

# BEYOND Academics: Conquering Senioritis



By Larry Rehage and Janice Dreis

Many educators complain that the blight of senioritis and the absence of rigor and relevance prevent the final year of high school from being the capstone year it should be. Helping seniors focus on the life-changing transition they are about to experience is an effective strategy for engaging seniors and infusing relevance and rigor in a profound way (Sizer, 2002). The guidance curriculum can be a natural vehicle for accomplishing this end.

Too often guidance programs in the senior year focus mostly on the postsecondary planning process, with an emphasis on either college admission or career exploration. Although this focus is essential to one aspect of the 12th-grade transition experience, there is much more that seniors must know and do to prepare successfully for life after high school.

Many new graduates leave the familiar structures of family and high school, so the network of supportive adults and friends that many have

enjoyed will most likely not be as accessible to them when they are off attending a college or working a job. The new demands of living on their own will require new graduates to possess practical knowledge about daily life, survival know-how, and myriad other personal and interpersonal skills.

Although certainly some of what they need to know has been taught through their formal education, family life, community of worship, and so forth, many graduates fail to adjust to their new settings in the early years after high school. The tales of woe include stumbling into the credit card trap, succumbing to stress, abusing drugs and alcohol, mismanaging time, and struggling with peer and employer conflicts.

The high toll that results from such experiences may lead parents to proclaim that academics are not enough and that seniors need more information about the world they are entering and better life skills to ensure their safety and success. Some highly

effective schools have accomplished this by developing special courses and programs that teach personal life skills to 12th graders through a student-centered approach.

## Student-Driven Guidance

New Trier High School in Winnetka, IL, along with a number of other schools across the country, have implemented a student-driven guidance plan that is founded on two key premises: First, seniors are remarkably capable and a valuable resource to the school. Second, seniors are extremely eager and ready to have a voice in what they learn.

Embracing these two premises and creating the right combination of student-centered activities empowers 12th graders to plan and direct a guidance program that is tailor-made to fit their unique needs. This is an approach that New Trier uses to create a yearlong student-driven guidance plan that culminates in a senior institute in the spring. The following steps are essential in this innovative initiative.

## PREVIEW

High school seniors need more than academic preparation and advice to prepare them for life after high school.

After identifying real-world concerns in a survey, students plan a yearlong series of activities to become better informed.

Efforts culminate in a senior institute in the spring that is modeled on a professional seminar and provides a variety of resources.

### Convene a Senior Guidance Committee

A committee of seniors and a few representative faculty members (e.g., teachers of seniors, advisers, and class counselors) coordinates a guidance program that will reflect the interests and concerns of the 12th graders as they prepare for life after high school. The student members of the committee are selected in a variety of ways,

but often they are culled from a governing organization, such as a senior senate or student council, to serve on what is essentially a standing committee. The committee is responsible for:

- Distributing a student voice survey
- Collecting and processing survey results
- Conducting a senior assembly to announce results
- Planning activities that address the topics students identified
- Organizing a senior institute.

### Give Seniors a Voice

An effective vehicle for fostering engagement in seniors is to invite them to identify some of the topics they want to learn about. Once they recognize that this is a serious endeavor to get their input, motivation and engagement follow. This process begins in September by giving a survey to each senior after the senior guid-

ance committee has been established. (A senior advisory program is the ideal vehicle for launching the survey and delivering the guidance program. If a school does not have such a program, surveys can be distributed through common senior classes, such as English.)

### Collect and Process the Survey Results

The committee processes the results by first determining the most-frequently-identified topics. This establishes a list of priorities for the guidance plan to address. The committee also decides whether other important topics should be included. It is also helpful to discuss a rationale for why each topic is significant and deserves attention. This helps the committee pare the list down to a manageable number of topics.

Many topics may deal with serious issues that make many seniors uneasy,

such as date rape or drugs and alcohol. Schools may find some of them challenging to address, but the topics are genuine and immediate concerns for seniors. As disconcerting as some topics might be, successful schools rise to the occasion to teach the whole child and respond to seniors' fears by teaching them about those topics; knowledge is the best protection students have for making their way safely in the world (Dreis & Rehage, 2008).

Members of the faculty may view some of the topics on the list as redundant, "old stuff" that was covered in such classes as health, physical education, biology, and business. However true that may be, some issues have new relevance to 12th graders, and seniors might be open to the topics in ways that younger students are not.

### Conduct a Senior Assembly

The class officers and the senior guidance committee jointly lead an all-class assembly that focuses on the importance of the senior year as a vital transition to the adult world. They also share the results of the survey and invite members of the senior class to help plan how the topics can best be addressed throughout the school year. Most important, the senior guidance committee conveys its goal to

sponsor a series of activities—such as assemblies, workshops, guest speakers, seminars, and even an all-day senior institute in the spring—to cover the topics that the students identified.

### Plan Ways to Address the Topics

The guidance committee meets regularly to discuss strategies for implementing activities to address the topics on the list. A key factor in making the program truly effective is to use as many different approaches as possible to deliver the curriculum: class assemblies, forums, panels, guest speakers, special classroom presentations, workshops, videos, software, reading materials, and student presentations.

Making the entire school aware of the senior guidance curriculum topics brings in a wide range of resources. School counselors have valuable expertise about developmental and other specific issues that seniors struggle with. In addition, they have information about what resources are available in the school and the community. Librarians locate current articles, videos, and software that address the issues in fresh and compelling ways. They pass along such materials to senior teachers or advisers.

Many of the topics fall naturally into the curriculum of various departments. Teachers of seniors in such subjects as psychology, economics, and civics easily find connections to their curricula that enable them to address a topic in class. Resident experts on specific topics volunteer their expertise in small or large groups. The school nurse is an obvious “go to” person who has access to information and resources to address the numerous health issues that surface on the list.

Seniors themselves are especially effective in delivering information to their peers. Some may already have

considerable knowledge about a particular topic; others can research an issue and present it to their peers either individually or as a member of a panel of experts. Recent graduates are extremely helpful in speaking to seniors: they love to give advice and tips about how to handle the next stage of life, and they have great credibility in the eyes of seniors.

The work of the senior guidance committee is to keep the senior class focused throughout the year on the list of topics that they identified in September. It is helpful to approach a topic more than once. Just because the entire 12th-grade class heard one speaker talk about money management does not mean that the committee should necessarily check off that topic as “covered.” Multiple “hits” on each of the topics helps improve understanding.

### Plan the Senior Institute

The senior guidance program culminates with an all-day senior institute in the spring. (Some schools have successfully sponsored a senior institute without formally connecting it to a student-driven guidance program.) This event is a special “seniors only” day that is dedicated to the senior class. The senior institute, beyond its educational value, provides a venue for a senior experience that enhances class unity and esprit de corps, individual empowerment, and excitement about the future.

The topics covered at the senior institute vary depending on how thoroughly various topics on the list were addressed earlier in the year, but some issues are effectively revisited, including diversity awareness, the freshman year of college, substance abuse, legal issues, self-advocacy skills, personal safety, and myriad health issues.

The senior institute features a program that in many ways replicates a professional conference with a keynote speaker, core sessions, and elective workshops. The format of the day recognizes and honors the seniors’ arrival to adulthood. Giving seniors a choice about which elective workshops they attend enhances personalization. Following are examples of some of the elective topics from New Trier.

**Your Roommate Did What?** A panel of four or five current college students talks to seniors about roommates, homesickness, money management, effective study practices, campus safety, Greek life, and other issues that are important to making a successful transition into college.

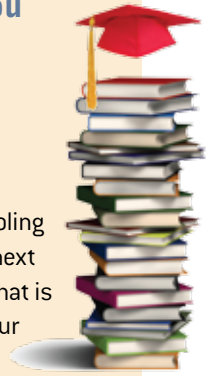
**On Your Own.** A panel of graduates who entered the workplace immediately after high school shares their experiences living and working independently and offers valuable insights about making it in the real world.

**Making College Count.** This program focuses on how to make the most of the college experience. Interactive and dynamic, the presentation is based on the book *Making College Count: A Real World Look at How to Succeed in and After College* by Patrick O’Brien. This professionally delivered program provides students with a “success map” for the future ([www.makingcollegecount.com](http://www.makingcollegecount.com)).

**Stay Out of the Poorhouse!** This session introduces seniors to a variety of financial and money issues, offering helpful suggestions on how to manage money responsibly. Topics include ATM/cash cards, checking accounts, budgets, and financial pitfalls.

**The World Is Your Classroom.** This workshop offers students the opportunity to explore exciting options for the coming year, such as travel,

### Seniors, what do you want to know in preparation for life after high school?



This is the last year of schooling before you move on to the next stage of your life, whether that is college or the workplace. Your senior year is a major transition period that will usher in an adult world of much greater independence than anything you have experienced before. Beyond what you may have learned in school, at home, through your faith organization, or even from your peers, what information, skills, or issues are vital to learn more about to prepare you for the coming years? In other words, what haven't you learned that you now need to know?

Your most thoughtful input to this survey will provide information that will be used to plan a meaningful senior program that is intended to respond to your and your classmates' specific interests and needs.

What issues, skills, and knowledge do you think that our school should address in your senior year to prepare you for life after high school?

work, social service, and alternate education experiences.

### Speaker Resources

Although professional agencies can locate speakers for nearly any topic, often experts among the faculty appropriately are well qualified to address the topics identified in the guidance plan. In addition, many communities have various social service agencies that might provide excellent speakers and facilitators for many of the health issues. Similarly, topics that are associated with a given profession are often best handled by simply drawing on local professionals: lawyers, doctors, social workers, finance experts, and so forth. Networking with the parent community frequently yields suggestions about who would be good for addressing one topic or another. In fact, inviting parents to participate in the senior institute as speakers, hosts, or support people builds great PR. In many respects, this student-driven guidance plan and the culminating senior institute is about partnering with the community to usher 12th graders into the next stage of their lives.

The community involvement in the high school is just one of the added benefits that accrue from this initiative. Primarily, the senior institute day is about helping ensure that seniors make a safe and purposeful transition to the next stage of their lives. The institute represents an exceptional opportunity for seniors to gain vital information about the world they will soon enter.

Other benefits include the greater personalization that results as seniors are engaged in directing their own very relevant learning throughout the year. No longer does the question "Why do I have to learn this?" hold sway. Also, the leadership roles that seniors assume

provide them with a sense of efficacy in being able to contribute to the school community. Most significantly, however, the program models an effective approach to lifelong learning because seniors are encouraged first to ask themselves questions about what they need to know and then to advocate for themselves within their community to access resources that can help them acquire the knowledge they seek. These are lessons that will serve them well throughout their lives. **PL**

### REFERENCES

- Dreis, J., & Rehage, L. (2008). *Making grade 12 meaningful*. Rexford, NY: International Center for Leadership in Education.
- Sizer, N. (2002). *Crossing the stage: Redesigning senior year*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

**Larry Rehage** ([lrehage@gmail.com](mailto:lrehage@gmail.com)) is a former codirector of senior guidance at New Trier Township High School in Winnetka, IL. He is currently an education consultant with Broadreach Education Consultants ([www.seniorprograms.org](http://www.seniorprograms.org)).

**Janice Dreis** ([dreisj@gmail.com](mailto:dreisj@gmail.com)) is a former codirector of senior guidance at New Trier. She is currently an education consultant with Broadreach Education Consultants.

### The following is a list of topics that have been typically identified by seniors.

- Success in college
- Eating disorders
- Diversity awareness
- Mental and physical health
- Drugs and alcohol
- Coping with stress
- Time management
- AIDS awareness/STDs
- Money management
- Gambling
- Dormitory life
- Voting and citizenship
- Date rape
- Personal safety
- Conflict management
- Identity theft
- College alternatives
- Sexual harassment
- Making new friends
- Résumé building