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**A Transition of Self:
How a Gap Year Experience Impacts Emerging Adults**

By

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Abstract

A gap year is an opportunity for emerging adults to take a break from academics, by having a novel learning experience that instills challenge and provides exposure to new perspectives and environments. A gap year ranges from unstructured leisure time to structured programs that offer domestic or international experiences. The gap year programs investigated in this study are classified as outdoor adventure education. Outdoor adventure education programs that incorporate experiential learning principles, in which participants engage in direct experiences with instructors, peers, and the outdoors provide insight on the impacts these experiences can have on program participants.

The purpose of this study is primarily to educate and broaden the scope of research that explores the impact of taking a gap year for those who participate in programs, in the United States. By understanding the developmental characteristics of emerging adulthood, correlations can be made regarding how a gap year program can support some of the challenges associated with this transitional period. A gap year experience has the capacity to build positive self-perceptions by supporting participants to combat physical challenge, discomfort, conflicting social dynamics, and internal struggle.

Gap year programs are highlighted as having the greatest impact on personal growth, for participating emerging adults. My research supports this previously existing claim, through a case-study examination that involves semi-structured interviews with five, Happy Trails Institute gap program alumni. In addition to gap year impacts on personal growth, my research also finds that participants were strongly impacted by their instructors and learning in an outdoor environment, which also facilitated a broadened sense of perspective.

This research is dedicated to all the educators out there, who put their entire heart and soul into inspiring and impacting their students in a way that is truly making this world a better place.

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A Transition of Self: How a Gap Year Experience Impacts Emerging Adults

Chapter One

I remember high school as a time of uncertainty, indecision, and soul searching. My identity as a high-achieving academic left me with little room for exploration of my innate passions. I felt restricted by the only trajectory I thought possible: high school to college to a life-long career. During my transition to college, I was overwhelmed with stress and self-doubt. This was a major step towards adulthood, and yet, I had little awareness of the person I was becoming. I went through college in a gray, urban environment aimlessly searching for a sense of purpose. I now realize that I needed the tools to explore myself, beyond academia.

It was not until my early twenties that my outdoor experiences and separation from formal education, brought me a sense of inner strength. I was able to explore my skills alongside like-minded individuals on the path to personal growth. I was challenged to break through my comfort zone and communicate with people from different perspectives, all over the world. I learned about the person I wanted to be, as I was inspired by educators who taught with an innate passion for their subject. After many years of working in the outdoor industry, I learned that a constant state of reflection would always teach me something new about myself. I now realize that perhaps, if I had taken a *gap year* after high school, I may have entered college inspired with self-confidence and a sense of direction.

Background

A gap year: while the term itself suggests the longevity of an entire year, ranges from several months to two years (Heath, 2007). A gap year can be defined as a 'break' from formal academia (Martin, 2010). This break most commonly occurs between high school and higher education (King, 2011). According to King, the concept of taking a gap year originated during

the Grand Tour of the Victorian era in which young men from the United Kingdom traveled throughout Europe studying The Arts. The history of taking a gap year can be attributed to the popularity of the experience in Europe and Australia, today (Curtis, 2014; O'Shea, 2011; Rose Birch & Miller, 2007; Simpson, 2005; Vogt, 2018). While the gap year experience was initially for those of high privilege, programs around the world are seeking opportunities to provide financial assistance and academic credit for interested participants (Gap Year Association, 2021). According to the Gap Year Association, taking a gap year has also become more popular in the United States.

The participation in a gap year program offers a broad range of experiences for interested individuals. These opportunities range from unstructured leisure time to employment, domestically or internationally (Gap Year Association, 2021). International volunteering is considered the authentic gap year experience (O'Shea, 2014). Taking a gap year for international volunteering is still recognized as an opportunity of privilege for middle and upper-class groups (Heath, 2007). According to Gallagher and Blythe (2020), over 70% of gap year participants spend their time travelling or volunteering. Meanwhile, structured gap year programs tend to integrate educational components through stewardship and outdoor adventure.

Many gap year programs are framed by experiential learning (Gap Year Association, 2021). The experiential learning model serves as an important foundation for instruction that addresses individualized opportunities (Kolb, 2015). Individualization is defined as the variety of ways an individual can make decisions (Schwartz et al., 2005). Some of the most widely known gap year programs categorized as outdoor adventure education, with an experiential learning focus are: Outward Bound and National Outdoor Leadership School. These programs are accredited through the Gap Year Association. National Outdoor Leadership School, for example,

focuses on developing personal strengths through leadership opportunities and outdoor learning (Hutson et al., 2019). Outdoor adventure education programs can impact students through challenging group dynamics, instructor influence, and the physical discomfort of outdoor environments (Sibthorp et al., 2011). The impacts of experiential learning programs are often measured by the perceived impacts of participating alumni, in which the variety of individual experiences creates a variance in study results. These individual differences highlight the ways challenges of transition are varied.

Study Problem

While for some, transition can mark attainable possibilities, for others, transition can instill negative impressions of personal life goals. Internal struggle and emotional challenges can be linked to individual behaviors and the emerging adulthood period of development. Arnett (2000) defines emerging adulthood as the transitional period from adolescence to young adulthood for ages 18-25. Arnett writes:

Emerging adulthood is a time of life when many different directions remain possible, when little about the future has been decided for certain, when the scope of independent exploration of life's possibilities is greater for most people than it will be at any other period of the life course. (p. 469)

Individuals may view possibilities as unattainable if they lack the self-awareness or self-confidence to follow through on a potential trajectory. "Transitions across the lifespan involve the experiences of dislocation, disorientation, and disruption" (Volstad et al., 2020, p.2).

Developmental transition involves physiological and socio-emotional changes that impact one's values and beliefs. Transition must therefore be combatted through a strong sense of self, and otherwise, external support.

Emerging Adults Need Support

Ultimately, emerging adults need multi-faceted layers of support in this pivotal, transition period of life. Support systems stem from family relationships, peers, and social dynamics, in addition to school counseling and advising. Families that encourage self-love in a loving environment are likely to instill individuals with self-confidence upon emerging adulthood. If parents are overly controlling, this might inhibit freedoms and exploration, causing emerging adults to feel more unstable and indecisive (Reifman et al., 2007). Strong peer relationships are essential in this phase of life because a lack of social connections can decrease self-confidence and self-perceptions (Sánchez-Queija et al., 2017). Additionally, limited school counseling inhibits students from gaining a sense of clarity about their future decisions (Martin, 2010). The question is, are emerging adults getting the support they need?

The Need for a Break

Academic stress in both high school and college, as well as the increasing competition for acceptance to and within higher education can stifle the ability for emerging adults to excel in performance (Vogt, 2018). Rose Birch and Miller (2007) found that low academic achievers in high school are less certain about their next step in academic study. The competition in formal education can also lead to academic burnout by the time students' complete high school, highlighting the need to take a break (Martin, 2010; Walburg, 2014). Meanwhile, "educational credentials are no longer a guarantee of success" (King, 2011, p. 343). This increases the demand for extracurricular activities and unique experiences that signify personal growth and maturity, beyond academic ability (Vogt, 2018). Can a gap year be the unique experience emerging adults need?

Purpose

The purpose of this study is primarily to educate and broaden the scope of research that evaluates the impact of taking a gap year for those who participate in programs, in the United States. Gap year programs generally emphasize experiential learning (Gap Year Association, 2021), so it is important to consider the impacts directly attributed to this form of education. By understanding the developmental characteristics of emerging adulthood, correlations can be made regarding how a gap year program can support some of the challenges associated with this transitional period. “Although gap years have gained in popularity, their efficacy is unclear” (O’Shea, 2014, p.7). An understanding of those who choose to participate in gap year programs, as well as the benefits attributed to this participation, can hopefully broaden gap year availability, through a deeper understanding of the impacts.

The Value of Experiential Learning

A purpose of this research is to outline gap year program (Happy Trails Institute, HTI) and the way experiential learning opportunities embedded in HTI, support personal growth. This gap year experience can serve as a unique developmental bridge between adolescence and adulthood. An investigation of experiential learning principles guiding outdoor adventure education, can help identify the value of this teaching style to support emerging adults with the challenges of transition. The purpose of experiential education is for students to take control of the learning experience and identify their contributions, according to their passions and skills (Kolb, 2015). This sense of control can be further explained by the need for independence in emerging adulthood, therefore highlighting the value of experiential learning for this age group (Reifman et al., 2007). By understanding pre-existing support systems and individual decisions prior to a gap year experience, the impacts of program participation can imply certain impacts of experiential learning as a teaching model.

Gap Year Programs as Support

Another purpose of this research is to highlight the emotional challenges of transition for emerging adults and the relevant avenues for support. Through a case study examination of the HTI Gap program, the program model and learning outcomes may indicate how gap year programs in general, can provide the support that emerging adults need at this time. This support can stem from participating in a gap year program to recover from the challenges of competitive high school environments and guide students in developing self-confidence. Support can also be separate from the gap year experience itself and encompass merely the healing elements of spending time in nature (Williams, 2017). While not all emerging adults need support, those with a negative perspective are likely to experience a decreased sense of psychological and social well-being (Baggio et al., 2017). My research takes an empathetic approach to better understand this emotional period of development, to provide insight for supporting individuals with the challenges of transition.

Research Questions

My research will examine the impacts of the HTI Gap program. As HTI Gap program participants reflect on their experience and support during the program, conclusions can be made about the impact of the gap year program on participant self-perceptions. These opportunities beyond high school are expected to become more manageable after a gap year experience, due to an increased sense of self-awareness. The research questions guiding the foundation of this study are:

- 1) What is the impact of the HTI Gap program on participants transitioning from high school to college?
- 2) How does experiential learning contribute to supporting emerging adults in transition?

My literature review will extend this research in greater detail in Chapter Two, supported by the theoretical framework and a critical evaluation of existing literature, providing a lens for this study. Chapter Three outlines my methodology including my semi-structured interview process, participant recruitment process, data collection and limitations. Chapter Four provides an overview of my data analysis, including the most profound interview responses and themes that emerged from participant responses. Chapter Five discusses the most prominent gap year program impacts indicated from participant responses, with connections to previously existing literature. This research seeks to provide information for emerging adults considering participation in gap year programs and outdoor adventure educators looking to understand how best to support their students.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

My research focuses on gap year programs and how they can serve as a form of support for emerging adults in transition. Through an evaluation of emerging adulthood as a developmental period, my research seeks to connect the perceived challenges for emerging adults with what these individuals might need for support. Gap year program impacts are evaluated as a beneficial transition for emerging adults, due to their influences from experiential learning. The many facets of experiential learning can be attributed to what emerging adults need for developing positive self-perceptions that support them in transition. This chapter is outlined by a theoretical framework and examines the challenges of transition, gap year program participation, gap year program outcomes, and outdoor adventure education within gap year program models.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework guiding this chapter will mainly consist of Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood and Kolb's experiential learning theory. Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood encapsulates specific features of development that describe this phase of life with a balance of the positive and negative perspectives about opportunities and transition (Reifman et al., 2007). While this transition period varies by individual, there are fundamental crossovers in the emerging adulthood stage of development. Individual experiences are also reflected by Kolb's experiential learning theory in the sense that all students will inherently experience learning differently whether that is according to different learning styles or varying engagement in the learning process (Kolb, 2015). As this chapter unfolds, references made to Kolb's experiential learning theory are intended to reveal opportunities for instructors to use this

research as a reference to support emerging adults who participate in opportunities that are outlined by experiential learning.

Arnett's Theory of Emerging Adulthood

Emerging adulthood is a developmental stage that generally ranges from 18-25 years old, however, age is arbitrary and sometimes adulthood occurs sooner or later, depending on the individual (Arnett, 2000). Arnett's emerging adulthood theory surfaced over twenty years ago with the intention to re-examine the period between adolescence and young adulthood through more precise descriptors. Life trajectories are individualized, which highlights the variety of opportunities for emerging adults. Individualization also represents independence for individuals facing the challenges of navigating through life. Arnett (2007) speaks to individualization occurring at a higher frequency for emerging adults, meaning that this is a time of great exploration of one's unique qualities. This therefore connects the variation of individual perspectives to the array of possibilities for emerging adults (Baggio et al., 2017). These individuals are taking the time to figure out their potential adult roles and the direction to take their passions and goals.

As outlined by Reiman et al. (2007, p.4), the five features that define the emerging adulthood period are:

1. The age of identity explorations
2. The age of instability
3. The self-focused age
4. The age of feeling in-between
5. The age of possibilities

An exploration of Arnett's five features of emerging adulthood is based on the positive and negative perceptions of emerging adults in this developmental period. There are individualized experiences in this time, which inherently creates variation in the process of developing a positive self-perception (Schwartz et al., 2005). Arnett's theory examines individualized and varied experiences within emerging adulthood, recognizing that life events and the range of support systems impact how these features resonate differently, for different individuals.

Exploration. Reifman et al. (2007) claim that identity exploration is the most essential feature of Arnett's emerging adulthood theory. "Identity exploration is a dimension in which youths explore different ways of living as they decide how to define themselves" (Baggio et al., 2017). Reifman et al. describe this feature as a necessary component to normative development. Normative development encompasses identity exploration where an individual develops emotionally and intellectually. Normative development is tied to the importance of understanding oneself, which can lead to stability and self-confidence (Schwartz et al., 2005). This self-awareness then guides decision-making, according to the emerging adult's strengths.

While Schwartz et al. describe identity formation as a necessary milestone in emerging adulthood, Arnett (2007) contests that challenges in finding one's identity, can manifest anxiety. There is also the possible struggle with insecurities and loneliness (Nelson & Barry, 2005). "Some emerging adults may find the developmental task of prolonged identity formation difficult without external guidance or help" (Schwartz et al., 2005, p. 202). These individual differences highlight the possible need for additional support for those who find this developmental period challenging. Identity exploration varies based on individual self-perceptions as an individual shifts from adolescence through emerging adulthood.

Instability. The age of instability refers to individual experiences in emerging adulthood from a negative perspective. Instability refers to the challenges for an individual in this period of transition, in which they are lacking the self-confidence to determine the best outcome for themselves. For some, this can lead to feelings of overwhelm, a lack of belief in one's abilities, and a general unease about possibilities (Reifman et al., 2007). Peer and McAuslan (2007) describe these negative self-perceptions as manifesting in self-doubt. Self-doubt can be attributed to the many options and choices presented to emerging adults. "It is possible that heightened instability and exploration may be related to depression for some individuals" (Nelson & Barry, 2005, p. 246). Self-doubt, uncertainty, and other negative self-perceptions represent the age of instability.

Self-focused. The self-focused age characterizes emerging adults by their exploration of independence and self-development (Arnett, 2007b). Arnett describes the self-focused feature as an opportunity for learning by travelling, exploring future occupations, and emerging adults starting to understand how they would like to live as an adult. Emerging adults are optimistically undertaking more responsibility and ownership for their decisions (Reifman et al., 2007). Self-focus is emphasized by Peer and McAuslan (2016) who argue that an awareness of the present moment provides clarity, to support self-focus. Self-focus instills individuals with a sense of confidence that supports personal growth and independence moving into adulthood.

In-between. The age of feeling in-between describes an individual's unsure identification as an adult or an adolescent (Reifman et al., 2007). Emerging adults may experience a more mature interaction with the world or continue to resonate with the child-like behaviors of adolescence. The self-perception of adulthood reflects the degree to which an individual identifies within or beyond the criteria describing emerging adulthood. Those who perceive

themselves as adults have a strong sense of who they are and are more likely ready for commitment in intimate relationships (Nelson & Barry, 2005). Adulthood is also defined as being financially self-sufficient (Arnett, 2000). The age of feeling in-between can be attributed to being conflicted or possibly unprepared, in this time of transition (Peer & McAuslan, 2016).

Possibilities. Emerging adults begin to experience the age of possibilities through a positive perspective, recognizing potential opportunities (Baggio et al., 2017). Individuals approach decisions with a sense of freedom. Schwartz et al. (2005) describe the age of possibilities through “developmental individualization,” in which personal growth is linked to individual exploration of the learning process, career options, and social dynamics (p. 204). According to Arnett (2000), individualism is the most important criteria for becoming an adult.

Emerging adults at this stage begin to survey their options and ways to apply their unique contributions and skills to their experiences, moving into adulthood. This is contrasted by the beliefs of Peer and McAuslan (2016) stating “perhaps the sheer number of possibilities for emerging adults triggers a sense of apprehension and/or skepticism about one’s identity and one’s future” (p. 176). While possibilities can create a sense of overwhelm for individuals, a positive perspective can make the transition to adulthood, more attainable.

Transition

The transition from adolescence to adulthood defines the emerging adulthood period of development. Transition is defined as a developmental shift resulting from physical changes and experiences (Arnett, 2001; Volstad et al., 2020). The experience of transitioning from adolescence involves an exploration of the inner self: personal values and beliefs, decisions, and ways to pursue independence. While there has been an existing societal pressure to finish school, start working, get married, and have children, Arnett found that these “role transitions” were not

as important from the perspective of individuals transitioning to adulthood (p.134). Arnett found that for emerging adults, the most important criteria for adulthood were a gained sense of responsibility and the capacity to make independent decisions. Meanwhile, some of these decisions and opportunities can be challenging for emerging adults in transition.

Graduating high school students may experience a bounty of opportunities, which can manifest as daunting decisions and a challenging transition. According to Volstad et al. (2020), if adolescents decide to attend college after high school, there are responsibilities and expectations related to academic transition. Volstad et al. explain “the challenges faced in this transition include leaving the parental home, experiencing financial strain, fitting into a new environment, establishing new social networks and supports, navigating the new post-secondary environment and adjusting to higher academic expectations and commitments” (p.3). These new experiences and changes can instill an emotional overwhelm for emerging adults in transition (Reifman et al., 2007). New environments can lead to struggles with self-doubt (Peer & McAuslan, 2016) and feelings of instability.

Alternatively, transition can yield positive outcomes due to increased levels of independence and opportunities. Schwartz et al. (2005) describe the individualization of life goals as an expansion of freedoms in decision-making. Baggio et al. (2017) found that more choices lead to positive emotional well-being for emerging adults. With available mental health support services and quick adaptation to a new environment, emerging adults have the capacity to ‘flourish’ when they transition directly from high school to college (Volstad et al., 2020). On the other hand, personal growth can be supported by taking a gap year break between high school and college, as a way to learn through different experiences. Experiential learning

supports the exploratory and experimental elements of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000) through learning that is derived by *experience* (Kolb, 2015).

Experiential Learning

At the start of the 20th century, John Dewey introduced a progressive educational reform that emphasized student-driven experience (Fowler, 2008). This became known as constructivist learning which provided the backbone of the experiential learning model developed by Kolb (2015) over 20 years ago. According to Kolb, experiential learning is:

a theory that helps explain how experience is transformed into learning and reliable knowledge. Truth is not manifest in experience; it must be inferred by a process of learning that questions preconceptions of direct experience, tempers the vividness and emotion of experience with critical reflection, and extracts the correct lessons from consequences of action. (p. xxi)

Kolb describes the intention of experiential learning as a way for students to take initiative and learn from the process. Learning can occur by practicing inquiry, finding creative solutions, and taking accountability for one's actions (Association for Experiential Education, 2020). Learning through experiences is constant and cyclical.

Experiential Learning as a Cycle. Kolb (2015, p. 51) describes experiential learning as a cycle of:

1. Concrete Experience: *experiencing*
2. Reflective Observation: *reflecting*
3. Abstract Conceptualization: *thinking*
4. Active Experimentation: *acting*

Concrete experience is described as the process of connecting external, sensory experiences to building a sense of trust in the experience. Reflective observation is connected to the emotional foundation of creating memories. Kolb explains that “emotion creates attention, and if we are not paying attention to an experience, it will not be sensed” (p.90). Abstract conceptualization is the process of using previous experiences and already established intellect to decide how to act on thoughts, establish goals and find creative solutions. Active experimentation is putting into action that which has been learned throughout the learning cycle. The learning cycle shifts for every individual. According to Kolb, experiential learning accommodates different learning styles, as it is learner-centered, and allows for opportunities of individualization in all stages of the learning cycle.

Experiential Learning Methodologies. Experiential learning methodologies are utilized by many disciplines and organizations that take an informal education approach. Experiential education is interdisciplinary, so learning across disciplines often occurs simultaneously (Kolb, 2015). Some examples of disciplines that take an experiential approach are outdoor adventure education, place-based education, and environmental education. Schools are also adopting experiential learning principles and placing more emphasis on inquiry and student-driven learning (Association for Experiential Education, 2020).

Outdoor adventure education is learning that happens in an outdoor setting, focusing on direct experience with leadership skills, risk management, community-building, and reflection (Hutson et al., 2019). Outdoor adventure education can also involve adventure therapy, as a way to support personal growth and building positive self-perceptions through extensive time and counseling in the wilderness (Jensen & Guthrie, 2006). These implementations of experiential learning practices emphasize interpersonal skills and reflection about the experience, to solidify

learning (Fowler, 2008). Outdoor adventure education is presented as a way to provide participants with impactful learning experiences (Huston et al, 2019; Paisley et al., 2008; Schumann et al., 2009; Shellman, 2014; Sibthorp et al., 2011).

Benefits of Experiential Learning. Experiential learning has many proposed benefits, derived from understanding programmatic impacts. Sibthorp et al. (2011) evaluated long-term learning transfer from a National Outdoor Leadership School program to understand the duration of impact after participation. Participants were surveyed between one and 10 years after participating in the program. Sibthorp et al. found that positive impacts from outdoor adventure education are demonstrated by the development of self-confidence, decision-making, and self-awareness. This happens through enduring challenges and failure, which are inherent to outdoor experiences (Association for Experiential Education, 2020). Outdoor learning environments have the capacity to reveal individual capabilities and mental endurance through the direct, concrete experience of physical challenge and the abstract conceptualization of finding independent solutions (Hutson et al., 2019).

Shellman (2014) believes students feel confident and motivated, through the experiential learning process - that unique opportunities arise to challenge an examination of their beliefs and goals, in order to shift their decisions, accordingly. Experiential learning sometimes leads to shifts in life choices, due to shifts in self-awareness. Shellman argues:

Experiential education programs, which provide opportunities for participants to develop and master skills, participate in decision-making, receive feedback on behavior, solve problems and negotiate challenges with supportive others, and view effort as an important contribution to outcomes, are ideally suited for empowering participants. (p. 23)

Shellman defines empowerment as a self-sufficient confidence that allows individuals to feel capable. Shellman speaks to support as a necessary ingredient for empowering emerging adults, whether that is from peers, instructors, or themselves. Experiential learning provides the framework for students to discover their capabilities. While the learning process differs for individuals, according to their own reflection and assimilation of the learning experience (Kolb, 2015), empowerment can be a beneficial outcome.

Doubts About Experiential Learning. On the other hand, there are doubts about the effectiveness of experiential learning as an appropriate teaching model. Seaman (2008) asserts that Kolb's experiential learning model is better equipped as a historical framework for progressive education in the 1960s. Seaman believes that experiential education is no longer relevant, and it is lacking a sequence of steps. Seaman states that experiential education does not provide a theoretical outline for educators, due to the lack of scientific evidence to justify experiential learning theory. Additionally, Kirschner et al. (2006) demonstrate that experiential learning is an ideology without enough research to support the claims that minimal instructor guidance is an effective teaching strategy. Experiential learning models infer less teacher involvement through a learner-centered approach; however, Kolb (2015) emphasizes the balance of instructing and allowing students to guide their own learning process. As such, the impact of experiential learning remains controversial.

Experiential learning offers the opportunity for emerging adults to diverge from traditional academia and explore themselves as learners, in different environments. As organizations and institutions adopt the experiential learning model, this also expands possibilities and opportunities for identity exploration, perhaps minimizing the challenges of emerging adulthood. Through direct experience and challenge, emerging adults learn their

capabilities from feelings of independence, that support self-focus. Taking a gap year is an opportunity for emerging adults to learn more about themselves and endure new experiences.

Gap Year

The variety of experiential learning opportunities offered by many different organizations throughout the United States (Association for Experiential Education, 2020), broadens the mechanisms of learning beyond high school. A gap year has the potential to expose emerging adults to who they are as learners, as well as the opportunity to explore their inner selves. While a gap year experience varies by individual choice, most individuals choose to participate in a structured gap program (Gallagher & Blythe, 2020). Many of the structured programs offered in the United States are accredited and apply experiential learning principles in their program structure (Gap Year Association, 2021).

Gap Year Association

The Gap Year Association, previously known as the American Gap Association, was established in 2012 as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. The purpose of the Gap Year Association is to serve as a networking platform and opportunity of accreditation for operating gap year programs (Gap Year Association, 2021). Accreditation allows for credibility, security and trust in these programs. Some examples of gap year accredited programs are Carpe Diem Education, National Outdoor Leadership School, HTI, and Global Citizen Year. The gap year programs mentioned offer international travel opportunities and roughly 37% of gap year accredited programs offer college credit (Gallagher & Blythe, 2020).

In addition to accrediting programs, the Gap Year Association provides data, existing studies and research, alumni reports, videos, and professional consultant resources to interested participants (2021). The Gap Year Association also hosts annual conferences to connect gap year

programs nationwide, looking for ways to improve the industry. One goal is to provide financial assistance and college credits for participating gap year students. While many gap year programs exist, the Gap Year Association, serves as an organized source of information for interested participants and families to find the right program, given the wide array of possibilities.

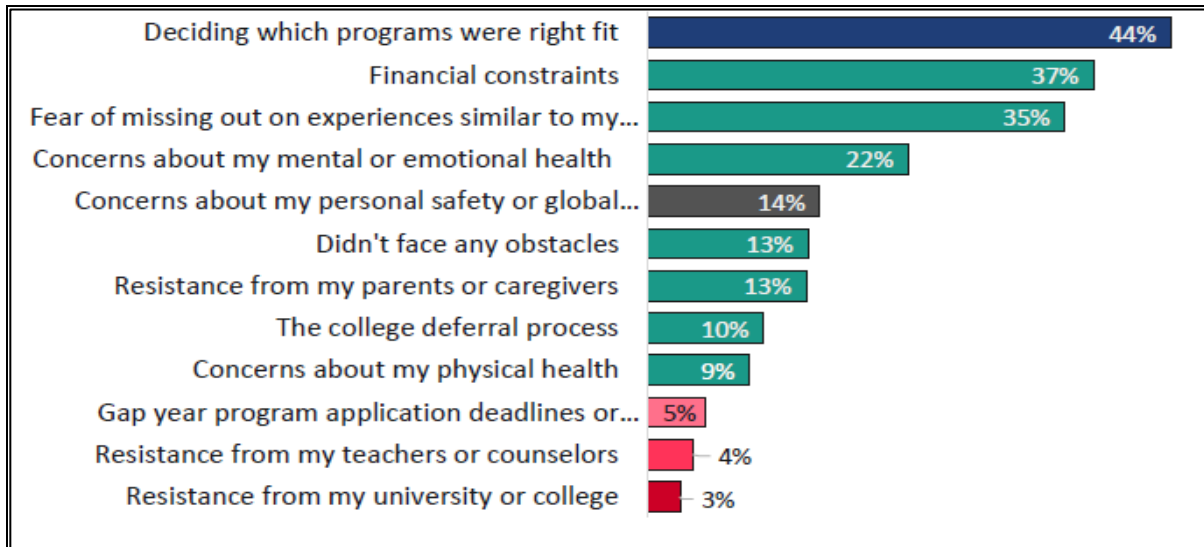
Gap Year Participation

Participation in a gap year program ranges by country, demographic, gender, and socio-economic status. Gap year programs are most common in Europe and Australia, with an increasing popularity in the United States (Gap Year Association, 2021). As of 2018, half the number of graduating Norwegian high school students were opting to take a gap year (Vogt, 2018). According to Martin (2010), young women are most likely to take a gap year in Australia. King (2011) found that most gap year participants were of middle-class backgrounds in the United Kingdom. Gallagher and Blythe (2020) found that most gap year participants in the United States and Canada are white females of middle-class background.

Financial Accommodation. While taking a gap year is still considered a privileged opportunity for middle to upper-class, white females (Gallagher & Blythe, 2020), it is important to consider the financial support that is available for potential participants (Clagett et al., 2020). Clagett et al. found that 37% of individuals interested in taking a gap year, experienced financial limitations (see Figure 1). While at least 32 gap year accredited programs offer some form of financial support, over half of these programs offer between \$1000-\$5000 to participants in need. This does not always cover the entirety of gap year related costs. Meanwhile, universities are offering accreditation and accommodation for taking a gap year, recognizing the value of the experience (Gap Year Association, 2021). Regardless of gap year participation by gender, nationality or socio-economic background, the desire to participate ranges for every individual.

Figure 1

Challenges with Deciding to Participate in a Gap Year Program



Note. This figure represents results from gap year alumni survey respondents, indicating 37% of respondents experienced “financial constraints” From “Gap Year Alumni Survey 2020,” by N. H. Gallagher & K. Blythe, 2020, *Gap Year Association*, p.19

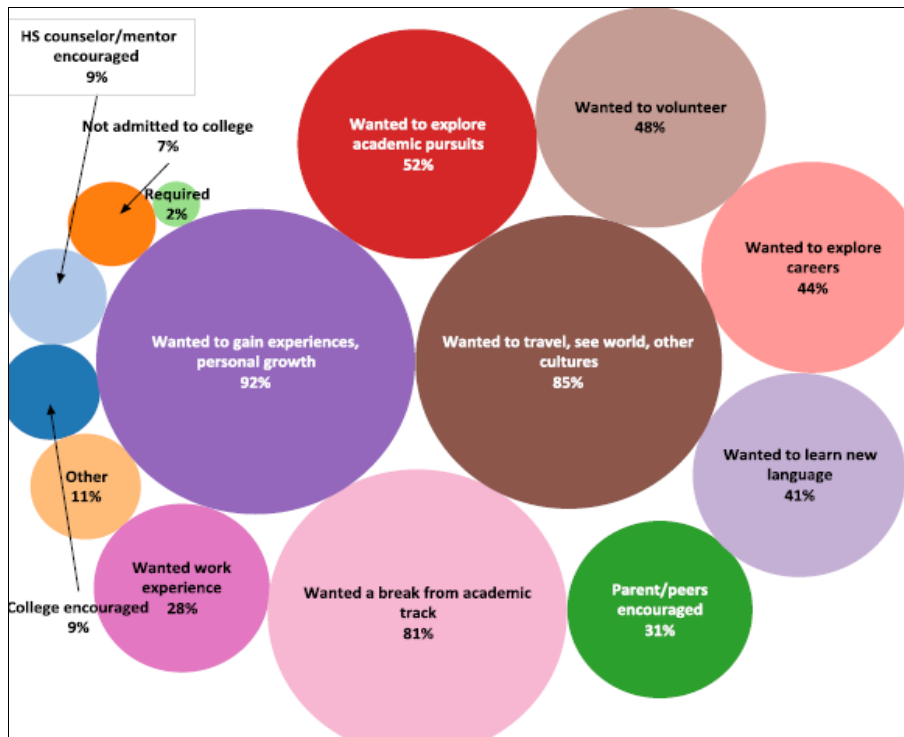
(https://www.gapyearassociation.org/downloads/2020%20GYA%20Survey%20Report%2BAmerica%20Supplement_FINAL.pdf). Copyright 2020 by the Gap Year Association.

Academic Influence. The growing interest in taking a gap year can be attributed to increased admission into higher education (Vogt, 2018). While a gap year is described as a break from formal education, academic performance in high school is a strong indicator of gap year participation (Martin, 2010). Hoe_(2015) found that 81% of gap year alumni chose to participate in a gap year due to the desire for a break from academia (see Figure 2). Martin conducted a study with undergraduate students in Australia to determine the connections between post-school uncertainty, academic motivation, and the likelihood to participate in a gap year program. Motivation is described as the intention to complete a task, activity, or goal. The conclusion was

that students with less academic motivation in high school, were less sure of what to do after high school and had a greater interest in taking a gap year.

Figure 2

Motivations for Taking a Gap Year



Note. This model shows the distribution of reasons why gap year alumni chose to participate in a gap year program. These are the results from a 2014-2015 survey completed by 558 gap year alumni. From “Gap Year Association National Alumni Survey,” by N. Hoe, 2015, *Gap Year Association*, p.12 (<https://www.gapyearassociation.org/assets/2015%20NAS%20Report.pdf>).

Copyright 2015 by Temple University Institute for Survey Research.

It is hypothesized that a lack of motivation, decrease in academic performance, uncertainty, and greater intention for a gap year is attributed to the lack of counseling or guidance available to these students (Martin, 2010). Martin’s study indicates a need for further research on emotional support that motivates students to move confidently through life’s

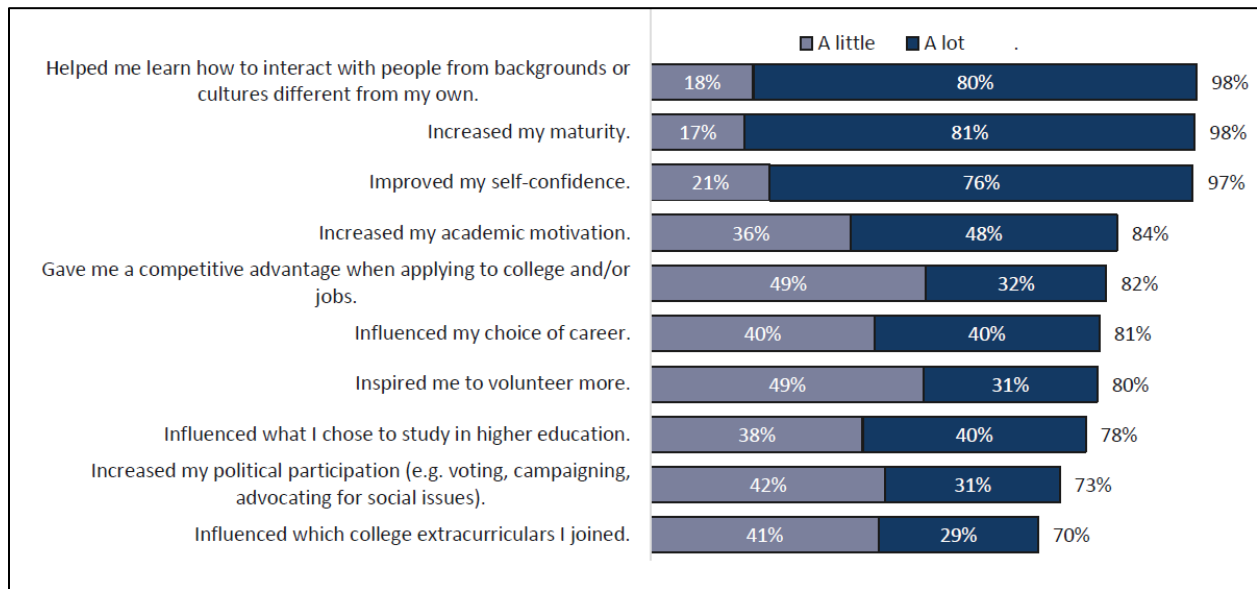
possibilities. This aligns with Arnett's (2007) age of possibilities and the need for mentorship. Gap year program outcomes indicate that emerging adults can be supported emotionally and academically, in this development period.

Gap Year Program Outcomes

The impacts of gap year experiences are limited in previously existing research (O'Shea, 2014), however, the existing research demonstrates outcomes related to college motivation, improved college performance, and enhanced self-confidence (Coetzee & Bester, 2009; Martin 2010; Rose Birch & Miller, 2007; Stehlik, 2010; Vogt, 2018). According to Hoe (2015), over 95% of gap year alumni participants indicated high correlations with personal growth. Personal growth was measured by the categories: personal reflection, personal development, increased maturity, and increased self-confidence. Five years later, Gallagher and Blythe (2020) found similar, but slightly different results. Figure 3 demonstrates that over 95% of gap year alumni participants also experienced an increased understanding of different cultures and 84% of participants experienced increased academic motivation. The varying studies that examined gap year program impacts on participants found strong correlations to personal growth, through surveys and interviews.

Figure 3

Gap Year Impacts on Participants



Note. This figure shows the participants’ perceived impacts from the gap year experience. These are the results from a 2020 survey completed by 1,190 gap year alumni. Personal growth in this case, is represented by increased maturity and improved self-confidence. From “Gap Year Alumni Survey 2020: Supplemented with 2015 AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps Survey Data,” by N.H. Gallagher and K. Blythe, 2020, *Gap Year Association*, p. 21 (https://www.gapyearassociation.org/downloads/2020%20GYA%20Survey%20Report%2BAmeriCorps%20Supplement_FINAL.pdf).

Additionally, Coetzee and Bester (2009) discover in their case study involving semi-structured interviews with three gap year program alumni, that personal growth is strongly correlated to gap year program impacts. O’Shea (2014) elaborates on gap year participants gaining a deeper understanding of themselves through more independence, emotional regulation, and self-confidence. The reported shifts in self-perception relate to Arnett’s (2000) identification of emerging adults needing time for identity exploration to combat negative perceptions of

instability. The level of autonomy offered by gap year programs relates to the need for emerging adults to experiment as a way to support a psychological state of well-being (Baggio et al., 2017). While it is difficult to measure whether positive outcomes in personal growth can be attributed to shifted perspectives following a gap year experience or an overall shift in development, there are direct correlations between self-confidence and gap year participation.

College Motivation and Performance. As gap year participants develop more self-confidence, this also resonates in their choices and level of motivation. A gap year opportunity supports individuals by giving them the time to recover from a demanding high school environment and work through some uncertainties about life (Vogt, 2018). Gap year participants demonstrate that the experience helped them decide on their field of study entering college (Hoe, 2015). Stehlik (2010) found that gap year participants in Australia were most likely to major in communication, international studies, or architecture. With relation to the field of study, O’Shea (2014) found that upon entering college, gap year alumni were more focused and ready to learn, with deeper confidence in their academic and extracurricular choices. Similarly, Rose Birch and Miller (2007) found that taking a one-year break after high school resulted in a positive impact on academic outcomes in college. Hoe (2015) confirms that over fifty percent of gap year participants in the United States and Canada had college GPAs in the A-range.

Meanwhile, Curtis (2014) found that gap year participants in Australia were less advanced in their courses and less likely to complete their college degree. Comparatively, Parker et al. (2015) found in their Australian study that gap year students were unaffected by way of developing goals and were more likely to drop out of college. Vogt (2018) describes gap years as:

...a token of the tolerance and freedom granted to some young people, and an expression of forms of discipline and uncertainty that all contemporary young people experience in the context of their school and work transitions. (p. 56)

While some individuals experience greater levels of motivation and certainty, others remain indecisive and unsure. Furthermore, the challenges, discomfort, and change experienced during a gap year can enhance college motivation, depending on the individual's perspective.

Impact on Post-Gap Year Trajectory. The impact of taking a gap year on an individual's trajectory is relatively unclear (O'Shea, 2014). O'Shea found that while many participants did not change their college major, they aimed to adjust their studies to be more humanitarian. Participating in forms of stewardship during a gap year is considered meaningful work that engages students in communication skills, community engagement, and adopting social behaviors beyond their own (Stehlik, 2010). This can influence a broadened perspective and widening of available opportunities. Volunteering and travelling for a gap year program can have profound impacts on personal growth, with particular attention to the self-focused age (Reifman et al., 2007) and the ability to make decisions that are more aligned with one's passions. Gallagher and Blythe (2020) found that forty percent of gap year participants were strongly influenced in their choice of career and choice of college study, after their gap year (see Figure 3). These choices and shifts in individual perspective often vary based on the desired outcome for the gap year participant.

Individualization

The individualized gap year experience is indicative of experiential learning principles. Kolb (2015) refers to concrete experience as leading to the individual's ability to envision possibilities and the ability to reflect on the deeper meaning of the experience. According to

Kolb, reflective observation, and the way an individual processes the meaning of an experience, varies according to the assimilation of the learning experience. Much of the data in the literature is based on individual recollections and perspectives about their experience, which can be skewed according to what an individual retains. King (2011) states:

Clearly, the young people in the sample saw it as *their* responsibility to make a success of their gap year; it was *their* actions and experiences that enabled them to grow up, enter university, and plan their future lives as adults. (p. 353)

This demonstrates that gap year participant outcomes can depend on individual intentions and motivations, prior to their gap year experience. If a gap year participant is not positively impacted by their experience, this can be indicative of unmotivated or negative perspectives (Reifman et al., 2007), prior to participating in the program. While a gap year experience is variable, many participants opt for an outdoor adventure education opportunity that includes travel, backpacking, and experiential learning.

Outdoor Adventure Education

The impacts of outdoor adventure education programs within a gap year experience can be attributed to several factors. Instructors are deemed highly influential for participant experiences, as they are identified as role models for strong communication tactics and ultimately shape the participant experience through curriculum delivery. Instructors can impact group dynamics by mitigating and modelling conflict management (Schumann et al., 2009; Sibthorp et al., 2011). Peer relationships within the group can also provide support for individuals, especially in moments of physical challenge or discomfort (Bobilya et al., 2014). Moments of challenge can motivate personal reflection and inspire a gained awareness of

personal capabilities (Brown et al., 2007; Fowler, 2007; Peer & McAuslan, 2016). The impact of outdoor adventure education can also be attributed to the healing properties of nature.

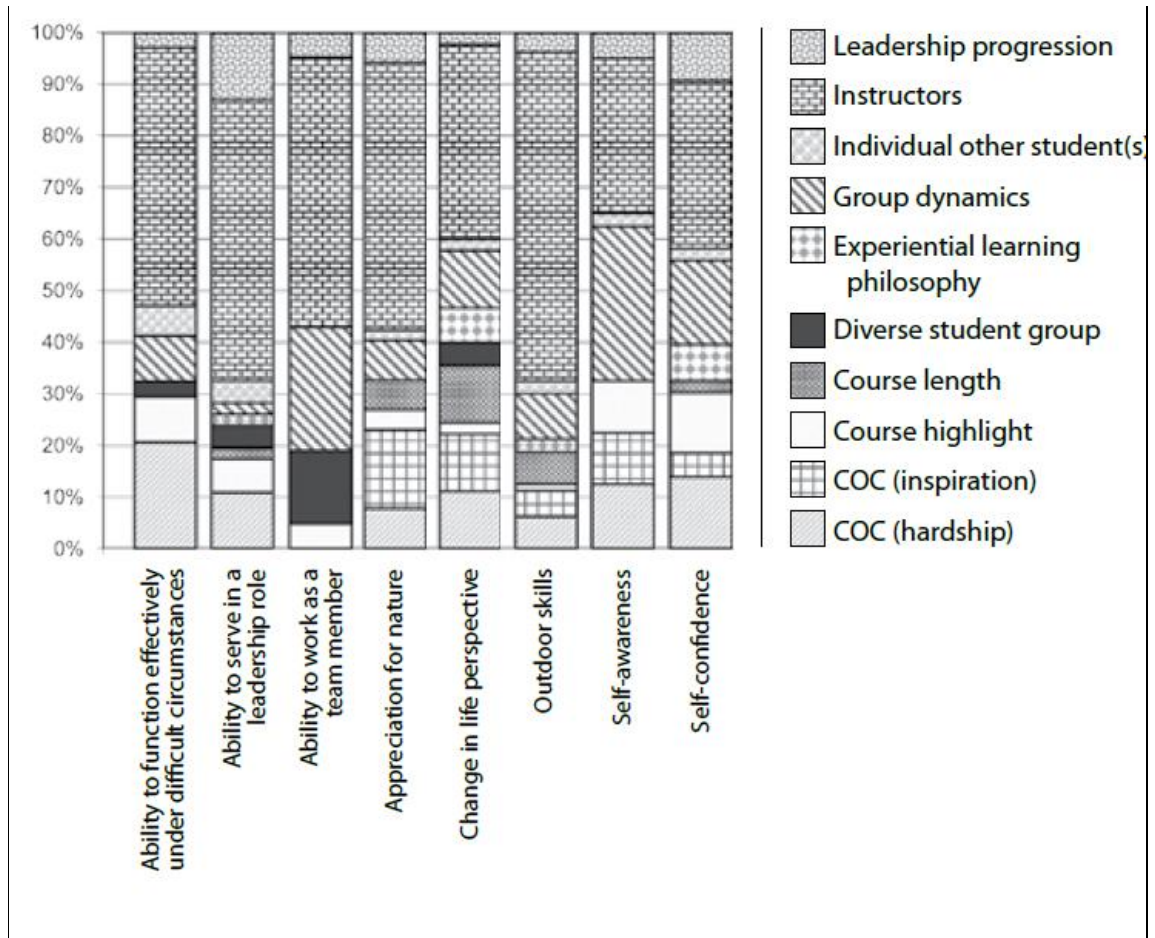
Instructor Impact

In outdoor adventure education programs, instructors are an integral member of the experience, since they are guiding and facilitating curriculum and supporting individual and group dynamics. According to Sibthorp et al. (2011), National Outdoor Leadership School instructors use active learning mechanisms, feedback techniques, and behavior modelling as ways to guide program participants. Active learning engages students directly in the learning process through feedback related to curriculum. This content provides students with the ability to create goals and ultimately, challenge themselves, accordingly.

Behavior modelling is also known as role modelling, which is important for preparing students for the process of active experimentation or putting into action what they have learned (Kolb, 2015). According to 508 study participants, instructor influence was broken down by influencing the learning experience in several ways: content delivery, role modelling, being an inspiration, instructor quality, and providing support (Sibthorp et al., 2011). Instructor influence is highlighted by the learning transfer experienced by participants in the categories of physical skills and personal growth (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

The Impacts of Learning in an Outdoor Adventure Education Program



Note. These are the results of a study on transfer of learning, regarding instructor influence. This study was completed in 2007 by 508 participants who had participated in a National Outdoor Leadership School program one to ten years prior to conduction of the survey. These are the reported categories by which participants continued to experience impacts from learning during their National Outdoor Leadership School experience. All the reported categories had a percentage of participants who attributed these lessons learned, to their instructors (Sibthorp et al., 2011, p.117).

In addition to instructor influence on learning transfer, many of these categories align with student learning outcomes, within or immediately following participation in the program. Schumann et al. (2009) attribute instructor influence to instructor personality traits. Instructor qualities include being empathetic and inspiring. Schumann et al. describe influential instructor behaviors as “role modelling, providing feedback, providing formal curriculum, creating a supportive learning environment, managing risk, direct instruction/coaching, and using a ‘pet’ quote or phrase” (p. 15). Furthermore, role modelling, feedback, and curriculum instruction are essential to instructor influence on student learning.

Group Dynamics

While instructors are deemed essential for teaching new skills and curriculum, minimal instructor influence can be equally impactful for participants (Bobilya et al., 2014). Bobilya et al. challenge the idea of instructor impact by demonstrating the lack of instructor involvement as beneficial for group dynamics by increasing the self-reliance of participants. In this Outward Bound study, 331 participants completed a survey on their final expedition, which involved minimal instructor involvement. Bobilya et al. concluded that “minimizing instructor involvement enhanced perceived personal growth by increasing self-reliance and self-awareness and enhanced perceived group development by encouraging greater group reliance, responsibility, and cohesion” (p. 397). The notion of freedom and control in this case, challenged participants to work as a team and enhance group dynamics, on their own. This aligns with the self-focused age and the need for emerging adults to experience independence (Reifman et al., 2007).

Social relationships are a vital component of the gap year experience. These social dynamics allow for understanding a variety of perspectives and the further development of a

broadened perspective. Gap year alumni reported being impacted the greatest in their growth, development, and learning by “developing relationships with different types of people” (Gallagher & Blythe, 2020, p.22). The expanded social experience deepens learning through challenges in communication and ultimately, for emerging adults to gain a further sense of internal insight.

In addition to emerging adults gaining a broadened sense of perspective from group dynamics, self-awareness can also be attributed to self-reflection. Peer and McAuslan (2016) found that through mindfulness, emerging adults were better able to manage feelings of self-doubt. Mindfulness emerged from eastern medicine and has been adopted by western practice to enhance experiences in the present moment (Brown et al., 2007). Peer and McAuslan found that practicing mindfulness lowered feelings of instability and increased self-focus, which can provide support for the challenges of emerging adulthood. Kolb (2015) asserts that “mindfulness aims to overcome automaticity and to reach direct, pure experience” (p. 61). Authentic experience, therefore, has the power to solidify learning.

An authentic learning experience can be more profound, through the process of personal reflection. While Gallagher and Blythe (2020) found that only 14% of gap year alumni reported the benefits of exploring spirituality, Hoe (2015) found that 98% of gap year alumni were given time for personal reflection. Fowler (2007) explains the overlap between experience and reflection which can be dependent on the individual’s motivation, the influence of a teacher, or another external influence. Emerging adults can practice reflection differently, whether that is through spirituality or other outlets. Reflection can support the practice of accepting discomforts and challenges by enhancing self-awareness, through an enhanced appreciation of the experience.

Benefits of the Outdoors

Challenges for emerging adults, such as increased technology use and decreased time spent outdoors can minimize an individual's ability to reflect on their experiences. The disconnect from the outdoors can be attributed to declines in self-awareness (Williams, 2017). According to Vannucci et al. (2017), higher daily social media use is associated with higher levels of anxiety, potentially due to social comparisons with others. Likewise, Weaver (2015) suggests that the technological change in societal norms and detachment from nature is linked to depression and anxiety. Williams claims that "nature appears to act directly upon our automatic systems, calming us, but it also works indirectly, through facilitating social contact and through encouraging exercise and physical movement" (p. 166). The combination of time spent outdoors, and removal of technological distractions has the power to support emerging adults in feelings of instability (Reifman et al., 2007), giving them the opportunity to explore their capabilities (Shellman, 2014).

According to the National Outdoor Leadership School study conducted by Sibthorp et al. (2011), an appreciation of nature can be an outcome of outdoor adventure programs (see Figure 4). 'Environmental awareness' is a National Outdoor Leadership School learning outcome attained through environmental stewardship and nature appreciation (Paisley et al., 2008). While not all outdoor adventure education programs have this specific learning outcome, it can be a focus of outdoor programming. Paisley et al. demonstrate that 2% of the surveyed National Outdoor Leadership School participants responded that the wilderness served as their teacher. Meanwhile, 58% of participant responses indicated that practice and experience supported their learning of outdoor skills. This can be attributed to Kolb's experiential learning theory (2015). Additionally, Leave No Trace principles broadened participant perspectives regarding their

impact on the environment and the importance of conservation practices. Participants benefit from outdoor programming, as well as the mere qualities of nature. By spending time outdoors, participants have direct experiences that influence a greater connection to the environment, their peers and ultimately, themselves.

As emerging adults are in a vital time of identity exploration, it can be noted that direct experiences support the development of clarity and self-awareness. Direct experiences are identified as a necessary component to experiential learning, providing opportunities for reflection that solidify learning. Outdoor adventure education offers emerging adults experiential learning opportunities through the influence of instructors, group dynamics, physical challenges, and spending time outdoors. When emerging adults opt for a gap year experience that is guided by outdoor adventure education, there are many overlaps in research regarding the impacts of experiential learning and gap year programs, on participants. Ultimately, high school students who are looking for a break from academia, generally wind up with a greater sense of academic motivation. Gap year programs are highlighted as a way to support emerging adults with personal growth, including deeper self-awareness and self-confidence. Moving forward, my research aims to connect findings in the literature to the results of interviews with participants from a gap year program with a foundation of outdoor adventure education.

Chapter Three

Methodology

The purpose of this research is to investigate the impacts of a gap year experience on emerging adult participants. The challenges and needs of emerging adults in this period, provide the context for exploring avenues of support and learning opportunities, through gap year program experiences. By exploring the principles of experiential learning (Kolb, 2015) in the context of gap year programs, the impacts of an outdoor adventure education program model and the opportunities for personal growth, connect to Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). After evaluating the literature that aligns with gap year program impacts, I would like to contribute to research by conducting interviews with gap year program alumni who can speak to the perceived impacts of their experience.

This chapter outlines the case-study research methodology central to this study. I will be discussing the study setting and participant information, such as the recruitment process and the specific population of the participants. I will outline the methods used in this study, followed by the process of data collection and anticipated data analysis will be provided in greater detail. This chapter will conclude with the limitations of this methodology. The research questions that guide this study are:

- 1) What is the impact of the HTI Gap program on participants transitioning from high school to college?
- 2) How does experiential learning contribute to supporting emerging adults in transition?

Program Recruitment

I found HTI, the gap year program of focus for my study, through the list of Gap Year Association accredited programs (Gap Year Association, 2021), as well as by recommendation

from my committee members. HTI was specifically chosen to serve as a representative sample of gap year program participants, because it is an outdoor adventure education program framed by experiential learning mechanisms and accredited by the Gap Year Association.

HTI is the representative program of study for this research. HTI's mission is to build community through experiential and expeditionary learning by spending time outside. Some core values of this organization are to build education through connections to the natural world, to value the process of learning, and to transfer the learning experience from HTI to life beyond. There are several learning opportunities offered by the organization, including an on-campus semester for high school students, a backpacking and writing-focused summer semester for high school students, an apprentice program for college graduates, and a gap year program for high school graduates. The HTI Gap program offers several options during each semester, including domestic and international opportunities. These programs mainly include conservation, rock climbing, backpacking, expedition, and research. HTI is a strong example of a gap year program that uses experiential learning principles in their program model.

After investigating the background of the HTI Gap program, I contacted the HTI Gap director via email. Upon contact, I reviewed the intentions of my research and my intended population. The HTI Gap director discussed current affiliations with program alumni and the ability to find agreeable participants. After identifying HTI as the program I would be using for my research, I applied for approval to work with human subjects, from the Institutional Review Board.

Participant Recruitment

After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (see Appendix A), HTI Gap alumni were contacted directly by the HTI Gap director. The HTI Gap director provided me

with the names and emails of willing participants. I emailed the potential participants with a consent form and brief explanation of my research. Participants were able to make the decision about whether to participate in the study. After receiving signed consent forms, participants were given an abbreviated list of interview questions (see Appendix B) as well as my proposal written for the Institutional Review Board.

In this study, I interviewed six individuals, five of whom were all in the emerging adulthood phase of life when they participated in the HTI Gap program and were 18-30 years of age. The sixth participant was the HTI Gap director, who participated in a different series of interview questions (see Appendix C) All the HTI participants were in the HTI Gap program in the Fall Semester of 2019. The participants fit within the criteria of having graduated high school and attended HTI for a full-semester gap experience. These participants are now involved in undergraduate studies, or they have recently completed their undergraduate studies.

For the purpose of this study, participant demographics and gender are not being analyzed or reviewed. Everyone who chose to participate in an interview was given a pseudonym to maintain anonymity (American Psychological Association, 2020). These pseudonyms are not representative of their gender or identity. I used they/them/their pronouns as another way to protect their identity. Additionally, each participant was given a color to represent the research findings connected specifically to that individual (see Table 1).

Table 1*Interview Participants*

Participant	Pseudonym	Background	Color Code
Participant 1	“Ezra”	19 years old. Interested in pursuing a degree in government with a minor in Spanish.	Red
Participant 2	“Jay”	Almost 20 years old. First year at university. Undecided major. Interested in becoming an educator. Lives in the city	Orange
Participant 3	“Kelley”	Graduated from undergraduate studies. Lives in the city. Would like to pursue a Master of Fine Arts.	Green
Participant 4	“Lyric”	Sociology major. Interested in pursuing Criminology and Criminal Justice.	Blue
Participant 5	“Mika”	Just turned 20 years old. Pursuing a degree in Sustainability Science and Society. Lives in the suburbs.	Purple
HTI Gap Director	“Charlie”	Interned at HTI in 2005. Envisioned becoming a teacher. In 2013, proposed the gap program for HTI. In 2014, began working at HTI full-time to lead the gap program.	Grey

Methods

This study involved a qualitative data collection process guided by a case-study approach. HTI program participants and the HTI Gap director participated in a one-hour semi-structured interview with me, by means of video conferencing. The semi-structured interview process can allow participants to feel more comfortable answering potentially vulnerable questions, in a less structured format (Thomas, 2017). Open-ended interview questions guided the conversation with opportunity for follow-up questions and probes. Open-ended questions, such as asking a participant to elaborate on a profound memory, allowed for participants to explore their experience without the restriction of the question. I used active listening techniques, reiterating participant responses in my own words, with the intention to connect to my participants and encourage deeper vulnerability. I also used probes to obtain deeper meanings

behind participant responses (Ritchie et al., 2014). Interviews were valuable to this research because they allowed for direct conversation with individuals about their experience and opinions.

The value of the case-study methodology for this research allowed for the ability to make inferences about participant outcomes according to the theoretical framework, Arnett's emerging adulthood theory and Kolb's experiential learning theory. A case-study enables the drawing of inferences about the greater gap year alumni population; however, this does also pose as a limitation to this approach (Thomas, 2017).

Data Collection

This study was conducted entirely online due to the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 requiring physical distancing from other people. Therefore, the participants in this study were interviewed via the Zoom Application. This visual contact for interviews allowed me to develop a deeper, more personal connection with each participant. I asked each interviewee if they were comfortable with me recording the interview. I explained that these recordings would only be seen or heard by myself and my faculty advisor, Kate Welsh. I reminded the participants that the purpose of this recording was merely for ensuring accuracy of their responses when referenced in my research.

Individual settings for participants during the interview process varied, while the setting for the interview experience was maintained with the same foundation of interview questions for all HTI Gap participants (see Appendix B) and programmatic-specific questions for the HTI Gap director (see Appendix C). Participants were asked to find a private location for the interview, reminded of the participation required for the study, and asked verbal consent for the ability to record the interview. The recorded interviews were only available to myself and my faculty

advisor, Kate Welsh, on the password protected, VidGrid Application. Some examples of interview questions for HTI participants are:

1. Describe your most profound memory at HTI. Why does this memory stand out to you?
2. Why did you decide to participate in HTI's gap year program?
3. What do you think are the benefits of a gap year experience?
4. In what ways did HTI challenge you, mentally?
5. In what ways did HTI support reflection on your gap year experience?

Some examples of interview questions for HTI Gap director are:

1. What are the learning outcomes for the gap program at HTI?
2. In what ways do you support students with the challenges of transition?
3. What skills do you hope for your students to gain upon completion of the program?
4. In what ways does the gap program incorporate experiential learning techniques?
5. What are your strategies for supporting student reflection throughout or at the end of the gap program semester?

My interview questions allowed for open-ended responses with an anticipated range of responses that connected to the theoretical framework and the literature that guided the research for this study. After all interviews were completed, the recordings were uploaded to the VidGrid Application, which automatically transcribed the words exchanged in each interview. To ensure precision of these transcriptions, I then went back through the recorded videos alongside the transcriptions, fixing any discrepancies. I printed the transcriptions for visual accommodation and the ability to compare responses side-by-side. This ensured greater ease with the constant comparative method for evaluating my data, due to splitting the data several times.

Data Analysis

The interview process was guided by the purpose of this study to broaden the scope of research examining gap year program impacts in the United States. My literature review, research questions, and theoretical framework informed my process of data analysis, due to previously examined impacts and the developmental needs of emerging adults in the learning experience. Data analysis was conducted through the constant comparative method and a process that evolved from initial coding to second cycle coding. Thomas (2017) describes the constant comparative method as repeatedly comparing interview responses, to one another. The coding process is demonstrated by the figures in Appendix D.

The Coding Process

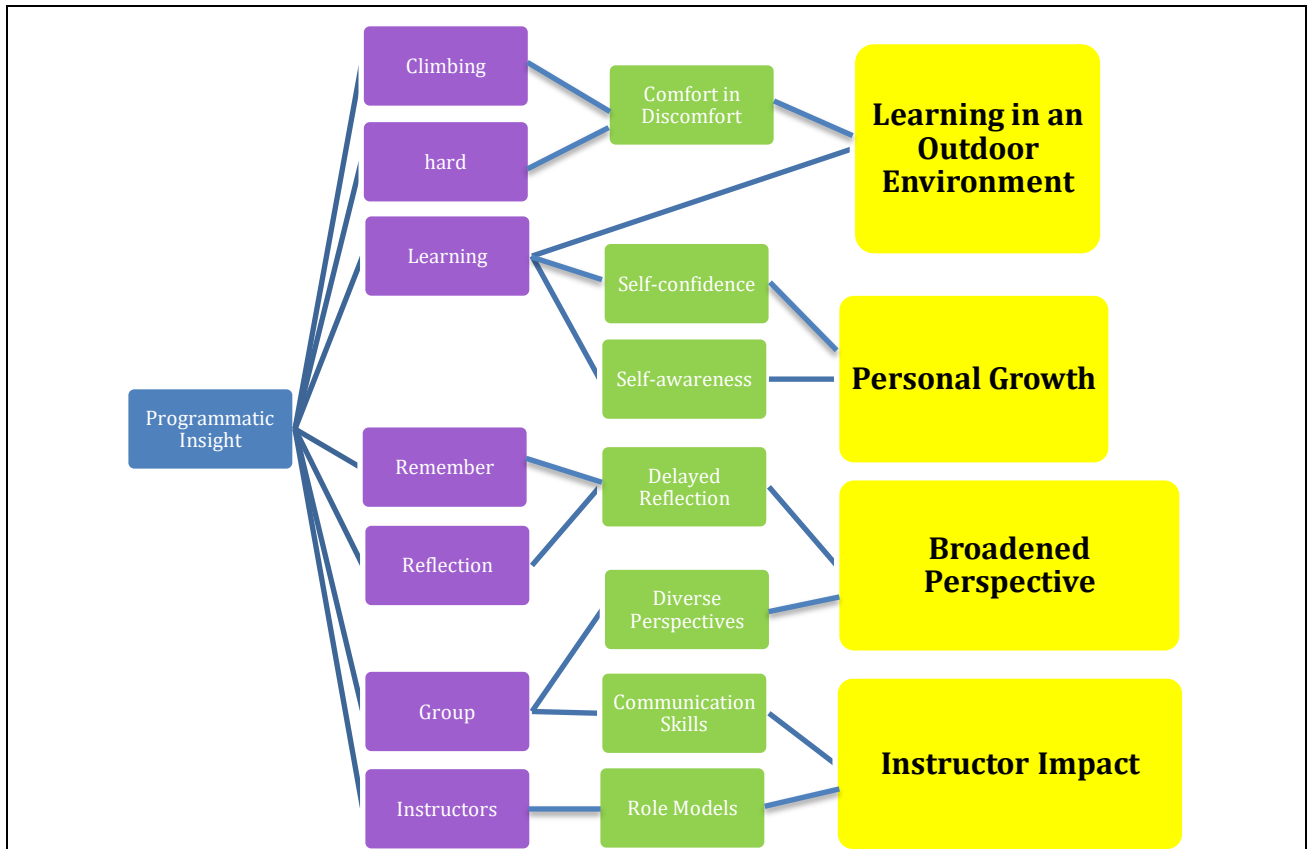
The coding process followed interviews and the compilation of transcribed interviews. Open coding began the process of identifying patterns by finding key terms used consistently by interviewees (Thomas, 2017). The initial coding process was guided by provisional coding. According to Saldaña (2016), provisional codes are generated according to previously existing literature. The initial codes used were social dynamics, learning opportunities, programmatic insight, and challenges (see Figure D1). By evaluating the data with my initial codes, I began to distinguish key words and phrases for each interviewee.

The key words were organized by most frequently stated words by all HTI participants (see Figure 5). The compilation of student responses revealed several key words and phrases to be further explored and analyzed. After identifying the key words and phrases most used by the participants, or the biggest words in Figure 5, I compiled key quotes and phrases for all interviewees, that included the most used words (see Figure D2). This splitting of data allowed for beginning the second cycle coding process.

key words, study themes were identified and organized by sub-theme. Figure 6 represents the coding process and four major study themes. Data analysis was conducted as objectively as possible, recognizing the limitations of this case-study approach (Saldaña, 2016).

Figure 6

The Coding Process from Initial Code Programmatic Insight



Note. This is a horizontal hierarchy representation of the initial coding theme, “programmatic insight.” The purple squares are some of the most used key words (see Figure 5). The green squares are the derived sub-themes, and the yellow squares are the major themes identified as impacts from the HTI Gap program. There are three more figures generated for the other three initial codes, “social dynamics”, “learning opportunities”, and “challenges” (see Appendix D).

Limitations

This study was limited due to several factors, mainly involving the interview process itself. A participant may have shifted their interview responses for a myriad of reasons. The participants had very little familiarity with me, which might have made participants uncomfortable responding truthfully to interview questions. A participant may have felt shame about negative emotions or have been unaware of those feelings entirely. Soucie (2012) describes this as impression management or the retelling of life events in a biased way. Since the participants were reflecting on their experience for some time afterward, their responses may have been a jaded recollection of the program. This can be connected to the narrative of individuality or the shifting of the interview response to present with more uniqueness (King, 2011). By knowing the purpose of my research, a participant may have believed they were providing me with my desired response.

This study would have benefitted from in-person interviews, as another limitation was conducting the interview process entirely online. Individuals are not always comfortable responding to such personal questions on a video platform. Often, vulnerability, or the ability to provide authentic responses is enhanced in person, however, it is inclusive to what degree (Ritchie et al., 2014). It is important to establish rapport with interviewees at the start of the interview process to limit participant discomfort and create a natural environment for a conversation. Despite the limitations in data collection and analysis, conclusions can be made regarding the impacts of the HTI Gap program on participants. The following chapter presents novel phrases and quotes from the interviews in addition to major themes and sub-themes derived from the culmination of participant responses.

Chapter Four

Results

In reviewing the literature that highlights gap year experiences for emerging adults transitioning from high school to college, I determined that gap year program participant insight would be beneficial for adding to the existing research. The purpose of this research is to educate and broaden the scope of research on gap year program impacts. My interviews revealed several themes related to the impacts of the HTI Gap program on participants, with regard to the intended programmatic impacts. After interpreting interview responses of former HTI participants, key phrases are highlighted in this chapter, as way to support the identification of my study themes.

Study Themes

There were four major themes and seven sub-themes identified from the coding process for the five HTI Gap program participants (see Table 2). The study themes are referenced according to interview responses and the percentage of participants who reference each theme. The interview responses are put into context of the interview in Appendix E.

Table 2

Study Themes

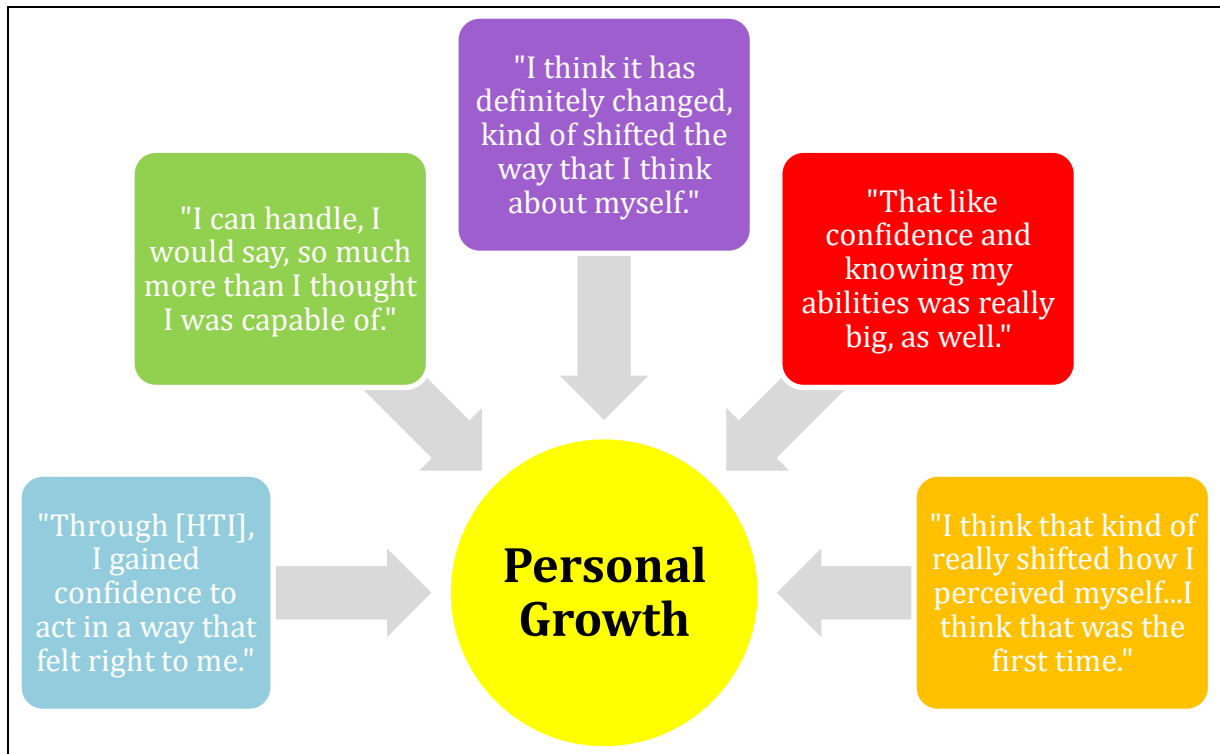
Major Themes	Sub-themes
Personal Growth	Self-Awareness Self-Confidence
Broadened Perspective	Diversity of Perspectives Delayed Reflection
Instructor Impact	Role Models Improved Communication Skills
Learning in an Outdoor Environment	Comfort with Discomfort

Theme 1: Personal Growth

The impacts of the HTI Gap program on student participant personal growth, was the first major theme identified. The initial coding process, with specific attention to programmatic insight and participant challenges align most directly with the impacts of the participant experiences and personal growth (Figure X and Figure X: programmatic insight, participant challenges). 100% of the participant interview population, spoke to this theme in a variety of ways. It is notable that each student participant experienced personal growth in slightly different ways. This theme was exhibited by student participant responses regarding the sub-themes that demonstrate personal growth, which are self-awareness and self-confidence.

Figure 7

HTI Participant Responses about Personal Growth



Note. This figure is a representation of profound responses from HTI Gap participants as a result of different questions asked throughout the interview process. Figure E1 outlines the context of each response, according to the interview question asked.

The intentions of the HTI Gap program regarding personal growth for participants, as a result of their experience, is highlighted by my interview with the executive director, “Charlie.” Charlie speaks to the program model and the way that it progresses in cultivating more student independence and ownership, over the course of the semester. Participants become solely responsible for planning climbing routes, packing their own meals, and are designated leaders of the day. While some of these impacts are on building a sense of capability and self-awareness for participants, some of the impacts on student self-awareness and self-confidence result from the challenges of living in the wilderness with a group of people, for three months. From the perspective of the executive director, Charlie, on some of the personal growth impacts for the gap program on participants, they say:

I think you gain self-awareness and then you’re able to build confidence and be more effective at various decision-making, as well as their sense of identity in some ways...these are concepts that students are dealing with on a daily level in our program...when we read student surveys at the end...these are regularly highlighted as the biggest things they take away from the program.

According to Charlie’s response, the HTI Gap program impacts personal growth for participants, in ways that are interconnected.

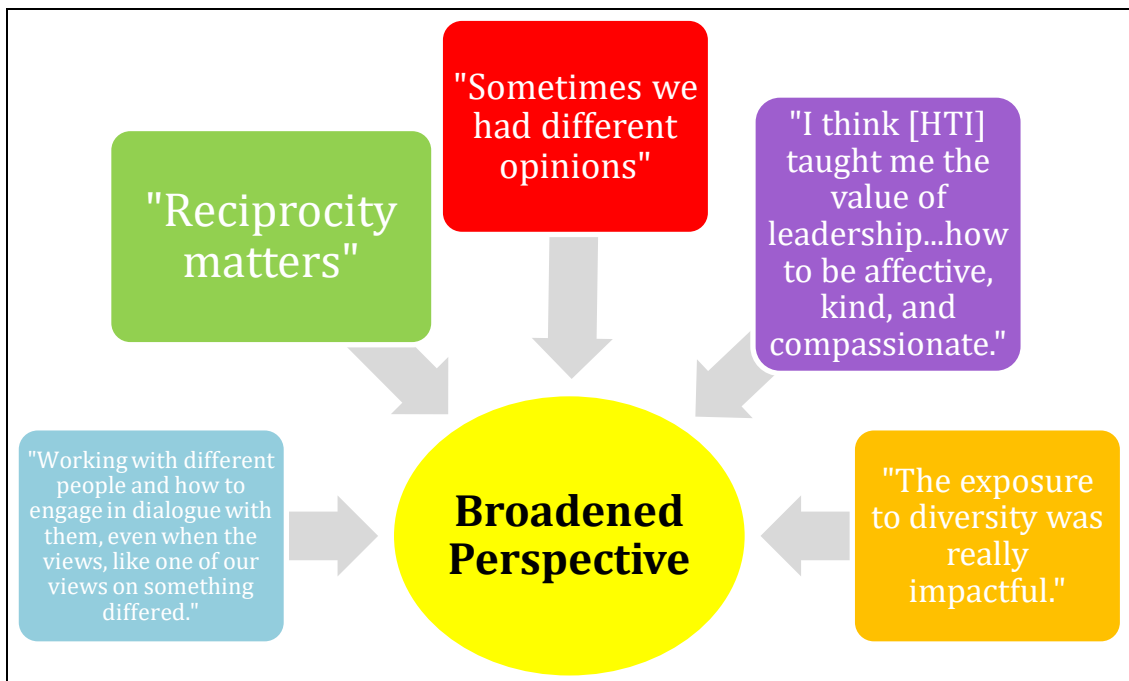
Theme 2: Broadened Perspective

The impact of the HTI Gap program on student participant’s personal growth contributes to a broadened outward perspective about the world and people beyond themselves. 100% of the

participants spoke to this theme, whether it was their shared experiences as a group, within the learning context, or the overall diverse interactions amongst one another. Twelve participants from around the world, brought together to live and explore the outdoors, allows for varying perspectives and opinions. The diverse backgrounds of the participants ultimately resulted in distinct contributions in discussion-based learning and social interactions. The participants discussed understanding the ways their actions impact others and the resulting need to work as a team.

Figure 8

HTI Participant Responses about Gaining a Broadened Perspective



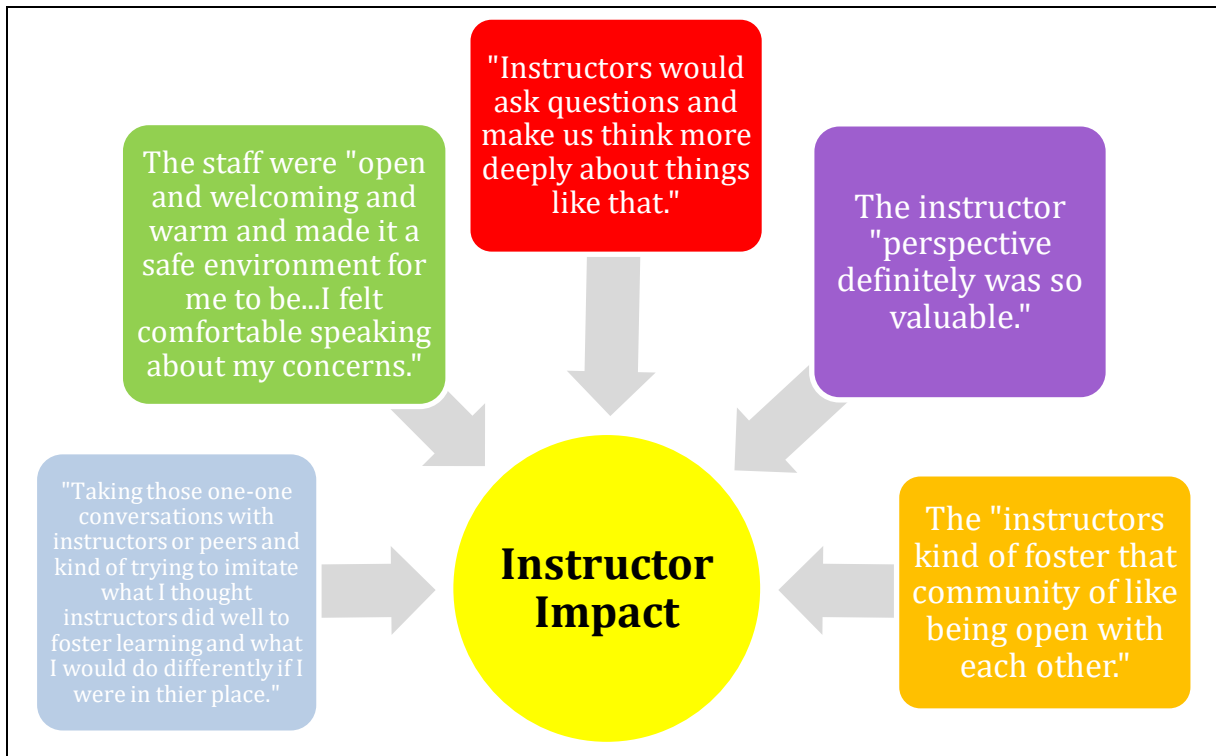
Note. This figure is a representation of profound responses given by HTI Gap participants as a result of different questions asked throughout the interview process. Figure E2 outlines the context of the response according to the interview question asked.

Theme 3: Instructor Impact

The impact of the HTI Gap program was reinforced by the participants speaking to the role of their instructors in creating the experience. The participants referenced the instructors fostering the learning experience and a community of openness. Two of the participants, 40% of the interviewee population stated that the instructors were an inspiration and served as a role model to them, during and after their gap year experience. Three of the participants, 60% of the interviewee population referenced instructor support during challenging social interactions, as well as their ability to learn from their instructors in these situations. These interview responses were all with regard to questions about HTI programmatic influence, examples of support, and support in the process of discovering who they are as a learner. The impact of the instructors on HTI Gap program participants is not an isolated impact. Given that the instructor was present for the majority of their experience, this impact is embedded within the other three major themes identified in my research.

Figure 9

HTI Participant Responses about Instructor Impact



Note. This figure is a representation of profound responses given by HTI participants in response to different questions during their interview. Figure E3 outlines the context of the interview response according to the interview question asked.

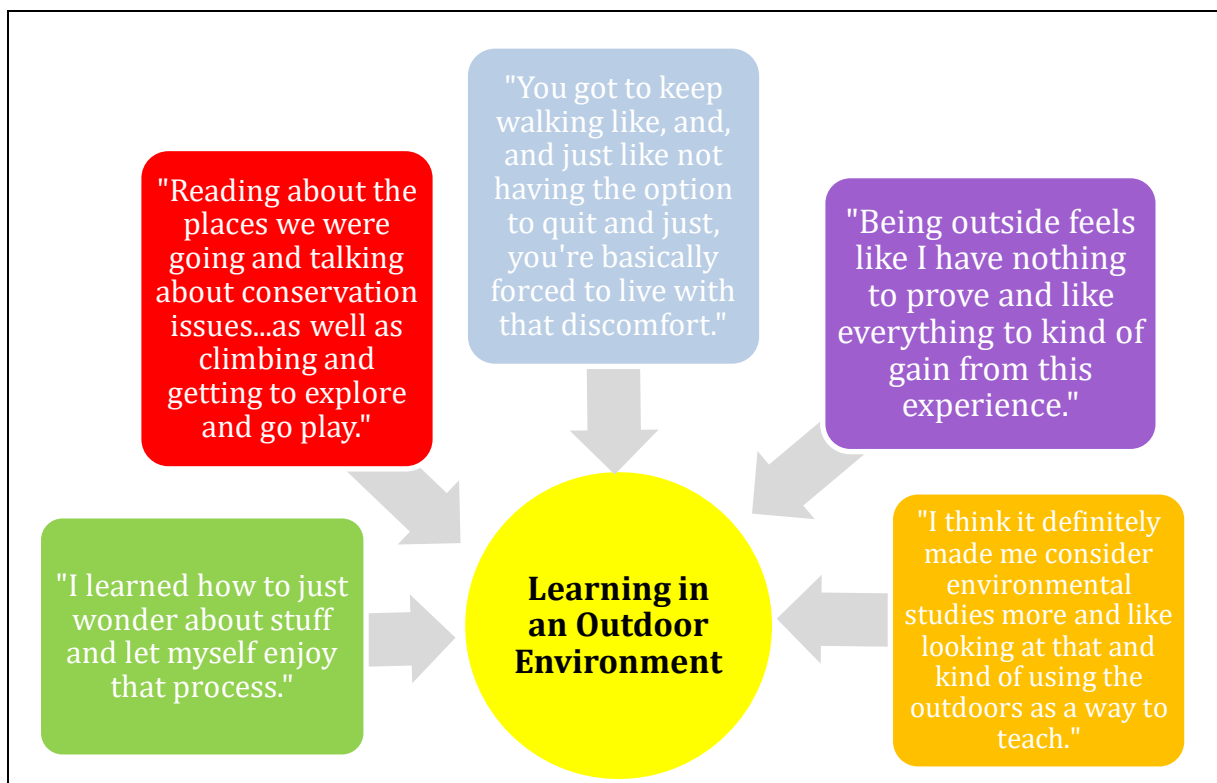
Theme 4: Learning in an Outdoor Environment

The impact of the HTI Gap program on the student participant learning experience, is embedded within many of the student responses. “Learning in an outdoor environment” is emphasized by HTI’s outdoor adventure education model that incorporates experiential learning principles as components of the educational framework. Four of the participants, 80% of the student interviewee population, spoke to the learning experience. Three of the participants, 60% of the student interviewee population referenced learning at HTI with comparison to learning in high school. Three of the participants, 60%, referenced the challenges and discomfort of the

outdoor learning environment, as well as what they learned about finding comfort in discomfort. The student responses were related to personal growth and what they learned about themselves, because of the challenges of living outdoors in parallel to the role of the instructors. There was also the impact of group discussions and the HTI Gap program curriculum that impacted student learning, in this environment.

Figure 10

Participant Quotes about the Impact of Learning in an Outdoor Environment



Note. This figure is a representation of profound responses given by HTI participants in response to different questions during their interview. Figure E4 outlines the context of the participant response according to the interview question asked.

Learning in an outdoor environment was a major component of the HTI Gap experience, given that HTI is an outdoor adventure education program. The impacts related to learning in an

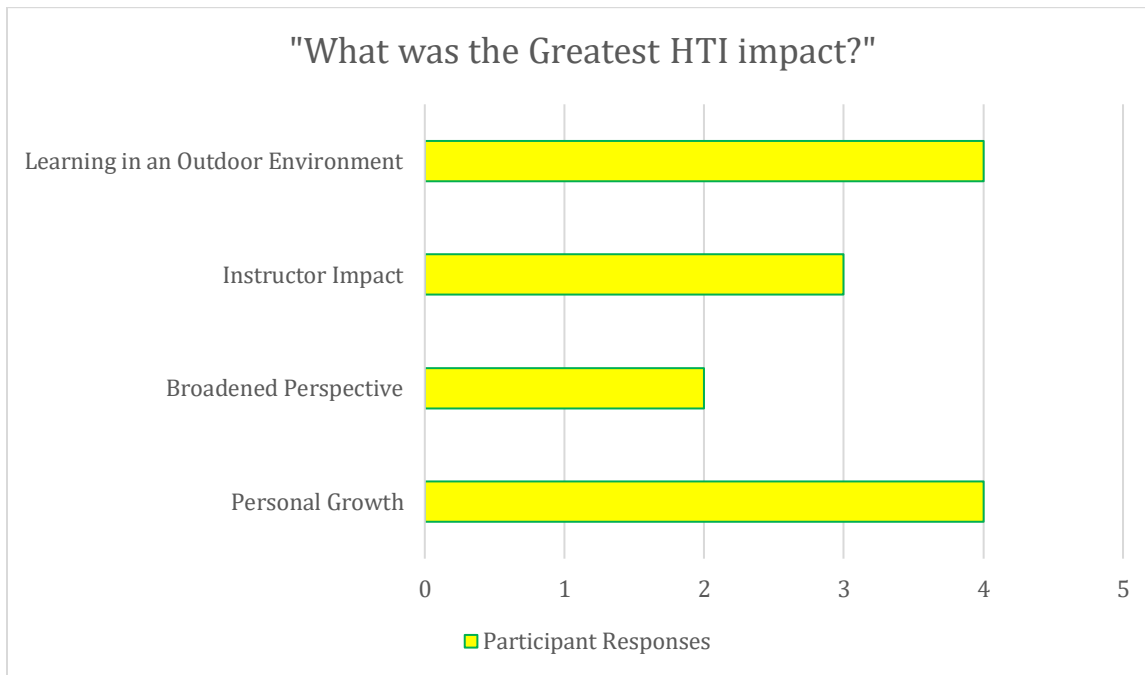
outdoor environment are strongly intertwined with the other three major themes: instructor impact, broadened perspective, and personal growth.

The Greatest HTI Impact

The major themes and sub-themes that emerged during the five HTI participant interviews were derived according to the responses given throughout the interview. The participant responses were based on a variety of interview questions and personal tangents or elaborations, without prompting. When the participants were asked, “what was the greatest [HTI] impact you experienced,” there was an assortment of responses (see Figure 11). While there was variation in HTI participant perspectives, regarding the greatest way HTI impacted them, there was also an overall sense of positivity in responses. HTI participant, Kelley stated the experience was “completely life-altering, completely life-changing in a positive way.” This response did not necessarily fall under any one theme, as this can take many meanings. Generally, participant responses connected to the four major themes identified.

Figure 11

The Greatest HTI Impact



Note. Personal growth and learning in an outdoor environment were mentioned by 80% of the HTI participants. All five participants were not the most impacted by one of the major themes identified. This figure demonstrates a culmination of participant responses, including variation in sub-themes that were mentioned by participants.

Conclusion

The results of my research revealed four major themes and seven sub-themes, according to HTI participant responses. The theme personal growth, connected to the sub-themes self-awareness and self-confidence, was identified by HTI participants as one of the greatest impacts from their HTI Gap program (see Figure 11). The theme, learning in an outdoor environment, related to the sub-theme of finding comfort in discomfort, was identified as an equally impactful component of the HTI Gap program (see Figure 11). The instructor impact of role modelling and supporting communication skills was either mentioned briefly by the HTI participants or

referenced several times throughout one interview. The exposure to diversity and delayed reflection regarding the overall experience and group dynamics were mentioned by all participants, indicating a broadened perspective. Broadened perspective was, however, least mentioned by the HTI participants as being greatly impactful from their HTI Gap program experience. While there is variation of impact according to participant perspectives, all HTI participants were impacted, to some degree.

Chapter Five

Discussion

The transition for emerging adults from high school to college can instill feelings of self-doubt and confusion, as adulthood can be overwhelming and intimidating for many individuals. By taking a break in academics, in ways like that of a gap year program, emerging adults can learn about themselves in an autonomous, outdoor environment. Personal growth is inherently supportive for all emerging adults, regardless of having a positive or negative outlook about this transitional period of life. Gap year programs such as the HTI Gap program have the capacity to impact emerging adults by supporting the challenges of physical and mental discomforts, social dynamics, and difficult decisions. Through the cycle of experiential learning, emerging adults gain a deeper understanding of personal strengths and therefore, have a stronger sense of self-confidence to combat the challenges of transition. HTI Gap participant interview responses with respect to the intentions of the program exhibit the many ways emerging adults are supported through the gap year experience.

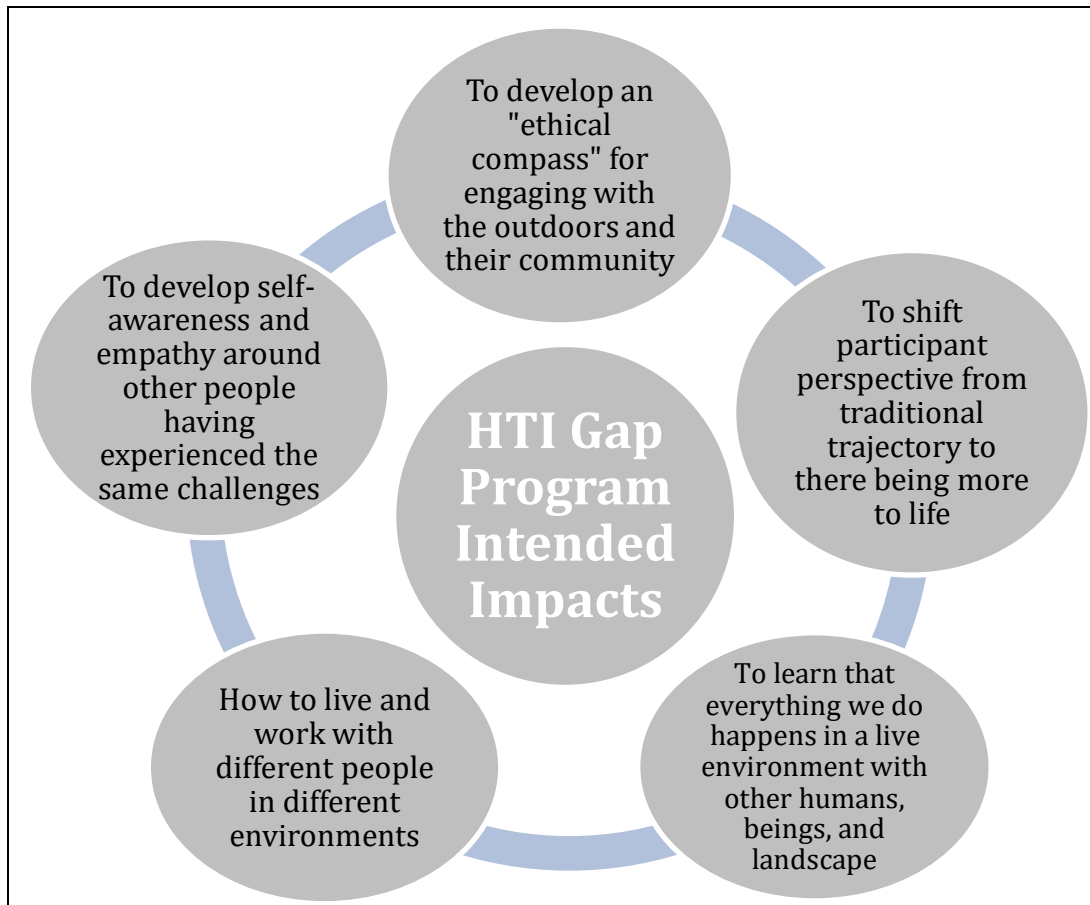
HTI Gap Program Impacts

As a result of the data analysis process through the lens of examining the impact of the HTI Gap program on emerging adults in transition, study themes were generated to explore the support HTI Gap participants experienced. The four major study themes identified are personal growth, broadened perspective, instructor influence, and learning in an outdoor environment. The sub-themes identified are self-awareness, self-confidence, diversity of perspectives, delayed reflection, communication skills, and comfort with discomfort. These themes are discussed according to my literature review that highlights the benefits of participating in an outdoor adventure education program as a form of a gap year experience.

The curriculum and progression of the HTI Gap experience is described by the HTI Gap director, Charlie. They describe three elements of engagement as extended time in the wilderness, intellectual engagement, and inclusive community. These components of engagement are supported by adventure skills, leadership, and environmental studies curriculum. There are several opportunities for feedback and semi-formal evaluations with instructors and peers, with a progressive level of ownership and independence over the course of the gap semester. Charlie describes that the ultimate student participant impact is individualized. They believe that each participant is impacted depending on what they hope to gain from the experience, upon signing up. Figure 12 outlines the intended HTI Gap program Impacts.

Figure 12

HTI Gap Program Intended Impacts



The intentions of the HTI Gap year program are highlighted according to interview responses from the HTI Gap director (see Figure 12). The intended impacts, in many ways, align with the impacts experienced by the participants. These intended HTI Gap program impacts are reworded according to Charlie's response to my questions, "what would you say are the greatest impacts that you want to see students going home with? How do you want to see [HTI] impacting them?" The most profound response was:

All of the things we do happen in a live environment, in a place that has other beings in it. Whether those are human or other organisms or just a landscape...we don't go backpacking and we're not just consumers of this backpacking experience. Life happens out there...these places exist beyond our own little way of interacting with them.

This statement strongly resonates with the themes of personal growth, learning in an outdoor environment, and broadened perspective, as well as the sub-theme, self-awareness. Additionally, these experiences are manifested by instructor implementation of the program curriculum, and therefore, instructor impact.

Study Themes

HTI Gap Program participant responses with respect to responses from the HTI Gap director are connected, by theme, to the existing literature that reflects reported impacts of gap year programs. Each theme personal growth, broadened perspective, instructor impact, and learning in an outdoor environment, will be connected to interview responses and the literature.

Personal Growth

Personal growth is a major theme identified by all five student participants and confirmed by the HTI Gap director. While personal growth can be perceived as a thread aligning all the identified themes in my research, it is specifically referenced in my results as represented by the

sub-themes: self-awareness and self-confidence. As represented by Figure 7, all student participants speak to personal growth as an HTI Gap program impact, however, Table E1 demonstrates the varying contexts of these responses. Figure 3 displays the impacts perceived by gap year alumni regarding the different components of a gap year experience (Gallagher & Blythe, 2020). Therefore, different programmatic components of HTI impact participants, differently.

According to previous research, personal growth can be one of the highest reported impacts by gap year alumni (see Figure 3). This aligns with the significance of personal growth-related responses during my interviews. All participants connected their experiences to personal growth at least once, while three participants mentioned these impacts several times. Gallagher and Blythe (2020) find that 76% of the 1,190 gap year alumni to complete their survey were impacted “a lot” by improved self-confidence (p.21). While this was relatively different from the 96% of survey respondents reporting improved self-confidence, Hoe (2015) had only received survey responses from 558 participants (p.12). Some of the other presented categories such as increased levels of maturity, personal development, personal reflection, and communication skills, all of which were higher than 70% of survey respondents, also align strongly with improved personal growth (Figure X).

International gap year literature highlights the positive impacts of a gap year experience on participants. Heath (2007) refers to self-development and personal enrichment. Coetzee and Bester (2009) find in interviews with three gap year participants, an increase in independence and confidence and connect this to a self-awareness that enables stronger relationships with others. King (2011) discusses the shift in self-perception for participants viewing themselves as more of an adult. Reflective observation related to the direct experiences (Kolb, 2015)

throughout the gap year experience therefore support emerging adults in identity formation (Arnett, 2000).

In outdoor adventure education literature, Sibthorp et al. (2007) reference the impact of experiential education on self-confidence, decision-making and problem-solving skills. These developed qualities align with the self-awareness needed to support feelings of instability in emerging adulthood, where the many options and opportunities can create a sense of overwhelm and instill feelings of decreased self-confidence (Reifman et al., 2007). As a result of experiential education within the gap year experience, students may then have the confidence to approach the possibilities of life after having experienced personal growth (Arnett, 2000).

Shellman and Ewert (2010) studied Outward Bound participants and found that a sense of achievement after challenge led to shifts in beliefs about participant capability and therefore, feeling more capable in their everyday life. HTI participant, Mika, speaks to this principle as they say, “I have that assurance that I can do hard things and be okay.” HTI participant, Kelley, spoke to their self-awareness built around learning their capabilities. Kelley and Mika were referring to the challenges of the outdoors leading to greater self-confidence in their following outdoor excursions and everyday lives. HTI participants, Lyric and Jay, spoke to the challenges of social dynamics and their resulting self-confidence after completion of their HTI Gap program. While participant responses were varied, they all referenced overcoming challenges as contributors to personal growth.

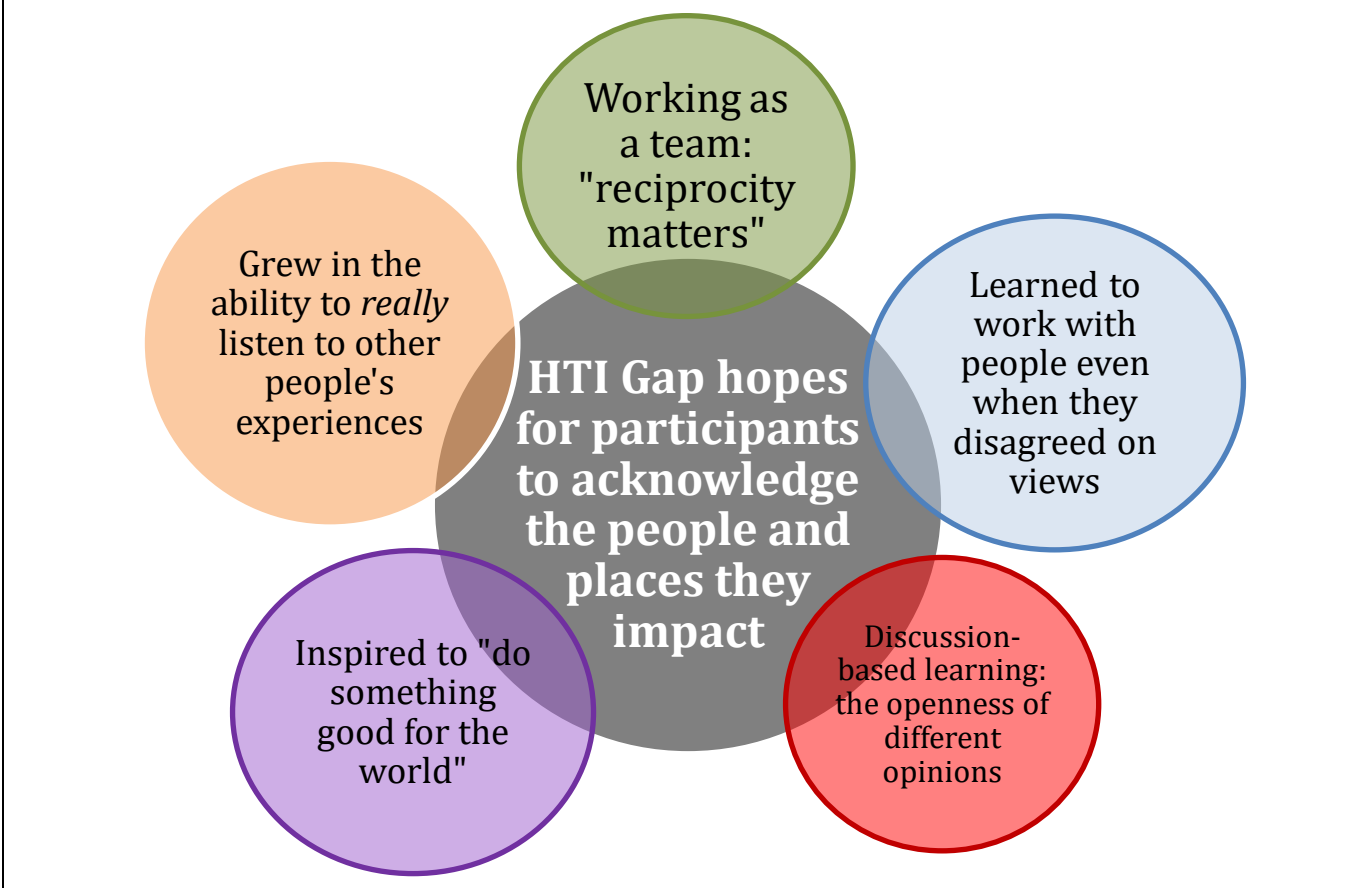
Broadened Perspective

Personal growth in many ways aligns with a broadened perspective. An enhanced self-perspective can create the open-mindedness to appreciate and understand alternative perspectives. All HTI participants spoke to the impacts of the HTI Gap program due to the

exposure to different perspectives (see Figure 13). HTI participant Kelley says, “I’ve learned that it’s important to be courageous and be adventurous and, uh, learn about other people, whether that’s, you know, from a cultural perspective, all these other perspectives, or other labels that we have thrown on us.” Kelley spoke to the principle of different perspectives in five separate moments during their interview. This impact aligns with the 80% of survey participants to report the impacts regarding the ability to interact with a diversity of people (see Figure 3). Kelley, Jay, and Ezra spoke to the value of diverse perspectives and opinions, with particular emphasis on discussion-based learning.

Figure 13

HTI Gap Program Intentions for a Broadened Perspective



Note. HTI Gap director speaks to the HTI Gap program intending for participants to

acknowledge their outward impact. The surrounding circles represent participant responses regarding the development of a broadened perspective as a result of participating in the HTI Gap program.

Four out of the five student participants referenced delayed reflection as a contributor to the impacts experienced by the HTI Gap program (see Figure 13). This abstract conceptualization (Kolb, 2015) and active reflection about prior experience, relates to the intentions of experiential learning. HTI participant Lyric mentions, “as the time passes, I feel like the growth was super delayed...it happened maybe 6 months or a year later, um, that I finally reap the benefits of doing this program.” Meanwhile, HTI participant Mika spoke to the process of growth as “peeling away layers.” This indicates the delayed reflection and learning that only happened months after the experience. An evaluation of programmatic impacts on participants, months to a year after the experience can also be indicative of learning transfer, as suggested by Sibthorp et al. (2011). The HTI participants in this study were interviewed over a year after their gap year experience, so it is possible that responses may have been slightly different if they had been interviewed immediately following their HTI Gap program semester. Broadened perspective can be related to social dynamics, experiencing a new environment, delayed reflection, or the HTI curriculum, which is all supported by the instructors.

Instructor Impact

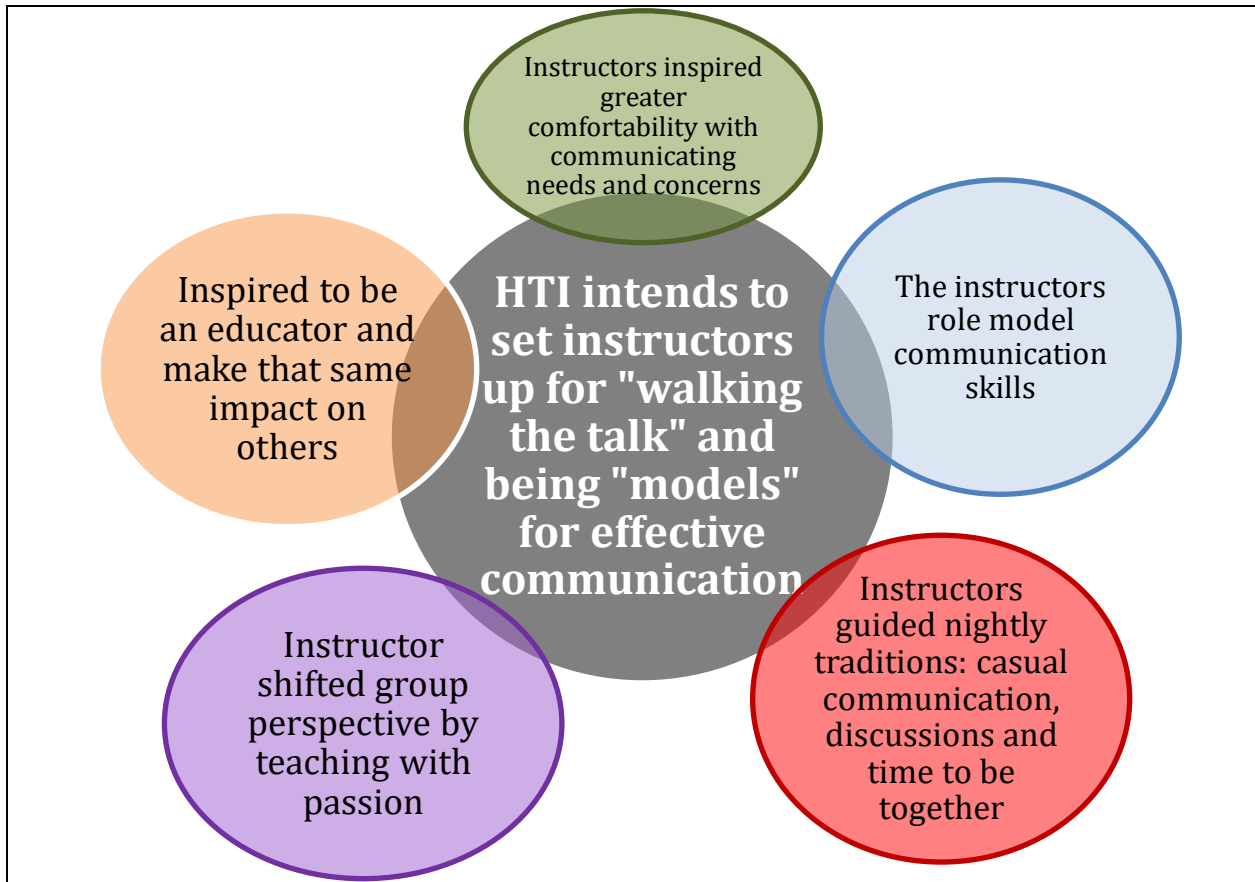
The HTI Gap program participants identify the gap program instructors as valuable and inspirational (see Figure 14). The instructors were defined as role models by HTI participants Jay, Lyric, and Mika. Jay references the desire to become an educator later in life, with a deeper sense of inspiration established by the impact from their HTI Gap program instructors. HTI participant Jay says:

That's kind of like why I want to be an educator just because I feel very indebted to all these people who have like changed my life. And so, I want to like make the same impact for other people.

Likewise, Kelley mentions gratitude for their instructor during a time of physical challenge. Mika spoke to a moment of leadership as their most profound HTI memory, and they implied that their instructor had a negative impact that inspired further reflection far beyond the HTI Gap program. They identified lessons of leadership later but did not experience a positive impact from this instructor interaction, immediately. By extension, Heath (2007) speaks to the development of soft skills as a gap year program impact. Kelley describes the HTI staff as “open and welcoming” which aligns with the empathetic qualities of instructors as essential for supporting participants in “self-awareness and communication skills” (Schumann et al., 2009, p. 28). According to Schumann et al., instructor impact aligns directly with impacting personal growth.

Figure 14

HTI Gap Program Instructor Community



Note. This figure demonstrates the intent of HTI Gap director for their instructor community.

The surrounding circles represent participant responses regarding HTI Gap instructors' impact.

Instructors have also been referenced by the HTI participants as impacting communication skills for participants. Kelley, Lyric and Jay identified the instructors as supporting their communication skills. Lyric describes several moments of challenge in social interactions and how they began trying to imitate instructor approaches to conversation (see Figure 14). The HTI Gap program trains their instructors for up to two weeks, which involves conflict resolution and establishing a community environment (see Figure 14). White (2007) says feedback that celebrates successes of behaviors and areas for improvement can have the greatest

influence on development. The HTI Gap director describes feedback as a “negotiation between what the students think they’re doing and what the instructors observed.” The participant-instructor relationship highlights the necessity of a supportive learning environment (Schumann et al., 2009; Sibthorp et al., 2009).

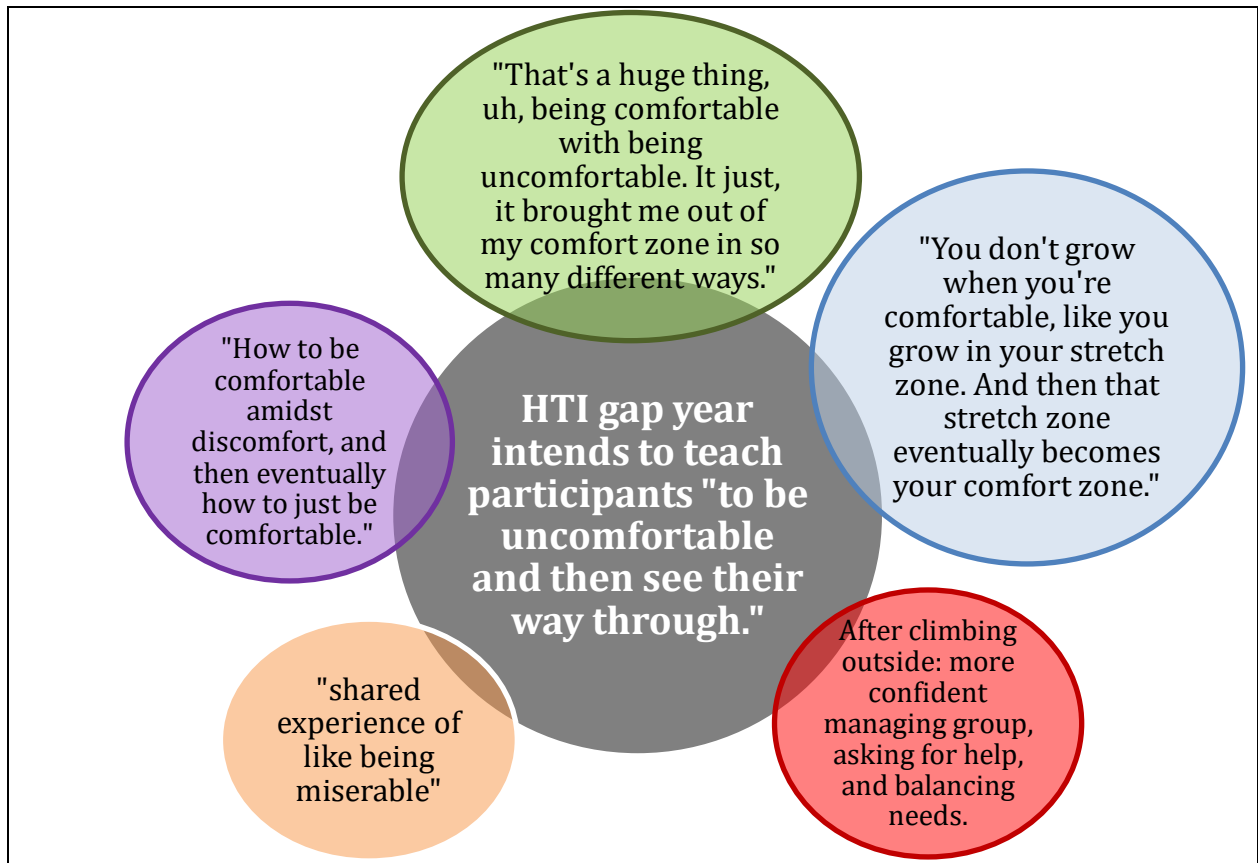
Learning in an Outdoor Environment

The term “learning” is broad in the sense that this can pertain to learning specifically from the HTI curriculum or learning that occurs within the context of personal growth. Learning can result from the challenges of the physical skills and endurance needed for the program, within the outdoor adventure education model. “The outdoors is for everyone. That’s one of the main messages I received,” stated by HTI participant Kelley. The discussion-based learning that occurred, alongside the HTI curriculum highlights the differences between learning in the outdoor environment versus formal learning in a traditional, high school environment. “One could argue that the ultimate purpose of any form of education is to empower learners, to think, to feel, and to act” (Shellman, 2014, p. 19). It is perhaps this active experimentation (Kolb, 2015) from the experiential learning theory that supports student self-confidence, connecting the outdoor learning environment to personal growth.

Personal growth also occurs as participants endure finding comfort in discomfort, the sub-theme identified within the context of learning in an outdoor environment. 100% of the HTI Gap participants speak to finding comfortability in their HTI Gap program experience (see Figure 15). Additionally, Kelley speaks to the questions and curiosities inspired from the environmental studies curriculum such as, “how does that affect the world? How does that affect us? How do we affect the environment?” It is inconclusive whether it was the discomforts and challenges of the outdoors or the HTI curriculum that most directly impacted HTI participants.

Figure 15

HTI Gap Program Intentions for Learning in an Outdoor Environment



Note. This figure demonstrates the HTI Gap director perspective on HTI Gap participants learning about finding comfort in discomfort. The outside circles represent participants speaking to this sub-theme, comfort with discomfort.

There is crossover between learning in an outdoor environment with a broadened perspective, given the recognition of the larger context of the place. Participant Mika mentions being impacted by the concept of “place,” several times. Mika states the greatest impact they experienced from the HTI Gap program was the value of place and their relationship to it. They stated they now experience their home in a very different way, by examining their relationship to their home, as a valuable and special place.

My study indicates 80% of the HTI Gap participant responses draw specific connections between the outdoors during their HTI Gap program and their present relationship with the outdoors. Lyric and Kelley both mention their experience with engaging with the outdoors and their senses, as well as smells and sounds reminding them of their HTI Gap experience. Williams (2017) states “we’ve known for millennia that smells can influence our moods, behaviors, and health...the hypothesis is that the smell of ‘cleanliness’ makes us aspirational” (p.76). Kelley and Lyric both mention the impact of the outdoors on their emotions, and how backpacking, in particular instilled a wide variety of emotions. HTI participant “Kelley” says, “I don’t know what the power is of the outdoors or being in this open environment with so much land around you in nature.”

All HTI participants in my study referenced learning in the outdoors as an impactful component of their HTI Gap program semester (see Figure 15). HTI student, Ezra says “something I did notice is like, I do very well without distractions when I can just kind of sit there in a beautiful place without my phone or anything and just do the work.” Whether this comment is related to possible anxiety from social media and technological use (Vannucci et al., 2017) or the benefit of leaving a city environment and entering an outdoor environment (Williams, 2017), it is unclear. Gallagher and Blythe (2020) determine that 63% of gap year alumni attributed their gap year impacts to the exposure to a new environment, however, this survey did not explicitly ask about outdoor environments (see Figure 3).

Inconclusive HTI Gap Program Impacts

The intentions to participate in a gap year program and certain gap year program impacts, were not revealed in my data analysis, due to a lack of interview questions or relevance to the participant. There are several themes identified in the literature that were insignificant in my

interviews. Themes from the literature consisted of impacts on academic motivation, participation in higher education, and impacts on post-gap year trajectory (Gallagher & Blythe, 2020; Hoe, 2015; King, 2011; Parker et al., 2015). These themes were inconclusive for several reasons. All interview participants mentioned the COVID-19 pandemic as contributing to the challenges of recognizing the impacts of their gap year experience on their trajectory. The pandemic also contributed to their lack of academic motivation, rather than improvements in motivation after a gap year (O'Shea, 2014). Three HTI participants stated they had already applied and been accepted to their college institutions, prior to their gap year. Three HTI participants did, however, mention that their passions and trajectory were affirmed, but not shifted by their gap year experience. Perhaps a more directed approach to the interview process would have reduced the limitations in my research.

Limitations

There are inherently limitations to this research, due to the limited number of studies that have examined gap year programs, specifically in the United States. Some of the most prominent studies referenced in the literature are from overseas (Heath, 2007; King, 2011; Martin, 2010; O'Shea, 2011; Simpson, 2005; Stehlik, 2010; Vogt, 2017). This is limiting due to the varying nature of programmatic implementation in different countries. There are also international disparities in economic support for individuals to take a gap year. This may impose limits on the HTI participant responses referenced in my study.

My research and interview interpretations are limited by my level of expertise in the field of research. The information gathered and coded is qualitative data, which is limited by my own interpretations, potential bias, and personal selection of quotes and information to include in my research findings (Saldaña, 2016). It is possible that I have omitted findings, unknowingly.

Due to the limited gap year research specifically exploring participant impacts and perceptions, this study relies on inferences made according to the fragmentation of previous research findings, of similar subject matter. The studies referenced in this research are from outdoor adventure education programs, formal classroom dynamics, and gap year programs experienced overseas. This may inflict gaps in drawing specific connections to previous research studies.

Additionally, my research question would have benefitted from being slightly more specific. By exploring the general impact of the HTI Gap program on emerging adults in transition, this may have limited my ability to draw specific connections between programmatic impacts and gap year programs as a form of support for future participants. Through a more specific research question, it may have been easier to extrapolate a specific factor of the HTI Gap program that impacted participants the most. Several of the recommendations for further research have partly been informed by some of these limitations.

Recommendations

As a result of my research on the impact of the HTI Gap program, there are several areas that I recommend for further development and research that would contribute to the existing literature. Given that research on gap year programs is relatively limited in the United States, any research on gap year programs that is conducted in the United States, with a more focused study on one of the themes that emerged in my data analysis, is suggested. This would entail a case study on personal growth, instructor impact, broadened perspective, or learning in the outdoors.

Given the challenges of participant recollection of their beliefs, values, and self-perceptions prior to their gap year experience, it is recommended to conduct a study that involves interviewing participants before and after their gap year participation. I intended to ask the HTI

Gap participants about their high school beliefs and decided their recollection might be skewed, according to how they wanted to see themselves, then. It is therefore recommended to conduct a comparative study by interviewing high school students and post-gap year participants about their self-perspectives.

I would suggest research that evaluates gap year financial assistance and availability for a wider range of individuals. This study examines the benefits of gap year programs as forms of support, and it is important to expand on the availability of support for all interested participants. Those who participate in gap year programs are generally white females of high socio-economic status (Gallagher & Blythe, 2020). While gap year programs and universities are offering financial assistance (Clagett et al., 2020), the sum offered may not always cover the entire cost of the program. An evaluation of the impacts of financial assistance on participant incentive to participate in a gap year program or a case study on a gap year program tailored specifically to racial diversity, would be beneficial. Similarly, a psychological evaluation of diverse individuals with reservations about participating in a gap year program, would be beneficial.

Incentives to participate in a gap year program are also connected to those who gap year programs would benefit. Rose Birch and Miller (2007) find that students with higher grades in high school are more likely to take a gap year, meanwhile, a gap year program is also likely to benefit students who are performing poorly in academics (Martin, 2010). Taking a break between high school and college might be the necessary form of support for these individuals. Research related to the impacts of taking a gap year for individuals struggling in high school, would be beneficial.

A further investigation of gap year programs and their connections to the learning experience, would be beneficial. HTI student, Mika, said the greatest impact from HTI was being

taught the value of place. They referenced the impact of place several times in their interview responses, which inspired the recommendation to explore the impact of gap year programs on participant relationships to place or place-based learning (Hutson et al., 2019). Several studies interviewed program participants many years after their participation in an outdoor adventure education program, examining learning transfer (Schumann et al., 2009; Sibthorp et al., 2011). An evaluation of long-term learning transfer from gap year programs, specifically, is recommended.

According to the theme, learning in an outdoor environment, there is immense possibility for research on the specific impacts of the outdoors or programs facilitated in the outdoors. Alternatively, investigating the impacts of outdoor experiential programs and the impact this can have, due to the detachment from technology, is becoming more relevant as technology progresses. Technology is implied as a means of stunting personal growth, due to the mental health impacts that result (Vanucci et al., 2017). Williams (2017) explores the healing properties of nature by investigating different types of programs, in multiple countries. While only one HTI participant mentioned the benefits of being away from their phone, a study that examines the impacts of extended time away from technology, as a component of gap year programs, is suggested.

By extension, an examination of gap year program participation in the months following the COVID-19 pandemic, would be a valuable contribution to research. All interview participants spoke to the challenges of the pandemic and the inability to separate HTI Gap program impacts from the impacts of the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the use of technology dramatically, so an evaluation of entering an outdoor gap year program, following a time where “our digital interactions replace analog ones” (Williams, 2017, p. 191),

would be a beneficial contribution to research. While these recommendations are jaded by my personal interests, all contributions to research are valuable.

Conclusion

My case study research on the HTI Gap program serves as confirmatory research for previous studies examining the impacts of experiential learning programs. Confirmation is demonstrated by HTI Gap participant responses as they align with the intended HTI Gap impacts. The purpose of this research is to inform emerging adults speculating a gap year experience, families of emerging adults, gap year instructors, and United States citizens about the impacts of gap year programs. By examining the impacts of the HTI Gap experience with connection to Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood and Kolb's experiential learning theory, conclusions can be drawn about support for individual learning in developing a positive outlook about transition and the process of development.

The findings of my research are that support for transition can take many roles, as represented by the impacts experienced by the HTI Gap program participants (see Appendix F). Personal growth is the perceived development of self-awareness and self-confidence. Through personal growth, emerging adults can find support within themselves. Personal growth is an overarching theme that demonstrates the shift from instability and self-doubt to understanding individual capabilities in decision-making. Through implementing abstract experimentation, emerging adults can confidently explore the possibilities of adulthood that support core skills and passions.

Delayed reflection encompasses a general gained insight from the HTI Gap program, as participants reflect on the support they received, during and beyond their learning experience. Through the interactions and diverse perspectives from fellow participants, the negative

perspectives that emerging adults may experience with feeling in-between adolescence and adulthood are inverted through deepened growth and maturity. A broadened perspective is enhanced by reflective observation that can create lasting impacts on emerging adults, due to the emotional foundation of experiential learning. Emerging adults become able to approach transition through the lens of a shared developmental experience. Broadened perspective is representative of the support gained from social dynamics and exposure to diversity, instilling explorations of identity and the pursuit of a wider range of possibilities.

Possibilities for emerging adults are supported and expanded through the impact of instructors. The HTI Gap participants describe their instructors as role models of communication skills by facilitating group dynamics and implementing program curriculum. The feedback process is an opportunity for emerging adults to find creative solutions and learn from prior experiences or interactions with group members. Through reflective observation and abstract conceptualization, identity exploration is supported through the development of communication skills. The HTI Gap instructors guide and support the space for emerging adults to gain deeper self-awareness and self-confidence for transition, moving forward.

Through the experience of finding comfort in discomfort, the HTI Gap participants were able to gain self-awareness in their individual capabilities. The cycle of experiential learning in an outdoor environment provides a vessel for participants to explore their independence and passions. Through physical and social challenges, emerging adults can understand their external impact and take responsibility for their actions, which enhances a positive perspective of self-focus. Daily reflection and active experimentation instill the notion of support that emerging adults can find outdoors, at any time. Overall, gap year programs have the capacity to impact

emerging adults in profound ways, serving as guidance and support for the transitions and future endeavors of adulthood.

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Appendix A

Institutional Review Board Human Subjects Approval

UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING

Vice President for Research & Economic Development
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December 16, 2020

Kim Johnson
Graduate Student
Science and Mathematics Teaching Center
University of Wyoming

Kate Welsh
Associate Professor
School of Teacher Education
University of Wyoming

Protocol #20201216KJ02910

Re: IRB Proposal *"The Impact of a Gap Year Experiential Learning Program on Emerging Adults"*

Dear Kim and Kate:

The proposal referenced above qualifies for exempt review and is approved as one that would not involve more than minimal risk to participants. Our exempt review and approval will be reported to the IRB at their next convened meeting on January 21, 2021.

Any significant change(s) in the research/project protocol(s) from what was approved should be submitted to the IRB (Protocol Update Form) for review and approval prior to initiating any change. Further information and the forms referenced above may be accessed at the "Human Subjects" link on the Office of Research and Economic Development website: <http://www.uwyo.edu/research/human-subjects/index.html>. Please note that exempt protocols are approved for a maximum of three years. If your study extends beyond three years, or beyond the duration that is approved in your protocol form, please be sure to submit an update before expiration to extend the duration. If you are not able to submit the update in time, you will need to submit a new exemption request for the project.

You may proceed with the project/research and we wish you luck in the endeavor. Please feel free to call me if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Nichole Person

Nichole Person
Staff Assistant, Research Office
On behalf of the Chairman,
Institutional Review Board

Appendix B

HTI Gap Program Participant Interview Questions

Preface interview by saying that an interviewee has the choice not to answer any question if it makes them uncomfortable. Confirm the amount of time the interview will take. Ask if the interviewee is in a private enough space to be having this discussion. Remind participants that responses are confidential, and they will remain anonymous in the presentation of research findings.

Rapport-building questions

1. Where do you live and what are you doing now? How did you land on what you are doing now? Student, working, unemployed, etc...
2. How old are you?
3. Why did you decide to participate in a gap year program?
4. Why did you decide on HTI for your gap year experience?
5. Describe your most profound memory from HTI. Why does this memory stand out to you?

HTI Gap Program Experience

6. What would you tell a friend about the HTI Gap program?
7. How did your facilitator help you learn?
8. What did you learn about *how* you learn?
9. What did you learn about *who* you are?
10. What did you learn that's applicable to what you are doing now?
11. How did your facilitator guide you in reflecting on your experience?

1. Is there any activity/activities that stands out that helped you in your reflection process?
2. Do you still use reflection in what you are doing now? Why/Why not?
12. In what ways did the HTI Gap program challenge you?
13. A lot of the literature I have explored has examined the following outcomes for students who have participated in gap year programs: self-awareness, confidence, decision-making, and identity formation. How did HTI focus on building your self-awareness, confidence, decision-making abilities, or identity formation?
14. What was the most impactful outcome of your gap year experience?
15. Is there anything else you would like to add about how HTI impacted you?

Higher Education Questions

16. What did you do after HTI? How did you decide on this?
17. What is/was your college major and how did you decide on this?
18. In what ways, if at all, did your HTI experience contribute to your decision to enroll in this program in college? Did this trajectory change at all?
19. Did you reflect on your HTI experience when in college? What did that look like?
20. What was your involvement in extracurricular activities in college?
21. How would you describe your academic motivation in college?

Appendix C

HTI Gap Director Interview Questions

General HTI Gap Program Questions

1. How long have you worked for HTI?
2. In what ways do you implement HTI's mission in your gap program?
3. How many students have enrolled in the gap program at HTI since the program began?
4. How many students enrolled in the gap program in the Fall of 2019? Do you have a record of student background/ethnicity/gender for participation in that program?
5. How has the program evolved? What are the noticeable successes for the student experience?

Experiential Learning Questions

6. What are the learning outcomes for the HTI Gap program?
7. What skills do you hope for your students to gain upon completion of the program?
8. In what ways does the gap program incorporate experiential learning techniques?
(Opportunities for reflection, accommodating different learning styles, interdisciplinary learning, allowing students to seek creative solutions, etc)
9. What are your strategies for *supporting* student reflection throughout their gap program semester?
10. How do you measure student success in the gap program?

Emerging Adulthood Questions

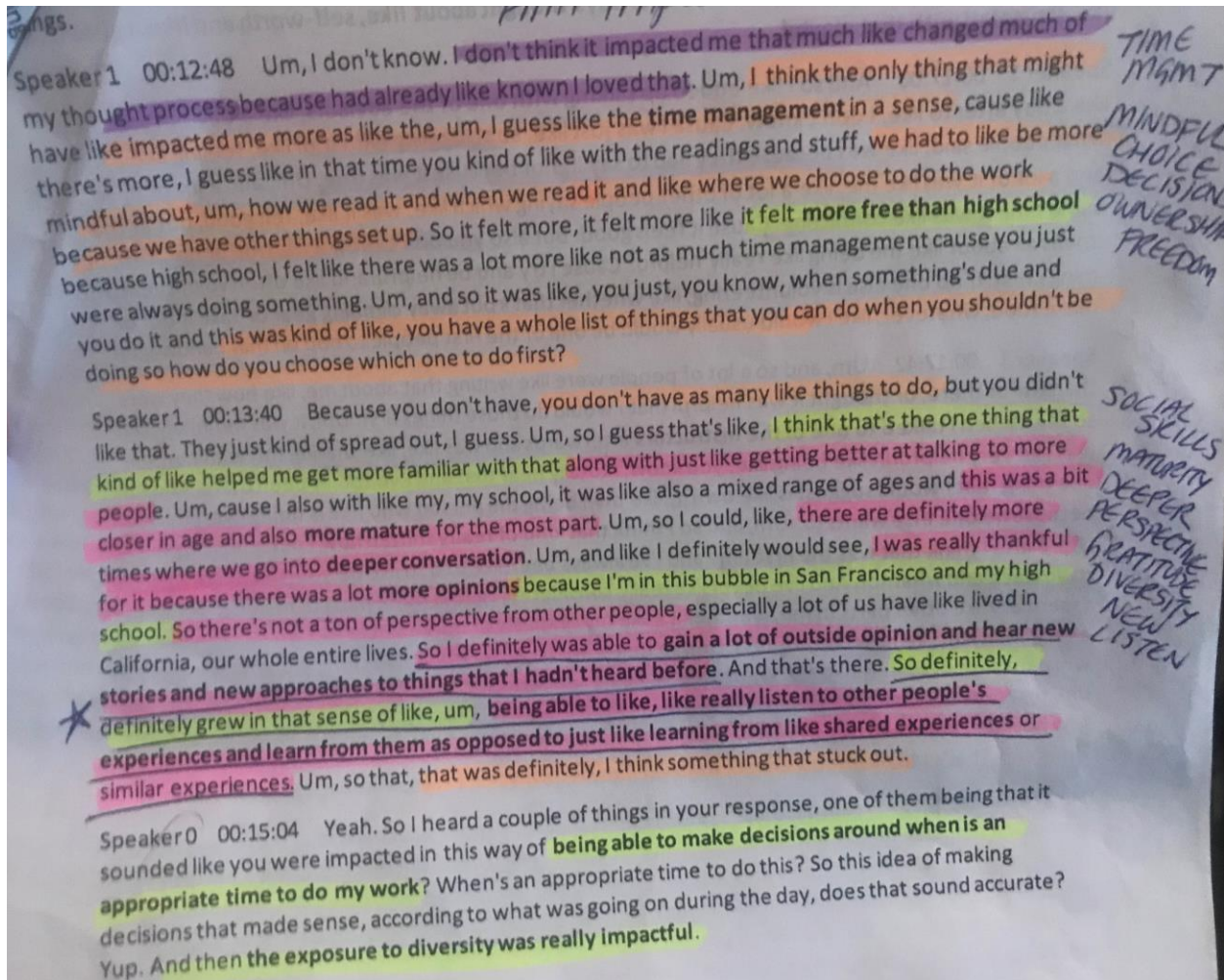
11. In what ways do you focus on supporting participants in their transition from high school to college?
12. What are your program's strategies for building participant:
 1. Self-confidence
 2. Self-awareness
 3. Decision-making
 4. Sense of Identity
13. How do you know if your students have gained skills in decision-making, confidence, and self-knowledge?
14. Is there anything else you would like to add about the desired impact of the HTI Gap program for participants?

Appendix D

The Coding Process

Figure D1

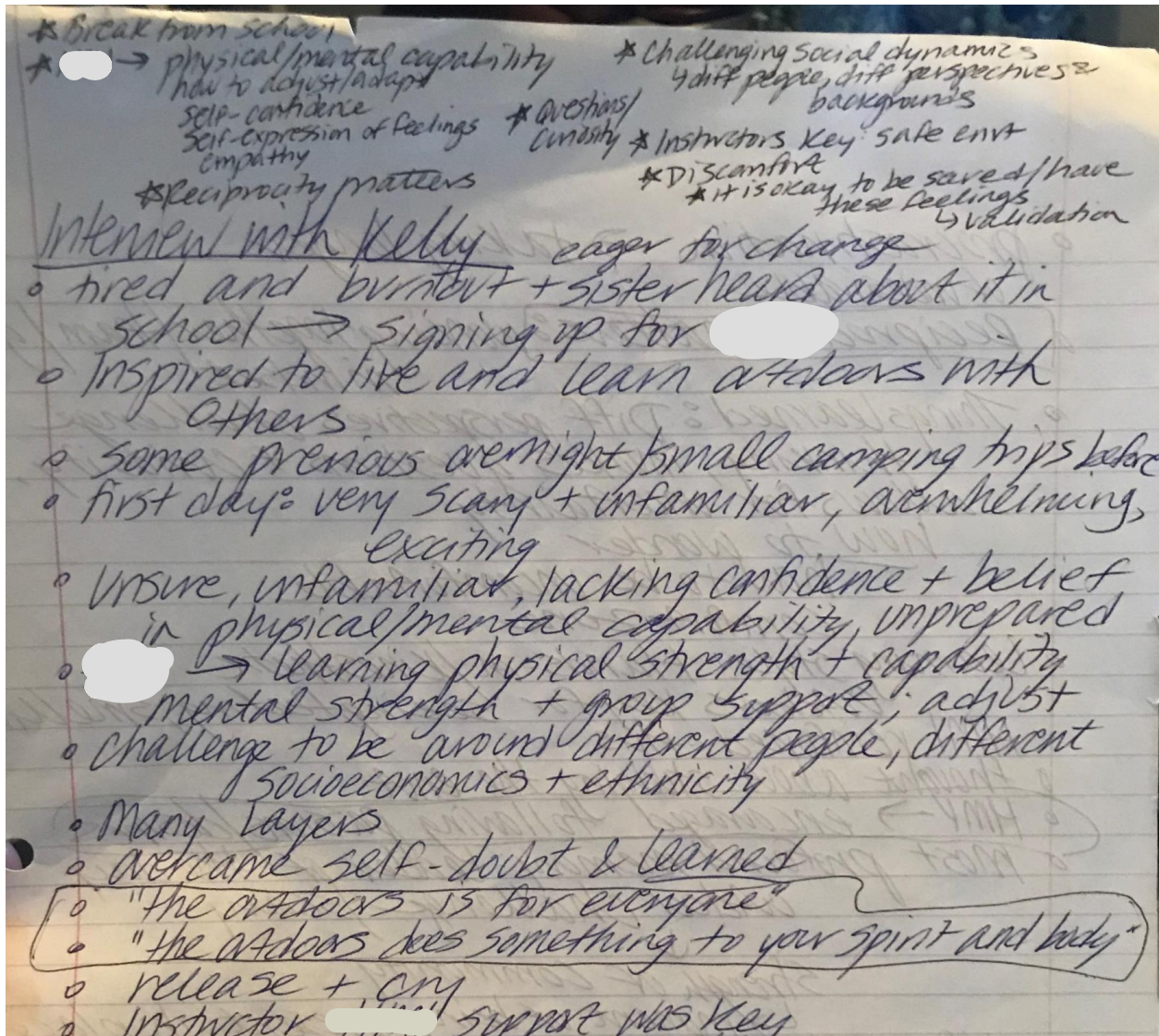
Provisional Coding Process



Note. This is a photograph representation of my provisional coding process (Saldaña, 2016). The highlighted colors represent the initial codes generated based on prior research. The initial codes were “programmatic impact” (orange), “challenges and uncertainty” (purple), “social dynamics” (pink), and “personal growth and learning outdoors” (yellow). Key words and phrases were both underlined and written in the margins.

Figure D2

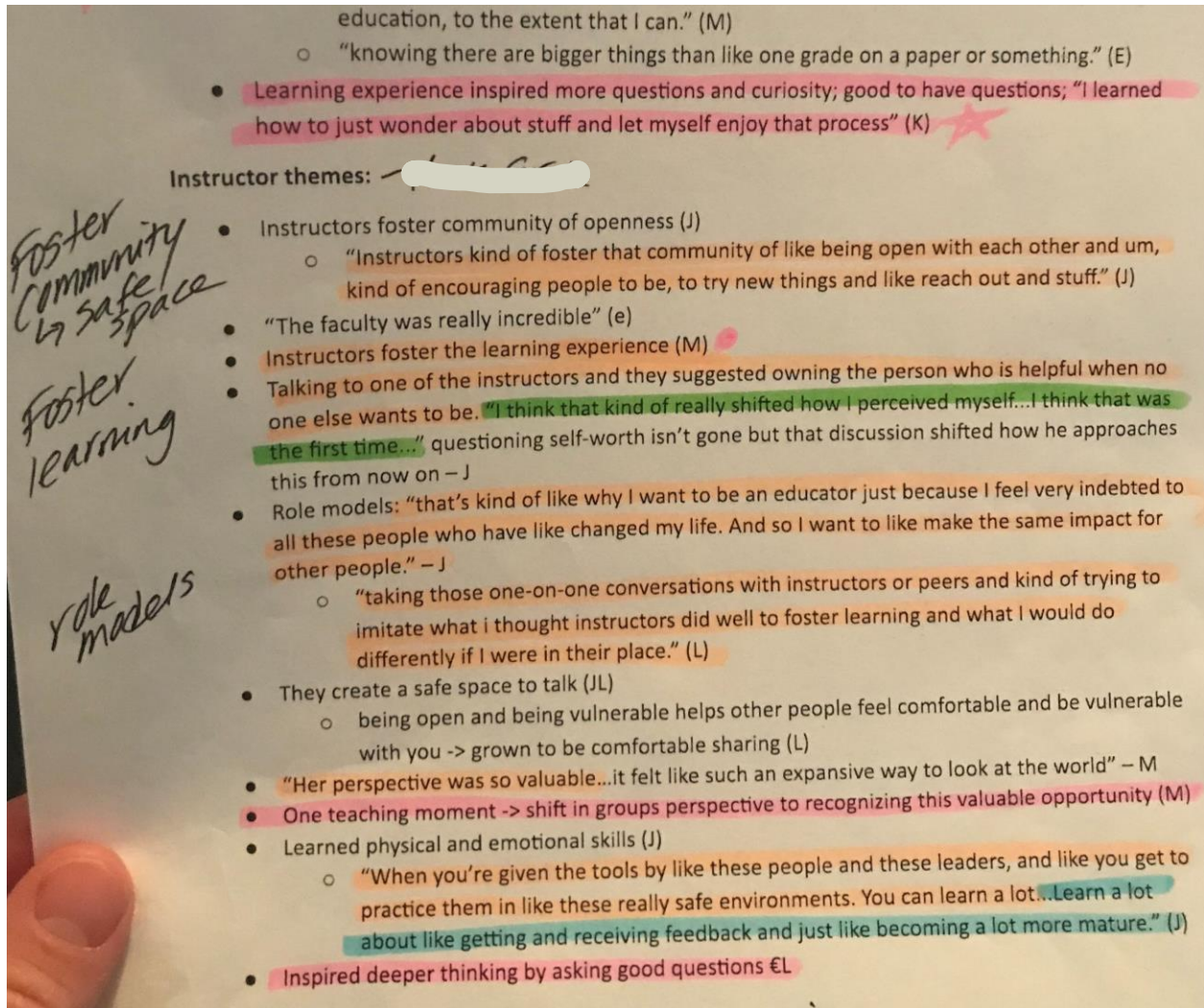
Key Words and Phrases Organized by Interviewee



Note. This figure is a photograph representation of the key words and phrases rewritten according to each HTI participant. Key words from each interview were written at the top of the page.

Figure D3

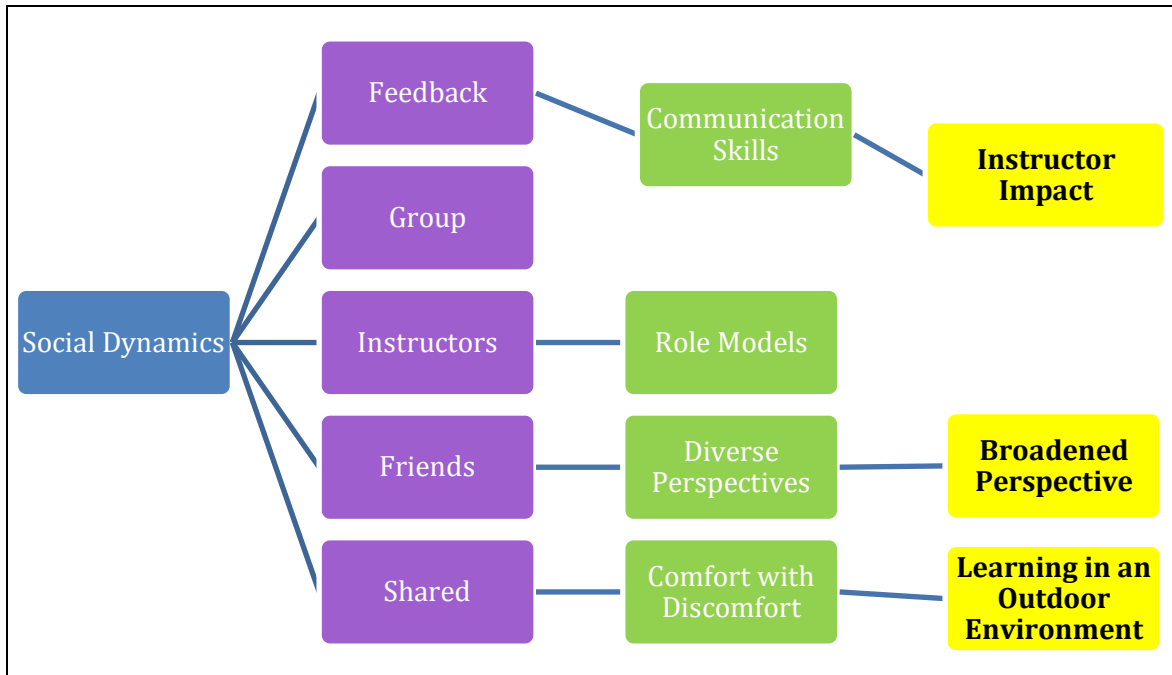
Pattern Coding Process with Study Themes



Note. This figure is a photograph of my second cycle coding process, pattern coding (Saldaña, 2016). HTI participant key phrases and quotes were compiled and organized by the second cycle codes which were both major study themes and sub-themes generated in my research. The second cycle codes were: “instructor impact” (orange), “broadened perspective” (purple),

Figure D4

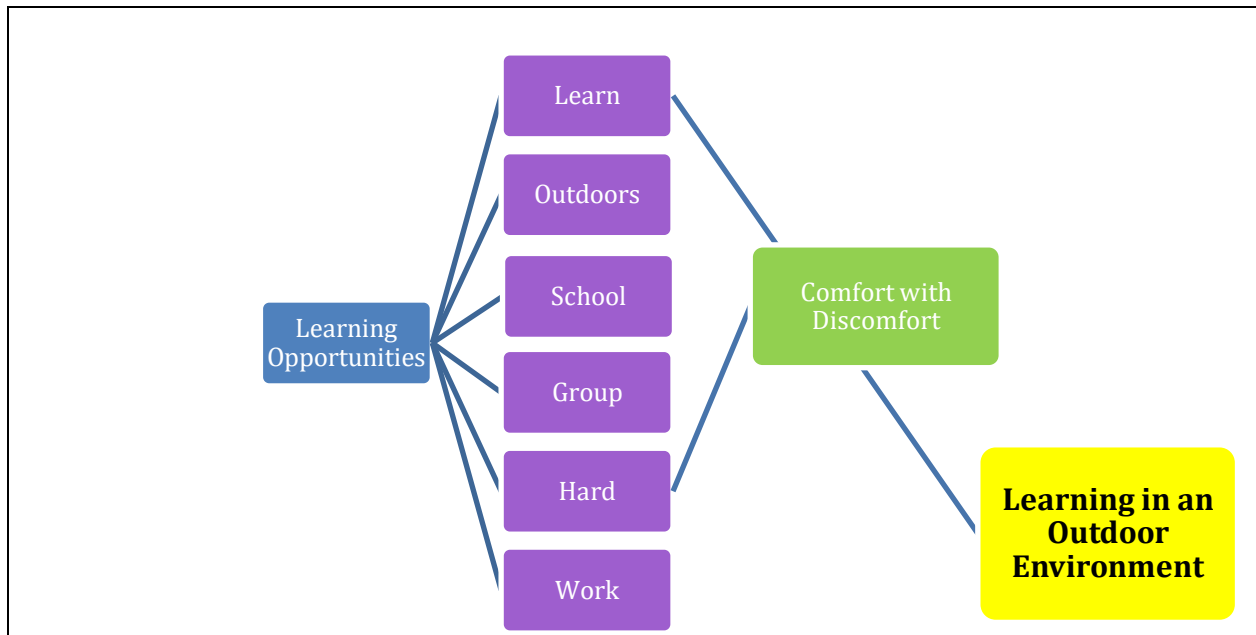
The Coding Process from Initial Code Social Dynamics



Note. This is a horizontal hierarchy representation of the initial coding theme, “social dynamics.” The purple squares are the derived key words (see Figure 5). The green squares are the derived sub-themes, and the yellow squares are the major themes identified as impacts from the HTI Gap program.

Figure D5

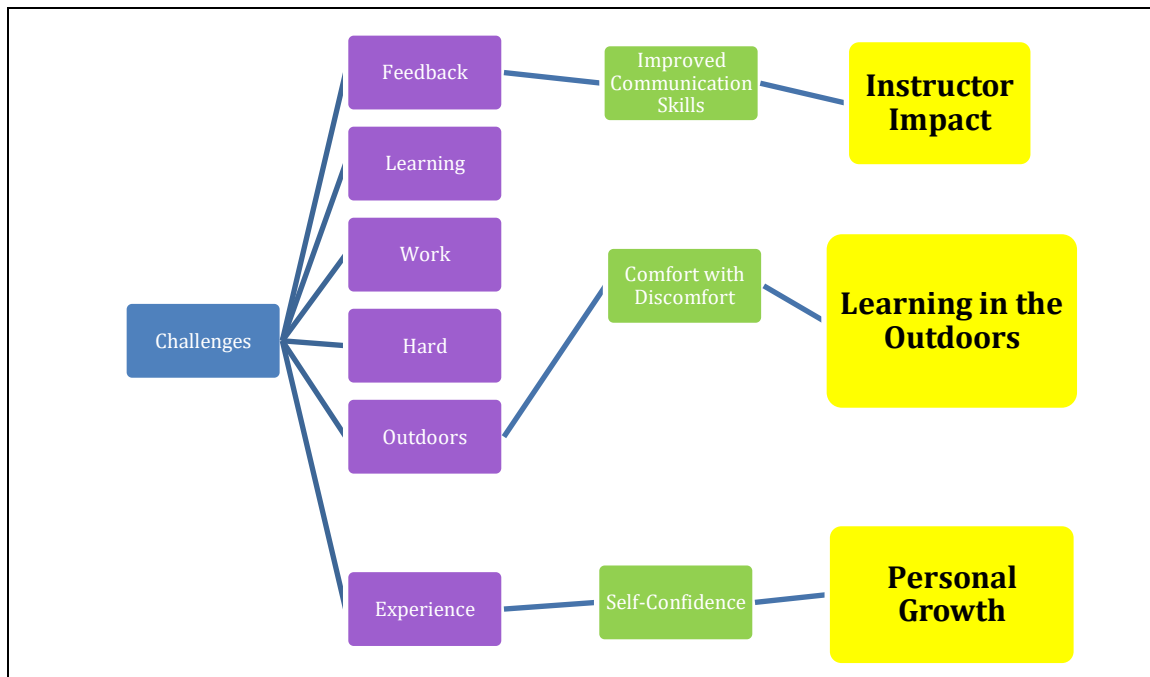
The Coding Process from Initial Code Learning Opportunities



Note. This is a horizontal hierarchy representation of the initial coding theme, “learning opportunities.” The purple squares are the derived key words (see Figure 5). The green squares are the derived sub-themes, and the yellow squares are the major themes identified as impacts from the HTI Gap program.

Figure D6

The Coding Process from Initial Code Challenges



Note. This is a horizontal hierarchy representation of the initial coding theme, “challenges.” The purple squares are the derived key words (see Figure 5). The green squares are the derived sub-themes, and the yellow squares are the major themes identified as impacts from the HTI Gap program.

Appendix E

The Context of Interview Responses

Table E1

The Context of HTI Participant Responses about Personal Growth

Participant	Context of Quote
“Lyric”	In response to, “what did you learn about your strengths as a result of participating in the [HTI] gap program?” This was in addition to discussing the challenges of social dynamics.
“Kelley”	In response to, “how did your experience at [HTI] impact what you know about yourself?” This response was in the context of the physical challenges of backpacking and living outdoors.
“Mika”	In response to, “what did you learn about how you learn?” Mika then spoke to what they learned about themselves in an outdoor setting versus a traditional academic setting.
“Ezra”	In response to, “what do you feel like translates specifically from what you learned at [HTI] into your life and who you are now?” This was in specific reference to physical capabilities.
“Jay”	This was in the context of describing a profound conversation with an instructor who encouraged them to take ownership of who they are.

Note. The colors represented in the table align with the colors behind the quotes in Figure 7.

While these responses are in the context of different physical challenges or social interactions within the HTI Gap program, there is significant crossover regarding the HTI Gap program impacts on personal growth.

Table E2

The Context of HTI Participant Responses about a Broadened Perspective

Participant	Context of Quote
“Lyric”	In response to, “what stands out to you as far as what you learned about who you are, or maybe some of your strengths as a result of going through this program?” Lyric stated this also shifted upon further reflection in just the past few months. They also stated, “I can choose my attitude” and “focus on the things I can control.”
“Kelley”	In response to, “So it's been over a year since your experience. What are some things that stuck with you and how do you see that resonate with your decisions or interactions with people, now?” They discussed the importance of working together and the ways that an individual can strongly impact group tasks. “We all have to work together, like, we’re all a unit.” They stated that “reciprocity matters” was a lesson they wrote down. Relatedly, they said, “there’s always more perspective to think about and challenge.” After several other thoughts, they said, “I’ve heard different perspectives that made me think, wow. Like I didn’t think about that before, or I would like to learn more about that or, or how could I challenge this or how could I challenge myself to think deeper about this question and this article?”
“Mika”	In response to a question about how HTI was the most impactful.
“Ezra”	In response to reflecting on the learning experience and facilitation by the instructors. These differences in opinion, as well as the HTI curriculum, shifted their thinking about wilderness as a construct.
“Jay”	In response to how the HTI programming has impacted their learning experience. They spoke to the mix of ages, opinions, and perspectives of fellow participants. They also said, “I definitely was able to gain a lot of outside opinion and hear new stories and new approaches to things that I hadn’t heard before... So definitely, definitely grew in that sense of like, um, being able to like, like really listen to other people's experiences and learn from them as opposed to just like learning from like shared experiences.”

Note. The context described in this table is aligned with the color represented by the quote presented in Figure 8. The impact of the HTI Gap program on participants and their broadened perspective relates to the community environment and learning experiences highlighted by the instructor’s influence on the students’ experiences. Each quote represented in this table was in response to a different question, context, or without my prompting in the interview process.

Table E3

The Context of HTI Participant Responses about Instructor Impact

Participant	Context of Quote
“Lyric”	In response to, “would you say there was anything programmatically that helped you learn about the best ways for you to learn?”
“Kelley”	Response to, “I’m wondering if you can speak to anything programmatically that you feel like [HTI] did is a strong form of support.”
“Mika”	In response to what was most engaging about learning at HTI. They spoke to a learning experience for a spontaneous geology lesson. They said this was potentially the most engaged the group was in an education experience throughout the semester.
“Ezra”	In response to “I’m curious if you noticed or had any affirming experiences that taught you anything about who you are as a learner or how best you learn?” Additionally, they stated they appreciated being able to take their time coming up with answers and preparing for group discussions.
“Jay”	In response to “would you say that you’re like that those skills gained were facilitated by [HTI] programmatically or they kind of happened naturally?” They said leadership feedback was something planned for the program and the encouragement to try new things came naturally from the instructors.

Note. This table is a description of the quotes in Figure 9 in the context of the interview with the participants. Each color in this table aligns with the background color of the quote presented in Figure 9. These quotes were generally prompted by asking participants to speak to programmatic impacts, with specific regard to how students are best able to learn. In the case of HTI participant Mika, they spoke to instructor impact with regard to one of their favorite learning moments in the program.

Table E4

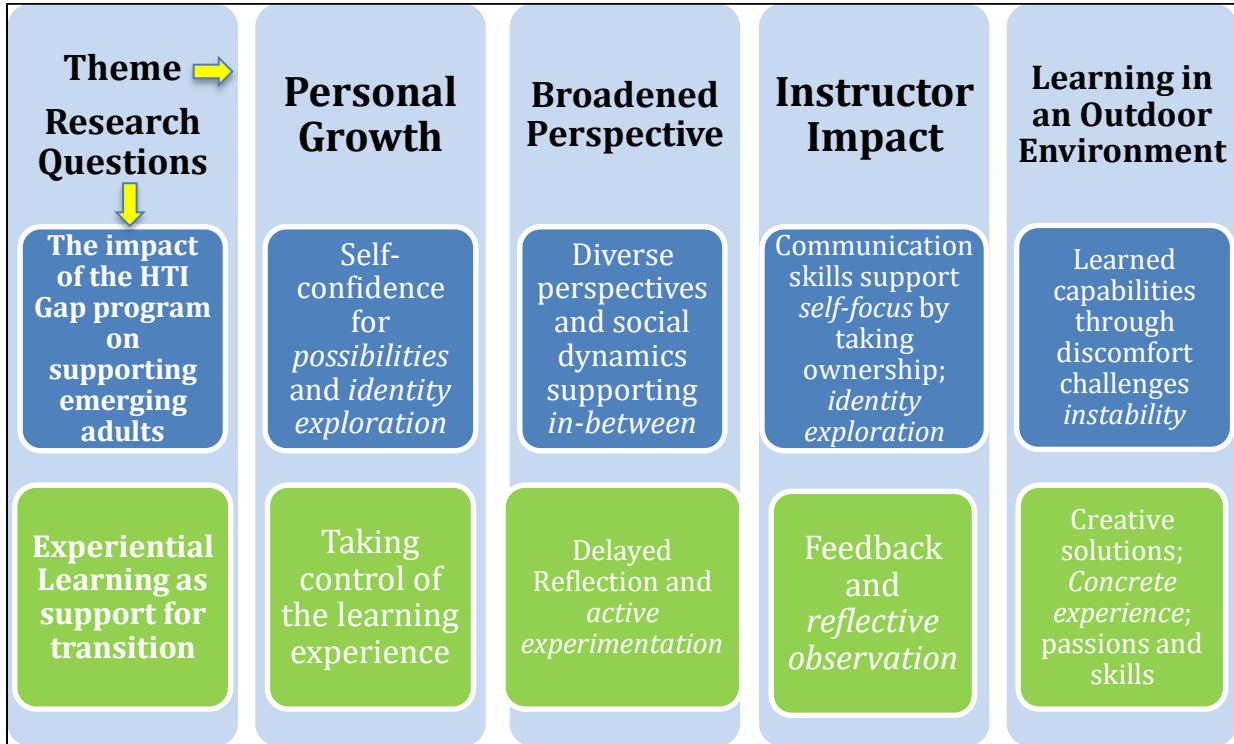
The Context of HTI Student Responses about Learning in an Outdoor Environment

Participant	Context of Quote
“Lyric”	In response to, “what would you say was the biggest impact from the [HTI] Gap Program?”
“Kelley”	Response to, “So it's been over a year since your experience. What are some things that stuck with you and how does that resonate in your decisions or in your interactions with people now?” They spoke to learning about the environment they were in for every place during their semester. They said they would always challenge themselves to think deeper about every question. They said they learned how it is always important to be curious and ask questions.
“Mika”	Mika spoke to the challenges of AP classes in high school and the pressure to perform and have good grades. They said they have always done well in traditional learning environments and felt that it was expected to have good grades. They compared this to the challenges of the outdoors and the ability to feel proud of their capabilities.
“Ezra”	In response to “if you had a friend who was interested in HTI, what would you say to them? They said they would highly recommend the program and that it was a good mix of experiences, as well as that the group dynamics are valuable due to all of the participants being in the same stage of life.
“Jay”	In response to “do you think that your gap experiences impacted your trajectory and in your studies?” They said they have thought about being an outdoor educator for a while, but this experience enhanced those feelings.

Note. This table is a description of the quotes about learning in an outdoor environment in the context of the interview with the participants (see Figure 10). Each color aligns with the color behind the quote in Figure 10. The participants spoke to learning in an outdoor environment throughout many of their responses, as this is a focus of the HTI Gap program, given their outdoor adventure education model.

Appendix F

The Connection Between Study Themes and Research Questions



Note. The italicized words in this figure represent terms used in the theoretical framework, connecting to experiential learning theory and the theory of emerging adulthood. Across the top, horizontally are the four major study themes. The squares in blue are connected to the research question, “what is the impact of the HTI Gap program on supporting emerging adults?” The squares in green are connected to the research question, “How does experiential learning support emerging adults in transition?” This figure is meant to serve as a visual representation of the conclusion stated at the end of Chapter Five.

Author's Biography

Kimberly Johnson completed this research project to support her beliefs in experiential learning through extended exposure to an outdoor environment. Last year, Kim participated in the first year of her graduate studies at the Teton Science Schools in Kelly, Wyoming, within the border of Grand Teton National Park. Teton Science Schools is a place-based education program that focuses on field ecology, building student connections to “place”, and living and learning in an inclusive community environment. As a result of her education and life experiences, Kim believes in student learning that is centered around personal growth and compassion for others.

Kim continued her graduate studies at the University of Wyoming, based out of Laramie, Wyoming. She was challenged and inspired by brilliant, hard-working, and supportive professors in the peak days of the COVID-19 pandemic. An online learning environment was an unfortunate circumstance that everyone was adjusting to. Shifting from the philosophy of outdoor, experiential learning to online learning was an incredible feat. Some days consisted of over twelve hours staring at a screen, longing for those moments outside with students, where Kim knew she really thrived. These reflections encouraged research prospects that would remind Kim the value of her work, during a relatively dark and hopeless time.

After years of working in outdoor education and wilderness therapy, Kim had many revelations that outdoor adventure within gap year programs would have benefitted her, earlier in life. After months of isolated days filled with introspective thoughts and switching research topics, Kim finally decided that combining her interests in therapeutic support and outdoor education would serve as an important way to conduct research from a passionate standpoint. Kim hopes that whoever reads this research project, is inspired to continue impacting individuals by exuding passion through their work.