SENIOR SEMINARS:
Focus on the Future
Senior year is the perfect time to offer students challenges that will help prepare them for life after school.

Academic seminars offer collegiate-paced curricular challenges, and guidance seminars combine challenging work with personal development.

Plan or improve senior seminars at your school with the ideas outlined in this article.

Twelfth-grade students experience a momentous transition that for all practical purposes marks the end of childhood. For many, graduation means moving beyond the familiar world of home, school, and community. The students who are college bound must be prepared to meet the demands of more-rigorous academics. For others, it may mean moving into the workplace and staying close to home, but things will still change.

Although many seniors may envision that they will be in college or in the workplace, most have no clear idea of what that future looks like. They can foresee only the dimmest outlines of where they will be living, what they will be doing, and with whom they will be interacting. This makes the senior year dramatically different from and more challenging than previous school years.

Regardless of where graduates find themselves after high school, all are about to enter an adult world. Graduation will usher in a host of challenges and new responsibilities that they must be ready to meet. In response, some high schools have implemented courses designed to address the unique needs of 12th graders. Those courses can also go a long way to offset all-too-common senioritis by injecting a dose of rigor, relevance, and personalization into the curriculum.

The term “senior seminar” has been commonly used to describe a course that is specifically designed to help 12th graders develop knowledge, skills, and habits of mind that will prepare them for their college or work experiences. Senior seminars typically fall into one of two categories: academic or guidance. Academic seminars are interdisciplinary courses for a limited number of seniors that focus on in-depth exploration of a given topic. These are not AP classes or dual enrollment offerings, but like those courses, they emphasize high-level critical thinking, application of previously learned concepts, and synthesis of earlier work. Guidance-oriented seminars tend to focus on the various transition issues that seniors face in the pivotal 12th-grade year. They address the social and personal management skills that graduates will need to successfully navigate the next stage of life, whether that is in college or the workplace (Dreis & Rehage, 2008).
Academic-Based Senior Seminars

The Center for Educational Policy Research (CEPR) at the University of Oregon has developed a codified approach to creating senior seminars that offer rigorous academic exploration and meet the standards of college-level course work. David Conley (2007), the director of CEPR, said

senior seminars can create a college-like experience in high school without teaching college-level material. These seminars can be designed for any subject area. They focus on key issues within the discipline and investigate them in depth. [There are] elements that distinguish the senior seminar from a typical high school course. (p. 25)

The essential components of these senior seminars include:

- A faster paced curriculum
- An emphasis on writing, feedback, editing, and rewriting
- Clear grading expectations and detailed scoring rubrics
- Key outcomes that are measurable
- An emphasis on the development of habits of mind, such as analytical thinking and intellectual curiosity
- Frequent evaluation and feedback from external sources, the teacher, and peers. (CEPR, n.d., p. 2)

The CEPR offers schools intensive support in how to develop and implement effective senior seminars according to its model. A number of high schools have drawn on the center’s framework for a senior seminar design and have created seminars on such topics as alternative fuels, media and culture, and natural disasters. David Douglas High School, an urban high school in Portland, OR, has successfully designed senior seminars. The school offers a forensic science course incorporating the key elements of a senior seminar. Students apply acquired knowledge from biology and chemistry and use the scientific method to examine crime scenes from fictional and non-fictional texts. Students conduct lab investigations and write technical, expository, persuasive, and thesis papers throughout the course, emphasizing the credibility of referenced sources and proper scientific processes. (Conley, 2007, p. 25)

Guidance-Based Senior Seminars

Another common approach to the senior seminar, beyond creating an engaging and coherent extension of learning for 12th graders, is to incorporate elements of a guidance strand that addresses the challenges of the senior year. Drawing on her extensive research on the 12th-grade experience, educator and author Nancy Sizer (2002) proposed that a senior seminar is a way for students and teachers to navigate the academic and the personal dilemmas that plague this year. It is a serious, intellectual undertaking. If successful, its chief outcome is the steady, effective use of the mind and the ability to channel the work necessary to address both short and long-term challenges. (p. 178)

Although there are similarities to the CEPR model, the emphasis in this framework is on students acknowledging and navigating the final year of high school by examining issues about themselves, following their per-
sonal interests, and planning for their futures. Seniors also pursue rigorous intellectual work that is relevant to the world they are about to enter, but there is no emphasis on replicating the accelerated pacing that is found in the CEPR framework. In some respects, Sizer’s model melds the guidance of an advisory with a strong academic base.

Components of a guidance-model senior seminar include:

- Small, heterogeneous classes that are required of all seniors
- Interdisciplinary work
- A focus on the transition that seniors are facing and its inherent challenges
- A heavy emphasis on writing: reflecting, journaling, rewriting, and developing an argument
- The development of problem-solving skills
- Engagement in planning goals and setting priorities
- Independent research that has personal meaning
- Support and guidance
- Frequent progress evaluation by teachers, peers, and other adults (experts and laypersons)
- Navigation of the college application process and the meaning of college
- Creation of two portfolios (individual and whole class)
- An emphasis on small group work
- Culminating presentations.

Such components allow great flexibility in how a senior seminar is conducted. The most important aspect of such a course is that each student becomes the topic and focus of the curriculum. Sizer (2002) summed up the value of a well-conceived senior seminar:

The senior seminar will not solve all the problems associated with transition, but it is a start. Seniors will be grateful for the change of pace, the attention to their deepest concerns, the research skills and problem-solving techniques they learn, [and] the chance to accomplish something that matters to them. A change like this in their curricular program reminds them that school is relevant, that teachers are sympathetic to the emotional stress and time demands inherent in their situation.... The seminar’s...purpose is clear: to link the activities inside the classroom with the questions that are dominating the seniors’ minds. An effective senior seminar helps seniors confidently accept that the big job of steering themselves intelligently through life is essentially their own. (p. 190)

A Model Guidance Senior Seminar

The Glencoe Study Center (GSC), which works with a number of schools in the Chicago metropolitan area, has designed a dynamic and engaging guidance-based senior seminar model in its effort to motivate 12th graders, nurture their habits of scholarship, deepen their learning and self-knowledge, and equip them with the skills they will need to flourish in the world beyond high school.

An effective way to infuse relevance into the learning environment of the 12th grade in a highly personalized way is to immerse seniors in an area of study that should be of high interest: themselves. The natural tendency of these emerging adults is to be preoccupied with matters of independence and defining themselves as they prepare for the transition out of high school. Consequently, it is an ideal time in their lives to focus on deliberate efforts to learn about themselves. Most 12th graders by this time have developed the disposition to engage, if properly prompted, in reflection and
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introspection. These tools of self-exploration enable them to make insightful discoveries about who they are. Who am I? is the compelling question of the year (Dreis & Rehage, 2008).

The goals of the GSC seminar are to:

- Sensitize seniors both to the momentous changes occurring in their lives and to the significance of the senior year
- Encourage seniors to address the challenges of the year as opportunities to take action, rather than fall victim to senioritis and the consequences of a lost year
- Help seniors acquire a deeper understanding of who they are with respect to their abilities, learning styles, interests, beliefs, aspirations, and dreams
- Introduce effective approaches to goal setting as seniors articulate both short- and long-term goals
- Help seniors identify and practice specific skills—such as self-advocacy, interpersonal communication, problem-solving, and conflict management—that they will need after high school
- Encourage seniors to identify the issues, knowledge, and information that they think must be addressed to prepare for greater independent living
- Strengthen important developmental characteristics of late adolescence:
  - The desire for increased independence
  - An interest in developing skills connected with independent living
  - A concern for the future and one’s role in life
  - An interest in identifying career paths
  - The desire to explore personal interests and develop relevant skills
  - A sense of identity and voice
  - A concern for others and connection to community
  - The ability to set goals and follow through
  - The capacity for constructive risk-taking.

The seminar is an interactive workshop that features a variety of strategies for engaged learning, such as multimedia presentations, discussions, small and large group activities, individual reflection, creative writing, and role playing. The facilitators endeavor to provide a safe and trusting environment in which the students feel comfortable exploring topics in a spirit of cooperation and camaraderie.

Conclusion

Given their profound tendency toward disengagement, 12th graders are especially in need of the benefits that accrue from a personalized, rigorous, and relevant curriculum. Senior seminars fill this bill. When carefully designed and implemented, they help students connect their learning to themselves, the real world, and their future. PL

REFERENCES


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