

INTRODUCTION

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Anthropologists have long understood the importance of transitions related to individuals' life stages and the ways in which cultures embrace these natural rites of passage. The senior year is indeed an important transition period in the lives of college students. Yet, the senior year as a transition point in the undergraduate experience has received relatively little attention in the academy. Of the three major phases associated with rites of passage, including separation, transition, and incorporation (van Gennep, 1960), the senior year represents a significant and sustained separation experience. Transition cannot occur without separation as a first step. If higher educators are to support senior students as they navigate this final transition in the undergraduate experience, opportunities must exist to create meaningful and educational experiences in the separation phase of this rite of passage. This book is designed to call attention to that final transition, the senior year, and challenge educators and institutions to make the most of the culminating experiences of students.

The Meaning of the Senior Year

Undergraduate education in the United States has a distinct beginning and end. The poignancy of going off to college and the pageantry of commencement are celebrated traditions. The first and final years of college have unique

transition symbols, such as submitting a first college essay or presenting a senior project, and make distinct contributions to student achievement and success. The rites of passage associated with the senior year, including traditions of senior week and graduation, are perhaps the most sacred of college experiences. Although the first year of college has enjoyed considerable definition and attention, particularly given its importance to transitioning into college and contributions to student persistence, the senior year is equally distinct in terms of moving out of college and its significance to student achievement and postcollege outcomes. The senior year represents the final and culminating phase of the undergraduate experience leading to entry into graduate school or the workplace and is an occasion to bring coherence to a program of study and to look toward a future beyond the baccalaureate degree.

The final year of college encompasses significant personal and educational transition. For many students, the senior year signifies the last year of university life—the final year to enjoy life as a student, before becoming a real person who goes to a job every day and no longer lives according to the academic calendar. The transition aspect of the senior year can be unsettling and bring about some of the same kinds of anxieties as the first college year, such as moving into another new and more independent life phase, forging a new identity (this time not associated with being a student), leaving friends and known comforts and routines, and new financial pressures (now repaying those loans vs. trying to fund college).

The institution's point of view on the senior year is also one of transition and culmination. The transition focus aims to help students increase their capacity to take charge of their own existence, prepare for their future, and move on to postcollege life. Institutions may organize programs and courses, such as from-backpack-to-briefcase workshops, career development seminars, and senior recognition ceremonies, and offer interventions to support students through their transition and ensure their success. In addition, as the culmination of the undergraduate program, the senior year is the site of distinct academic initiatives, including capstone courses, senior theses or projects, comprehensive examinations, internships or practica, senior presentations and recitals, and other educational experiences designed to cap off the degree. These academic experiences coupled with career and student affairs programming are intended to foster synthesis; bring coherence across years of work in the major; and offer students the opportunity to demonstrate breadth and depth of knowledge, growth, and competence. Lastly, culminating experiences, like

senior projects and comprehensive exams, are also viewed as an important rite of passage and often one of the hallowed traditions of undergraduate education.

Although the culmination and transition aspects of the senior year have long been acknowledged at colleges and universities, the important qualities and purpose of the senior year garnered scholarly attention only in the late 1980s when a growing circle of educators and prospective employers raised concerns about the preparation of seniors for life after college. Leadership by John Gardner and the National Conference on the Senior-Year Experience (Gardner, 1999) broadened the discussion to include consideration of the developmental and transition needs of seniors and emphasized college and university's moral obligation for helping students transition out of college. Educators began studying facets of the senior year, detailing key student needs and identifying what campuses could do to improve the final college transition experience (Gardner, Van der Veer, & Associates, 1998; Henscheid, 2000).

Since the explication of the senior-year experience, references to the senior year have evolved from simply meaning the in- and out-of-class experiences of students in their final year of college to a comprehensively designed effort that

- addresses the needs of seniors;
- assists them through their transition with holistic support and an appreciation of the role of ritual and rites of passage;
- brings closure, integration, and reflection to the undergraduate journey; and
- helps students graduate with the skills they need to be successful in life beyond college (Gardner, 1999; Gardner et al., 1998).

These goals can be achieved by (a) creating curricular coherence and bridging the curriculum to the world of work; (b) fostering seniors' personal development in terms of making career connections and clarifying an adult identity; (c) establishing relationships with students with an eye toward encouraging alumni commitment, as well as connections to employers and graduate schools; and (d) identifying institutional accountability and outcomes assessment activities to examine educational quality.

In essence, the senior-year experience is "a variety of initiatives in the academic and co-curricular domain that, when implemented in a coordinated effort, can promote and enhance learning, satisfaction, and a successful transition during the final quarter of the baccalaureate educational experience"

(Gardner, 1999, p. 7). According to Chickering and Schlossberg (1998), it is important to be intentional about experiences in the senior year because it represents the institution's final opportunity to do something positive for students to help them leave college with a sense of being in charge of their future and as effective agents for their personal and professional development.

Trends and Developments

The senior-year experience movement initially outlined issues related to the transition out of college and why it was important for institutions to adopt a strategic and intentional approach to this time (Gardner et al., 1998). It was envisioned as a bookend to the well-defined, successful first-year experience (Barefoot, 2000) and as the vehicle for raising awareness of and addressing the important issues and goals related to the senior year listed above.

Over the last two decades, the senior year of college has continued to receive steady attention from higher education scholars and educators (e.g., Collier, 2000; Gardner, 1999; Gardner et al., 1998; Henscheid, 2008a; Taub, Servaty-Seib, & Cousins, 2006). The themes advanced in recent literature include more detailed senior student development issues and needs; the importance of establishing a comprehensive campus approach to addressing these needs; the value of senior curricular experiences, including capstones and field experiences; and holistic career transition programs to help students further refine skills needed for success in a competitive workplace and global economy.

The theme of developing a more comprehensive approach to addressing senior student needs has been facilitated through greater partnerships between student and academic affairs units. This alliance is a necessary component of creating a more integrated, seamless curricular and cocurricular experience in the senior year. Student and academic affairs offices have partnered around the creation of senior leadership programs, rites of passage experiences, career and life transition courses and workshops, and in assessing student learning outcomes. Student and academic affairs collaboration is important to implementing a comprehensive first-year experience; this same partnership contributes to an integrated, cohesive senior-year experience.

Discussion about the quality of the senior year and concern about student outcomes has intensified recently given the sagging economy, rising student debt load, and indicators that college graduates may lack the skills needed for a 21st century economy (AAC&U, 2007; Hart Research Associates, 2009, 2010; Schneider, 2012). Concerns about whether students actually leave college with

the rich portfolio of learning that employers seek and society needs, including broad knowledge, strong intellectual and practical skills, grounded commitments to personal and social responsibility, and demonstrated capacity to deal with complex challenges, has placed greater demands on the senior year as a central point for reflecting on student learning outcomes and preparation for employment. The senior year has become a key time to assess what students know and can do as a measure of institutional quality and also what students can communicate to prospective employers.

Much of the literature on the senior year has documented the serious transition issues new graduates face. As students get closer to graduating and moving on to the next stage in their lives, they are faced with significant challenges, including a competitive job market or the rigors of a graduate program. Navigating a first job, establishing financial independence, separating from college support systems, deciding about graduate and professional school are but a few of the transitions that graduating seniors encounter (Pistilli, Taub, & Bennett, 2003). The career development and transition programming on campus has become more refined and specific to helping students make the most of their senior year and address postcollege needs in a more holistic way.

Gaff, Ratcliff, and Associates (1997) identified the senior-year experience as one of the more important changes taking place in the curriculum at numerous colleges and universities. Many senior capstones and projects were launched in the late 1980s in response to concerns about eroding quality in undergraduate education and possible fragmentation in the curriculum. According to Durel (1993), the capstone course is defined as a “crowning course or experience coming at the end of a sequence of courses with the specific objective of integrating a body of relatively fragmented knowledge into a unified whole” (p. 223). Dickinson (1993) suggested that the capstone course could also function as bridge to the world beyond college. Increasingly, institutions are designing senior-year experiences that require students to pull together their learning and demonstrate their abilities through demanding senior seminars, research projects, portfolios, artistic productions, and internships.

As the assessment movement has taken hold in higher education, the senior year has become the focal point for assessing student learning outcomes, particularly in the major. Outcomes like critical thinking or writing could be examined using standardized tests or by reviewing senior capstone projects or portfolios employing a critical thinking rubric, such as the Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) tool provided by the

Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). Similarly, the systematic analysis of comprehensive exam results over time can help a department identify key concepts that students are failing to grasp or theories that may be getting insufficient coverage across courses. Similarly, performance on these exams could help inform course redesign, suggest alternative course sequencing, or indicate other necessary changes in curricular requirements. Seniors have an important perspective for assessment activities as they are in a good position to render a judgment about the quality of their experience, and they provide the institution with a more complex picture than students at earlier points in their degree.

Another trend associated with the senior year is the need to make clear to students their role in giving back to their institution as alumni. Campus development offices and alumni associations see the senior year as a time to build loyalty among students and to help them understand the responsibility they have to invest in the education of future students. Alumni associations are reaching into the senior year to begin the transition to alumni status early and to help students understand the responsibilities and privileges of being an alumnus.

Overall, these trends have resulted in colleges and universities devoting greater attention to five broad categories of programming in the senior year. These include (a) senior seminars and capstone courses, (b) programs and workshops to prepare students for postcollege life and careers, (c) opportunities for students to make intellectual connections across course work, (d) events that celebrate the achievement of becoming a senior, and (e) activities that work toward cohesion among seniors class and alumni (Henscheid, 2008b).

Preparation for Life Beyond the Undergraduate Experience

Students leaving their undergraduate years enter a new phase of life. Traditional options include graduate school; military service; volunteer efforts; domestic life; and for the majority of graduates, the work force. Many college leavers will engage in multiple options simultaneously (e.g., work and attend graduate school while starting a family). Adjusting to new situations can be challenging as navigating new waters is difficult without preparation and guidance. The decade of one's 20s, what Jay (2012) termed the defining decade, is a critically important time:

Again and again, 20-somethings hear that they have infinite time for the dreaded adult things but so little time for the purportedly good stuff. This makes living in the present easy. It's connecting the present with the future that takes work. (p. 191)

It is the preparation for this connection to postcollege life that seniors need and that educators can influence.

The economy of the future requires an educated, well-trained workforce, so preparation for the college-to-career transition is increasingly important. Yet, many new graduates are not ready to manage complex issues, think critically and creatively, solve problems, speak and write clearly, accept responsibility and accountability, take the perspective of others, or meet employer expectations (Keeling & Hersh, 2012). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2011), while the economy is recovering, educated young professionals are still having a difficult time finding and securing employment. Competition depends not only on the credential of a degree but also on a number of additional skills or qualities (i.e., competencies) that employers seek in new hires.

How can institutions help their students close the gap between what they are learning in the classroom and employer expectations? One solution is to encourage students to participate in cocurricular programming and experiential learning opportunities (e.g., internships, co-ops, practica, study abroad, directed research) to enhance the academic experience, increase skills, and provide important out-of-class connections to the world at large. Recent research (NACE, 2012) showed that employers prefer to hire candidates with relevant work experience acquired through an internship or co-op.

Preparation for the postcollege transition must accompany students' ability to not only take advantage of integrated learning experiences but also to connect and process these experiences to academics so they are truly prepared to meet our current and future workforce demands. Seniors who participate in cocurricular activities gather new knowledge about their chosen area of study, industry, and themselves—all important aspects of learning. However, as Taylor (2011) points out, "Facilitating such deliberate reflection beyond the individual classroom experience appears to be largely absent in our institutional practices" (p. 16). Preparing today's seniors for the world of work suggests that higher education examine how institutions can actively create and foster learning within and beyond the classroom.

Further, institutions should factor in employer preferences and needs during outcomes assessment associated with the senior year. A recent publication by Arum and Roska (2011) found that students did not improve significantly in their critical reasoning and writing skills while in college. Additionally, poor performance in these areas tended to be associated with programs such as business education, where team projects rather than individual assignments have a tendency to be the norm. Findings such as these may be an indication that what the academic community sees as important and what the business community finds valuable in a college education are at odds. It is unlikely that what students study in college will be the same as what they end up doing in their career, since the average number of jobs an individual with a bachelor's degree will hold in their lifetime is 12 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010) and the number of career changes a person goes through in his or her lifetime is approximately five. Such change requires the ability of young people to hone and identify their transferrable skills—attributes that are not learned from a textbook—and explore the variety of ways to apply them to the workforce. Therefore, institutional assessment in the senior year must be broad enough to include measures of the competencies needed in the workplace as well as the transferability of skills and knowledge learned in the undergraduate program.

By 2020, 2.6 million new jobs will require an advanced degree, with a projected increase of about 22% for jobs requiring a master's degree (CGT & ETS, 2012). As such, graduate education also plays a critical role in the success of our workforce and economy, attracting and producing influential leaders, researchers, and problem solvers. Graduate school admissions are at an all-time high. This is not surprising given that 26.3% of the class of 2011 reported plans to attend graduate school, up from 20.6% in 2007 (NACE, 2012). The decision to attend graduate school often occurs early in the senior year. Although students are ultimately responsible for their careers, universities, industry, and policy makers must also play a role in helping identify career pathways for students, which often includes graduate school. The role of institutions in preparing seniors for decision making with regard to graduate school is to establish programs aimed at understanding the connection between undergraduate education, graduate education, and potential career paths so that students can determine routes of progression and whether graduate school is the right choice for the college-to-career transition.

New and young professionals entering the workforce struggle to find career opportunities because there is an expectation that graduates be equipped with a higher level skill set and knowledge base than in the past. Further, economic

conditions prohibit employers from providing an abundance of on the job training opportunities and out-of-the-gate professional development. In other words, new graduates are expected to come prepared. Providing students with resources and information about themselves and their postcollege options (e.g., continue their education, travel, volunteer, accept a full-time job) supports them in their transition and ensures that the workforce has the young professionals it needs and that society has the creative individuals required to tackle the problems and challenges of the 21st century.

Rationale for Attending to the Senior Year

Gardner (1999) identified a handful of reasons that seniors need and deserve greater attention. First, seniors have high expectations for capping off their undergraduate experience and unique needs as students in transition. The senior year offers the institution its last chance to ensure students a rewarding education and sufficient preparation for postcollege life. Seniors will soon be alumni and potential donors and supporters of the institution. As such, institutions must cultivate an ongoing relationship with them. Another practical rationale for attending to the senior year is that seniors are the students on campus most likely to graduate and to be judged as a reflection of institutional quality (Gardner et al., 1998). Finally, there is the moral imperative to ensure an enriched senior year—students simply deserve a more defined and effective culminating experience (Gardner, 1999).

The rationale for attending to the senior year has both a student and institutional perspective. From the students' point of view, the senior year carries considerable expectation. Seniors have made it this far, and have invested significantly in their experience. They want their education to amount to more than just a diploma. Students expect the senior year to be substantive, involve reflection, and bring coherence to their education. It should also help students transition to postcollege life.

Although Cuseo (1998) concluded the senior-year experience is really a student-centered movement, in that it aims to support students in transition to life beyond college, the institution is also a beneficiary. Most institutions acknowledge the importance of having collaborative relationships with prospective employers and business leaders. Senior-year experience programming can foster such relationships through partnerships between the college or university and corporations on career preparation workshops and job fairs. Similarly, the institution benefits from seniors who have a positive experience and become loyal alumni. More specifically, the institution gains when

students are prepared for and experience postgraduation success, which in turn makes them better alumni and college ambassadors. In addition, curricular experiences, such as capstones, senior-year presentations, and interdisciplinary seminars in the senior year can offer invigorating faculty development opportunities. Further, assessment data from seniors can provide institutions a wealth of information about program quality and educational outcomes—information that can be used to improve curricular coherence or to retool the undergraduate program.

There is also a societal rationale for attending to the senior year. Pressing national issues over that last decade, including a constrained economy, the demand for more Americans to earn college degrees, and concerns about graduates lacking skills desired by employers, amplify the justification for attending to the senior year. The pressure on colleges and universities to increase graduation rates and to reduce time to degree makes it incumbent upon institutions to ensure that the path to the senior year is clear and that seniors get the support they need to make it to the graduation stage. A tough economy and rising student loan debt makes it even more important for students to have good job-search skills and know how to manage their finances. Finally, the U.S. economy needs students who possess the skills and talents that employers desire and that our global labor market demands. Institutions must ensure that seniors are prepared to navigate the increased challenges of current economic conditions and rising employer demands.

The Chapters Ahead

This book is organized in such a way as to help readers understand the senior student first, consider how institutions can address student needs in the collegiate context, and then attend to actual strategies that can be employed to assist seniors in their transition out of college.

In section I, Jennifer Keup provides a helpful portrait of the needs and demographic characteristics of today's seniors. Tracy Skipper builds on this portrait by describing how student development theory informs our understanding of today's seniors. Rey Junco and Jeanna Mastrodicasa then discuss the technological changes in student culture and technology use by undergraduates, educators, and employers, encouraging the reader to embrace and integrate these changes when interacting with seniors.

In section II, Jillian Kinzie addresses how high-impact practices can be used to improve institutional efforts in supporting seniors. Jean Henscheid continues this discussion by examining the curricular context for enhancing the senior-year experience.

Section III focuses on the transition to the world of work. Heather Maietta turns our attention to the central topic of career development during this last year of college. A consideration of the gap between college preparation and the skills and knowledge needed in the world of work is addressed by Philip Gardner and April Perry.

Colleges and universities have many options for formalizing and ritualizing the transition out of college, and a number of possibilities are outlined by Peter Magolda and Michael Denton. Our institutions can be more intentional about trying to develop loyal alumni and future donors before the seniors leave us. Meredith Fakas and Mary Ruffin Childs offer strategies for doing just that.

In the concluding chapter, John Gardner and Mary Stuart Hunter provide a synthesis of the volume and suggest a set of recommendations for action steps that colleges and universities can take to meet the needs of seniors and improve their chances for success in an increasingly competitive world.

In summary, the implementation of a senior-year experience has benefits to students, institutions, and society. The senior year provides important opportunities for integration, closure and reflection, and transition (Gardner et al., 1998). In the same way that the first-year experience helps student navigate their transition into the institution, the senior-year experience provides students important opportunities to reflect on their experiences and facilitate the transition to postcollege life.

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