The Gap Year Dilemma: When a Purposeful Gap Year is the Answer to Career Unpreparedness

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Abstract

Students entering post-secondary are shown to be increasingly underprepared for the educational and career related demands associated with higher education. Quickly becoming a global trend and an attractive alternative to entering post-secondary directly from high school, a purposeful gap year increases student academic motivation and performance. Despite gaining popularity, there is limited research exploring the implications of the gap year among a North American population. The present study sought to examine how university students come to make career choices and the implications that a gap year has for this process. Two hundred first year undergraduate students studying at a large university in Western Canada completed a survey about their career plans. An analysis of the results comparing gap year and non-gap year students using a non-parametric ANOVA revealed that while students who had taken a gap year benefited from enhanced personal experiences and indicated that taking this time out of school was a positive experience, they continued to lack confidence and clarity regarding their career plans. These and other findings are discussed and serve to enhance an understanding of the potential benefits and implications of a purposeful gap year.

Students' decisions in post-secondary directly influence their later educational, occupational, and career/life options, making this a critical time for effective career planning. With today's competitive labour market demanding highly educated workers (Harvey, 2000), it is more important than ever for students to prepare themselves for productive employment by establishing a solid educational and experiential foundation.

According to Wilensky (2007), students and employers increasingly view post-secondary education as necessary for successful integration and participation in the workforce. Across North America, approximately 60 percent of students continue their education directly after high school (Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Alisat, 2004). Educational systems and society at large expect that these students will not only succeed at the post-secondary level, but that they will also have a clear idea of their career path at this time (Sears, 2004).

Career-ready students are assumed to be actively involved in shaping and directing their lives both now and in the future; having a proactive, resilient, and assertive style of moving towards self-defined career futures (Gysbers & Lapan, 2009). According to Code, Bernes, Gunn, and Bardick (2006), the central factors guiding career development are the readiness to make educational and vocational choices, as well as the requisite knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to visualize and plan one's future. While the importance of career-readiness for making educated and informed career decisions is apparent, there is less certainty about whether or not all students entering post-secondary possess the necessary skills and knowledge.

Career Unpreparedness of Post-Secondary Students

Career preparation and decision-making is repeatedly cited to be one of the most stressful processes faced by young adults (Bloxom et al., 2008; Gray, Gault, Meyers, & Walther, 1990; Stringer, Kerpelman, & Skorikov, 2012). Developing the career planning confidence and clarity needed to make educated career decisions requires a substantial amount of knowledge not only about career options, but also about oneself (Cherry & Gear, 1987). Unfortunately, many post-secondary entrants lack the breadth of knowledge and understanding about the self and the world of work necessary to be fully prepared for the career demands associated with higher education (Nel, Troskie-de Bruin & Bitzer, 2009).

Although it is generally assumed that the decision to enroll in higher education is informed by one's career readiness and confidence, recent research places the high rates of personal, academic, and career problems at this level as indicative that many post-secondary entrants are woefully unprepared for university life (Pancer et al., 2004). Whether a result of unrealistic ex-

pectations, poor academic adaptation both socially and emotionally (Nel et al., 2009; Pancer et al., 2004), or a lack of fit in one's program of study (Christie, Munro, & Fisher, 2004; Council of Alberta University Students, 2011; Tansey & Keane, 2011), research has consistently found that higher learners are unprepared to make informed educational and career decisions upon commencing their post-secondary studies (Gysbers & Lapan, 2009).

Implications of Career Unpreparedness

One of the most quantifiable consequences of career unpreparedness among higher learners is attrition. Wilensky (2007) has observed that post-secondary institutions fail to graduate a large number of the students that initially enroll. Forty percent or more of students attending university, college, or another type of post-secondary institution within Canada will drop out before completing their studies (Council of Alberta University Students, 2011; Shaienks, Gluszynski, & Bayard, 2008), and almost half of the students studying towards a four-year degree program in the United States do not graduate (Jansen & Van der Meer, 2012).

Career unpreparedness has additional academic and personal consequences. For example, even if students are choosing to continue their education, being unprepared to make effective career choices at the post-secondary level can lead to increased costs associated with changing majors, taking extra courses, and consequently remaining in school for longer than anticipated. Students who are less prepared for higher education have also been shown to suffer from decreased confidence as well as lower levels of social adaptation, emotional stability, and self-actualization (Stringer et al., 2012).

If individual learners can develop the career readiness needed to make informed decisions about their post-secondary education with confidence, they will be more prepared for the associated demands, and ultimately gain the self-assuredness necessary to be successful in their endeavours outside of the educational environment (Gysbers & Lapan, 2009). The gap year offers students an increasing popular route to better prepare themselves for post-secondary education and effective career decision-making.

The Benefits of a Purposeful Gap Year

Defined as a period of time taken 'out' of formal education and training, where that time sits in the context of a longer career trajectory (Heath, 2007), the gap year is quickly becoming a global trend (Stehlik, 2010). Choosing to defer formal study between completing high school and commencing post-secondary education has been well received in many countries, particularly across Europe and Australia, where gap year participation is not only common (with more than 25 percent of students deferring admission), but also encouraged (Curtis, 2014).

One important factor setting the gap year apart from simply taking a year off is that it is purposeful and planned. Without a plan, a year out of formal education is characterized by few ambitions or aspirations about how this time will be spent. Alternatively, a formal gap year is known to offer many significant benefits. Martin (2010) identified three components as being integral to the gap year experience: intentionality, motivation, and achievement, such that gap year students are necessarily involved in structured activities (e.g., paid-work, volunteerism, and other forms of self-development) directed towards furthering their career pursuits. As a result, students who take a gap year prior to beginning their post-secondary studies exhibit increased self-directness, academic motivation, and maturity, all of which have been shown to increase academic performance in higher education (Heath, 2007; Stehlik, 2010). When compared with students who had not taken a gap year, these individuals were less likely to drop out of university after their first year (McEniry, 2008).

According to Heath (2007), as more graduates enter the labour market with post-secondary qualifications, the value of these credentials declines. Escalating standards for minimum education has made it more important than ever for students to seek experiences that develop skills and competencies not typically made available in a classroom setting. In a labour market where employers place high value on the acquisition of 'soft skills' (e.g., interpersonal skills; organizational skills) (Brown, Hesketh, & Williams, 2003), the gap year serves to complement what is gained through post secondary, which tends to favour the development of technical skills (Munro, MacLaine, & Stucky, 2014). As such, industry professionals have recommended that the most effective way to develop soft skills and thus a competitive edge in today's economy is to integrate oneself directly into the workforce (Cappel, 2001; Saunders & Zuzel, 2010). While it is possible for all students to gain this experience, the gap year affords individuals the necessary time and

independence to seek and design occupational expertise that serve to further develop these valuable and highly marketable skills.

Gap Year Suitability and Potential Drawbacks

Despite its proven benefits, the gap year is not indicated for everyone. Individuals who are not highly motivated or career oriented at this stage may find themselves reluctant to continue their formal education the following year. While rare, with up to 90 percent of gap-takers returning to school within the year (American Gap Association, 2012), students must consider the potential impacts of taking a gap year on their longer-term career plans. Career maturity and/or certainty may also play a role in determining the desirability of a gap year.

Individuals with lower academic certainty are both more likely to take a gap year and to benefit from it (Martin, 2010). Accordingly, a gap year is not encouraged for students with high levels of academic certainty. Likewise, students who are committed to enrolling in post-secondary directly after high school should not necessarily be discouraged from doing so, but many of them are likely to benefit from interventions and programming focused on developing career decision-making skills, self-knowledge, and transferable skills.

The gap year can also be associated with certain financial disadvantages. When a tax-advantaged education investment account is involved, withdrawing from formal education, even if just for a year, may invite tax penalties and other unexpected financial costs. As well, taking a poorly planned or budgeted gap year can be costly in itself, particularly when major expenses such as travel are involved. Individuals considering a gap year are encouraged to address the possible financial implications of doing so prior to making any commitments.

Limitations of Previous Research

Despite increasing understanding, acceptance, and recognition of the gap year, there is limited research exploring the implications of this experience among a North American population (Strauss, 2012). After completing high school, 27.8 percent of Canadian students defer their post-secondary studies (Shaienks et al., 2008). However, the practice of taking a formal and structured gap year continues to be uncommon in North America. For example, only an estimated 1.2 percent of first-time college freshmen in the United States deferred admission in 2011 to take a gap year, according to the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California. As well, gap year participation rates are significantly lower in North America compared to other parts of the world, such as Norway and Denmark, where upwards of 50 percent of students choose to take a year off before beginning their higher education (American Gap Association, 2012). With gap year research having typically overlooked the population of North American students, additional research into the North American gap year experience would contribute to a better understanding of the potential benefits and the low participation rates by these students.

The Present Study

The present study makes use of a new self-report scale focusing directly on the student perspective. While previous research has paid little attention to the perceptions that young people have about their own careers (Code et al., 2006), the present study aims to more precisely identify the processes by which learners themselves come to make career choices, and to determine how gap year participation can influence these decisions. With a sample of post-secondary students currently studying at a large university in Western Canada, the present study provides a unique and largely understudied perspective on the gap year, and how this experience affects the career preparedness and decision-making of higher learners.

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses have been designed to guide the present study:

Perceptions of Taking a Gap Year

The proportion of students taking time out of further study after graduating from high school has increased substantially in recent years (Curtis, 2014; Martin, 2010). In fact, the gap year has become so popular in parts of the world such as the United Kingdom and Australia that a ‘gap year industry’ has emerged (Heath, 2007; Jones, 2004). Through the marketing of guidebooks and services provided by ‘time-off consultants,’ placement agencies and websites, such as EnRoute Consulting, are assisting young people in planning their gap year by finding them work, volunteer, and travel opportunities relevant to their career interests. More than a year off, the gap year experience is now being sold as an important aspect of career development (Stehlik, 2010).

Despite its popularity, the practice of taking a gap year con-

tinues to be met with hesitation across North America, where participation rates pale in comparison to those of many European countries. According to Martin (2010), the concept of taking time off after high school before enrolling in higher education has only recently emerged in North America and is therefore far from being a formalized or even an accepted part of students' educational careers. Given that the gap year experience remains to be relatively unfamiliar and unsupported among industry professionals and post-secondary institutions, as well as populations of Canadian and American students, it is presumed that the potential benefits of taking time out of formal education are not yet fully understood by most students. In consideration of this interpretation, the following hypothesis has been offered:

Hypothesis 1. Students will be neutral towards the idea of taking a gap year.

While gap year participation rates remain low in Canada and across North America, students who have chosen to take a year off after high school prior to beginning their post-secondary studies tend to speak highly of their experience and often benefit both academically and professionally as a result (Jones, 2004). According to Jones (2004), young people demonstrate higher performance outcomes, improved employability, and advancement of a variety of life skills following a gap year. Beyond the advantages in competitive education and the labour market, previous research has also consistently demonstrated that taking a gap year enhances an individual's economic, social, and cultural capital (Ball, Vincent, Kemp, & Pietikainen, 2004; Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Heath, 2007; Power, Edwards, Whitty, & Wigfall, 2003; Reay, David, & Ball, 2005). With an understanding of the above-mentioned advantages offered by a gap year, the following hypothesis has been proposed:

Hypothesis 2. Students who took a gap year will stand by their decision, indicating that taking a year off after high school was a good idea.

Influence on Career Preparedness and Planning

Taking a gap year has in many ways proven to be beneficial for both educational achievement and career decision-making (Jones, 2004). Studies continue to demonstrate that the gap year is an important opportunity for young people to develop clarity in their academic and professional plans, particularly in cases where there is uncertainty in these areas (Martin, 2010).

As an important time for the development of intentions and specific goals, the gap year plays an integral part in the resolution of academic deficits, such that participation can mitigate academic deficits and career choice uncertainty (Martin, 2010). These findings have informed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3. Gap year students will be significantly more likely than non-gap year students to:

a. Have a specific career plan
b. Express greater clarity with regards to their career plan
c. Have more confidence in their career plan

In addition to supporting academic and career gains, a purposeful gap year can offer substantial personal advantages as well, providing students with engaging experiences that increase self-awareness and create opportunities for self-reflection (Heath, 2007). According to an independent study of 280 gap year students, the most common outcome of the gap year experience was gaining a better sense of self and a more comprehensive understanding of one's personal values (Haigler & Nelson, 2005). By affording one the time necessary to participate in volunteer work, internships, extracurricular activities, and travel, the gap year experience serves to enhance one's identity, sense of self, and an understanding of personal interests, needs, and values. Accordingly, these experiences facilitate better decision-making, not only related to educational plans, but also to future occupational options (Heath, 2007). The following hypothesis is offered based on this view:

Hypothesis 4. Gap year students will rate their overall personal life experiences as being significantly more helpful to their career planning than non-gap year students.

Method

Participants

The present study analyzed data collected from 200 first year undergraduate students (157 females and 43 males) currently enrolled in a psychology course at a large university in Western Canada. Students who completed the study ranged in age from 17-20 years old ($M = 18.07$, $SD = 0.59$), with a total of 30 participants (22 female and 8 male) or 15 percent of the sample indicating that they had taken a gap year prior to beginning their post-secondary studies. All but one of the faculties of this institution

was represented in the sample. For the purpose of this research, a gap year has been defined as exactly one full year taken out of formal education directly after high school and prior to enrolling in post-secondary studies.

Materials

Survey questions were generated based on an in-depth review of the literature, relevant material from a previously established career development survey titled: "Comprehensive Career Needs Survey" (Magnusson & Bernes, 2002), and information gathered from three focus group sessions previously conducted by researchers of the present study.

The resulting survey instrument consisted of 31 questions targeting three main areas related to the career decision-making processes of post-secondary students. Being an online measure, participants were required to have access to a computer with Internet compatibility in order to complete the survey.

In section one of the survey, participants were asked a series of demographic questions pertaining to information about their age, ethnicity, and the name of the faculty in which they were currently enrolled. The second section of the survey focused on participants' 'Career Plans,' including topics such as the importance of having a career plan (e.g., "How important is career planning to you at this time in your life?"), and a description of participants' current career plan (e.g., "How confident are you about your career plan?").

The third and final section of the survey consisted of questions surrounding the 'Career Planning Supports' available to, and/or used by, participants during high school and post-secondary education. In the first part of this section, participants were asked to reflect on the availability and usefulness of various career related services or resources while they were in high school (e.g., "Rank the people or sources you felt were most useful or valuable in approaching for help with your career planning in high school"). The second part of this section focused on similar questions, but asked participants to reflect on the availability and usefulness of career related services or resources accessible to them in post-secondary (e.g., "Rate the people or sources you feel are most useful or valuable in approaching for help with your career planning now in post-secondary").

Procedure

Participants completed the study online through the research participation system available to students attending the university. Prior to beginning the survey, participants were provided a brief introduction, where they were advised that the survey must be completed in one sitting, and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty. Participants were also told that, when given the option, declining to respond to a question was acceptable. It was also made clear that all individual responses would remain confidential and anonymous.

Following this brief introduction, participants were asked to provide their informed consent by indicating whether they would like to participate in the survey. At this point they were free to complete the survey questions at their own pace. The questions were expected to take approximately 15-20 minutes to finish. Upon completing the survey, each participant received 0.5 course credits for their participation, which could be applied to their grade in an eligible psychology course.

Frequency of scores and percentages for given responses to each question were calculated in aggregate in order to analyze proportions of response tendencies. Isolated individual scores were not considered in the initial data analysis in favour of frequency data of aggregate responses to each question, which was of greatest interest in this study.

Results

Mann-Whitney U tests were used to interpret and identify any associations in response tendencies between gap year and non-gap year students. A nonparametric test such as the Mann-Whitney U is commonly used in cases where the number of participants in comparison groups is substantially different (i.e., they are not normally distributed), such as the case when comparing gap year and non-gap year students. Scores that produced a comparable alpha value of less than .05 were considered to be statistically significant. Descriptive statistics have also been reported through an analysis of proportions and measures of central tendency in order to summarize response patterns. Through an analysis of significant difference and mean scores from each group, an understanding of their unique and/or similar patterns in responding could be determined.

Perceptions of Taking a Gap Year

In support of Hypothesis 1, first year university students most commonly reported feeling neutral (n = 83; 42%) when asked whether taking a gap year after high school was a good idea (M = 3.09, SD =

1.07), using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree.' Of the remaining participants, 33 percent responded favourably to this item, with a total of 44 participants (22%) and 21 participants (11%) indicating that they agreed or strongly agreed that taking a gap year idea was a good idea, respectively. A number of participants also disagreed (n = 35; 18%), or otherwise strongly disagreed (n = 17; 9%), with the statement (see Figure 1).

In consideration of response tendencies among gap year students, perceptions of taking a year off after high school were significantly more positive (M = 4.23, SD = 0.97) than the general sample (M = 2.88, SD = 0.96), $p < .001$. In line with Hypothesis 2, the majority of gap year students (n = 24; 80%) believed that taking a gap year after high school was a good idea, most commonly indicating that they either strongly agreed (n = 15; 50%), or agreed (n = 9; 30%) with the statement. A small number of gap year participants expressed feeling neutral (n = 5; 17%) towards the concept of taking a gap year, with only one student (3%) indicating that they strongly disagreed with the concept of taking a gap after high school (see Figure 2).

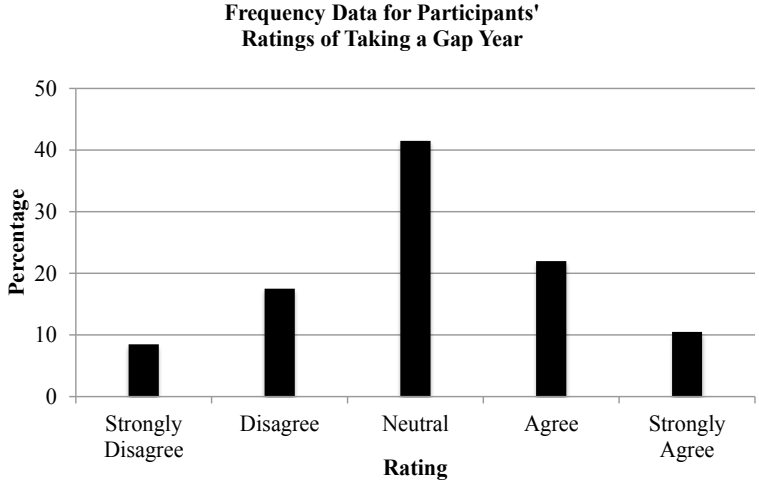

Figure 1. Perceptions expressed by participants when asked about whether a gap year is a good idea after high school.

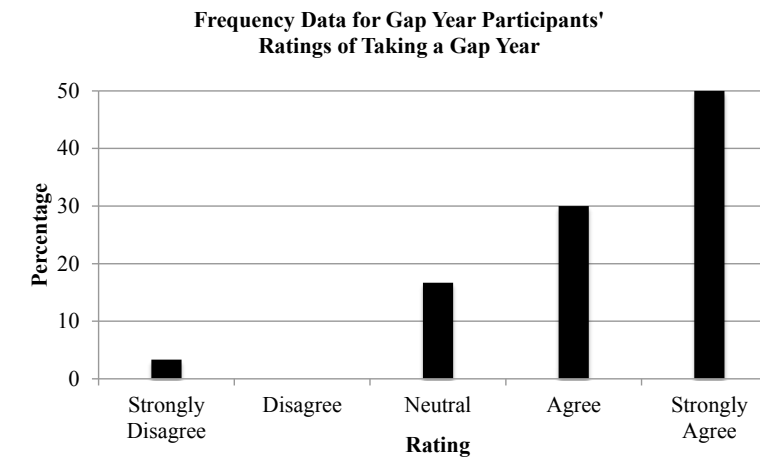

Figure 2. Perceptions expressed by gap year participants when asked about whether a gap year is a good idea after high school.

Influence on Career Preparedness and Planning

Contrary to Hypothesis 3 and much of the literature, gap year students in the present study were no more likely than non-gap year students to have a specific career plan or otherwise express greater clarity and confidence in their career direction. When asked along a 5-point Likert-type scale (ranging from 'very unclear' to 'very clear') about how clear they were about their career and life plans following post-secondary, gap year students (M = 3.1, SD = 0.92) and non-gap year students (M = 3.29, SD = 1.06) expressed similar levels of clarity in their perceived career direction, $p = .356$. In an analysis of expressed clarity in their current career plans, gap year students (M = 3.1, SD = 0.80) did not express any higher clarity than non-gap year students (M = 3.28, SD = 0.96), $p = .320$, with both groups feeling only somewhat clear about their current career direction.

Gap year and non-gap year students were also highly similar in their overall ratings of confidence related to their current career plans when assessed along a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 'very confident' to 'very unconfident.' While gap year students were presumed to express higher levels of career confidence, ratings made by gap year (M = 3.53, SD = 0.94) and non-gap year (M = 3.45, SD = 0.95) students were not significantly different, $p = .681$.

While there were no significant differences between gap year and non-gap year students in levels of career preparedness and planning, one area in which gap year students

conveyed significantly more growth than non-gap year students was in terms of their personal life experiences. Assessed along a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 'not at all helpful' to 'very helpful,' gap year students rated their personal life experiences as being significantly more helpful to their career planning ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 0.64$) than non-gap year students ($M = 3.56$, $SD = 1.10$), $p = .034$, thereby supporting our hypothesis that life experiences add value to career decision-making.

Discussion

A better understanding of the ways in which taking a gap year prior to beginning post-secondary can influence an individual's career planning process and decision-making abilities is warranted. While the benefits of taking time off between high school and beginning higher education (e.g., improved soft skill and self-development, shaping social values, and improved adaptation to university life) have been well-studied and supported in other nations (Heath, 2007; Stehlik, 2010), North American students, parents, and professionals are seemingly more hesitant to acknowledge the gap year as a positive learning and growth experience.

According to Hoover (2001), North Americans are generally suspicious of those who choose to get "off the train" to success, even if just for a brief period of time. Rather than a constructive experience, the gap year is perceived as distracting youth from the natural, linear transition between school and further education (Berkner, He, Forrest-Cataldi, & Knepper, 2003). These commonly held perceptions are consistent with the North American trend of learners choosing to forgo the gap year experience. In 2011, only 1.2 percent of first-time college students in the U.S. deferred admission to take a gap year, whereas 7 percent of students in the United Kingdom and 11 percent of students in Australia deferred post-secondary education in favour of a gap year (Strauss, 2012). There is currently not an equivalent data available for Canadian students.

Uncertainty and hesitation about the gap year was reflected in participant responses, which indicated they neither agreed nor disagreed with the idea of taking a gap year. Despite the neutral response of most participants, 80 percent of those individuals who did choose to take time out of their formal studies between high school and post-secondary indicated that they agreed (30%) or strongly agreed (50%) that taking a gap year was a good idea. While this result is understandable given the existence of a conceivable choice-supportive bias among gap year participants, it does serve to support the potential value of a gap year.

A factor that likely contributed to this positive reaction by gap year students is the life experience gained, adding to their development on both a career and personal level. Brown and colleagues (2003) found that students who took a gap year expressed greater levels of self-awareness and maturity after their year out of formal education. In the current study, gap year participants rated their personal experiences as having significantly more influence on their career planning than non-gap year students, a finding supported in the literature. The potential advantages afforded students who participate in a purposeful gap year have been well documented, particularly the development of soft skills and other aspects of identity associated with career readiness (Heath, 2007; King, 2011).

Despite identifying the personal benefits associated with taking a gap, participants in the current study made no connection between self-development and positive career outcomes or educational growth and confidence. While participants were able to recognize the more immediate, personal advantages gained by taking a gap year, academic and professional benefits were not identified.

Implications

First and foremost, for gap year participation to be a viable option for North American students, hesitation towards and misinformation about this experience must be addressed. It is essential that all stakeholders (i.e., students, parents, educational institutions, teachers, and career practitioners) have a working definition of what is meant by a purposeful gap year as well as a better understanding of the potential benefits offered. Further, success stories from gap year participants reporting that personal experiences enriched their career decision-making process need to be more widely disseminated. Examples such as those offered in King's (2011) article about young people's accounts of taking a gap year, as well as in the recently published book *The Complete Guide to the Gap Year* (White, 2009), provide meaningful examples of the gap year experience and its associated benefits.

Re-conceptualizing the gap year. According to Heath (2007), the difference between a year away from school and a purposeful gap year is that the latter demands structure and some level of productivity. By intention, the gap year is considered an important component

existing within, and contributing to, the context of a longer-term career trajectory (Jones, 2004). It is therefore characterized by planned, effective, and structured activities associated with career development. To bolster awareness and acceptance of this working definition, stakeholders (i.e., students, parents, educators, and other professionals) ought to be aware of both the potential short- and long-term benefits, as well as possible shortcomings, experienced by students who participate in the gap year experience.

Implications for students. More than any other outcome, gap year students reported that their personal experiences benefited from taking time away from formal education. Gap year participation increases self-directedness and self-development, thereby enhancing focus, motivation, as well as commitment in future higher education and work experiences (Martin, 2010). Personal experiences afforded students during their gap year also work to bolster their ability to adapt to the demands both of university life and future employment opportunities (Stehlik, 2010). According to Brown and colleagues (2003), as a growing number of individuals enter the labour market with post-secondary qualifications, personal qualities are more highly valued. Employers are therefore increasingly seeking out the skills that gap-year students tend to develop, such as enhanced self-awareness, the acquisition of soft skills, as well as increased independence and maturity.

Gap year students in the present study identified personal life experiences as helpful to their career planning. However, clarity and confidence in one's career plans were no different from non-gap year students. There are many possible reasons why this may have been the case, some of which have been identified in the limitations. Regardless, it appears that what is missing for participants who took a gap year is a clear connection between, and understanding of, how these personal experiences explicitly impacted their career confidence and clarity.

One practical solution is for students to engage in more accurate self-assessment, such as through the creation of a career portfolio. According to Saunders and Zuzel (2010), students who develop and maintain a portfolio that showcases their achievements (including both formal and informal certificates, awards, nominations, and achievements) are able to more accurately reflect on their competencies and abilities. Not only does this create an opportunity for one to organize information and documents relevant to career planning, but it also helps to facilitate self-awareness of skills and experiences (Cappel, 2001). More recently, career portfolios have been modernized and re-invented to include digital elements, such as LinkedIn profiles.

Implications for counsellors. Counsellors can play a role in strengthening student recognition of the association between personal experiences and competence as a professional. Individual counselling offers one path, but community initiatives and larger school system promotions are apt to inform a wider demographic. Because of their role in facilitating student development, counsellors are afforded a platform to advocate for the importance of career development and employability skills through school, work, extracurricular, and volunteer experiences. For example, hosting an information session for prospective high school graduates would provide an outlet for practitioners to facilitate conversations explaining the purposeful gap year, along with the types of skills and competencies expected of new entrants to the workplace. While an initiative such as this would be best served in partnership with and through the support of industry, government, and post-secondary institutions, counsellors play an important part as helping professionals in bringing these conversations to life.

Counsellors also play a key role in normalizing and validating career indecision and noting the developmental nature of effective career decision-making. Rather than focusing on the task of career commitment, counsellors are encouraged to emphasize the importance of this time for students to gather information about both themselves and the world of work for the purpose of career exploration. Further, emphasizing the global normality and the potential benefits of a gap year is likely to make it a feasible option for certain students. For the sake of informed decision-making, it is also important to provide accurate information about the potential drawbacks (e.g., financial) along with the benefits offered by this experience.

While some students and practitioners may be inclined to concentrate on the criteria for a particular occupation of interest, counsellors are encouraged instead to explore with students what they can learn about themselves through the process of a more general career search. In doing so, students are provided the opportunity to discover the transferable and personal skills they possess that may lend them to a variety of career paths, rather than feeling restricted by the demands of a particular occupation. With

an orientation towards individual interests, values, knowledge, and strengths, counsellors can help to encourage open-mindedness towards and meaning making of the career planning process, and in so doing, further develop the confidence that students have in their abilities and professional capacities.

For those individuals who express a lack of career confidence or readiness, the benefits of a gap year can be profound. To ensure that students are getting the most out of this experience both personally and professionally, it is important for counsellors to encourage suitable students (i.e., those individuals identified as career-unprepared or undecided and who intend to use time away from formal education to engage in self- and career-exploration) to consider the possibility of taking a structured, purposeful gap year. Counsellors can also play a role in the process of shaping and structuring the gap year, thereby increasing the likelihood of creating an experience characterized by involvement in career-related endeavours (e.g., through networking, volunteering, internship or externship work, and conducting informational interviews). This process will likely maximize skill development, as well as the personal and professional benefits afforded students by the gap year experience.

Limitations

There are several potential limitations to the findings of the present study. First, generalizability of results may be restricted given the distinct characteristics of this sample. For one, the number of gap year students who participated in the present study (n = 30) was small in comparison to the total number of participants (n = 200). While significant results were found, it is believed that a larger sample of gap year students would have allowed for greater reliability, and as a result a closer estimate of both true and meaningful effects on a number of variables. Another factor contributing to the limitations of generalizability is that all participants were first year undergraduate students who attended the same university. The sample not only lacked diversity among university students, but also across types of post-secondary institutions, such as colleges, vocational schools, polytechnics and institutes of technology. The emphasis on career and career-related opportunities offered to students has been shown to differ considerably depending on the type of post-secondary institution that one attends (Canadian Information Center for International Credentials, 2009). To better understand in what ways the orientation of higher educational institutions towards career development interacts with and influences students' experiences of career confidence, preparedness, and perceptions of taking a gap year, a more diverse and representative sample of higher learners would be beneficial.

A second limitation of the present study is that a number of within-group differences were not considered. For example, unmeasured factors, such as self-esteem and self-efficacy, have been shown to contribute to levels of career preparedness among students (Creed & Patton, 2003; Hirschi, 2011; Skorikov, 2007). Important precursors to what constitutes an effective gap year, such as differences in levels of career productivity (i.e., time spent exploring one's career and life ambitions either through working, volunteering, or another form of self-exploration), and distinctions in purposefulness were also not accounted for. By homogenizing gap year students, the present study failed to acknowledge the variability in students' motivation towards and engagement in productive work or educational experiences, and as a result may have contributed to a limited understanding of the positive effects a truly purposeful gap year has on career decision-making and confidence. By neglecting to control for these variables, it may be that results were confounded by relevant extraneous variables, such as the amount of active career preparation and/or exploration engaged in during the gap year, previous work experience, and baseline levels of career readiness.

Another important limitation that must be considered given the design of the present study is the potential flaws associated with the collection of retrospective self-report data. New students typically approach the transition to university with boundless idealism and confidence in their educational and career aspirations, which often does not end up matching the reality of their experience at the post-secondary level (Briggs, Clark, & Hall, 2012; Hansen, 1998). This means that there may be a propensity for students to overestimate their career confidence (Nel, Troskie-Bruin, & Bitzer, 2009), and more specifically, the impact that taking a gap year had on their readiness. Individuals also tend to endorse their actions through a choice-supportive bias. In this sense, gap year participants' high ratings of their experience may be influenced by a desire to see this occurrence as more positive and efficacious than it was in reality.

It is worth noting that all of the students who completed the survey had less than one semester of experience at the post-secondary

level, limiting opportunities to apply or otherwise realize the potential influences and impact that taking a gap year had on either their academic or professional experiences. With the knowledge that high school graduates tend to have difficulty envisaging and predicting their experiences in university (Briggs et al., 2012), it is likely the case that students were limited in their ability to comprehend the applicability of their gap year to post-secondary and career-related development.

Had this study been undertaken at a time when participants were advanced further in their education and career, the correlated benefits may have been more apparent to students and thereby reflected in their responses. For example, in the case that this research had been conducted longitudinally, retrospectively towards the end of one's degree program, or after transitioning from academia to the workforce, students would have had greater exposure to a variety of academic and professional environments in which to apply their self-development skills and knowledge (e.g., resume development, job interviews, work settings, team-based projects). As such, students might have developed a greater awareness and understanding of the personal and professional benefits of the gap year.

Finally, recent research has found that students who choose to take a gap year before enrolling in post-secondary typically have lower school achievement, as well as greater career uncertainty, compared to those students who choose to enroll directly from high school into post-secondary (Birch & Miller, 2007; Curtis, 2014). Given that pretesting of participants was not possible as a result of the retrospective design of the present study, it is difficult to determine whether gap year and non-gap year students expressed equivalent levels of these characteristics prior to beginning post-secondary. As a result, the potential for pre-existing baseline differences between groups makes the present study susceptible to error in the evaluated magnitude of within-group differences (i.e., an underestimation of gains in career preparedness and certainty among gap-year students). In this case, while levels of preparedness may have increased from taking a gap-year, this change would not have been observed in a between-group comparison.

Future Directions

Future explorations of this topic should consider conducting research with a more diverse and representative sample of gap-takers and post-secondary students. It will be important for prospective research to incorporate a wider demographic of students studying across a variety of post-secondary institutions so as to capture a more complete and expansive understanding of the gap year experience, and further validate findings of the present study. It is also recommended that future research address potential within group differences, particularly among those who have previously taken a gap year. This would include measures of personal factors such as self-efficacy and self-esteem, as well as an analysis of the productivity and engagement of students' in relevant educational and career related opportunities during their gap year.

To expand on this, given the potential for fundamental differences to exist between-groups in levels of career confidence and preparedness, it would also be beneficial for future research to be conducted longitudinally within-groups. To more precisely understand the possible baseline differences in levels of career confidence between gap year and non-gap year students, a within-group assessment of career confidence ratings both before and after starting post-secondary is needed. Additionally, a longitudinal analysis of career confidence after completing post-secondary that accounts for potential baseline differences between gap year and non-gap year students is warranted. By establishing a relative scale of measurement for career confidence within each group, a more accurate assessment of effect size and understanding of the implications that taking a gap year has on levels of career confidence can be realized. With recognition of the limitations presented by self-report data, particularly in cases where a choice-supportive bias is likely to occur (such as among gap-takers), more objective measures of efficacy are also required. It is recommended that future research analyzing the effects and implications of taking a gap year on students' career readiness make use of implicit measures so as to avoid social as well as self-desirable response biases.

For the gap year to be implemented most effectively, it is essential that future research and other initiatives consider the possibility of a structured gap year program that incorporates stakeholders at all levels (i.e., students, career and guidance counsellors, teachers, parents, government, industry, and post-secondary institutions). A program that allows for partnerships between those with a vested interest in its success will not only allow for greater recognition of and engagement in the gap year experience, but it will also create opportunities for evaluation. Implementing measurable objectives for the participants

and other stakeholders, such as pre and post tests and longitudinal surveys, will capture the data required to more accurately determine the value and potential benefits of the gap year.

Conclusion

Increasingly, high school graduates are choosing to take time out from their formal studies prior to beginning post-secondary education (Martin, 2010). Given that higher levels of education, training, and soft skill development are demanded of our working population, with up to 80% of jobs created in Alberta over the next 10 years requiring a post-secondary credential (Council of Alberta University Students, 2011), it is more important than ever for students entering post-secondary to be confident in their career planning and decision-making abilities. While many students still lack confidence upon beginning their post-secondary studies, gap year participation has been shown to correlate with improved tertiary academic performance as well as provide a competitive edge in the workforce (Hoover, 2001). Unfortunately, many of these benefits are misunderstood in North America, where the gap year is in many ways misconstrued as a period of inactivity. Contrary to these perceptions, the present study has demonstrated that the gap year is not only conceived of positively by those who partook, but it was also a contributing factor to enhancing personal experiences and student knowledge. If perceptions of the gap year can be changed and students are educated about the benefits of being proactive in their time away from formal education, it is believed that the full academic and professional potential of the gap year experience can be realized.

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