cannot use a small number of participants to speak for the greater population” (G. Louis, personal communication, October 7, 2016).

Tenser (2015) conducted a qualitative study that examined the effect upon 12 gappers’ return during their first year in college. The researcher was interested in knowing the transitions participants had from high school, to gapper, and to college students. This study was unique in that the experiences were described in detail in

addition to the reasoning behind why a gap year was taken and the familial support from loved ones. One significantly unique aspect of this study was the lack of confidentiality of the participants and incentives. Some themes that recurred in this study were gappers' participation in planning, encounters, relationships, independence/confidence, and, finally, how they would adjust to college. Tenser (2015) found that the gappers experienced personal growth through various encounters. Each gapper reported feeling ready for college based on the unique situations they encountered during their gap year. With every participant, each had the support of their family as well as the expectation that after their gap year was completed, they would immediately enroll in college, and in most cases, also attend graduate school. The majority of the gappers in the Tenser study had at least one parent who was college educated. Similar results were found in the study conducted by Debacker and Routon (2017) in which a child was more likely to gain support from an advantaged parent than those who were considered disadvantaged. Some limitations of this study were the low number of participants, and the study was limited to the Northwestern United States.

Several researchers (Hsieh et al., 2007; Martin, 2010; Parker et al., 2015) discussed the motivational factors behind college-aged students making decisions. All three studies were quantitative in nature with surveys used for measurements. Data from the studies support a strong correlation between determination and completion among the participants. The researchers found that gappers were typically less motivated but still determined to complete tasks. The findings show that individuals who view themselves in high regard are more motivated to complete their goals effectively, such as participating in a gap year and then obtaining a 4-year degree.

In-Service Learning in a Gap Year

Sin (2009) focused on the concept of volunteering coupled with tourism. The researcher conducted a study with 11 students from the National University of Singapore (NUS) and actively observed the participants in action during a 26-day volunteer and tourism mission in South Africa. Data were collected via interviews, before, during, and at the end of the study. The participants of this study created local hot spots that included cafes with designed maps and excursions within a popular tourist area in South Africa. The study found that volunteer tourists preferred to travel over volunteering. Sin (2009) found that there were more self-praises when referring to the work done as opposed to how the work contributed to others. The researcher pointed out that there was more emphasis on the volunteer than on those in need of the services provided. In addition, the participants gained meaningful experience from the trip; however, their intention was focused away from those who needed help the most, which were the host communities. Although a unique concept, one limitation was that Sin (2009) was a participant in the group of volunteer tourists and therefore possibly held biased views. Another limitation may be the time that is spent on missions, which is too short in comparison to a normal gap-year experience.

In a study conducted by Butin (2010), 31 programs in higher education were reviewed and focused on in-service learning. Butin completed a quantitative, empirical analysis, and although it was not specifically focused on a gap year, he stated that research encompassed many similar aspects with their research on in-service learning. Butin reviewed programs in the United States that utilized the term “in-service learning” in either studies of majors, minors, or certificate programs. The researcher found 31

programs in higher education. The programs were researched via university homepages on the worldwide web. Butin (2010) found that although growing in popularity, the programs were not fully structured. At Northwestern University, students were required to earn 100 community service hours and attend seminars, but the actual coursework was subjective and not formal. However, DePaul University omits community action from its language and defines their program, rather, as “community engagement.” Butin also found discrepancies in what was listed on the schools’ websites under programs in comparison to actual coursework/syllabi, also displayed on their websites. The researchers found the gap year experiences can lead to substantial work initiatives in communities in and outside the United States; however, the programs that were part of the Butin (2010) study lacked true organization and academic purpose. Some researchers may agree this type of phenomenon is similar to partaking in a gap year. One limitation was the sole use of data and the lack of actual participants.

Bailey and Russell (2012) focused on “volunteer tourism.” The researchers conducted a quantitative study that involved 288 students from a university located in the United States. Students volunteered during their spring break across various cities. Participants voluntarily completed questionnaires (82%) before and then weeks after the trip. The data were collected from 192 participants, and data included measurements of social environments, social engagement, civic attitude, openness, wisdom, cognition, affection, and reflection. A second set of data were collected from students who did not participate (in any service initiative), resulting in a 68% return. When compared, the findings showed that those who participated reported to be more active in the community throughout the calendar year, and they had a strong belief system on civic duty. The

study acknowledged the difficulty in finding participants who genuinely knew how to help those in need over having an adventurous experience. The limitation of the Bailey and Russell (2012) study was that many of the volunteer tourism participants were from a school group named, Pay It Forward Tour (PIFT) in which the premise is to “pay it forward,” resulting in questions being answered by sheer involvement.

Cipolle (2004) conducted a systematic review of in-service learning. The researcher found that the purpose of in-service learning encourages community service and involvement. Furthermore the researcher noted that sometimes volunteering through in-service learning can do more harm than good. Cipolle stated that rather than to help those in need, the act may be counterproductive with those assisting, feeling powerful regarding the misfortunes of others. The “feeling good” when doing good while helping others may be the sole motivation for some, where “nothing is more insulting in a multicultural placement than poorly prepared, culturally uninformed service learners, who descend on a community armed only with stereotypes” Cipolle, 2004, p. 14). The researcher found that young adults are accepted into gap year programs to volunteer their time in other countries for the experience with minimal training and unrealistic expectations. Cipolle (2004) noted that gap-year participants may not have a healthy grasp of real-world scenarios. One limitation to this study was that the researcher focused on information based on in-service learners in the present time and not having a follow up description of how the volunteer work shaped the gap-year participants’ long-term understanding of in-service learning.

Conran (2011) completed a qualitative study, using an ethnographic method to collect data in Thailand. The participants consisted of 40 volunteers, 25 coordinators and

10 members from the community host. The researcher utilized coding and triangulation for the interviews with the volunteers. The study found that most volunteers thought it was imperative to have a good rapport with their host community to feel closest to those they served; this was listed as “intimacy.” The coordinators were found to be eager to share their culture as well as learn about Thailand. Community members that were interviewed found that volunteer work was completed by people with “good hearts.” The findings indicate that emotion was the drive in the group that was studied. The researcher noted stereotypes helped in the division of different culture norms. The participants openly expressed their expectations to be unique, non-tourism-like, and heavily involved in the community. This study was unique as it focused on all the roles surrounding volunteers in foreign countries. One limitation was that the Thai language did not easily translate to English.

Tomazos and Butler (2012) conducted a study that utilized an ethnographic approach to study gap-year volunteers, their experiences working in a Mexican village, and their behaviors. The information was collected in a firsthand method via covert observation. The qualitative study included 40 gappers volunteering their time in a children’s home; the majority of the gappers were students between the ages of 18 and 25 years old. Tomazos and Butler followed the patterns of the freely chosen work schedules and found that although volunteers worked diligently with the children, they also partied heavily. During the 3-week post, morning shifts were hardest to fill (due to nightly partying), and they needed to be addressed by the center director. It was reported that the motivational standards were measured based on scheduling; many volunteers avoided shifts to participate in tourism adventures. The question that was repeatedly referenced:

Were the individuals there to work with the children or get a cheap vacation? Tomazos and Butler (2012) found that the lack of staff led to interruptions in the children's home's daily operations. Another concern noted was that the volunteers may have done more harm than good to the already neglected children. The bonds that developed diminished because the children were consistently exposed to different rounds of volunteers. One limitation was the fact that the researchers observed but did not simultaneously ask questions on why they decided to volunteer in the Mexican village.

Bennett (2008) concentrated on the gap year as a business, rather than a charity. The researcher conducted a report exposing gap year organizations as frauds. Bennett concentrated on the gap year firms who tailored to UK students. The study indicated that the students were going into debt for attending the university as well as for their gap year activities. The researcher focused on the charities and firms that offered volunteer opportunities and found that students were paying large sums of money to volunteer their time in comparison to a small donation to local charities. With the popularity of taking a gap year, students have plenty of firms to choose from. Bennett focused on the alternative options when taking a gap year. Admittedly, the researcher acknowledged the dangers of working in an unknown foreign country and how the bigger firms provided more large group assignments and support. The focus of the study was the possible exploitation of young adults wanting to provide their free services yet paying large sums of money for the experience. Charities such as Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO) encouraged students to do absolutely nothing and then participate in a commercialized gap year as they believed the end results would be the same. Bennett (2008) found that voluntourism firms were more often a business, and the fees paid went to the program budgets rather

than to the people the students served. To get the most of their gap year, it was suggested that students complete thorough research on the firm, its mission, and inquire for a complete breakdown of their fees to ensure their money was worth their participation (Bennett, 2008). One limitation was the focus on the fees for the gap year experience and not on the benefits of working with a gap year organization.

Reasons for Taking a College Delay

Dills et al. (2015) conducted a study examining “knowledge decay” in the time off from school (i.e., summer break, gap year). The researchers showed class subjects such as language, science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) classes posed the greatest risk of forgotten lessons among those who participate in an academic break. The researchers conducted a quantitative study, via interviewing, using both K-12 students and FYCSs from 1982 to 2002. One interesting comparison was with year-round school districts versus traditional summer-break school districts. The findings indicated that there was no significant loss of data with any given school calendar type. Cooper et al. (1996) concluded that on break, students lose approximately 1 month’s worth of the last grade completed, per summer break. The researchers found that summer break, compared to mini breaks throughout the year, still posed a risk to students’ retention of information. Shorter delays between semesters helped the students better retain the information. They also suggested that those who take longer pauses in their education (gap years) should relearn and renew to enrich their level of knowledge. One limitation was the concentration of students, as a whole, instead of the students being placed into subcategories based on age, specific subject, and whether the student was a gapper (Cooper et al., 1996).

Holmlund et al. (2008) conducted a mixed-methods study in Sweden in which they focused on who was likely to take a gap year and what were the effects of taking one. The study participants were a minimum of 30 years old and the range of time spent was 12-30 years after the completion of high school. The linear model supported that women were less likely to take a gap year, as well as students with high GPAs. One significant finding that contradicted other studies was that parental education level did not help to determine if a student was more prone to partaking in a gap year. The researchers studied parental earnings and its connection to taking a gap year. The study concluded that a gap year negatively affects a student's lifelong financial gains (overall 40-50%) when taken for 2+ years due to “inactivity.” A limitation to the study was the mean age of 35 years old.

Nui and Tienda (2013) studied post high school delay and found that there was a major disadvantage to taking one. The researchers surveyed 13,803 Texas seniors using a quantitative method. In Spring 2002, seniors were surveyed; a year later a random sample was reinterviewed and once more, reinterviewed 4 years after their high school graduation. Postponement was defined as enrolling into college more than 1 year after graduation. The study found that the length of postponement also mattered. The longer a student is out of school (3+ years), the likelihood of attending a 4-year college or university diminishes. Furthermore, the delay often correlated with students enrolling in 2-year community colleges or vocational training schools. Rather than continue to 4-year institutions, 56% of delayers were more likely to begin their careers from 2-year degrees. Expectations from the students themselves support evidence that those who took no

delays expected to obtain a bachelor's degree or higher compared to the delayers. One limitation of this study was that the research was conducted locally rather than nationally.

Hoe (2014b) conducted a recent study that focused on the different reasons for delaying college. The researcher acknowledged the popularity of gap year in Europe and Asia, however, was interested in discovering the negative perception surrounding taking an American gap year. In the study, the researcher points out there are differences in gap years between students from different socioeconomic statuses (Hoe, 2014b). Findings show that students with higher income are likely to have a year full of planned activities, concluding the gap year is not a wasted year. One aspect the researcher was careful about was to list gappers as intentional and planned. The researcher's findings contradict Nui and Tienda (2013) instead noting that those who delay university have a greater likelihood of expecting a 4-year degree. Hoe (2014b) discussed the GPA debate and found those who were delayed had higher GPAs than the immediate enrollers. Hoe (2014b) conducted a mixed-methods approach, across the United States, finding that many delayers were either female, White, without disabilities, middle-class, or unintentional and with low-income backgrounds. Travel delayers were found to be more academically driven, completing degrees beyond the bachelor's degree level.

Many researchers (Dills et al., 2015; Hoe, 2014b; Holmlund et al., 2008; Nui & Tienda, 2013) all investigated the gap year as a delay and its different factors. First, the researchers examined if the delay is intentional or unintentional. The researchers noted, if planned, taking a gap year was deemed a choice that would probably end with a bachelor's degree. Furthermore, the researchers found that simply taking a gap year affected the learning retention of students, thus making it difficult when returning to their

student status. The delay also affected postsecondary direction—the longer the gap year, the higher the likelihood the student would enroll in a 2-year college or vocational school. Although school breaks are given across the nation, the researchers found that no particular problem with gap-year participation if the participants reviewed past academic lessons to help retain learned information and stay current.

Analysis and Interpretation of the Literature

As seen in the studies included in this paper, the participants ranged from 15 to 30 years of age, they came from various countries, and they came from different socioeconomic statuses. Students who are unsure of their future paths are more likely to participate in a gap year (Coetzee & Bester, 2009; Martin, 2010). In the Hoe (2014a) study, 24% of the gappers report their parents being a huge influence on taking a break. Individuals from “advantaged” households were more likely to have financial and parental support to complete a gap year (DeBacker & Routon, 2017; Tenser, 2015). According to Jones (2004), young adult males are an underrepresented group in taking a gap year. Among the studies, it was supported that students participate in a gap year with intentions of growth, learning, and independence (Hoe, 2014a; Jones, 2004; Paterson-Brown et al., 2015; Tenser, 2015).

Chapter Summary

The gap year has been a phenomenon overseas, and it has gained attention in the United States (Tenser, 2015). Several factors lead to an individual’s choice to take some time off from school (Parker et al., 2015). The educational level of the parents contributes to a student making an informed decision because they can play a major role in funding the student’s adventure (Tenser, 2015). According to Skillings (2021), when an

individual is placed in a challenging situation (i.e., COVID-19), problem skills are immediately practiced, even if it is the first time.

Parsons (1909) believed a strong correlation between personality and interest is necessary to determine a positive career journey. With access to gap-year participants in the fall 2020 semester, this researcher was interested in studying why an individual took a COVID-19 gap year. Gap years are still relatively new to U.S. students, making it an already challenging decision. Skillings (2021) showed that when children are in nontraditional situations and outside of their norm, the results in lasting independence prove to help an individual make more proper life choices at any age, and this includes planning career paths. According to Parsons (1909), individuals are satisfied when their chosen decision meets their overall interests. According to O'Shea (2013), gappers create a personal set of time of nonstop exploration in the form of work, volunteerism, and/or noncredited studies.

There is a need for research documenting the decision-making factors for gap-year participants whose enrollment was delayed due to COVID-19. This study will add to the limited body of knowledge on the COVID-19 gap year.

Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

This study highlighted two phenomena: COVID-19 and the gap year; 2020 has been a challenging year for most and, arguably, one set of individuals would say they had it the worst: the class of 2020 high school seniors (Douglas-Gabriel, 2020; Krantz & Fernandes, 2020). Beyond the missed milestones of their last year in their hometown school districts, many were forced to rewrite their postsecondary plans (Marketplace, 2020). For fall 2020, many were not aware of what they were going to do (Gavazzi, 2020). Colleges and universities were not forthcoming on their fall itinerary; students and families expected better planning and information in the spring and summer months; last-minute emails were the norm; and they left many questions unanswered (McLoon & Berke, 2020). Higher education was limited with their options, and students, along with their families, were taking notice (Gross, 2020).

The gap year is a growing educational phenomenon. According to Dover and Lawrence (2010), a gap year refers to the year between high school and the first year of college in which an individual decides to engage in a world that is exciting and personally transformative through volunteering, work or non-credited studies (Dover and Lawrence, 2010, p. 56). Effective gap-year participation comes with buy-in, an initial plan, and the desire to try something different. The choice to take a gap year is dependent upon how one plans to spend their time, and when, where, and why they choose to take a gap year. The gap year is tailored around the student's needs and preferences. Decision-making may include input from various individuals deemed necessary in the student's

lives, that is, parents, guidance counselors, and mentors. Communication from the admitting colleges and universities, along with mainstream media outlets, may impact the decision to take a gap year. The decision factors impact one's gap-year experience. Besides various options after high school graduation, the gap year participant can enroll in an untraditional, educational program that combines real-world experiences with problem-solving.

The Current State of COVID-19

According to the CDC (2020), the global pandemic is still a high risk; however, a COVID-19 vaccination was approved in December 2020 (Rubin, 2020). As of March 2021, the future in day-to-day operations is looking promising as more and more Americans are getting vaccinated and the number of COVID-19 cases dropped 15% in the first 2 weeks of March (Bosman & Tompkins, 2021). With such changes, colleges and universities across the United States are beginning to release future semester plans.

Impact of Enrolling First-Year Students for Fall 2020

Fewer first-year students were present on campus. Fall 2020 experienced a 16% reduction of first-time college students due to COVID-19 (Keates, 2020). According to Douglas-Gabriel (2020), 629 schools surveyed found colleges and universities across the United States were experiencing a drop of 2.5% in overall enrollment at the undergraduate level. In an unprecedented move, many colleges and universities were reassessing their wait lists in hopes of meeting enrollment number goals for fall 2020 (Malani, 2020). As a result of COVID-19, many institutions chose to teach virtually, or 100% remotely, and many students factored this in for their decision to enroll or to defer.

Problem Statement

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, universities across the nation are seeing record numbers of students deferring for a gap year. These educational institutions typically have 1% of their student populations defer their first year at college, but this year they have seen their numbers jump as high as to 8% (Krantz & Fernandes, 2020). Gap year information from well-known institutions, like MIT, are encouraged, and they have mostly granted students up to a year before starting their first year of college. Information on the gap year can provide opportunities that may not otherwise be explored, and the youth can appropriately weigh their options (Hoe, 2014a). In recent months, the global medical pandemic, COVID-19, has changed how students review postsecondary plans. This research will add more context to the newly-referred to COVID gap year. The lack of research supports that the COVID gap year is a new phenomenon, and follow-through is necessary to better understand the students' choices from gap-year introduction to a gap-year commitment.

With COVID-19 having an impact on new student enrollment in colleges and universities for fall 2020, many students have chosen to take a COVID gap year. The COVID gap year is specific to the 2020 health pandemic and the impact on the college campuses and communities. Taking a gap year allows students to stay active in their interests while being creative in their choice of concentration under structured guidance, such as gap year programs. Due to COVID-19, students are being given the freedom to participate in some time off from matriculated study.

The research question was designed to investigate the decision-making strategy and future planning of today's first-year college-bound students while they are in the

midst of a global pandemic. The major research question was: What motivating factors contributed to recent high-school students' decisions to take a gap year during the COVID-19 global pandemic?

The subquestions to help answer the main research question were:

1. Who, if anyone, influenced recent high school graduates in the midst of the COVID-19 global pandemic to not enroll in college/university for fall 2020?
2. What plans do first-year college students, who deferred in fall 2020 due to COVID-19, have to enroll in college/university in the future?

This researcher selected a qualitative, phenomenological method to obtain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences (Creswell, 2014). The phenomenological approach was chosen for this study because it seeks to capture and document the voices and experiences of first-year students who were admitted to 4-year colleges and universities and decided to not enroll in fall 2020 during a “once-in-a-century” global pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020). The participants in this study had a unique experience that related to decision- making about not pursuing the first-year college experience during a global pandemic.

Research is a shared perspective by both the research participants and the researcher. It is important for the research to be as clear and transparent as possible and identify any biases or conflicts of interest to the relation of this study. The researcher's positionality includes being a female, a person of color, a youth mentor, and having a strong interest in the postsecondary options for young adults. This researcher is a member of the Gap Year Association. As a person who never took a gap year, the researcher is

curious to understand more about the decisions that led to finalizing gap-year plans and more during a global pandemic.

Research Context

The research took place in the Northeastern Region of the United States, and the participants for this study had to have a permanent mailing address in the Northeastern Region of the United States. The participants needed to have a permanent mailing address ZIP code, assigned by the U.S. Postal Service, in one of the five states designated for this study: Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania.. The use of permanent mailing ZIP codes to indicate where the students lived solidified they were eligible for this study's participant pool (Appendix A). The rationale for choice was any first-year student admitted to a 4-year institution (private or public), making an enrollment deposit or committed to a 4-year institution, but did not attend for fall 2020 due to COVID-19.

The rationale for choosing the Northeast Region of the United States was because COVID-19 had the largest impact on this region for a long period of time at the height of the pandemic. Students in this region were left with many unanswered questions because their experience with the pandemic differed from their peers in states like Florida or Utah where numbers were lower and a lockdown was not mandated.

Research Participants

The study focused on individuals who identified as 18 to 22 years old, a FYCS, accepted to a 4-year college or university for fall 2020, and committed to the college or university by making an enrollment deposit for fall 2020 but never enrolled. For this study's purposes, the concentration was on FYCSs defined as young adults aged 18 to 22

(Simpson, 2018). The prescreening (Appendix B) tool helped to identify the demographics that matched the population sought after for the study.

For this study, the participants were recruited via snowball sampling. Used as a referral source for participation, snowball sampling is traditionally used to connect with underrepresented research populations (Meyer & Wilson, 2009) such as gappers. No incentives were given in exchange for participation in this study.

The rationale for utilizing the Gap Year Association (2021) was mainly because the organization, being a hub for everything related to taking a gap year, has as its mission statement: “To maximize the potential of young adults, through accessible and meaningful gap year opportunities” (Gap Year Association, 2021, para. 1). The association has listed programs, definitions, alumnus, and research regarding the topic, so it was appropriate to utilize this resource as a recruitment tool.

Recruitment of the participants occurred via email and social media. The Gap Year Association agreed to post an announcement on their Instagram page that included a letter of introduction to the study from the researcher, a link to the participant interest/demographic survey, and to the informed consent form for the study. The researcher also sent an email to the Gap Year Association about the request for participants for the study. The email to the Association members included a letter of introduction to the study from the researcher and the informed consent form; the email asked the Association members to pass on the email to potential participants who met the criteria of the student. Originally, those interested were asked to reach out to the researcher via the information listed on the flyer. After the post circulated for 2 weeks, it was determined that an amendment should be made to better accommodate those who

might be interested in completing the survey. A link was included in the social media post, thereafter, in which individuals who were interested in the survey could simply click on a link that included the informed consent form, the basic demographics questionnaire, and the survey. Recruitment on social media was ongoing and posted daily for 6 weeks, between two major holidays, in the summer of 2021.

Given the limited resources and data in the field concerning this topic, triangulation was not done for this study. This study has a set of unique circumstances in which qualitative data was not published previously on the topic; therefore, this study is creating a foundation of new knowledge as it relates to this study's research question. This researcher is the first person to try and gain lived experiences via written documentation on the research topic; therefore, a focus group was not appropriate at this time. A minimum of five participants were needed for the phenomenological study, as 5 to 25 participants were recommended by Creswell (2007). Ten individuals participated, supporting the recommended number of experts in qualitative research. The mortality rate for participation was minimal to none.

Originally, 38 individuals showed interest in the study, but many were deemed ineligible because of their ages, college status, not residing in the Northeast Region of the United States, or they had not been accepted or committed to a 4-year college or university. Of the 38 volunteers, 13 individuals were disqualified from being included in this study because they did not answer all of the questions, one was volunteer was underaged, nine were listed as either second- or third-year college students, and five had primary addresses outside of the five states required for this study.

Snowball sampling helped achieve the number of interested individuals by word of mouth from those who knew or partook in the study. This helped focus the desired population from their peers and those who knew of similar experiences. In addition, the researcher sent out numerous emails to gap-year affiliates and those in higher education, posted information on both Instagram and TikTok, and had the flyer posted on numerous gap-year home pages, including the Gap Year Association page. Strategically, the researcher only included participants who (a) affirmed to being 18- to 22-years old; (b) answered each question within the parameters of the focused population; (c) was a FYCS in fall 2020 who applied, was accepted, and was committed to a 4-year college or university but decided not to enroll as a result of COVID-19, and who took a gap year instead; and (d) completed the questionnaire in its entirety.

The sample of the six males and four females ranged in ages from 18 to 20, had similar experiences, and they had an unknown bond over the subject matter of the global pandemic. Six of the participants identified as Hispanic/Puerto Rican rather than Hispanic/Other, three identified as White/Caucasian, and one identified as Asian/Pacific Islander. None of the participants listed the same school, which provided a diverse experience for the study's focus on each school's communication trends and the FYCSs takeaways. Although everyone was a first-time college student, only four were 18, while the rest of the six were 19–20 years of age. The sample was well represented because traditional FYCSs are 18–19 years of age, and with the study being conducted approximately 1 year after the height of the pandemic, the age population was supported. The entire frequency data and participant demographics are depicted in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1*Frequency and Participant Demographics*

Participant	Age	Gender	State	Racial/ethnic category	Type of institution
FYCS 1	18	F	PA	Hispanic/Puerto Rican	Public
FYCS 2	18	M	NY	Hispanic/Puerto Rican	Public
FYCS 3	19–20	M	NY	Asian/Pacific Islander	Private
FYCS 4	19–20	M	NY	Hispanic/Puerto Rican	Private
FYCS 5	19–20	F	NY	Hispanic/Puerto Rican	Private
FYCS 6	18	F	CT	White	Public
FYCS 7	18	M	NJ	Hispanic/Puerto Rican	Public
FYCS 8	19–20	F	MA	Hispanic/Puerto Rican	Private
FYCS 9	19–20	M	NY	White	Public
FYCS 10	19–20	M	NY	White	Private

Instruments Used in Data Collection

The instruments used to collect data consisted of the announcement of an invitation letter to participate in the study, a prescreening tool, an informed consent form, and an FYCS questionnaire link (Appendix C). All participants were given the consent form, which was embedded in the front portion of the survey, a prescreening tool that needed to be completed, and the final portion was linked to the FYCS questionnaire. No one was eliminated. The researcher reviewed the prescreening tool for each participant. The participants who did not meet the criteria of the study did not have their data included in the analysis portion of this study. Everyone was given the direct contact information of the researcher to discuss the study or for the researcher to address any questions or concerns anyone might have had regarding this study.

First-Year College Student Eligibility Prescreening Tool

The prescreening tool was used to determine if a participant fit the demographics necessary for this study. Some of the questions included:

- age,
- gender identity,
- postal ZIP Codes,
- college classification year,
- if they were accepted into a 4-year college or university,
- did they commit to the 4-year college or university,
- name of said school, and
- identification regarding race/ethnicity.

First-Year College Student Questionnaire

The questionnaire questions were formulated from the literature and the theories of decision-making and model of communication. The research question was a guide to the FYCS Questionnaire, and it was validated by the researcher's peers and dissertation committee members to better field the answers needed for this study. The panel of experts included gap-year experts who held a doctoral degree, members of this researcher's doctoral cohort, and other education experts who helped validate the research questions and questionnaire. The panel of experts was utilized to validate the survey. The panel consisted of three individuals who had experience with qualitative research and had an understanding of enrollment in colleges and universities during fall 2020. All experts hold doctoral degrees.

The questions listed were not used in another publication. The researcher focused on why a participant was interested in a gap year, their expectations of the gap year, and how their postsecondary decision was finalized. The FYCS Questionnaire consisted of specific open-ended questions that were directed to high school graduates who had begun their fall 2020 plans. This researcher used the questionnaire as the main focal point of the data.

The prescreening tool was readily available for anyone interested in participating; however, certain eligibility standards (e.g., age, college classifications, postal ZIP Codes, etc.) were noted to prevent an influx of unnecessary participants. This researcher reviewed each completed prescreening to ensure only eligible data was included in the study. The prescreening questions were basic information and it should have taken no more than 5 minutes to complete. The survey was deemed complete when all the requirements were met, and all questions were answered. To minimize mortality in the sample, all participants received a SurveyMonkey link with all the links associated with the study: prescreening tool, informed consent form, and FYCS Questionnaire. The prescreening tool and the informed consent form, together, took approximately 10 minutes to complete, and the questionnaire took about 30-45 minutes to complete. The questionnaire was fully online, via SurveyMonkey, but it was also made available via paper form for anyone who requested a hard copy. After all pieces were completed, the information was sent to the researcher. The results of the demographic survey were interpreted by the researcher, who reviewed the answers to ensure that each participant met the criteria for this study. If all questions were answered and met the criteria for the study, the participant's data was included in the study. A generic email was sent to all

participants, thanking them for their interest in the subject matter and for their participation. The surveys are kept safe in a password-protected laptop with a password required to access the files.

Confidentiality was ensured by creating pseudonyms that the researcher only knew, so there was no instance that a participant was linked to their self-identified information. Based on the qualitative design being used, phenomenology typically has five to 25 participants, as noted by Creswell (2013). The researcher was able to collect 10 fully completed questionnaires, which is twice the required minimum amount for a phenomenological study. The researcher believed that collecting more than the minimum responses assisted with ensuring data richness.

Only fully completed questionnaires were used for the study. This researcher wanted to implement inclusion, knowledge on the topic, and experience to ensure all voices were heard. Questionnaires are best in obtaining a participant's perspective, are best in practice for the direction of questioning and are best where personal history can be obtained in a controlled and uniform way for all participants.

Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis

The study consisted of questions, which complimented the phenomenological design, to provide otherwise unknown insight into the participants' experiences (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). The data are rich with an in-depth understanding of lived experiences (Creswell, 2014) of American young adults, planning their futures amid a worldwide health scare (CDC, 2020) and its relation to their gap-year participation. A phenomenological research design was used to better understand the phenomenon of deciding to take a gap year during a health pandemic and to describe the experiences of a

gap year. The study concentrated on asking the same population, in the same matter, under the same conditions to obtain their experience and so the researcher could analyze all data given (Pew Research Center, 2020). Data were collected using questionnaires. Coding and decoding methods were utilized, such as descriptive and pattern coding (Saldaña, 2013). In addition, a code book was utilized by the researcher to assist in the organization of the themes that came out during the analysis of the data (Saldaña, 2013). Analyzing the data through multiple lenses helped to discover different themes. Saldaña (2013) described a coding system, with pen and paper, that processes qualitative research, which helped to guide the analysis. With concentration on decision-making and communication from colleges and universities, and a special interest in FYCS's lived experiences, it was first questioned what should be coded. As suggested by Richards and Morse (2007) "if it moves, code it" (p. 146). The researcher initially completed preliminary notes that helped map the data as they came in, and the researcher was able to format and create several columns from the raw data, preliminary codes, and final code. This method allowed for familiarity with the data as they developed into areas to further analyze. In addition, in-vivo coding was also practiced. Upon the final code, the researcher connected similar attributes to one another to help create themes.

At the conclusion of all the completed questionnaires, the beginning stages of data analysis commenced. The researcher interpreted the data using open or line-by-line coding. Through the open-ended portions of each of the FYCSs' answers, several categories and themes emerged from the coded data. Comments for each of the research questions were collected and properly grouped. As the data were considered in detail, preliminary attributes were developed and identified via coding. The coding scheme was

developed by using open, axial, and selective coding. Selective codes were then created by connecting and consolidating axial codes and abstracting them from the evidence contained in the data. Categories and themes emerged from the analysis of the open-ended answers of the questionnaire, and they were continuously developed to determine a trend of the FYCSs' thoughts and perceptions. Because all of the FYCSs gave similar answers, the categories were easily selected for discussion. It is also important to note that there were overlaps in categories for each of the research questions. Specifically, some FYCSs identified feeling lost with lack of guidance, while other FYCSs identified the same attributes with the lack of communication from the committed schools.

In order to strengthen intra-coder reliability, in addition to the researcher's coding, two peers assisted in validating the coding of the same data. The researcher's peers hold doctorate degrees from the same program at St. John Fisher College and they had ties to higher education in their professional lives and experience working with the same age bracket of participants in this study. The codes that were determined, as well as the accompanying answers/narratives, were reviewed for suitability, consistency, and/or agreement.

Data were presented through data visualization, such as graphs and charts, using descriptive statistics. These methods were chosen to obtain the most accurate and detailed experiences of the participants. The data collected from the questionnaires remains safely secured under password-protected digital formats, and the data will be kept for 3 years and then properly destroyed.

Summary

This researcher was interested in studying young adults' decision-making process regarding a gap year during a health crisis. Studies regarding the gap year in connection with COVID-19 are relatively new. Using a phenomenological research design, this researcher connected the lived experiences and captured the participants' voices regarding this unique circumstance created by the pandemic. The purpose of this study was to analyze the decision-making process behind potentially choosing to take a gap year in the current societal climate. The study looked to obtain real-life, firsthand accounts of young adults weighing out a gap year in comparison to college or university in what is now considered a COVID gap year. The researcher was especially interested in this study because of such a unique real-world scenario for the college-aged generation during the COVID-19 outbreak.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

This study explored how FYCSs decided to take a gap year during the fall 2020 semester because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The lack of research surrounding this topic and this phenomenon encouraged the researcher's interest in looking for the firsthand accounts of those most impacted individuals by the change in circumstances created by the health crisis. Studying the students' perspectives on a variety of items, it was found what influenced their decisions and had a large impact on the young adults' postsecondary plans. Lack of communication helped to obscure their decision-making. A qualitative framework was used to design this study. Phenomenological research methods were used to help guide the stages of design, data collection, interpretation, and analysis. The data collected was rich in information and allowed for a clear perspective of the FYCSs and their lived experience.

To study FYCSs in the Northeastern Region of the United State and their decision-making of postsecondary plans during a pandemic, the researcher established a research framework based on a main research question and two subquestions:

Main research question: *What motivating factors contributed to recent high school students' decisions to take a gap year during the COVID-19 global pandemic?*

Subquestions:

1. Who, if anyone, influenced recent high school graduates amid the COVID-19 global pandemic not to enroll in college/university for fall 2020?

2. What plans do first-year college students who deferred in fall 2020 because of COVID-19 have to enroll in college/university in the future?

Main Research Question

Data were collected to answer the main research question. *What motivating factors contributed to recent high school students' decisions to take a gap year during COVID-19 global pandemic?* As opposed to just making a choice, which is a simple task, deciding what factors play a role in students' finalized plans is not as simple. Communication that is fluid and consistent keeps the decision-maker informed and educated in order to appropriately determine what the next steps are in their plans. As a result, throughout the questionnaires, themes emerged from the codes, and categories were created that the FYCS participants perceived to be important. The 11 themes consist of communication, cost, personal, student engagement, ambition, fear of missing out, challenges, lack of guidance, decision-making, impact of COVID-19, and COVID break. Table 4.1 presents the themes and categories and how the phrases were defined. Table 4.2 displays the open-ended questionnaire questions that helped to answer Research Question 1 and Subquestions 1 and 2.

During the analyzing phase, the researcher identified 93 phrases or statements that were deemed significant to the study. Some statements were repeated by several participants, highlighting clusters and similar thinking among the peer group. With the developing clusters, the researcher was able to identify reemerging themes. The phrases were then organized into 11 coded systems: communication, cost, support, student engagement, ambition, fear of missing out, challenges, lack of guidance, decision-making, impact of COVID-19, and impact COVID break.

Table 4.1*Categories, Themes, and Definitions of How the Codes Were Defined*

Categories	Themes	Codes defined
Poorly updated	Communication	Fall 2020 unknown, plans unclear, questions unanswered
Effective communication	Communication	Received emails, received calls, informative
Tuition	Cost	Same for less, no change, no discount
Valueless	Cost	Not worth it, importance of value, online education unvalued
Academic	Support	Relating to school, staff, studies
Personal	Support	Family, friends, peers
Emotional	Support	Feelings
Unsupported	Support	Did it alone, relied on self
Peer supports	Student engagement	Sports, clubs
Workshops	Student engagement	Academic improvements
4-Year college	Ambition	Good grades, admission to dream school, goal, always the plan, embedded since young, prestigious
Importance of a degree	Ambition	Career goals, work hard, make parents proud, plan for future, independence, importance of education
Worries	Fear of missing out	Left behind, expectations not met, late to everything, missed opportunities, with younger class
Wants	Fear of missing out	Full college experience, straight to college
Restrictions	Challenges	No visits allowed, buildings closed, strict rules
Technology	Challenges	Connectivity issues, older systems, need upgrades
Lost	Lack of guidance	Future unknown, needed direction, unpredictable
Confused	Lack of guidance	Unanswered questions, relied on parents, indecisive
Confidence	Decision-making	Self-identified as confident, declared their decision
Empowerment	Decision-making	Self-identified as empowered
Influence of others	Decision-making	Sought input on finalizing decisions
Difficult	Decision-making	Indecisive, relied on others for finalizing on their decisions
Lack of planning	Impact of COVID-19	Late decisions on fall 2020, no guidance, difficult to connect
Campus closures	Impact of COVID-19	School closures, 100% online, empty campuses
Growth	COVID Break	Prioritized self-care, more independent, breaking away from ideals, became more confident, more spiritual
Time	COVID Break	Time to think, can relax
Gap year	COVID Break	Joined work force, concentration exploring interests, research careers, volunteered time, stayed home, move next year, took an art class.

Table 4.2*Questionnaire Questions*

Open-ended Questionnaire Question	Aligned with Research Questions
How has being a young adult/HS senior during the pandemic impacted your experience of applying to a 4-year college or university?	1, S2
Can you describe how your committed school communicated with you during the pandemic? Did anyone else receive the same info on your behalf?	S1, S2
What information did you learn that warranted another look at your postsecondary plans? Please describe what concerned you.	1, S1, S2
Describe your experience with speaking with others on your gap year choice journey.	S1
Do you feel that you rely on those older than you by 10+ years for answers, or do you feel your peers are more knowledgeable on alternative postsecondary plans?	S1
Discuss the importance of decision-making in your choice to take a COVID gap year.	1
Discuss the role of those around you in your path toward finalizing your decision for your fall 2020 plans.	S1
Describe any challenges you may have had when finalizing your decision to not enroll in classes for the fall 2020 semester.	S1
Describe your experience when speaking with others about your gap year choice journey.	S1, S2
How do you describe your confidence in decision-making on your own regarding your change of plans?	1
As a first-year college student, did you feel empowered to make this decision on your own? Please share why or why not.	1

In consideration of the important attributes for the FYCSs' decision to take a COVID gap year, 11 themes revolved around the motivating factors in the decision-making process, influences, the climate of COVID-19, and plans for the gap year and beyond. The themes that emerged from the main research question and the subquestions relating to decision-making and taking a COVID gap year amid a pandemic include communication, cost, personal decision, student engagement, ambition, fear of missing out, challenges, lack of guidance, decision-making, impact of COVID-19, and COVID break. The themes that emerged in consideration to the FYCSs deciding to take a COVID gap year increased when the schools did not provide information on their fall 2020 plans and cost appeared to remain the same.

Table 4.3 displays the codes, categories, and themes gathered from the participants' answers.

Table 4.3

Codes, Categories, and Themes

Code	Category	Theme
Silence, didn't get anything, impractical information, no staff, no answering phones, no updates, delayed responses, days for response, run around, connectivity was iffy, unhelpful staff (5), housing unanswered, unaware, help with communications, improvement, emailing system, need helpful staff, no emails regarding pandemic, communication not valued, hard to get, emailed schools, didn't hear back, lack of emails, time was delayed, student initiated contact, difficult communication, unclear.	Poor Communication	Communication
Emails best, email communication (10), emailing peers, orientation registration (3), emailing other students, Zoom office hours, school contact, school communication, many emails, connected social media, easiest with emails, faster with emails, payment reminders.	Effective Communication	
Primarily about money, contact for payment, payment reminders, no reduced tuition, in-person learning, remote, no cost change, no difference.	Tuition	Cost
Not worth it, lack in-person, no full college experience, full cost online, lack of hands-on, not a real education, wasting money, classes in dorms, made no sense, no face time, impersonal.	Valueless	
Counselors helpful, gave advice, scholarships, financial aid, direction, opportunities, kept in contact, allowed deferment, high school experience.	Academic	Support
Parents supportive, narrowed down choices, weighed out options, relied on peers, BFF knows me, college visits with mom, others listened, helped me, figure it out, reassuring, speaking with others, coach supported me, relied on older elders knowledge, peers understood experience, feedback given, trust.	Personal	
Exciting, overwhelming, help process information.	Emotional	
On my own, no one gets it, college or nothing, not keeping traditions.	Unsupported	Student Engagement
Clubs, athletics, scholarships, active in school, have a job, held a job, connected students, accepted students, Barstool, social media groups.	Peer Support	
College virtual meets, Zoom meetings, opportunities to mingle, know other students, promote activities, encourage involvement.	Workshops	Ambition
Importance of grades, academics over recreation, thrive, get into them, "dream" schools, more prestigious than 2-year, active college visits, visits with Mom, path, postsecondary plans, high school to college (8), had to go, linked life goals, full package, education plan.	4-year college	
Always the plan, embedded since young, educated parents, following parents' footsteps, need for a good job, need for my career, worked hard, parents, success, intelligence.	Importance to get a degree	

<p>Feeling left behind, starting college late, younger class, delay in adulthood, behind my peers, missing school, late social scene, lose chances, no cliques/network, not doing it, doesn't align, my plan, can't play sports.</p> <p>Get away, full college experience, try new things, start, real world.</p>	<p>Worries</p> <p>Wants</p>	<p>Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)</p>
<p>No visits allowed (5), lack freedom, buildings access, closed to students, many rules, rules to enroll, agreements required, didn't create interest (9), not seeing the campus, no action visits, website differs.</p> <p>Connectivity iffy, "Zoomed out", impersonal, hard to adapt, through it before, used to it.</p>	<p>Restrictions</p> <p>Technology</p>	<p>Challenges</p>
<p>Scary, needed parents, fall 2020 unknown, felt lost.</p> <p>Indecisive, what to do, future unknown, needed reassurance, relied on parents, seek guidance.</p>	<p>Lost</p> <p>Confused</p>	<p>Lack of Guidance</p>
<p>Confidence very high (6), I don't regret it at all, no overthinking.</p> <p>Learned, time to adult, independent, feel empowered, can do, my own, huge decision, life's trajectory, decisions supported.</p> <p>Parents supported me, told what to do.</p>	<p>Confidence</p> <p>Empowerment</p> <p>Influenced by others</p> <p>Difficult</p>	<p>Decision-Making</p>
<p>Overwhelmed, indecisive, hard to do, pressured.</p> <p>Plan unknown, lack of info, took gap year, school's nothing, no interest was gained (9).</p>	<p>Lack of Planning</p> <p>Campus Closures</p>	<p>Impact of COVID-19</p>
<p>Got a job, matured, tried new things, became more spiritual (2), realization, more with less, separate ideals, focused on self, definitions evolve.</p> <p>Time to think, others intrigued, sound, centered, made income, busy, figure things out, peaceful, needed time, alone, learned to relax.</p> <p>Relaxed from ideals, got a job, focused on art, researched on schools, personal journey.</p>	<p>Growth</p> <p>Time</p> <p>Gap Year</p>	<p>COVID Break</p>

Table 4.4 displays 27 categories that emerged throughout the data as well as the participant's pseudonym who contributed to these categories

Table 4.4

Categories That Emerged Throughout the Data and Participants' Input

Category	FYCS										Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
Poor Communication	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	9
Effective Communication							X	X			2
Tuition	X	X	X		X	X	X	X			7
Valueless	X	X	X		X		X	X			6
Academic					X				X	X	3
Personal	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	10
Emotional	X		X	X		X	X	X			6
Unsupported								X		X	2
Peer Support	X				X	X	X			X	5
Workshops	X									X	2
4-year college	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	10
Important to get a degree	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	10
Worries	X	X	X		X	X	X			X	7
Wants	X	X	X	X	X			X		X	7
Restrictions	X	X		X	X	X	X	X		X	8
Technology			X	X		X				X	2
Lost	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	10
Confused	X		X		X	X	X				5
Confidence	X	X		X			X	X	X	X	7
Empowerment	X		X				X	X	X	X	7
Influenced by Others	X				X	X	X				4
Difficult	X				X	X					3
Lack of Planning	X	X			X	X	X	X	X	X	8
Campus Closures	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	10
Growth	X	X	X		X			X		X	6
Time	X	X		X							3
Gap Year	X	X	X		X			X		X	6

During the analyzing phase, the researcher identified 93 phrases or statements that were deemed significant to the study. Some statements were repeated by several participants, highlighting clusters and similar thinking among the peer group. With the developing clusters, the researcher was able to identify reemerging themes. The phrases were then organized into 11 coded systems: communication, cost, support, student engagement, ambition, fear of missing out, challenges, lack of guidance, decision-making, impact of COVID-19, and impact COVID break.

Research Participant Descriptions

Ten participants from the Northeast Region of the United States consented to completing the questionnaire for this study and their pseudonyms consisted of the FYCS abbreviation plus an assigned number. The following brief profiles of each participant provide a glimpse of their answers to the open-ended questions along with background information from the FYCS questionnaire.

FYCS 1. At the time of the study, FYCS 1 was an 18-year-old Puerto Rican female from Pennsylvania who described herself as being overly involved in her studies, participating in many extracurricular activities, always finding/accepting new jobs and “gigs,” and trying new things. The participant’s goal was to go to a large school that emphasized school spirit and honors achievements. She had toured schools since her second year of high school, attended workshops, called admissions and other departments to ask questions, watched YouTube videos about the schools, and followed students on Instagram as well as reading testimonies on school websites. FYCS 1 reported receiving many offers for scholarships, she had money saved for education, and she was thrilled to be accepted and committed to the university. FYCS 1 consistently referred to ambition

and having top grades and being proud of all of her accomplishments, and it was clear when referring to herself that she wanted the researcher to know her education was valued. When asked why she wanted to go to college, FYCS 1 answered that she wanted to go to college because of the importance of an education had been ingrained in their life since she was a young girl. When asked why she wanted to attend a 4-year college, she said that “everyone needs to have [an education] at some point in their teenage to adult years” and she believed the college experience has a “social expectation to be a part of this experience.” FYCS 1 described being a high school senior/young adult during the pandemic as “lost.” At times, being unsure of deadlines, extensions, and with admissions teams seemingly overwhelmed, there was limited communication, and she felt “in the dark.” When referring to school communication, FYCS 1 answered that it was “poor” because there were no updates on the admissions team’s thoughts or plans for the fall. FYCS 1 also noted that she strongly disliked the wait times to reach someone, and she stated when calling, after a long wait and their turn, it was simply a voice automated system. In terms of the tools the school used for communication, it was via email, but it was scarce. The school was described as continuing with business as usual with no real awareness of the pandemic, and it consistently pushed new student orientation sign ups and financial account update emails to “pay for this and that” to both FYCS 1 and the parents. She noted “it was clear to me our money is all they care about” but no “real information was shared.” She added that there was a need for direction and the school did not provide it. She found out all the necessary information from her peers who also committed to the same university and they used an Instagram page called “Barstool.” Emails were most effective as a communication tool since the would-be FYCS were

accustomed to checking daily starting in with the pandemic. FYCS 1 began second-guessing her postsecondary plans when the news started reporting that schools across the nation were beginning to decide to change to fully remote learning for the fall semester. FYCS 1 and her parents created a pros and cons list, and they decided it was not worth the cost of the semester to sit at home and miss out on the full college experience. FYCS 1 decided to defer with the university and take a gap year.

When asked about any challenges on the decision to take a gap year, FYCS 1 stated she worried she would be missing out on the social scene or the networking. The decision was less about school and more about her personal engagements. She had a desire to put socialization first, for the first time, and she felt college was the way to do it. She expressed that the preceding 10 months had been spiritual and relaxing. When asked about decision-making, FYCS 1 stated there was a need to do it and felt it was life changing. When speaking with other peers regarding their gap year choice, their experiences were reportedly dull, and they noted they were interested in knowing about FYCS 1's last year and comparing how different everyone's paths had been, and many wished they did the same as FYCS 1. When describing confidence in the decision-making, it was described as needing reassurance, which was given to her from her parents because of how uncertain FYCS 1 felt. Once the decision was made to defer, it was described as feeling an overwhelming sense of confidence that then trickled to other areas of life, which launched trying new things and excelling at them. FYCS 1 described ultimately making the decision on her own and feeling empowered when this was done.

FYCS 2. At the time of his interview, FYCS 2 was an 18-year-old Puerto Rican male from New York City who applied, was accepted, and was committed to a large

public university in Long Island, New York. When asked why he wanted to attend a 4-year college, FYCS 2 stated his goal was to be a chiropractor and the education was needed to help achieve his goal as well as to enjoy his independence. When asked how being a high school senior/young adult during a pandemic affected him, FYCS 2 answered that it provided more time to think and “fortify my decision more wisely.” When asked about the communication from the committed school to FYCS 2, he said that “it was not very helpful and always had me contact someone else to help me or left me on hold for hours.” The communicating tools used by the school were emails. FYCS 2 found the staff to respond quickly, and they were helpful and reasonable. When asked if there were any concerns, FYCS 2 listed the transition to and from classes, but he was open to try something new. FYCS 2 described his family as wanting the best for the participant and going to college was most helpful in pursuing his goals. When speaking about the challenges of a college education, cost was listed with being aligned with what can be afforded. FYCS 2 relied on his peers for guidance but listened to elders’ opinions as well. FYCS 2 described his confidence in decision-making as A+, as he took a lot of learning on his own understanding, he researched, and he did so independently. FYCS 2 felt empowered to make his own decision but he credited his parents for the push to reevaluate the fall 2020 plans due to the pandemic, and FYCS 2 reported being glad it was done.

FYCS 3. At the time of his interview, FYCS 3 was a 19–20-year-old Asian/Pacific Islander male from New York State who applied and was committed to a private, medium-sized Connecticut university for the fall 2020 semester. FYCS 3 described his dream college as the university he committed to when narrowing down on

4-year colleges to choose. FYCS 3's precollege activities included college visits and calls to admissions departments. When asked why he decided to apply to college, FYCS 3 answered that he wanted to have the college experience and to obtain a bachelor's degree. Noting that FYCS 3 was a young adult during the pandemic, he was asked how the pandemic impacted his experience when applying to a 4-year college/university. FYCS 3 stated there was growth, he became more spiritual, he learned more about inner growth and self-care, and he would love to apply the experience at the committed 4-year school. When asked to describe communication with the committed school, FYCS 3 stated the university provided updates, but it was not helpful, and nothing spoke about going to school in the fall 2020 and "it was not clear." Some of the challenges listed were staying online most of the time and finding it too time consuming with no real information to take away; this was across the campus, including the financial aid office. The only benefit from the school was signing up for new student orientation. FYCS 3 stated the most effective method of communication was emails but noted there "was no real information coming through" that line of communication. FYCS 3 began to rethink his postsecondary plans when it was discovered that many students would be on campus and that made FYCS 3 uneasy because of the pandemic. FYCS 3 listed his mother and brother as supporting him every step of the way, especially when experiencing the challenge of the fear of missing out. FYCS 3 described the choice journey as "going with my gut" and "I had to do what I had to do." FYCS 3 decided on the gap year on his own because his parents were not familiar with what was commonly known as a gap year. FYCS 3 explained there were so many decisions to make and not making them was also a choice and needed to finalize the plans. When FYCS 3 shared his gap year decision with

everyone, he stated that it was done confidently. FYCS 3 found that some didn't agree with the decision, but it didn't deter FYCS 3. One challenge FYCS 3 had during the process was getting in touch with someone at the university to confirm the deferment as no one was getting back to FYCS 3, and he was worried the university had not received or processed the application correctly. FYCS 3 added that the gap year had ended, and there was time for reflection and he was proud of the choice, adding others wished they had done the same. FYCS 3 described having high confidence regarding the decision-making skills, as it was difficult, but he insisted the right choice was made. FYCS 3 noted, "I feel empowered to make the decision on my own because it has changed my life forever."

FYCS 4. At the time of his interview, FYCS 4 was a 19–20-year-old Puerto Rican male from New York State. FYCS 4 applied, was accepted, and committed to a small private liberal arts college in Westchester, New York. The first open-ended answer was a response to a question regarding what led him to applying to a 4-year school, and he answered simply "to get away from home." FYCS 4 did not partake in any precollege activities but stated he wanted to further his education past high school. FYCS 4 noted that 4-year colleges were more efficient. FYCS 4 noted that being a high school senior/young adult during the pandemic was "boring," and he did not specify or provide any further details. FYCS 4 noted that the committed school was able to create more interest in the community by encouraging a review with him to see what different schools had to offer. FYCS 4 felt comfortable with the college's communication but noted that the challenges were more on the technological side; that is, planned livestreams did not run or lack of a connection led to other issues. One benefit FYCS 4 found was that

everything was going to be online for classes. FYCS 4 did like the school's communication tool of choice, which was emailing, but he highlighted the need to hire more personnel to deal strictly with communication with the students. FYCS 4 noted taking another look at the postsecondary plans and felt it was not worth it to keep going to the committed school. FYCS 4 described that he was independent and made his decisions alone, but he also adding that a support system was his "second voice." FYCS 4 noted that individuals older than he were helpful stating "the older, the wiser" crowd was where he sought advice. FYCS 4 found the decision-making regarding taking a COVID gap year a bit overwhelming because the financial planning was not expected, but FYCS 4 was able to continue through, adding he was "always confident with my decision-making." When asked if FYCS 4 felt empowered to make the decision on their own, FYCS 4 said there was a need to stay focused and "did feel empowered because it's a starting moment in adulthood."

FYCS 5. At the time of her interview, FYCS 5 was a 19–20-year-old Puerto Rican female from New York City. FYCS 5 applied to several schools and decided on a private university in a New York City suburb. FYCS 5 aspired to be a surgeon and looked for schools to meet the prerequisite for medical school. FYCS 5 was advised by the high school staff to look for the best offers in scholarships and opportunities. FYCS 5 reported researching and visiting schools, speaking with alumni and current students. FYCS 5 always knew the path to college was the plan, as it was discussed in the family, and it that it would bring FYCS 5 closer to her career goals or as FYCS 5 called it "a good job." FYCS 5 applied to several 4-year colleges with a backup career in psychology. The pandemic impacted FYCS 5 because she was not able to see many

schools “in person” and the schools that she saw in person were missing students on campus because of the pandemic, so she was missing out on the real representation of the campus. Although FYCS 5 finalized her choice on the 4-year college, she admitted that the school did not create much interest amidst the global pandemic, but they tried their best. FYCS 5 reported the school’s communication was sent via emails, and they called directly (no one else received information on FYCS 5’s behalf). Some challenges encountered as FYCS 5 was communicating in person. FYCS 5 found communicating online to be difficult as it would take days to answer and respond to inquiries with follow-up questions. FYCS 5 found staff to be short and not helpful. When asked about the benefits up until August of 2020, FYCS 5 thought the high school classes would best prepare students for college, but she quickly realized that was not the case, stating “it’s different than college.” FYCS 5 found the Zoom video platform to be the most effective line of communication. FYCS 5 found that the schools could have been better with communication as the listed office hours never matched the availability of the staff or they could have had longer hours instead of the 1 hour a week or being open multiple days would have been helpful. Financial aid was especially difficult to reach for FYCS 5. FYCS 5’s mother played a supporting role when finalizing the college decision by going through the pros and cons and which schools were final contenders, without visiting the campuses. Talking with other peers, FYCS 5 discovered that the pandemic hurt everyone and their decisions because it was hard to see schools, dorms, and speak to staff. Many of FYCS 5’s friends picked schools that they only saw online and that was reportedly a huge struggle for all her peers in her group of friends. FYCS 5 personally narrowed down the decision to the schools that she was able to visit, which were not many. FYCS 5 stated

there was reliance on peers because they had similar experiences but she trusted friends who were 10+ years older than she more than her peers who were in the same situation as she, and she stated that they “don’t know anything about life.” Her mother played a big role in figuring out what FYCS 5 wanted to do regarding school, which roommates to live with or staying home, and ways to save money. Some challenges FYCS 5 found were career related, she questioned exactly what FYCS 5 wanted to do in her future. FYCS 5 found the COVID gap year was an excuse for those who did not know what they wanted to do, and she refused to acknowledge that she, too, took a COVID gap year for different reasons, but she admitted that staying home was the best decision for such a trying year. FYCS 5 reported to be very confident in her decision-making in the preceding year and realized her capability of doing a lot with very little and she credited her mother for helping her in the process to become more confident.

FYCS 6. At the time of her interview, FYCS 6 was an 18-year-old White female from Connecticut. FYCS 6 committed to a medium-sized public university in Rhode Island, and she was looking to attain a business degree. FYCS 6 reported that “college was always the plan” and it was the norm in FYCS 6’s family to go to college after high school. The pandemic hindered FYCS 6’s experiences when applying to colleges because she visited her top three choices but the experiences were “artificial” as the campuses were completely empty at each visit (no action visits). FYCS 6 did not believe the colleges were doing anything to stand out or create interest during the pandemic. When FYCS 6 referred to the communication from the committed school of choice, she stated reaching out was initiated by FYCS 6, yet no one responded. The school’s choice of communication was the email system, and FYCS 6 found this extremely difficult as her

questions were emailed, they were not answered properly. FYCS 6 found the most effective form of communication was via Zoom meetings as it allowed some form of face-to-face connection. When asked if she found anything beneficial, FYCS 6 said she was not sure. FYCS 6 reviewed her postsecondary plans when it was discovered the majority of the freshman classes were going to be online, which FYCS 6 defined that she as “not going to have the college experience that I have been expecting.” When asked what FYCS 6 thought the college/university could have done better to enhance communication between the school and her, FYCS 6 stated that more in-person classes should have been offered. When it came to finalizing her college choice decision, FYCS 6 said her parents and best friend impacted the college decision because she trusted their opinions and helped narrow down what worked best for her since they know her so well. Not seeing the schools in action with students was a challenge in finalizing the decision, but FYCS 6 and her mother made the best out of the tours. When FYCS 6 spoke with others regarding her school choice journey, she made pro and con lists for each school. FYCS 6’s parents were both college educated and relied on their knowledge and opinion, but they also relied on FYCS 6’s best friend who “knows her social personality best” to help determine the best path at the time. FYCS 6 admitted to being eager to start college and taking a COVID gap year was not something she ever considered. FYCS 6 added that being an indecisive person can be difficult but felt empowered to make her school choice decision, but she was not too confident when things did not go according to plan. FYCS 6 was left feeling doubtful, adding any type of decision-making was hard on the student.

FYCS 7. At the time of his interview, FYCS 7 was an 18-year-old Puerto Rican male from New Jersey. FYCS 7 applied and committed to a large public research university in New Jersey. Early in the questionnaire, FYCS 7 stated he had begun applying to 4-year colleges and universities as the result of his parents “forcing it on to me that I have to go to a college throughout high school.” FYCS 7 decided to apply to colleges around the hometown of his childhood, but he also noted that his college tours ranged from South Carolina to the Canadian border. FYCS 7 reported pre-activities including college tours, doing lots of activities within high school, and talking with older siblings, which also helped. FYCS 7 chose 4-year schools as opposed to 2-year schools because they were deemed more prestigious and they could help with a lot of opportunities in the future, adding that both of his parents had graduated from 4-year colleges and he “figured why not follow in their footsteps” if he was going to go to college. FYCS 7 said the application process was smooth since applying began prior to the start of the pandemic and the experience was not impacted. When asked about the communication from the committed school, FYCS 7 stated the school communicated information, but it was always “pretty general” and not informative. When asked what type of communication tools FYCS 7 found most effective, email was listed as FYCS 7 found it “super easy and simple.” FYCS 7 thought the school of choice had communicated well and did not differ too much from his senior year of high school experience, and he was “used to it.” When asked who helped in finalizing the college choice decision, FYCS 7 listed his parents and older sister. When it came to naming challenges, FYCS 7 noted the cost of tuition to be online was still at full tuition rate and not discounted. When speaking with others, FYCS 7 stated the school choice journey

included the comparison with peers looking to go to big schools, and the pandemic changed everything, citing the tuition did not make sense to pay the same amount to be online and this persuaded FYCS 7 into taking a gap year. FYCS 7 relied on older peers and family members for their knowledge and experience for advice. FYCS 7 described the decision-making being solely around the tuition and when the cost did not drop, FYCS 7 finalized the decision to take a gap year. FYCS 7 discussed his plans and rather than attend another school, he and his family determined a deferment to his committed school would be made and would attend Rutgers at a later semester. FYCS 7's parents supported the decision and it helped solidify the plan. When asked if there were any challenges, FYCS 7 reported feelings of being worried about starting with the class younger and wondered how that would be but he realized it did not really matter. FYCS 7 described discussing plans with others and how they were supported by their parents and peers, adding "you were smart for not paying if the full college experience was missing," and he noted his appreciation of everyone's feedback. FYCS 7 credited having more confidence as a result of the gap year decision, but he noted that personal and high school experiences helped lead him to strong decision-making abilities. FYCS 7 also noted feeling empowered to do this on his own because it was a huge decision that changed his life for the future.

FYCS 8. At the time of her interview, FYCS 8 was an 18-year-old Puerto Rican female from Massachusetts. FYCS 8 knew the chosen school she wanted to attend since her second year of high school and she committed early to a specialized arts college in Georgia. FYCS 8 stated that the experience in high school involved a passion for the arts and taking animation courses to better prepare for the first year of college. Some

precollege activities were done prior to applying for college, including taking special courses in arts that were highlighted on her transcript and calling the admissions advisors and contacting them directly to schedule a tour. FYCS 8 said she was in contact with the school for years before applying, adding they knew FYCS 8's name and that made FYCS 8 feel special. FYCS 8 said applying to college and getting a degree in the arts was always a dream she had, and she specified that the education would make FYCS 8 eligible to produce work on animation, adding that only 4-year degrees can help get the full package of assistance for an education. FYCS 8 said that being in high school and applying during the pandemic helped by eliminating the SAT and ACT requirement and the school focused more on grades, and it was less of a hassle. FYCS 8 stated the school stayed in contact "here and there," but she noticed the contact was linear in which the initial reaching out was done by FYCS 8, and she found the school not reciprocal when help was needed. FYCS 8 reported "communication was highly difficult to have clear communication." FYCS 8 added that the school called and updated when they wanted to ensure FYCS 8 was up-to-date for admissions but for nothing else. When asked what the most effective communication tool was, FYCS 8 listed emailing, adding it was more practical, easier, and faster. When asked how the college could improve, FYCS 8 suggested having a better emailing system and incorporating texts to FYCSs, especially for those out of state. FYCS 8 did add that the committed school did not do anything different to gain interest, but she was not interested in other schools as many were beginning to announce closing down and keeping students in their dorms, which did not interest FYCS 8. In August 2020, FYCS 8 began researching other online colleges with her strong opposition to wasting money on tuition and attending classes in a dorm room

because “it made no sense.” FYCS 8 felt she was going to miss out on so much and she specifically noted the hands-on education for a year, which resulted in her rethinking of any postsecondary plans. FYCS 8 described the decision-making process to be highly overwhelming. FYCS 8 said the discussion on the postsecondary plans’ decision was done with her family and she received full support on her school decision but she noticed a change when she decided to take a gap year. FYCS 8 reported feeling terrible, but content because for the first time, it was something selfishly done, and she was intent on seeing it all the way through. When it came to challenges on finalizing the decision, FYCS 8 stated there were none because knowing what was going to be done, she added “there was no overthinking, really!” FYCS 8 stated that while talking to others on her choice journey, there was support from some, and others expressed how they, too, wanted to take a gap year because of how highly FYCS 8 spoke of it. FYCS 8 relied on those 10+ years older friends for their experience and being wiser adding “people my age know what life is like at OUR age” and she wanted more insight on “the ways of life.” FYCS 8 added that some of the older people she spoke to also took a gap year and they “always say they don’t regret it.” FYCS 8 stated the decision-making to take a COVID gap year took a lot of self-convincing, but it was clear what she wanted. FYCS 8 identified as being independent and she made the decision completely on her own. The only reported challenge was her parents, but, ultimately, she convinced them with a “PowerPoint presentation on the benefits of taking a gap year, especially during the pandemic.” When speaking with others, FYCS 8 was warned of possible regrets, but she stated there were no regrets when she was able to focus on career and life goals as opposed to taking classes in a high-priced dorm room. FYCS 8 noted the decision-making independently

was scary but fulfilling as it felt responsible to do the best thing during that time. FYCS 8 was empowered to make the decision on their own because “it made me feel like an adult and break away from the ideals of teenage years and embrace the independence side of myself.”

FYCS 9. At the time of his interview, FYCS 9 was a 19–20-year-old White male from New York City who committed to a medium-sized college in upstate New York, seeking a degree in finance. FYCS 9 described his high school experience as always caring about grades, wondering what he would do after high school and what he desired in life. FYCS 9’s precollege activities, when applying for college, included college visits and emails. FYCS 9 chose a 4-year college because most jobs in his desired field required a 4-year degree. FYCS 9 expressed that being a high school senior made applying to school difficult when trying to keep in contact with the committed schools and to complete campus visits. FYCS 9 did not think the colleges created more interest in their schools during the pandemic. FYCS 9 was able to keep in contact with his committed school through college representatives, using email and Zoom. FYCS 9 found it difficult to get in touch with staff and he experienced unavailability to speak to them directly. FYCS 9 found the most effective communication tools were Zoom and email. He felt if more emails were sent, it would have enhanced the communication between the school and the students.

Some concerns that warranted another look at the postsecondary plans was when FYCS 9 realized how hard his institution, and specifically the business school, was going to be. FYCS 9 deferred the first semester and found it challenging to figure out what to do in place of the newfound time. FYCS 9 was supportive of his decision when speaking

with others, but he did not clarify how support was given, just that “they helped me.” FYCS 9 relied on those 10+ years older than him “because they have been around the block a few times.” He did not have any challenges when finalizing his decision to not enroll in classes for the fall 2020. FYCS 9 did not comment on his confidence in decision-making or feeling empowered as a FYCS.

FYCS 10. At the time of his interview, FYCS 10 was a 19–20-year-old White male from New York City who committed to a large private university in upstate New York. FYCS 10 was an athlete in high school and participated in the Distributed Education Clubs of America (DECA), a school club. FYCS 10 said their committed school was always a dream school. FYCS 10 did a college visit prior to applying. FYCS 10 chose a 4-year college because it felt like it would give the needed time to mature and he could experience life outside of his parents’ care and applying would provide the college experience to step into the “real world.” According to FYCS 10, being a high school senior/young adult, lacked freedom. FYCS 10 did not think the committed college created more interest for itself during the pandemic. FYCS 10 listed the communication tool used by the committed school was email and social media. FYCS 10 found email to be the most effective. He noted it was challenging to communicate with the school because of the length of time and several delays in replying back. When FYCS 10 learned that the campus would have limited access to buildings and have strict rules, he took another look at his postsecondary plans. When asked what the school could have done better to enhance communication, FYCS 10 suggested the school interact with students on social media and have giveaways. When finalizing the college choice decision, his parents, friends, and coach were all supportive. One challenge FYCS 10 experienced was

choosing between two schools, but, ultimately, he chose the one that was able to give more in scholarships. When FYCS 10 finalized his choice, he was found that “others were biased, but I was okay with that and felt no one judged me” on his choice journey. FYCS 10 relied on 10+ years older individuals for guidance because of their experiences. FYCS 10 did not regret taking a COVID gap year and he was fully supported when finalizing the fall 2020 plans. One challenge he noted was knowing that he needed to find a job to acquire some form of income. FYCS 10 reported that he found job and felt content because connections were made with others “as if I were to be at school.” FYCS 10 self-evaluated as having high confidence in independent decision-making and felt empowered to make the decision as a FYCS.

Findings

Chapter 4 presents the findings that evolved from the data collected through a questionnaire completed by a total sample of 10 FYCSs in the Northeastern Region of the United States. Written answers from the open-ended question portion of the questionnaire revealed like-minded language among the peer group and rich data was gathered that supported similar views. Upon further analysis, the answers were coded and linked to patterns that provided a set of themes (Smith et al., 2009). After reading each participant’s response multiple times, the researcher attempted to paraphrase their reviews with key words. This was accomplished by placing the participants’ definitions and descriptions of their experiences in categories and clusters, ultimately applying theme buckets.

Themes

Communication. Although all the FYCSs committed to different schools throughout the Northeast Region of the United States, there were considerable similarities in the lived experiences regarding the theme of communication. In alignment with the main research question, 10 out of 10 FYCSs deemed communication a huge factor for deciding to take a gap year during the global pandemic. All 10 FYCSs stated there was poor communication, but two out of the 10 also noted there were examples of effective communication as well. FYCS 3 described the communication as an FYCS was time consuming:

[The] university has kept me updated, but it was not helpful in any way. There was no update on going to school in fall 2020. It was not clear. I had to stay online most of the time, it was all very time consuming. It took a long time to get information. It was unfortunate, too, because financial aid was not helping.

Several FYCSs were concerned that their committed schools were not available to them. Students were attempting to reach out to the schools, but no one was answering, replying, or confirming information. FYCS 1 stated that the communication fell apart as the year moved forward:

No emails from [institution] regarding COVID-19, as if we were not in a pandemic and everything was simple. They were only talking about signing up for . . . new student orientation and my financial account reminders to pay this and pay that. They were not communicating with us, really, and it was clear to me that our money is all they care about because they would have updated us on their

decisions instead of me having to find out on [institution's] Barstool Instagram account. I needed direction and they did not provide it.

FYCS 2 agreed stating that the information “remained secretive” and it was frustrating because the student body wanted to know the plans of the school so, in turn, FYCS 2 could finalize on the fall 2020 plans.

Cost. The cost of going to a 4-year college or university was reportedly a huge factor for many of the FYCSs in the Northeast Region of the United States. Seven of the 10 FYCSs reported the tuition as being substandard in comparison to the experience. FYCS 8 referred to the changes as unjust to the cost of attending. FYCS 8 stated: “It was my dream to go to . . . but the cost of the tuition never decreased and sitting in a high-priced dorm to take online classes made no sense to my liking.” FYCS 8 stated they began looking up online colleges as their prices were more aligned with that type of education.

FYCS 7 noted the tuition was a huge factor as the “amount of money to not even have the experience was not smart” and he cited “just the cost, to be honest, the cost to be online for a full tuition” prompted the initial review on his fall 2020 plans. FYCS 2 added that the tuition had to be “reasonable” and “somewhat affordable” for the extreme change of the college experience and did not feel the college experience had the same value.

FYCS 5 had similar attributes as there was mention of unnecessary “important to not drain my parents bank accounts because all schools teach the same thing” as the value was not the same as expected when first applying to the committed school.

Support. Support came from many individuals for all 10 of the FYCSs in this study. There were parents, older siblings, counselors, peers, coaches, neighbors, and best

friends. Many proudly spoke of those in their network who helped from personal to academic support. FYCS 1 highlighted her support systems:

My parents, of course, helped me write down pros and cons of each schools I was accepted to, we laid out the financial aspect of each and crossed off ones as we went. While talking to others about my journey, it has either a reaction of “OMG” or “okay.” I relied on people 10+ years older than me for knowledge of alternate postsecondary plans as they have come across more people doing that and can attest to different successes. My parents were, again, very supportive, so that makes everything easier, along with my peers who are not very familiar with this idea but still saying “go for it!”

FYCS 2 noted everyone in his family and friends circle wanted “the best for me, the best education.”

FYCS 3 was evenly split in different support groups. FYCS 3 referred to his main support from his mother and brother in reference to school dealings, but he turned to his peers when the attention shifted to taking a gap year, adding “my peers definitely supported me because my parents weren’t knowledgeable on what a gap year is.” While FYCS 4 was seeking and appreciative of a “second voice.”

FYCS 5 listed counselors as providing support in addition to family. Help was provided in applying for school and scholarships “to get one step closer to med school.” Counselors advised FYCS 5 to apply to many schools and weigh out the scholarship offers to see which one gave the most for the best opportunities for medical school.

FYCS 6 responded similarly as FYCS 1, stating that parents and close friends helped by creating a pros and cons list on each option. FYCS 6 also credited their best

friend as having the biggest impact on the finalized decision since “my best friend is knowledgeable on my social personality and what type of person I am so she would have very valuable input.”

Student Engagement. The FYCS participants were involved in their high school clubs, athletics, jobs, and workshops. FYCS 1 stated, “I was very committed to school and my extracurricular activities.” Like FYCS 1, FYCS 10 also played on a sports team throughout high school and he was a member of the nationally known DECA club. FYCS 5 credited her student engagement to the exposure in the medical field, resulting in a career path to become a surgeon, stating that “I took a medical class that made me fall even more in love with the idea of becoming a surgeon.” FYCS 6 and FYCS 7 utilized opportunities to speak with attending college students and alumni of their potential schools to gain a better grasp on the college community.

Ambition. All 10 of the FYCSs had the drive to go to a 4-year college and get a degree. FYCS 1 stated:

I knew I would see myself attending a large school that emphasized school spirit and honors achievements. I knew I wanted to go to college because education’s importance has been implemented in my life since [I was] a young girl.

FYCS 2 agreed, adding, “Going to a college that is most helpful in pursuing my goal. I understood that I wanted to be a chiropractor and needed school education in order to achieve that goal.” FYCS 3 was direct in stating the need was “to obtain a bachelor’s degree.” While FYCS 4 felt that college was more economically sound as “it leads to more money later in life . . . it makes more sense to continue.” FYCS 5 shared her upbringing as a motivating factor to making college a goal:

College has always been something talked about in my family. Because of the job I want, college is necessary. Nowadays, to get far in life, I feel like you need a bachelors or a master's degree, so college was definitely something I always wanted. Prior to applying, I researched schools and visited them too. I knew this is what I wanted.

Like FYCS 2 and FYCS 5, FYCS 6 and FYCS 9 relied on the importance of getting a degree as a building block for their desired career paths. FYCSs 7, 8, and 10 all referred to 4-year colleges and its importance on attaining a degree with expectations. FYCS 7 referred to college after high school as:

[They] can help a lot with opportunities in the future. I decided to apply to see where I want to go in life. To better plan, I did a lot of college visits to South Carolina, Rutgers, Stony Brook, SUNY Oswego, etc.

FYCS 8 knew what was required and actively worked toward those goals:

4-year, so I can get the full package of education. I took many animation courses in order to prepare for my freshman year of college and took the recommended courses they really liked to see on my transcript throughout high school.

FYCS 10 referred to heading right from high school to college as the “real world.”

Fear of Missing Out. All the FYCSs wanted to experience the full college experience but with the pandemic, all FYCSs questioned if the true college experience could be attained. FYCS 1 detailed the worry:

The college experience seems like one everyone needs to have at some point in their teenage to adult years and it is a social expectation to be a part of this. I was worried I would be behind my peers in school, be late to the social scene, while

people may have already formed their cliques and miss out on chances to network early on.

FYCS 10 agreed, stating “I wanted the full college experience” including wanting to play sports on a collegiate level. FYCS 8, stating they want the “full package of education” referencing in-person learning with the dorm life experience.

Challenges. There were many restrictions that resonated with the FYCSs. Half of the students listed not being allowed to visit the campuses created difficulty, while other reasons also weighed heavily, such as no building access while on campus, strict rules, and nine out of the 10 stated colleges not making an effort to build an interest in their schools during the pandemic was a challenge. FYCS 10 did not like the “limited access to other buildings and strict rules,” while FYCS 3 reflected on “feeling uneasy about the pandemic,” in general. FYCS 1 stated rumors were rampant on social media “having to find out on . . . Barstool account” what the plans were for the upcoming semester proved to be challenging as well. Overall, the consensus in restrictions was the need to see an active campus and this was an issue for most as visits were not allowed during the second half of their senior year, as FYCS 6 stated, “I didn’t get to see the schools in action with students in them. The tours I did were solo with just my mom and I, so it definitely made a different effect on me.”

When it came to technology challenges, most students were “Zoomed out.” They were tired of having online classes and did not want this to be their first semester of college as well. The technology was deemed impersonal and dreaded, to say the least. FYCS 4 stated the connectivity was “iffy” leading to minor issues at times.

Lack of Guidance. The FYCSs were lost and confused because of the lack of guidance from their respective schools. Most turned to their parents for help, like

FYCS 1:

I needed direction and they did not provide it. I was lost in more ways than one, like, I was not sure if deadlines were being extended. Reassurance everything was going according to plan, but nothing. I relied on my parents' input.

FYCS 2 stated they "didn't receive much help from others." Like mindedly, FYCS 5 was confused and tried to "figure things out" on her own and did not find that to be helpful.

Decision-Making. The FYCSs faced many decisions and relied on others when finalizing their plans. Decisions were considered to be life changing and necessary in a small timeframe. Nine of the 10 FYCSs personally stated their confidence level to be high when it came to their own decision-making. FYCS 3 stated:

I do feel empowered to make the decision on my own because it has changed my life forever. My confidence is very high; it was a big decision, but I feel like I made the right choice. While others did encourage me to go with my gut, I had to do what I had to do. I was faced with a lot of decisions and not making a decision, is also making a decision. When I reached out to [the committed] university, they didn't get back to me ASAP; therefore, I was worried that my deferment didn't go through.

FYCS 4 reported: "I'm always confident with my decision-making. I didn't experience any difficulties in this facet." While FYCS 5 added that she was confident in her decision-making skills, but her mother played a role when finalizing any postsecondary plans. FYCS 6 and FYCS 7 both reported feeling indecisive and relying on others for

guidance, while FYCS 8 and FYCS 10 stated they knew taking a gap year was the path they wanted to take and decided this on their own.

Impact of COVID-19. The FYCSs collectively described their time in the global pandemic as challenging. FYCS 1 stated:

Due to COVID-19, deadlines were changing and moved around, and I was lost in more ways than one, like, I was not sure if deadlines were being extended, admission teams were getting influx of calls, and there was no one available. I was unable to communicate.

FYCS 2 found the concept of being home a bit refreshing as it saved money and time.

While FYCS 3 was “uneasy when I found out that a high amount of students were going to come in, I felt uneasy because of the pandemic.” FYCS 4 highlighted the “boringness” that COVID-19 brought to them and their day-to-day routines. FYCSs 5, 6, 8 and 9 all reported that COVID-19 altered the first-year anticipation experience described by older relatives and friends with all the altered changes. All the FYCSs agreed that their committed schools lacked a creative approach to promoting interest in the schools or, as FYCS 7 added, “because everyone was more interested in what was happening in the world and not so much interested in college.”

COVID Break. Also known as the gap year in which FYCSs take a break or time off from matriculated studies between high school and their first year of college, time off during COVID ranged from working and “getting a job to make some sort of income,” such as stated by FYCS 10; to taking up new hobbies, as FYCS 1, 7, and 8 did; and finding time to improve being a better person, tending to their mental health, or becoming

more spiritual, like FYCSs 1, 2, 3, 5, and 9. FYCS 1 stated the COVID break was necessary

Blessing in disguise, as we should be working on ourselves before we make life-changing decisions like college. When speaking with others about my gap year journey, they seemed interested to know what it did for me and how they could have that experience too. My ability to try new things and work on being the best at them. I tried and now am obsessed with goat yoga! I wouldn't have done this if it wasn't for COVID-19 changing the direction of my life.

Preliminary Descriptive Analysis

The results for this phenomenological study developed through the collection of data from 10 fully completed questionnaires from FYCSs who committed to five public and five private 4-year institutions. The researcher found many similarities of concerns and importance with the participants. For example, all 10 participants declared having a college degree was the ultimate goal, and it was equally important to attend a 4-year college. FYCS 6 stated, "it was just the normal thing in my family to go to college after high school to get further educated, get a 4-year degree to succeed." Feeling lost during this time was a sentiment described by all 10 participants, as FYCS 1 stated, "I needed direction and they did not provide it." Half of the participants also stated they were confused, adding to the data that no clear direction was given to purposefully plan their next steps. FYCS 8 described this time period as "highly overwhelming." When seeking answers in the data, all 10 participants listed campus closures to be a last-minute decision and, overall, overwhelming and the reason a review was initiated on their postsecondary plans. Eight of the 10 participants also stated the lack of planning from their committed

schools contributed to their lost and confused feelings. Nine participants felt their schools' communication was poor, while only two participants found the communication to be effective. This shows that one participant, FYCS 8, felt her school was both communicating poorly and effectively. According to FYCS 8, "they called here and there, but weren't available at the needed times to help me. It made it highly difficult to have clear communication. Most effective, emailing 100% but can improve by better emailing system, calls, and texts." The participants valued communication, but, essentially, they sought out communication with useful information. One participant, FYCS 9, stated they, "reached out and it was harder to get in touch, not being able to talk to them directly." Communication was linear, by the institutions sending out mass emails or by the students asking questions with no response—both sides were communicating with no active exchange of valuable information.

Fear of missing out for the FYCSs had a major hold on them. All 10 mentioned some form of disappointment regarding their committed colleges' fall 2020 plans. The topic varied from their wants and what worried them. FYCS 1 stated, "I felt like I was missing out on the real college experience," FYCS 10 was specifically annoyed with the "strict rules and limited access to campus buildings," and FYCS 8 added, "going to college to sit and do college in a dorm room was not to my liking." In all, the FYCSs expectations were being challenged and not what they were looking forward to because their wants and needs were being compromised as a result of the pandemic.

Upon review of the data regarding the decision-making process for the FYCSs, seven felt empowered and seven felt confident. FYCS 10 stated, "I made my decision on my own. I have high confidence, and I don't regret it at all." In agreement, FYCS 8 said,

“I knew exactly what I wanted and did it. No complaints because I’m more independent that way,” and FYCS 3 added, “I feel empowered to make the decision on my own . . . my confidence is very high; it was a big decision, but I feel like I made the right choice.” Examining how external influences affected their decision-making, three FYCSs found the decision-making difficult, and four described being influenced by others. FYCS 6 stated she was an “indecisive person,” while FYCS 5 described her mother as “playing a strong role in finalizing” the decision. Although each of the 10 participants stated they had personal support systems, most were self-reliant and described how they took hold of their choices regarding their postsecondary plans.

Finally, how the gap year was spent was defined with growth and time, the same six FYCSs, who took a gap year, also listed they experienced growth, and three of the FYCSs experienced time that was reportedly “needed.” FYCS 4 was the outlier who listed only time without growth and answered “boring” when referring to the time off.

The theories covered in this study of decision-making and linear communication were heavily connected to the FYCSs findings. The FYCSs were limited to important, helpful information that would determine if/when they would begin their first year of college. The FYCSs supported that the information from their institutions was a one-way approach in communication and not helpful. This theory supports that the colleges and universities did not encourage or practice two-way communication or effective communication that would allow the FYCSs to feel heard or informed to the point of adequate decision-making.

Decision-making was a huge theory that pointed to the confidence that the FYCSs felt to finalize their postsecondary plans. Seven out of the 10 participants felt confident

with their decision-making skills, while seven (some overlapping) also reportedly felt empowered with their decision-making regarding their postsecondary plans. A few students reportedly felt uneasy with deciding on their own, and they summoned family members (mainly mothers) to help solidify their decision. Decision-making took on such a role in the covered time period, because of so many changes in such a short time span, warranted a revisit to the plans. Overall, the FYCSs were given an opportunity to decide if the pandemic was going to alter their college plans, and rather than to proceed with the original path, the FYCSs decided to research different options that could provide an alternate solution as they experienced the global pandemic. All 10 FYCS participants decided to try a gap year during this time as opposed to enrolling in the college or university they were committed to.

Summary of Results

The findings supported that all the participants deferred their 4-year college choice during the pandemic for similar reasons that surrounded the lack of communication from their schools, cost of tuition, and not having a full college experience, due to many restrictions put into place. The FYCSs were actively involved in the decision-making process and most named at least one parent as support. Some were strong in their responses on their decision-making abilities stating, “this is my life” or “I’m independent” and six rated their confidence on decision-making to be “very high.” FYCSs in this study were actively weighing their options, given the unique circumstances of the past year and the global pandemic. The group were conscious of the cost and hesitant to pay for a tuition that they did not believe would be worth what was being offered as the college experience.

The participants reported that communication was not adequate or “not what they expected” from their colleges of choice. They hoped for exciting news but continuously received “a whole lot of empty information.” One piece of information that lacked a roll out was orientation. Amid confusion or even an acknowledgement that a fall semester would go according to tradition, the students were left wondering how or when orientation was going to take place—updates and reminders were not rapidly sent out on the topic. This experience was echoed across all the participants. All the participants noted that college after high school was always their plans. Each FYCS applied and committed to the college of their choice, but they lacked enrollment because of the changes that were not anticipated when they originally applied to their 4-year college/university choices. When they sought information, lines of communication were closed off, phone calls went unanswered, staff rerouted inquiries to other departments, and emails had no useful information.

Also, the definition for the fear of missing out changed with this group of young adults who were navigating college and related items in the midst of a pandemic. The FYCSs for fall 2020 were the first freshmen who experienced a pandemic, and they did not know what to expect because they were the first to experience this type of scenario. The FYCSs of this study were the first to experience a new fear of missing out, and they were eager to share their experiences with their peers and exchange experiences because no one had the same story. In terms of fear of missing out, the FYCSs were in fear of missing out but on another level, which included staying in the know about what was happening at their colleges and universities. For example, did they sign up on time for admission, they did get a weekly COVID test, were they late in doing what the colleges

expected, did they receive the information they were supposed to receive, etc. There was a constant feeling of anxiety, forgetfulness, or something missing or due that was not the norm pre-COVID or a universal experience as in years past. The FYCS were the first to experience a disconnect from their colleges and universities on a large scale.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological questionnaire study was to discover how FYCSs perceived their decision-making, and how the communication received by their committed institutions of higher education affected their decision to take a gap year because of the COVID-19 pandemic, rather than follow through with their original plans to enroll in a 4-year institution. Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the implications of the research findings regarding the FYCSs. It then identifies the limitations of the study and gives recommendations for further research, and, last, it summarizes the research, and provides a conclusion.

Research Questions

The main research question was:

What motivating factors contributed to recent high-school students' decisions to take a gap year during the COVID-19 global pandemic?

The subquestions to help answer the main research question were:

1. Who, if anyone, influenced recent high school graduates in the midst of the COVID-19 global pandemic to not enroll in college/university for fall 2020?
2. What plans do first-year college students, who deferred in fall 2020 due to COVID-19, have to enroll in college/university in the future?

In response to the main research question, all of the FYCS participants believed that the lack of resourceful, informative, and helpful communication from their

committed schools led to them to reevaluate their fall 2020 plans. The schools did not touch base with their students enough, but they did return the students' calls or answer their emails. Those who received communication reported it to be generic with empty information for the upcoming school year, and there was no enlightening communication about their first semester of college, and there was no indication how COVID-19 would affect their college experience. For the participants, the linear communication was unhelpful and made them feel confused and lost; one-way communication proved to be ineffective. Many participants began researching the possibility of taking a gap year during these unprecedented times. The Gap Year Association reported that their highest website traffic was in the midst of the pandemic, with a 150% jump in website interest (Gap Year Association, 2020). In other words, a variety of students (not just this study's FYCSs), were seeking alternative options for postsecondary plans as a result of COVID-19. Most of the FYCSs reported that a gap year was never their plan, and their goals were to attend a 4-year institution and obtain a 4-year college degree within 4 years, but the COVID-19 pandemic introduced different possibilities.

In response to Subresearch Question 1, most participants decided on their own to take a gap year. Decision-making with limited information caused high anxiety and debate regarding what would be best for them. There was support, but the participants expressed that they were confident in concluding that the gap year option was best for them in such a time of uncertainty. Two participants credited their mothers for helping them decide what to do for fall 2020, but the remainder of the participants reported making the decision on their own and only seeking support after they had made their decisions. The "who" that influenced most of the participants regarding their gap year

decision for fall 2020 was internal and self-directed. In response to Subresearch Question 2, all the participants stated that going to a 4-year college or university was still their goal. COVID-19 disrupted their timelines, but their goal to attain a 4-year degree was still the purpose across all 10 participants. Some of the participants specifically listed fall 2021 as their ideal start date, while others were vague on their ideal start date. Most cited their decision to wait until a full-on college experience could be experienced. Ultimately, the participants did not enroll in their committed schools because of the lack of a college experience on campus brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Implications of Findings

The seven findings were (a) poor communication, (b) fear of missing out, (c) confidence in their decision-making skills, (d) exterior support, (e) cost, (f) 4-year colleges/universities were always the plan, and (g) impact on number of students going to colleges/universities in 2020.

Major Finding 1

All the FYCS participants generally reported negative perceptions regarding communication from their schools. Linear models of communication, also known as one directional lines of communication, left many students with unanswered phone calls and emails. The FYCSs were left to seek last-minute information regarding what fall 2020 would be like with no real direction or guidance as to their first year as a college student. The theories covered in this study of decision-making and linear communication were heavily connected to the FYCSs' findings. The FYCSs were limited to important, helpful information that would determine if/when they would begin their first year of college. The FYCSs supported that the information from their institutions was a one-way

approach in communication and unhelpful. This theory supports that the colleges and universities did not encourage or practice two-way communication or effective communication that would allow the FYCSs to feel heard or informed to the point of helping with adequate decision-making.

Decision-making was a huge theory that related to the confidence that the FYCSs felt to finalize their post-secondary plans. Seven out of the 10 participants felt confident with their decision-making skills, while seven (there was some overlapping) also reportedly felt empowered with their decision-making regarding their post-secondary plans. A few reportedly felt uneasy with deciding on their own, and they summoned family members (mainly moms) to help solidify their decision. Decision-making took on such a role in the covered time period, and because so many changes had to be decided in a short time span, it warranted a revisit to the plans. Overall, the FYCSs were given an opportunity to decide if the pandemic was going to alter their college plans, and rather than proceed with the original path, the FYCSs decided to research different options that could provide an alternate solution as they experienced the global pandemic. All 10 FYCS participants decided to try out a gap year during this time as opposed to enrolling in their originally committed-to college or university.

Major Finding 2

FOMO was a major reason to defer college but it was also a motivator to keep the plans the same. One major finding was that the definition for FOMO changed with this group of young adults who were navigating college in the midst of a pandemic. The FYCSs for fall 2020 were the first freshmen experiencing a pandemic in the last century, and they were not aware of the possible expectations because they were the first to

experience this type of scenario. The FYCSs of this study were the first to experience a new FOMO, and they were eager to share their experiences with their peers and share their stories with others. In terms of FOMO, the FYCSs' fear was on another level that included staying in the know. For example: Did they sign up on time for this? Did they get a weekly COVID test? Were they late to do this/that? Was the information received, etc. There was a constant feeling of anxiety, forgetfulness, or something missing or due that was not the norm before COVID or a universal experience that occurred in years past. The FYCSs were the first to experience a disconnect on a large scale. They were conflicted with what they wanted to experience to make their college experiences perfect and they did not want to be left behind.

Major Finding 3

The FYCSs described themselves as confident in their decision-making skills. They were determined, and at times unapologetic, at not seeking approval prior to finalizing their decision. With communication and decision-making, the students made better decisions when they were informed. The students also had more confidence to make their decisions regarding higher education.

Major Finding 4

The FYCSs had exterior supports, and their mothers were influential. Most of the FYCSs relied on their family and friends for help in their decision-making; they specifically noted their mother as an immediate support system and confidant.

Major Finding 5

Cost was a major issue, and it was repeated in most answers. The FYCSs wanted the value of a college experience but when it was determined that there would be no

change in the cost for a lesser college experience, enrolling in fall 2020 was deemed unworthy. The FYCSs found online teaching to be undervalued. The students wanted teaching in-person, and they found the quality of teaching online to be equivalent to teaching themselves and not worth the cost.

Major Finding 6

Although all the FYCSs took a gap year, 4-year colleges/universities were always their plan. Going to a college or university was ingrained in their educational goals, and all of the participants stated that they had known since they were young children that they would go on to attend college. COVID-19 may have delayed their college enrollment, but their plans remained the same—enroll in a 4-year college or university. The FYCSs may or may not continue with their original committed school, but their plans are still to go to attend a 4-year college or university.

Major Finding 7

The lack of communication affected the number of enrollments to the 4-year colleges and universities. This situation had a snowball effect for the college communities. Less students were on campus and this meant less money would be spent on food, merchandise, and services in and around the college communities, which translated to businesses suffering because of lost revenue.

Limitations

The first limitation was that the research was conducted as an online survey and not via interviews with the participants, as originally conceived, especially given this was a phenomenological study. While the students' voices were captured via the survey, the nuances of the responses and nonverbal reactions were not able to be captured. This study

was conducted in the spring and summer, at the end of the academic year for the FYCSs, rather than during the academic year. Although there were numerous students interested, only 10 met the criteria to participate. In addition, the researcher did not anticipate there would be such difficulty reaching eligible participants. The process of obtaining participants would have proven easier if a larger pool of the participants were available during the nontraditional academic year of May to July when the questionnaire was to be distributed. Due to the pandemic, the researcher was unable to reach out to a larger number of participants. Some of the participants who started the survey, did not complete it, possibly due to being too long—this could have discouraged some likely participants to fully complete the survey. For those who fully completed the survey, there was no opportunity for follow-up questions that might have required clarity. Also, the survey was not originally embedded in the original link, and this was later added after finding that the young adults preferred immediacy (via links) rather than contacting someone to express interest (email, phone call), and, in turn, having a link sent to them. Another limitation of the study was the concentration on 4-year college students in the Northeast Region of the United States, which omitted potentially rich data from those listed in other parts of the country and those in 2-year colleges and graduate programs. The study did not take into account international FYCSs, national research projects, gappers outside of their incoming year of college, FYCSs over the age of 22 years old, independent students as defined by FAFSA, and the FYCSs' socioeconomic status defined by FAFSA.

Another limitation was that engagement follow-up phone calls via virtual chats could have been an option and could have added data to the study, but the IRB documents outlined that the researcher would not be contacting anyone after they

completed the survey. Finally, it took many resources to help combat researcher bias from occurring during this study. This researcher sought outside peers to review the findings and provide feedback to help review the research, from an outside perspective, to help combat researcher bias.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the implications of this study. These recommendations offer other researchers' insight into what is needed in order to conduct a study with questionnaires.

Future researchers should look to use a questionnaire, paired with in-depth interviews, to gain more insight on FYCSs and their connection to taking a gap year, with COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 settings, and there should be a focus on how the FYCSs' time was spent during their gap year. It is recommended that this study be repeated for the fall 2021 gap-year participants (and beyond) with the same questionnaire questions delivered in a face-to-face setting. To further add to the literature, a replication of this study could be conducted to gain an understanding of the experiences of the participants. This would be important for the research on FYCSs and gap-year studies. It is important to note that follow-up information should be embedded in the survey, so further engagement is accessible in future studies.

In an effort to expand the literature on the topic, future research opportunities should include conducting research with Latinos/Latinas to gain an understanding of their experiences. To further add to the literature, a replication of this study could be conducted to compare differences and similarities; the study would then account for triangulation. The literature would also benefit from a study that is conducted by

comparing the experiences of Latinos and Latinas. This study was gaining some momentum in Latino participants, however, there were no questions pertaining to race and ethnicity, thus, there was a lost opportunity on this insight. In addition, further research is recommended to evaluate if students of color are given alternative information for gap-year programs. This study supports those students who took a gap year, but none partnered with a certified gap-year program. Are students, predominantly of color, aware that such alternatives exist? This researcher highly recommends a study on gap-year exposure in public, inner-city school districts. In addition, further research is recommended to explore high school students' gap-year knowledge and options, nationwide.

The participants discussed the importance of having confidence in their decision-making and this, too, should be further explored in the age group of 18–22-year olds to better understand what makes a young adult more confident in their decisions than another individual in the same age group. Also, excluding the pandemic, this subject can be studied by looking into parents' expectations for this age group's decision-making and confidence level on taking a gap year after high school. This could help to further expand, under a larger participant pool, who is more likely to take a gap year, and are those FYCSs motivated to explore from traditional ideals. In addition, colleges and universities can develop an assessment tool that would better assist them in approving and disapproving gap-year deferments, which could be expanded to include all types of gap years—not just gap years for FYCSs.

A concentration should be made on Zoom fatigue and how and what FYCSs feel about the new way of learning. Did being online for every factor of their academics,

affect the online experience? Was this practiced in high school and standardized for college? The researcher recommends using Zoom, Microsoft teams, Skype, etc., applications, to find out how FYCSs feel about them, and their constant usage be included in any future studies. Researchers do yet know the full implications of COVID-19 to high school students moving onto college and more research is needed in this area. Finally, a study is recommended that focuses on the review of the cost of in-person learning as opposed to online learning and how their values differ as perceived by students.

Conclusion

There is limited literature that speaks to the reasons why FYCSs take a gap year, but there is a lack of literature that speaks to taking a gap year during a global pandemic. This study was necessary to better understand the FYCSs' experiences in order to assist those in the near future with the aftermath of the continued global crisis. Institutions that continue to support college deferment for a gap years allow those, who want to explore this option, some peace of mind. Given that colleges and universities promote expanding the mind, thinking outside your community and comfort zones all while growing as an individual, the gap year experience appears to foster the same mission. Students who take a gap year enter back into academia with insight, and they have experiences to share in their college communities, benefiting both the student and the institutions' communities.

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Appendix A

Invitation to Participate in the Study

Study Title: An Exploration of First-Year College Student Enrollments for the Fall 2020 Semester Among Northeastern United States Individuals and Their Final Postsecondary Plans

Dear _____,

My name is Ritza Santiago and I am a doctoral student in the EdD program in Executive Leadership at St. John Fisher College. I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements for my degree, and I would like to invite you to participate. I am interested in learning more about your experience as a first-year college student during the fall 2020 semester. Your insight into this phenomenon is crucial because you can provide pertinent information that can assist other first-year college students to succeed at the postsecondary level. I am interested in studying the decision-making factors for choosing to not enroll in a school, college, or university in fall 2020 and “taking off” time from your educational plans. I am interested in discovering what worked for you and what didn’t work for young adults like yourself. Your participation will be of value to university administrators, faculty, and your peers who are interested in improving the quality of admissions and enrollment services for all students and, in particular, to those attending or looking to attend colleges or universities amidst a global pandemic.

Appendix B

FYCS Eligibility Prescreening Tool

Thank you for consenting to participate in this important study. The study is designed to explore college enrollment for first-year college students. The information collected in this survey will be valuable for this research. The data requested will be used in preparing a doctoral dissertation to be published in fall 2021. By completing this survey, you are granting me permission to use the data in this study. As such, you are advised of the following:

- A. You have the right to decline answering any question you are uncomfortable with.
- B. It should take approximately 5 minutes to complete the survey.
- C. There will be no physical discomfort.
- D. Your answers will remain confidential at all times, and the data will be properly secured.

Please choose an answer for the following questions to the best of your ability.

1. What is your age? (please select one)
 - 18
 - 19–20
 - 21–22
 - over 22

2. How would you describe your gender identity?
 - Female
 - Male
 - Other
 - Prefer not to answer

3. What is your permanent mailing address ZIP Code?

4. What is your classification in college for the fall 2020 semester?
 - Freshman/First Year
 - Sophomore
 - Junior
 - Senior
 - Fifth Year
 - Graduate

5. Were you accepted into a 4-year college or university?
 - Yes
 - No

6. Did you commit to a 4-year college or university by submitting an enrollment deposit?
 - Yes
 - No

7. What is the name of the 4-year college or university you committed to?

8. How would you identify yourself given the following choices?
 - Asian/Pacific Islander
 - Black, Non-Hispanic
 - Hispanic/Puerto Rican
 - Hispanic/Other
 - Native American
 - White/Non-Hispanic
 - Other

Appendix C

FYCS Questionnaire

Introduction of Participants

Overall Experience

1. Please share your academic journey and how you decided on going to college?
2. Please explain your experiences in high school and what led you to apply to one or several 4-year colleges and/or universities?
3. What type of precollege activities did you do prior to applying? This can be college visits, phone calls, alumni testimonials, etc.
4. Please explain why you decided to attend college?
5. Why did you choose specifically a 4-year college or university?
6. How has being a young adult/high school senior during a pandemic impacted your experience of applying to a 4-year college or university?
7. Finally, what do you think colleges and/or universities can do to create more interest in their schools amidst a global pandemic?

Research Question 1

To what extent did communication from the college or university from your committed school help field questions on COVID-19 concerns?

1. Can you describe how your committed school was communicating with you?
Did anyone else receive the same information on your behalf?

2. What challenges, specifically, have you encountered with communication as a first-time college student?
3. Which aspects did you feel were beneficial up until August 2020? Why?
4. What types of communication tools did you find most effective for first-year college students?
5. What information did you learn that warranted another look at your postsecondary plans? Please describe what concerned you.
6. What do you believe the college/university can do to better enhance the communication between the school and first-year college students?

Research Question 2

To what extent did outside influences facilitate the decision-making factors for first-year college students residing in the Northeast Region of the United States to partake in a COVID gap year?

1. Discuss the importance of decision-making in your college choice journey.
2. Discuss the role of those around you in your path toward finalizing your college choice decision.
3. Describe any challenges you may have had in engaging when finalizing your decision.
4. Describe your experience regarding speaking with others on your journey choice.
5. How do you describe your confidence in decision-making on your own?
6. As a first-year college student, did you feel empowered to make decisions on your own? Tell me a little about why or why not.

7. Do you feel that you gravitate to the older generation for answers or do you feel your peers are more knowledgeable on the subject? Why or why not?
8. Discuss the importance of decision-making in your choice to take a COVID gap year.
9. Discuss the role of those around you in your path toward finalizing your decision on your fall 2020 plans.
10. Describe any challenges you may have had in engaging others when finalizing your decision not to enroll in classes for the fall 2020 semester.
11. Describe your experience regarding speaking with others about your gap year choice.
12. How do you describe your confidence in decision-making on your own in regard to these change of plans?
13. As a first-year college student, did you feel empowered to make this decision on your own? Tell me why or why not?
14. Do you feel that you gravitate to the older generation for answers or do you feel your peers are more knowledgeable regarding alternate postsecondary plans? Why or why not?