

SENIOR YEAR Experience

Challenges and Options

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PREVIEW

Three components ensure that the senior year is as meaningful as possible: a strong core curriculum, an advisory program, and a Senior Options program.

The advisory program includes service learning as well as college preparation.

The Senior Options program allows students to take advantage of opportunities to learn outside of school.

Recent publications raise three concerns about the traditional senior year: it lacks rigor, it fails to provide students with clear pathways to work and postsecondary education, and it does not prepare students for a successful transition from high school to post-secondary experiences (NASSP, 2004; National Commission on the High School Senior Year, 2001; Southern Regional Education Board, 1998). These documents suggest that high schools should transform the senior year to make it a consummation of what students have already accomplished and a launching pad for what lies ahead.

At Malcolm Price Laboratory School's Northern University High School in Cedar Falls, IA, a strong core curriculum, a required advisory program, and a multicomponent Senior Year Options program help ensure that seniors are successful after high school, whether in work, college, the military, or another experience.

Designing a Program

Northern University High relied heavily on high school reform research during the development of its initial list of senior requirements and options. Some of the most influential ideas were research findings from the National Commission on the High School Senior Year (2001), which recommended the Triple A Program to help address senior year issues. This program is designed to:

- Improve alignment for smooth transition to postsecondary experiences
- Raise achievement
- Provide more (and more rigorous) alternatives that help individualize a program for each senior and encourage every senior to complete a capstone project or presentation, internship experience, or research project; participate in community service; and take college-level courses.

The Southern Regional Education Board's *High Schools That Work* (1998) also identified key practices for creating a meaningful senior year, including:

- Setting higher expectations and getting more students to meet them



Typical Senior Advisory Requirements

Complete and submit to your adviser each of the following items:

- One college application or other postsecondary experience application
- One teacher recommendation related to college or some other postsecondary plan
- A copy of the thank-you note for the teacher who wrote your letter of recommendation
- A copy of one completed scholarship application that is applicable to your postsecondary plans
- An essay of at least 350 words summarizing the type of service you have performed throughout high school and describing what you have gained from these experiences
- A senior presentation
- Fifteen hours of documented service performed during your senior year
- A reflective, professional portfolio

- Increasing students' access to intellectually challenging career and technical studies
- Requiring all seniors to take at least three academic courses, including high-level math or science classes
- Enrolling students in college preparatory courses
- Requiring all seniors to complete a project that includes a research paper, a product or service, and an oral presentation.

The goal at Northern University High is to provide every senior with a

personalized and meaningful senior year that allows him or her to make a seamless transition from high school to a postsecondary experience. For this endeavor to be successful, what students do in their senior year must be significantly different from what the underclassmen and juniors are doing and must enable seniors to choose not only what to do but also how and when to do it. Some portions of the senior year package allow total student choice, others allow some choice, and still others are requirements.

Core Curriculum

A rigorous core curriculum should ensure that all graduates are ready for college. Many states are currently wrestling with the issue of what and how much to require of students to ready them for college. Northern University High is more committed to ensuring that all courses are rigorous and have high standards than to identifying the exact courses and sequence students are required to complete. The school is currently mounting a schoolwide effort to increase the rigor and relevance of all courses.

Students at Northern University High now have a slate of opportunities—including senior presentations, advisory requirements, and portfolio components—to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in communication, reasoning, and personal development. The school continues to develop and refine ways to measure this knowledge.

Advisory Program

A second important component of the senior year experience at Northern University High is the advisory program. One of the biggest impediments to building a successful advisory program was getting teachers and students to take it seriously. The combination

About Northern University High

Malcolm Price

Laboratory School

is located on the campus of the University of Northern Iowa and is a part of the college of education's teacher education program. It is a preK-12 school; Northern University High School is the high school branch and serves approximately 375 students, approximately 28% of whom are from diverse cultures and ethnic minority groups.

of adding more legitimate assignments, assigning credit to the course, and requiring the advisory credit for graduation contributed significantly to elevating the program to the level of a bona fide course. Presently, students in Northern University High receive one-fourth credit each year for advisory and cannot graduate without having earned the advisory credit.

Another factor contributing to the success of the program is the support and participation of the teachers. As teachers became more familiar with the program, they not only saw the benefits of having the same students as advisees for four years but also began enjoying those relationships. Teacher advisers began to feel comfortable enough to tweak advisory lessons to better suit the needs of their individual advisees and began writing their own activities. Northern University High operates on a system of continual revision because teachers have the freedom to add, subtract, and alter components of the program each year in response to new research, the needs of students, and the creative ideas of

the faculty and the administrators.

The advisory program houses a service learning requirement. Students must perform 15 hours of documented service each year and complete reflections about it. This requirement increases each year, beginning with 15 hours for freshmen and ending with 30 hours for seniors. Northern University High also recognizes outstanding service: seniors who have completed 150 hours of documented service receive a silver cord at graduation and students who have performed more than 200 hours of service receive a gold cord.

Advisories also address the requirements for college and scholarships, reflective portfolios, and senior presentations. Although all students must complete the advisory requirements, they fulfill them in different ways. For example, students select their own service. Their essays are designed to be deeply reflective and thus personal. The senior presentation is a completely individual celebration of the students' past experiences and what they have learned, where they are now in terms of their personal growth and maturity, and where all of their accomplishments and achievements will likely take them.

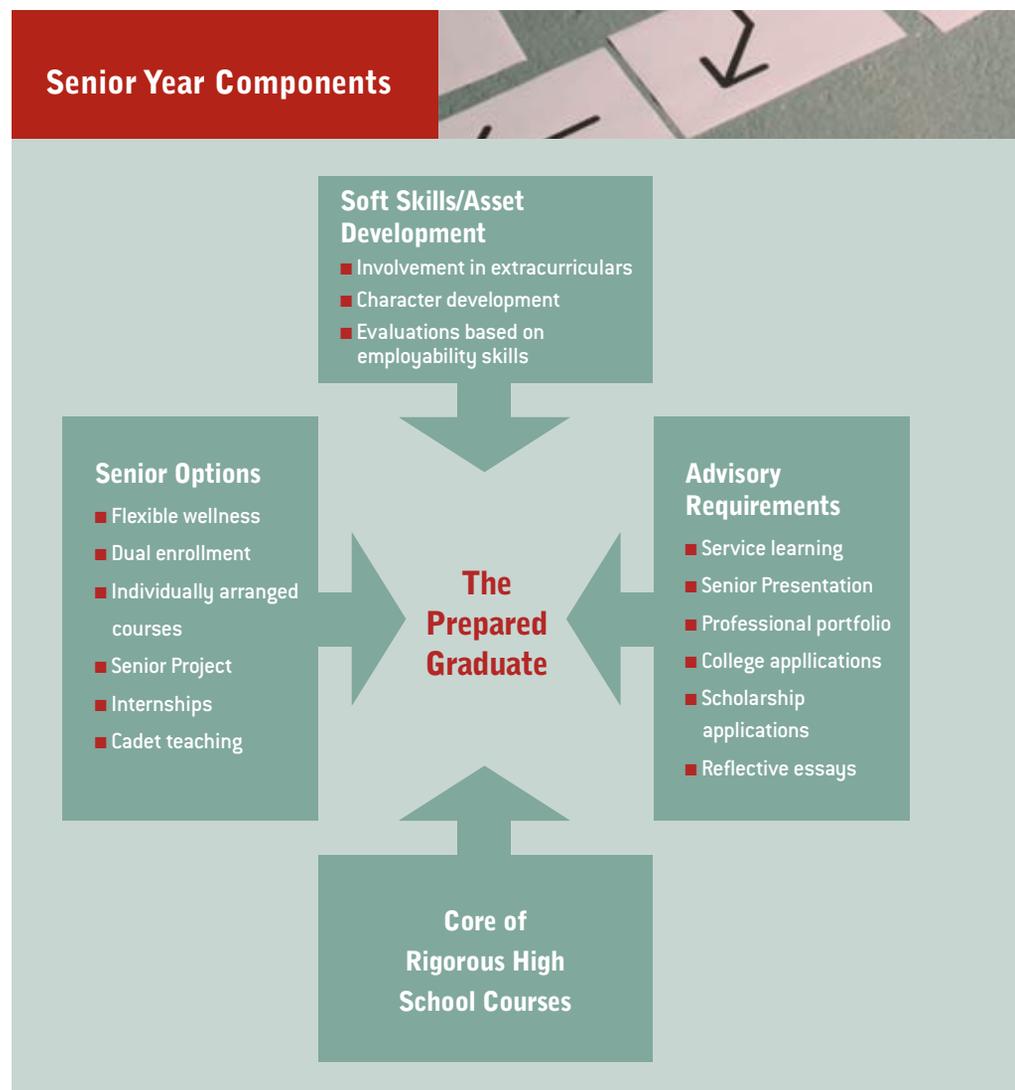
Senior Options

The components that truly separate the senior class from the other classes at Northern University High are the senior options. These options provide students with viable alternatives to personalize their own curriculum, which relates to and helps put in order their future plans. Northern University High has an eight-period schedule, and seniors must enroll in at least seven periods. Students are allowed to schedule course work that counts toward the seven-period requirement (e.g., dual enrollment courses, intern-

ships, and service learning experiences) outside of the eight-period day. This, along with other courses that may be taken on an arranged basis, allows students to create schedules that mirror the scheduling flexibility of most postsecondary experiences and gives them the opportunity to develop and refine their time management skills, organizational skills, and independent decision-making skills. For example, while other students at Northern University High are engaged in daily physical education, the seniors may choose to participate in Healthy, Active Lifestyles, a flexible

wellness alternative. This requires that they arrange their exercise on their own, either in the school's weight room, in the wellness center of the local university campus, or through involvement in athletics. Other examples of senior options follow.

Dual enrollment. Success in a dual enrollment course is the best predictor of student achievement at the college level, especially when these courses take place on the actual college campus, rather than at the high school (Bailey & Karp, 2003). A survey of the class of 2004 and their parents and teachers showed that approxi-



mately 95% of the students who dual enrolled felt that the experience was very beneficial in helping them prepare for college. One hundred percent of parents were satisfied with the dual enrollment experience provided for their children. Some commented that this experience was the best possible college preparation their children could have had.

Internships. An internship is a planned and supervised connection between school and work that is designed to give a student the opportunity to develop and apply his or her knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors to lead to informed career choices and productive employment.

Cadet teaching is a special type of internship that gives students who have an interest in the education field a teaching experience in a preK–12 classroom. Many cadet teaching students are placed in classrooms in Northern University High, but others have been placed in schools in the local community. During this experience, students plan and teach lessons, participate in active reflection, and discuss teaching and learning with a master teacher. In addition, the cadet teachers gain valuable firsthand experience working with and instructing students.

Approximately 25% of Northern University High students participate in an internship or cadet teaching experience each year. Approximately 75% of those students have found their experiences to be very beneficial to their preparation for and transition into their postsecondary options. There is no better way to enable students to determine the feasibility of a certain profession than actually working in that profession.

Senior projects. Seniors identify an area of study that they wish to pursue in-depth that relates to

their own goals and objectives. This experience is a synthesizing activity that gives seniors the opportunity to establish their own education goals, work with primary sources and raw data, and take the initiative in creating an educational experience consistent with their interests and values. Seniors who choose to do a project must work individually and produce a tangible product. A minimum of 100 hours must be documented as devoted to the study.

Approximately 12% of students at Northern University High participate in a senior project each year, and the majority of those students feel that their experience was extremely satisfying and meaningful to them. More than 90% of the students who undertook senior projects felt their efforts were beneficial and allowed them to pursue a personal passion of their own design and complete each phase of the project independently.

Communication

As Northern University High staff members worked on enhancing the senior year options, it was important to develop a system to communicate those options to parents and students. The school's Web site contains all the essential information for communicating, tracking, and evaluating senior options. This includes letters to parents communicating the purpose of the senior year options; student guidelines and responsibilities, contracts, and agreements; and a series of evaluation forms and grading rubrics. The information is easily accessible and comprehensive.

Organizing the requirements and unique options into a chart not only simplifies communication with students and parents but also lets teachers, administrators, and counselors see the big picture. As additions and

alterations are made, the model can change and evolve.

New Directions

The staff of Northern University High is currently wrestling with career education and character development ideas. Rather than using the traditional A through F grade scale, a number of courses use a rubric that is designed to provide a performance appraisal similar to what students would see in the workplace. Using this system, students receive one of four ratings: Promotion Worthy, Satisfactory Performance, Performance Probation, or Fired.

The research strongly supports the idea that involvement in cocurricular activities is important to developing good leadership skills, a strong work

Senior Year Menu of Options

- Dual enrollment
 - University of Northern Iowa
 - Area community colleges
- Independent study courses
 - Anatomy/Physiology
 - Scientific Latin
 - Language arts options
- Correspondence program
- Online classes
- Cadet teaching
- Senior project
- Internship
- Volunteer experience
- Healthy, active lifestyles

ethic, and the ability to collaborate effectively (Lipscomb, 2006). Although involvement in cocurricular activities is not yet required at Northern University High, students track their involvement and staff members talk to them about the benefits of such involvement. The goal is to have as many students as possible involved in at least one cocurricular activity each semester. The same applies for character-building activities that are designed to help students develop core ethical values, such as trustworthiness, honesty, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship (Lubbock Christian University, n.d.). These important factors have a role in the model of a prepared graduate. They are difficult to assess, but are nonetheless important to success in the world.

As you work to tailor your senior year experiences to meet the needs of your students, venture beyond the aspects that are traditionally emphasized because they are most easily assessed and create a broad senior year package that will help ensure the success and happiness of your students as they embark on a future laced with change. **PL**

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Communicating Senior Options

Senior Year Experience Guidebook With Expanded Explanations

Contains...

- A letter to parents communicating the purpose of senior year options, as well as procedures
- Student guidelines and responsibilities for senior year options
- Senior year experience contract
- Student attendance log
- Memorandum of agreement
- Adviser evaluation of student performance
- A variety of evaluation forms, rubrics, and rating forms

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