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## Delaying College for Domestic Civic Service: The Gap Year Experiences of City Year AmeriCorps Alumni

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Delaying College for Domestic Civic Service: The Gap Year Experiences of City Year  
AmeriCorps Alumni

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements of the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Public Policy

by

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December 2022  
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This dissertation is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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## **Abstract**

Over the past decade the concept of taking a gap year has become mainstream in the US. This idea of delaying enrollment, or taking a break from college, before beginning a bachelor's degree, has gained popularity, especially as the cost of attendance in higher education has soared and the burden of paying for it has been placed on the student as the consumer. Similarly, the sought-after gap year experiences offered in the private sector are often costly. With the rising popularity of gap years, it is important to identify experiences that are accessible to a wide variety of backgrounds and that have demonstrated a positive impact on individuals and society. There are several federal funded programs within AmeriCorps that seek to provide these kinds of meaningful, individual, and socially beneficial experiences. The purpose of conducting the study was to explore the lived experience of individuals who completed a gap year through City Year AmeriCorps. A specific focus of this study was placed upon the Segal Education Award, which is given to AmeriCorps' alumni upon completion of one year of domestic civic service to supplement the cost of pursuing a postsecondary education.

A qualitative approach was used to investigate the lived experiences of 8 City Year AmeriCorps alumni. All participants completed at least one year of domestic civic service in the city of Jacksonville, FL, within the last 4 years. Findings indicated participants sought to make meaningful change in their lives as well as others when deciding to serve in City Year AmeriCorps. The experience was marked by the development of lifelong relationships, an array of challenges, as well as personal, individual growth. Participants left the experience inspired to continue to serve others, and the Segal Education Award's influence was varied. In general, the findings support the notion that gap years within City Year AmeriCorps foster a variety a positive benefits from a public good perspective by increasing the civic engagement capabilities

of service members, increasing accessing to postsecondary education opportunities moving forward, and making a demonstrable impact within communities in need.

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this dissertation to my mom and dad, Bob and Eileen Bryson, for all the love and support they have shown me over the years, even when I wasn't sure I wanted to go to college.

## **Acknowledgements**

There were many moments when I thought I would never get this thing done, and I am beyond grateful for so many people that helped me through the toughest times. First and foremost, I would like to thank my other half, Sarah, who watched over our family the days and nights I was going to class or working on my dissertation ... even throughout a pandemic! I didn't make any part of this easy. I really can't put into words how much I appreciate what you did for us and how much you supported me. I love you, and I can't wait for the next chapter of our lives together.

I would also like to thank my advisor, Dr. Michael T. Miller. I have so much respect for you, and I honestly don't think I would have completed my dissertation without you. You are the hardest working person I have ever met. I can't thank you enough for all the support and guidance you have provided me with over the years.

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To all the folks connected to City Year that helped make this happen, I cannot thank you enough! There have been several staff members that worked with me over the years even when I would go dark for 6 months at a time. Plus, to the alumni that served as participants, I am so humbled and inspired by you all. You are amazing people. Thank you.

To my mom and dad, thank you for all the sacrifices you have made in your lives that led to the opportunities I have had throughout mine. Each day I get older, I become more grateful for what you both have done for me. Mom, I don't know anyone more devoted to her family than

you. You have always believed in me when I didn't, and your confidence in me (right or wrong), has given me enough tools in the tool kit to make it this far, and I know I wouldn't have done this without you. Dad, you have been the best friend I have had in this life, and you have set the standard I measure myself by each day. Thanks for always being there for me even when it wasn't always fun. To both of you, I will be forever grateful, and I love you.

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To my mother-in-law, Dena James, you have been a rock for me and my family. You have been the glue that has held Sarah and me together, and a parent to both of my boys. I did not expect to feel as close to you as I do each day. I love you. Thank you for all you did for us throughout those long nights and weekends when I couldn't be there, and I look forward to our next chapter together!

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## **Chapter I. Introduction**

### **A. Context of the Problem**

Earning a degree within the higher education system in the United States (US) has remained the most effective way to climb the socio-economic ladder for the vast majority of Americans. Carnevale et al. (2021) recently conducted an analysis that demonstrated that lifetime earnings increase significantly with each level of education obtained. For example, between 2009-2019, the median lifetime earnings for an individual who has earned a bachelor's degree is \$2,800,000, compared to just \$1,200,000 for an individual with less than a high school diploma. The benefits of an educated society extend beyond the individual level when considering graduates have been shown to be happier, healthier, and more civically engaged, compared to high school degree holders (Hout, 2012). These factors have helped justify a system that forces individual citizens to sometimes assume a substantial amount of risk and sacrifice to pursue a degree by utilizing federal student loans.

Over 43,000,000 student loan recipients owed over \$1,610,700,000 by the end of 2021 (Office of Federal Student Aid, n.d.). This accounts for approximately 11% of total national consumer debt in America, second only to mortgage debt (Hanson, 2021). Shifting the burden of paying for college to the consumer impacts individuals from a lower socioeconomic status (SES) disproportionately. Cottom (2017) described this as the difference between absolute and relative debt. A recent report issued by the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education illustrates this point. In 2016, the average net price to attend college full-time required 94% of the average family income for individuals in the lowest income quartile, compared to just 14% of household income for the families in the highest income quartile (Cahalan et al., 2021). Such inequity not only impacts accessibility to colleges and universities, but it also impacts

persistence upon enrollment. Cahalan et al. (2021) compared five-year bachelor's degree completion rates across four income quartiles using the Beyond Postsecondary Series (BPS) longitudinal data that tracked first-time students who enrolled in two and four-year institutions in 2011/12-2017. The authors found that individuals from the highest income quartile obtained a degree at a 69% rate, while individuals from the lowest income quartile obtained a degree at a 26% rate. It is clear that such a system can run the risk of exacerbating inequities that exist rather than filling a void.

Further compounding the issue of placing the cost of attendance on the consumer is a complex array of factors that impact one's wages even after a college degree is obtained. The analysis conducted by Carnevale et al. (2021) demonstrated earnings vary significantly by major, race, gender, ethnicity, and location. This forces the more educated consumer to approach higher education with a fair amount of skepticism, and it increases the risks associated with attendance for those with less, all while we lose focus on the benefits of a more educated society from a public good perspective. A byproduct of this dynamic has led to the concept of a gap year becoming more mainstream within the US (Haigler & Nelson, 2013; Lieber, 2016; McPhate, 2016; Muller, 2020). It should be noted there are several types of gap years that were first classified by Jones (2004). However, for the purposes of this discussion, the term 'gap year' refers to the decision to take a formal break from education after graduating high school and before completing a bachelor's degree while engaging in activities focused on personal growth (Jones, 2004; Wu et al., 2015; Guidi, 2018). The growth of the gap year concept within the US is evident through the development of a commercial gap year industry, nationally recognized Gap Year Association, as well as a plethora of institutions of higher education developing programs that account for students that have made the decision to take a gap year. Proponents of the gap

year argue that intentionally delaying enrollment allows prospective college students a chance to avoid academic burnout, gain a broader self-understanding, and enhance their cultural awareness (Haigler & Nelson, 2005; White, 2009; O'Shea, 2014). Such arguments are challenged by decades of research demonstrating delaying enrollment is associated with being from a lower SES (Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Goldrick-Rab & Han, 2011; Hoe, 2014), lower levels of attendance at bachelor's degree granting institutions (Horn et al., 2005; Nui & Tienda, 2013), and lower levels of degree attainment (Hearn, 1992; Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Hoe, 2014). As the debate regarding gap years in relation to higher education continues, this study focuses on the influence of a federal public policy that subsidizes the practice and enhances access to higher education for those willing to serve during their gap year within an AmeriCorps organization known as City Year.

Service to the country as a US citizen has been inextricably linked to higher education throughout recent history. The most notable policy that exemplifies this relationship is the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (GI Bill), which provided millions of military veterans access to higher education who might have otherwise never considered it a possibility (Thelin, 2004; Goldrick-Rab & Han, 2011). However, it is not just service through the military that can supplement a pursuit of a postsecondary degree. In 2009, Barack Obama signed the Edward Kennedy Service to America Act, that allowed for one year of domestic civic service to be rewarded with the equivalent of a Pell Grant known as the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award. It was the aim of this study to explore the lived experiences of a subset of gap year takers within the City Year AmeriCorps organization.

## **B. Statement of Purpose**

The purpose for conducting the study was to identify and describe the ways that the Edward Kennedy Serve America Act is perceived to influence the behavior and perceptions of individuals that have completed a gap year with the City Year AmeriCorps program. A specific focus in the study was the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award, which is a source of financial aid provided to members following their term of service that can be used to pay the cost of enrolling in a postsecondary institution. The study is situated in Political feedback theory (PFT) as a way to understand the relationship between the student, the opportunity of seeking a postsecondary education, and the federally funded Segal Education Award. A primary component of the theoretical framework aims to understand how the resources and experiences fostered by a given policy shape the behavior and perceptions of its' citizens (Pierson, 1993; Mettler & SoRelle, 2018).

## **C. Research Questions**

The following research questions were explored through phenomenological qualitative research methodology:

1. How did City Year alumni describe their rationale for choosing to pursue a gap year, and what did they believe motivated them to do this through the City Year program?
2. How did City Year alumni retrospectively describe their lived experiences during their gap year?
3. How did City Year alumni describe their perceptions of how the volunteer experience has shaped their personal beliefs about societal service roles and citizenship obligations?



4. How did City Year alumni perceive and describe the influence of the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award on their decision to pursue a gap year and enroll in postsecondary education?
5. What is the potential public policy impact of gap year programs generally, and the federal Segal AmeriCorps Education Award program specifically?

#### **D. Definition of Terms**

*Civic Service:* This is a form of service that extends beyond the demands of informal volunteering. Civic service involves engagement with a formal program or organization for a significant duration of time, with the intent of contributing to a complex problem at a local, national, or international level, in which participants receive minimal compensation (Sherraden, 2001; McBride et al., 2004; Perry & Thomson, 2004).

*Gap Year:* A period of six to twelve months in which a person takes a formal break from education before or during enrollment in a postsecondary institution prior to the completion of a bachelor's degree. During this period of time, the individual may participate in a wide range of activities with an emphasis placed on enhancing one's perspective and/or skill set (Jones, 2004; Wu et al., 2015; Guidi, 2018).

*Gapper:* This is a term commonly used to describe an individual that has embarked on a gap year.

*Pre-University Gap Year:* This is the most traditional form of gap year that directly follows the completion of high school with the intent of enrolling in a postsecondary institution once concluded.

*Postsecondary Institution:* This term represents all different types of institutions of higher education including for-profit institutions, technical institutes, community colleges, and traditional universities.

*University:* This is a particular type of postsecondary institution that awards baccalaureate and/or graduate degrees, and it will be used interchangeably with the term ‘college’ throughout this study.

### **E. Assumptions**

The following list of assumptions served as foundational beliefs that informed this research project:

1. An individual’s experience with a government policy or program impacts the perception of their own role within society.
2. In terms of the traditional educational path within the US, the year following high school graduation provides a unique and significant opportunity for personal growth.
3. Domestic civic service impacts the personal values, perceptions, and behaviors of the individuals benefiting from the service provided as well as those providing it.
4. Qualitative data obtained through interviews, artifacts, and written responses is an accurate way to describe an experience.

### **F. Limitations and Delimitations**

1. City Year is a competitive AmeriCorps program that implements a holistic selection process (Tear, 2016). This will likely result in a participant pool that is high-achieving, mature, and motivated to help others with or without experiencing a gap year through City Year AmeriCorps.

2. This study explored a unique gap year experience compared to those offered within the commercial industry or higher education. Specifically, the focus of City Year AmeriCorps was the communities in which it served more so than the volunteers that participated in the study. This reality also makes transferability an issue in terms of attempting to make grand assumptions about the gap year experience.
3. This study was conducted during and/or after the COVID-19 pandemic that has swept through the US. It is likely participants within this study have experienced significant stress, anxiety, and/or hardship, which could impact findings.
4. As the researcher, I have not completed a gap year, I have not participated within City Year AmeriCorps, nor do I have any experience with the city of Jacksonville. Qualitative researchers often have experience with the phenomena being studied. This limitation was addressed through spending a significant amount of time with the City Year staff and volunteers to build rapport and understand the culture.
5. City Year AmeriCorps engaged in this study under the condition they were actively involved in the recruitment of the participant pool for this study, and they were able to review the content before publication.

### **G. Significance of the Study**

This study potentially provides valuable insight into a gap year experience for a variety of constituents. First, these findings will inform prospective gappers, as well as their families, with in-depth knowledge into the lived experience of City Year AmeriCorps members. Serving in AmeriCorps is often touted as an affordable, structured, gap year experience that provides future financial support to the pursuit of a postsecondary degree (Haigler & Nelson, 2005; White, 2009). The decision to delay enrollment and/or complete a structured gap year has been shown to

be heavily influenced by parents and high school guidance counselors (Hoe, 2014; Rowan-Kenyon, 2007). To date, no research study has been conducted using only a criterion sample of City Year AmeriCorps that have completed a gap year. The findings within this study may serve students and families exploring gap year alternatives provided City Year is considered a model AmeriCorps program (Bass, 2013).

Colleges and universities across the US also stand to benefit from the findings of this study. Many of the country's elite institutions, such as Harvard, have a long history of openly encouraging students to take a gap year prior to enrollment (Brown, 2009; Fitzsimmons et al., 2017). As the gap year phenomenon has gained notoriety within the US, more colleges and universities are acknowledging the practice through deferral policies, scholarships, and even their own gap year curriculums (Falik & Frey, 2018; Johnson, 2019). The opportunity to recruit AmeriCorps alumni has led to over 300 institutions providing rewards and incentives to prospective students through the Schools of National Service initiative. These institutions typically offer a dollar-for-dollar match equal to the Segal Education Award upon enrollment (AmeriCorps, n.d.-a). Insight into the lived experience of these volunteers may provide admissions counselors and college administrators valuable information when considering participation in the Schools of National Service initiative or recruiting and supporting alumni as participating member institutions.

In addition, the impact of the service embedded in many gap year experiences is rarely measured beyond the gapper, and the need for organizations facilitating gap year experiences to measure such impacts has been noted by scholars for over a decade (Simpson, 2004a; Lyons et al., 2012). While this has still not become a standard practice, the City Year AmeriCorps organization has demonstrated a significant positive impact on the underrepresented populations

and the communities it has served (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2020; Meredith & Anderson, 2015).

Exploring an organization with a demonstrable positive impact has the potential to provide value to the general public, as well as those experiencing a gap year.

This study will also serve policymakers in their ongoing discussions regarding domestic national service and higher education finance. The Edward Kennedy Service to America Act passed in 2009 authorized increasing the annual number of AmeriCorps members from 75,000 to 250,000 by 2017. However, this increase in service opportunities was not implemented in the years following due to funding issues (Mulhere, 2014), and proponents are still advocating for the expansion from roughly 75,000 members annually to occur (McChrystal, 2021). Expanding domestic civic services opportunities has also been pitched as a policy alternative to addressing student loan debt and increasing access to higher education (Serve America Together, n.d.). The information discovered within this study also supplements the ongoing policy debate regarding a one-year national service mandate (Bridgeland & Dilulio, 2019), and whether it should be used as a form of preparation prior to enrollment (Walsh, 2020). First introduced in 1992, John Kingdon's agenda setting theory suggested policy windows are only formed with the convergence of three separate streams which are political, problem, and policy alternatives. This theory indicated that academics share, study, and float policy alternatives within a "policy prime-evil soup" (Kingdon, 2011, p. 116). This theory is directly applicable to AmeriCorps itself, as several scholars played an integral role in its development in the years leading up the passage of the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993 (Buckley, 1990; Eberly, 1988; Moskos, 1988). This study also has the potential to inform policymakers the next time the political landscape allows for reform.

Administrators responsible for the recruitment, training, and support of City Year AmeriCorps volunteers will also benefit from the information this study may glean. Like any other AmeriCorps organization, City Year is faced with a complex array of objectives and goals that often include the need to balance support for service members as well as the communities they serve (Bass, 2013). Developing a deeper understanding of the member experience specifically, the recent experience of gappers, may provide valuable insight to full-time staff moving forward. Since its inception in 1988, City Year has focused its efforts on recruiting a diverse composition of volunteers interested in completing a gap year as defined by this study (Goldsmith, 1993; Khazie, 2010). One of the founders of City Year, Mike Brown, has been a longstanding proponent of gap years and civic service (Brown, 2009). City Year AmeriCorps' growth and expansion has led the composition of its service members fluctuating over time and by location. Currently, the City Year AmeriCorps volunteer base is roughly comprised of 20% gappers (A. Allen, Personal Communication, January 10, 2020). While recent dissertations have provided valuable insight into the City Year experience (Lopez, 2019; Sekerak, 2020), the focus on this subset of the City Year AmeriCorps member population has yet to be investigated.

Finally, this study was developed to examine a specific gap year experience within a public program created, in part, to foster access to higher education in return for one year of domestic civic service. The qualitative studies of US citizens completing gap years have often included participants that have engaged in a wide variety of activities and deferred enrollment to postsecondary institutions (Flowers, 2015; Guidi, 2018; Hoe, 2014; Tenser, 2015). Two of these studies included a small portion of participants that have served within AmeriCorps (Flowers, 2015; Tenser, 2015), but these experiences have not been the sole focus. One of the most recent recommendations for future research was to explore different types of gap year experiences

within the US given it's a relatively new phenomenon (Guidi, 2018). The literature on the AmeriCorps member motivations and outcomes is more extensive. Studies have consistently shown that AmeriCorps members have found their experiences rewarding and beneficial (Perry et al., 1999; Cardazone et al., 2015; Friedman et al. 2016). Further, studies have demonstrated increases in life skills, civic engagement activity following a year of service, and social capital (Anderson & Fabiano, 2007; Yamaguchi et al., 2008; Flanagan et al., 2012; Ward, 2013; Ward, 2014; Hudson-Fledge, 2018). However, these findings also identified a need for further qualitative research among the gap year population within AmeriCorps, because the vast majority of these findings are based on quantitative studies that treated AmeriCorps members as one homogenous group (Hudson-Fledge, 2018). Considering the broader implications to access to gap year experiences and higher education, it is imperative a publicly funded gap year experience accessed by a diverse participant pool be investigated.

## **H. Theoretical/Conceptual Framework**

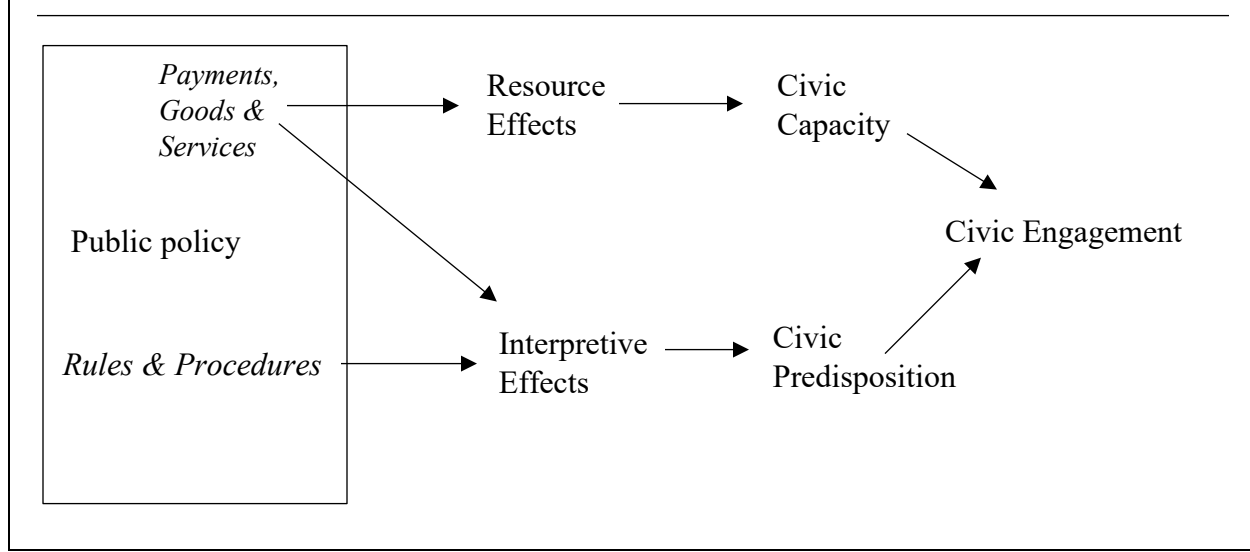
The theoretical framework applied to this study is known as Political Feedback Theory (PFT). While the most prominent public policy theories seem to have an anointed creator, this is not the case for the PFT. It is not as well-researched as some of the other juggernaut public policy theories, although it is recognized as a theory that shows promise in future public policy scholarship (Heikkila & Cairney, 2018; Weible, 2018). There is no question PFT was built on the backs of renowned public policy theorists. Theodore Lowi (1972) expanded upon E. E. Schattsneider's original idea when he rolled out his policy typologies and stated, "policies determine politics" (p. 299). What catapulted the PFT onto the national and international stage was an essay written by Paul Pierson in 1993 (Mettler & SoRelle, 2018). In this essay, Pierson (1993) categorized the types of feedback effects that could result from public policies on

government elites, interest groups, and mass publics. Pierson (1993) argued “... the impact of policies on individual actors outside the circuit of bureaucrats, politicians, and interest groups is especially urgent” (p. 625). Pierson defined two primary concepts fundamental to the PFT: resource effects and interpretive effects. He explained resource effects on the mass public included the incentives that dictate patterns of behavior, and interpretive effects are the learning effects that occur based on an individual’s experience with a given policy (Pierson, 1993). The conceptual framework he introduced led to PFT literature investigating ways in which policies impacted everyday people. Within PFT there are four different feedback streams dictating future policymaking behavior once a policy is enacted: political agendas and problem definition, forms of governance, power of groups, and the meaning of citizenship (Mettler & SoRelle, 2018). The feedback streams are outputs of the policies enacted as well as inputs of future policymaking.

A seminal article that first illustrated this concept investigated the use of the GI Bill among World War II veterans (Mettler, 2002). This mixed methods study demonstrated veterans that took advantage of the GI Bill were more civically engaged compared to those veterans that did not take advantage of the benefit. Findings demonstrated that veterans that took advantage of the GI Bill did not perceive it as a right. Rather, veterans viewed it as an opportunistic reward that led to substantial resource effects in terms of educational attainment, as well as more active civic engagement behaviors, and these findings extended to veterans from all different SES backgrounds. Mettler (2002) introduced the PFT model in the following figure:



Figure 1. Policy Feedback for Mass Publics: How Policy Affects Civic Engagement



*Note.* From “Bringing the State Back in to Civic Engagement: Policy Feedback Effects of the G.I. bill for World War II Veterans,” by S. Mettler, 2002, *American Political Science Review*, 96(2), p. 353. (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3118030>).

This study focuses on the interpretive effects of the City Year AmeriCorps gap year experience. This line of inquiry is primarily focused on the gappers’ self-perceived citizen obligations moving forward, future educational pursuits, and overall impact of the policy on the individual participants. Mettler (2002) argued that such interpretive effects make “...individual citizens acquire perceptions of their role in the community, their status in relation to other citizens and government, and the extent to which a policy has affected their lives” (p. 352). This line of research would be classified within the meaning of citizenship feedback stream of the PFT, and it is generally defined as “the reciprocal relationship between the government and ordinary people under its domain” (Mettler & SoRelle, 2018, p. 108).

## **Chapter II. Literature Review**

Obtaining relevant sources specific to the research questions explored required using a variety of search methods and sources. ‘Gap year’ is only becoming a widely recognizable term within the US. There is not a substantial amount of literature that has been conducted by US scholars specific to gap years, which led to me relying heavily on dissertations, books, and the related topic of delayed enrollment. On the other hand, domestic civic service research consisted of a blend of refereed academic journals, books, government reports, and neutral third-party research projects funded by the Office of Research and Evaluation within AmeriCorps. As a University of Arkansas student, I was able to conduct searches using the subscriptions offered by the Mullins Library to access scholarly literature using the following search terms: gap year, bridge year, delayed enrollment and higher education, pre-university gap year, gap year and higher education, civic service, domestic civic service, VISTA, Civilian Conservation Corps, AmeriCorps, AmeriCorps member outcomes, AmeriCorps social capital, and AmeriCorps human capital. I also utilized the search engine directly on Google Scholar to obtain sources using the same search terms, too. Finally, I obtained several sources directly from the websites belonging to the AmeriCorps and City Year organizations. I consistently conducted searches utilizing these strategies beginning in the summer of 2017 up until the completion of this project.

The topics covered within this literature review follow three overarching lines of research: gap years, delayed enrollment in higher education, and US domestic civic service. The following is an overview of how this chapter is organized. The foundational research used to define the term gap year, the growth of the commercial industry, and postsecondary institutions outcomes, required reviewing sources predominately out of the United Kingdom (UK). It should be noted several scholarly works from different countries outside of the UK, such as Canada,

China, Australia, and South Africa, were also identified and included throughout relevant sections. Next, academic journals and one dissertation related to delayed enrollment in the US higher education system are reviewed. These sources are primarily quantitative studies which focused on demographic factors associated with delayed enrollment, and academic performance and persistence outcomes at the postsecondary level. The next section of this chapter reviews qualitative studies conducted internationally and domestically exploring the motivations, experiences, and reflections, of individuals that completed a gap year. This is followed by a review of domestic civic service literature related to legislation, policy dynamics, and AmeriCorps member outcomes. The final section of this chapter is a review of each of these topics which concludes with the foundational basis for the research questions investigated.

#### **A. Defining the Gap Year**

Gap years have become an international phenomenon. Much of the research on gap years has been conducted in the United Kingdom (UK) due to its history and culture. In 2004, Dr. Andrew Jones conducted a report for the UK Department of Education and Skills to define and understand the modern-day concept of the gap year given its perceived prevalence. Jones defined the gap year as “any period of time between three and twenty-four months which an individual takes ‘out’ from formal education, training or the workplace, and where the time sits out in a context of a longer career trajectory” (p. 24). Inherent in this definition and the literature that followed is the notion that a gap year is a clear break between traditional phases of a student’s life (Wu et al. 2015). Further, scholars have emphasized that a gap year is not simply vacation (Nieman, 2013), and these experiences should be viewed as a meaningful time that serves to enhance one’s perspective and skill set (Guidi, 2018). Gap year activities commonly include a combination of volunteering, working, travelling, and/or studying (Jones, 2004; Haigler &

Nelson, 2005; Crawford & Cribb, 2012). Jones (2004) categorized 11 types of gap years as shown in Table 1 below. Most of the typologies identified were based on when they were taken in relation to enrollment in higher education. Jones (2004) identified three types of gap years taken prior to enrollment in a postsecondary institution, an additional gap year that could be taken as an undergraduate break in study, and seven additional types of gap years associated with graduate school enrollment and/or employment.

**Table 1**

	<b>Category of Gap Year</b>
<b>A1</b>	Planned Post-School at 16
<b>A2</b>	Planned Post-School at 18
<b>A3</b>	Default Post-School at 18
<b>B1</b>	Undergraduate Break in Study
<b>B2</b>	Postgraduate Break in Study
<b>C</b>	Immediate Post-University
<b>D1</b>	Break in Postgraduate Study
<b>D2</b>	Postgraduate Combined with Course
<b>E</b>	Employment Break
<b>F</b>	Immediate Post-Training
<b>G</b>	Complex Gap Year

*Note.* Reprinted from *A review of the gap year provision*, by A. Jones, (2004, p. 26), Department of Education and Skills, University London. Copyright 2004 by Andrew Jones.

The majority of the research conducted internationally and within the US has been focused on gap years completed prior to obtaining an undergraduate degree, with a primary focus on gap years taken prior to enrolling in college. Subsequently, the term ‘gap year’ will refer to a period of six to twelve months in which a person takes a formal break from education before or during enrollment in a college or university. A ‘pre-university gap year’ will specifically refer to those gap years experienced after high school or the equivalent, and prior to enrolling in college.

## **B. Historical Roots and Emerging Trends Institutionalizing the Gap Year**

Scholars have associated the modern-day gap year with the idea of the ‘Grand Tour’ in the UK (Simpson 2004a; Heath 2007). At the height of its popularity in the eighteenth century,

the Grand Tour was marked by English teens of the elite class travelling to France and Italy to conclude their formal education (Cohen, 2001). The Grand Tour was hailed as an “indispensable form of education for young men in the higher ranks of society” (Mead, 1914, p. 407). The individuals who were fortunate enough to be able to embark on a Grand Tour gained cultural capital evident through their acquired accents, manners, and broader perspectives upon return (Cohen, 2001; Mead, 1914). The critical point was that a high value was placed upon travelling abroad at the conclusion of an affluent young adult’s traditional education, which became embedded in the UK’s culture for centuries. This historical practice helped lay the groundwork for some of the most well-known non-profit agencies that offer international, service-based, gap year experiences, to develop in the UK, such as Project Trust in 1967 (Project Trust, n.d.). Eventually, the concept of a gap year became mainstream as two young men within the British Royal Family took gap years overseas in 2001 and 2003 (Haigler & Nelson, 2013). Simpson (2004a) argued that the institutionalization of the gap year phenomenon became evident after receiving praise within the House of the Lords in 2000, and the perceived value of such experiences were reinforced through marketing conducted by an emerging gap year industry.

The report issued by Jones (2004) identified a blend of commercial and non-profit organizations that provided gap year opportunities. Jones (2004) found 80-100 specialist organizations offered an estimated 50,000 placements per year, and these organizations often targeted pre-university and post-university participants. Additionally, 50,000 UK-based volunteer placements were identified, and another 350,000 placement opportunities were available within 800 organizations that provided overseas volunteer opportunities (Jones, 2004). Millington (2005) estimated the UK gap year industry expanded due to a host of factors, such as

the phasing out of national service programs across Europe, increased fees and loans within the university system, and increased social support for gapping among parents and employers.

Noting a rise in the number of university deferrals over the previous decade, Millington (2005) estimated that the economic market for the gap year industry specific to people aged 18-24 was approximately £800,000,000 annually in the UK. It was also argued that there is a hierarchical value placed upon specific types of gap year experiences made available through the industry (Heath 2007), as UK gappers were much more likely to travel overseas rather than stay within the UK to work or volunteer (Millington, 2005). Ansell (2008) investigated two gap year organizations that provided international volunteer experiences in the UK. His review of texts, imagery, and interviews with gappers and industry leaders found these organizations “... commodify experiences of risk, packaging ‘challenge with security’, for which the privileged is willing to pay” (Ansell, 2008, p. 29).

The industry has effectively targeted an expanding pool of prospective customers. Jones (2004) estimated the UK annually averaged roughly 250,000 to 350,000 across all his gap year typologies combined for participants aged 16 to 25. Estimates specifically identifying pre-university gappers have also steadily increased over time. Heath (2007) estimated the 45,000 pre-university gap years were taken in 2004 in the UK, which was a two-fold increase compared to 1994. Another UK government report found that the number of students entering university at age 19 had increased from 9% to 11% between 2005-2010 (Crawford & Cribb, 2012). This rate of enrollment for 19-year-olds held relatively steady from 2010-2018 and suggests that roughly 65,000-70,000 students have been completing pre-university gap years in the UK annually throughout this time (UK Government, n.d.).

Quantifying the prevalence of gap year participants in other countries is challenging. Curtis (2014) estimated that pre-university gap years among Australia's young adults increased from 10% to 25% between 1995 and 2006, but similar studies of different countries have not been conducted. Studies investigating the gap year have also been conducted in China (Wu et al., 2015), South Africa (Nieman, 2013; Raibie & Naidoo, 2016), Australia and Finland (Parker et al., 2015), and the Netherlands (Hermann et al., 2017). The last decade of research suggests the concept of taking a gap year has gained the attention of a host of countries due to a perceived increase in the practice. Identifying the prevalence of gapping within the United States (US) has proven to be difficult, but a review of the gap year and higher education sectors suggests the concept is becoming more conventional.

### **C. Gapping in the US: History and Recent Trends**

US national data sets do not include information on deferral rates or gap year intentions that have allowed for intentional studies to be made possible within the UK and Australia (Crawford & Cribb, 2012; Curtis, 2014). For this reason, the options provided to assess whether the gap year concept is growing are limited. In *The Gap-Year Advantage: Helping Your Child Benefit From Time off Before or During College*, Haigler and Nelson (2005) advocated for parents and prospective students to consider the gap year as a viable option prior to college enrollment. The authors identified the Center of Interim Programs as the first gap year counseling organization, founded in 1980. Currently, this organization endorses over 6,600 gap year experiences on their website (Center for Interim Programs, n.d.). Indeed, a growing industry of gap year organizations within the US suggests the gap year is gaining notoriety.

One of the strongest indicators of an emerging gap year industry in the past decade was the founding of a non-profit accrediting agency known as the Gap Year Association (GYA) in

2012. The GYA provides a comprehensive list of accredited gap year programs (GYA, n.d.-a), and a state-by-state listing of any college or university that supports gapping through enrollment deferrals (GYA, n.d.-b). The Executive Director of the GYA, Ethan Knight, estimated there were 150-200 gap year organizations in the US in 2016 (as cited by Guidi, 2018). Additionally, Knight also estimated 30,000 to 40,000 individuals participate in a gap year each year through their programs, and that number is increasing (Dickler, 2017). The growth of gap year fairs and a growing pool of participant vendors has also occurred over the past decade (Mohn, 2011; Flowers, 2015). Former President Barack Obama's daughter, Malia Obama, completed a gap year in 2016 prior to enrolling at Harvard, and her decision received a substantial amount of attention in the popular press (Lieber, 2016; McPhate, 2016; Green, 2016). Additionally, prospective students were much more inclined to consider gap years when it became apparent that the COVID-19 pandemic would change the higher education experience significantly (Hoover, 2020; Muller, 2020; Walsh, 2020). Colleges and universities across the country have also shown an inclination to embrace the gap year; in fact, some elite institutions have been proponents of the experience for decades (White, 2009).

At Harvard University, Fitzsimmons et al. (2017) explained the practice of taking a pre-university gap year has been encouraged through their acceptance letters sent out to the incoming class over the past 40 years. Princeton University created a Bridge Year program in 2009 (Princeton University, n.d.). This program finances and orchestrates international service-oriented gap year experiences for 40 students each year. Bridge Year participants return after nine months of service to begin their undergraduate careers on campus. Support for a pre-university gap year has also emerged at select public institutions. At the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill (UNC), the Global Gap Year Fellowship Program provides an \$8,000 merit



award to 21 applicants per year who embark on a pre-university gap year (UNC, n.d.). The merit award recipients have the option of participating in an 8 month long overseas experience through a well-known gap year organization known as Global Citizen Year or designing their own trip. Florida State University (FSU) has implemented a Gap Year Program and Gap Year Fellowship Program. The latter provides a need-based financial stipend of \$5,000 for students selected to the fellowship program, and all pre-university gap year students complete a for-credit course during their first semester on campus upon return (FSU, n.d.). Another avenue higher education institutions have taken to support gapping is partnering with specific gap year providers, such as Verto or Carpe Diem, to award college credit earned during a gap year experience prior to taking classes on campus (Johnson, 2019). Naropa University has even developed its very own 'LEAPYEAR' program in which students are able to earn up to 30 college credits with access federal financial aid funds to pay for a gap year that involves international travel, service, and internship experiences (Naropa University, n.d.). Clearly, the interest in gap years amongst prospective students and higher education institutions has created alternative routes to the traditional path of enrollment.

One of the persistent issues these programs attempt to address is the cost associated with taking a gap year. GYA Executive Director Knight, explained that 80% of gap year programs involve international travel with the average cost of such experiences ranging between \$30,000-\$40,000 (Gillies, 2016). A more affordable gap year experience through domestic service has also received increased attention in recent years. Founded in 2016, the Service Year Alliance (SYA) is a non-profit organization that provides a list of domestic service opportunities available to young adults looking to serve. These opportunities are often provided through AmeriCorps, but they can also be provided through organizations working directly with SYA. The SYA is the

leader of a coalition pushing for increased access to national domestic service opportunities to meet demand (Serve America Together, 2020). The organization also provides guidance to colleges and universities interested in supporting service years before, during, or after college through a published institutional toolkit (SYA, 2017). A broader overview of the domestic service landscape will be provided in a later section of the literature review; however, the SYA is worth noting here given its expanding role within the gap year and higher education sectors.

There remains a consistent trend among select colleges and universities to continue to cater to a growing interest among prospective students considering a pre-university gap year. In 2018, Colorado College announced the creation of the Gap Year Research Consortium. This group consisted of several elite institutions that supported the practice of taking a pre-university gap year including Harvard University, Stanford University, Yale University, and several others (Colorado College, 2018). The focus of the group was filling a void in higher education research specific to pre-university gap years. The existing quantitative research focused on delayed enrollment does not allow for an accurate depiction of the prevalence pre-university gap years, demographic profiles of gappers, or outcomes associated with enrollment and persistence in higher education amongst gappers. A review of the literature will illustrate this point.

#### **D. Delayed Enrollment Research in the US**

Several studies have evaluated delayed enrollment patterns and outcomes in the US higher education system. Carrol (1989) published a National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) report that assessed enrollment and degree attainment patterns of a sample of graduating high school seniors in 1980. The US High School and Beyond survey was a longitudinal study conducted in 1980, 1982, 1984, and 1986. The enrollment trends of the 10,583-person sample demonstrated those that immediately enrolled in a four-year institution directly after high school

were five times more likely than those that “started off-track” (p. 5). A total of 38% of the sample was classified as off track because they enrolled part-time, attended a two-year institution, or delayed entry. A total of 15% of the off-track subgroup delayed entry, and 21% of this subgroup obtained a degree compared to 74% of the immediate enrollers. Carrol (1989) concluded his report by highlighting the clear advantages apparent when controlling for socioeconomic status (SES), even within the those who delayed entry.

Hearn (1992) used Carrol’s report as a foundation for delving deeper into the impact of enrollment patterns using a logistic regression technique that accounted for background factors, academic factors, and educational aspirations. Hearn argued that isolating for SES was not as effective compared to his analysis, because it accounted for all these factors together rather than in isolation. Using a sample of 8,203 high school graduates from the class 1980 within US High School and Beyond data set, the analysis demonstrated that approximately 10% of the sample delayed enrollment into a college or university. Hearn concluded that delaying entry to college was associated with being from a lower SES, as well as having lower academic credentials, and career aspirations.

Bozick and DeLuca (2005) evaluated the impacts of delayed enrollment on graduation using a large nationally representative sample known as the National Educational Longitudinal Study. The data set used for this study, referenced as NELS:88/2000, followed a cohort of 24,599 eighth graders from 1988 through the year 2000. Bozick and Deluca found that 67% of the cohort immediately enrolled in college, 16% delayed entry for at least seven months, and 17% never enrolled. The individuals who delayed entry were more likely to have lower standardized test scores and identify as a racial minority. Additionally, delayed entrants were found to be less likely to enroll in a four-year institution and be from a lower SES. Another

important finding in the study determined delayed entrants were 64% less likely to complete a degree compared to immediate enrollers after controlling for socio-economic support, academic achievement, and demographics. Although these scholars were not able to isolate for one-year delayed enrollment, the findings indicated that there are disadvantages with not immediately enrolling in a postsecondary institution.

Horn et al. (2005) generated another report for the NCES that investigated demographic factors, academic preparation, and persistence rates associated with delayed enrollment, using three separate national data sets. Findings were consistent with previous research as delayed entrants were associated with being from a lower SES, minority, and/or first-generation status as compared to immediate enrollers. The authors also found that delayed entry was associated with less rigorous academic preparedness and a higher likelihood of having parental responsibilities. Horn et al. (2005) used the 1996/2001 Beginning Postsecondary Longitudinal Study (BPS:96/01) to evaluate the duration of delay. Specifically, 9% of the cohort delayed entry for one year or less, 8% delayed entry for two to four years, 7% delayed entry for five to nine years, and 12% delayed entry for ten or more years. After accounting for variables related to demographics, income, attendance/enrollment characteristics, and academic preparation, the only group of delayers less likely to earn a postsecondary credential compared to immediate enrollers were those who delayed entry for one year or less. Worth noting from the cohort of delayers in the study was that those who delayed entry for one year or less were much more likely to pursue a bachelor's degree compared to the other cohorts who delayed entry longer. Nonetheless, the one-year delayed enrollment negatively impacted earning a postsecondary degree six years after high school graduation. The study found that 43.3% of those who delayed entry for 1 year or less

completed some form of postsecondary credential compared to 57.5% of those who enrolled immediately.

Rowan-Kenyon (2007) investigated the impact of social and cultural capital on delayed enrollment. This was a response to the growing literature tying a lower SES to delayed enrollment patterns. The NELS:88/2000 data set was used once again. The study divided the population into immediate enrollers, delayed enrollers (any duration), and non-enrollers. This analysis found that beyond SES and academic preparation, social capital and cultural capital had a significant impact in predicting enrollment. Specifically, the highest levels of social and cultural capital were within the group that immediately enrolled. Additionally, delayed enrollees were found to have higher levels of social and cultural capital when compared to the group that never enrolled in a postsecondary institution. Thus, more barriers associated with immediate enrollment were identified, it became increasingly clear that the obstacles faced by the majority of those who delayed enrollment were numerous.

The impact of SES on the prevalence of delayed enrollment was investigated further by Goldrick-Rab and Han (2011). In the study, the NELS:88/00 sample was divided into two groups: immediate and delayed enrollers. Those who postponed enrollment eight months or more qualified as delayed enrollers. The authors found that 31% of individuals from the lowest 20% SES delayed entry compared to just 5% of participants from the highest 20% SES. Further, those from the highest SES delayed entry for a substantially shorter duration at four and a half months on average, compared to a thirteen-month average for those on the other end of the spectrum. The authors used a blocked regression demonstrating that family formation and rigorous academic course loads in high school decreased the likelihood of delayed entry fourfold after accounting for SES. The authors cautioned the glorification of the gap year industry prevalent

within the media, and they reminded readers to be cognizant of the need to address the barriers that exist which appeared to impact enrollment opportunities.

Another NCES study focused specifically on the prevalence of delayed postsecondary enrollment utilizing data in four different longitudinal studies consisting of nationally representative samples of graduating high school seniors in 1972, 1980, 1988, and 2002 (Ingels et al., 2012). Delayed entry was defined as enrolling in college at least one semester later than the semester after graduating high school. The authors found that rates of delay ranged between 12-16% during this time span. Delayed entry was found to be more prevalent with Blacks and Hispanics and declining most recently with Whites and Asians. Also, high student expectations and parental postsecondary education were both associated with lower rates of delayed entry.

Niu and Tienda (2013) were the first to delineate between different durations of delayed enrollment. The data set used for the study was comprised of 4,114 Texas high school graduates surveyed at three different points over four years following graduation. Although this was not a nationally representative sample, the composition of the data set was highly similar to the NELS:88/00 in terms of the proportion of students that delayed entry. The authors categorized five different types of enrollees in the data set. Findings indicated that delayed entrants were less likely to enroll in a four-year college or university, and this likelihood increased substantially as the length of delay increased. The final wave of the study identified 65% of immediate enrollees were still enrolled at four-year institutions, compared to just 23% of delayed entrants. Accounting for academic credentials, SES, and enrollment in a two-year institution, the authors concluded delays of one year or more negatively impacted the chances for delayed entrants to attend a four-year institution.

In the first two papers in her dissertation, Hoe (2014) used the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS:04/09) to attempt to identify pre-university gap year students based on the reasons for delayed entry among participants. The data set consisted of a nationally representative sample of graduating high school seniors in 2004 and follow up surveys were conducted in 2006 and 2009. The survey instrument asked participants to identify one or more reasons for delayed entry. If the reason for delay was identified as travel or work, and the duration of delay was one year, these participants were categorized as having participated in a gap year. In total, 17% of the sample delayed entry into higher education, and 8% of the delayed entrants were classified having participated in a gap year. Other findings supported many of the same trends outlined in previous studies focused on delayed enrollment. Delayed enrollment was associated with being from a lower SES, lower levels of parental education, and lower academic performance in high school compared to those who enrolled immediately. Overall, delayers were also more likely to attend college part time and enroll at a two-year or for-profit institution. In comparison to other participants who delayed enrollment, the gap year participants were more likely to be from a higher SES, male, and perform at a higher level academically.

In the second paper in her dissertation, Hoe (2014) used matched samples in the data set to account for pre-college characteristics to investigate outcomes associated with grade point average, degree persistence, and civic engagement. Overall, the negative effects of delayed enrollment persisted. Delayed entrants proved to have earned high GPAs, but they were also more likely to enroll part-time and much less likely to earn a degree compared to immediate enrollers. Further, among all those who delayed enrollment, participants who delayed for travel performed better academically and were more civically engaged. Finally, the gap year delayers were found to have lower first semester GPAs and be less likely to participate in community

service compared to non-gap year participants in the sample. Hoe (2014) concluded by stating that it is a likely inaccurate depiction of gappers given the limitations in the data set that do not identify the intentions of the participants prior to delay.

In summary, the quantitative studies using large national data sets in the US have consistently demonstrated delayed enrollment into higher education after high school is not favorable to immediate enrollment. This research spans over three decades. Delaying enrollment has been associated with an increased likelihood of attending a two-year postsecondary institution and a decreased likelihood of earning a bachelor's degree (Hearn, 1992; Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Niu & Tienda, 2013). Studies have consistently found that 10%-17% of entrants in higher education have delayed enrollment (Hearn, 1992; Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Ingels et al. 2012; Hoe, 2014). However, the attention of all but one of these studies was not specific to pre-university gap years, and the focus of different durations of delay and limitations in data sets has proven to be problematic. Additionally, these studies have consistently demonstrated delayed entry is more common among individuals from a lower SES, with lower levels of support and academic performance in high school, and first-generation status (Horn et al., 2005; Rowan-Kenyon, 2007; Goldrick-Rab & Won-Han, 2011; Ingels et al., 2012; Hoe, 2014).

### **E. Gap Year Profiles at Home and Abroad**

Given the limitations described, one of the best sources of information that can be used to better understand the gapper profile in the US can be found in a survey published by the GYA in 2015. Results of the survey showed that participants were predominately White females from a higher SES. For example, only 19% of the sample identified their annual household income being less than \$74,999. A total of 77% of the 558 respondents completed a pre-university gap year, and another 16% took their gap year during college. Additionally, respondents from a



higher SES were associated with an increased likelihood of participating in accredited GYA programs that involved international travel. The sample also consisted of participants with strong academic credentials at the high school level. Overall, 95% of respondents had earned a 3.0 GPA or better in high school, and the average ACT among the group was 29.4. The sample of participants was a stark contrast to the delayer groups identified in the literature using nationally representative samples. In their study, outlining the increased likelihood of delay among those from a lower SES, Goldrick-Rab and Won-Han (2011) explained "... there is a social class gap in the gap year" (p. 424). The GYA, select gap year providers, and institutions of higher education are putting programs in place to account for this disparity; however, the information available supports an individual's SES background is an influential factor in determining viable gap year experiences.

It is widely accepted in the UK that SES is a determining factor regarding the type of gap year a student might be able to experience (Jones, 2004; Simpson, 2004a; Stehlik, 2010). Heath (2007) argued that pre-university gap years in the UK were effectively a way for the middle and upper classes to further distinguish themselves among their peers. At the same time, studies in the UK and Australia have demonstrated that a large spectrum of SES backgrounds exist within gap year cohorts (Birch & Miller, 2007; Crawford & Cribb, 2012; Curtis, 2014). One of the most differentiating factors of gap year research overseas, compared to what exists in the US, has been the ability for scholars to isolate gap year cohorts effectively. A prime example is the report sponsored by UK Department of Education in 2012. Crawford and Cribb utilized the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE) to identify specific characteristics among pre-university gappers. The LSYPE tracked 16,000 young people between ages 13-20 from 2003-2010 and interviewed participants annually through the second year of higher

education. Upon completion of the high school equivalent known as secondary school, participants of the LSYPE were asked if they had applied to a university, deferred enrollment, and intended to take a gap year. The authors identified two distinct groups of pre-university gappers in the LSYPE. First, the participants who applied to a university, deferred enrollment, and intended to take a gap year were more likely to be from a higher SES and attend private secondary schools. The second group of gappers did not apply or defer enrollment to a university following secondary school, and they did not express a gap year intention following completion of secondary school. This latter group tended to be from a lower SES and obtain lower academic marks prior to university enrollment. The authors also used a different longitudinal data set known as British Cohort Study which tracked individuals from their birth in 1970 through age 38. After comparing characteristics among gappers and immediate enrollees in both data sets, Crawford and Cribb (2012) argued that gappers have become more affluent over time within the UK. This type of gap year research has led to a broader understanding of the gap year experience and the lasting impact throughout a collegiate career and beyond.

#### **F. Gap Year Outcomes**

This section of the literature review will explore quantitative research associated with gap year outcomes conducted overseas. Two of the six articles that were reviewed were large government sponsored research projects out of the UK and Australia, conducted as the perceived prevalence of gap years had increased. These articles were markedly different than the delayed enrollment literature in the US because identifying pre-university gap year cohorts were the primary focus. The topics covered in this literature focused on variables associated with choosing to take a gap year, academic motivation and performance, and lifetime earnings.

Birch and Miller (2007) conducted a study investigating the impact of pre-university gap years on students attending the University of Western Australia. The total sample was comprised of 6,896 students that included cohorts from 2002, 2003, and 2004. A total of 6% of the sample was identified as gappers due to one year of delayed enrollment. The authors found that being female, from a lower SES, rural community, and/or having a lower Tertiary Entrance Rank (TER) increased the likelihood of taking a gap year. TER is a peer performance-based ranking earned by prospective students on university entrance exams. The authors used an ordinary least squares regression to account for a variety of factors, such as major, gender, and TER, to evaluate first year academic performance. Findings indicated gappers significantly outperformed their peers who immediately enrolled, and the difference was most pronounced in males with a lower TER. Although the study only evaluated one year of academic performance at one university, the study garnered the attention of other scholars in Australia to delve deeper into reasons behind these findings.

Building off the previous study focused on academic performance, Martin (2010) explored the relationship between academic motivation and gap years through two separate studies in the same publication. First, the author surveyed 2,502 students between grades 7-12 to assess academic motivation, gap year intentions, and future educational plans. Findings indicated that students with lower levels of academic performance were more uncertain of future educational plans, and this uncertainty increased the likelihood one intended to take a pre-university gap year. The second study was conducted at two different Australian universities. The sample consisted of 338 undergraduate students, with 20% having identified as completed a pre-university gap year prior to enrollment. A similar survey instrument was used to assess academic motivation and engagement, and gappers were found to have had an increased level of

academic motivation and decreased level of maladaptive behavior compared to their peer counterparts. These findings suggested pre-university gap years can play a role in increasing academic motivation and engagement within a subpopulation of students less inclined to excel in higher education.

The Australian Department of Education, Employment, and Workplace Relations sponsored specific gap year research in 2012. The focus of the research was predicated on proposed policy reform to a financial aid program known as the Youth Allowance. Legislators were interested in better understanding if the increased prevalence of gap years was associated with prospective students looking to qualify for certain financial aid. Curtis et al. (2012) defined a gap year as delaying enrollment between secondary education and higher education for one to two years. The authors used the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) between 1995-2006, and they found that the prevalence of taking a gap year had doubled from 10% to 20% over this time. They also found that gappers were spread evenly across four different SES quartiles; however, those who received the Youth Allowance aid were more likely to immediately enroll. Gappers were more likely to achieve lower academic marks and TER's prior to enrollment in higher education compared to immediate enrollers. Once in college, there was no difference found between immediate enrollers and gappers in terms of persistence and graduation. Curtis (2014) later argued that these findings suggested it could be concluded a gap year benefited the lower performing students considering the lower TER's compared to immediate enrollers; however, a regression accounting for background factors was not used as this was not the primary focus of the research.

In the study conducted by Crawford and Cribb (2012) in the UK, several key findings followed after effectively separating gappers based on planned intentions within the LSYPE.

First, intentional gappers who had applied to a university and/or deferred enrollment proved to be just as likely to enroll in college following their gap year when compared to those who indicated their intention to immediately enroll. The intentional gappers cited the top two reasons for choosing to take a gap year being the need to take a break and gain independence. Among all gappers in the LSYPE, 80% reported working in Britain during a gap year, with the intentional gappers being more likely to study or work abroad. Although the LSYPE allowed for clear distinction in groups of gappers, the other data set utilized by these researchers allowed for a comparison of degree persistence and lifetime earnings.

Gappers within the British Cohort Study were identified by data retrieved at age 30 that inquired about breaks in higher education, so this was not completely effective in identifying pre-university gap year participants in the sample. Nonetheless, 357 gappers were identified and compared to 1,582 immediate enrollers. Overall, persistence rates for the two groups were not statistically significant, and immediate enrollers earned a higher income until age 38 when earnings leveled between the two groups. This final point regarding career prospects and earnings has been further explored by other researchers as well.

Holmlund et al. (2008) investigated the impact of different durations of delayed enrollment on lifetime earnings using a Swedish longitudinal data set. The data set used tracked sample participants' university enrollment beginning in 1977 and data were collected through 2002. The authors controlled for a variety of variables such as grade point average, gender, parental education, and SES. The authors concluded what is consistent with findings from many of the other articles that have been reviewed by showing that poor academic performance in high school is a strong predictor of delayed enrollment. Specific to lifetime earnings, the authors used a regression to demonstrate a one-year delayed enrollment to higher education resulted in a

decrease of 21% and 31% of lifetime earnings by age 40 for men and women, respectively. The earnings penalty was much larger for longer durations of delay; however, annual earnings among delayers and immediate enrollers was no longer significantly different by age 40.

Another article that shed light on a potential negative impact of taking a gap year used two different longitudinal data sets in Finland and Australia (Parker et al., 2015). Both studies used propensity score matching techniques to account for a number of background variables to assess goal commitment, university enrollment and/or degree completion, and career prospects. The first Finnish study had a sample size of 636 participants of which 105 had indicated a planned gap year. The study included three different surveys of individuals between the ages of 19 and 23. The findings of the study indicated that there were no significant differences in goal commitment or university enrollment between gappers and immediate enrollers. The second study used the 2003 cohort of the LSAY. A total of 2,228 participants were identified as having completed secondary school with 505 participants being considered on a gap year because they deferred entry. The study reviewed survey answers obtained over the next four years pertaining to life satisfaction, career prospects, prospects, and degree completion among both groups. Findings indicated that there was no significant difference among the measures of interest. The authors did note a significant difference in dropout rates and enrollment rates between the gappers and immediate enrollers. Specifically, 8% of gappers reported dropping out compared to only three percent of immediate enrollers, and thirteen percent more of the immediate enrollers reported being currently enrolled. Parker et al. (2015) concluded by arguing that the gap year outcomes explored were largely inconclusive of any significant differences.

The outcomes reviewed in this section of the literature review presented mixed results. Gap year experiences were found to be more likely among prospective college students with

below average academic performance in secondary school (Birch & Miller, 2007; Martin 2010; Curtis et al., 2012; Crawford & Cribb, 2012). Research has also demonstrated academic motivation can be enhanced by a pre-university gap year (Martin, 2010). Evaluating academic performance among pre-university gappers and immediate enrollees has produced inconclusive findings. Birch and Miller (2007) found a significant difference in academic performance among gappers, but the study was conducted at one university focusing specifically on the first year of enrollment. Two large studies using nationally representative samples in the UK and Australia suggested academic performance may improve with a pre-university gap year for those with lower academic credentials upon enrollment, but no conclusive statistical significance was identified (Crawford & Cribb, 2012; Curtis 2014). The most comprehensive data analyzed showed that there is no significant difference in academic performance or persistence that exists among gappers and immediate enrollees (Parker et. al., 2015). Finally, there was a substantial perceived and actual earnings penalty associated with taking a gap year, too (Holmlund et al., 2008; Crawford & Cribb, 2012; Parker et al., 2015). These results challenge the gap year findings consistent in the qualitative research that has shown generally positive outcomes.

### **G. Gap Year Decisions, Experiences, and Reflections**

Qualitative literature exploring gap years has provided a deeper understanding related to the motivations behind taking a gap year and the experiences that are often cherished upon reflection by participants. Both concepts are relevant considering the focus of the study. This self-reported data has largely emerged through 20 different qualitative research studies that have been conducted in five different countries since 2006. The literature reviewed in this section is presented thematically given the volume of studies and the findings that have been consistently confirmed. Relevant survey data is also included, and it is worth noting that not all the studies

referred to in this section were focused specifically on the gap year or are they all considered academic studies. Gap year research does not have a primary discipline and it is still a relatively new concept. Therefore, the synthesis of this research includes studies focused on travel, volunteer tourism, and research conducted outside of academia within guidebooks and the GYA.

### ***Gap Year Motivations***

There is no single reason that students report in the decision to take a gap year. Rather, the decision to take a gap year has a variety of motivations, and these motivations are interconnected. One of the most consistent motivations found amongst gappers is the feeling of wanting a break from education due to feeling burned out (Jones, 2004; Coetzee & Bester, 2009; Neiman, 2013; Hoe, 2014; Hoe, 2015; Hoe & Blythe, 2020; Vogt, 2018). In their study of three pre-university gappers in South Africa, Coetzee and Bester (2009) found each participant recalling negative experiences with school factored into their decisions. Hoe (2014) found that 71% of the 36 different US pre-university gappers interviewed and surveyed cited the need for a break from school as a primary motivating factor. She found that this need was primarily driven by the structured, high-achieving culture among the current generation, with negative experiences in high school being less common or influential. With the future in mind, gappers also consistently shared another the motivation of the hope that it will provide career clarity in a time of uncertainty for the participants (O'Shea, 2011; Neiman, 2013; Haigler & Nelson, 2013; Hoe, 2014; Rabee & Naidoo, 2016). This is often coupled with the motivation to develop new skills, such as learning a new language, and building a stronger resume (Jones, 2004; Soderman & Sneed, 2008; O'Shea, 2011; Haigler & Nelson, 2013; Hoe, 2014, Vogt, 2018). Although academic and career aspirations have clearly served as influential factors, it has often been the personal benefits participants foresee gaining to be just as compelling.



Two difference GYA alumni surveys conducted in 2015 and 2020 have indicated other common reasons for taking a gap year as seeking personal growth and gaining exposure to different cultures and experiences. Motivation to take a gap year to experience personal growth has been a consistent finding across a number of academic studies, too (O'Shea, 2011; Griffin, 2013; Hoe, 2014; Wu et al, 2015). This focus has often been coupled with the gappers hoping to experience different cultures, travel, and have fun (Jones, 2004; Soderman & Sneed, 2008; O'Shea, 2011; Haigler & Nelson, 2013; Hoe, 2014; Vogt, 2018). Altruistic motives of gap year participants have also been cited in the literature (Jones, 2004; Soderman & Sneed, 2008; O'Shea, 2011), but more often as a component to the themes already mentioned. Soderman and Sneed (2008) interviewed 50 different young adults completing their gap year in one of three different organizations in the UK, and they identified 10 different motivating factors that played a role in those decisions. These authors explained "Altruism was often part of the motivation, although usually in combination with oneself, and thus more in line with 'reciprocal altruism' or motivation similar to those of the 'new volunteers'" (p. 124). This is worth noting considering many of the most well-known gap year providers have promoted and marketed the acts of service offered in the experiences they provide.

Another component to the decision to take a gap year is the family support network. A handful of studies investigating US gapper experiences have noted the influential nature of family and friends in making the decision to take a gap year (Haigler & Nelson, 2013; Hoe, 2014; Flowers, 2015; Tenser 2015). In her study, Hoe (2014) found that 68% of participants attributed their decision to take a gap year to the social and cultural capital that was supportive of the idea in their own lives, while others mentioned significant pushback received by parents hesitant of the idea. One consistent trend prevalent in the US gap year literature among sample

participants has been the acceptance and/or deferred enrollment to a postsecondary institution prior to embarking on their journeys (Haigler & Nelson, 2013; Hoe, 2014; Tenser 2015; Guidi, 2018). This has served as a compromising factor in swaying parents tentative support of the idea. The influence of cultural expectation also extends overseas. Wu et al. (2015) argued that it is more common in China to embark on a career gap year versus the pre-university gap year, typically due to the strict cultural expectations demanding the traditional path of college completion first.

Current literature does not always support the notion that earning an income has been a motivating factor in deciding to take a gap year. Only one academic study listed the motivation to save money for college as a primary reason for taking a gap year (Nieman, 2013). In the most recent GYA alumni survey, which consisted of 1,190 participants, only 5% of respondents listed wanting to earn an income as a motivating factor, but 37% did list financial constraints as a barrier in planning their gap year (Hoe & Blythe, 2020). Haigler and Nelson (2013) conducted an online survey of over 300 US gappers, and only 2% indicated finances as being the most critical factor in gap year planning. Overall, the multifaceted decision to take a gap year among participants in these studies suggested social and cultural expectations have played an integral role, and financial resources have been much less of a concern.

### ***Gap Year Experiences***

The research that has been conducted specific to gap years has demonstrated many different activities that have resulted in meaningful experiences for participants. Jones (2004) found that UK gappers were engaging in a range and combination of activities domestically and overseas that often involved work, volunteering, travelling, and free time. The extent to which gap years vary in this respect is illustrated in the most recent GYA alumni survey in 2020.

Among the 1,596 respondents, a key finding was that a total of 246 different combinations of activities were reported. The most common activities included travelling outside of the US and Canada, volunteer or service work, and language learning (Hoe & Blythe, 2020). Given the sheer combination of variables that comprise a gap year, much of the existing qualitative research conducted overseas has focused on synthesizing data among sample participants without attempting to equate outcomes to activity types or experiences (Jones, 2004; Coetzee & Bester, 2009; King, 2011; Neiman, 2013; Rabie & Naidoo, 2016; Stehlik, 2010; Wu et. al.; 2015; Vogt, 2018). Other studies have investigated outcomes associated with international volunteering abroad through gap year providers (Griffin, 2013; O'Shea, 2011; Simpson, 2004a), or travel (Bagnolia, 2009; Johan 2014; O'Reilly, 2006). Finally, the four qualitative studies conducted in the US specific to gap years incorporated a variety of activities and experiences among participants (Flowers, 2015; Guidi, 2018, Hoe, 2014). Studies that have focused on activities have attempted to provide great detail on the lived experience of the participants.

One of the most consistent themes throughout this area of the literature is that gappers reported being pushed out of their comfort zones by engaging in new environments (Bagnoli, 2009; Flowers, 2015; Guidi, 2018; Hoe, 2014; Johan, 2014; O'Shea, 2011; Tenser, 2015). These new environments have been reported to evoke feelings of culture shock, and frustrations in attempting to assimilate into new cultures (Hoe, 2014; O'Shea, 2011). Another consistent theme in these studies is the development of influential relationships with local communities, fellow gappers, staff within gap year providers, and mentors (Flowers, 2015; Guidi, 2018; Hoe, 2014; Johan, 2014; Tenser 2015). Finally, these challenging environments, coupled with new deep relationships with others, has led to introspection specific to values in an expanding world

according to many participants (Flowers, 2015; O'Shea, 2011; Tenser, 2015; Guidi, 2018). The rich experiences reported by gappers have led to many self-reported outcomes upon reflection.

### ***Gap Year Reflections***

Gap year participants have consistently reported their experiences to be transformative personally and professionally. The strongest theme identified throughout the literature is growth in one's own personal development through a better sense of identity (Bagnoli, 2009; Johan, 2014; Stehlik, 2010), greater confidence (Guidi, 2018; King, 2011; O'Reilly, 2006), and independence (O'Shea, 2011; Flowers, 2015; Tenser, 2015). This personal growth often results in participants' perceptions that they have increased their interpersonal skills (Hoe, 2014; Rabie & Naidoo, 2016), as well as other life skills related to decision-making, managing money, or speaking a new language (Haigler & Nelson, 2013; Jones, 2004; O'Shea, 2011; Spenader, 2011). In her dissertation, Tenser (2015) followed 12 first-year students during their first year at three different selective universities in the northeastern US following completion of a pre-university gap year. Based on her findings, Tenser (2015) developed the gap year impact model, which posited that after gap year experiences participants appeared "... to have hastened or accelerated, greater personal growth and increased evidence of self-authorship [*Meaning Making*], which in turn resulted in greater agency in the transition to college during the first year [*Sovereign Engagement*]" (pp. 84). Tenser later argued that sovereign engagement did not necessarily result in stronger academic performance. Rather, this concept was tied to an awareness and appreciation for opportunities and others, as well as ownership of the first-year experience and the responsibilities that came with it.

The identity development that has been reported to occur in gap year experiences has also resulted in future clarity regarding next steps (Coetzee & Bester, 2009; Flowers 2015; Guidi,

2018; Hoe, 2015; Hoe & Blythe, 2020; King, 2011; Nieman, 2013; O'Reilly, 2006; O'Shea, 2011; Rabie & Naidoo, 2016). Nieman (2013) interviewed 34 different pre-university gappers who had enrolled in higher education institutions in South Africa, and she found the most consistent theme among all participants was clarity regarding future career aspirations that were lacking prior to the gap year. Participants in the study also reported being more focused, motivated, and resilient, because of these newfound goals. Gappers have found that the gap year experience can serve to enhance an ability to seek a pre-determined career path (King, 2011), or shift one's focus entirely (O'Shea, 2011). These findings have also been reported in US-based gap year studies (Flowers, 2015; Guidi, 2018) and GYA research. The 2020 GYA alumni survey found that 95% of participants reported the experience prepared them for the next step in life, which could have been work, vocational school, or higher education. The outcomes specific to career aspirations were not the only areas of self-reflection that gappers have reported being a byproduct of the experience.

Gap year participants who have engaged in a broad range of activities have reported a shift in perspective and values. One of the most prominent themes across a multitude of studies and gap year activities is participants gaining a deeper appreciation for relationships with friends and family (Flowers, 2015; Johan, 2014, Nieman, 2013; O'Shea, 2011; Spenader, 2011; Tenser, 2015). Additionally, the experience has led to a broader awareness of complex world issues and different cultures (Haigler & Nelson, 2013; Hoe, 2014; Hoe, 2015; Hoe & Blythe, 2020; O'Reilly, 2006; O'Shea, 2011). In his book, *Gap year: How delaying college changes people in ways the world needs*, O'Shea (2014) expanded upon the findings originally outlined in his study in 2011 that consisted of observations, in-depth interviews, and end of the year report data from a well-known gap year provider in the UK called Project Trust. This organization provided

volunteer-based opportunities for gappers in impoverished communities in Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Project Trust, n.d.). O'Shea (2014) found that these gap year volunteers were exposed to complex moral issues related to poverty, complexities related to international aid, and the role of religion. Participants reported being more empathetic, focused on others, and motivated to engage in civic service in the future, too. O'Shea explained participants "... reflected new orientations, values, and meanings the volunteers made of themselves and the world – and their desire for how they wanted to contribute to the world" (p. 114). Ultimately, O'Shea argued that such international volunteer gap year experiences served as a catalyst by "pushing volunteers toward a form of self-authorship almost by necessity" (p. 147). He also mentioned the need for research on domestic gap years with more diverse samples to be conducted to determine if such results would be reported in a similar manner. This is one example of existing literature highlighting the need for the current study being proposed.

#### **H. Volunteer Tourism and Criticisms of the 'Gap Year'**

In contrast to findings reviewed in the previous section, some scholars have challenged the findings of purported growth reported by gappers, as well as the ethics of the commercial industry that provide volunteer experiences in third world countries. This section of the literature blends research specific to volunteer tourism and gap years to illustrate these points. Wearing (2001) defined and explored the concept of volunteer tourism as it became an emerging trend in the UK and Australia. He explained that the volunteer tourist is one who travels with the focus of making a difference with respect to disadvantaged communities or the environment. His study of a young adults engaging in an Australian Youth Challenge International non-profit organization produced results similar to gap year research in terms of motivation to engage and self-reflection upon return. However, Wearing (2001) also found the "... the majority of the tourism industry

has been focused on self-interest rather than a true conservative ethic” (p. 159). Callanan and Thomas (2005) suggested the growth of volunteer tourism emerged in the UK in the 1980s and 1990s, influenced by an “by an ever increasing ‘guilt conscious’ society” (p. 183). These authors argued volunteer tourism should be deconstructed into different durations, types of projects, and levels of commitment asked of volunteers. The critical point in this early literature highlighted conflicting priorities in an emerging tourism industry in the UK and Australia. Essentially, the industry was experiencing substantial growth catering to young tourists with a variety of motives, with altruism being the primary motivation of only a small proportion of the target population (Rehberg, 2005; Soderman & Snead, 2008), while attempting to serve disadvantaged communities that could be easily exploited. These same concerns have been shared by scholars conducting gap year research.

One of the first research projects to shed light on these potentially conflicting priorities was a dissertation by Kate Simpson (2004a). She conducted ethnographic research between 2001 and 2003, interviewing and observing individuals from the UK completing their gap year through an organization known as Quest Overseas. Participants volunteered and travelled throughout Peru. Interviews with gap year industry professionals were also conducted in San Gabriel as part of this study. In her analysis of the data, Simpson (2004a) challenged the pedagogy implemented by gap year providers, which she claimed lacked self-reflection or historical context given such organizations were often operating in countries that had previously been colonized by the British Empire. In subsequent publications, Simpson (2004b) reviewed the way in which gap year organizations sold their experiences under the presumption the communities they served were in need and volunteers were the solution. Finally, Simpson (2005) argued the gappers’ personal growth and development heavily marketed by the commercial gap

year industry had created a culture in which affluent participants were seeking such experiences to enhance their curriculum vitae. The sentiment was further expanded on by Heath (2007). Citing the substantial cost that was making overseas gap year volunteer opportunities affordable only to a select few, she explained the ‘personality package’ touted by gap year providers and participants was a form of cultural capital that allowed prospective college students to distinguish themselves from their peers (Heath, 2007, p. 93). Ultimately, Simpson (2004a; 2004b; 2005) called into the question the private industry’s role in providing gap years given a heavy reliance on experience as a tool for learning, while lacking a deeper consideration for the host communities they claimed to serve. Lyons et. al (2012) echoed these same concerns, while also stressing the fact that existing research at the time had largely been conducted using snowballing sample methods with little focus on underrepresented populations in host communities.

The potential negative impacts of volunteer tourism on host communities were outlined by Guttentag (2009). He explored cultural and economic concerns such as poor performance by volunteers who were unqualified to serve in their assigned roles. Guttentag (2009) also argued local communities desires might be ignored by the developing organization, stereotypes could be reinforced for volunteers, and local jobs would be lost to volunteers. There is still not specific research exploring the impact of commercial gap year organizations on local communities overseas. Instead, scholars have focused on the promotional materials used by these organizations to attract customers (Cremin 2007; Calkin, 2014; Hermann 2017). In effect, these studies demonstrated gap year organizations promoted a combination of experiences one would have on a vacation, coupled with moral or ethical activities that make a difference. Cremin (2007) and Calkin (2014) both highlighted the historical context being of particular concern, as



these were both UK studies focused on organizations serving Third World countries previously colonized.

This leads to the final point of emphasis of a critical nature regarding gap year outcomes. Research has challenged the claims of increased cultural competence made by many gappers upon return from serving in Third World settings. Snee (2013; 2014) reviewed 39 blogs and conducted 9 interviews of a sample consisting of 17-19-year-old UK gappers. Her findings suggested gappers often attempted to meet the societal expectations of a meaningful gap year with striking similarities. Snee (2014) argued the reflections shared by gappers often lacked depth and used stereotypes that reinforced existent structural inequities. Griffin (2013) conducted a qualitative study of 10 UK gappers upon return and came to a similar conclusion. He highlighted narratives provided by participants who expressed frustration with local communities reluctant to embrace the guidance being provided, and stereotypes being prevalent. Griffin (2013) wrote “Our social narratives do not encourage us to consider the historical and political contexts, let alone our role in the process” (p. 864). The notion that well-intentioned volunteers can do more harm than good has been evidenced in the volunteer tourism literature, too. Conran (2011) conducted ethnographic field work in which she observed and interviewed volunteer tourists, staff, and host community members at three different non-governmental organizations in Thailand. Conran (2011) explained the close individual relationships developed between volunteer tourists and locals “...overshadows the structural inequality that volunteer tourism seeks to address and reframes it as a question of individual morality” (p. 1467). This shift allowed many of the inequities prevalent in these communities to persist.

The rise of volunteer tourism and the commercial gap year industry in the UK has been controversial. The same conversations have not been as prevalent in the US. However, it is

evident that the gap year phenomenon and the commercial gap year industry are growing (Dawes et al., 2019). Given the inherent conflicts that have been shown to persist in the private sector, the gap year experiences provided in AmeriCorps is appropriate to explore.

## **I. An Overview of Civic Service in the US**

Although the term gap year is a new concept gaining notoriety in the US, the public policy debate focusing on national, non-military, domestic, civic service opportunities for young adults has intensified. The debate as to whether the federal government should subsidize such efforts has been going on for over 100 years (James, 1910/1995). This section of the literature review provides a brief history of the three most widely recognized domestic national service programs in the US: Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), and AmeriCorps (Bass, 2013). This review includes the legislative history, political dynamics, and external events that have helped shaped today's policy environment, which in turn provides a viable option for prospective individuals considering a gap year. In addition, research conducted on the experience of AmeriCorps members is provided.

### ***Civilian Conservation Corps***

The CCC was established as part of the New Deal in 1933, and remained in effect until 1942 (Sherraden, 1979). At the time of the CCC's conception, the Great Depression had overtaken the country. Salmon (1967) described a country plagued by unprecedented unemployment and suffering with over two million people who were uprooted from their homes. The conservation of America's lands had largely been ignored up until 1933, and the degradation of hundreds of millions of acres of timber had resulted in millions of acres of soil erosion (Salmon, 1967). The creation of the CCC was spearheaded by President Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) (Sherraden, 1979), who focused on combining his passion for conservation with the need

to address unemployment at a time when it was vitally important to America's future (Salmon, 1967; Bass, 2013). The tangible impact the CCC had across the country generated broad support, and it is widely considered the most popular domestic national civic service program in US history (Bass, 2013).

The speed at which the CCC was assembled has been considered striking. In the first 49 days of FDR's executive order to create the CCC, 250,000 young men and 25,000 local experienced men had been hired to work in camps across the US in 1933 (CCC, 1942). The US government distributed more than \$100,000,000 per year to CCC enrollees and their families during its tenure (Sherraden, 1979). CCC enrollees received \$30 per month for their service (Salmon, 1967), and \$25 was immediately sent home to the enrollee's family (Sherraden, 1979). This served as a vital resource, particularly for the those without a formal education, as only 10% of CCC enrollees had earned a high school education (Moskos, 1988). Over the life of the CCC, 3,000,000 enrollees served, and an estimated 12,000,000 to 15,000,000 dependents of enrollees received support as a result (CCC, 1942). The sole source of income was critical not only for the families of enrollees, but the towns in which CCC camps were stationed throughout the country as members would spend their money in these locations (Bass, 2013). The economic stimulus the CCC provided at the time was paralleled by long-lasting conservation efforts of natural resources. During this nine-year period the CCC was operating, 20,000,000 acres of public land were added, 800 new state parks were created, 2,355,587,000 trees were planted, 40,000,000 acres of farmland were provided erosion control, and over 4,000,000 acres of forest were improved (CCC, 1942). The list of economic and conservation achievements could continue, but the critical point here is that scholars have concluded it was successful in achieving its primary

goals of addressing unemployment and conservation needs that are still being made evident through research today (Salmon, 1967; Sherraden, 1979; Pasquill, 2008; Rippelmeyer, 2015).

The CCC ended in 1942 despite its widely regarded success. In her analysis, Bass (2013) concluded that the CCC had a difficult time shifting its purpose as the country emerged from the Great Depression. Unemployment had plummeted throughout the US as it engaged in the more pressing effort of World War II (Salmon, 1967; Sherraden, 1979). Another factor highlighted by scholars was the organizational structure of the CCC, which spanned across four different existing federal departments, none of which solely focused on the CCC (Salmon, 1967; Bass, 2013). In the end, although the CCC's impact is thought to have had profound impact on enrollees and the nation, there were no alumni organizations or dedicated government departments to advocate for its continued existence as priorities shifted to the global war (Bass, 2013). It would take over 20 years before the next federal civic service program would be created.

### ***Volunteers in Service to America***

Between 1961-1976, key policymakers in all three branches of government passed the most liberal and voluminous policy enactments of any era in the modern history of the US (Grossman, 2014). This included a policy that created the national domestic service program now known as VISTA. Building off the perceived success of the Peace Corps established in 1961, President John F. Kennedy proposed the idea of a domestic version shortly thereafter (AmeriCorps Service Resources, 2015). President Lyndon B. Johnson declared a War on Poverty in his State of the Union Address on January 8, 1964, following President Kennedy's assassination. President Johnson outlined a series of efforts that included the creation of a National Service Corps to "help the economically handicapped of our own country as the Peace

Corps now helps those abroad” (Federal Register, National Archives, and Records Administration, 1964, p. 114). Months later, the Economic Opportunity Act was passed, and VISTA was placed under the direction of the newly created Office of Equal Opportunity (AmeriCorps VISTA Campus, n.d.).

There were stark differences between the CCC and VISTA. The CCC was a relief effort and enrolled as many as 500,000 volunteers annually. Remuneration for service served as an economic catalyst to CCC members, their families, local communities, and the nation. Conservation and economic relief were clear objectives that could be quantifiably measured and visible to the general public. In contrast, President Johnson’s War on Poverty was spearheaded in a time of great economic prosperity in the country. Bass (2013) explained that the idea of serving in VISTA was thought to be a sacrificial act, as members were provided a living allowance equal to the standard of the poor, health insurance, and \$50 for every month served at the end of a one-to-two-year term. Being selected to serve in VISTA was a competitive process, and many of the volunteers were college graduates who had unsuccessfully applied to serve in the Peace Corps (Moskos, 1988). However, this trend was not sustained as VISTA made a conscious effort to select more older, locally recruited, volunteers in the neighborhoods it had hoped to serve to be effective (Moskos, 1988). The competitive environment to be selected did not lead to an expansion of positions, though. VISTA averaged 4,000 volunteers per year between 1964-1993, with its peak enrollment being 5,000 in 1968 (Bass, 2013).

Unlike the CCC, VISTA was not widely supported by both political parties. Bass (2013) argued that the controversy surrounding VISTA was in large part due to the complexities associated with its primary purpose to eliminate poverty. A former VISTA volunteer, David Pass (1976) wrote a dissertation highlighting how VISTA’s purpose perpetuated a conflict between

staff and volunteers rooted in “a community/advocacy ideology and a compensatory/service ideology” (pp. xviii). Pass (1976) explained the community/advocacy ideology more actively challenged the status quo through volunteers engaging in community organizing and political action. The compensatory/service ideology focused on information and services provide by volunteers with the expectation recipients would be solely responsible for taking advantage. The conflicts that arose from these two perspectives limited VISTA’s ability to grow due to political opposition. This controversy seemed to culminate during President Jimmy Carter’s administration in the late 1970s. Moskos (1988) wrote “Put in its best light, VISTA during the Carter administration sought to promote democratic participation among poor citizens. Put in another way, VISTA was subsidizing radicalism” (p. 54). Both President Richard Nixon and President Ronald Reagan attempted to end VISTA, but they only managed significant restructuring due to effective lobbying efforts carried out by former VISTA volunteers (Bass, 2013). Under President Nixon, the Domestic Volunteer Service Act was passed in 1973, and VISTA was moved out of the OEO and into the new ACTION Department (AmeriCorps VISTA Campus, n.d.). By the end of the Reagan administration, approximately 80% of the VISTA volunteer force was comprised of adults over the age of 26 (Moskos, 1988). In the end, VISTA has been able to remain intact, but unable to grow into a broadly recognizable national service program to most Americans.

### ***AmeriCorps: From the beginning to the Present***

The next push for national service began under Republican President George W. H. Bush when he signed into law the National and Community Service Act of 1990 (Perry & Thomson, 2004). This policy created the Commission on National and Community Service which assumed responsibility of overseeing VISTA (AmeriCorps VISTA Campus, n.d.). This work laid the

foundation for President Bill Clinton to make domestic national service a foundational component to his campaign and presidency (Bass, 2013). In 1993, President Clinton signed into law the National and Community Service Trust Act, which formed the federal agency known as the Corporation for National Community Service (CNCS) responsible for overseeing AmeriCorps. The development of this policy was influenced by political debate specific to the role of government, the purpose of national service, and rewards provided to volunteers (Bass, 2013). There were also several scholars who had published books advocating for the broad expansion of domestic national service leading up to his presidency that proved to be highly influential in the structure of AmeriCorps (Buckley, 1990; Eberly, 1988; Moskos, 1988). In the end, the policy created an AmeriCorps that was mindful of the history of national service efforts before it, and heavily dependent on state and private partnerships (Bass, 2013).

The National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993 effectively combined programs under ACTION, such as VISTA, and the Commission on National and Community Service, to create AmeriCorps (Serve America, 1993). The purpose behind this legislation was broad and multifaceted compared to domestic national service legislation before it. A total of 8 different purposes were outlined in the policy, and two pertinent examples include:

- (1) meet the unmet human, educational, environmental, and public safety needs of the United States, without displacing workers; ... (3) expand educational opportunity by rewarding individuals who participate in national service with an increased ability to pursue higher education or job training (p. 4).

CNCS was tasked with the administration of AmeriCorps, and within it, three primary programs for young adults that had evolved: AmeriCorps\*VISTA, AmeriCorps\*NCCC, and AmeriCorps\*State and National (Bass, 2013). AmeriCorps\*VISTA and AmeriCorps\*NCCC both carried with them similar purposes to their earlier predecessors. AmeriCorps\*State and National was the largest of the three, and it operates under a grant-based funding model. To

receive grants through the CNCS, governors of each state appointed 15 to 25 citizens to form state commissions. These groups were responsible for overseeing the grant application process in their states, and a limitation of 40% of grant funding from the CNCS was permitted to go to state entities (Serve America, 1993). In turn, public and private non-profit organizations were incentivized to participate, and the policy has experienced slow growth for nearly three decades as a result.

The decentralized nature and broad purpose of AmeriCorps drew support from President Clinton's successor, President George W. Bush. The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks led President George W. Bush to draw from an inspired nation looking to serve when he expanded the annual number of AmeriCorps members from 50,000 to 75,000 through executive action (Bass, 2013). This marked the first Republican President in history to advocate for an expansion of domestic national service programs. President Barack Obama continued the path of advocating for AmeriCorps' expansion, but this time it was done with more legislation. Shortly after being elected to office, the Edward Kennedy Serve America Act was passed in 2009 with broad bipartisan support (CNCS, 2010). This policy permitted increasing the number of active members in AmeriCorps from 75,000 to 250,000 by 2014, and increased the amount provided through the Segal Education Award to the equivalent of the maximum Pell grant level (CNCS, 2010). As such, a full-time AmeriCorps member would receive a Segal Education Award worth \$6,345 in 2021 following a year of service (Fountain & Overbay, 2021). This award is provided to members for every year of service, and it can be put towards paying tuition at eligible institutions of higher education or training programs, and/or student loans (AmeriCorps, n.d.-a). This type of remuneration for service was a point of contention during the time in which the policy was crafted. No other domestic civic service program had rewarded its members in this



manner. Opposition to the Segal Education Award was based on the idea such a reward defied the concept of volunteering, and too large of a reward would compete with the education award provided to military veterans (Bass, 2013). Nonetheless, the Segal Education Award has played a vital role in supplementing AmeriCorps members paying for a postsecondary education. Over \$4,000,000,000 has been awarded to members for their service to date (AmeriCorps, n.d.-a).

The other component of the Edward Kennedy Serve America Act, expanding the number of annual members from 75,000 to 250,000, proved much more difficult to implement. The cost of expanding AmeriCorps has been the primary hindrance to its expansion politically (Mulhere, 2014). The total cost of implementation was estimated to be \$6,480,000,000 between 2010-2014 (Congressional Budget Office, 2011), and the increase in annual number of AmeriCorps members was never reached. President Obama's successor, President Donald Trump, called for the complete elimination of AmeriCorps in each of his proposed budgets (Schmelzer, 2019; CNCS 2020), but Congress maintained funding for its programs due to strong bipartisan opposition (Green, 2017). The funding hurdle was overcome, to an extent, in the most recent American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 passed signed by President Joe Biden. A total of \$1,000,000,000 was provided to AmeriCorps in 2021 as part of the COVID-19 relief effort. Allocations for different purposes were outlined in the legislation, with the most significant investments being provided to AmeriCorps\*State and National and the National Service Trust. The latter provides the funding for the Segal Education Awards, and it is unclear as to whether this funding will increase the number of AmeriCorps members moving forward, but it reinforced the notion that AmeriCorps will likely continue to expand over time. Bass (2013) argued the decentralized nature of AmeriCorps and effective administration of its programs have allowed it to withstand the test of time. Today, politicians from both political parties support policies for

future growth (Coons, 2021). This argument is strengthened further when considering influential non-profit organizations such as the Voices for National Service and Service Year Alliance are actively advocating for expansion.

Bass (2013) explained that the policy AmeriCorps policy was created with the hope that grantees would have the option of selecting college graduates, or those without, depending on the needs of the organizations. At the same time, President Clinton and his allies were concerned an AmeriCorps volunteer base that was comprised only of college graduates would damage the concept of the Segal Education Award serving as a vehicle for access into higher education for others. Currently, AmeriCorps members are provided several benefits that would incentivize young adults to serve, such as a living stipend, Segal Education Award for each year of service, student loan deferment, and some positions provide ways supplement healthcare (AmeriCorps, n.d.-b). According to the AmeriCorps 'Fit Finder,' there are approximately 75,000 year-long AmeriCorps member opportunities available for young adults annually (n.d.-c). There are 65,000 positions that exist within AmeriCorps\*State and National, 8,000 exist within AmeriCorps\*VISTA, 1,200 exist within the AmeriCorps\*NCCC and 1,000 more exist within the NCCC FEMA Corps. AmeriCorps\*State and National requires members to be 17 or older, AmeriCorps\*VISTA requires members to be 18 or older, and the AmeriCorps\*NCCC programs require members to be 18-26. Given that gap years vary in definition and are not the focus of AmeriCorps research, only a certain amount can be gleaned from the prevalence of pre-university gap years being completed in the organization through data sets made available on the AmeriCorps Open Data website.

First, it is clear that the AmeriCorps members are more diverse in terms of race and ethnicity when compared to the general population of the US (AmeriCorps, 2021). This has

remained consistent since the inception of the program (Bass, 2013). The most recent data set that provided the age of members across all AmeriCorps programs indicated that 16.5% of service members were less than 20 years old, and 67.8% were between the ages of 20 to 29 (AmeriCorps, 2018). The age breakdown was also provided in each program. In Fall 2017, members under the age of 20 reached 9,902 within AmeriCorps\*State and National, 460 within the AmeriCorps\*NCCC, and 699 within AmeriCorps\*VISTA. This is also consistent with historical trends that have demonstrated the AmeriCorps\*NCCC consistently maintained the heaviest composition of AmeriCorps' youngest members (Bass, 2013). Finally, one of the most recent AmeriCorps member exit surveys, which consisted of 48,076 complete responses, indicated that 11,349 planned to enroll college and 1,534 planned to enroll in vocational/technical program within the next 6 months after serving (AmeriCorps, 2019). This did not include members who planned to attend graduate school as there was a separate selection built into the survey for this option. The data supported the notion that pre-university gap years are being completed in AmeriCorps each year, but a majority of members have earned a college degree. This is likely due to the competitive nature of being selected for a position. Former Army General Stanley McChrystal (2013) explained that in 2011 only 80,000 of the 600,000 AmeriCorps applicants were selected to serve, with many being selected for part-time service roles that did not qualify for a Segal Education Award.

Based on the most recent published data sets, this review has demonstrated it is likely that approximately 10,000 citizens are serving within AmeriCorps on a gap year annually. The next section of this literature review will review the outcomes associated with experiences of these members. However, a persistent theme prevalent in the literature is that AmeriCorps members are often treated as one homogenous group, and this is one reason why scholars have argued

more qualitative research focusing on young adults within AmeriCorps is needed (Hudson-Fledge, 2018).

### ***AmeriCorps Members Motivations and Outcomes***

The literature regarding AmeriCorps members' motivations and outcomes required a review of academic literature, government reports, and private research firms. Many of these sources addressed motivations, experiences, and long-term outcomes, so that much of this review is presented in a chronological order rather than divided by topical area. The first study investigating young adult motivations specific to the AmeriCorps program was conducted by Serow in 1995. He obtained 356 survey responses from currently enrolled college students at four different institutions in the southeast. Participants that showed interest in domestic national service were motivated by the potential personal benefits related to education and job training, as well as the thought that civic awareness would be promoted on the national level. Results also indicated that participants were more inclined to show interest in civic service and had a strong sense of civic duty and personal optimism.

Mesch et al. (1998) investigated the motivations of AmeriCorps members and their impact on retention during a year of service. The authors surveyed a total of 495 AmeriCorps members at three different locations a month into their year of service and confirmed whether each participant completed their year of service with site supervisors a year later. A total of 59 individuals in the sample did not complete their year of service, and the researchers compared a variety of measures between the two groups. Findings revealed members were more likely to complete their year of service if they had a satisfying initial experience. Career related motivations, high self-esteem, and local placement in one's community were associated with a decreased likelihood of serving a full term. Finally, factors related to altruistic motivation,

perceived meaningfulness of work, and educational stipend motivation had no significant impact on member retention. These findings suggested the remuneration provided to AmeriCorps members attracted a different type of volunteer than previous literature on volunteerism described. Specifically, AmeriCorps members appeared more motivated by instrumental factors rather than altruistic factors, but both types of factors likely played a role in members' motivation to serve.

Scholars also gave attention to whether AmeriCorps members' motivations impacted their behaviors and experiences. Tschirhart et al. (2001) surveyed 362 AmeriCorps members at the beginning and end of their service year. Five different constructs were developed related to motivations and outcomes: instrumental, altruistic, avoidance, self-esteem, and social. Findings showed that members' motivations were positively associated with their outcomes. Authors also noted members with altruistic, instrumental, and social motivations whose levels declined over time. Finally, members' who increased levels of self-esteem also experienced higher social outcomes. Researchers concluded that AmeriCorps members motivations impacted the experiences they seek during their year of service, and once these goals were achieved, motivations may have shifted to other goals that were not the initial priority.

Seeking to better understand how factors related to social capital might be affected by a year of service, Simon and Wang (2002) administered pre and post surveys to AmeriCorps cohorts in 1997-1998 and 1998-1999 in three different states. The researchers sought to measure participants' involvement in communities, confidence in public institutions, optimism about their role in government/social trust, and values. The analysis found that participants showed no change in confidence in public institutions or optimism about their role in government. However, participants did report being significantly more involved in communities post-service and

personal values shifted significantly for both cohorts. Although cohorts experienced different value shifts, participants from both groups identified family security, happiness, true friendship, and freedom as values that increased significantly. Simon and Wang (2002) observed that the AmeriCorps experience could enhance critical components of social capital for its alumni through the value identification and increased community engagement that resulted from a year of service.

Six years following the passage of the National and Service Community Trust Act, Perry et al. (1999) published the first academic journal article that synthesized data related to the implementation of the AmeriCorps programs. The authors noted the challenges associated with implementing the national domestic service program given its multiple purposes and substantial deference to state commissions. Five goals of AmeriCorps were identified by the authors based on the eight purposes outlined in the legislation. These goals were investigated using government reports and scholarly research that had been conducted to date. The authors found AmeriCorps programs had successfully tracked quantifiable measures outlining services provided directly to communities. Additionally, AmeriCorps members reported positive benefits such as an increased understanding of others and improved self-confidence across multiple studies. These findings were tempered by high attrition rates of members, low use rates of the Segal Educational Award, and increased costs. Other goals identified by the authors resulted in mixed results that left the authors calling for further research needing to be conducted to determine whether AmeriCorps programs were meeting the goals set forth by policymakers.

A broader research synthesis on domestic civic service in the US was conducted by Perry and Thomson (2004) in their book *Civic service: What difference does it make?* The authors first defined civic service to distinguish it from literature focused on other forms of

volunteering. According to the authors, key factors that defined civic service included frequent, long-term engagement with minimal compensation in a formal program that “addresses either difficult public problems or needs that have been defined collectively as critical” (p. 40). A total of 139 studies were reviewed including 72 government reports. Studies from AmeriCorps\*NCCC, AmeriCorps\*VISTA, and AmeriCorps\*State and National were included. The authors noted that few studies included in their review made use of random samples and classified them as “pre-experimental” in nature (p. 44). However, the authors also argued that their book was the most thorough review of the literature on the emerging field of civic service that was meant to provide insight into the impact such programs have had on servers, beneficiaries, institutions, and communities. Across 15 different measures in these four categories of interest, there were over 7 positive outcomes for every null or negative outcome identified in the analysis. There were 7 outcomes identified specific to servers: skill development, civic responsibility, educational opportunity, self-esteem, tolerance of diversity, satisfaction from serving, and health. Findings indicated that 85% of server outcomes were positive, with the tolerance for diversity outcome being the only area to receive mixed results. The authors noted that these findings should be approached with caution due to their limitations. For example, given that many of the positive outcomes associated with educational opportunity were based on servers receiving a Segal Education Award, the use rates and college completion rates of AmeriCorps members were not evaluated due to the relatively new policy at that time. The authors also concluded that outcomes among servers were impacted by individual characteristics. The authors suggested more research should be conducted to identify how specific attributes such as age and educational attainment at the time of service impacted outcomes.

The need for more robust experimental designs was apparent based on the reviews conducted by scholars in the first decade of AmeriCorps (Perry et al., 1999, Perry & Thomson, 2004). During this same time, CNCS partnered with an independent research firm known as Abts Associates to conduct an 8 year-long study that focused on the impact the AmeriCorps service had on members' future civic engagement, employment, educational attainment, and life satisfaction (Yamaguchi et al., 2008). After 8 years, the study consisted of nationally representative samples of 1,717 AmeriCorps\*State and National members and 475 AmeriCorps\*NCCC members. Comparison groups for each treatment group were also obtained. The AmeriCorps\*State and National comparison group ( $n=1,524$ ) consisted of individuals who had contacted AmeriCorps in the summer of 1999 to learn more information but did not actually enroll in the program. The AmeriCorps\*NCCC comparison group was comprised of individuals who had applied to the program, but either declined an invitation to serve or were not selected. Surveys were conducted directly before members began serving in 1999, as well as in 2000, 2004, and 2007. The data set related to the project will be referred to as the CNCS longitudinal data set throughout the rest of the literature review because it was utilized in a several studies.

The first publication provided data related to members demographic and educational background, as well as their motivations for joining. Jastrzab et al. (2001) found that AmeriCorps\*State and National members age ranged from 17-79, with enrollment peaking at ages 18 and 22. Members in this group were 46% White, 28% Black/African American, 16% Hispanic, and 10% Other. AmeriCorps\*NCCC members' age ranged from 18-24 given the age restriction. This group was not as racially diverse, with 86% of members identifying as White, 5% Black/African American, 4% Hispanic, and 6% Other. Both cohorts of AmeriCorps\*State and National and AmeriCorps\*NCCC were predominately female at 71% and 68%, respectively.



Among all AmeriCorps members, approximately 25% had earned at least a high school diploma, 37% had attended some college, and 29% had earned a bachelor's degree. Approximately 50% of AmeriCorps\*NCCC members had earned a bachelor's degree prior to service compared to only 30% of AmeriCorps State\*National members. Findings also indicated that 42% of members indicated that the Segal Educational Award was one of the most important reasons for serving in AmeriCorps. The top two primary motivations for serving in AmeriCorps were to help other people (58%) and explore future job/educational interests (51%) (Jastrzab et al., 2001). In later waves of the study, (Jastrzab et al., 2007) reported the Segal Education Award was a stronger motivator for AmeriCorps\*State and National members (70%), compared to AmeriCorps\*NCCC members who indicated motivations for joining were more oriented towards social justice causes. Other baseline measures obtained by researchers focused attitudes and behaviors related to civic engagement, education, employment, and life skills. Researchers concluded AmeriCorps members' commitment to service was strong upon entry, and differences between treatment groups and comparison groups would still allow for an effective study moving forward (Jastrzab et al., 2001).

Following the final wave of the study, Yamaguchi et al. (2008) found that AmeriCorps State\*National members showed positive significant differences across five of fifteen civic engagement measures evaluating attitudes and behaviors. It is important to note that four other civic engagement measures also showed positive significant differences for this group in 2004, but those effects had dissipated. Additionally, AmeriCorps\*NCCC members showed positive significant differences across seven of fifteen civic engagement measures. Both treatment groups also reported significantly higher levels of life satisfaction. There were no significant differences identified with respect to attitudes or behaviors towards education. This analysis concluded

participants self-reporting their highest-level degree attained. Researchers indicated that the comparison groups used in the study were likely to be highly engaged and successful citizens, citing that both groups surpassed national averages on several measures. Additionally, authors noted that it was clear that the positive impacts decreased over time; participants from each program experienced different outcomes, and AmeriCorps\*State and National members from disadvantaged groups showed significant differences on a number of civic engagement measures.

Frumkin et. al., (2009) published the results of the study referenced here and highlighted the fact that future research should be focused on program characteristics given the different outcomes found between AmeriCorps\*State and National members and AmeriCorps\*NCCC members, and the need for more qualitative research. Epstein's dissertation (2009) identified such characteristics in AmeriCorps\*State and National programs using a mixed methods design. First, she conducted interviews with 38 AmeriCorps alumni members who had served in the last 10 years. Participants shared a range of motivations for serving, from wanting to serve others, needing a job, or feeling burned out. Participants indicated that their service experience often provided career clarity and built social relationships that led to future jobs. Members typically entered the program as civically engaged citizens, and the experience of serving provided a broader awareness of social issues and the impact of policies at the ground level. Less tangible outcomes often cited in the gap year literature were also identified by participants such as enhanced interpersonal skills, confidence, compassion, and shifting values. Epstein (2009) also used quantitative data from the CNCS longitudinal data set to identify key characteristics of programs that enhanced these impacts. Her findings suggested such characteristics included strong relationships among members and staff, tailored trainings focused on the tasks related to the service work, service opportunities that provide leadership experience and meaningful

engagement opportunities, and a commitment to addressing issues related to diversity intentionally.

Flanagan et al. (2012) utilized two different data sets to investigate the protracted nature of young adulthood, and the ways in which AmeriCorps programs helped provide opportunities to address the need to create engagement during this time period. First, the authors reviewed key themes found in a qualitative data set comprised of a diverse sample of 424 individuals aged 21-38, obtained by MacArthur Foundations Network on Transitions to Adulthood. Findings indicated that young adults' civic engagement was a result of opportunities made available through their social networks, or a lack thereof, as such opportunities dissipated for individuals from a lower SES status. The second portion of the study began by analyzing a subset 505 AmeriCorps members and 839 comparisons aged 19-29 in the CNCS longitudinal data set. The authors found AmeriCorps members' increased level of civic participation over time to be compelling given that they were from more disadvantaged circumstances. The authors separated the AmeriCorps members by median household income to investigate whether socioeconomic status impacted the experience of serving. AmeriCorps members with a household income above the median that increased civic participation cited meaningful experiences related to interacting with people from different backgrounds and obtaining leadership skills. Conversely, AmeriCorps members below the median household income who showed increased levels of participation cited meaningful experiences related to being part of a community and contributing. The authors concluded by emphasizing the need for such institutions to create opportunities for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Research using the CNCS longitudinal data set has also demonstrated that selecting young, less educated, AmeriCorps members comes with its own risks to the organizations

partnering with AmeriCorps. McBride and Lee (2012) isolated 1,087 AmeriCorps\*State and National participants in the CNCS longitudinal data set to identify individual and institutional factors that would increase the risk a member did not complete the year of service. Factors identified that increased the risk an AmeriCorps member would leave prior to completing a year of service included age, education, disability status, and having children. Institutional factors in service organizations that enhanced completion rates were also identified. Authors concluded by recommending further research be conducted to learn about the motivations and challenges of AmeriCorps members who have not attained higher levels of education prior to serving.

Another scholar investigated the impacts of AmeriCorps service on long-term attitudes and behaviors using the CNCS longitudinal data set. Ward's (2013) first inquiry focused on a concept broadly known as public service motivation (PSM). This concept has been examined across multiple disciplines, and Perry, Hondeghem, and Wise (2010) explained "At the heart of the construct is the idea that individuals are oriented to act in the public domain for the purpose of doing good for others and society" (p. 687). Using questions in the longitudinal survey, Ward (2013) identified 3 of 6 dimensions outlined by Perry (1996) that could be used to measure PSM: commitment to the public interest, civic awareness, and attraction to public policy making. Findings revealed that AmeriCorps members scored significantly higher than the comparison group on measures evaluating a commitment to the public interest and civic awareness. Ward (2013) concluded that PSM was shown to be improved and sustained at higher rates following a year of service in AmeriCorps, and he investigated whether this motivation led to future behaviors in his next study.

In 2014, Ward investigated whether or not serving in a disaster relief effort through AmeriCorps\*NCCC in 1999 increased participants' volunteer behavior later in life. The author

used the final survey data in the CNCS longitudinal data set to identify 107 AmeriCorps\*NCCC members who indicated that they had served in a disaster relief effort during their term of service in 1999. The survey also asked participants to identify whether they volunteered time, money, clothes, or donated blood, to assist with relief efforts in response to the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Ward (2014) used a logistical regression to compare the 107 AmeriCorps\*NCCC members to 190 individuals in the comparison group. Findings showed that there was no significant difference in terms of donations made by either group; however, AmeriCorps\*NCCC members reported donating significantly more time to relief efforts. This study furthered the notion that service in AmeriCorps leads to participants' willingness to serve later in life. Ward's research demonstrated that AmeriCorps service can increase PSM and future volunteer behaviors well after participants' service year (2013; 2014).

The final study that used the CNCS longitudinal data sought to understand the long-term impact of outcomes associated with civic engagement, employment attitude, life skills, and educational aptitude on specific members' profiles based on age, education level, and PSM, at the time of participants' service year. Hudson-Flege (2018) created four profiles for AmeriCorps members and the comparison group: Young Idealists, Wanderers, Gappers, and Public Servants. Participants were categorized as Young Idealists if they had earned a high school diploma but had no educational experience at the postsecondary level. Wanderers were classified as such if they had some level of postsecondary education experience but had not earned a bachelor's degree. Both Young Idealists and Wanderers were relatively young compared to other profiles but differed in terms of PSM. Young Idealists had higher levels of PSM at the beginning of the study compared to Wanderers. The same strategy was implemented to separate older participants in the Gapper and Public Servant profiles. The majority of these older participants had a

bachelor's degree, and they differed in their initial levels of PSM. Gappers were categorized as such based on lower levels of PSM, and Public Servants had higher levels of PSM. Several analyses were conducted to better understand the motivations and long-term impacts a year of service had based on these characteristics.

Hudson-Flege (2018) found that Young Idealists and Wanderers reported significantly lower household incomes and were more racially diverse compared to Gappers and Public Servants. For this reason, he suggested that the Segal Education Award was likely a motivating factor for both of these groups in deciding to serve in AmeriCorps. Hudson-Flege (2018) used analyses of variance procedure to compare each profile to their respective comparison groups while controlling for age, gender, and household income. Findings indicated that Young Idealists and Wanders who served in AmeriCorps scored significantly higher on one of three measures of civic engagement, and no other measures related to employment aptitude, life skills, or educational aptitude. AmeriCorps members classified as Gappers showed significant increases on two civic engagement measures, one measure of employment aptitude, and two measures related to life skills. Additionally, this group showed a negative significant difference on the measure related to acceptance of responsibility for educational success. Finally, AmeriCorps members classified as Public Servants demonstrated a significant difference in the final wave of the study related to two civic engagement outcomes and two life skills outcomes. Hudson-Flege (2018) concluded by arguing that Young Idealists and Wanders opportunities should remain a focus in AmeriCorps despite the fact that these profiles were associated with less positive outcomes. He argued members in these profiles were from lower SES backgrounds and more racially diverse, and qualitative research investigating each member profile was needed.

Roberts (2010) explored a diverse sample of members' intentions to attend college following 1 or 2-year terms in the America Reads Mississippi (ARM) AmeriCorps program. The sample consisted of 225 participants, with 93.5% who identified as female and 79.6% African American. Additionally, 22.9% of the sample had attained a bachelor's degree or higher prior to service. Roberts (2010) examined participants' reported influence of a year of service on their intentions to use the Segal Education Award and motivation to attend college. She also inquired about participants' perception of the non-monetary value of earning a college degree, as well as if they felt earning a college degree would help them obtain employment. Surveys were administered before and after a year of service. Roberts (2010) reported the majority of participants reported high levels of motivation to attend college, use the Segal Education Award, and perceived values in earning a college degree prior to serving. Therefore, the only significant differences identified by the researcher indicated participants were more likely to use the Segal Education Award, and first year ARM AmeriCorps members increased their perceived non-monetary benefits of a college degree. The study provided an example of a diverse sample of AmeriCorps volunteers taking a gap year being motivated to use their Segal Education Award and valuing the benefits of a postsecondary degree.

The City Year organization has also conducted research specific to alumni outcomes. Anderson and Fabiano (2007) obtained 2,189 completed surveys by mail and conducted 6 focus groups with alumni who had served at some point between 1988 and 2003. Researchers investigated members motivations for serving, experiences, and long-term outcomes on a variety of measures. The sample provided a diverse set of participants in terms of gender, race, and prior educational attainment. A total of 46% participants identified as male and 54% female. Additionally, 46% of the sample identified as White, 29% Black, 13% Hispanic, 29% Black,

13% Hispanic, 5% Asian, 1% Native American, and 7% other. Finally, in terms of the highest level of education attained prior to service, nearly half of the sample indicated a GED or high school diploma, 26% some college, and 17% held a bachelor's degree. Focus group findings indicated the majority of alumni joined City Year "at a crossroads in their lives" (Anderson & Fabiano, 2007, p. 17). Alumni reported a lack of motivation or direction in the traditional educational setting leading them to look at other options. Following their experience in City Year, 81% of members indicated they attended additional education. Researchers also found that alumni who entered the program with less education were more likely to seek it following a year of service. A total of 35% of alumni with a bachelor's degree, 41% of alumni with some college, and 83% with a GED or high school diploma prior to service attended further education. Overall, City Year alumni reported being satisfied, challenged, and changed in a variety of ways as a result of their service experience. The researchers measured civic participation and social capital, which demonstrated positive significant differences when compared to matched samples of the national population. These findings were consistent regardless of participants race, prior education, and year of service.

More recent data obtained on AmeriCorps alumni has also not allowed for a quasi-experimental research design. The information published still provided a window into AmeriCorps members' profiles, experiences, and long-term outcomes. Cardazone et al. (2015) administered a survey to a stratified random sample of AmeriCorps members in AmeriCorps\*NCCC, AmeriCorps\*VISTA, and AmeriCorps\*State and National who had served in 2004, 2009, or 2012. A total of 1,468 usable survey responses were obtained. The sample was comprised predominately of White, women who had not received any forms of welfare or public assistance prior to service. Findings indicated that AmeriCorps members program affiliation or



type of service had little impact on the four key measures of interest: career oriented soft skills, career pathways, sense of community, and civic engagement. Most survey participants reported their service experiences improved all of these outcomes. Researchers also used a regression analysis to control for AmeriCorps members who had served without having previously obtained a four-year degree. The results indicated these individuals would be more likely to encourage civic engagement among others and use their Segal Education Award to pay for college following their terms of service. The vast majority of AmeriCorps members used their Segal Education Award to repay student loans (48%) or attend graduate school (25%). Researchers concluded that satisfaction with the service experience was a critical predictor to the long-term outcomes of interest in the study, and that most AmeriCorps members found their experience to be meaningful and satisfying.

Another alumni study of a similar nature yielded more positive results a year later. Friedman et al. (2016) obtained 3,772 completed surveys from alumni who had served in 2005, 2010, and 2013, across all three programs. Participants reported increased levels of civic engagement, a sense of community where they resided at the time, cultural competence, and self-efficacy following their service years. These findings were most pronounced in the AmeriCorps\*NCCC cohort when comparing outcomes by program. A substantial majority of participants indicated high levels of satisfaction with their service experience and reported feeling as though they had made a positive impact while serving. The study did provide more information regarding postsecondary degree attainment. First, approximately one half of the sample had obtained a 4-year degree prior to serving, and 5% had obtained a graduate degree. The AmeriCorps\*NCCC sample was most heavily comprised of individuals who had not obtained a 4-year degree (56%), and 30% of this group had indicated their highest level of

education was a high school degree or less. Further, 38% of participants had obtained a graduate or professional degree and 41% of participants obtained a four-year degree. Young participants in the sample reported higher levels of current enrollment in higher education, too. The researchers concluded a substantial portion of AmeriCorps participants were more educated than their parents and the general US population.

Still, many questions remained regarding postsecondary educational enrollments and outcomes for AmeriCorps alumni. CNCS contracted with Abts Associates to further investigate using the same database provided for the previous study conducted by Friedman et al. (2016). A stratified random sample of 3,150 AmeriCorps alumni was pulled from the existing database which contained 79,346 members who had served in 2005, 2010, 2013. Zeidenberg et al. (2016) partnered with the National Student Clearing House to better understand enrollment patterns and the highest level of degree attainment. Findings indicated that an estimated 58.7% enrolled in or after their exit year in the AmeriCorps program. Enrollment patterns were further explained based on educational level prior to service. A total of 54.8% of AmeriCorps members with a bachelor's degree prior to service enrolled in a postsecondary institution within a year of exiting the program. Results were similar when comparing enrollments rates for alumni with a high school degree or equivalent (49%), some college (69%), or an associate's degree (53.4%). Further analysis demonstrated a substantial drop-off in terms of highest degree obtained based on prior education level. For example, for alumni in the sample who had only obtained a high school degree or equivalent prior to serving, only 2.4% had earned a bachelor's degree. The same analysis revealed 22.6% of individuals with an associate degree, and 21.6% of individuals with some college, earned a bachelor's degree after their service year. The authors noted several

limitations that likely under-reported educational achievements for AmeriCorps alumni such as FERPA blocks, incomplete data, and current enrollment of the latest cohort.

The more recent academic literature specific to AmeriCorps members motivations and experiences have been qualitative studies. Ceresola conducted in-depth interviews with 22 AmeriCorps members following a year of service. It was unclear whether each member had earned a four-year degree prior to serving; however, all individuals in his sample indicated a college major and ages ranged from 21-23. The findings related to this research project addressed three different series of research questions that were published as different studies. First, Ceresola (2015a) found that 16 out of 22 members joined AmeriCorps in need of work, and altruistic motivations were largely secondary except for 2 individuals who were from lower income households. He also found that members did not develop a strong identity with the AmeriCorps organization, but members' individual service identity was reinforced leading many choosing to serve another term due to stronger altruistic motivations. The collective identity formed among members was related to hardships endured specific to the monetary compensation provided. Specifically, the majority of participants disassociated with internalizing a poor identity by making jokes about their lack of income while using food stamps (Ceresola, 2015b). Further, participants referred to their experience living below the poverty line as an achievement that allowed them to better relate to others moving forward.

Finally, Ceresola (2018) delineated between the motivations and experiences of members of different social class backgrounds. He found that AmeriCorps members from middle to upper class backgrounds reported difficulties connecting to the service population, and that they were more prone to referring to the resume building aspect of the experience as a benefit upon reflection. In comparison, those from a lower income household often referred to their

backgrounds as a tool that allowed them to connect more effectively with the service population. These participants expressed more stress related to concerns for their service populations and were less inclined to mention the resume building effect the experience would provide them moving forward as a primary benefit. Members of a lower-income background often referred to personal growth and relationships with others as the more valuable benefits of the service experience. Although it is unlikely any of the AmeriCorps members in the study would be considered on a gap year, the findings related to Ceresola's work (2015a; 2015b; 2018) as the first to provide a detailed analysis of how one's social class background can impact the motivations and experiences of AmeriCorps members.

In addition, two more recent dissertations incorporating qualitative data investigating the AmeriCorps experience should be considered. Both studies were doctoral student research published in a dissertations format that explored aspects the AmeriCorps member experience through City Year organization. First, Lopez (2019) conducted a mixed-methods study at two different research sites in western states to investigate members perceptions of the communities they served at low-income schools. A total of 85 members were surveyed, 11 members were interviewed, along with 2 training directors at the service sites. The sample population was 56.5% White, 20% Asian, 13% Hispanic, and 13% African American. Additionally, prior to serving in City Year, 76.5% of the sample had earned a bachelor's degree. Members reported learning predominantly through informal experiences at the school sites and in local communities. Qualitative data supported service experiences incorporated a sense of culture shock for some members. Further, members and staff also demonstrated an emphasis was placed on self-reflection to develop and/or maintain a service mindset that was mindful of privilege and culture. Lopez (2019) emphasized members supported the need for ongoing training throughout

the service year that would involve local community members to deal with the challenges associated with serving impoverished communities.

Sekerak (2020) explored the lived experience of City Year alumni through the lens of transformational learning theory. This phenomenological qualitative study investigated disorienting dilemmas identified by participants during their service year and the impacts that followed. The sample consisted of 9, White individuals who identified as middle-class. Seven of the nine participants had attained a bachelor's degree prior to service, and service years ranged from 1997-1998 to 2017-2018. Participants identified aspects of the experience that initiated a transformation, and the following themes were generated as a result: City Year culture and training, relationships with students and Corps members, the nature and difficulty of the program, and time changed feelings on experience. Data supported the idea that each participant had undergone a transformational learning experience. Consistent throughout many of these themes was the challenging aspects of the service experience, rooted in working long hours and exposure to inequities associated with race, class, and education. Sererak (2020) argued that the structure of City Year's program offered consistent opportunities for deep self-reflection that led to substantial personal and professional growth in a variety of ways. She concluded by recommending that future research be conducted to better understand how alumni from a different social class, and/or more familiar with the service population's culture, experience City Year.

## **J. Literature Review Summary**

Gap years have emerged as an international phenomenon over the past two decades. The historical roots of the modern-day gap year have been tied to the UK, given its history of young, male, elites embarking on a Grand Tour in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as part of their transition to adulthood

(Mead, 1914; Simpson, 2004a; Heath, 2007). Jones (2004) issued a report for the UK Department of Education and Skills, which defined 11 gap year typologies. The majority of typologies, and the scholarship that followed, focused on motivations and outcomes associated with gap years taken in relation to enrolling in a college. The increased prevalence of taking pre-university gap years has been documented in the UK (Heath, 2007; Crawford & Cribb, 2012) and Australia (Curtis, 2014). There are also strong indicators that taking a gap year in the US has become more prevalent with the emergence of colleges adopting gap year friendly admission policies, and the development of entities such as the Gap Year Association in 2012, Service Year Alliance in 2016, and the Gap Year Consortium in 2018.

Attempting to quantify the prevalence of pre-university gap years in the US is challenging. Research spanning more than three decades has examined delayed enrollment patterns and outcomes in higher education. Analyses of national data sets demonstrated 10-17% of entrants delayed entry into college (Hearn, 1992; Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Ingels et al., 2012; Hoe, 2014). Consensus within this line of research is that delaying enrollment to college is not beneficial to the student because it decreases the likelihood of attending a college or earning a bachelor's degree (Hearn, 1992; Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Niu & Tienda, 2013). The concerns regarding delayed enrollment were further compounded when studies repeatedly demonstrated it was associated with lower academic performance in high school, lower levels of parental education, and lower SES backgrounds (Horn et al., 2005; Goldrick-Rab & Han, 2011; Ingels et al. 2012; Hoe, 2014). In comparison, a GYA alumni survey in 2015 demonstrated that most participants were from middle to upper-class backgrounds and reported earning relatively high grades in high school. One set of US scholars raised concerns about the glorification of the gap year in the media given the barriers that existed for underrepresented populations (Goldrick-Rab

& Han, 2011). Similar concerns with social class and the gap year have been raised by scholars in the UK (Simpson, 2004a; Heath 2007; Ansell, 2008).

Multiple studies overseas have also examined background factors and higher education outcomes for pre-university gap year students. Similar to the US, multiple studies in the UK and Australia have demonstrated pre-university gap year students are more likely to achieve lower grades in secondary school (Birch & Miller, 2007; Martin 2010; Curtis et al., 2012; Crawford & Cribb, 2012). Additionally, Martin (2010) found pre-university gappers experienced an enhanced motivation to perform well academically upon entry into college, and Birch and Miller (2007) showed a significant positive difference in academic performance in the first year of enrollment between gappers and immediate enrollers. Researchers in Australia and the UK noted increased academic performance in college among pre-university gappers with lower academic credentials upon enrollment, but none of these reached the level of statistical significance (Crawford & Cribb, 2012, Curtis, 2014). There have also been multiple studies that have demonstrated pre-university gappers experienced a perceived and actual lifetime earnings penalty (Holmlund et al, 2008; Crawford & Cribb, 2012; Parker et al., 2015). In summary, the quantitative studies examining 1-year delayed entry in other countries were more effective at isolating the population of interest, but no consensus has been identified in terms of how this impacted higher education outcomes.

The qualitative research exploring gap years was much more extensive. Twenty different qualitative studies out of five different countries provided clear themes associated with participants' gap year motivations, experiences, and reflections. Scholars identified key motivating factors included wanting to take a break from traditional education due to burnout (Jones, 2004; Coetzee & Bester, 2009; Neiman, 2013; Hoe, 2014; Vogt, 2018), develop new

skills (Soderman & Snead; O'Shea, 2011; Haigler & Nelson, 2013), and experience personal growth (Griffin, 2013; Wu et. al, 2015). Altruistic motivations were also identified, but often as a component to the other themes identified (Jones, 2004; Soderman & Snead, 2008; O'Shea, 2011). It is also important to note the gap year studies specific to the US have highlighted the importance of family support in making the decision, and most of these participants accepted and/or deferred enrollment to a university prior to embarking on their journey (Hoe, 2014; Tenser 2015; Guidi, 2018). Themes were also identified in the literature across a variety of experiences investigated. Specifically, participants consistently reported being pushed out of their comfort zones (Bagnolia, 2009; O'Shea, 2011; Johan 2014), developing deep relationships (Hoe, 2014; Tenser, 2015), and personal reflection (Flowers, 2015; Guidi, 2018). Finally, gap year participants consistently reported experiencing substantial growth in areas such as identity, interpersonal skills, and life skills (Stehlik, 2010; King, 2011, Hoe, 2014; Johan 2014; Rabie & Naidoo, 2016; Guidi, 2018), as well as clarity surrounding career and values (Coetzee & Bester, 2009; Nieman, 2013; O'Shea, 2011; Flowers, 2015). Clearly, gap year participants have found these experiences rewarding, but such experiences have not gone without facing their fair share of criticism.

As the literature on gap year experiences developed, so did a focus on a growing industry defined as volunteer tourism (Wearing, 2001). Scholars have specifically outlined concerns regarding the exploitation of citizens in Third World countries to accommodate the growing demand for prospective gappers (Callahan & Thomas, 2005; Guttentag, 2009). Additionally, scholars have also argued that no research exists exploring the impact on the local communities that these international volunteer experiences have claimed to have served (Lyons et al., 2012). Such experiences have been shown to be more common among affluent gap year participants in



the UK (Jones, 2004; Heath 2007). As such, several gap year scholars have argued that much of the reported personal growth referred to by gap year alumni has been at the expense of underserved communities, and it has exacerbated stereotypes that exist in the privileged population able to afford such experiences (Simpson, 2004a; Heath, 2007; Griffin, 2013; Snee, 2013; Snee, 2014). Given these concerns, it was apparent that gap year experiences have the potential to do more harm than good and being mindful of the impact gap year experiences have on others should be considered.

The final section of the literature review explored the evolution of public policy specific to national domestic civic service in the US. An in-depth analysis of the politics and external events that led to the current program known as AmeriCorps was provided. The program was developed as a result of the passage of National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993 (Serve America, 1993) under President Bill Clinton. The passage of the Edward Kennedy Serve America Act in 2009 supported its expansion, but political dynamics have stalled implementation of such changes. Each year, 75,000 AmeriCorps members serve in a diverse array of experiences dependent upon partnerships at the federal, state, and local level. For each year of service, AmeriCorps members are given the option of choosing a cash stipend or a Segal Education Award. This award is equivalent to the Pell grant, and it could be put towards the cost of tuition and/or student loans (Fountain & Overbay, 2021). AmeriCorps has provided over \$4,000,000,000 in Segal Education Awards since the policy's inception (AmeriCorps, n.d.-a). Although the term gap year is not prevalent in the literature, research related to motivations and outcomes of AmeriCorps members were reviewed.

A substantial amount of research related to AmeriCorps members motivation was conducted soon after the policy was enacted. Early research related to motivations suggested the

college-aged population would be motivated by a combination of factors to better themselves and help others (Serow, 1995; Mesch et al. 1998). Additionally, the Segal Education Award has been identified as a top motivating factor by AmeriCorps members in retrospect (Yamaguchi et al., 2008), particularly for underrepresented populations who had not previously attained a 4-year degree at the time of service (Roberts, 2010). Scholars also found that members' motivations could change throughout a year of service once such instrumental motivations were satisfied (Tschirhart et al., 2001). AmeriCorps members have also exhibited significant shifts in personal values as a result of their experience (Simon & Wang, 2002). Studies have repeatedly demonstrated that the service experience is often rewarding and beneficial to members (Perry et al., 1999; Cardazone et al., 2015; Friedman, et al. 2016). Long term outcomes associated with increased civic engagement behaviors, life skills, and increased social capital have been documented across multiple studies, too (Anderson & Fabiano, 2007; Yamaguchi et al., 2008; Flanagan, 2012; Ward 2013, Ward 2014; Hudson-Flege, 2018). Additionally, qualitative studies illustrated how social class background might impact members' experience and motivations (Ceresola 2015a; Ceresola 2018). More recent qualitative studies in City Year have reported undergoing life-changing experiences often encompassing culture shock, deep self-reflection, and close relationships (Lopez, 2019; Sekerak, 2020).

This review has identified several areas for future inquiry that have served as the basis of the study. First, gap year scholars have identified the need to explore different experiences to compare findings given this is a rather new phenomenon in the US (Guidi, 2018). Further, the vast majority of samples in the gap year literature have been comprised of predominately White-middle class participants, and the need for more gap years participants from diverse backgrounds has been echoed (O'Shea, 2013; Hoe, 2014; Sekarak, 2020). In addition, the AmeriCorps

member gap year experience has not been well-documented through qualitative inquiry. The literature suggested these AmeriCorps members are often the most diverse, and it is likely the Segal Education Award served as a strong motivating factor that had the potential to provide access to higher education (Anderson & Fabiano, 2007; Hudson-Flege, 2018). The study serves to shed light on the lived experiences of gap year participants within City Year AmeriCorps for these reasons.

### **Chapter III: Methodology**

Access to higher education has played a fundamental role in allowing US citizens to climb the socioeconomic ladder throughout history within the US. However, rising costs, dissipating state funding, and an increased reliance on federal student loans, have created a persistent problem for our society. Gap years via domestic civic service have often been debated as a policy alternative to help address this issue. This study aimed to explore the lived experience of a subset of City Year AmeriCorps members completing a year of service prior to earning a degree at a college or university. A specific focus of this investigation was to understand the Segal Education Award's impact, or lack thereof, on the motivations and experiences of City Year AmeriCorps members in making the decision to serve and/or seek a postsecondary education afterwards. This study builds upon qualitative scholarship which has explored gap year motivations and experiences by providing insight into a new subset of gappers – a need identified by several scholars (O'Shea, 2013; Hoe, 2014; Guidi, 2018). Further, domestic civic service scholarship has done little to provide insight into gappers' experiences within AmeriCorps, and the need for such qualitative inquiry has been noted (Hudson-Fledge, 2018). Provided the intent of the Edward Kennedy Service to America Act is, in part, to foster access to higher education for its service members, examining the effect of such experiences is critical.

This chapter will address the methodologies chosen to conduct this study. First, the research design will be reviewed, including a discussion regarding my interpretative framework, philosophical assumptions, and the type of qualitative study chosen. This will be followed by a description of the setting, sample selection, data collection, and data analysis methods, that were implemented. The chapter will conclude with a review of the steps taken to maintain proper ethical standards and a high degree of research validity while I conducted this research.

## **A. Research Paradigm and Philosophical Assumptions**

The design of this study was influenced by the research lens through which I view the world. A researcher's philosophy has been referred to as a paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Mertens, 2010; Maxwell, 2013) or an interpretive framework (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This became a focus as social scientists pushed back against the dominant philosophy within quantitative studies known as positivism (Mertens, 2010). The paradigm I most closely identify with is the constructivist paradigm first introduced by Guba and Lincoln (1989). Ascribing to a particular philosophy or paradigm has been a challenge for me as a researcher, and it appears I am not the only one. Gage (1989) even made his case for the pragmatic paradigm after recognizing what he coined the 'Paradigm Wars.' Nonetheless, my personal beliefs have heavily influenced my approach to this study; therefore, they are critical to make evident. The philosophical assumptions associated with the constructivist paradigm include a relativist ontology, subjectivist epistemology, hermeneutic methodology, and balanced axiology (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Each of these assumptions will be explored below.

A researcher's ontological philosophy "relates to the nature of reality and its characteristics" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 20). The relativist ontology adopted by the constructivist paradigm is rooted in the notion that there are multiple, socially constructed, realities (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). This assumption stems from the complexities of researching human behaviors, or the way we think and feel. Rather than presuming there is one objective reality that remains to be uncovered among participants, I believed each City Year AmeriCorps members would make different meanings of their experience based on their own socially constructed experiences. The intent of this inquiry was to identify common themes that describe how participants made meaning of this experience.

Epistemology refers to a researcher's set of assumptions related to how truth is uncovered. As such, a researcher's epistemological assumptions are heavily influenced by ontological assumptions and the basis of the research questions at hand. Qualitative researchers adopt epistemological assumptions that value a close relationship with participants, and they view the individual conducting the research as a critical instrument in the process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The subjectivist epistemology found within the constructive paradigm assumes "that an inquirer and the inquired-into are interlocked in such a way that the findings of an investigation are the *literal creation* of the inquiry process" (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 84). Fundamentally, I approached this study under the assumption the data uncovered would only be as accurate as my ability to build trusting relationships with willing participants. Further, I assumed that I would not effectively remove my own values or biases completely, but that I should do my best to account for them within the methodological design.

In addition, having adopted the social constructivist paradigm, the procedures I implemented within this study could be effectively classified as hermeneutic methodology (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). My relativist ontology and subjectivist epistemology have directly influenced the steps I put in place to uncover shared truths among participants. Hermeneutic methodology assumes that complex realities can be best understood through vigorously analyzing and synthesizing multiple sources of data (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). This methodology also assumes that research questions may be identified by the researcher as the study progresses, and that the basis of the inquiry will evolve from the "ground up" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 21). The procedures laid out in the following sections of this chapter will make such an approach evident in areas such as sampling, and the ways in which data is gathered and analyzed.

Finally, a researcher's axiological assumptions relate to the influence of one's values on the research project (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The social constructivist paradigm adopts a balanced axiology that is mindful of the influence of the researcher's values as well as the participants' values (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). This shift extends a researcher's role beyond remaining impartial and objective, and Guba and Lincoln (1989) laid out several steps researchers could take in order to effectively execute such an approach. Their original work challenged researchers to view participants with a level of empathy that was mindful of what stood to be gained or lost through uncovering the truth. By adopting a balanced axiology, I have been transparent and mindful of my personal values and biases. I was mindful of my social class, gender, age, and race, when I spoke to participants. I ensured the voices and lived experiences were recorded, analyzed, and synthesized, with the participants' feedback. Furthermore, I acknowledged City Year AmeriCorps as a key stakeholder throughout this endeavor and a balanced partnership was the most effective way to seek answers to these research questions.

## **B. A Qualitative Approach**

The purpose of qualitative research is to uncover, explore, and attempt to make meanings through the research of social problems in their natural settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research has many forms, and the purpose of a study will influence the approach used by the researcher. This study was focused specifically on the lived experiences of City Year AmeriCorps members completing a gap year. Such a study is best suited for a type of qualitative research known as phenomenology, which seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of a shared lived experience (Teherani et al., 2015). Before addressing the details of this qualitative phenomenological study, it is critical to note the philosophical roots of the term phenomenology. This term was introduced by the renowned German scholar, Edmund Husserl, in the early 20<sup>th</sup>

century (Beyer, 2020), and it is defined as “the study of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view” (Smith, 2018, p. 1). It is important to distinguish the fact that Husserl did not introduce phenomenology as a method of qualitative inquiry, but “as a *beginning* science” (1913/1982, p. 235). Fundamentally, Husserl (1913/1982) argued for a blended philosophical and scientific approach that recognized the conscious meaning making that occurs as a result of a lived experience. The key terms and concepts first introduced by Husserl led to the development of one of the most widely recognized forms of qualitative, phenomenological, methodologies today known as transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In his book, *Phenomenological Research Methods*, Moustakas (1994) provided a guide for qualitative researchers seeking to conduct research using transcendental phenomenology. A brief discussion of key concepts of this approach is critical because they influenced this research project’s interview questions and data analysis procedures. First, the idea of consciousness within this framework is known as intentionality. Moustakas (1994) explained “Intentionality refers to consciousness, to the internal experience of being conscious of something; thus the act of consciousness and the object of consciousness are internally related” (p. 28). Moustakas (1994) used Husserl’s framework to further breakdown the idea of intentionality into noematic and noetic experiences. Noematic experiences, later referred to as textural descriptions, are what is experienced. Noetic experiences, later referred to as structural descriptions, explain how such experiences are perceived by participants. Moustakas (1994) explained that transcendental phenomenology seeks to explore the interactive relationship between textural and structural descriptions to uncover the “invariant meanings” of an experience known as the essences (p. 51). It is through this perspective I designed a study to better understand the lived experiences of City



Year AmeriCorps members that completed a gap year. Before describing the procedures of this inquiry, it is critical to provide insight into the history and growth of the City Year organization, as well as a description of the site selection study.

### **C. Setting and Site Selection**

City Year was founded in 1988 by Alan Khazei and Michael Brown (Klau, 2012). As recent graduates of Harvard Law School, these two individuals turned down lucrative prospective careers to develop the non-profit organization in Boston, MA. Khazei (2010) chronicled the humble beginnings of City Year, which included scraping paint off the walls inside the original Boston headquarters building to make it presentable for then presidential candidate Bill Clinton's visit, as well as the ups and downs of challenging fundraising efforts focused on getting the organization off the ground. According to Khazei (2010), the 1988 summer pilot program engaged 50 service members, aged 17-21, who were paid \$100 per week and provided a \$500 scholarship at completion of the program. More than thirty years after its inception, City Year has grown into one of the most well recognized AmeriCorps programs in the country, and it has served as a model program for policymakers to refer to while advocating for national service funding and legislation (Bass, 2013; Khazei, 2010).

After engaging in a variety of service projects for more than a decade, City Year leadership made the decision to focus all efforts where the perceived impact was greatest – impoverished school districts experiencing high dropout rates (Khazei, 2010). In 2005, City Year established the “Whole School Whole Child” (WSWC) service model which placed teams of City Year AmeriCorps members with partnering schools (City Year, 2018, p. 14). This model has City Year AmeriCorps members serve as “Academic Success Coaches” mentoring students inside and outside of the classroom for students between the third and ninth grades (City Year,

2018, p. 7). Each team of City Year AmeriCorps members at a given school, ranging from eight to twenty, is supported by a full-time City Year Impact Manager. The WSCS service model focuses on enhancing the social, emotional, and academic development of students, and recent research supports the notion the time students spend with City Year AmeriCorps members significantly enhanced these competencies as well as their academic performance (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2020). Schools that have partnered with City Year have also demonstrated significant increases within their student populations on state level Math and English Language Arts assessments when compared to their peers that have not adopted the program (Meredith & Anderson, 2015).

The success experienced by City Year implementing the WSWC service model has allowed it to expand a great deal since 2005 through a combination of public and private funding. City Year's budget consisted of \$174,368,771 in revenue in 2020, with \$45,286,375 being provided through grants from CNCS (City Year, 2020a). With the vast majority of resources being put towards program services, City Year AmeriCorps members serve school districts in 29 cities in 21 different states (City year, n.d.-a). There are also affiliate locations in Johannesburg, South Africa, and London, England, that were established in 2005 and 2010, respectively (Klau, 2012). City Year (2018) plans to continue to expand its service by increasing the number of AmeriCorps members serving each year to 4,000-6,000 and establish new locations in 5-10 cities by 2023.

The City Year AmeriCorps members' experience is heavily influenced by the organization's leadership model known as the "Flame of Idealism" (Klau, 2012, p. 412). This model is focused on providing City Year AmeriCorps members the opportunity to engage in civic service, build their civic capacity, and explore the civic identity, all while taking part in

activities and traditions that define the City Year culture (Klau, 2012). The curriculum designed to enhance City Year AmeriCorps members' development is known as the Idealist Journey, which fosters reflection on "... purpose, meaning-making, and development" (Klau, 2012, p. 413). Today, more than 3,000 City Year AmeriCorps members serve each year, and City Year boasts an alumni network of over 35,000 individuals (City Year, 2020b). This alumni network has utilized over \$150,000,000 in funding through the Segal Education Award following their terms of service (City Year, 2019). This has facilitated access to higher education for a significant amount of first-generation college graduates, with 25% of all City Year alumni identifying as such (Copeland & Raynor, 2018).

A critical component to City Year's future involves recruiting and supporting service members completing a gap year. The organization has a long history of coveting a young, diverse pool of service members (Khazie, 2010), and that is still true today. All City Year AmeriCorps members must be between the ages of 18 to 25. The most recent City Year alumni survey obtained 4,453 responses, and 45% identified as a person of color (2020b). City Year is also one of the only AmeriCorps\*State and National organizations that markets directly to prospective pre-university gappers (Dempsey, 2021). The composition of service members that have not completed a bachelor's degree varies a great deal by site (A. Allen, personal communication, January 10, 2020). This factor played an integral role in identifying an ideal site location for this study.

### ***City Year Jacksonville***

All sample participants within this study have completed their year of service in Jacksonville, FL. This is the twelfth largest city in the US, with a population of 949,611 according to the most recent US Census Bureau report conducted in 2020 (Frey, 2021). The city

of Jacksonville is unique in that it technically spans a total of 874 square miles in northeast Florida, making it the largest city by land area in the continental US (Downtown Investment Authority & Downtown Jacksonville, 2021). This substantial footprint was the result of residents of both the city of Jacksonville and Duval County, FL, voting in favor of consolidating into one government entity in 1968 (Bliss, 2018). The original 30-mile square mile region that comprised the city of Jacksonville at the time of this consolidation is often referred to as the “urban core,” which is marked by more traditional street patterns and less of a suburban feel (Delaney, 2018). This region has experienced a significant amount of economic growth in recent decades, particularly in the downtown area of the city. A total of 603,734 citizens currently reside within a ten-mile radius of the city, and billions of dollars’ worth of development projects in office space, residences, and hotels have recently been touted by city officials (Downtown Investment Authority & Downtown Jacksonville, 2021).

The City Year Jacksonville location was first established in 2013, and it has experienced considerable growth since its’ inception (E. Keeney, personal communication, September 15, 2021). Today, the City Year Jacksonville location serves a total of 11 schools in Duval County, and they are all clustered close together near the urban core (City Year, n.d.-b). Partnering schools at this location are predominately elementary schools, but middle schools and high schools utilize City Year AmeriCorps members, too. The positive impact City Year has had across many schools nationwide has been demonstrated within Jacksonville as well. City Year has reported positive impacts among Duval County students working directly with City Year AmeriCorps members in areas such as English Language Arts, Math, school attendance, and socio-emotional competencies (City Year, 2021). Annually, City Year Jacksonville recruits approximately 100 first-year City Year AmeriCorps members, and roughly 10-15 of those

members are returning for a second year of service. However, this location had experienced challenges in recruitment during the pandemic, and the number of City Year AmeriCorps members serving in Jacksonville were well below these goals during this time (A. Bauman, personal communication, November 22, 2022).

#### **D. Sampling Procedures**

Phenomenological researchers must obtain participants that have experienced the phenomenon in question. This process is most commonly described as purposive sampling (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). These authors explained that a specific sample size is less of a concern for qualitative researchers, as long as the study focuses on obtaining an in-depth, multitude of perspectives, focused on the research questions. To emphasize this point, Creswell and Poth (2018), suggested an ideal sample size for phenomenological study ranges from five to twenty-five participants. Furthermore, US-based research studies that utilized similar qualitative methodologies exploring gap year experiences ranged from seven to twelve participants (Flowers, 2015; Tenser 2015; Guidi 2018). My goal was to obtain a sample size of eight to ten participants that met a specific set of criteria, also known as a criterion sample (Miles & Huberman, 1994). First, participants had to have completed their gap year within the past four years to ensure their experiences are relatively fresh in their minds. Second, all participants have completed a full year of service within City Year. Third, none of the participants had obtained a bachelor's degree prior to their year of service. Finally, all participants agreed to participate in the study having been provided no form of monetary compensation.

The recruitment of the sample for this study was conducted by City Year. I had no prior affiliation with this organization or AmeriCorps. This lack of connection with the organization required that I reach out via email and phone to City Year staff to explain my goals for this study

and inquire about the possibility of conducting it. Individuals who provide access to sample participants of interest in qualitative research are often referred to as gatekeepers (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Carl and Ravitch (2016) explained the need for researchers and gatekeepers to develop relationships rooted in a reciprocity that is mindful of the extra time and effort the organization devotes to such a project without jeopardizing the researcher's ability to seek and report valid findings. To illustrate this point, I was only able to obtain the sample of participants needed to conduct this study because of City Year staff members' efforts to connect me with participants. Prior to this recruitment effort, I met with multiple staff members to share my hope for a diverse set of participants in terms of race, gender, SES, etc. due to the identified need in the literature. City Year staff were willing to meet, identify a site location that could best fit these needs, and agreed to provide a sample of participants. However, given this sample was not recruited randomly, and participants were vetted by City Year staff prior to introducing me to them, this is a limitation to the study that is worth noting.

#### **E. Ethical Considerations**

The research procedures outlined below were approved by the University of Arkansas Institutional Review Board (IRB). This entity is responsible for overseeing all human research subjects at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, and it is bound by federal, state, and institutional policies, developed to ensure the safety of all research participants.

#### **F. Research Procedures**

This section outlines each step of the data collection procedures implemented once I was provided the names and contact information of each research participant by City Year.

### ***Step One – Initial Contact and Informed Consent***

First, I reached out to each potential participant via email thanking them for expressing interest in participating in the study (Appendix B). This message included an attached document that provided a detailed description of the research project and requested they email me back to confirm their willingness to participate in the study (Appendix C). Once I received this confirmation, I set up an initial interview via the Zoom application.

### ***Step Two – Preparation for Participant Interviews***

I familiarized myself with the Zoom software to minimize any technical difficulties prior to engaging in meetings with each participant. This included becoming acclimated with the option to derive a transcript and recording of each interview with participants. Additionally, prior to each interview, I wrote an analytic memo, which is described by Saldaña (2016) as “... a place to “dump your brain” about the participants, phenomenon, or process under investigation” (p. 44). Saldaña (2016) explained that analytical memos should be written for a variety of purposes such as reflecting on emerging themes, coding decisions, problems, or ethical dilemmas within the study, and much more. Personally, I wrote analytic memos throughout the research process, but the analytic memos I wrote prior to conducting interviews focused on what is known as the Epoché within transcendental phenomenology.

The term Epoché, as it applies to transcendental phenomenology, was first introduced by Husserl in 1906 (Beyer, 2020). Epoché is a Greek word meaning “stay away from or abstain” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). Engaging in the Epoché process requires the researcher to bracket any assumptions or biases prior to engaging in the research. Memos of this nature have been recognized as a common practice within phenomenological studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Moustakas (1994) spent a great deal of time explaining the difficulties engaging in the Epoché

process effectively, and he emphasized its importance by listing it as the first step in conducting transcendental phenomenology. Moustakas (1994) acknowledged that not all biases are completely able to be removed by the researcher but emphasized the importance of engaging in the process to be “ready to perceive and know a phenomenon from its appearance and presence” (p. 89). It is for this reason that I devoted an analytic memo to this process prior to engaging in each interview with a participant. I also address my role within the research in Section H of this chapter.

### ***Step three - Interviews***

Participant interviews are considered the most common and effective research instrument in phenomenological studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All interviews for this study were completed using the Zoom application. This application is well-recognized as an effective tool to utilize within qualitative research considering its user-friendly features, security options, and proven track-record in allowing researchers to build rapport with participants (Archibald et al., 2019). Prior to recording the interview, I referred to the informed consent form (Appendix C) that has already been sent to the participant and obtained verbal confirmation they were willing to participate in the study after answering any questions. Once the participants agreed to engage in the research process, I began recording the interview via Zoom. I conducted 45–75-minute semi-structured interviews using the Interview Protocol form (Appendix D). Semi-structured interviews ensured each participant was asked the same basic questions and allowed for me to probe as necessary to develop a deeper understanding of each contextualized experience (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). I developed the questions using the “General Interview Guide” provided by Moustakas (1994, p. 117). The focus of this approach is to develop deep textural and structural descriptions of the phenomena. The probing prompts listed under each primary question in



Appendix D were based on relevant literature related to gap years (Hoe, 2014; Flowers, 2015; Guidi; 2018) and the City Year experience specifically (Sekerak; 2020). My approach throughout the interview process was guided by the practices outlined in “Table 5.2 – Advice Before, During, and After Interviews” (Ravitch & Carl, 2006, p. 136-137). Key points of emphasis throughout this guidance include clear communication, reflective listening, discretely writing notes, maintaining eye contact, time checks, and leaving time at the end of the session for follow up discussion.

#### ***Step four – Follow Up***

At the conclusion of each interview, I set aside approximately 30 minutes to review the field notes I took during the interview and wrote a more comprehensive set of field notes regarding the interaction that just occurred. Saldaña (2016) explained that field notes are different than analytic memos in that they are focused primarily on the researcher’s observation of their interaction with the participant. These documents attempted to capture what I perceived to be points of emphasis from the participants’ perspectives and they were considered an important way to triangulate data later on in the research process. A full transcript of the recorded interview was obtained via Zoom. I reviewed each interview to verify the accuracy of each transcript and make edits as needed. Once an accurate copy of the transcript was developed, a copy was sent to the participant for review and comments (Appendix E). Participants had the opportunity to clarify statements, add additional information, and/or request a follow up meeting. After approval from each participant, I assigned pseudonyms and made redactions as needed to maintain the confidentiality of each participants’ identity. Recordings of each interview were maintained on a password-protected, personal, computer and deleted once the participant verified the interview transcript. All interview transcripts, field notes, and analytic memos were also stored in a file on

my password-protected, personal computer. These files were referred to in the data analysis stage of the research process and deleted at the conclusion of the project.

### **G. Data Analysis**

A distinguishing characteristic of transcendental phenomenology, as compared to hermeneutic phenomenology, is that data analysis and findings are rooted in the text derived from participant interviews rather than a researcher's interpretation of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Neubauer et al., 2019). As such, an emphasis is placed on pulling direct excerpts from the data to develop and support findings at the stage of data analysis (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). Moustakas (1994) originally outlined a series of steps researchers should implement which I relied on heavily in this process.

As described previously, the first step whenever conducting a transcendental phenomenology study is entering the Epoché process. Moustakas (1994) explained entering this state of mind prepares a researcher to conduct phenomenological reduction. The purpose of phenomenological reduction is to uncover the structural description of the experience. Moustakas (1994) explained the first step in phenomenological reduction is horizontalization. This is facilitated by listing all significant statements in no particular order and treating them as though they have equal value. Moustakas (1994) explained "Each horizon as it comes into our conscious experience is the grounding or condition of the phenomena that gives it a distinctive character" (p. 95). At this point, statements that are overlapping or unrelated to the research questions are removed, and the researcher is left with distinct horizons, or themes, that define the textural experience of the phenomena. The final step in phenomenological reduction is describing a composite textural description of the lived experiences of participants.

The next step in the process of analyzing the data is known imaginative variation. This stage is focused on describing the meaning-making that occurred for participants as a result of the experience. Moustakas (1994) explained “The aim is to arrive at a structural description of the experience, the underlying and precipitating factors that account for what is being experienced; in other words, the “how” that speaks to conditions that illuminate the “what” of experience” (p. 98). Through this lens, I considered structural themes that could best describe the context of participants’ experiences as a result of their shared textural experiences. These themes were derived directly from data obtained in interviews as well, and a composite structural description was provided.

Throughout the process of developing themes, and composite textural and structural experiences, I referred to my observational field notes to triangulate potential findings. The final stage of transcendental phenomenology is capturing the essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). This is achieved by synthesizing the textural and structural descriptions into a thorough description that captures what would be considered universally experienced among all participants. I used an external peer reviewer that is familiar with the transcendental phenomenological method of data analysis to confirm my findings were accurate given the level of judgement that was required within this process.

It should be noted that I did not utilize any qualitative software program for this analysis. Creswell and Poth (2018) do not consider such software a necessity unless a researcher obtains over 500 pages of interview transcripts, and I did not eclipse that number. The learning curve often experienced in familiarizing oneself with new software did not appear to be worth the time.

## **H. Role of the Researcher**

As clearly articulated by seminal works already cited in this chapter (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Moustakas, 1994), I had to remain cognizant of my background characteristics, experiences, and biases throughout this research project. In terms of entering the Epoché process, this is a state of mind that I was constantly working to reach through analytic memos and reflections with peers and mentors. I did not have direct experience serving within City Year AmeriCorps; however, I have served as a mentor for students within higher education in various capacities for over ten years. This experience has deeply embedded the perspective that serving others has a reciprocal effect. These mentoring relationships have also engrained in me a persistent belief that higher education has become too costly for prospective students to enter without a plan and a demeanor that is resilient and adaptable. These perspectives have pushed me to seek public policy alternatives that address both issues. My personal biases towards service and higher education posed a risk to the validity of this research. For these reasons, I continuously attempted to enter a state of mind that sought to understand the experience from the participants' perspective and bracketing my biases or assumptions throughout. I was also cognizant of the fact that I was in a position of power as the researcher, and my gender and race only exacerbate this dynamic within that setting. As a result, I recognized that I must be intentional about checking in with participants throughout the interview process, focus on building rapport, and listen intently.

## **I. Trustworthiness**

The quality of a research project using this methodology can be assessed through the components of trustworthiness; specifically, credibility, transferability, dependability, and

confirmability (Guba, 1981). Below I apply these components to the design of this study considering the approaches I implemented as a researcher.

Credibility is the one of the most important components of trustworthiness in a qualitative study (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Credibility refers to “...establishing the match between the constructed realities of respondents (or stakeholders) and those realities as represented by the evaluator and attributed to various stakeholders” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 237). Credibility assumes issues the real world cannot be isolated, and a strong research design accounts for multiple factors influencing the phenomena of interest (Guba, 1981). To account for this, I developed a research design that triangulated multiple sources of data through in-depth interviews and observational field notes. I also spent a significant amount of time with City Year staff learning about the culture and leadership model implemented at the site location. Finally, I utilized built-in member checks that asked participants to verify the information they provided. Triangulation of data, prolonged engagement with the site location, and member checks are all considered critical aspects of a research design to ensure credibility (Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2004; Cope, 2014).

Transferability refers to whether or not the findings in this study are generalizable to other contexts outside of the research setting (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). This is not necessarily achievable in qualitative research because it is not the focus. However, to provide the reader with context, the most effective way to ensure the applicability of transferability is through providing rich, thick descriptions of the phenomena of interest (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). This information was obtained through the interviews with participants. Additionally, I have provided a detailed description of the boundaries of the study in terms of the site location, criterion sampling procedures, and data collection methods.

Dependability refers to the logic behind the research methods implemented (Ravitch and Carl, 2016). Clearly, researchers using qualitative methods must adapt within an emergent design and use judgment when identifying themes in the data analysis stage. The dependability of a study is improved when such decisions are outlined and reported (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Shenton, 2004). Throughout this process, such decisions were explored and analyzed through analytic memos. Additionally, I continuously sought assistance and guidance from my dissertation advisor, committee members, and peers with research experience using qualitative methods. Furthermore, any changes to the design, or judgments I made in the data analysis stage, have been fully articulated for the reader.

Finally, confirmability refers to the objectivity of the findings presented (Connelly, 2016). This was evident through the continual practice of entering the Epoché process to attempt to remove all my biases prior to engaging in the research process. Furthermore, I recruited a peer external auditor reviewed my data analysis decisions who is familiar with the transcendental phenomenological methods explained by Moustakas (1994). This was also further enhanced by the triangulation of multiple data sources, and detailed quotes that exemplify how I arrived at my findings.

## **J. Chapter Summary**

This chapter provided an overview of a research proposal to explore the lived experience of City Year AmeriCorps members having completed a gap year within the organization. The research design used a transcendental phenomenological approach outlined by Moustakas (1994), and this is recognized as one of predominant phenomenological methodologies today (Creswell & Poth, 2018). An overview of the City Year AmeriCorps organization was provided, and the site location from which the sample pool of eight to ten participants were recruited was

identified. This research design was approved by the University of Arkansas' IRB. The primary form of data collection was through semi-structured interviews using the Zoom application. A detailed description of methods and analysis was also provided to ensure the study's trustworthiness.

## **Chapter IV. Results**

Access and persistence in higher education remains the primary vehicle for citizens in the US to find jobs that provide financial stability and climb the socioeconomic ladder. One of the main purposes of the Edward Kennedy Service to America Act is to foster access to higher education by awarding AmeriCorps members who completed a year of domestic civic service with the Segal Education Award. This study investigated the lived experience of a subset of AmeriCorps members; specifically, individuals who completed a gap year in the City Year AmeriCorps program. An emphasis was placed on better understanding the Segal Education Award's influence on the decision to serve in City Year AmeriCorps and/or enroll in a postsecondary institution following service. The purpose for conducting the study was to understand how this policy impacted the behaviors and perceptions of these AmeriCorps members using the theoretical framework known as Political Feedback Theory (PFT). This framework focuses on how a policy's resource effects and interpretive effects influence citizens.

This chapter presented a review of the findings of the study. First, a summary of the study provided an outline of the purpose, significance, and design. Next, data collection results were reviewed. The data analysis section included the processes used to analyze the data and findings. The results were then addressed by each research question, and the chapter is concluded with a summary of the findings.

### **A. Summary of Study**

The current funding model for higher education impacts individuals from a lower SES-levels disproportionately. The value of a college degree has led to a model in which the burden of paying for higher education has been shifted primarily to the consumer, and the increased reliance on the federal student loan system has led to ballooning student debt that attracts the



attention of prospective students, families, educators, and policymakers. This dynamic, coupled with the fact that a variety of other factors impact the return on investment of a particular degree (Carnevale et al. 2021), have led to a more cautioned approach to higher education, and an emerging concept known as the gap year has become mainstream. The purpose for conducting the study was to investigate the lived experiences of individuals who completed a gap year in the City Year AmeriCorps program. These experiences, as well as the Segal Education Awards that followed, were funded through the Edward Kennedy Service to America Act. A specific focus of the study was the effects of the resources provided by the policy, and the interpretations made by the citizens who experience it.

The study provides important data to better inform a variety of constituents. First, it provides students and families considering a gap year within City Year AmeriCorps valuable insights into the lived experience of participants; how the program works and what participants take away from this experience. This is of particular value to those individuals considering a gap year who cannot afford the high price tag often accompanied with gap year experiences in the private sector, and/or those wishing to serve in an organization with a proven track record of positive impacts in marginalized communities (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2020; Meredith & Anderson, 2015). Additionally, colleges and universities that are growing more accustomed to working with gap year students will also benefit in understanding these individuals' perspectives in terms of deferment policies, recruitment, support, and financial awards. Finally, the study fills voids that have been identified in the literature by other scholars in terms of the need to understand the perspectives of a diverse pool of participants taking a gap year through domestic civic service (O'Shea 2014; Hoe, 2014, Sekerak, 2020), and the need to better understand the influence of

AmeriCorps members' service experiences as it relates to future educational pursuits (Hudson-Fledge, 2018).

Qualitative research was utilized to investigate the study's research questions. The specific type of qualitative research that influenced the design of the semi-structured interviews conducted is known as transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). This form of qualitative research seeks to uncover rich, textural, and structural descriptions of a specific lived experience. This allows for the chronological analysis of what and how the City Year AmeriCorps gap year experience occurred for participants. The interview protocol (Appendix D) consisted of one broad question meant to address a specific research question. Included under each broad question were probing prompts I utilized as needed within each interview. These questions were derived from the "General Interview Guide" outlined by Moustakas (1994, p. 117), as well as previous literature related to gap years and domestic civic service relevant to the research questions being explored. Prior to engaging in any interviews with participants, I conducted a practice interview with a full-time City Year staff member who also provided feedback which led to minor adjustments. Once the final interview guide was completed, City Year AmeriCorps assisted in the recruitment of participants based on the criteria I had identified, and I was able to begin engaging with participants.

Once I was provided the name and contact information of a potential participant, I sent an email providing more information about the study (Appendix B) with an attached online consent form (Appendix C). I also directly contacted potential participants via voice call or text message using a mobile number they provided City Year AmeriCorps at the time they expressed interest in participating in the study. All interviews were conducted virtually and transcribed. I developed a deep familiarity with the data by repetitively reviewing each recorded interview, updating field

notes, and drafting memos. To analyze the data, I initially identified every meaning unit for each interview. I labeled each meaning unit with a specific code and identified which research question(s) it addressed as I added it to an Excel database. Once all meaning units were identified, I used the initial codes I had developed to create clusters that related to emerging themes that addressed a specific research question. Each theme used within the findings was triangulated with my field notes, memos following interviews, and the data itself. Further information regarding the themes identified for each research question have been provided in Section C of this chapter; specifically, I addressed the number of initial codes, clusters, and themes, identified after analyzing the data. As a result, the study provides an in-depth analysis of the lived experience of City Year AmeriCorps members who completed a gap year in Jacksonville, Florida, and the effects of the policy that helped shaped them.

## **B. Data Collection Results**

City Year AmeriCorps staff assisted me in recruiting a total of 8 participants for the study. Seven of the 8 interviews were conducted using Zoom, and 1 interview was conducted using Microsoft Teams due to technical difficulties the participant experienced when attempting to use the Zoom application. Prior to recording each interview, I obtained verbal consent to proceed and asked each participant to come up with a pseudonym to protect their identity. The duration of each interview ranged from 45-75 minutes. Each interview was recorded onto a personal, password-protected, cloud account, and a rough transcription of the conversation was provided using features made available by the software program. After completing an interview, I watched the recording of it and made edits to the transcription as needed. A copy of the draft of the transcript was sent to each participant providing them an opportunity to add content and verify its accuracy (Appendix E). Verification by participant was provided electronically by each

participant. Finally, after a transcript was verified, I rewatched the interview again and made updates to my field notes for that interview. At this point, I deleted the interview from the cloud storage in compliance with institutional IRB regulations. The following table provides more information specific to each participant within the sample:

**Table 2.**  
**Summary of Participants**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Prior Education</b>	<b>Service Year(s)</b>
<b>Cassie</b>	20	White	Female	HS Diploma	2020-2021
<b>Robert</b>	21	Black/AA	Male	HS Diploma	2019-2020; 2020-2021
<b>Sunflower</b>	22	Black/AA	Female	HS Diploma	2020-2021
<b>Dez</b>	19	Black/AA	Male	HS Diploma	2021-2022
<b>Kayla</b>	24	Black/AA	Female	Some College	2019-2020; 2020-2021
<b>Suzy</b>	21	Black/AA	Female	HS Diploma	2021-2022
<b>Victoria</b>	20	Black/AA	Female	HS Diploma	2020-2021
<b>Kelli</b>	26	Black/AA	Female	Some College	2019-2020; 2020-2021

*Note.* The abbreviation ‘AA’ represents African American, and the abbreviation ‘HS’ represents high school.

### **C. Data Analysis**

*Research Question One: How did City Year alumni describe their rationale for choosing to pursue a gap year, and what did they believe motivated them to do this through the City Year program?*

The interview protocol utilized in the study investigated this research question at the beginning to allow for a chronological analysis of the lived experience to be explored. After obtaining verbal consent and asking several short-answer questions to glean the information outlined for Table 2, I asked participants to share their experience in choosing a gap year through City Year. Probing questions were used to encourage participants to consider factors related to their values, circumstances, and motivations. A substantial amount of time was spent exploring

this question because it was often the time in which rapport was built with participants. Following the completion of each interview, I drafted a memo highlighting the aspects of the interview that stood out to me. I also rewatched each interview and updated my field notes throughout that process. Once each transcript was verified by the participants, I went through each transcript identifying the meaning units that addressed each research question. Meaning units were selected based on the text, the context of the conversation, and the emphasis added by participants. I labeled each meaning unit with an initial code based on my familiarity with the data. After initial codes were identified, they were condensed into clusters, and ultimately, the themes were explored by research question and have been presented in this section. Coding decisions and themes were developed with the assistance of an external auditor familiar with transcendental phenomenology. For research question one, there were 15 initial codes across all meaning units identified which were condensed to 10 clusters. In the end, these clusters were applied to two themes: Seeking Meaningful Change and Family Input. These themes have been presented here through data derived from interviews with participants.

### **Theme One: Seeking Meaningful Change**

The basis for taking a gap year for all of the participants interviewed stemmed from wanting to change their current circumstances through meaningful experiences in City Year. The participants' circumstances have been presented first. Suzy explained, "I'm from like a small city, small county, and so it's like the same people, same stuff every day. I just needed something new." Sunflower shared, "I was actually working at this job doing insurance and ... umm ... it really wasn't where I wanted to be at. I previously interned with students before at a local community center and, I, you know, fell in love with it." Dez said, "So, I got an offer to play baseball and then, I like caught COVID. And I, like, lost all hope ...". Some participants

viewed their gap years as a necessary break before embarking on a college journey. Robert stated, “I kind of struggled a little bit in one of my high school years, as I was, like, I think I need to take a break from school ... I wanted to make sure that I’m ready, because I know college is much different than high school, and so I didn’t want to jump in and then fail at it.” Victoria completed a pre-university gap year, and she shared

So, it was a very academically rigorous college prep-type of high school, and I just spent, like the past four years just focusing on my academics and my work, and I decided that before I would want to continue with my education ... I should take a break and give myself some time to relax.

Cassie, another participant who completed pre-university gap year, had planned a full overseas gap year that included taking classes and foreign aid work; however, the COVID pandemic made those plans impossible to carry out. She explained

... City Year ended up being the only thing that was in-person, and a full year, and not something I had to pay to do, and it felt like a very secure option and also, like honestly, I do think there’s something to be said for the idea of taking a service year rather than a gap year.

Two other participants had actually endured difficult experiences while in college prior to completing their gap years. Kayla shared

While I was in college, like I said earlier, I did get really sick, so I had to take a break ... Before I transitioned into City Year, I was working like three jobs, trying to pay back financial aid, and all that stuff, so it was kind of like oh my gosh, at this point, I’m going to the military, because I don’t know what else to do .... You know, so I was like, I’m going to apply for City Year, if I don’t get accepted, then I’ll just go to the military.

Kelli struggled pursuing a major she felt she needed to get into law school. She explained,

So, I went in day of orientation like, okay, I’m declaring my major now, Political Science is what I’m going to do, and then maybe two or three years in, I’m just like, Political Science isn’t what I want to do. It’s not ... So, I kind of felt misled, and then disappointed at myself, that I didn’t do my own research and just took, you know, word of mouth. And then also, on top of that, it was starting to become a financial burden on me.

Kelli ended up moving away from home to nanny for a family member for six months, and she was referred to City Year by a friend. She stated

And I was like, oh, wow, well this ... I mean, it seems okay to me, it seems like something, you know, I don't mind doing .... that's how I decided to take my gap year through City Year, as opposed to going back home and being with my family.

All of the participants seeking such changes perceived City Year as an opportunity to use their strengths to make a difference in their personal lives as well as the lives of others.

Several participants considered teaching as a viable career path, and City Year provided them the opportunity to explore it further. Cassie said, "I am a very good tutor." She went on to share, "... this is a way to kind of see if I would like that or not, because there's no way of knowing whether you'd like being an actual teacher until you're an actual teacher, but I figured that a teaching assistant in AmeriCorps will be pretty close." Three participants were originally from Jacksonville, FL, and their experiences with City Year as students inspired them to serve as well as consider education as a career field. Sunflower shared,

I had a City Year in my middle school, and I always thought, you know, the jackets were cool and just, you know working with students, that I always thought that was cool ... I always thought about it. It was something I always wanted to do.

Robert described his experience with City Year AmeriCorps members (referred to as 'City Year Corps members moving forward) at his middle school as influential. He stated,

... they were inspiring, you know, they had a fun, they were able to relate to us and things like that, and you know they just made sure that we were successful, whether they were required or whether we're on their focused lists or not, you know they still made us feel included.

Robert's experience led him to view education as a clear career path, "I will go to school for education, you know, or at least get my degree, get my certification for teacher." Dez, another Jacksonville native, described his decision to serve in City Year by saying,

I feel like it came from the City Year I had, basically, because she was that positive influence in my life. I grew up ... I didn't really have a lot of positive influences, and she was that influence that, like helped change me ... who I was, for the better.

This experience led Dez to consider teaching as a profession and City Year as an ideal environment to pay it forward

At first, I did want to be a teacher ... I always wanted to give students what I didn't have growing up, and I was that positive influence that looked like them in the school, like teaching them that you don't have to live like everybody else ... City Year would have fit right in with what I wanted to do, because it gave me that teaching experience.

Not all participants were considering City Year as a training ground for their future careers, though. Numerous participants made the decision to pursue a gap year based on previous life experiences and altruistic motives. Kayla shared

And prior to that I was really into community service and serving others, and I would go serve, you know the homeless on my free time, and even when I was in college for the first time ... so I always had a niche for giving back.

Suzy stated, "I like working for the community. Um, I did community service out here when I was in high school um ... for my church we did like soup banquets and stuff like that ... clothes banquets. So, I always liked helping other people." Kelli explained

... growing up, my mom, she did an in-home daycare, and so I was always like her 'big helper' .... And like in the church ... I was always seen as one of the leaders for the youth. And so, I think, just between those two things, that's what really drew me into – okay, well, you kind of already know what it's like to teach, not necessarily teach, but guide other people through things.

Finally, Victoria stated, "So, I was already doing like a very similar thing. It wasn't teaching per se, but I was working with kids in public schools, in marginalized communities, engaging with community members." She found her prior service work and City Year's approach to be inspiring, "... which is why I chose City Year over another community service program, because they do have a lot of like, engaging with the community, actually asking the community what it



is they want.” Indeed, the decision to take a gap year through City Year was defined by participants who were seeking meaningful change considering their current circumstances and perceiving the organization to be a platform that would allow them the opportunity to put their passion and experience to work.

### **Theme Two: Family Input**

Discussions with family members took place with each participant as the idea of serving in City Year became more realistic. For most participants, seeking family input resulted in parental guidance and support as they pursued the opportunity to do meaningful work. Victoria explained that her parents were supportive of her ambition to take a gap year based on a trust that she would pursue college afterward, but it was not until she found City Year that her dad became fully supportive,

My dad was a little on the fence. He was like pro, but just wasn't sure what it was I would be doing, whether or not I would be making productive use of my time during that, and so City Year was actually what convinced him completely, that, like, I can take a gap year because he knew that I would be doing something that was meaningful.

Cassie had always planned to take a gap year, but it was also clear to her that it would come with certain expectations:

My parents were very adamant that, and they didn't want me to do, like, the traveling backpacking thing um ... because they didn't feel that would actually change me as much ... not even change but impact my ... that it would impact my like, character, I guess, or maturity. I don't really know how to say this properly, but if you're gallivanting around Europe, even if, you know, you're living in hostels and working weird jobs, like, to get through that, you're still, at its core, you're still gallivanting around Europe for a couple of months, you know? Whereas something about the idea of national service, specifically, even though I know City Year is technically like AmeriCorps state or something like that it's still national service, you know ... um ... I think it's really important, and repeatedly, my dad has said, like if he had any boys, he would make them do two years in the military. But he's not going to make his girls do that, so I and I'm not going to touch that one with a ten-foot pole but um ... he ... my parents think that, you know, the idea of serving your country in some way is really important.

Other participants found supportive parents who played influential roles in their decisions to serve. Suzy shared, "... my mom ... she supports everything I do. So, she was all for it. She was like, if it makes you happy, then I'm happy." However, Suzy went on to share her mom had reservations about the original service site location she had selected,

... I was going to Miami. Um, I think she was kind of concerned because I don't know anybody in Miami, and it's very expensive. Florida in general is expensive. So yeah, then I had a visit in Jacksonville, and I was like, okay, they have a City Year out here in Jacksonville, and it's close to my aunt and uncle, and she was more comfortable with me doing that compared to me going somewhere where I wouldn't have anybody at all.

Sunflower stated, "They were very, very proud. They always knew I wanted to work with kids, and they felt like this would be something that will definitely just go ahead and get my career in education started." After having to take a break from college due to becoming ill, Kayla was struggling with the idea of returning to classes, and her mom suggested the idea of national service instead, "And then, it was really hard to kind of bounce back from that, and go right back to college, so my mom, she's an educator and she had a colleague that did AmeriCorps program ... she was like, hey, you should look into AmeriCorps." Kelli said,

... I mean being that I just stopped with going to college ... they were like ... well, you need to find something to do ... And then I was like, well, I mean here's City Year. It's something to do for the time being, and it's going to be ... you know, it's meaningful.

Family input did not result in support for all participants, though.

The 2 male participants originally from Jacksonville received a substantial amount of criticism from their family when they made the decision to serve. Both participants openly shared that their families did not have much financial stability growing up, and the fact that they would not be earning a substantial income created tension when making their decisions. Robert shared

... I think they were just looking more at the pay and what we have to deal with, and so, and I was telling them, I was like, yeah, we got to deal with it, but it's something I wanted to do, and so, if I keep doing what I'm supposed to do, I know that later down the line, there's bigger things to come.

Robert also received pushback when he made the decision to serve an additional year as a Service Leader,

A lot of people was ... was like, you know, well, you know you're not getting paid a lot and I don't why you still there, because you're not getting paid a lot ... and I was like, well, you know, I know I'm not getting paid a lot and I ain't went to school yet, but I mean it's ... it's the experience for me.

Dez experienced a similar pressure, but the conflict stemming from his decision to serve in City Year escalated much further:

My family ... like, they were not on board. They wanted me to like ... Okay, so this is how my family did ... they want me to live ... they want me to walk the way that they walk, basically like live the way they live ... And there was a point during the summer I had graduated, where they wanted me to work in a warehouse with them, and I was like I can't do that, like, I want to work with students, I want to help change like where we grew up ... like I can't do that. I just ... they was like ... okay well you can't live here, like you, basically can't live here, since you want to do stuff like that you can't live here, so I had to go live with my girlfriend and stuff like that.

### **Summary of Findings: Research Question One**

Two themes were identified in the data that addressed the participants' decision to take a gap year through City Year AmeriCorps: Seeking Meaningful Change and Family Input.

Regarding theme 1, all participants sought to change their current circumstances and experience meaningful change for themselves and others. Several participants wanted to take a break before seeking a degree, others needed a break after a difficult college experience, and others were only sure they needed to experience a completely different environment. Meaningful change to participants often involved motivations related to gaining career clarity and serving others utilizing skills sets they had acquired through previous experiences. In addition, all participants

received input from their family about their decision to serve. This input ranged from encouragement and guidance to criticism based on pressures to earn a higher income. Finally, the decision to serve City Year AmeriCorps was based on the positive difference participants anticipated making in their roles as Corps member, and the perceived benefits of the experience often shared by parents. These perceptions were predicated on previous experiences with the City Year program, or value placed in the idea of national service through the AmeriCorps in general. Therefore, the answer to this question is that participants rationalized their decision to take a gap year due to motivation to change their life circumstances and make a difference in the lives of others, and they perceived City Year AmeriCorps as program providing the platform to do so.

*Research Question Two: How did City Year alumni retrospectively describe their lived experiences during their gap year?*

The lived experience of participants was explored in sections 2 and 3 of the interview protocol (Appendix D). Transcendental phenomenology heavily influenced the development of these sections of the protocol. In section 2, I focused on obtaining rich, textural descriptions of the City Year AmeriCorps member experience. I utilized probing questions as needed to inquire about their experience in specific contexts such as training, community service, and the schools in which they served. I also used probing questions to better understand their living arrangements, day-to-day tasks, as well as relationships that were developed throughout their journeys. Once a strong understanding of what was experienced was developed, the interview transitioned to better understanding the structural descriptions that occurred as a result of the participants' experiences. Specifically, I asked participants to describe how this experience affected them, and I used probing questions to explore concepts related to personal changes,

beliefs, and future aspirations. Toward the conclusion of the interview, each participant was also asked if they had shared all that was significant to them about their City Year experience and if they had anything else to add. This protocol provided a deep understanding of each participant's lived experience and how it impacted them.

Once all interviews were complete, I followed the necessary steps outlined previously to develop an accurate transcript of each interview. After watching the interviews again and updating my field notes, I began combing through each transcript for meaning units. I labeled each meaning unit with an initial code based on my familiarity with the data, and I identified which research questions I felt it addressed. For Research Question 2, I identified a total of 27 initial codes which were condensed into 12 clusters. These clusters were then used to develop 3 themes: Relationships, Challenges, and Personal Growth. These themes were triangulated based on transcripts data, field notes, and the memorandums I drafted throughout the data collection process.

### **Theme One: Relationships**

The most dominant theme identified by participants when sharing their AmeriCorps member experiences was the development of deep, memorable, long-lasting, relationships. These relationships were cultivated in a culture that valued high energy, community, and diversity. This often-entailed unique practices such as staff gathering for 'morning circle' to check-in to get the day started, or the morning power greet, which is the practice of City Year Corps members lining up and participating in a chant to welcome students to school each day. Victoria shared

City Year is very much, very involved, very much focused on building a community within the team members, so we would do morning circle, and we would talk about our day. And so, they're very high energy, very close nit.

Robert shared

... we would power greet every morning, greet the kids ... if we were not there, the kids would be like, why y'all ain't out there? Where were y'all all? Why weren't you all power greeting? But then, when we do it, they'd be like, oh my gosh, why am I doing this ... so it's like ... y'all gotta choose one or the other.

Kayla explained further how she felt the energy and traditions of City Year fostered the welcoming culture,

It just has a nice aura. I love, I don't know who came up with power chanting and how things are orchestrated, but I love it and um ... circling. I just love it because it ... it kind of touches on ... like hey, we care about you, we know ... it is ... I feel like my voice is heard, my feelings matter, when things, like we have circle, like you know, two joys and a ripple and things like that, like ... I really enjoyed that. I'm just like, I've never been in a job where that was important, and people take the time out to listen, and I really, really, loved it.

This feeling of being valued was expressed through Corps members appreciation for how diversity was celebrated within the culture, too. Suzy shared, "I just know City Year was very accepting of anybody, they respected anybody's pronouns, anybody's race, ethnicity, all that. So, I really liked that." Sunflower stated, "The culture is like no other. Everybody's family ... everybody, you know, talks with each other, and everybody works as a team ... everybody has a part and a say so and that's what I liked." Dez described the culture as "phenomenal" and explained, "Like they seek anyone's and everyone's best interest at heart, no matter what it is, no matter what they came from, they like DO NOT let your past define who you are ... like at all ... and that what I like about City Year." Kelli, after having served two different years of service within City Year, said

The overall culture of City Year? I don't even ... let me find the right word because it's so ... it's an amazing culture ... the overall culture of City Year is inclusive, right? So, it's inclusive, it's inviting, it's impactful, in every single way. I didn't mention this, but there were students who, I felt like had an impact on my life. Yes, I knew I was gonna be able to impact them in some ways, I never thought it was going to be vice versa, where I had students impact me as well. So, it's literally impactful in every single aspect. It's inclusive in every single way. I

mean, at City Year they welcome any and everyone. And there's like ... I don't know ... it's really just like ... it's hard to explain, but it's easy to explain at the same time. It's just something that's so different, but it's a good different. It's like what ... I feel like it's what the world needs. It's just that, it's literally that great. I really fell in love with City Year, and in this mission of, you know, making sure students are on track to graduate and being prepared for the outside world. And that's what I really loved about City Year is that we weren't just focused on academics. We were focused on their social-emotional growth.

This energetic, welcoming, culture helped foster an environment ripe for relationships between City Year Corps members. These relationships were highlighted by all participants as one of the most meaningful aspects of the experience. Dez shared, "... those five have made my whole City Year experience, like, worthwhile. There were times when I was like, dang, this is too hard, but they made those hard times a lot better." Robert stated, "With the team that I had it was amazing, because we all worked together, we all knew why we were there and that's something that City Year was big on knowing our why, why are we serving ..." Corps members referred to their team as family often when describing their relationships. Kelli said,

... If there was a day that I felt super down, didn't feel like actually being there, but I had to be there ... I wasn't there mentally, there was always someone that was just like: Are you okay? You can just take a moment, breath .... It was all so hard being that my family was hundreds of miles away, so for them to step in and step up to support me in that way, it really left a huge impact on me, which I never expected that at all – that I would actually find family within a job.

Kayla referred to a similar type of supportive environment

... my team, they were a huge impact on me my first year. They were awesome. They ... my team was so diverse. It was like one day, if I'm feeling kind of down, I had one teammate pick me up. If I saw a teammate down, I would pick them up. We're all so supportive of each other – it was like a little family.

Suzy explained, "They were like my only friends out in Jacksonville, so ... and then being able, like to talk to people, or just tell them like, how I was feeling throughout the day ... that means I am like, really comfortable with someone, like really comfortable with them." Victoria also expressed being close to her team when she said, "I love my team, too, which is one thing I am

so grateful for is that the other City Year members that were working with me in the school were also so great and incredible, and I still speak with them to this day.” It was commonplace for Corps members to mention staying in touch with other members after serving. Sunflower referred to the relationships she developed with fellow Corps members as being the highlight of her experience

I would say my team members. They stood out to me the most. I mean, you know, like we were with them like 10 hours a day, every day. So, we’ve all become really close. Some of them, I still, you know, keep up with and you know we check on each other. But just having like that brother-sister bond that ... that you know, that helped me a lot, too. I met some amazing people. You know they would go out of their way for me, they would be there for me like, you know, anything that I needed with my daughter. Yeah, I would say, just my team, you know my team members, they really stood out the most to me and just having a family, you know, at school made a difference. You know, just seeing them it made you also want to, you know, get up every day as well, because, you know, you had your team members depending on you.

Participants also consistently mentioned intense, memorable, relationships with their partner teachers and students in the schools in which they served. Cassie shared, “I love my partner teacher and I love my kids. I still text my partner teacher occasionally. I managed to build a relationship with every kid in my class in both of my classrooms.” Suzy recalled, “My partner teacher, love her. I still talk to her.” Suzy also stated, “Um ... the students ... loved the students. They loved us.” Dez stated,

Middle of the year ... like everybody, all the relationships got so much stronger with staff, teachers, principals, City Year, and students .... I was like connected with literally every single body at that school. There wasn’t a kid, a student name, I didn’t know, there wasn’t a teacher that I didn’t make laugh, there wasn’t a principal that didn’t like me ... I was just well connected with every single person in that school.

Kelli served two years in City Year. The COVID pandemic ended her first year abruptly to the extent she did not get to say goodbye to many of the students she was working with at the time. She recalled her experience reconnecting with her students the following year when classes



returned to in-person, “So it was very heartwarming. We weren’t supposed to be like hugging students just because, you know, we are in the middle of a pandemic, but I am just like, I can’t resist. I can’t resist the hug, I am here!” Victoria stated

I do miss the kids a lot, and I love them. I remember when I was leaving the last day of school, they had surprised me with a card that had things written on them, and I was literally in the car crying on the way home because I was like, I have to leave these kids behind, and that was really hard. But it was the most incredible experience ever.

Sunflower explained, “But just the experience and just learning from all the students and interacting with them, it was very rewarding to me.” Kayla shared that she was inspired to serve another year due, in part, to the relationships she developed with students in her first service year

and then seeing my students at the end, that was the biggest reward, the students at the end of the year, crying because they will not see you another year or get, you know, it was like man, I really made a difference in the students’ lives and I just thought that was so great ... like that feeling was so rewarding. I was like, I got to experience this all over again, like, I love this.

Robert, a Jacksonville native who was raised in a low-income household, found his passion for developing relationships with the students by considering what their lives were like outside of the school environment:

And I think, when we get in the roles of where we even start working with City Year, you just, all you want to do is just be with the kids, help them, be with them, you know, spend time with them while you have it, because you know, they leave you, and have to go back to, you know, an atmosphere that may not be as well for them, you know. They may get in arguments with their parents, or you know, just their lifestyle isn’t that great. So, you know, we try to make their time useful and happy while they are there, you know, so that even if they do leave, they can leave in a good mood and a happy mood, knowing that I have somebody that really cares.

## **Theme Two: Challenges**

The deep, meaningful, relationships mentioned by all Corps members as a result of their experiences were often coupled with a variety of challenges physically and emotionally. All

participants reported serving long hours. Participants reported waking up regularly before 6:00 a.m. to arrive at work on time and staying well after classes ended to support after school activities. Sunflower said, “I would wake up at 5:45 a.m. in the morning.” Dez recalled, “I would get up at 5:00 a.m.” Cassie stated, “I was at school from 7:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. most days.” Robert shared,

So we were, my first year of City Year, the school didn’t start at 9:00 o’clock. When ... didn’t start until 9:00, and so we had to be there at like 7:00 a.m. So, I was like, oh my gosh, and sometimes there were certain events, and then we will help out with certain events, with the school, we didn’t leave until after 7:00 p.m. ... a lot of days we did ... we did like 12, 13, 14-hour days.

The accumulation of long days and challenging responsibilities led participants to consider quitting, but most felt motivated to stay based on a sense of duty.

Attrition was a consistent topic among Corps members. Kelli took pride in the fact that her entire team stayed together throughout her first year of service, “we were the only team that had the full team from start to finish.” Cassie shared

... I’m really glad I did it ... even when I know there were times when I was not loving it while it was happening ... I am really glad I did it, and every time I was like ... I should quit. I would go in the next day, and I would have one interaction at least with a student that made me go, like, oh, like I can’t ever quit, like I need to ... I need to help these kids ... I need to finish out the year ... like I can’t let them down.

Sunflower said “You just have to, no matter what happens, like one day, you might wanna quit and say, you know what, I just can’t serve anymore, this is too much. You know, you might have a bad day, but you just have to keep going. You can’t give up because your students need you.”

Dez’ experienced challenges outside of work that had him consider quitting, “I’ve had a lot of low times during the school year, whether it was outside of City Year or inside of City Year. I’ve had like, I had a lot of family issues and stuff ... there were times I didn’t think I would complete the program, because of family issues.” Suzy shared that she contemplated leaving for similar

reasons, "... it was just, it was so much to it. I wasn't, like, leaving because of City Year. It was leaving because of the stuff I had going on outside of City Year, and I just wanted to go back home." Kayla served 2 years in City Year, with her second being as a Service Leader managing other Corps members, and she provided insight into the issues related to attrition that seemed to arise near the winter holiday season

I don't think they really understood what City Year was in full effect. A lot of the Corps members that I've encountered they got into it just to have money for school - there was no passion behind it, and I think that's where that divides people like me, I'm there to actually serve, and actually give back, whereas some people are just there for a purpose. I feel like the biggest thing, the complaints, I would say around that time would be, they don't like their partner teacher, the impact manager at the time was not the best, they would also be struggling with family issues back home, and they were like the support system emotionally for the family or anything like that, so it was different factors that played a key role, however, with City Year, at that point, you get kind of burnt out because it becomes repetitive. Um ... with Power Greeting in the morning, then you have to help with breakfast, depending on what your school wants you to do, you help with breakfast, or you do hallway duties. It becomes so repetitive you get worn out and then it's like, I need a break, I don't know what to do, like, I just want to break, I don't want to do this anymore ... and, honestly, because it's so repetitive, and then by that time ... um ... everything as far as paperwork with our binders, making sure we're meeting all, every one of the focuses lists, a new districts coming in, so it's like a whole lot of stress during that time, making sure, everything is met ... um ... and then hours. So many people call off around that time, like, no one ever wants to come or they're sick or they're dealing with roommate issues, it's just so much that happens in that time that it's like, I don't want to do City Year anymore. Like you just go to all, like, its ... it becomes too much, it really does, it's so repetitive, I mean you get tired of, you know, circling, and you know and then, on top of that, I think the biggest thing was, we have to stay later than teachers, so we're there an extra hour and a half after school and we're all burnt out from the day because the schools already end but let's be honest here, the kids are sometimes dealing with heavy issues that we... we take on and it becomes a lot with our students, because we care so much about our students and we get so attached in a way where it's ... oh my gosh ... you feel like you need to help, you feel like you know about resources, and when you're feeling like that for 10 plus students, it becomes really heavy on you and then you're dealing with ... huh ... where am I gonna lay my head? Do I have something to eat when I get off? Like it all comes in full effect around that time, it really does.

Kayla's observations highlighted several of the challenges noted by different participants further elaborated on in this section; specifically, emotionally challenging relationships and financial hardships. It should also be noted that all participants service years were impacted by the COVID pandemic, too, which appeared to exacerbate the conflicts and challenges that arose.

For 2 participants, the most challenging conflicts occurred with their impact managers, who were full-time City Year staff responsible for managing Corps members teams in a school. Cassie shared

One thing that stood out was my partner teacher told me in confidence that there was a student in the class that just tested positive for COVID, and I said to her, I was like .... I'm sorry but like ... I need to go then, like, I can't ... I can't be in this classroom because I've had an hour of contact with him yesterday and he's not in the classroom today, but I had an hour of contact with him yesterday. I can't be spreading that to the rest of the classroom. I need to go get tested. I'm going home to see my mom who's in chemo right now, this weekend, like I need to get some shit in order. And my partner teacher was upset about that but got over it quickly as a rational person would. My impact manager just freaked out over that.

Robert served as a Service Leader in his second year at City Year. In this role, Robert reported directly to an impact manager and led a Corps member team at a specific school. For Robert, conflict occurred when a different group of City Year Corps members from another elementary school joined the school in which he was serving. Ultimately, Robert made the decision to quit late in the spring of that semester. He stated

Yeah, it bothered me because, they knew why I was there, and they knew the passion that I had. But it's like, when you work under certain leadership you, you know, it's like either ... some people ... it's like it's either their way or the highway and it's like I can't ... I can't get with that.

Other areas of conflict also transpired within the classroom.

Multiple participants reported feeling conflicted about their responsibilities in the classroom. Kelli said, "... some teachers did take a little bit more advantage with their City Year

members by having them teach lessons to the classroom, which technically they're not supposed to do." Kayla shared that during her first year, there was a substantial amount of turnover at the partner teacher level in her classroom. Kayla ended up taking on a leadership role in the class that she found challenging

And I just felt obligated just because of the circumstances, so it was kind of ... it was hard to get through that and I became overwhelmed by it, because I was taking on responsibilities within the school, too. Um ... and in the classroom, there'd be times, I would just break down ... like I would .... I usually can, you know, be strong about it, but for some reason that first Corps year, it was tough.

Other participants mentioned their work with students to be stressful and challenging. Suzi explained, "... it's stressful when you want to help somebody and you don't know how to help that person, or they won't let you help them." Kelli stated

It really frustrated me that a lot of my students, ninth grade and tenth grades, they were reading on a third-grade level. A third/fourth grade level and I'm just like, this act, the no child left behind act, it's actually ... it's pushing us back more than ... it's harming more than it is helping.

Victoria served in a fifth-grade classroom during her service year, and she elaborated on similar challenges

So even though I knew, objectively, how to put together a lesson plan, how to tutor in a sense, it's a little bit different when you're dealing with kids one on one, when you're dealing with like, a mélange of different personalities, of different skill sets ... very, very, much different skill sets because of COVID. A lot of the students were just passed on into this ... well, actually, all of the students were just passed on to fifth grade, regardless of whether or not, they were ready for it. So, I remember I had some students who were literally learning how to add in a fifth-grade classroom, and some students who are learning about fractions and how to multiply three-digit numbers. So, all of these kids are being put together in one classroom, and you're trying to teach, and then it didn't help that we were hybrid. So, we had students in-person, and also students on the computer. So, the setup that we had was that my teacher had like a monitor, and so she was able to like, and she had ... I don't know if you've heard of an Elmo, but it's kind of like a little mini projector, so she could like, do the math problems on a piece of paper, and the projector would project it on the screen, so that the students virtually, and the students in-person, could see it. So, that was kind of the setup we had, so her job was mostly to focus on the students online if they had questions, and I was

focusing on the students in person if they had questions, and I was going around helping them. But again, it's like, completely different skill sets, like some students are struggling with the material because they don't understand multiplication. Some students just are missing a step, and it can be very frustrating to deal with that for them and for me. So, you can tell that they're frustrated with not understanding the material, I'm frustrated because I'm trying my best to explain it to them, and they're just like still, not getting it. But one of the best things that one of the students sent to me, that I still remember is that he said, Miss Victoria, which is what they call me ... they're like Miss Victoria, I just understand it so much better when you explain it, and that was just made my heart smile to know that I was actually helping them, even though I swear there would be some days where I feel so bad, because I'm so frustrated, and I know that hurts them, because it can be hard to take your own personal emotions out of it. I feel definitely, like, at age eighteen, that is like ... very ... like a thing that all teenagers are struggling with, is being able to take that personal emotion out of it. But I knew that, like they were still getting better, all of their test scores improved.

Another one of the most challenging components of the experience for Corps members was related to financial hardships. These challenges manifested themselves through participants' sharing their struggles to have their basic needs met. Sunflower, Robert, and Dez were all from Jacksonville, so their experienced looked different others'. When asked if the living stipend provided by City Year was a livable wage, Sunflower replied, "No." She went on to explain

I had a roommate who I'd met, I'd say like the year previous to me serving. Um ... but yeah it was pretty difficult just, you know the stipend and having to pay rent and, you know, food, and all that stuff, it was ... money was tight, but it definitely taught me how to budget.

Robert lived with his grandma and dad. He shared that it would have been very difficult to afford rent otherwise, "... you know, it's just like the way rent and things have been going up, you know, this ... yeah ... that wouldn't have been affordable at all. I'd probably have to have a whole village living with me just to make it happen." As stated earlier, Dez was forced to move out of his family's house based on his decision to serve in City Year and shared just how difficult it was to make ends meet

It is very expensive ... rent is ... my rent right now is \$1431. It is very ... very expensive out here. I could not do that on the stipend, and I had to pick up a second job. There's no way I could be living off of that. We made \$800, and my rent is \$1400, so there's no way I would've lived off of that.

Dez later share that he worked 20-30 hours per week at a fast-food restaurant while also working at City Year, "Weekends, evenings, and it was evening, like, I think, four days a week, I mean four days ... it was Tuesday, I mean Monday through Thursday, then I'd have my Friday off, and then Saturday and Sunday, I would work again."

Several other participants who were not from the area also struggled financially. Kelli had issues finding housing initially and stated, "It was so stressful, so I thought, like the moving stipend, I would get that, like, before I moved, so that was interesting to find out I wasn't getting that until like two weeks after." Kayla said

It wasn't enough to cover you know, housing or food or anything like that, and that was another thing the food... however, they did help with food stamps, but with that, it was a headache, it was a huge headache, in you had to wait for months and then I would say that was the biggest frustration out of City Year as a whole.

Finally, Suzy's biggest stressors were related to her financial situation, and she ended up trying to work multiple jobs to make ends meet

... towards the end, I did. I worked a hotel towards the end. I had three jobs. So, City Year, the hotel, and then I worked for Amazon. But the Amazon ... it got too stressful. It was like ... okay so City Year's from 7:30 a.m. – 5:30 p.m., and then my job at Amazon was like 6:00 p.m. all the way until 6:00 a.m. in the morning, so I couldn't handle that ... I stopped doing that.

The other 2 participants in the sample, Cassie and Victoria, did not endure financial hardships because they were supported substantially by their parents.

### **Theme Three: Personal Growth**

A tremendous sense of personal growth was reported by all participants after overcoming the challenges faced in their roles. These areas of growth included an increased level of patience,

empathy, maturity, self-confidence, and career clarity. Sunflower stated, "... it taught me how to be patient [with kids] ... you have to take your time ... be really delicate." Victoria said, "I think it's given me a lot of compassion and sympathy and patience. Patience is very much required when you're dealing with children." Robert shared, "It was, like you know, it helped me learn a lot of new patience for kids." Suzy noted,

Um ... it definitely opened my eyes. I guess, I look at people or I get to understand people before I judge them. I'm ... I don't really judge people, but you know, I learned how to work with different types of people and different backgrounds ... So, I'm not quick to judge someone's situation ... there was this one student he would act, like, there were a few students, that would act like, crazy. They, they were crazy. But then I learned, like what life was for them at home, like one of them was in the foster system, and the other was homeless. So, I was like, okay, maybe that's why they're acting the way they do in school and giving them such a hard time.

Kelli shared how her experiences with students changed her perspective:

I've had multiple walks with these students, and you know, they're telling me their life, you know, what's going on at home, and I feel like it just made me realize how different they look at the world, and how different I look at the world. It made me to be more grateful, more empathetic, of the way I was growing up, the way I was raised growing up. No, I wasn't in the richest family, no. But I was blessed to have two loving parents, loving, supporting parents, be able to go to school, and you know, they were able to provide a life for me. Some of these students, you know, they were struggling with their parents, struggling with light bills, keeping, you know things like the house together, and not knowing ... let me see ... not knowing all that's going on while you're doing these small groups with these students. They're not going to tell you this until they feel comfortable with you. So, I guess just seeing where they're coming from, their walk of life, it was just kind of eye-opening to me, and it just helped me feel more humble. It just kind of humbled me in a way. Um ... in a way, like ... yes, I complained about my childhood at times. Yes, I complained about opportunities that I had or didn't have, should I say. But it just, I feel like it helped me realize that there are people that are in worse situations.

This increased sense of self-awareness translated into an enhanced level of maturity and self-sufficiency. Kayla shared

I would say I grew up very quickly. I would say I definitely grew up. Um ... I ... my patience was tested. My grit was definitely tested ... um ... and my drive. I



knew I had some drive in me, but I didn't know, when you're in survival mode, you don't know what you can do, you know?

After having returned to college, Victoria perceived a lack of maturity among her peers

So, even though that transition was a little difficult at first, kind of navigating that feeling like there was an extra level of maturity above some of my peers who had just gotten out of high school, versus me already having been a year out, and then already having a year, in like, the real world. So, there was like an extra level of maturity, but I think for the most part it leveled out.

Cassie also found the transition to college different based on her City Year experience

I think that I became a lot more self-sufficient ... just by, like, I got to campus, and I didn't have to cook my own food and like, you know, there was a laundry machine in my building. Like all that stuff ... I was like wow ... like this is so easy, like, literally, even just not having to cook my own food was huge. Like, after a year of kind of living, I know, real life is not accurate, but it was, you know, felt like more like real life.

This self-sufficiency looked different for each participant, but it was clearly apparent for most.

Dez had not completed a year of college yet, but he was enrolled in his first semester at a

Historically Black College/University (HBCU), and he shared his experience with the transition

It has affected me, in like, the best ways. I've literally changed who I was as a person, like, completely. I did a full 180 of who I was as a person, completely. Like, this is, I've always been a youthful spirit ... spirit-filled person, but like, this experience like, just worked on me, like, I used to ... there's a lot of stuff that I used to do, like, that I just don't do now. Like, every other word out of my mouth used to be a cuss word, I never went to church, I never did any of that stuff, until like I got in this program and met those people, and like, it basically just taught me to just walk by faith basically. And like, just trust, and honor your God, and he always do, he will always come through. Like, no matter what the circumstances is ... so they taught me a lot. Like ... looking back at it, like ... I would not, I would not be here if it wasn't for them. Like, I would not be sitting in this dorm, like, right now, if it were not for them.

This stronger sense of maturation and self-sufficiency could be clearly attributed to, in part, participants' hard and soft skills. Kayla said

I would say the biggest thing City Year gave me was it helped me with the professional world. I started getting more acclimated with the small things, like

email deadlines, communication being a leader, so many things came at me at once. I look back, and I was like, you know what ... City Year really did help me.

Kelli shared, "Skill sets with my professionalism. I was always a professional person, but I feel like it helped enhance it. It helped me develop my speaking skills, my interview skills." Robert stated, "Team building for the most, like, one of the, that's one of the biggest things I learned in City Year." Sunflower explained, "I learned more professionalism from City Year, for sure.

They taught me a lot of different things, like how to properly write an email." Victoria noted, "And just like, I think it really helped with how I deal with and relate to people ... like conflict resolution skills, knowing how to talk to people through difficult problems, or how to relate to people. I think those are the skills sets I've gained." This level of self-improvement, coupled with overcoming the challenges that they faced, left participants with a solid sense of accomplishment and self-confidence moving forward. When I asked Dez if any of his personal belief had changed because of this experience he responded, "The biggest(??) one is believing in myself to do, like, a lot of stuff. Like I didn't think I could do a lot of stuff I am doing now."

Cassie shared

I learned how to do a year of something that I had been thinking about quitting sense, like, October, you know? I'd gone through that. Definitely, I think I gained some confidence because I know that I did a good job in something, and like it was very measurable, and I did a good job with it.

Sunflower stated, "It was a lot, but I did it. I was able to complete my full-service year, and I was just proud of that." Robert said

So, for me, it is just, it made me feel accomplished, I guess, in the area that I was in, just because, again, I tell people, I want to continue to be impactful for kids and so when I left, I know it made me ... I left knowing that I still helped, and I still make a difference in the kids' lives.

Kayla explained how her sense of accomplishment followed her home

And I would say, too, when it comes to the red jackets, like I honestly, didn't understand like how powerful us wearing those red jackets are. I ended up having a friend that was in City Year Chicago, and he was telling me, he was like, yeah, we, every time we walk in the city people were like ... oh my gosh that's City Year, that's City Year. Like, I feel like a celebrity, I'm not gonna lie. I honestly went back home, and I went into the store, and this man he was, maybe in his early 50s, he came up to me, and he's like, oh my gosh, your City Year, and I was like yeah. He was like oh ... when I was a little boy, I had a City Year and I loved them ... they were awesome, and he was like ... is it still around? I was like yeah, it's still around. He went on into a whole entire story about how he loves City Year, how his City Year person help him out with some life choices and whatnot ... and I was just like, dang, this definitely reaches beyond what I'm doing just by wearing the jacket ... so um I felt like a celebrity ... I was like okay, this is awesome ... So, yeah when I always say the red jacket, wearing the red jacket, I do definitely wear it with pride.

Finally, the experience of serving provided career clarity to most participants. Kelli stated, "I would say it affected me with helping me find my passion. I will definitely say that. Because, I mean, I always knew that I liked people, being around people, a people person, but I never knew how big of a scale I wanted to go. I never knew what that would actually look like." For most participants, the experience helped them clarify if the teaching profession was for them. Dez shared,

Okay, in fact, it like, in ways it changed what I wanted to do with my life. Like I said, I wanted to be a teacher and serve students. But now like, I want to be like a police officer and, like, serve everybody, instead of just serving students. I want to serve students, adults, elderly people ... like whatever it is, I can do to serve people in that way, I will do it.

Cassie said, "... it made me realize that I could be a teacher, maybe, like that might be a legitimate career path for me, but that I probably wouldn't do it in elementary school." Robert had a similar experience, "I have a better view on wanting to do, like elementary and high school, but middle ... I love middle. I would do middle all day love ... love me some middle school." Other participants found that the teaching profession was not for them. Suzy explained that she considered teaching toward the middle of her service year, but now feels like, "I don't

think I can be like that. I don't think I can be a full-time teacher." Victoria said, "I think it definitely showed me that I don't want to be a teacher." Kayla defined a different career path based on a newfound passion

After my two Corps years, I was like, oh my gosh, I want to work with kids. And then, now that I'm working at this nonprofit, now, this is really not my ... this is not my end all, be all. I actually want to be a psychiatrist. So, I was like, you know what, I want to work in pediatrics, I want to work with the kids, and City Year definitely geared my thoughts on ... okay, I actually enjoy working with kids.

This broad range of insights provide clarity on next steps for each participant.

### **Summary of Findings: Research Question Two**

Three themes were identified through the exploration of the lived experience of participants. The most dominant theme identified was Relationships. These were formed between participants and other Corps members, City Year staff, partner teachers, school staff, and students. The relationships developed were often maintained after their year(s) of service. The second theme identified was Challenges. Participants reported a wide variety of struggles inside and outside of their City Year experiences. Participants consistently recounted working 10-14-hour workdays, with responsibilities inside the classroom, as well as after school projects on weekdays and community service projects on weekends. These challenges were coupled with emotionally challenging experiences related to working with City Year staff, partner teachers, and students. Several Corps members also experienced financial difficulties related to housing and food. All of these challenges were also impacted by much of each participants' experience taking place during the COVID pandemic. The final theme identified was Personal Growth. Participants reported shifts in self-awareness, empathy towards others, maturity, self-confidence, interpersonal skills, intrapersonal skills, and career clarity. As a result, the answer to this question is that City Year AmeriCorps members viewed their experiences as life changing.

Members developed extensive, memorable, relationships, and experienced accelerated personal growth after overcoming a variety of challenges.

*Research Question Three: How did City Year alumni describe their perceptions of how the volunteer experience has shaped their personal beliefs about societal service roles and citizenship obligations?*

Participants were asked to explore whether their personal beliefs related to societal obligations and service shifted in any way following their experience in City Year. The answer to this question were derived from the broader answers related to question 3 on the interview protocol (Appendix D), as well as a probing question that I utilized if this topic was not addressed directly by each participant. The data compiled and analyzed related to this question was much less dense because of its specificity when compared to Research Questions 1 and 2. In total, there were 15 initial codes identified among all the meaning units that addressed this question at the beginning of the coding process. These codes were condensed into 4 different clusters, which led to the identification of 1 theme. The findings in this section were triangulated with the data obtained during interviews, field notes I maintained throughout the transcription process, and memos I drafted following each interview.

### **Theme One: Inspired to Continue Serving**

Participants reported a broad motivation to continue serving based on the value it provided to others as well as themselves. When asked whether the belief that she should serve others increased after her service year, Sunflower replied

Oh yes. It definitely increased. I mean you have to give back to your communities and your area; especially the ones that lack the materials. And it's just rewarding because just to know that you can make a difference in a child's life or someone's life by just being there or just showing an act of kindness. You know, it makes you feel really good about yourself, and it makes you feel like you are doing something right.

Robert was in the process of developing his own nonprofit mentoring organization based on his perceived value of service as a result of his City Year experience. He shared

So, it showed me where my heart is ... is to work with kids, whether it be in a program, whether it be in a school, which is why I'm pushing myself to go get my degree. Because I just want to continue to be impactful to kids, want to continue to pour into them even as they pour into me.

Suzy's experience led her to conclude serving society is a citizen's obligation

I think your service ... I think people should serve society. I think people should want to do stuff for their community. I am saying that about where I am from all the time. It's a small county. It's like two cities, but like we're basically like one city. But um ... I tell my mom, I'm like, there's so much potential out here, and if people would just stop robbing like, local businesses, or like, destroying businesses it could be so much more than what it was, and somehow, like, the community needs to come together, so this don't look like a dead town. It could look like something ... it's like we have like a black river landing thing, and people come to perform, and they could have like a whole bunch of people that come out here and perform. But it's just ... people don't ... make it look nice, or people ... but I think people should do stuff to better the community, even if they don't want to go out to a different state or City Year or stuff like that, they can start at home.

Most participants were more focused solely on continuing a path that incorporated service due to their altruistic values and the work they found so meaningful in City Year. Dez stated

Before, I didn't really, like I wanted to, but like, I didn't really know where to start ... if that makes sense? And City Year gave me that way to like ... they gave me that starting mark, and like, I'm not done, like, I'm not finished. Anywhere I go, like, I'm always trying to serve others, whether they're older than me, younger than me, it don't matter where it is ... I like, try my hardest to serve others because I feel like that's so important.

Following 2 years of service, Kayla currently works in a nonprofit organization that mentors youth. She viewed her decision to pursue a career in pediatric psychology as a way to continue to serve, "So, after working with my students in City Year, I was like, you know what, a lot of the kids I've served really do have some mental health issues, and the kids that I serve ... the stuff

that they're going through, I mean, I felt like they needed so much help.” She later stated, “So, City Year definitely helped with me making the decision on working in pediatrics. You know, it’s just, I was like, yeah, you know, I felt like I could do this if I can make a difference in that way.” Other participants were less sure about their career path but dedicated to the cause based on their experience. Cassie explained

Um ... I had already learned a lot about inequity in schools, and so I wasn't as surprised, as I think some people are when they like ... have such a drastically different like ... so some of the people I was working with had gone to schools exactly like the one we were in because they were from Jacksonville and all of that. Um ... but I know that, like my roommate was kind of shocked all of the time by things that she was seeing, and I didn't have that experience as much. Um, but I do think that I ... having now had that one ... having done City Year, I know that I, even if I don't professionally work in education, I'm going to have to continue to be volunteering time and resources to educational inequity. Um ... one of those things where like once you've seen it, you can't unsee it, and you can't do nothing about it. Even if I don't professionally do something about it, I am going to have to make that part of my life somehow.

Victoria also shared a similar sentiment

I always had a belief that my life should be dedicated to serving others. So, it didn't really change after City Year, but definitely reinforced it ... That that's what I'm supposed to be doing ... that this was, because, again, it was like one of the most incredible and rewarding experiences ever. So, it just kind of like reinforced the idea that this is definitely what I should be doing with my life is serving others.

### **Summary of Findings: Research Question Three**

Data obtained addressing this Research Question was identified with participants' answers to question 3 on the interview protocol (Appendix D). Probing questions were used if participants did not address this topic specifically within their general answer. One theme was identified which was Inspired to Continue Serving. It was very clear in the data that participants valued service after serving in City Year AmeriCorps. One participant spoke to the importance of others serving, while the majority of participants spoke to their devotion to continue to serve

in a volunteer or professional capacity. There was a strong consensus that participants' City Year experiences provided a critical platform to serve others, and it reinforced the altruistic motivations many shared prior to joining the organization. Therefore, the answer to this question is Corps members described their experiences as reinforcing their own altruistic motives, but rarely did this transfer to a broader consideration related to shared obligations to serve among citizens.

*Research Question Four: How did City Year alumni perceive and describe the influence of the Segal AmeriCorps Education Award on their decision to pursue a gap year and enroll in postsecondary education?*

The final research question was addressed specifically in section 4 of the interview protocol (Appendix D). At this point in each of the interviews, participants were asked to broadly describe what stood out to them about the Segal Education Award. I used probing questions as necessary to better understand the influence of the award on the decision to serve as well as its impact on future enrollment in college. Additionally, I often inquired about participants' experiences in City Year that may have impacted their plans after service, and their overall perception of higher education. There were 12 original codes assigned to each meaning unit that addressed the Research Question. Based on distinct patterns in the data, these codes were used to identify 3 themes: Minimal Influence, Access, and Appreciation. These themes were triangulated between transcripts, field notes, and memos, that were comprised throughout the research project.



## **Theme One: Minimal Influence**

For the majority of participants, the Segal Education Award did not influence their decision to serve in City Year AmeriCorps. Several participants indicated that they were not made aware of the award until after joining the program. Kelli shared

So, when I first heard it, I was like, what is that? [laughter] It's kind of like, okay, cool. I've never of heard of the Segal Education Award. I'm not even sure what that is, but doing more research even, honestly, even in my first year, or finishing my first year. It was ... what can I do with my Segal Education Award?

Suzi recalled, "I wasn't ... so the college part ... um, I really didn't know about the college part.

When I read stuff, I have to read it, like a thousand times to actually understand it. But so, I didn't know that they gave money for college, so that wasn't like a reason." Victoria explained

I actually didn't know about it until after I was in City Year. I guess I just skipped that part of the website, so I wasn't aware of it until the middle of the school year when they started talking about, again, like after City Year, and what you might do with your award, so it didn't influence my decision at all. I didn't know about it.

Several participants acknowledged that they were aware of the award, but it did not influence their decision to join City Year for different reasons. Sunflower indicated that her understanding of the award was minimal at the time she joined City Year, "I heard that they gave you school money, but I didn't know a lot about it." I asked Robert directly whether the award influenced his decision to serve, and he stated, "Nah ... it really didn't have too much of an influence when they said it. I was like, okay, that'd be helpful um ... I just knew I was that I just wanted to come to work." Finally, Cassie explained that funding her higher educational pursuits was not a concern for her, so the award had minimal influence, "... my parents are paying for college ... like I'm not ... like I'm so ... it wasn't much of an aspect of the decision or anything like that, it was a nice bonus ..." Cassie has been enrolled in an elite private college for over one year now, and she later stated, "I don't think ... I actually, I am not sure my parents even know

that I had that. Like, I probably told them, but I'm not sure they even parsed it, to be honest with you ...” While it was clear that the Segal Education Award did not influence the majority of participants’ decision to pursue a gap year, there were outliers who factored it into their decision a great deal.

### **Theme Two: Access**

Dez and Kayla both acknowledged that they viewed the Segal Education Award as a vehicle for access to higher education following their service years. Originally, Dez had planned to attend college through a baseball scholarship, but that did not happen after he became very ill due to COVID. He explained that he viewed the Segal Education Award as a primary source of funding his postsecondary education, “Yeah, I considered it. I thought about it a lot because I’m like ... I don’t have money for school ... like, I don’t have anything. Yeah, I don’t have one dollar for school, so this will help.” Kayla found herself in a different set of circumstances that made the Segal Education Award equally appealing to her. First, Kayla shared that she had attended college prior to serving and she faced an outstanding bill from that institution that was limiting her ability to transfer elsewhere. She shared

It was very stressful because I was in good academic standing, and I said, you know what, when I looked at the bill, it was literally over room and board, and I was so upset. I was like, a room and food are keeping me from pursuing my education.

When asked whether the Segal Education Award influenced her decision to serve in City Year AmeriCorps she responded, “It did because, honestly, the award was enough to pay for my institution I attended. So, I was like, yes that will be enough to help pay it off.” The recollections of these two participants were distinctly different than the other participants in the fact that it further compelled them to consider City Year AmeriCorps as a viable option to obtaining resources which would allow them to enroll at a university at a later date.

### **Theme Three: Appreciation**

The final theme generated from the data related to this Research Question was an appreciation for the Segal Education Award at the conclusion of their service year(s). Several participants felt as though it represented a sense of recognition for their service, and they appreciated the opportunities it represented for themselves and others moving forward. As noted previously, 2 participants had formally deferred enrollment to college and embarked on their pre-university gap years through City Year. Both of these participants had enrolled in those institutions after their service and shared their thoughts on the award. Cassie was appreciative of the award given its utility, “It paid for my room and board my first semester so huge shout out, I guess.” Victoria shared

I haven’t figured out how I’m going to use it yet. I, again, would most likely be going into like some kind of graduate school program, so I figured I would put it towards that. I guess I really don’t think about it too often, but it can definitely help out a lot of people, especially people who are dealing with, like a majority of Americans dealing with debt, from schooling and from education, and so having that award at the end of their service is definitely like ... it’s definitely an idea of recognition for what you did that I think is very important and incredible for them to have.

The feeling of appreciation for being recognized was also present for participants who had not yet enrolled in a postsecondary institution.

Suzy has not enrolled in college yet, as she is still considering different career paths, and she stated, “... City Year in general has helped me, like ... okay I know I want to go to college, and I have this money here, and I don’t want it to go to waste, so I need to figure out what I want to do.” Overall, Suzy shared very positive feelings towards the award

I think it’s a good thing. There’s a lot of people who do know what they want to go to school for, and, you know, student loans and all that stuff. So, I think it’s a really good idea that they give you money for doing something good in the community or somebody else’s community. So, I think its very, very convenient.

Robert was currently applying to colleges and universities at the time of his interview, and he shared his process of learning about the award and what it means to him

So, when I first heard it, I was like what the world is a Segal Award? I ain't never heard of that. But then, once they explained, and it was like you know it's money that we're getting, for you, know committing to a year of service. You know, I was like okay, well, I can use that to be able to help out with whatever, you know, when I decided to go to school. So, I think it's beneficial because yeah, a lot, a lot of people aren't there for the reward or the money. Because of, you know, you're not really making as much because this is a stipend, and you know you got to have roommates just to be able to you know pay for rent and all that stuff like that. And so, you know a lot of people is there because that's what they love to do, and so I believe that that's just, you know a token or a small token, you know, to show gratitude and appreciation for taking the time out to you know, be a help to a community where a lot of people aren't being a help.

Sunflower also had not enrolled in college after her service year because she was a young mom working 40 hours per week to make ends meet. She explained

... it was like a sense of relief for me to just know that's something I could use towards bettering my education because, you know, I don't necessarily come from a family who can like, you know, pay my way through college. So, just knowing that I could use this to better myself ... it's very ... well I've been using the word rewarding a lot, but that is very rewarding ... and it's still sitting there. I haven't touched it. Yeah, I haven't touched it. I know I have, like, 5 more years to use it, so I am gonna definitely put it to use. I just don't know what for exactly.

Kelli expressed the same sense of uncertainty regarding future plans, and she was unsure how she would use the award, too. Kelli shared

... well okay, well I have six years to use this award, what certificates do I want to get? Because, like I said earlier, I don't think ... well, I'm not one hundred percent sure if I'm going back to college to finish my degree ... I'm not sure if that what I want to do.

The other two participants had gained more career clarity and enrolled in college following service.

Dez was enrolled in his first year at an HBCU, and he said

Okay so it is very helpful. I am never gonna complain about free money, but I would say ... if they had the opportunity to like, raise it a bit more, because

there's a lot of stuff, like it will help for sure, but there's a lot of stuff people will want to do, that obviously they won't have ... like if they grew up like me, they won't have a lot of money to do it.

Finally, Kayla found out she was unable to use the Segal Education Award like she originally planned, so she completed community college coursework during her second year of service instead

I love it, and honestly, it helped me. Um ... I wasn't able to use my award to pay back the first institution I went to; however, I was able to pay out of pocket with my Segal Ed Award to take classes. So, I wasn't far behind, so I was able to use the award to kind of keep me going. And I eventually transferred to the university I am at now and here I am. So, the award is beneficial ... um it helped keep on with my college career. And, honestly, like I lost all hope before I did City Year, I was like, if I could not pay, I feel like I ... back home was hard for me to go back to school because I had to pay in order to get my transcript to go somewhere else so ... I like, when I got the award, I was like, oh my gosh, I could just pay for it out of pocket, I was so used to doing financial aid or loans ... so it all worked out.

#### **Summary of Findings: Research Question Four**

Three themes were identified in exploring the influence of the Segal Education Award in participants to decision to pursue a gap year and enroll in postsecondary education following service. The first theme identified was Minimal Influence. This theme emerged due to most participants reporting a lack of awareness of the Segal Education Award in its entirety, and others noted it was a nonfactor. Access was the second theme that recognized as a result of 2 participants having perceived the award as a primary source of funding for future educational pursuits. Finally, the third theme observed was Appreciation, because most participants were grateful for the award. They viewed it as a form of recognition for their service and appreciated its utility. For these reasons, the answer to this research question is that the Segal Education Award influenced a small number of participants in the decision-making process of choosing to take a gap year. Furthermore, the Segal Education Award did not result in immediate postsecondary enrollment following service for participants that lacked career clarity, but it was

evident they planned to use the award before it expired. The award was viewed as a valuable supplement to the pursuit of a degree by all other participants, and it's perceived value was dependent upon the personal, socioeconomic factors experienced by participants.

*Research Question Five: What is the potential public policy impact of gap year programs generally, and the federal Segal AmeriCorps Education Award program specifically?*

The Edward Kennedy Service to America Act that funds AmeriCorps was uniquely crafted to foster federal, state, local, and private partnerships. The decentralized nature of the policy requires significant coordination from all levels of government and investment from the private sector. This has the potential to create challenges and opportunities moving forward. In this section, relevant findings will be outlined that could impact public policies related to gap year programs and the Segal Education Award moving forward.

### **Relationships and Personal Growth**

All participants in the study reported developing meaningful, lifelong, relationships with peers, mentors, and youth. Additionally, it was evident participants experienced personal growth in areas such as maturity, empathy towards others, and self-confidence. The implications for public policy in the gap year sector were that such investments should continue to be made and expanded upon. These findings continue to support that positive gap year outcomes can be achieved through domestic civic service, and this program specifically also provided tangible, measurable, outcomes to the communities that it served. In essence, these findings should reinforce the notion that domestic civic service is a worthwhile investment for the public good. Federal policymakers should seek to expand such opportunities in AmeriCorps programs such as City Year or AmeriCorps\*NCCC. These opportunities represent valuable opportunities for all prospective individuals considering a gap year. This should also serve as a call to non-profit

organizations and private sector gap year organizations to measure the impacts of the service they provide to local communities, since it is now even more apparent gappers can benefit in conjunction with the communities they serve.

### **Lack of Awareness**

Participants in the study exhibited a general lack of awareness of AmeriCorps programs and the Segal Education Award. Only 1 participant even mentioned AmeriCorps State\*National, while the rest identified solely with the City Year organization. To an extent, this is to be expected considering the decentralized nature of AmeriCorps, and it has been a challenge for the organization throughout history (Bass, 2013). However, this lack of ‘brand’ recognition has negative implications for recruitment of prospective gap year participants, and it might also impact the transition college.

The Service Year Alliance has taken tangible steps to market and advertise gap year opportunities, but more work remains if the visibility and awareness of these programs is truly going to improve. Partnerships at the state and local level are much needed. High school and colleges should look to partner with organizations in AmeriCorps, such as City Year, and an open discussion about such opportunities should take place. Ideally, high school guidance counselors could feel confident speaking to graduating seniors and their families about the opportunities available in AmeriCorps. Additionally, higher education professionals in financial aid offices, career centers, and academic advising units could prove to be critical touchpoints in this area, too. This could not be more apparent regarding the institutional matching program related to the Segal Education Award. While over 300 institutions of higher education provide some form of assistance or match to AmeriCorps alumni who have earned Segal Education Award, there is still room for growth, and it would improve the visibility of the AmeriCorps

programs in general. Despite multiple professional development sessions focused on next steps after City Year, not a single participant in the study was aware that there were institutions that matched the award.

### **Socioeconomic Factors**

The final policy implications that will be reviewed in this section are based on participants' struggles financially during their years of service. Multiple participants from lower SES backgrounds reported struggling to have their basic needs met, and some worked additional jobs that proved to be challenging. Additionally, the issue of attrition in AmeriCorps was raised by several participants and these were contributing factors. The living stipend is not dictated by City Year AmeriCorps. From a policy perspective, federal lawmakers might review the mechanics of the calculation of the living stipend for all AmeriCorps programs and how an increased cost of living is factored into areas that are experiencing substantial growth. In addition, government officials at the state and local levels might work together to offer living quarters on a college campus based on need. Without a policy response, the current living stipend disproportionately impacts those from lower SES backgrounds and increases the risk of attrition in City Year, which places the communities that are served at risk of experiencing more hardships.

Federal policymakers could also consider changes to the Segal Education Award. Although all participants appreciated the Segal Education Award, its impact was tempered by the socioeconomic background of each individual. Essentially, individuals from a higher SES reported a minimal effect, and individuals from a lower SES reported feeling limited in terms of enrollment options following service. Policy options that could be considered to minimize this impact are removing the government's taxation of the award as income when it is used. Further,



policymakers might consider removing the active balance requirement that mandates the award be put towards student loans or educational costs acquired after service. This limits the use of the award for a student who stopped out of college after incurring the costs of enrollment and it has the potential to negatively impact degree attainment.

#### **D. Chapter Summary**

The chapter provided a review of the data obtained through semi-structured interviews with 8 participants who completed a gap year through City Year AmeriCorps. Themes were developed based on a triangulation of data points, and they were explored by research question. Overall, the participants in the study reported choosing to serve City Year with the hope of making a difference and they found the experience to be highly rewarding. All participants reported challenging aspects of the service, but the relationships experienced in the schools and among fellow Corps members were highly appreciated. These experiences provided a platform to serve and reinforced the value it provides among participants. Finally, the influence of the Segal Education Award was also explored. The impacts of the policy in influencing the decision to serve were minimal as most participants were unaware of it; however, all participants reported a sense of recognition and appreciation of the award upon reflection.

## **Chapter V. Discussion**

The concept of taking a gap year has gained momentum in recent years, and examining the practice through the scope of a public policy that fosters such experiences is important. This study explored the lived experiences of 8 City Year AmeriCorps members taking a gap year and the influence of the federal policy related to academic tuition support for participating in such a program. The chapter begins with a summary of the study, followed by conclusions based on the data analysis, and a discussion that relates those findings to the theoretical framework and previous literature. Recommendations for practice and further research have also been offered, and the chapter concludes with a summary.

### **A. Summary of Study**

Among the many challenges facing the future of higher education, no topic could be more important than access and persistence. Earning a degree remains the straightest path forward for US citizens to climb the socioeconomic ladder. As college costs have risen and philosophically institutions place a greater burden for payment on the student, students from lower economic statuses are less likely to participate in higher education. Gap years also appear to be a byproduct of this consumer-driven approach to higher education. Prospective students are delaying enrollment to college within institutional parameters that encourage, or at least permit the practice, such as the Gap Year Association, Service Year Alliance, and university programs and policies. As this phenomenon continued to gain notoriety during the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, the study sought to explore the gap year experiences in an AmeriCorps organization known as City Year. The purpose for conducting the study was to better understand the ways in which the Edward Kennedy Service to America Act influenced the behaviors and perceptions of participants. An emphasis was placed on the Segal Education Award. This award is equivalent in

value to a Pell grant, and it can be put toward future educational expenses or the repayment of student loans. The theoretical framework used in the study is known as Political Feedback Theory (PFT) (Mettler, & SoRelle, 2018). This framework is predicated on the notion that policies provide resource effects and interpretive effects that combine to dictate the ability for citizens to civically engage in society.

The study was designed to provide a deeper understanding of an affordable gap year experience, available to a wide variety of prospective ‘gappers’ and their families that has the potential to supplement future enrollment in higher education. It also provides valuable insights for colleges and universities considering the adoption of policies and practices that cater to this population of incoming students. Additionally, it fills voids in the literature relative to the need for a better understanding of the lived experience of gap year participants from a diverse background and a variety of activities (O’Shea, 2013; Hoe, 2014; Guidi, 2018). Further, the research compliments that specific to AmeriCorps in terms of the service experience’s impact on future educational pursuits (Hudson-Fledge, 2018) and the lived experience of local, diverse, volunteers in City Year AmeriCorps (Sekerak, 2020). With these goals in mind, qualitative research utilizing the specific approaches consistent with transcendental phenomenology were implemented (Moustakas, 1994). A criterion sample of 8 participants was recruited by City Year AmeriCorps after having served in various schools in Jacksonville, FL. This location was identified by City Year AmeriCorps due to the higher concentration of Corps members serving in this area who had not attained a bachelor’s degree prior to service in recent years. All sample participants had served in City Year AmeriCorps within the past four years, and none had obtained a bachelor’s degree prior to serving.

Data were obtained through virtual interviews conducted over the Zoom and Microsoft Teams applications. Data analysis involved triangulation across interview transcripts, field notes, and memos compiled throughout the project. Meaning units were identified in the text based off of the substance of the answer in relation to the research question, as well as the emphasis added within the context of the conversation. Initial codes were given to each meaning unit, codes were grouped into clusters, and themes were generated to address each research question. An external auditor reviewed the coding process and agreed with the findings outlined. Findings indicated that all participants sought the opportunity to take a gap year with City Year AmeriCorps to make a difference in their lives as well as others, and they viewed City Year as an organization that would allow them to utilize their strengths to do so. Additionally, the lived experience was defined by challenging experiences emotionally and physically, which resulted in deep, meaningful, relationships with others and substantial personal growth. The experience rarely shifted participants' perspectives on the societal service roles. Rather, the altruistic values shared by participants prior to serving were reinforced through the experience. Finally, the resource effect investigated in the study, known as the Segal Education Award, had a minimal impact on most participants' decisions to serve. The award did reinforce the notion of recognition and appreciation among recipients. Finally, the policy implications of these findings demonstrated that there is a need for additional federal money for such programs, as well as coordination at the state and local levels to raise awareness of these opportunities.

## **B. Conclusions**

1. The interpretive effects of the City Year AmeriCorps program extend beyond Corps members and to the students in the schools who are served at a young age. This could create a cycle of citizens predisposed to future civic service.

2. Individuals who complete a full year of service through City Year AmeriCorps on a gap year are motivated by prior life experiences that instilled altruistic values. A Corps member was less likely to serve an entire year if the resource effect of the Segal Education Award is the primary motivator. Thus, altruism is a fundamental, key element in defining those who pursue public service.
3. Serving in City Year AmeriCorps has a reciprocal effect on Corps members. The positive impact provided by service members is reciprocated through lifelong relationships and substantial personal growth in areas such as self-confidence, patience, maturity, self-sufficiency, empathy, and interpersonal and intrapersonal skill sets.
4. Barriers to postsecondary enrollment extend beyond resources and information. Specifically, Corps members were less likely to enroll following service if they experienced career uncertainty or conflicting life priorities (e.g., parenting, pressure to earn an income).
5. A lack of awareness existed regarding AmeriCorps participants in the study and the resources provided by participating in domestic service. Coordination among federal, state, and local government officials could prove beneficial in terms of name recognition, recruitment, and financial support moving forward.

### **C. Discussion**

Various components of the study build upon the literature related to Political Feedback Theory, AmeriCorps, and gap years, and each will be addressed in this section. Before investigating these relationships, it is crucial to once again recognize a major underlying challenge that impacted the study. The COVID-19 pandemic occurred in the Spring of 2020, and it is still influencing the way we view and interact with the world more than 2 years later. Many

of the experiences shared by participants were impacted by the pandemic, too. Examples of these impacts included dramatic changes to day-to-day school operations, the loss of family and friends, financial hardships, and the physical and mental health of participants. This limitation presents a challenge regarding transferability related to gap years and the City Year AmeriCorps experience. Despite these difficulties, I was very fortunate to have found a set of participants willing to spend a significant amount of time with me to share their experiences. The findings in the study demonstrated clear resource effects and interpretive effects that increased the likelihood of future civic engagement by these participants and the students they served.

The study encapsulated multiple facets of PFT at work within City Year AmeriCorps. To begin, the City Year Corps members who were originally from Jacksonville, FL, indicated a principal reason that they wanted to serve was due to their childhood experiences as students interacting with City Year Corps members in their schools. Participants attributed vivid memories of interactions with the program and attributed much of their success in the K-12 system to their mentors in City Year. This type of early touch point embedded a meaning of citizenship which inspired future service as City Year Corps members themselves. In turn, experience as Corps members strengthened their civic capacity and civic predisposition which further prepared them for future civic engagement activities. This cycle of feedback was also made evident through participants who travelled from different parts of the country, too. All participants reported being committed to future professions and/or civic engagement opportunities that continued to serve the structural problems in education that they were exposed to and the high-need populations that they engaged with during their service experiences.

Longitudinal studies have demonstrated quantitative findings that showed AmeriCorps alumni are more likely to be motivated to serve in a public capacity (Ward, 2013) and remain

civically engaged following a year service (Yamaguchi et al, 2008; Ward, 2014). The qualitative findings in this research explained how these behaviors come to fruition. It is without question that the participants in the study joined City Year AmeriCorps due, in part, to altruistic motives. However, participants also repeatedly indicated that these values were reinforced based on their experiences. Participants consistently reported a feeling of accomplishment and a sense of doing good for others that had them committed to serving others in the future. In essence, AmeriCorps provided the platform for service work that reinforced its value to those providing the service. This is an interpretive effect that was demonstrated with each participant, and it complements the previous literature reviewed for the study.

These findings can also be related to the resource effect investigated known as the Segal Education Award. Previous literature supports the notion that this award has been a primary motivating factor for serving in AmeriCorps in the past (Yamaguchi et al., 2008), and it has been hypothesized that the specific subpopulation identified in the study would be heavily inclined to consider it as a factor in the decision to serve (Hudson-Fledge, 2018). Surprisingly, the majority of participants in the study were not even aware of the Segal Education Award until after joining City Year, but 2 participants did report it as a significant motivating factor. It should be noted that the 6 participants who were unaware of the award came from a broad range of SES backgrounds. The conflicting findings with previous literature could be explained by the fact that the sample population utilized in previous studies stemmed from a longitudinal data set acquired in 1999-2000. The cost of higher education was much lower at that time, so any debt incurred for pursuing a college education even after using the Segal Education Award was relatively low compared to the cost one would experience today.

In his dissertation, Hudson-Fledge (2018) also found that individuals who served in AmeriCorps prior to obtaining a bachelor's degree were less likely to accept responsibility for their educational success following a year of service. The author who acknowledged this finding was limited to one question on the survey instrument. In response to his call for qualitative research to explore this concept further, the findings in this study demonstrated the barrier to future educational pursuits were career uncertainty or life circumstances. Nearly all participants expressed the belief that a postsecondary education had monetary and non-monetary benefits, and all participants left City Year with a belief that they would eventually use the award. None of the participants expressed a lack of ownership related to future educational pursuits; in fact, all presented with more confidence, discipline, and self-awareness. Yet a lack of vision related to future careers created substantial hesitation in using the award. The other reasons for delaying enrollment further among participants were family circumstances associated with pressure to earn an income or parenthood. Although it is still unclear whether each participant will use the award, the study further established the complexities surrounding postsecondary degree attainment and gap years.

The study also reinforced several findings with literature related to gap years. Participants in the study identified family and friends playing a critical role in their decision to take a gap year which was consistent with several other US-based gap year findings (Haigler & Nelson, 2013; Hoe, 2014; Flowers, 2015; Tenser 2015). Additionally, personal growth related to identity development, confidence, interpersonal skills, and future career clarity have all been reported by gappers in other studies, too (King, 2011, O'Shea, 2014, Tenser, 2015). Consistent with findings highlighted by Guidi (2018), this study also supported the idea such outcomes do not differ between gap year experiences at home or abroad. The challenge this line of research presents is



related to the limitations of qualitative research being that it is impossible to compare differences. Nonetheless, these findings reinforce the idea that gap years can create powerful, memorable, experiences for participants. In addition, it established that such positive outcomes can be achieved with organizations that are positively impacting the communities they are serving, which is an important contention from the public good perspective.

Literature related to City Year AmeriCorps is only limited to two studies (Anderson & Fabiano, 2007; Sekerak, 2020), and many of the findings in these studies were reinforced. Participants' experiences in this study were heavily defined by the relationships developed between fellow Corps members, and they reported these relationships remaining strong to this day. This is consistent with both previous studies in terms of defining elements of the experience (Sekerak, 2020) and an increased level of social capital (Anderson & Fabiano, 2007). Other findings related to Sekerak's dissertation (2020) were also supported here, such as the challenges related to the experience, and the altruistic motivations that served as the basis for most participants' decision to serve. The study's findings also suggested that personal and professional growth can be experienced among City Year Corps members from different races, SES backgrounds, and educational backgrounds. One of the unique findings specific to the diverse sample pool was related to the two male participants. Both men had no prior postsecondary education and self-disclosed they came from low SES backgrounds. Both participants reported division and resistance from their families and friends toward serving in City Year AmeriCorps due to the low pay. This not only demonstrated the interpretive effects that compelled the participants' future service, but it also helped illuminate the challenges those with fewer resources might be facing in the decision to a gap year even if it is relatively affordable.

#### **D. Recommendations for Practice**

1. City Year AmeriCorps should continue to focus on building an inclusive community among Corps members and the communities they serve. The relationships developed by participants appear to be invaluable to Corps members, and the practices and rituals unique to the experience appear to be working well.
2. City Year AmeriCorps should do its best to ensure all site locations are facilitating professional development sessions related to the use of the Segal Education Award, and career exploration with tangible next steps in mind. These programs were reported by several participants, but it was not consistent with the entire sample.
3. City Year AmeriCorps should explore potential partnerships specific to housing for Corps members on a temporary and long-term basis. These partnerships could be developed with the private sector or public sector, such as on-campus residence halls.
4. City Year AmeriCorps should identify different ways to gather data focusing on member attrition through practices such as exit interviews, surveys, etc., to identify areas of concern.
5. High school administrators, teachers, and guidance counselors should continue to be made aware of the opportunities throughout AmeriCorps and the City Year organization, as well as the Segal Education Award. These opportunities should be promoted in schools to students and their families.
6. Policymakers should change the Segal Education Award so that it is not considered taxable income. This award's value is relative to the income of the recipient, and taxing the income disproportionately impacts individuals from a low SES.

7. Colleges with the flexibility and resources to do so should encourage gap years by actively engaging students in discussions about deferring enrollment, including service years in their curricula, and developing communities on campus for gappers transitioning back to campus (e.g., living learning communities in residence halls, fellowship programs, etc.).

#### **E. Recommendations for Future Research**

1. Future studies related to the AmeriCorps experience in different programs focused on this subset of the population could be conducted. For example, AmeriCorps\*NCCC is an ideal program to explore given it has an age limit geared towards young adults, and the work completed by AmeriCorps members is uniquely different than City Year.
2. Researchers could also work with AmeriCorps to begin new longitudinal studies that measure outcomes related to educational attainment, civic engagement, life satisfaction, etc. A critical component to this project would be incorporating a control group so that statistical significance, rather than descriptive data, could be identified.
3. Studies related to AmeriCorps member attrition could prove invaluable to the AmeriCorps organization and the communities that are served. Mixed methods studies investigating the factors related to attrition would be helpful in limiting its impact moving forward through the selection and support of future service members.
4. A lack of research exists relative to the use of the Segal Education Award. In conjunction with AmeriCorps, studies could be conducted to identify patterns of use among alumni based on demographics, service organizations, types of use, etc. This could also be achieved if federal data was made available related to the Segal Education Award's use in

terms of demographics, locations, educational backgrounds, etc., as long as the anonymity of individuals was protected as well.

5. Additionally, it would be important for research to be conducted exploring the reasons why the Segal Education Award was not used. Findings in this area may help identify programmatic touchpoints that could make a difference for alumni moving forward.
6. Studies related to AmeriCorps alumni persistence at the postsecondary level would be an important addition to the literature. Specific factors impacting persistence for AmeriCorps alumni subpopulations could be compared to similar subgroups that did not serve to investigate whether the personal growth often experienced by alumni increased the likelihood of educational attainment.
7. Finally, as other scholars have noted, gap year studies investigating persistence and degree attainment at the postsecondary level would be very helpful. Struggles still remain in identifying various subgroups in national data sets, so these inquiries would likely need to take place at the institutional level. Statewide or regional inquiries involving multiple institutional types could protect anonymity and provide a broad scope of trends.

## **F. Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, a summary of the study was provided and the answers to the research questions were reviewed. A total of five conclusions were identified, and these were related to previous literature specific to AmeriCorps, gap years, and the City Year organization. These findings were also applied to the theoretical framework utilized known as PFT. The powerful interpretive effects of the City Year AmeriCorps program were readily apparent throughout this research project. The impact of the program embedded impressionable meanings of citizenship on all participants, and this reinforced their perceptions and values to continue to serve others.

The personal growth experienced, as a result of their participation, prepared them for future civic engagement, and the resource effects awarded as a token of recognition supplemented continued educational opportunities for some. This study demonstrated there is an affordable, practical, gap year experience available to individuals from a broad range of backgrounds, and the services they are providing are having a positive impact on others, too.

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## Appendix A

### IRB Approval



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**To:** Chris Bryson

**From:** Douglas J  
AdamsJustin R  
Chimka, Chair IRB  
Expedited Review

**Date:** 05/11/2022

**Action:** **Exemption Granted**

**Action Date:** 05/11/2022

**Protocol #:** 2203392373

**Study Title:** Delaying College for Domestic Civic Service: The Gap Year  
Experiences of City Year AmeriCorps Alumni

The above-referenced protocol has been determined to be exempt.

If you wish to make any modifications in the approved protocol that may affect the level of risk to your participants, you must seek approval prior to implementing those changes. All modifications must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have any questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact the IRB Coordinator at 109 MLKG Building, 5-2208, or [irb@uark.edu](mailto:irb@uark.edu).

cc: Michael T Miller, Investigator



## **Appendix B**

### **Interest Recruitment Email**

[INSERT DATE]

Dear [POTENTIAL PARTICIPANT],

I hope this email finds you well. City Year AmeriCorps has provided me your contact information and they indicated you may be willing to participate in a study I am conducting about the gap year experience. I truly appreciate your time and consideration.

First, I want to reassure you that participation in this study is voluntary. Whether you choose to participate in this study or not will have no effect on your relationship with me, the University of Arkansas, or City Year AmeriCorps. I have attached a document that provides more information regarding the study and what would be asked of you.

If, after reviewing that document, you are interested in participating please contact me at bryson@uark.edu or [REDACTED] (call or text). Once again, I greatly appreciate your time and effort on this project. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to reach out.

Sincerely,

Chris Bryson

## Appendix C

### Online Informed Consent

#### **Delaying College for Domestic Civic Service: The Gap Year Experiences of City Year AmeriCorps Alumni**

#### **Consent to Participate in a Research Study**

**Principal Researcher: Chris Bryson, Doctoral Student, Public Policy Ph.D. Program**  
**Faculty Advisor: Michael T. Miller, Professor, Higher Education, University of Arkansas**

#### **INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE**

You are invited to participate in a research study about the experiences of City Year AmeriCorps members who served in the organization prior to obtaining a bachelor's degree at a college or university. You are being asked to participate in this study because you served in City Year within the last four years, completed one full year of service, and you had not obtained a bachelor's degree prior to your year of service.

#### **WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE RESEARCH STUDY**

##### *Who is the Principal Researcher?*

Chris Bryson (bryson@uark.edu)  
University of Arkansas  
[REDACTED]

##### *Who is the Faculty Advisor?*

Dr. Michael Miller (mtmille@uark.edu)  
University of Arkansas  
[REDACTED]

##### *What is the purpose of this research study?*

The purpose for conducting the study will be to explore the lived experiences of City Year AmeriCorps members who completed their year of service prior to obtaining a bachelor's degree at a college or university. This study will focus on the decision to serve at City Year, the lived experience during the year of service, and the decisions/opportunities to enroll in a college or university following a year of service.

##### *Who will participate in this study?*

For the study, the sample will consist of 8-10 participants that have served at the Jacksonville, FL, City Year location within the past four years (as far back as the 2016-2017 academic year). These participants will likely range in age from 19-25 years old.

##### *What am I being asked to do?*

Your participation will require the following:

You will be asked to participate in one, 45–60-minute interview via Zoom web conferencing (audio and video). Some participants may be asked to participate in one additional follow up interview, if deemed beneficial to the research process. You will also be asked to review the transcript of your interview to check for accuracy and validity. During the interview, a pseudonym will be chosen by you or assigned to you. This pseudonym will be used from the point of transcription forward. Once the transcription is deemed accurate, original recordings with your actual name will be destroyed.

*What are the possible risks or discomforts?*

During the interview process, you will be asked to reflect on your experience in City Year AmeriCorps. I do not anticipate you experiencing risks or discomfort; however, you will have the opportunity not to answer any question or to stop if these feelings/responses arise.

*What are the possible benefits of this study?*

This study will provide valuable insight for individuals considering serving in City Year AmeriCorps, particularly for those considering serving prior to attending a college or university. Furthermore, this study seeks to better inform parents, families, educators, and policymakers on the gap year experiences available through City Year AmeriCorps. The information gleaned from this study will also inform City Year staff regarding the Corps members' experience.

*How long will the study last?*

You will sit for one 45-60-minute interview at the beginning of this six-month period. If a follow up interview is needed, this will last 30-45 minutes, and you will be contacted 1-2 months following the initial interview. Your review of the interview transcript will be requested within 1 month of the interview recording. You will be requested to submit any revisions or questions within two weeks of receiving the transcript.

*Will I receive compensation for my time and inconvenience if I choose to participate in this study?*

You will not receive any compensation for your participation in this study.

*Will I have to pay for anything?*

No, there will be no cost associated with your participation.

*What are the options if I do not want to be in the study?*

If you do not want to be in this study, you may refuse to participate. Also, you may refuse to participate at any time during the study. You will not be affected negatively in any way if you refuse to participate. Whether you choose to participate will have no effect on your relationship with me, the University of Arkansas, or City Year AmeriCorps. Furthermore, even if asked, I will not be identifying for City Year AmeriCorps which people chose to participate or not among those they recruited.

*How will my confidentiality be protected?*

All information will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by applicable State and Federal law.

Participant information will be collected on the first page of the interview guide. Following the interview, the first page will be removed from the field note section of the interview guide so no attribution to individual participants will be possible. All field notes will be collected onto one master document. Following the collection of basic information from the first page, these pages will be shredded. All interview recordings will be saved to a personal, password-protected cloud account. Once the transcription is deemed accurate, original recordings with your actual name will be destroyed. The transcripts and notes obtained as a result of the interview(s) will be kept in a password protected folder on a personal, password-protected laptop.

*Will I know the results of the study?*

At the conclusion of the study, you will have the right to request feedback about the results. You may contact the faculty advisor, Dr. Michael Miller ([mtmille@uark.edu](mailto:mtmille@uark.edu)) or Principal Researcher, Chris Bryson ([bryson@uark.edu](mailto:bryson@uark.edu)). You will receive a copy of this form for your files.

*What do I do if I have questions about the research study?*

You have the right to contact the Principal Researcher or Faculty Advisor as listed below for any concerns that you may have.

Chris Bryson ([bryson@uark.edu](mailto:bryson@uark.edu))  
University of Arkansas  
[REDACTED]

Dr. Michael Miller ([mtmille@uark.edu](mailto:mtmille@uark.edu))  
University of Arkansas  
[REDACTED]

You may also contact the University of Arkansas Research Integrity and Compliance office listed below if you have questions about your rights as a participant, or to discuss any concerns about, or problems with the research.

Ro Windwalker, CIP  
Institutional Review Board Coordinator  
Research Integrity and Compliance  
University of Arkansas  
105 MLKG Building  
Fayetteville, AR 72701-1201  
479-575-2208  
[irb@uark.edu](mailto:irb@uark.edu)

I have read the above statement and have been able to ask questions and express concerns, which have been satisfactorily responded to by the investigator. I understand the purpose of the study as well as the potential benefits and risks that are involved. I understand that participation is voluntary. I understand that significant new findings developed during this research will be shared with the participant. I understand that by participating in the interview as described indicates that I give my consent for my responses to be used in this research. I have been given a copy of the consent form.

**\*\*Signing and returning this form is not necessary. If the above information is accurate, please email Chris Bryson at [bryson@uark.edu](mailto:bryson@uark.edu) to confirm you have read this form, and you would like to schedule a Zoom meeting to engage as a research participant. Please note verbal consent that you have read this form, and agree to the terms, will be requested by Chris Bryson in the Zoom meeting prior to beginning the initial interview or recording.**

## Appendix D

### Interview Protocol

**Delaying College for Domestic Civic Service: The Gap Year Experiences of City Year  
AmeriCorps Alumni  
University of Arkansas**

**THANK YOU FOR AGREEING TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY ABOUT YOUR DECISION TO COMPLETE A GAP YEAR. THIS STUDY REALLY FOCUSES ON YOU – YOUR DECISION TO TAKE A GAP YEAR AT CITY YEAR AND WHAT YOU EXPERIENCED.**

**I AM PROVIDING YOU WITH AN INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR YOU TO REVIEW. PLEASE NOTE THIS INTERVIEW WILL BE RECORDED AND TRANSCRIBED OVER ZOOM. AS NOTED, YOUR IDENTITY WILL BE HELD IN STRICTEST CONFIDENCE AND YOUR IDENTITY WILL NOT BE LINKED DIRECTLY OR INDIRECTLY WITH THE FINDINGS. FURTHERMORE, EVEN IF ASKED, I WILL NOT BE IDENTIFYING FOR CITY YEAR AMERICORPS WHO CHOSE TO PARTICIPATE THIS STUDY OR NOT AMONG THOSE THEY RECRUITED.**

**YOUR PARTICIPATION IS ENTIRELY VOLUNTARY AND YOU MAINTAIN THE RIGHT TO WITHDRAW AT ANY TIME. YOU WILL NOT BE AFFECTED NEGATIVELY IN ANY WAY IF YOU REFUSE TO PARTICIPATE. WHETHER YOU CHOOSE TO PARTICIPATE WILL HAVE NO EFFECT ON YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH ME, THE UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS, OR CITY YEAR AMERICORPS.**

**BEFORE WE BEGIN, DO YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS?  
DO I HAVE YOUR PERMISSION TO BEGIN?**

Should you have questions or concerns about this survey, please contact Chris Bryson (bryson@uark.edu) or his Dissertation Director, Dr. Michael Miller (mtmille@uark.edu), University of Arkansas, [REDACTED]. You may also contact IRB Coordinator Ms. Ro Windwalker if you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant, or if you have any complaints or wish to speak to someone not directly involved in the research.

Date		Did you complete 1 full year of service through City Year? When?	
Gender		Years of college prior to service	
Race/Ethnicity		Highest level of degree earned	
Age		Enrolled in college? If so, where?	

## **SECTION I: DECISION TO TAKE A GAP YEAR/PERSONAL BACKGROUND**

1. Can you start by sharing your experience in choosing to take a gap year through City Year?

*Other elements to consider:*

- Family's influence
- Motivated to serve others
- Prior life/educational experiences
- Career aspirations
- Future plans to attend college? Deferred? Increase acceptance? Costs?
- City Year's role

## SECTION 2: CITY YEAR EXPERIENCE

2. Tell me about your year of service in City Year. What experiences, people, and feelings stand out to you when you think about this time?

*Other elements to consider:*

- Training
- School Based
- Community Engagement
- Culture of City Year
- People (kids, teachers, principal, City Year service members, staff, community members/engagement)
- Living arrangements, meals, ‘day in the life of...’
- Feelings/emotions generated by experience



### **SECTION 3: INFLUENCE OF CITY YEAR**

3. How has this experience affected you?

*Other elements to consider:*

- Personal changes you associate with the experience
- Personal beliefs
- Experience on significant others
- Shifts in societal obligations after service
- Career aspirations

#### **SECTION 4: INFUENCE OF SEGAL EDUCATION AWARD**

4. What thoughts stand out to you regarding the Segal Education Award?

*Other elements to consider:*

- Influence on decision to take a gap year.
- Influence on the decision to go to college/university following year of service
- Influential City Year experiences impacting planning/use
- Perception of higher education
- Other thoughts/feelings about the award?

5. Have you shared all that is significant with reference to the City Year experience?

6. Is there anything else you would like to add?

**THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY!**

## **Appendix E**

### **Thank You Letter and Transcript Verification**

#### **Delaying College for Domestic Civic Service: The Gap Year Experiences of City Year AmeriCorps Alumni University of Arkansas**

[INSERT DATE]

Dear [PARTICIPANT],

I want to sincerely thank you for taking the time to participate in this study exploring gap year experiences. I feel very fortunate to have had the opportunity to speak with you about your experience and learn from you on this journey.

Attached to this document you will find the verbatim transcript of our conversation. As we discussed, my hope is that you would be willing to take some time to review this transcript and ask yourself whether your lived experience as a City Year AmeriCorps member was captured effectively. If there is anything you would like to add or correct, please use the 'New Comment' feature in Microsoft Word to offer more perspective. Please make sure not to edit the transcript for grammatical errors, because the way you told your story is critical. If you would prefer that we meet again to discuss questions or comments you might have I would be happy to arrange that so feel free to reach to make this request.

Please reply to bryson@uark.edu to confirm you have reviewed the transcript and attach the updated transcript with your additional comments. If you feel the transcript that is attached to this message accurately depicts our conversation and your experience, please just reply to this message to confirm you have reviewed the transcript and you have no further comments.

Once again, I greatly appreciate your time and effort on this project. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to reach out.

Sincerely,

Chris Bryson

