



UNDERGRADUATE
STUDENT GOVERNMENT

2014 Extended Leave Report

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

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INTRODUCTION

The Princeton Gap Year Network (GYN) is an ODUS-recognized student group that provides a space for community, discussion and advocacy for undergraduate students who have spent time away from the University before or during their Princeton career. Started in 2011 by a group of Bridge Year students, GYN organizes social events for students, raises general campus awareness about the importance of being intentional with one's academic career, and collaborates with other university organizations to determine strategies that could better streamline the experience for students who take gap years and/or leaves of absence.

In collaboration with the Undergraduate Student Government (USG), an Extended Leave Survey was conducted in October 2013 to collect feedback about current and graduated students' experiences deferring or taking leaves of absence. 72 current undergraduate students (currently enrolled or on leave) and 14 alumni completed the survey. In addition, two focus groups involving 14 students total were hosted in November 2013 to provide a structured forum for students to discuss their experiences.

This Extended Leave Report compiles the most critical findings from the survey and focus groups. We hope the Extended Leave Report serves as the first step in gaining a comprehensive understanding of gap year students, and sparks a dialogue between the administration and students to address concerns with respect to these experiences.

The results of the Extended Leave Survey were intended to identify barriers to student success, and to identify policy recommendations meant to address these barriers, based on the opinions of students affected by these policies. We hope this report serves as a catalyst for meaningful and continuous dialogue such that Princeton can provide a more welcoming, supportive and equitable experience for all students.

TOP 8 RECOMMENDATIONS

Princeton's current policy does not comprehensively address the experiences of students who take time away from Princeton. In order to better position University components such that all students are more equitably supported by the University, we, on behalf of all students surveyed, propose the following recommendations. They have been compiled according to responses from the Extended Leave Survey in October 2013, and the two focus groups held in November 2013.

- 1) Ensure that students who are away maintain access to an active NetID and email account.
- 2) Provide more online information about gap years and leaves at Princeton.
- 3) Establish more financial support and career opportunities for Princeton students who take time away.
- 4) Create a formal mentorship network for gap year students to advise each other.
- 5) Allow students who are away to pick classes at the same time as their new class year.
- 6) Add a discussion panel about gap years and time off to Freshman Orientation.
- 7) Create an orientation session for all deferred and returning students.
- 8) Send a newsletter about key events and changes on campus to students who are away.

#1

ENSURE THAT STUDENTS WHO ARE AWAY MAINTAIN AN ACTIVE NET ID

Students on leave need to have a way to easily communicate with University administrators and departments. They also need to be able to receive University updates and mailings. The best solution to ensure this steady two-way communication is to allow all students on leave to have an active NetID and email account, in collaboration with the Registrar and OIT. At present, many students are only permitted to keep their NetID active for up to one year, which can be problematic for students who plan on returning to the University in two or more years. In addition, OIT's KnowledgeBase does not provide a clear timeline of account status for undergraduate students on leave.

Sending transcripts, filing financial aid forms, responding to University requests (such as housing or class selection) and receiving time-sensitive information (such as OIT configuration steps during the transition from Exchange to Gmail) is difficult if not impossible without an active NetID/e-mail. Students have also mentioned the relative difficulty of getting responses from Princeton administrators and faculty using a personal email address. Dozens of students in our survey and focus groups mentioned technical issues in reactivating their NetID and email account, in some cases leading to delays in applying for financial aid and securing work study employment on campus. These complications can be avoided if NetID deactivation is reserved only for graduation, expulsions and rare exceptions.

¹ Because of similar themes in students' experiences and for the sake of inclusiveness, the Gap Year Network uses a broad conception of 'gap year students', which includes students who take interim years and students on disciplinary leave.

#2

PROVIDE MORE ONLINE INFORMATION ABOUT GAP YEARS AND LEAVES AT PRINCETON

The university provides a patchwork of online information about leaves and gap years other than Bridge Year. The easier links to find are ODOC's 'Taking Time Away from Princeton' and The Davis International Center's 'Leaves of Absences', and a brief Admissions FAQ. Students report not being pointed to or finding these pages when they needed them, and not finding information they needed on these pages. The Gap Year Network would like to work with administrators to add additional details, a timeline, and FAQs to the pages above. The ultimate goal is to have one streamlined, well-publicized online resource that draws on the strengths of similar web pages at Harvard, Columbia and other peer schools.

The online FAQ should address common concerns related to the following: the readmission process, NCAA student-athlete eligibility, eating clubs, room draw, immigration and student visa renewal for international students, and the availability of specific university resources while a student is on leave. A step in the right direction is Columbia's University's FAQ on voluntary leaves.

Students usually struggle to find online information about how leaves will affect their transcript, and about whether readmission is guaranteed or likely. Current web pages also do not clearly separate options available only for students with Advanced Standing, such as leaving for only one semester. More online information about necessary paperwork and University check-ins would also help students plan ahead.

Finally, among the forms and correspondence currently involved in the leave and return process, we also see potential to revise the wording and tone to minimize students' feelings of exclusion from the university.

#3

ESTABLISH MORE FINANCIAL SUPPORT AND CAREER OPPORTUNITIES FOR PRINCETON STUDENTS WHO TAKE TIME AWAY

Students take leave for a variety of reasons, but those who return home because of family or financial problems should be able to find more support from the University. At present, Career Services does not have programming to provide support for students who are preparing to take leave. It would be helpful for students preparing to take leave to get specialized support from Career Services in finding internships and jobs during the time that they are away.

The online FAQ should address common concerns related to the following: the readmission process, NCAA student-athlete eligibility. In addition, students who have formally been readmitted to the university for the fall semester should be eligible to apply for funding and internship opportunities for the summer they return. Presently, the majority of university opportunities remain unavailable to students returning from leaves of absence despite their official status as an enrolled student.

#4

CREATE A FORMAL MENTORSHIP NETWORK FOR GAP YEAR STUDENTS TO ADVISE EACH OTHER

For students who have made the decision to take a leave before or in the middle of their undergraduate studies, it can be beneficial emotionally to hear the perspective of another older student who has gone through a similar experience. Mentors can share with mentees their personal stories about helpful experiences, how to navigate the process of taking a leave (e.g., when in the calendar year to contact their Dean, and recommendations for courses to take at other universities) and best practices for how to make the most of their time away from Princeton.

The GYN is willing to take the lead on this, but needs the support of ODUS, the Registrar and the Residential College Deans to help confidentially contact students who are taking time off so that when they return to campus, they are fully aware of the support network and resources available to them.

#5

ALLOW STUDENTS WHO ARE AWAY TO PICK CLASSES AT THE SAME TIME AS THEIR NEW CLASS YEAR

Students who return after taking leave often have trouble getting into classes they want to take because they register later than currently enrolled students. Students returning in the fall are required to do course selection on the same day as freshmen (the day before the first day of classes), while their peers had already selected courses in April or May of the previous semester. Students returning in the spring select courses right before the new semester begins, while their peers had already selected their spring courses in November of the fall semester.

This can lead to more dissatisfaction with the University, as well as making it difficult for students to fulfill requirements. In some cases, they are relatively unprepared for the challenges of course selection. Allowing students on leave to select courses according to the same timeline as their fellow students would help them prepare for a more streamlined return to the University

“I returned in the spring, and I wasn't allowed to pick my classes until the second semester started. This meant that I wasn't receiving information that I needed for the classes I was going to take until class had already started. Some classes were also listed as closed, so I wasn't able to get into them until I emailed professors and they made the necessary changes on SCORE. The challenge of coming back after time-off, not knowing any of my new classmates, and now being a week behind in work led to my most difficult and stressful semester at Princeton.”

- Extended Leave Survey respondent

#6

ADD A DISCUSSION PANEL ABOUT GAP YEARS AND TIME OFF TO FRESHMAN ORIENTATION

Many students are not aware of the procedures and opportunities associated with taking a leave of absence. Setting this type of precedent for incoming students could be very meaningful for those who, during their course of study at Princeton, begin to think about or seriously consider taking time off. A discussion panel held during Freshman Orientation would allow students to understand more about University procedure related to these matters, as well as hear about other students' experiences. Knowing about resources and having students discuss their experiences would be a helpful first step and public statement of support for those students.

#7

CREATE AN ORIENTATION SESSION FOR ALL DEFERRED AND RETURNING STUDENTS

We would like ODUS to facilitate a returning students orientation session that incorporates ideas from John Luria and Scott Leroy of the Bridge Year Program, who run a successful reorientation program for Bridge Year students. This session can show a visible support network for students who are returning to campus as well as providing a space for students to learn about important campus resources. We have four main goals for the orientation session, which we envision will take place the weekend after the first week of classes:

1. Help foster community amongst those returning students, no matter what they were doing during their time off.
 2. Help with logistics of returning to Princeton and with Princeton-specific programs/resources
 3. Help students help others through leading discussions/activities
 4. Help students become comfortable and familiar with administrators by inviting them to introduce themselves and perhaps participate in the orientation session to ensure that students feel supported.
-

“Though I worked hard in a ‘real-world’ job during my time off, I do feel that I lost study skills and a general academic bearing. The real world is not like the life of a student, and at times I’ve felt I was floundering as I tried to reverse the transition.”

- Extended Leave Survey respondent

#8

SEND A NEWSLETTER ABOUT KEY EVENTS AND CHANGES ON CAMPUS TO STUDENTS WHO ARE AWAY

Students who take time off will inevitably return to a changed campus. In the future, it would be helpful for students to be updated a little bit on the physical, administrative and technological changes at the University.

For example, substantial changes to campus life have occurred in the past 2-3 years. Students who have taken leave may not have been informed about the following:

- Appointment of President Eisgruber
- Relocation of the NJTransit Dinky train
- OIT migration of all undergraduate student emails to Gmail
- Implementation of keyless locks in dormitories
- Additions to departmental faculty
- New ODUS-recognized student groups
- Campus-wide meningitis vaccinations

CONCLUSION

The GYN and USG will continue to advocate for students who have taken time off for various reasons and we are grateful to have the survey, focus group, and anecdotal evidence that brought us to these conclusions. We are looking forward to working with the University to implement the policy recommendations proposed in this report.

We welcome feedback and comments from any member of the University community who would like to add their voice to this initiative. In the immediate future, the GYN will continue to bring students together, and we will work on implementing the ideas discussed in this report.

Our vision is that in the near future, all Princeton undergraduate students will be able to make informed decisions regarding their academic careers based on clear, accessible information and with unambiguous support from the University. We also envision that during the time students are away, they will be treated as valued members of the University community who are expected to return. Finally, we envision that when these students arrive, they will feel fully welcome and supported according to their specific needs. Implementing new University policies to streamline the process of spending time away from the university will result in a more fulfilling and intentional academic experience for future students.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank all of the current students and alumni who took the time to complete the Extended Leave Survey, as well as all of the students who attended the focus groups.

We would like to thank Dean Dunne for meeting with us and giving us advice on the survey results. We would also like to thank Dean Herschbach, Dean Lestition, and Dean Fowler for consultations on this topic. We look forward to continuing the conversation.

We would like to thank the USG Senate for their input regarding the policy recommendations.

APPENDIX

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

1) Full-time staff person (or people) who are responsible for coordinating the needs of students who are thinking about or taking time off.

We believe that students who take or seriously consider taking time off, who in a given four-year cohort represent at least about 500 students, represent a significant enough portion of University students that it is worth hiring a full-time staff member to streamline and improve these students' experiences. Much of the feedback, from the survey and focus groups, indicated that the process of taking time off is often disjointed and inconsistent. We believe it will help the University as well as the students by devoting a staff person to answer questions and help guide students through the process.

2) Flexible room draw options

We believe that students who take time off should be treated with more flexibility in the room draw process because their needs and level of knowledge upon re-entering Princeton are different. It should be expected that their familiarity with the process will be lower and that their priorities will be different from the typical student. One student in our focus groups reported wanting to be placed in a quad with roommates, akin to freshman year, but only finding singles available upon logging into the housing website.

3) Flexibility in selecting the duration of a leave of absence

While we understand it is University policy to only allow students certain durations of a leave of absence, we would like for the University to reconsider how this affects students. Many students have voiced that they would prefer to take a semester off, but cannot due to this policy and them not having Advanced Standing. We believe this gives an unfair advantage to students with Advanced Standing. -

SUMMARY OF EXTENDED LEAVE SURVEY DATA

We conducted two focus groups and an online survey. The focus groups had five students and nine students respectively (fourteen students total). The GYN also informally discussed students' stories and concerns throughout the year at study breaks, meetings and social dinners attended by roughly 60 unique students. The Extended Leave Survey included 86 responses (35 male, 51 female). 14 were alumni, 7 were advanced standing, 69 were currently enrolled.

In the survey, 44 respondents took leaves after matriculating, while 39 deferred admission. 12 were Bridge Year students. Of those who deferred, 19 participated in a structured program other than Bridge Year. The vast majority (66 respondents) spent exactly one year away from school, but the number of semester away ranged from 1 to 9 (i.e., four and a half years). The three most common reasons chosen for taking time away were (1) pursuing new experiences, (2) mental health concerns and (3) academic struggles. Respondents' most common activities while away were travel, paid work and volunteering or service work.

Among the list of recommendations provided to respondents, deferring students and leave students ranked them similarly. Across the board, students made mostly positive statements about their personal experiences away, including marking Agree or Strongly Agree for this statement: "I grew more during my time away than I would have grown at school". Most students across the board also rated their satisfaction with the university's support during the time away as positive or neutral.

However, we also found systematic differences between students who deferred and students who took leaves. In our sample, 38% of leave students self-identified as cultural or ethnic minorities, 26% identified as LGBTQ, and 19% were first generation college students. By comparison, 23% of deferral students identified as minorities, 0% of them identified as LGBTQ, and 0% identified as first generation college students. Similarly, a higher proportion of leave students were athletes and low income. Leave students also expressed more negative sentiments and dissatisfaction with the University than deferring students. For example, in a set of three questions about time points before, during, and after time away, students were asked: "Please rate your overall satisfaction with

Princeton's administrative support and resources [during this time]'. Among the 32 responses of Dissatisfied or Very Dissatisfied, 84% (27/32) were from leave students. Among free response questions on prompts such as 'briefly explain how comfortable you felt after arriving/returning to campus', leave students wrote longer responses and more often made negative statements such as, 'I felt incredibly uncomfortable and unwelcome'.

One final source of data was the registrar's office, which provided the following numbers of students took leaves voluntarily in the past three years. It does not include students on leave involuntarily, or students who defer admission.

2010-2011 – 118 students

2011-2012 – 125 students

2012-2013 – 131 students